

Elections at last!

We must appreciate the reformatory action. If the next elected government continues to support these reform programs the country will definitely be benefited immensely. If not, we may see worse days than those prior to 1/11. We wish better people are elected to push Bangladesh to the range of mid-level countries soon.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

THROUGH his speech on September 20, the CA has stopped all sorts of speculations about national election. In addition, dates for *upazila* elections have also been announced. National election will be held on December 18 and *upazila* elections on December 24 and 28. In consideration of exigency of the situation, the CA announced the dates instead of the CEC.

We are glad that almost all the political parties have welcomed the announcement and are going to participate in the national election. With regard to BNP and its alliance partners, they are of the opinion that it is not possible to abide by the recent ordinance revising the Representation of the People Order (RPO).

They may reconsider their stance if the EC agrees to relax the criteria for registration. They want the Commission to either scrap the new provisions or to suspend them till the upcoming polls are over.

However, it appears that there are differences of opinion in the party. Some of them are worried that total disagreement with EC might hinder the efforts to restore democracy. There is no last word in politics. Thus, we may hope for successful election by the announced date.

It appears that amongst all the parties preparation of AL for participation in the election is the most advanced. It wants full implementation of the RPO and the electoral code of conduct.

It feels that if national election is held under the newly framed electoral law and rules, the upcoming polls may be free and fair and will ensure participation of honest and competent candidates. As electoral reforms are the outcome of 1/11, AL may not allow ruination of these reforms for sake of a party.

By obtaining approval from EC that changes made in the party constitutions by the central working committee instead of by the national council are acceptable (due to time constraint), AL has been able to bypass requirement of lengthy process of obtaining approval of the national council.

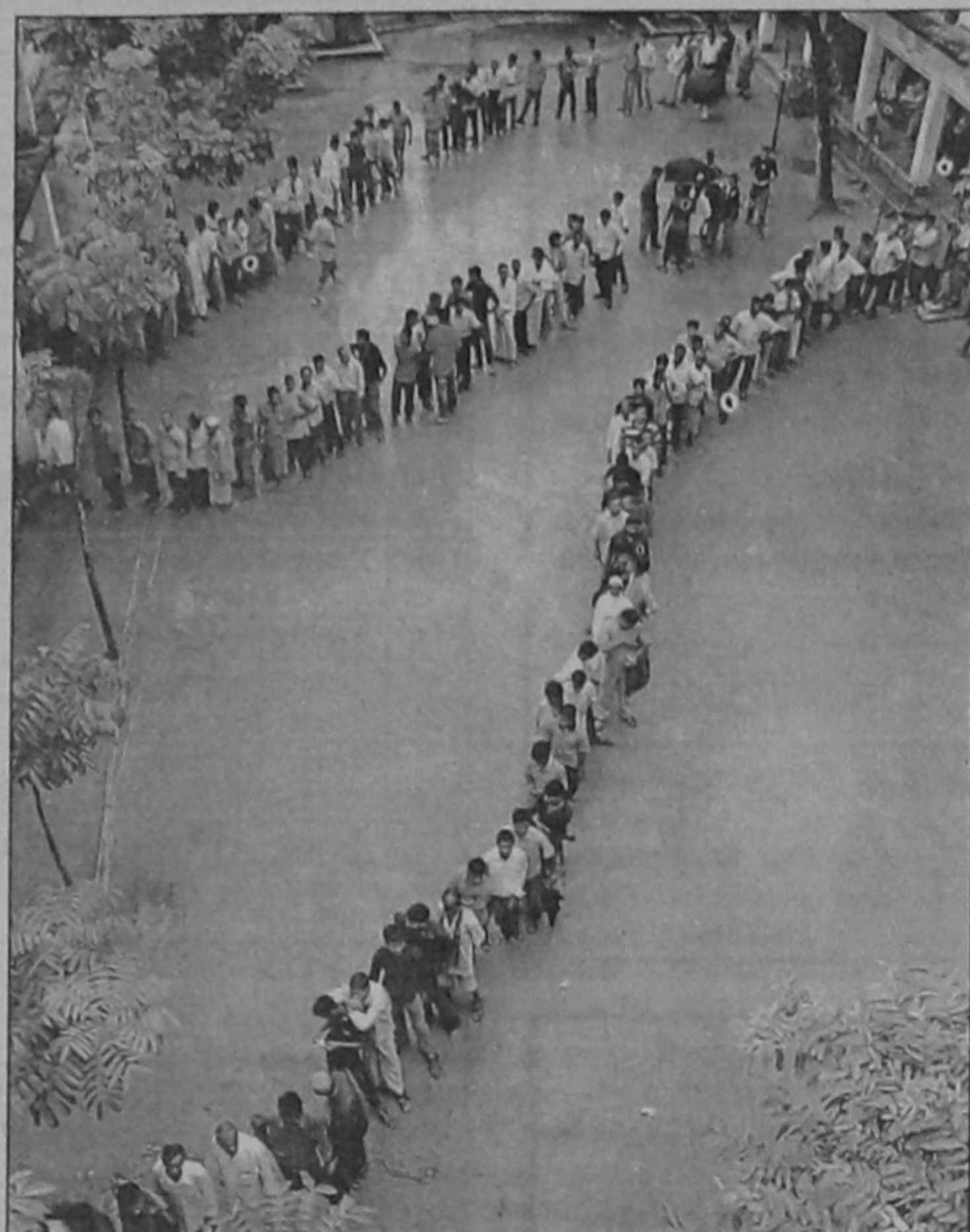
In the case of BNP, similar approval may be given. But it appears that BNP is not prepared to participate in the national election because of the following reasons:

- Khaleda Zia has not yet been able to unite the divided party;
- The reformists have not yet left the field, and reports of their secret meetings are heard;
- Tarique Rahman's treatment abroad and his expected long absence (2 to 3 years) from the country has demoralised the JCD appreciably;
- With the absence of Barkatullah Bulu and Goyeswar Roy, the Jubo Dal has been weakened considerably; and
- BNP (main) thinks that without its participation in the election there cannot be any credible election.

Whatever is said by BNP openly, we see that it is not sitting idle and is busy in contacting its grassroots level workers and leaders for preparation to participate in the election.

Thus, we may not be surprised if BNP fully participates in the election. It must calculate its loss if it refrains from participation.

- Even though the EC is almost ready to hold the election on schedule, some issues like,
- Lifting of emergency,
 - Little time between national and *upazila* elections,
 - Eligibility of under-trial prisoners to participate in the election, and
 - Whether party committees consist of some reformist members are also eligible for recom-



We will vote, come hell or high water.

mending nomination of candidates at the central level.

As regards lifting of emergency, it may not be advisable to lift it fully because of the following factors:

- Uncertainty of BNP about full participation in the election;
- Possible resurgence of militants;
- Growing students' unrest in educational institutions; and
- Increase in extortions and other crimes.

Thus, the decision to relax or totally withdraw the emergency depends mainly on following factors:

- Capability of law enforcing bodies to control deteriorating law and order situation due to political restlessness and resurgence of militancy;
- Intra and inter party clashes in pre-election rallies and meetings, and threat to voters; and
- Entry of political *mastans* from outside and starting of nefarious activities.

Some prominent members of civil society and political leaders are discussing vigorously about the small gap between the national and *upazila* elections. They apprehend that as the cooling-off of the heat of national election takes time

(say about a month) there remains the danger of political violence in connection with *upazila* elections.

As major parties do not want lessening of the influence of their parliamentary members due to strengthening of *upazila* they do not encourage early *upazila* elections. The CTG and the EC may not ignore the directive of the Supreme Court in this regard. Conceding too many relevant or irrelevant demands of major parties may jeopardise its total plan.

The CTG is holding the national election 23 months after its formation. All these reform measures are aimed at establishing good governance and a level playing field for a free, fair and credible election existence. However, we must appreciate the reformatory action.

If the next elected government continues to support these reform programs the country will definitely be benefited immensely. If not, we may see worse days than those prior to 1/11. We wish better people (honest and competent) are elected to push Bangladesh to the range of mid-level countries soon.

A.B.M.S. Zahur is a former joint secretary.

Uneven progress

With the current volatility in global markets, the growing crisis of rising food and fuel prices, and the risks posed by climate change, it is the more vulnerable of the countries in the region that are going to be at risk of sudden downturns.

AJAY CHHIBBER

ON September 25, at the midpoint towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), world leaders will gather in New York to see where more can be done to reach them by the deadline of 2015. This is a critical moment as the prospects of a slowing global economy, high food and fuel prices and climate change threaten to derail and even reverse the progress already made.

Advances made towards the MDGs across the world have been varied. As the secretary general's annual MDG report indicated this year, while significant gains were made on some fronts, overall performance has been mixed. In particular, the benefits of growth have been unequally shared both across and within countries. This is particularly true for the Asia-Pacific region.

Asia's record of progress on the MDGs remains impressive but uneven. The remarkable growth figures from Asia, driven primarily by China and India, no doubt have helped lift millions out of poverty. Vietnam has surpassed the MDG poverty reduction goal of halving the number of people living below the poverty line and is planning to go even further beyond them by another 40% by 2010.

Bangladesh is well on track on poverty reduction, with poverty down to 40% in 2005. But, in recent months, rising food and fuel prices have reversed some of these gains. East Asia is generally on track, and South Asia is behind but is making progress on many goals. But progress across the MDGs is disparate, with health and environmental sustainability being the slowest areas for progress.

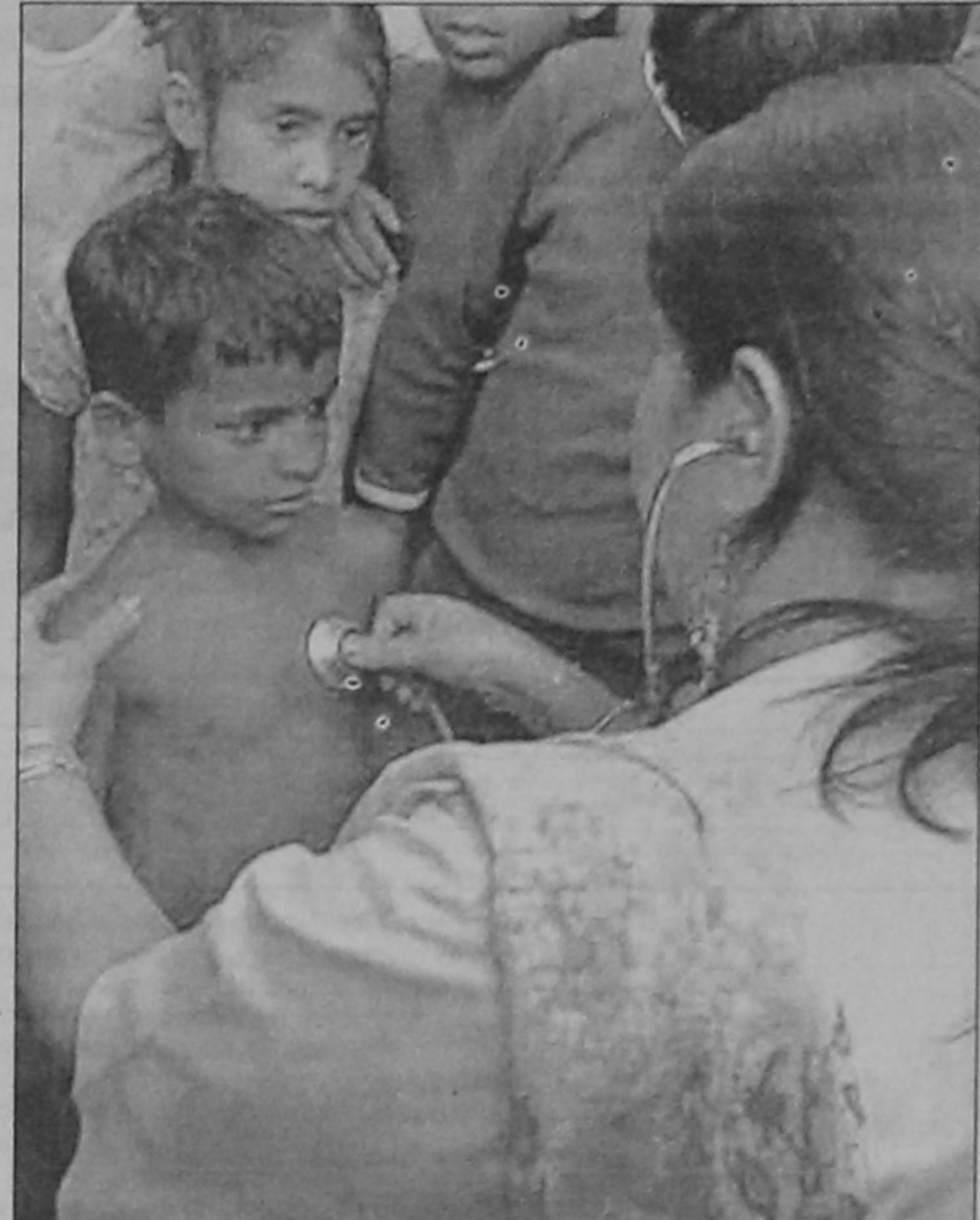
One of the striking features of the growth story in the Asia-Pacific region is the increasing gap between countries -- while the larger, rapidly growing economies like China and India have

advanced by leaps and bounds, there is a widening gap between the faster growing economies and those being left behind -- particularly the least-developed countries, landlocked countries and the small island states. Here countries are mostly off-track towards meeting the MDGs.

Within well-performing countries too, particular regions and groups are falling behind. The rapid economic growth in these prospering countries has not automatically translated into tangible improvements for the majority of the people, or directly improved the lot of those at the lowest rungs of society. Inequalities are increasing dramatically, especially in the fast-growing economies.

This is painfully evident when we note that the indicators for maternal mortality have barely improved across the region, despite remarkable progress on economic indicators. This is primarily because the benefits of Asia's growth have remained largely concentrated to the urban centers. Rural populations, who still comprise the majority of the region's populace, have typically been bypassed. Moreover, these dramatic growth rates have not been accompanied by commensurate increases in employment opportunities or in investments for human development -- crucial opportunities that the region can no longer afford to miss.

Conditional cash transfers, which have been pioneered and tried with some success in Latin America, can provide much needed focus on specific MDGs, especially those related to education and health. Such schemes, in which mothers are provided cash incentives to ensure that their children -- especially girls -- go to school or to ensure that children are inoculated, can make a major difference in reaching the MDGs. Asian countries, with some exceptions, have not used such schemes as widely as in other regions where they have



Ailing health care sector.

been shown to work especially well in rural areas.

At the UN Development Program, we have seen and helped drive some progress in this region, even in countries that are landlocked and emerging from conflict. Operating in one of the most challenging security environments in the world, and assisted by the UN and other development partners, Afghanistan has rolled out a basic package of health services covering nearly 85% of the population, which is reported to have led to a 26% drop in under-five mortality and a 23% reduction in infant mortality between 2002 and 2006.

Bhutan, working closely with the UN and other agencies, has already reached the goal of halving the number of people without access to adequate drinking water and sanitation. But as a group more support is needed for these countries, especially landlocked countries, to help them benefit from broader Asian prosperity.

With the current volatility in global markets, the growing crisis of rising food and fuel prices, and the risks posed by climate change, it is the more vulnerable of the

countries in the region that are going to be at risk of sudden downturns. This is going to be one of the largest challenges in the years that remain until 2015. In a region where natural disasters and conflict have often inflicted substantial reversals to previous achievement, no gains can be taken for granted.

So while Asia has much to celebrate, there is also much to do. With increasing global pressure that threatens to slow things down, now more than ever the important dialogue that is to take place on September 25 must be converted to our most precious international currency -- action.

The message is simple: the Goals are achievable, but it will take concerted, creative and decisive action from the global community. That is precisely what Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is asking for at this high level meeting of world leaders, North and South, to share their concrete plans and next steps to deliver on these commitments.

Ajay Chhibber is Assistant Secretary-General, Assistant Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme and Director of UNDP's Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific.

National interest first

If we put the country's interest first, the CA's address to the nation has some merit. If we continue to operate as political operatives, rather than as dutiful citizens of the country, we will continue to wage the same old battles against the same old enemies with the same outcome. We are fighting on the battlefield of their choosing, in which they possess all the advantages.

RIPAN KUMAR BISWAS

ALTHOUGH good solutions are more important than good speeches, the address delivered by Chief Adviser (CA) Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed put an end to the long-drawn debates and speculations over the dates for the parliamentary and *upazila* parishad ballots.

There are plenty of reasons for everyone, including the political parties and businessmen, to feel happy about the announcement of the dates for the stalled elections. According to the CA's announcement, the general elections will be held on December 18 and the elections to local village and town councils will be held in two phases -- on December 24 and 28, which, according to major political parties, can distract the full attention of the Election Commission (EC)

and the government from the parliamentary elections.

The CA did not clarify the issue of the withdrawal of the emergency, nor did the EC clarify its commitment with regard to registration of political parties and redrawing of constituencies.

The people expect the political parties, the government, and the democratic institutes to offer a positive agenda and get things done for the country.

The fact of change is more important than the feeling of change. Since the imposition of emergency on January 11, 2007, the government of Fakhruddin Ahmed had undertaken a number of schemes for political and electoral reforms and detained over 200 leading politicians on graft charges, but there was suspense

clouded with suspicion and uncertainty regarding the journey toward democracy.

Mentioning the previous anarchic situation, Fakhruddin hoped that with the support of the people and sincere cooperation from the political parties Bangladesh could establish real democracy.

To reach a consensus on basic national issues, shunning all negative and destructive politics, everyone will have to work with unity and amity to establish a congenial and stable atmosphere so that the nation can come out from the vicious grip of terrorists and corrupt elements.

He expressed his optimism that the next elected government would strengthen the institutional reform process that has been initiated by his government.

If we put the country's interest first, the CA's address to the nation has some merit. If we continue to operate as political operatives, rather than as dutiful citizens of the country, we will continue to wage the same old battles against the same old enemies with the same outcome. We are fighting on the battlefield of their choosing, in which they possess all the advantages.

National interest cannot be achieved by settling old scores, extracting vengeance for past wrongs, and demonising those with whom we disagree. History operates its own court of justice, and vengeance is the enemy of progress.

National interest is not an ideology, and not the possession of a single cabal of self-appointed imperialists. It is not achieved by substituting consensus for principle. It is not bipartisanship for its own sake, or in pursuit of bad policy.

The national interest of Bangladesh is the product of its glorious national history. Equal rights for all, sustainable democracy, economic opportunity, respect for the constitutional

guarantees (including habeas corpus), regulation of market excess, natural heritage and environment, fairness, justice, and balanced government are all in the national interest.

On the other hand, concentrated wealth, fear of terrorism, theocracy, empire building, corruption in government and politics, arrogant and ignorant executives, and violation of civil liberties always put the country in many difficulties.

Today, people are living in a planet without borders/ boundaries because any change of one element has an impact on other elements in the world. Good foreign policy can help to protect a country's national interest, national security, ideological goals and economic goals.

The foreign policy of Bangladesh is tied closely to the realities of its economic condition. Since independence in 1971, the country has required a great deal of foreign assistance in the effort to keep its people fed and to build, for the first time, a modern society.

Despite its poverty and small military capability, Bangladesh has

not hesitated to defend its sovereignty and to take strong stands on many international issues.

In the geopolitical sphere, Bangladesh has prestige and influence in the world. It is the fourth largest Muslim democratic country in the world. It is rich in historical heritage, cultural traditions and natural beauty.

Apart from various active roles in the UN organisations, Bangladesh is playing a vital role in regional organisations like Saarc, Asean and OIC. In UN peacekeeping operations, Bangladesh is still the top troop contributing country in the world.

The CA will address the 63rd UNGA on September 26. In addition, he will attend high-level meetings of the Commonwealth heads of government, on millennium development goals, on Africa's development needs and on malaria.

He will have interviews with Time magazine and BBC, as well as interaction with local media. His last address to the UNGA, on September 27, 2007, covered the climate change issue and Bangladesh's participation in



They need but do not get.

different UN organisations.

In his 15-minute address, he had neither mentioned anything about the legacy of democracy in the country nor even a word about the glorious democratic struggles of the people in the pre-independence days or about the victory of people's struggles against the military dictatorships and quasi-military rules in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

But his recent address to the

nation brought new inspiration in the march of attaining total development of the country's progress and prosperity. And people expect that he and the future leaders of Bangladesh will put more positives agendas in front of them, rather than doing anything that goes against national expectations or interests.

Ripan Kumar Biswas is a freelance writer based in New York. He can be reached at: Ripan.Biswas@yahoo.com.

The long arm of the law finally catches up with me



I am writing this column locked in a jail cell. No, really. Fifteen minutes ago, police officers turned up at my home. They put me in a police van, took me away, and then locked me in a cell.

Yes, they got me at last! I know a lot of readers are thinking: it's about time -- how on earth did that cheeky columnist survive on the loose so long in a place like Asia?

I was thinking the same thing myself. Officers gave me little information except the fact that my crime was one for which I might be released on bail.

So I am writing this in a tiny,

barred jail cell wondering which of my many crimes I had been nabbed for. Perhaps it was for writing: "Most Westerners think of Asia as a place of natural disasters and bad leaders. Actually, they're right."

Or was I being detained for general acts of being sarcastic in public places? Or had I been caught red-handed in the act of committing irony?

I was not particularly worried, as my normal mental state is "hungry for new experiences," or as my wife prefers to call it, "borderline insanity."

And I knew that police officers, like bees, tax collectors and facial moles, are charming companions as long as one doesn't antagonise them.

Indeed, my mind was working in the way that only a journalist's mind could work. You see, to the dedicated reporter, getting into trouble is a badge of honour.

Journalism is a funny sort of job. A typical conversation among reporters goes like this:

First reporter: "I got sacked yesterday for something I wrote."

Second reporter: "Wow, you lucky dog. I hoped to get sacked for

my column yesterday but I only got arrested and beaten up."

Third reporter, carried into the scene on a stretcher, on his way to the Accident and Emergency department of the hospital: "Well, I got SHOT for something I wrote."

First and second reporters: "COOL."

I recall being at a dinner party where a doctor said: "You can only call yourself a professional if you can be struck off for misbehaviour by a committee of your peers."

"Lawyers can call themselves professionals," a lawyer said, and then asked me: "What happens to a

reporter who misbehaves?"

"He gets promoted," I replied. Half an hour later, I'm a free man!

The cops let me out. But they gave me some really bad news. The offence for which I had been jailed was a minor motoring one. I was crestfallen. My visions of "Asia gripped by mass civil unrest after inconsequential minor syndicated columnist arrested" vanished.

Being locked up for a parking offence was intriguing, as I don't have a car.

But it took only a few minutes for my lightning-quick brain to work

out I had been collared because my name was on the registration document for my wife's vehicle.

Outside the station, I found that selfsame lady waiting in that selfsame car -- neatly parked on a double yellow line, of course.

Anyway, she knows me well, and had just the right words to comfort me. "Don't worry, dear," she said. "I'm sure one day you'll get properly arrested, beaten up and shot. And if the police won't do it for you, I'll do it myself."

Now that's love.

Feel free to tongue-lash our columnist at his website: www.vittachi.com.