

CEC's frustration perfectly understandable

Higher judiciary must be fully aware of implications of its decisions

THE frustration of the Chief Election Commissioner is perfectly understandable. With the higher judiciary directing the Election Commission to allow a number of individuals earlier barred on legal grounds from contesting the general elections to take part in the polls after all, A.T.M. Shamsul Huda and his colleagues are truly in a dilemma. The elections are slightly over a week away and all necessary preparations have been made to hold them on schedule. But to what extent this schedule has been affected, even rocked, can be seen from the EC's move on Thursday, in line with Supreme Court directives, to have twenty one individuals take part in the December 29 elections. The CEC, in a clear tone of exasperation, has been sarcastic about these developments. The EC, he has said, will go on accepting candidacies till the day before the polls if the higher judiciary says it must.

There are very compelling reasons why the men at the helm of the Election Commission are now in a state of frustration. A very valid one involves the logistics needed to accommodate the new candidates on the ballot. The necessary manpower and all other elements required for the elections to be conducted properly and normally are already in place. But with the higher judiciary stepping in with decisions in favour of those earlier disqualified as candidates, some major complications have arisen. At all the constituencies where these new candidates will contest the polls, new ballot papers (literally in the tens of thousands) have now become necessary. The EC does not appear to have enough time on its hands to do that. But assuming it does, there is the further problem of making all these fresh ballot papers available to voting centres in the deep rural interior of the constituencies. And that is not all. With the EC having already allocated symbols to the candidates, the entry of the new candidates will mean new pressure on it about a reallocation of the symbols. There are other difficulties as well. The candidates cleared for polls participation by the higher judiciary will likely find themselves contesting against individuals from their own parties with the same symbols.

Against such a background of complexities, the higher judiciary needs to exercise the greatest caution. While dispensation of justice must be the highest priority, the need to hold a well-managed national election cannot also be given any less importance. There is a larger society whose political imperatives cannot be denied. At this newspaper, we believe it is of the utmost importance to have the elections held in a proper, free and transparent manner so that Bangladesh can get back to democracy. We fear, though, that the increasing legal tangle the EC is getting into over such last-minute candidacies will create management hurdles that may jeopardise the polls. Let the higher judiciary take a broader view by making it possible for the elections to be held without the hurdles that have lately been coming in their way. It will be a shame if the elections get tied into legal knots at this late stage.

Migrant workers' future

Don't close doors on productive workforce

WE express our deep concern at the looming likelihood of mass scale retrenchment of migrant workers around the world as a fallout of the global economic recession. Our concern is primarily based on the forecast of the International Labour Organization (ILO) of worsening conditions for migrant workers in the present economic state of affairs.

Shutting the door on productive migrant workforce would be the worst thing to happen. After all, the story of massive development in the rich countries is the story of millions of comparatively cheaper migrant workers contributing immensely with their hard labour and skill. On the other side of the divide, millions of families in the poor and developing countries depend on remittances sent by the migrant workers for their sustenance. Any setback, therefore, will result in starvation of the members of these families. Already the impact of layoffs is being felt in countries like Bangladesh, which send a large number of semi-skilled and skilled workers to various destinations. Remittances to Bangladesh are likely to reach \$8.9 billion in the current fiscal because of global retrenchment, though the projected target was \$10 billion. This will no doubt put pressure on the country's foreign currency reserves in the coming days.

Fearing a major social and economic turmoil following large scale retrenchment of migrant workers, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has already issued a statement that we believe developed countries should take into immediate consideration. It says that as the 'economic crisis is yet to unfold totally, its full impact remains unknown. Therefore, it would be unproductive for the developed countries to close their doors to migrants.' Though the IOM has spoken for all migrants it no doubt addresses the plight of the migrant workers in the present context.

There are also important steps that need to be taken at the national level in our country. The focus must be on an enhancement of the skills of the workers we send abroad since at present they happen to be at the lowest rung of the job ladder abroad. In this regard, we note the advantages that can be had from sending our nurses abroad. Unfortunately, training of nurses is something that has not happened because most universities cannot provide such training, again because they do not have medical schools attached to them. But it is a problem that can be tackled by the existing universities, public as well as private, through using the facilities of existing medical schools or colleges. In other words, a more creative use of nursing facilities, and similar facilities, can be thought of. It is time for a rethink on our part.

Addressing integrated rural development through ICT

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

DESPITE advances in nuclear technology and rocket science in India and Pakistan, South Asia is generally recognized by the rest of the world as a region of promise but still held back by poverty, illiteracy, lack of sufficient economic development and infrastructure in its vast rural hinterland. We have within SAARC nearly one billion people who remain mired in the subsistence level, devoid of sufficient economic opportunities.

It was this matrix that persuaded me recently to visit one of the regional multilateral institutions based in Dhaka. I am referring to the Centre on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific (CIRDAP). It was a revealing experience. Established under the aegis of FAO in 1979 as a regional, inter-governmental and autonomous institution, its objectives include -- the reiterating of the commitment (political will) of its membership to rural development, enhancing sustainable livelihoods and promoting gender equality. Now it has added on to its agenda the prospect of leveraging information and communication technology for alleviation of poverty in the region. Worthwhile ambitions! However I wish it was poverty reduction and not poverty alleviation. That would have suggested addressing the root causes instead of a general approach in the treating of the problem of poverty.

The area of engagement within the issue of integrated rural development is complex. It has to find ways and means as to how to make the economic growth processes more inclusive by reaching out to millions of poor households in the rural areas. It also has to identify the best means for implementation of special programmes for sustainable development, natural resources regeneration and management, rural infrastructure, rural employment generation, minor irrigation and consequential water management. This process has now become even more multifaceted with the idea of including rural e-connectivity and trying to base it within the paradigm of a gender responsive approach.

The CIRDAP Governing Council recently met in New Delhi and quite correctly decided to bridge the rural-urban digital divide by bringing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to the

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door steps of the rural households. This will be a difficult move given the really poor infrastructure that currently exists in our rural areas. However, it is indeed commendable that the first step of agreeing on this important measure has been taken.

I believe that Bangladesh could set the ball rolling in this regard by promoting self-help groups of women and empowering them through member-based organizations, micro-credit and enterprise based activities. Decentralising the governance system as envisaged within an elected local government structure would definitely help in decision making. This will require greater political will but that should emerge after the forthcoming parliamentary election.

If one looks at countries in the Far East as well as in some regions of Latin America, one will be able to identify easily the helpful changes that have emerged in these countries because of greater usage of ICT. It has helped their rural populations to achieve development goals effectively and enhance the capabilities of their poor to be a part of an emerging knowledge society. It has also strengthened their integration into a market economy, speeded up the production processes and facilitated faster communications between individuals, groups, enterprises, communities and the government.

This process should be of particular interest to small and medium entrepreneurs in Bangladesh and our quest to better market our rural products and to diversify our export based and potential. It will also help improve sustainable livelihoods, increase incomes of rural households, and sharpen product design, quality control and maintenance of standards. It will also contribute towards the creation of appropriate market supply chains and regional networks for

marketing through trade fairs (of rural products).

Addressing our poor rural power and energy network will have to be one of the priorities of our next political government. This, and the spread of functional literacy will be required if we are to profit from e-connectivity. We need to look at Thailand, Korea, India and China and learn from them.

As agreed upon by the Governing Council, community access to ICT may be expanded through 'successful e-community models such as information kiosks, wired villages, agriculture marketing portals, computerisation of land records, 'grameen' (mobile phones obtained through micro-credit facilities) phones, etc.' This will however have to be facilitated through technologies that are simple, cost-effective and user friendly. The effectiveness of this exercise could also be strengthened by using local resources including renewable energy sources wherever possible. I have written today about integrated rural development and the use of ICT to redress existing poverty conditions because of the prevalence of ultra poverty in Bangladesh's rural hinterland. The steep rise in commodity prices over the last two years has also not helped. We have to remember that according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) nearly 40 per cent of our population still live below the upper poverty line and that nearly 65 per cent of the rural population is functionally landless. The situation is further exacerbated through food insecurity (particularly for those living in Chars, in coastal areas and in the Monga hit regions in north-west Bangladesh directly hit by seasonal unemployment), chronic malnutrition (affecting nearly half of the children under the age of five and nearly 40 per cent of

the mothers) and disease (compounded even further because of the prevalence of arsenic in ground water resources).

Bangladesh's next political government has to undertake an effective and coordinated response to the need for integrated rural development through both short and long term strategies. Our development partners can help us to make it more effective by insisting on tools that will make the process more accountable. CIRDAP can also lead a hand through capacity building and improving in-house training facilities pertaining to participatory learning methods.

Such a hands-on engagement needs to be put in place especially for the agricultural sector. Development functionaries like agricultural extension managers serving farmers in rural areas, should be motivated to provide not only technical guidance but also to influence the attitude of the farmers and the rural community to accept new habits and practices. That should be possible given the fact that our farming community (as demonstrated over the past two decades) is always willing to learn. CIRDAP should also help tackle, throughout South Asia, the non-income dimensional problems of poverty such as access to education and preventive health care.

This constructive engagement will require additional resources. I know that the international community is presently suffering from an acute financial crisis and a credit squeeze. Nevertheless, we have to find the necessary political will to address this issue. We need to understand that reducing poverty means increasing economic opportunities and better living conditions. That will directly reduce the prospect of disaffection (that contributes towards desperation and antagonism).

I firmly believe that in the long run, containing poverty is a cheaper alternative to fighting the costly war on terror. A rural community empowered by ICT will assist this process. It will help the entire region to move forward in qualitative terms. It will also create a more intensive rural-urban interaction which has recently been described aptly as 'urbanization'. This in turn, will assist in rural development and the enhancement of the productive capability of the poor.

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Lofty promises

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

WITH AL and BNP having announced their manifestos containing a big list of pledges. However, people are left wondering more why BNP that ruled the country in the immediate past failed so miserably to achieve some of the goals like meeting the food gap and energy crisis in their earlier tenure. Strangely, without admitting their lapses and mistakes, both parties are making commitments to redeem their pledges if they are voted to power again. But the mother of all advices for any party vying for power is: do not commit what can't be delivered. And as for BNP, already their load of unfulfilled promises is excessively heavy.

When the anxious citizens are waiting to see transfer of power to an elected government through a peaceful and credible election to be held in the next few days, BNP chairperson's discordant notes in different meetings on her election campaign in the south western part of the country about a conspiracy being hatched to foil the election astonish many. With Police, RAB and Armed Forces deployed around the country to plug all such loopholes, people cannot give credence to such doomsaying.

People are optimistic about the resurgence of democratic governance in the country. This has been evident from the impressive voter enthusiasm and the effort of the Election Commission through different electronic and print media aimed at educating the voters about the way they would exercise their franchise after receiving the ballot paper.

The BNP manifesto embraces all aspects of peoples' suffering and woes, but evidently there is lack of direction and action plan to tackle these issues and problems. The manifesto has made loud proclamations of eliminating corruption from the body politic of the society but tragically during immediate past alliance rule this country's corruption record was most abysmal as the TI scoreboard indicated. Shockingly, despite knowing the adverse reaction it would have on the voter's mind, the party has nominated persons with tainted past for the parliamentary seats. In none of her speeches since she

BITTER TRUTH

Foremost of all issues that seem to have received scant attention in the manifesto of both the parties is the attendance in the Parliament session. AL has made just a cursory mention about making the Parliament effective, while the BNP has made pledges aplenty, but going by the past experiences, people are skeptical about their implementation.

started her election campaign, BNP chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia did either admit or regret the lapses committed during the alliance rule.

The action plan of the present EC suggests it is possible to turn a corrupted system into an agency of self-purification. Bangladesh statecraft is susceptible to public opinion and EC used the public disgust and the newly framed RPO to tame the political class. After so much of public resentment, people wonder why any such resolve to rid the country of corruption menace is missing in the BNP manifesto? At this crucial hour BNP manifesto should have given priority to transparency in government, fiscal discipline, disentanglement of the state from the areas that should be left to private initiative, the repeal of the archaic laws that encourage violations and an assault on the politician-criminal nexus.

The manifesto indicated that if the 4-party alliance were again voted to power they would complete the tender process of Bibiyana and Sirajganj power project within 100 days of their going to power. But people know that even the tender process of Sirajganj power project could not be completed during their five-year rule because of political consideration.

Hopefully both AL and BNP have made pledges to arrest price hike of essentials in their manifestos, however, with no mention of the specifics as to how it can be achieved. Undeniably true, food prices started shooting up during the alliance rule. Reports

published in the newspapers in July 2006 indicated that intelligence agencies as per the instruction of the Commerce Minister at that time identified the vicious circles working behind the scenes in creating artificial crisis and consequent price spiral. The identity and number of such importers and hoarders were reported to the minister. Reports further indicated that these were reported to the PMO at that time but no green signal was obtained to bring the culprits to book. That brings to the fore the same governance issue that plagued the administration during the alliance rule.

In fact only the caprices and vile profit making motives of the business groups are not only to blame. For over a decade now agricultural production has been stagnant. Agriculture faces a crisis of cultivable land for food grains remaining static at 2 crore 21 lakh acres. Rapid urbanization, road construction and industrialization, too, are taking up sizable chunks of land meant for agriculture. More disconcerting, the profitability from this land has not increased either, as land holdings have become smaller, expenses on irrigation water, fertilizer and pesticides have become higher.

Farming is increasingly becoming an unviable activity. Compounding the crisis is the addition of 25 lakh new mouths every year. So the prime minister of the newly elected government has to move with unusual alacrity to stem the rot, if, according to both the major parties, we have to live as a self-reliant nation with dignity. The basic fact behind any crisis

situation is shortage in production that has to be improved first. In fact, as capacities are created and supply situation improves, competition will drive inflationary pressure down and prices will even out.

It may also be mentioned in this connection that about 50 per cent of the vegetables and seasonal fruits gets wasted in the fields, launch ghats and bus terminals because of lack of proper storage and transportation facilities.

Foremost of all issues that seem to have received scant attention in the manifesto of both the parties is the attendance in the Parliament session. AL has made just a cursory mention about making the Parliament effective, while the BNP has made pledges aplenty about building up a healthy Parliament with deputy speaker nominated from the opposition party and both the speaker and the deputy speaker resigning from their parties. But going by the past experiences, people are skeptical about the implementation of these pledges because during the last five years of alliance rule, there was hardly any healthy debate on any national issue participated by the treasury and opposition benches. Parliamentary standing committees formed at that time could not even sit together on any vital issue starting from corruption allegation to development efforts.

Going by the parliamentarian's propensity or rather habit to skip House sessions, one would presume it was a task of scant significance, stripped of the gravity usually associated with running a country. For, the presence of an increasing number of members in Parliament seemed to be more a chance occurrence than a foresworn duty. On the issue of parliament boycott, sensible citizenry feel that it is criminal for the MPs to shirk their constitutional obligation towards people for any reason, inter-party conflict or pre-occupation with business, whatsoever. The people's representatives should value the enormous amount of public money spent on running Parliament other than the fact that MPs carry with them a pledge to speak about people's need in the parliament.

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OPINION

Explore tourism potential for forex earning

DR ZAKARIA LINCOLN

BANGLADESH can earn a lot of foreign currency based on the tourism products it has. Because tourism products are unique to respective countries and thus cannot be competed. It is being observed that many countries in the world are earning a big amount of foreign currency based on one or two tourism products. For example, our neighbouring country Nepal, with the highest mountain peak Everest in the world has taken a position in the world tourism market and earns huge amount of foreign currency. Bangladesh has a number of tourism products like Cox's Bazar, the longest sea-beach in the world; Kuakata from where one can get the rare chance of viewing the sun-rise and sun-set from the same point; Sundarban the largest mangrove forest in the world with the rare and special Royal Bengal Tiger. Moreover, during winter numerous guest birds come from Siberia and such other cold weather and stay in our marshy areas for sometime as bonus

for our tourism industry.

Our tourism industry is in a better position. Summer i.e. June to August is the tourism season in Europe and America. On the other hand, our tourism season is in winter i.e. October to March during when there is extreme cold in Europe and America and the tourist spots are not favourable for visiting. We are also in a favourable position from a lengthy tourism season here. The tourism season in Europe and America is three months (June-August) and our tourism season is six months (October-March) when we have congenial weather for tourists. Our tourism industry is having an extra advantage in terms of location too i.e. all the tourist locations situated within a distance of 400 km from the capital Dhaka. Tourists can reach any spot by road within dawn to dusk.

It is extremely regrettable that in spite of so many rare sights available, the name of Bangladesh is found nowhere in world tourist map. The issues of expansion of tourism industry and making it attractive to the foreigners always make one type of

policy makers raise eyebrows in terms of social and religious values. They just deny the fact that it is possible to flourish this industry even after following the social and religious norms and values.

There are other hindrances which act as setback to our tourism industry.

It is heard that after daylight, our Cox's Bazar sea-beach becomes hunting house for the rogues and there is no security for any type of tourists. It is not strange that you fill prey to muggers. The most negative aspect is that there is no rescuer for the surfing tourists. It is very surprising that there is no safety measures at the largest sea-beach in the world. Whereas in the small sea beaches in other countries rescue personnel are constantly patrolling with speedboat.

In spite of having tremendous specialties, everything is overshadowed by the incompatible communication system here. For instance, to cover Kuakata, a distance of 100 km from the divisional town Barisal, it takes five long hours by road. Especially terrible is the condition of 68 km of road to Kuakata

from Barisal-Patuakhali Highway junction. It takes four hours to cross this distance.

All the existing communications and other problems in these areas must be immediately worked out. Roads and communication systems have to be highly developed from Chittagong to Cox's-Bazar and Chittagong to Rangamati and Banderban and also from Dhaka to Kuakata, so that tourists can easily enjoy the beauty of world's largest sea-beach and the loveliness of hilly region and its tribal culture and life style as well as the enchanting sunrise and sunset.

Brochures can be prepared citing all the sites and sounds of Bangladesh tourist spots and distributed throughout the world by the tourism corporation.

Tourism is a service oriented industry. Therefore, government and non-government entrepreneurs who are running different hotels, restaurants and entertainment organizations should provide special training on hospitality to all its employees and staff.

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