

TALKING POLLS AND BEYOND

'Minus-two formula was not to minus two leaders, it was to minus democracy'

Rashed Khan Menon is the president of Worker's Party. He started his political career during student life and was elected vice-president of Dhaka University Central Student's Union. Menon was elected member of parliament twice, in 1979 and 1991, from Barisal. He played an important role in the liberation war in 1971 and in the anti-autocratic movement against H.M. Ershad. **Shariful Islam** and **Suranjith Deabnath** took the interview.

Do you have any doubts about the December 18 national elections?

The election must be held on December 18. But, the attitude of the government and the Election Commission has created doubts among the public. The government could not take any effective step to create an atmosphere conducive to holding a free and fair election. We still have to run our political activities indoors under six set conditions. Besides, government advisers, including the chief adviser, are making statements regarding elections that are not clear to anyone. The delimitation issue has not yet been settled. Besides, this is an army-backed government. Though they are saying repeatedly that they have no high ambitions, we know they are trying to establish a control system in Bangladesh. And, for doing that, they are taking various steps which are also creating doubts among the people.

Different political parties are pressing strongly for withdrawal of the state of emergency during polls, but the government wants to hold the election under emergency. What is your view?

If the election is held under the state of emergency it will be questionable. The government is saying that it will relax or suspend the state of emergency, but it has no constitutional right to do that. The government says that it is keeping the state of emergency

for curbing corruption, but all corruption suspects have already come out of jails. Tarique Rahman has already gone abroad. Why should the whole country suffer for 180 or 200 people. If the state of emergency is needed to maintain law and order during election, it will be required in all elections in future. Election and state of emergency do not go together. If the EC and the government remain strict in holding a free and fair election it must be free and fair.

You wanted deferral of upazila election.

The whole nation will focus on national election. So holding of upazila election five days after the parliamentary one will not be possible. Besides, voters will be confused if both the elections are held simultaneously. The caretaker government is holding the election due to their mistrust of political parties. How can you mistrust political parties that are going to lead the nation?

Will not it be easier for criminals to take part in election and flex their muscle power in elections under a political government?

In the 1979, 1986 and 1988 general elections, which were held under military government, killers were elected parliament members and I can identify them by name. This government is also a military-backed government. So, it is not

true that criminals can participate, or be used, in elections held under a democratically elected government. After the 1990 mass movement we made a commitment for a fair election and an accountable government free from criminals, but unfortunately the two big political parties who ruled the country failed to perform. And, unfortunately, by that time our politics slipped into criminalisation, communalisation and corruption.

Why are political parties, including your party, expressing reservation about local election observers?

We raised the objection because, in the election of 2001, a good number of Jamaat and Islami groups in the form of NGOs got registered as election observers, and they acted in favour of the BNP-Jamaat-led coalition in the election booths. There are still many such people. Why do they become election observers? The foreign community provides them funds. We told the EC to form an all-party election observer group that will observe the election.

Do you think the government and the EC back-tracked from their earlier position about reforms?

Excepting the EC, ACC, PSC and formation of some commissions, there were no other reforms by the government. The EC, on the basis of our reform proposals, made

some electoral reforms. However, the EC retreated from its earlier position on stopping religion-based politics and war criminals, though it earlier accepted those proposals. It admitted that and expressed frustration that it had to do that due to pressure from the executives.

Will the reforms play any role in changing the political culture?

There will be some changes in electoral culture. The change in political culture depends on the political parties. However, due to those electoral rules, political parties will think 10 times before doing anything, and this will be the only return from the laws. There will not be any basic reforms if political parties themselves do not change their political culture.

Should reform be imposed?

Reforms should come from inside. Reforms is the mindset, it is the political culture and behaviour and political practices.

How can the conflict and disbelief now prevailing in our political culture be removed?

Political parties need to accept election results, and play roles in parliament as treasury and opposition as per parliamentary norms. They also need to stop money games and criminalisation of politics.

How do you evaluate the success and failure of this government?

The government achieved successes in reforming the EC, ACC, PSC and some other commissions. It, however, proved seriously lacking in running the administration. It also lacks responsibility to the people. During this government's tenure, 40 lakh people in the informal sector have become unemployed and shelter-less, another 14 lakh have gone below the poverty line in the last one and a half years due to price hike of essentials, and

we have moved backward from forward marching position. Political corruption decreased slightly in the upper level, but institutional corruption increased. Besides, all the steps this government has taken regarding our national resources are controversial.

What's your opinion about the so-called minus-two formula?

The minus-two formula was ill-conceived and unfortunate. It was not to minus the two leaders, rather it was to minus democracy. They could not convince the people. So, minus-two has turned to manage-two policy. It was a boomerang for the government.

What is your view about the anti-corruption drive of the government?

Political bigwigs who thought themselves untouchable have been arrested. But, people's perception is that the anti-graft drive is a drive against politicians because the drive against corruption was not conducted with due transparency and accountability. Besides, corruption has shifted to other tracks from politics, but I do not want to mention those names. If you inquire about those who purchased lands and flats you will see corruption has been transferred, not removed.

Do you think those who are accused of corruption should get nomination in the upcoming election?

In our reform proposal that we placed to the EC, we have clearly suggested not giving nomination to any corrupt people. Our party will not give nomination to corrupt people. Besides, 14-party alliance partners are also committed, as per our 23-point charter, not to nominate any corrupt people, criminals and black money holders. We hope they will

also not give nomination to such people.

If a big alliance partner like AL gives nomination?

In that case we will refrain from campaigning from such candidates. We will not take their responsibility.

What do you think about the proposed meeting between Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia?

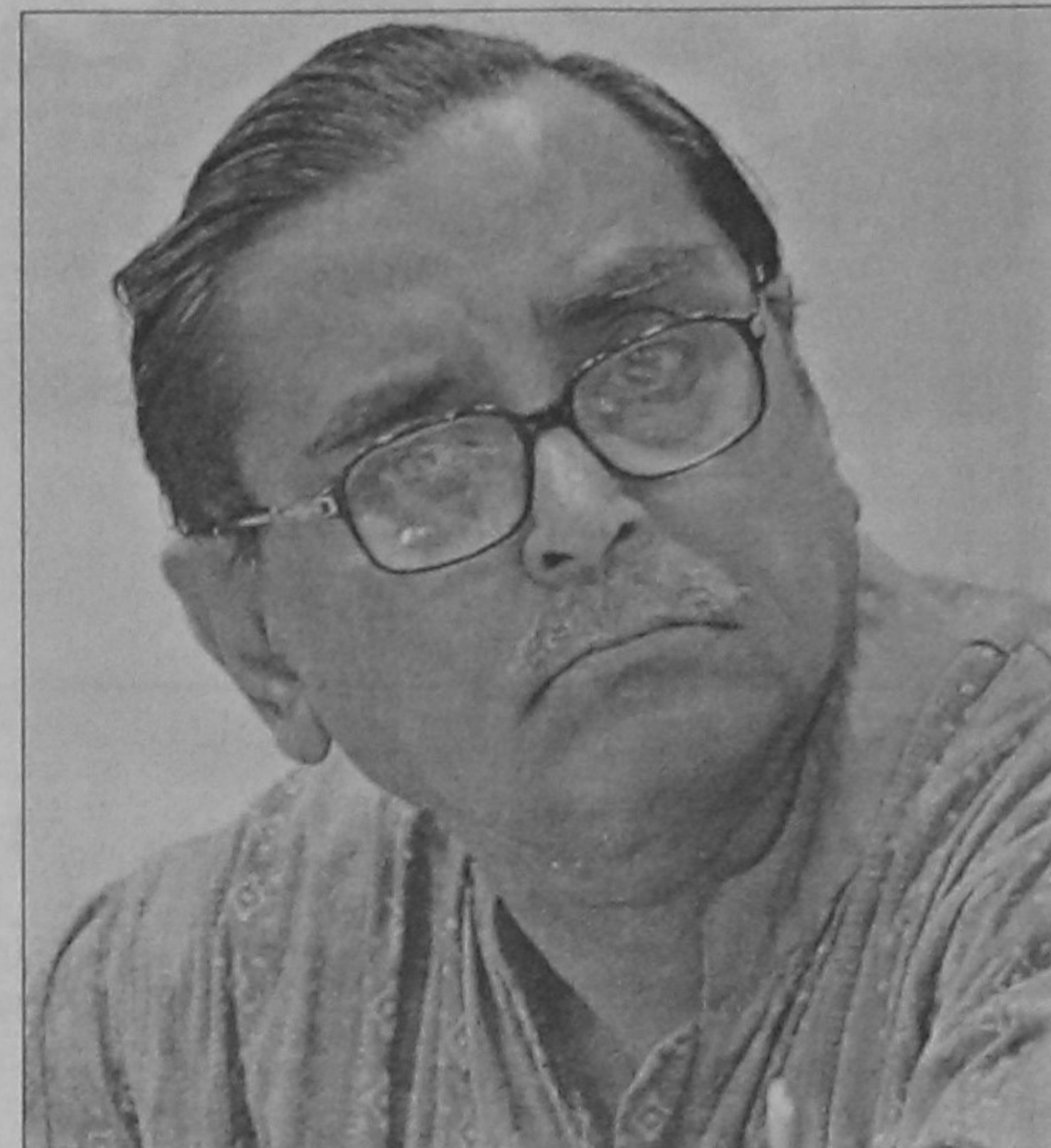
I think political party leaders will hold dialogues among themselves, and it is nothing special. I believe political leaders should sit together if any crisis arises, and if the two top leaders sit together some results will come.

There is criticism about foreign diplomats' comments about our internal political activities. What is your view?

We are always against such activities. Unfortunately, during the political turmoil before 1/11, the US ambassador, the British high commissioner in Bangladesh, and the EU nakedly interfered in our politics, and they have continued it after the 1/11 changeover. They are again active as the next election is nearing. I think it is not only beyond diplomatic norms, but also unfortunate. The political parties also should not go to them willingly to have their views. The media people also should not want their views.

What is the position of Worker's Party in the 14-party alliance? Recently, 11 parties of the alliance held meetings separately.

Apart from the 14-party alliance activities, 11-party is doing its program separately. AL is also doing so. We had differences with the AL on some issues. When AL made a five-point agreement with Khelafat Majlish, 11-party held a press conference and protested it. What about H.M. Ershad's joining of the grand alliance?



Rashed Khan Menon

Ershad is now talking about the grand alliance. I think he is doing so to consolidate his political position. I am not saying that there will be no grand alliance in the election but, till now, there has been no discussion in the 14-party about grand alliance. We have clearly said that Ershad has no chance of joining the 14-party fold. However, there might be unity with Jatiya Party about seat sharing in the upcoming election. We have already said we will not forge any political unity with communal and autocratic forces.

How do you see 1/11?

1/11 is nothing but an accident, and an abnormal situation. Our democratic trend has been affected, two years have been wasted and the country has gone

10 years backward. A non-elected government backed by the military never gave good results, and we will see that if we look at the last one year's economic indicators. This army-backed government wants to establish a control system under, and backed by, western powers and under the hegemony of an unconstitutional system for a long time, but they could not do that and will not succeed. The EU office here played a criminal role at that time.

Is there any lesson that political leaders can take from 1/11?

Political leaders will behave democratically and march forward upholding democracy. The lesson is that if you invite a tiger, it will attack you.

Power play

Over the years, Bangladesh has been generating less electricity than the demand. The result is a crisis that afflicts national life. There is a policy, but it rarely delivers according to plan. There are snags of many kinds -- incompetence and frailty of the minister, venal political agenda of the party in power, bureaucratic procrastination, snares of business groups and high-browed mantras of international donors etc.

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THE other day, a prominent business leader was on a TV talk show, one of the many that private satellite channels telecast in large numbers. He was projecting a doomsday scenario of the government power sector.

In his opinion, the machinery in government sector aging plants is nothing but junk and should be replaced, or else a disaster is awaiting our power sector. As far as I could gather, there are some aging plants in all power sectors.

As for the machinery, they are replaced as a matter of routine maintenance of plants. What is worrying is the shortfall in power generation that runs to approximately 1200 MW. I later learnt that the business leader is a budding power sector entrepreneur.

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Naturally, the power sector plods. The arithmetic has always been disappointing. In 2008, Bangladesh's power sector had an installed capacity of about 5500 MW. But the electricity generated is on average 3700 MW. The demand for power is 5000 MW approximately. It grows by roundabout 30%. Had it not been for the captive generation of around 1000 to 1500 MW, pressure on the national grid would have mounted.

Power sector officials point out a number of factors responsible for this shortfall. As a matter of routine work, some plants are out of opera-

tion for overhauling and for balancing and modernisation. Indeed, there are plants that have been out of operation for a long time, albeit their numbers are few.

Insufficient supply of gas is another factor that accounts for a shortfall of 300 to 500 MW.

Whatever be the factor, our governments have always responded to the crisis with knee-jerk reactions. The government in power during 1996-2001 responded to the power crisis by enlisting the support of Independent Power Producers in setting up barge-mounted power plants for the expeditious improvement of the worsening situation.

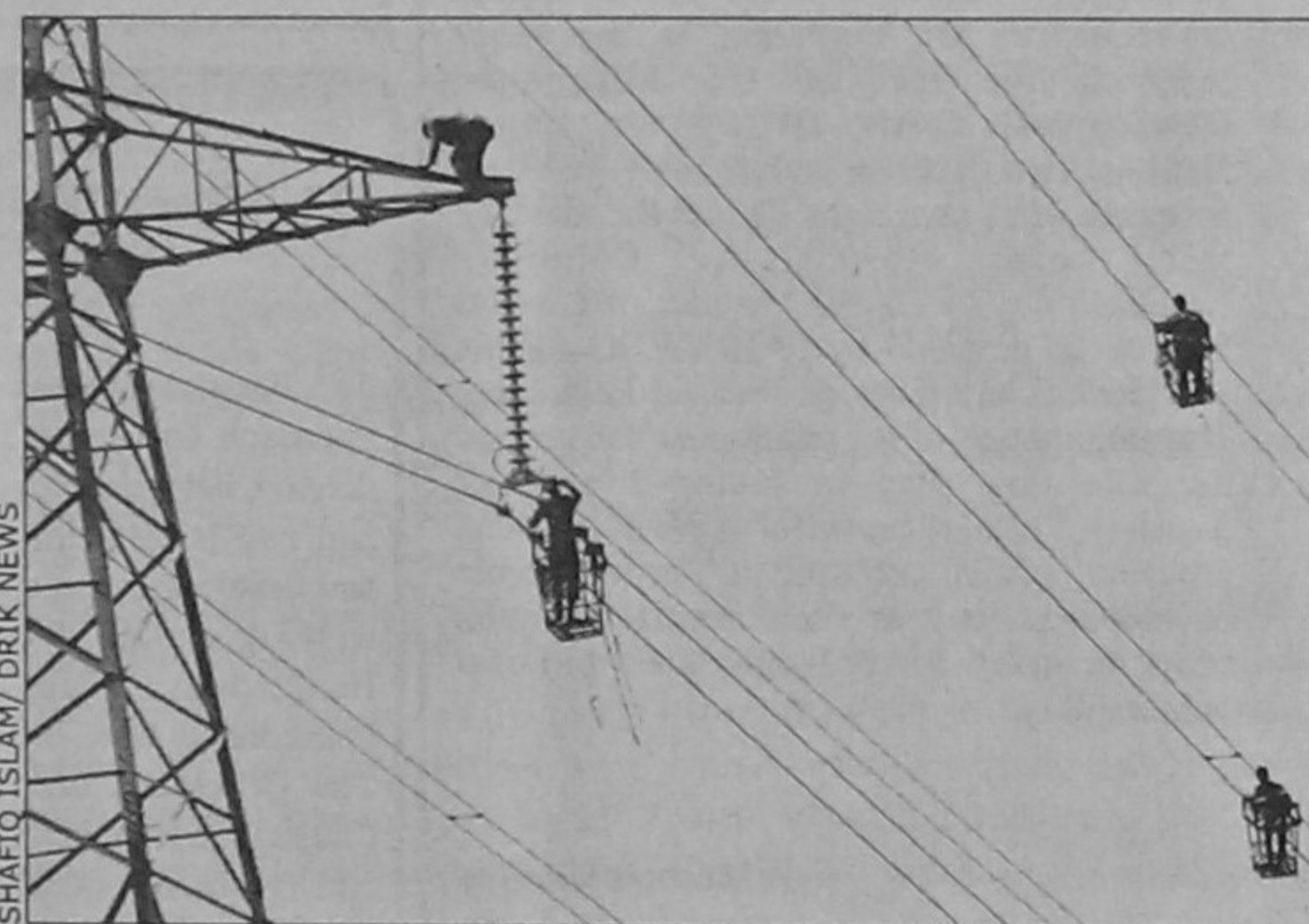
The deal that set up the barge-mounted power plant in Goalpara, Khulna added 110 MW to the national grid but, at the same time, it placed a big burden on the government sector power under the power purchase agreement.

Half of the payment is to be made in convertible foreign currency and the other half, for the importation of furnace oil, is to be adjusted against international price of oil. The equation is so heavily loaded in favour of the owning company that per unit cost of electricity often goes over Tk.6.

Besides, there is a loss of revenue because imported furnace oil for the plant was made duty free. The only consolation was that it saw the birth of indigenous entrepreneurs in private sector power generation.

The power situation did not improve when the next government came to power. The prime minister kept the portfolio under her. The new state minister for power made it clear from the beginning what he stood for. He castigated the rationality of setting up small power plants as wasteful.

However, he could not set up a single large power plant in five years. Besides, the increase in generating capacity was also not



Power sector: Barely hanging on.

significant. Only 300 MW, approximately, was added to the national grid.

Much was heard about a 450 MW gas-based power plant at Sirajganj. The process exposed a rift within the government and showed that the ministers were out of touch with the prime minister. The single bid tender opened Pandora's Box -- that there were questionable motives behind the proposal.

The ministerial purchase committee duly approved it, but it got stuck in the prime minister's secretariat. The proposal was sent back, questioning the lone bid offer, with an order to institute an enquiry commission to look into it for possible wrong-doing.

If the lone bid violated transparency, why was it opened in the first place? The redeeming part of it was that it had the most attractive offer of Tk. 2.3275 per unit of electricity. The plant was to be set up on the basis of ownership ratio of 60:40 -- 60% owned by the bidder and 40% by PDB for the land provided by it.

Later, the Sirajganj power plant project was to become an ill-fated proposal. This is what happens to a good project when power play acts as the arbiter.

Much has been said about small power plants. Small power plants are less efficient and less cost effective than bigger power plants. But it must be said that small power plants are not without their merits.

Small power plants can be commissioned within a short period. For localised development or the development of a particular area, it is useful. Besides, the fund can be raised locally, enabling indigenous entrepreneurs to participate in the power sector.

Indeed, it has seen the rise of a

number of indigenous private power producers. However, it is not practical to believe that small power plants alone are a solution to the power problems of Bangladesh. It will involve the setting up of an unbelievably large number of small power plants all over the country for something that can be done by a few large power plants at the load centres.

Since small power plants are not dependent on foreign donors, they attract political power peddlers to seize on the opportunity. In fact, the last government indulged in this kind of power play when it brazenly distributed 20 MW power plant contracts like it was distributing largesse. The folly was realised and the contracts were cancelled.

Power plants in the scenario of Bangladesh are like big game hunting. The catch is big and there is grandeur about it. Ayub Khan was all about grandeur, and his government set up the Kaptai Hydroelectric dam for 230 MW of electricity.

Large tracts of wooded land were lost in Kaptai Lake, and it gave rise to long drawn out tribal insurgency. The present caretaker government is actively pursuing rental power plants. Like small power plants, these alone are not the solution to the power problem.

I understand that the power ministry always had a plan, but its implementation had to pay obeisance to political expediency. The power problem is carried on from one government to another. Our fervent prayers will be for our power sector to be run professionally, not only in planning but also in implementation.

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The twin crises of finance and food

In 2007 alone, the food crisis threw an additional 75 million people into the ranks of the malnourished. Hard-won gains by many nations in their battles against hunger and poverty may be reversed. The ability of countries to meet the Millennium Development Goals will be ever more doubtful. Over 60 countries are receiving support and assistance from the international community to boost food production.

HE CHANGCHUI

AS world leaders struggle to halt the crisis spreading across the global financial markets, analysts and economists are attempting to gauge the magnitude of this meltdown. Will it rival or surpass the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Black October of 1987 or the Asian Economic Collapse of 1997? In fact, it has the potential to be far worse, and the reasons are high food prices and food shortages, and the steady erosion of agriculture and rural economies.

Food availability and affordability are the bedrocks of any society. During the Great Depression, Black October and the Asian Economic Crisis, food prices were at historic lows. No matter how dire the situation, food was still plentiful and cheap. Today, the story is different. Food is in shorter supply; prices have been steadily climbing since 2001, and have escalated dramatically since 2006.

According to the tracking of our Organisation, food prices rose by 9% in 2006, 24% in 2007, and surged 51% in the past 12 months. Although we saw some price drops for certain food commodities in the past months, average prices are still much higher than normal, and the international markets remain volatile.

During normal times, that level of 'sticker shock' would spell hardship for most working people and the poor. Coupled with an economic crisis of the enormity taking place today, the impact could be catastrophic.

The role of food security in wider events should not be underestimated. Food shortages and runaway food price inflation have a history of leading to social unrest and political upheaval. The current crisis has already sparked riots and social turbulence in over 30 countries, and contributed to the fall of at least one elected government.

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people into the ranks of the malnourished. Hard-won gains by many nations in their battles against hunger and poverty may be reversed. The ability of countries to meet the Millennium Development Goals will be ever more doubtful. Over 60 countries are receiving support and assistance from the international community to boost food production.

World leaders have been aware of the growing threats to food security for several years. Recently, they began taking steps to address these looming perils. In June 2008, more than \$11 billion was pledged at the Rome Food Security Summit, attended by representatives from 181 nations including more than 40 Heads of State.

The money is to be used for immediate food aid for those who need it, and for investing in and revitalising the agricultural sector to boost crop production. Considering the array of needs to be addressed, it was not an enormous sum, but it was a good start.

The danger today is that those commitments will not be kept. Governments have few choices except to set aside hundreds of billions of dollars to rescue ailing financial institutions. But that may leave them with hard choices. Some may have to cut funding from other programmes to pay for this bailout.

One of the least politically popular areas of government expenditure is foreign aid. Citizens naturally ask: when times are tough at home, why should we be giving money to poor farmers in developing countries? It is a legitimate question. Let us be clear about the answer.

This is not just a problem of poor farmers in developing countries. This is everybody's problem. In the modern world few if any nations are self sufficient when it comes to food security. Even the wealthiest countries import massive amounts of food. Countries that ship rice overseas may still need to source wheat from outside

their borders.

In this respect, the world truly is interconnected and interdependent. For that reason, this is a problem that can only be addressed at a global level, and so the pledges made in Rome must be fulfilled -- and fulfilled on time.

For food prices to come down, food supplies will have to increase. And for food supplies to meet the growing demands of the world's population, an infusion of investment in agriculture is essential. Climate change may already be a factor behind increasing droughts and flooding in fertile, food-producing regions.

The lure of quick cash from growing crops suitable for bio-fuels has reduced the amount of land devoted to growing food. Subsidies and trade barriers distort markets and reduce efficiency in production and distribution.

That said, no country can do this alone. It requires partnerships, investment on industry, the lives of those engaged in agriculture have become ever more hard.

There are 583 million hungry people on farms and in villages across Asia and the Pacific; 75% of the region's poor live in rural areas. These days, there may not be much in the village for the jobless to return to. The social safety net has been frayed.

Governments of developing countries, therefore, must also do their part. The bulk of investment to improve infrastructure and boost productivity must come from the developing countries themselves. Policies that support agriculture, making it sustainable, rewarding and sufficiently productive to support us all must be adopted with urgency.

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Shrinking ability to buy food.

A critical factor in the shortfalls in food supplies is that in much of the developing world farmers are not anywhere near as productive as they could be. They have the potential to grow a greater variety of crops and increase the number of harvests each year. Unfortunately, many lack the technical knowledge, tools and infrastructure to achieve this. With investment and support they can remedy these problems and begin producing enough food for us all at prices we can stomach.

A thriving agricultural sector provides another benefit for many societies; it serves as a social safety net. As factories closed and jobs disappeared in the wake of Asia's meltdown during the late 1990s, substantial numbers of rural people who had migrated to cities to work returned to their farms and villages. Resources were still plentiful and food was there to be shared. But with governments focussing

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