

Crackdown on crime

A more credible explanation needed

THE sudden intensification of the drive against crime which saw the law enforcers arresting several hundred persons around the country in two days would normally have been seen as a special effort to check the slide in law and order. But reports say that many of those arrested are workers and activists of major political parties. And that raises a host of questions and queries about the move ostensibly undertaken to haul up criminals against whom warrants of arrest and charges lay.

The situation calls for a close look at the government decision to crack down on criminals which was taken at a high-powered meeting -- a clear indication of the decision being fully endorsed by those at the helm. They must have been convinced that the noose of the law had to be tightened, but the tally of crimes that is being mentioned had been there for quite a length of time and one believes if timely action had been taken there would not have been any need for a countrywide drive leading to so many arrests.

There are quite a few things to consider before we can place the crackdown in the right perspective. The drive was launched 17 days after the ban on indoor politics had been lifted and the government is now busy trying to ensure the participation of all the political parties, particularly the major ones, in the dialogue to pave the way for a free and fair election. So, caution and discretion were in order and the need was to avoid anything that might be viewed negatively by the political parties. The timing of the drive has therefore been hardly propitious; in fact, it might not be an overstatement to say it sounds anachronistic to the government's otherwise professed aim to facilitate political dialogues by all means through ensuring participation of the two major political parties.

The modus operandi of the law enforcers conducting the anti-crime drive is also not above question. First, mass arrests, as we have always pointed out ran counter to the spirit of the rule of law, fair play and whatever decent things we could talk about. No one contests the necessity for severe action against hardened criminals but the approach should not even unwittingly lead to any panicky situation for the common people.

The government has claimed in a press handout that the law enforcers are chasing the hardened criminals only. But judging by reports, such claims need to be substantiated through a more credible explanation in the public domain.

Occasional unrest in garment sector

This must be overcome to realise its full potential

IN the last eleven months there has been 30 percent increase in the overseas demand for our RMG products compared to that in the corresponding period of the last fiscal year. At a time like this, nothing could be more frustrating than to learn that pockets of labour unrest are still there in the sector.

For example, on Sunday clashes between the police and workers of three garment factories at Kalurghat BISIC industrial area in Chittagong left several injured while there was a chain debilitating effect in the industrial zone.

The workers were demanding introduction of basic pay system in the salary structure alongside piece rate system. Their argument is that they couldn't get overtime allowance in the piece rate system in the absence of any basic pay. Other demands were increase in the share of piece rate and breakfast allowances.

We would have thought that the tripartite accord reached among government, BGMEA and the workers had covered all aspects of salary and benefits but it seems that some of the basic details are left to the factories concerned. So, you have the compliant factories, non-compliant factories and those who see-saw between compliance and non-compliance.

In the specific case of Chittagong, a consultative process had actually begun but this was not allowed to run a full course, thanks to factors best known to the people concerned.

According to the workers version, the owners of Azam Group assured them of giving a decision on their demands on Friday. Failing which, they requested the workers for a meeting on Sunday morning.

But there seemed to be a preemptive strike as the police arrested 10 workers of the factories on Friday night from their houses thus forcing them to take to the street.

While the factory owners should have proved true to their word, the workers going on a rampage and vandalising 50 vehicles were highly reprehensible acts. All sides must know that no durable solution can be reached except through a consultative process.

Hapless wage earners, useless foreign trips



SHAHNOOR WAHID

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

A careful probing would reveal that in no developing country politicians or government officials are allowed to spend so much money for useless trips abroad. While our politicians and government officials merrily spend foreign currency to attend faltoo meetings or go to Singapore for "treatment," the actual wage earners toil in most inhuman conditions far away from home. Who gives them care when they fall sick? Does the local MP ever go to the airport to receive the dead body of a wage earner?

OUR suited-booted big bosses are ever ready to travel to Europe or the US on any pretext. It is said that they have a suitcase packed with essentials for such trips since there is no drought of invitations. It is also said with a great deal of amusement that you will find Bangladeshi delegates in every possible UN/World Bank/IMF/Unesco/ILO/Unicef/EU sub-sub-sub-committee meetings if these are held in the US or any European, South American or African country.

And when under-under secretaries from other foreign countries attend those meetings to mostly sleep through the sessions, we find our big big bosses running through the VIP lounge to catch the plane. Before leaving they tell the press that Bangladesh's future depended

on their attending the meetings. You see, Bangladesh has to watch and listen, wine and dine, gossip and guffaw, and come back with plentiful experience. This is the art of foreign affairs that commoners like us will never understand, dear readers.

So, off they go, the happy, patriotic bosses, to salvage the country once again. In the flight they make mental plans to meet sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, distant cousins and nephews in Paris, London, New York and Nairobi. A dinner here, a lunch there, some shopping, some gossiping -- all expenses paid for by the exchequer. Ah! Life couldn't have anything better to offer!

But, discerning readers, do you see those immaculately dressed roly-poly bosses walking through the hot and humid forests of Malaysia to listen to

the plight of our boys (who send the same foreign currency the bosses spend on foreign trips) toiling long hours for a meagre wage? Do you see them negotiating with the owners of palm or rubber gardens for increasing wages and improving the living conditions? Did you ever hear them arguing with those garden owners that if all Bangladeshi workers were to leave today they would find it extremely difficult to find workers at such low wages?

Did you ever see our big bosses visiting the quarters in the hot deserts of Kuwait or Saudi Arabia where thousands of Bangladeshi workers (we so proudly call "Wage Earners") live? Did they ever set up a meeting with those employers who have the record of mistreating and often cheating Bangladeshi workers? Did they ever tell those

rogue employers that they will never find such good workers at such low wages, therefore, it is for their own benefit that they should pay the workers well and give them all the benefits that they are bound to give as per the law of their country? Did they ever point out the fact that actually there could be no replacement of Bangladeshi workers?

No, we never see the big bosses taking so much of trouble for the wage earners. Do you know why? Because those destinations are hot and humid! Because there is no glamour in listening to the plight of those menial workers cleaning roads or working in palm forests or rubber gardens! Because no brother, no sister, no nephew lives there. But, yes, we love to count the dollars they send to the country, which we need while going abroad. Dear me!

Life would have been so dreary if we couldn't go on those trips to Europe or the US!

Have you ever taken a note of how many times our politicians, government officials, sports teams and cultural teams go abroad spending the hard earned foreign currency? It is horrendous if not anything else. We are at the bottom rung as far as poverty and per capita income are concerned, but look at them? Going to Geneva or New York every month to attend insignificant meetings! Then the entire gang going off to Bangkok or Singapore to shoot for some crappy TV play! Right at this moment possibly hundreds of our singers and dancers are abroad presenting some mediocre songs and dance numbers to entertain crowds.

A careful probing would reveal that in no developing country politicians or government officials are allowed to spend so much money for useless trips abroad. While our politicians and government officials merrily spend foreign currency to attend faltoo meetings or go to Singapore for "treatment," the actual wage earners toil in most inhuman conditions far away from home. Who gives them care when they

fall sick? Does the local MP ever go to the airport to receive the dead body of a wage earner?

It is time to call a spade a spade. So, all trips titled "For observation, idea sharing and lesson learning" must be stopped right now, since video conferencing or CDs on training or idea sharing are easily available in this era of technology. It is much cheaper to have one foreign trainer brought in here than ten people going abroad for receiving the same training. And our experience shows that more often than not after a government official has been given training on a particular topic or skill, he gets transferred to a post where there is no scope for him to apply his knowledge.

For God's sake let us change our feudal mindset and learn to honour the wage earners and the foreign currency they earn by breaking their backs. That is how we shall become patriotic. Patriotism is not something you announce loudly in public meetings. You practise it within yourself, quietly. That will be your duty.

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Dealing with agricultural disarray



ABDUL BAYES

BENEATH THE SURFACE

The options could be used in combination and, if necessary, a superstructure could be established (for example a panel appointed by UN leadership) to guide changes in the global governance of agriculture. In this new structure, sufficient space should be created for newly emerging players in the food markets, such as Brazil, India China and others. By and large, the old order should pave the way for a new world order.

Causes of conundrums

LONG ago, D. Gale Johnson discovered "disarray" in world agriculture fraught with misalignments and missing markets. After many years of relative calm, a quiet journey towards feeding the world population at a reasonable price, agriculture seems to be back to the border of disarray. The costs of the conundrums are well documented. Food prices shot up suddenly at an exorbitant rate. Since the poor tend to spend about two-thirds of their total income on the purchase of food, they were the worst victims of the crisis with debilitating effects on their consumption of non-food items.

Demonstrations and social unrest have already crippled some of the capital cities. International agencies have come forward with more aid commitments. But all said and done, the sustainability of the system itself is now seriously threatened, if not thwarted.

Many experts now see the current world food and agricultural policy system itself in disarray. We can refer the readers to the opinions of two eminent economists, Joachim von Braun and Nurul Islam (respectively, director general and emeritus senior research fellow of IFPRI) who succinctly summarise the symptom of such disarray: incoherent or inadequate response to exploding food prices, the slowdown in agricultural productivity growth, looming water problems, a disorderly response to higher energy prices, rapid concentration in multinational agribusiness corporations without necessary institutional innovation to guide them, lack of progress in addressing scarcity, adverse impacts of climatic change, widespread nutritional problems including hunger, obesity and chronic diseases, and agriculture-related health hazards such as avian influenza.

Finally, adding fuel to the fire was under-investment in public

goods related to food, nutrition and agriculture, such as rural infrastructure, agricultural research, and rural institutions, which have spillover effects and global impacts.

Coping with crisis

Joachim von Braun and Nurul Islam consider national agricultural policies as central but, in the same breath, call for collaborative actions among countries for adequately addressing opportunities and challenges. Especially poor nations have already had a pinch of populist national policies pertaining to agriculture in general.

In a global regime, autarkic position barely brings benefits, either to the nation concerned or to the world at large. It is, thus, not surprising that the cost of bio-fuels is being borne by the Bangladeshis living thousand of miles away from the producers and users of such fuels. For example, according to Joachim von Braun, about 30% of US maize production will go into ethanol in 2008, rather than into

world food and feed markets. This will push up food prices.

Oil price is a case in point. Energy and agricultural prices are interwoven: a rise in the former causes the latter to rise through affecting costs of production. Similarly, the inward looking strategy of rice exporting countries is forcing the importers for import substitution on a large scale.

Now, seemingly, every country is planning to produce everything with a distinct disrespect to Ricardo's theory of comparative advantage. By and large, Gale Johnson's "disarray" appears to have appeared in a new guise! Hence, the writers' vision of designing a global governance system for food, nutrition, and agriculture seems to suit the time.

In addressing the current conundrums, the authors appear to suggest three options -- though not mutually exclusive, and could range from realistic to utopian. The first -- and possibly the most realistic --

option is to make marginal improvements on the current institutions. This means, strengthening UN and CGIAR systems in terms of their effectiveness, their governance and their resources.

The second realistic line is to form an innovative government network that would strengthen government-to-government systems for decision making in the area of food and agriculture through a set of agreements and conventions. A third option is to expand the current system to explicitly engage the new players in the global food system -- the private sector and civil society, including large private foundations -- together with national governments in new or significantly reorganised international organisations and agreements. Given the fact that the global food system is in reality no longer governed only by governments, this inclusive approach seems worthwhile now.

Changing the global system

The offshoot of the discussion is that the existing global system has developed many cracks over the years and, therefore, is not fit to face the foray. It needs an overhauled structure "to quickly come closer to a world that sustainably provides each person with enough food to live a healthy and productive life as

envisioned in the Millennium Development Goals." The options could be used in combination and, if necessary, a superstructure could be established (for example a panel appointed by UN leadership) to guide changes in the global governance of agriculture.

In this new structure, sufficient space should be created for newly emerging players in the food markets, such as Brazil, India China and others. By and large, the old order should pave the way for a new world order.

New wine in old bottle? But there is a million-dollar question looming large on the horizon. In the past, distortions created by the agricultural policies of the developed countries went a long way in putting the world agriculture in peril.

The negotiations in the WTO failed because of heightened heavy-handedness of these nations. Could a newly created superstructure achieve what WTO has failed to do so far? The political economy of the "disarray," and the superstructure that will go along to heal it, hold no less importance than the naive options of eminent economists. Keeping this in mind, continuation of dialogues among stakeholders can be considered only as a necessary condition.

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Alarm bells for the UPA



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writes from New Delhi

THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

The Karnataka election's true significance lies in the grim message it carries for the Congress: it may face a rout in the next Lok Sabha election unless it urgently takes thorough-going, comprehensive and radical -- as distinct from piecemeal, cosmetic and half-hearted -- measures to reform itself.

highlights the Congress's decline and leadership crisis, and should jolt it into radical course correction.

The BJP won 110 out of the Assembly's 224 seats, because it ran a focused campaign and got its caste/social group arithmetic basically right. This was centred on the Lingayats in the North and diverse upper-caste groups on the Southern coast.

Besides consolidating this base, the BJP gained in central Karnataka. In Bangalore, it won 17 of 28 seats because successive Congress-led governments have messed up the city.

The BJP presented a united and cohesive front, with a clearly identified leader (BS Yeddyurappa). He got sympathy because he had been unfairly dumped by the small Janata Dal

(Secular) from a power-sharing arrangement.

The Congress's campaign was lacklustre, and failed to project a leader from among many contenders with clashing identities. The JD(S) couldn't overcome the stigma of opportunism and venality, and lost more than half its seats.

The Congress was on the defensive because of rising prices, in addition to the agrarian crisis and unemployment. The BJP cynically exploited the Jaipur bombings in Karnataka's communally charged atmosphere.

The BJP also gained from divisions in the secular vote in the three-way contest. Its aggregate vote (33.9 percent) was lower than the Congress's 34.6. But it won 30 more seats --

because its vote is concentrated; the Congress's is evenly spread.

However, one must not underrate the BJP's great gains from its strategy of communally polarising Karnataka -- by laying a Hindu claim to the syncretic Sufi Baba Budangiri shrine in Chikmagalur, fomenting violence in Mangalore, Belgaum and Hubli, drumming up hysteria on false allegations of cow slaughter, and resorting to hate-speech and crime, well-documented by the Karnataka Communal Harmony Forum.

It's no accident that Mr. Narendra Modi was the BJP's star campaigner.

Communalism was pivotal to the BJP's dramatic growth, from 4 percent of the votes and 4 Karnataka Assembly seats in 1989, to 28 percent and 79 seats

in 2004. The Congress has never fought the BJP's communalism, or questioned its lack of pluralism and inclusiveness.

However, the BJP's win in Karnataka is unlikely to open the road to power in Andhra, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The politics of these states is dominated by two parties/coalitions.

Karnataka is the only Southern state where the main non-Congress political space was occupied by the right-wing Congress (O) in the late 1960s and, later, the Janata Party. In the other states, that space was taken by secular regional parties -- DMK, AIADMK, Telugu Desam, etc. -- and in Kerala, by the Left.

The Janata legacy facilitated the BJP's entry into Karnataka. This can't happen in the other Southern states. The Karnataka victory may be a one-off affair.

Indeed, as Election Commission data shows, the peculiar distribution of the BJP's vote in Karnataka could work against it in the national elections.

If all the assembly segments

vote in the next Lok Sabha elections exactly as they did now, the BJP would win only 10 of Karnataka's 28 seats, down from 18. The Congress would soar from 8 to 14.

This won't be a breakthrough even in Karnataka, leave alone the South.

The Karnataka election's true significance lies in the grim message it carries for the Congress: it may face a rout in the next Lok Sabha election unless it urgently takes thorough-going, comprehensive and radical -- as distinct from piecemeal, cosmetic and half-hearted -- measures to reform itself.

The Congress faces three crucially important crises. First, there's a crisis of political strategy. This is the party's inability to garner mass support and run an efficient electoral machine while articulating a broad vision for society.

The Congress no longer works at the grassroots. It doesn't quite know what its social constituencies are, and what message it should give them. Nor does it

know how to demolish the opposition's case against it.

It's not good enough to have a few clever spokespersons who turn and twist words. The Congress needs leaders and cadres who speak with conviction.

Second, the Congress faces an organisational crisis. This consists in a severe lack of coordination among party units, and absence of mass following of a majority of central-level Congress leaders.

A major manifestation is the mis-assignment of leaders to functions they aren't capable of or interested in.

In Karnataka, the BJP carefully micromanaged constituencies, with targeted canvassing and excellent coordination between district leaders and RSS members under Mr. Arun Jaitley, who camped in the state for 6 weeks.

By contrast, the Congress's coordinator barely spent any time in Karnataka, and didn't project a united party image. There was no pressure to show results.

Finally, there's the leadership crisis. The Congress cannot countenance a democratic elected leadership independent of the Nehru-Gandhi family. But it lacks the courage to call this leadership to account when it loses.

The Congress still prevents the emergence of autonomous regional leaders. It doesn't project its leaders except in a dynastic mould, without subjecting them to a results-based credibility test.

Unless the Congress boldly and honestly confronts these crises, it cannot resolve them. Ultimately, the corrective measures it takes must be related to its policies and programs.

The Congress should know: it's not enough to pass the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. This has to be accompanied by mobilisation of the state and party machineries, and a high-powered public awareness campaign. This alone can prevent large-scale corruption and the scheme's sabotage.

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