

Food productivity challenge

Modern methods key to winning it

IN a technology-driven world where new cultivation techniques are being applied in the agriculture sector to maximise output, Bangladesh has not been able to capitalise on such modern technology well within our reach. A Bangladesh Agriculture Development Corporation (BADC) study says that while present per annum yield of rice hovers around 3.5 crore tonnes, Bangladesh could actually increase production to 7.00 crore tonnes through introducing modern irrigation system, proper use of fertilizer and bringing more fallow land under cultivation.

But what is happening in real life is just the contrary. As farmers do not remain conversant with modern ways of agro-technology, they fall for unnecessary use of water for boro cultivation, which is 50 percent more than what is actually required. And because of the excess amount of water, nutrients from fertilizers go deeper into the soil beyond the reach of the plant roots. This wastage ultimately results in low yield of crop. On the other hand, farmers are faced with shortage of water during cultivation of Aman, another major rice variety, that again results in lesser yields. Agriculture experts are of the opinion that through adopting new techniques of irrigation the per hectare yield of boro can be raised from 3.66 tonnes to 6.00 tonnes. And aman yield can be more than doubled in the same way. Another report focuses on the relative inefficiency of irrigation system in Bangladesh where irrigation accounts for 28 percent of rice production cost, which is 13 percent in India, 8 percent in Thailand and 6 percent in Vietnam.

When globally food is taking the centre stage in the national economy of developing countries and is a potent precondition to social stability, it is no wonder this would remain a subject matter of engaging deliberation in Bangladesh. But mere talking will not get us anywhere. The utter need to feed an ever-growing population makes it all the more vital to use modern agro-technology to get the most out of our existing farmlands. We urge the government to extend full support to the endeavours of our agro-experts in strategising greater food production in a sustainable manner.

WASA losses

Identify illegal connections and take action

IT is a horrendous figure -- but true -- the Dhaka Water & Sewerage Authority (WASA) loses Tk 35 crore every year due to system loss. The loss takes place in various ways -- but most of all due to the connivance of some of its corrupt officials and employees who dispense illegal services to those willing to pay for illegal benefits.

What is frustrating is the fact that while it is well known that there are over a lakh illegal connections in Dhaka and Narayanganj, which cause the maximum system loss, we have seen nothing to assure us that the concerned authorities have taken appropriate and adequate measures to redress the situation.

We realise the fact that like many service providers WASA faces resource crunch -- and its inability to meet the demand of water of the residents of the areas it serves, is not entirely its fault. But the least it can do is to ensure that whatever is produced goes to the deserving ones, and other system losses like less billing than the actual usage are reduced to the bare minimum. We appreciate the fact that its complement of manpower is not up to the required level -- resulting in a very poor supervisory function of the inspectors. But whatever little there is, is not used efficiently.

WASA is learnt to have requested the army through LGRD ministry to conduct a customer survey to determine the actual number of illegal connections. Had WASA used its own oversight resources, whatever little that might be, regularly and honestly over the years, it would not have been necessary to involve in a six-month exercise by another agency. However, we suggest that instead of waiting six months to get the exact figure of illegal connections, corrective measures should be taken immediately not only to disconnect the illegal connections that are well known, but also to ensure that those responsible for dishonest deals are taken to task.

We suggest also that the government seriously address the state of WASA manpower and other resources on one hand and on the other WASA should organise its present manpower more efficiently as also its internal oversight mechanism. After all, no system, even with the full resources at its disposal, can be efficient with warped objectives lacking in commitment.

The BNP's pied pipers



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

HUMBUG is what has often been the BNP's forte. During her fairly long years in politics and two stints as prime minister, the party supreme mastered well the art of gobbledygook and developed a malignant arrogance that borders on paranoia. Madam Zia took refuge behind this when flummoxed, and thought that it was the means to absolve her past sins for which she is yet to be chastised.

The last few days witnessed a fresh spurt of the phenomenon, when the madam started speaking defiantly while appearing in the court. The BNP, however, seems to have got a shot in the arm after a long hiatus as its "uncompromising" leader could give vent to her feelings.

The unfortunate problem is that this great country -- at least in terms of the way it came into being -- was ruled by lesser beings fortuitously catapulted to the apex. Khaleda Zia doesn't even understand how her last government precipitated the country's ruin. Neither can she perceive how the

Madam Zia still thinks that she can again call the tune for the party's pied pipers to mesmerise the public as before -- notwithstanding the reversal of her fortune. Perhaps, that's the reason she isn't responsive to the caretaker government's effort to work out a modus-operandi to hold a credible election with the participation of all political stakeholders. At this critical juncture, when the country is passing through a delicate phase of transition, the BNP prefers to throw a spanner in the political process aimed at an early transfer of power to a representative government.

nation is to be retrieved from the sorry pass it has been pushed into. She is only interested in retrieving the paradise the BNP has lost and ensuring her position at the party's helm.

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As a political stakeholder, Sheikh Hasina has already been freed for her treatment in USA where she was treated earlier. Her early release was not accorded any undue priority because she was

critically ill. Her health bulletin, received from the US, confirms this. If there is need Madam Zia also, as indicated by the authorities, can avail a similar advantage. But to be a so-called "uncompromising" leader, and to be able to whip up the dead horse of BNP, she seems to be in favour of treatment, if required, at home while bargaining for her sons' release and treatment abroad. Whether they come under the present political equation for such a favour is a crucial question.

The madam, however, roared, demanding their immediate release and treatment abroad. Is it a kind of blackmail on the part of the "uncompromising" madam, who is instinctively machiavellian, to secure her son's release from captivity while readying herself for a fresh bout with the country's liberal forces in concert with the Jamaat which has, of late, come out of hibernation and bared its fangs.

The BNP is re-aligning with the Jamaat within its existing frame-

work of four-party alliance, which has demanded the release of Khaleda and Nizami and has also threatened to launch a movement for the purpose.

What has, however, been disconcerting, while becoming the joke of the town, is Madam Zia's unabashed and emphatic claim that her sons haven't done anything wrong. The nation has been taken aback, and is nonplussed at an affectionate mother's discovery while feeling baffled at her demand because her sons' notoriety, still sketched in the public psyche, speaks otherwise. Madam Zia has no compunction in sacrificing truth at the altar of her blind and biased view of stark-reality with regard to her sons' criminality and corruption.

Madam Zia has so far been successful in stirring up an impotent and divided BNP. Even a hawk like her chosen secretary-general has sprung back to life and taken a dictatorial posture -- the hallmark of BNP -- in directing the future course of the party which is

still holding the nation at ransom with regards to both the dialogue and election.

It's clear from the pronouncements of the BNP that neither the party nor its leadership are repentant for what they did during their rule, in alliance with Jamaat, from 2001 to 2006 when they unleashed a reign of terror, plunder and militancy, targeting the AL, minority communities as well as the liberal secular forces including journalists, human right activists, intellectuals and progressive elements of the country. The alliance's unholy nexus compelled numerous AL activists to leave their homes to escape the torture of BNP Jamaat goons.

The enormity of the BNP Jamaat terror tactics makes it difficult to record them in full detail. Infact,

depravity, depredation and organised skullduggery in each field of socio-economic and political life became the order of the day. Apart from numerous political killings, the indelible dark spot for them has been the enactment of August 21, which is still shrouded in mystery.

As regards Madam Zia's clean chit for her sons, it aptly reminds one of the folk saying that "the thieves' mothers are always vocal." The Hawa Bhaban cronies of Tarique Zia allegedly looted the country to the extent that even relief materials meant for the destitute were not spared. The worst had, however, been the BNP Jamaat lust for power. Their blue-

print to perpetuate their rule necessitated the coming of the present dispensation, accompanied by a state of emergency. Now they blame the present Election Commission for impartiality. Don't they see their own faces in the mirror?

They blame the government for so many things -- injustice, no rule of law, it's interference in the judiciary, as well as public misery because of the food crisis. Madam Zia and her party conveniently forget that they set in motion all these vices during their rule. Begum Zia used the "talent" of Moudud to turn the judiciary into a mockery. She forgets that the syndicated price rise of food was the BNP's invention to benefit some of its favourites. And people? Did the word "people" exist in their lexicon?

Madam's crocodile tears may inundate the soft delta of hearts belonging to BNP's beneficiaries, but the ordinary people are non-chalant about her gesture, which is directed only at their sympathy vote if one day the party goes for election after the present phase of hard bargaining. The BNP may well win that election in a country of collective amnesia. After all, some are endowed with an element of serendipity. And Madam Zia is one of them. She seldom tasted the rigours of political activism, yet enjoyed the best of its returns.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

Indo-US nuclear treaty: Uncertainty looms large



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

EFFORTS for the implementation of the Indo-US nuclear agreement have suffered another setback with the crucial talks between the Indian government and its leftist allies getting postponed, much to the dismay of the enthusiasts of the accord. The parleys, that were expected to narrow down the differences between the two sides on the issue, did not take place last Tuesday, understandably because of the fear of failure to hammer out the differences.

Consequently, the Indo-US accord is still in trouble, with little sign that the Indian leftists would endorse it and facilitate its forward movement.

On the other hand, time is also passing for the Bush administration, as the accord needs to be passed by the Congress ahead of the November presidential elections. There is not much opposition to the deal in the US, although there is criticism. On the American side, there is no major problem in implementing the agreement signed in 2006, but the failure on the Indian end has stalled it.

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MATTERS AROUND US

The much-talked about treaty has been clearly hanging in the balance for sometime, even though both countries had been expecting that the obstacles would be overcome and the accord would be put in practice. But no tangible progress has being made towards its implementation, and Washington has alerted New Delhi that the "clock is ticking" on the issue.

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The deal, seen by many as a "landmark" one in their bilateral relations, was agreed in principle when president George W. Bush visited India in 2005. The two sides later met several times to finalise the details. But the agreement remains far from being implemented mainly because of problems with the Indian side. It is not that the Indian government is showing scant interest or any sign of unwillingness; in fact, New Delhi is set to go ahead with the accord, which it considers as a big achievement for India.

But the government's supporters, the leftists, are not favourably disposed to such a development with the United States. On the contrary, they that feel the Manmohan Singh government is taking India "too close" to the US and, obviously, the communists cannot relish such a situation.

Since the support of the leftists is critically important for the government that falls short of absolute majority in the parliament Dr. Singh's administration is

faced with a difficult situation on the matter. On one hand, it wants to implement the agreement since it feels that it would benefit India in many ways, on the other, the government cannot ignore the sensitivities of its supporters. It is in this context the scheduled talks between the government and its supporters failed to take place, adding elements of further uncertainty.

The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) has completed more than four years of the five-year term, with general elections scheduled early next year. It is a minority government, relying totally on the support of the leftists, who attached no strict conditions to the government for their cooperation.

The communist party of India (Marxist), the main leftist force, and its allies are opposed to the US, obviously on ideological lines. They are not supposed to endorse a close relationship with Washington, but the government of Dr. Manmohan Singh has developed deeper ties with the US.

The civilian atomic cooperation accord is an eyesore for the leftists, which is no surprise. Once it appeared that differences on the issue might even lead to collapse of the government if the leftists chose to withdraw their support for the ruling alliance. The UPA

does not have the requisite majority in the house, but it formed the government with the support of the communists, who have 60 members.

Many thought that this outside support would not last long since the leftists do not see eye to eye on many issues with the government, even though they have a common approach on the issue of secularism and some other broad matters. Such an assessment has largely been belied since the understanding remained somewhat unhindered, although some issues did create some misunderstanding between the two in the past, but not to the extent of causing any major problem. The much-vaunted nuclear deal is proving to be a difficult nut to crack, with the two sides taking diametrically opposite positions on the subject.

The world's largest democracy has been experiencing coalition culture for sometime past, and it is now almost inconceivable that any single party can form the government. Gone are the days when a single political organisation could muster enough support in the lower house of parliament and stake a claim to form a government on its own. Even the major parties these days seldom dream of having an absolute majority in the 545-member lower house of

parliament (Lok Sabha). They either seek to reach electoral understanding before the voting, or look for like-minded parties in the event of necessity to form the government as an absolute majority is often lacking.

The previous NDA government, and its successor the UPA alliance, all fit in the same milieu of coalition culture. The coming together of different political forces for the purpose of ruling is not unusual in parliamentary democracy, and may come through compulsion or political understanding.

The UPA and the leftists forged broader understanding mainly to prevent the BJP-led former ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA), widely seen as communal, from coming to power again. But the bottom line is that they have many differences on many issues -- particularly the policy towards the United States. The leftists even criticised the Indian government for taking a pro-Washington stance on America's conflict with Iran.

Leftist leaders, particularly the CPM heavyweight Prakash Karat, are known to oppose the accord tooth-and-nail, while some others leaders from the leftist citadel, West Bengal, blow hot and cold on the issue. Those relatively lenient on the matter feel that withdrawal of support from the government on the nuclear issue would result in the exit of the Manmohan government, and this would not eventually help the secular forces as the BJP and allies may get an opportunity to stage a come back to power.

Likewise, some leaders in the ruling UPA also feel that too much enthusiasm about the nuclear deal will anger the leftists and a kind of "go slow" may help the

overall interest of the coalition, because the collapse of the government would be a setback for the coalition.

But many in India favour the deal, and some key figures in the government are keen to go ahead with it, regardless of their communist allies' sentiments. It appears that a firm decision on the important and sensitive issue is proving difficult for the Indian government. Both Sonia Gandhi, the chairperson of the ruling UPA and undoubtedly the most influential person in shaping the policies -- albeit not directly -- and prime minister Manmohan Singh are very keen to implement the accord.

Several phases need to be crossed before it becomes operational, but problems with the leftists have been thwarting the government plans. The two sides have formed a joint committee with external affairs minister Pranab Mukherjee as its head to thrash out differences, but no headway could be made.

As fresh talks have failed to take place, a new date June 25, has been fixed for the crucially important discussions. However, analysts are sceptical about the success of the parleys unless the leftists make some major concessions, which is largely unexpected.

The communists, as it appears, will not disturb the government, but are totally unwilling to fall in with the government's pro-American policy. This is not surprising, and it makes the fate of Indo-US nuclear accord uncertain -- at least its passage in India during the term of present government looks bleak.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist and analyst of international affairs.

Barack Obama pulling away

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Republicans are the masters of negative campaign. But, they are not sure how far they can go attacking a black candidate before eliciting white backlash. That is why they had literally campaigned for Hillary Clinton, for whom they have been preparing for four years and have the perfect playbook. Currently, the Republicans are despondent. Their party's presumptive nominee, the aging John McCain, does not excite them.

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

THE latest Newsweek poll has Barack Obama leading John McCain by fifteen points (51% to 36%) in the presidential race. A month ago, in the same poll, the two presumptive presidential nominees were tied at 46%. Either this is the bounce the pundits were predicting after Obama clinched the nomination, or this poll is an outlier.

Even if the numbers truly reflect popular will, the Obama campaign ought not to be celebrating,

Michael Dukakis had a similar lead at this stage of the campaign in 1988, and went on to lose the election to the then vice-president, George Herbert Walker Bush, rather badly.

Republicans ought not to be hopeful either. Barack Obama is a far better candidate than Michael Dukakis ever was. Besides, the senior Bush was running to continue the policies of an immensely popular two-term president, Ronald Reagan.

John McCain is running for the

third term of an extremely unpopular two-term president, the junior Bush, whose approval ratings are in the mid twenties. To give an example of how bad things are for Bush, when his chopper landed at a destination today, he waved at the only two people around, twice, and they never waved back!

The Obama people are determined not to repeat Dukakis's mistakes. Instead of letting the Republicans define Obama negatively, Obama is defining himself

positively. Starting June 20, the Obama campaign is running a 1-minute infomercial on Obama in 18 states.

To neutralise Republican innuendo that he is not patriotic enough, Obama appears in the commercial, appropriately entitled, "The country I love," wearing a flag-pin and making patriotic pronouncements.

To show his mainstream American roots, the ad starts with a photograph of Obama's white mother, Ann Dunham, holding Obama as a toddler. Another photograph shows a young Obama, sitting between his white grandparents, who brought him up and instilled mainstream "Kansas values" in him.

The script of the ad reads: "I am Barack Obama. America is a country of strong families and strong values. My life's been blessed with both. I was raised by a single mom and my grandparents. We didn't

have much money, but they taught me values straight from the Kansas heartland where they grew up.

"Accountability and self-reliance. Love of country. Working hard without making excuses. Treating your neighbours as you would like to be treated. It's what guided me as I worked by way up -- taking jobs and loans to make it through college.

"It's what led me to pass up Wall Street jobs and go to Chicago instead, helping neighbourhoods devastated when steel plants closed. That's why I passed laws moving people from welfare to work, cut taxes for working families, and extended healthcare for wounded troops who'd been neglected.

"I approved this message because I'll never forget those values, and if I have the honour of taking the oath of office as president, it will be with a deep and

abiding faith in the country I love."

So far things appear to be going well for Obama. Hillary Clinton is going to make her first campaign appearance with Obama on June 27. Most Hillary supporters, including an overwhelming majority of white women, have unified under the Obama banner. The latest polls in the three swing states show Obama beating McCain in all three -- in Pennsylvania by 12%, in Ohio by 6% and in Florida by 4%.

Still, Obama can ill afford to be complacent. The Republicans and the rightwing 527s are scheming and plotting. Women voters have noted wryly that while Hillary Clinton had projected herself as a man, someone who wants to fight, Obama's campaign was all about pacifism -- stopping fighting, empathy, sensitivity and making compromises -- supposedly all women's virtues!

Obama was raised by a "strong"

mother (and a "strong" grandmother), bolstered by a "strong" sister, married to a "strong" wife, and (is) proud of his "strong" daughters." Says Megan Beyer, a charter member of Women for Obama: "In many ways, he really will be the first woman president."

One potential line of Republican attack will be that Obama is not masculine enough for the job. Anti-Obama websites have called him "effeminate." Republican surrogates have labeled Obama "hysterical," the same word Michael Corleone uses in Godfather to describe his grief-stricken sister, Connie, after she finds out that her brother had her husband executed! Obama has also been referred to in feminine terms as a "wuss," "prissy" and "sissy boy" by Republican hacks.

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eliciting white backlash. That is why they had literally campaigned for Hillary Clinton, for whom they have been preparing for four years and have the perfect playbook.

Currently, the Republicans are despondent. Their party's presumptive nominee, the aging John McCain, does not excite them. While they have successfully played the race card against white opponents like Michael Dukakis, (for example through the infamous "Willie Horton" ad in 1988) they realise that doing so, even subtly, against Obama can be suicidal. There is a perception among the Republicans that Obama does not hate them. Obama does not even hate President Bush. Consequently, Republicans find it difficult to hate him. What are the poor Republicans to do come November?

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed is a Rhodes Scholar and a Daily Star columnist.