

## A farmer-friendly pro-agriculture step

*Complementary action needed to maximise dividends*

**I**N a timely, bold and decisive move, the government has halved the price of non-urea fertiliser, a major input required for high-yield boro cultivation. Farmers so far applying only urea fertiliser having been inhibited by the high price of non-urea fertiliser have been given a strong signal about where the government's focus lies and the area that the government aims to provide a thrust to.

Memory is still fresh of the huge food deficit being worked off by a good boro harvest during the last agricultural season. This happened despite a somewhat flawed fertiliser supply, featured by high prices, too. We are heartened by the government's action to step up boro production based on its realisation of how crucial the crop is to ensuring food security.

By this single step which couples with a slender cut in the price of diesel, the farmer's cost of production will be reduced by Tk 1 to 2.5 per kg enabling him in turn to sell his produce cheaper. Constant vigil must be maintained to ensure remunerative price to the producer by keeping middlemen at bay.

Affordability is, however, no guarantee for availability. Now, the big task before the government is to arrange timely and trouble-free distribution of fertiliser to the farmer. The AL manifesto commits itself to ensuring smooth supply of fertilisers. So, halving of the price is in partial fulfillment of that promise, the more important part is to put in place an efficient distribution network.

Besides, there are other vital inputs like seeds and irrigation that would have to be provided in equal measure to boost agricultural productivity. We would in particular concentrate on irrigation under which 80 percent of the cultivable land has been brought over time. There is a simple calculation that serves to highlight the advantage that electricity-run irrigation pumps have over diesel-operated ones. While the per acre operating cost of the former is Tk 2000 that of latter is Tk 5000. Therefore, in order that the cost of production can be effectively reduced, power supply to the rural areas will have to be steadied.

The stakes are high in providing subsidy totalling 2700 crore in the specific area of non-urea fertiliser. Therefore, all efforts must be made to make sure that the purpose for which it is being given is fully and effectively served.

## A matter of 80 gold-plated gifts, for a lawmaker

*The maverick should be disciplined*

**A** newly elected lawmaker from the Awami League was presented with eighty gold-plated miniature boats at a civic reception in Natore the other day. The lawmaker in question, Abdul Quddus, a former minister of state elected from Natore-4 constituency, later defended his acceptance of the gifts as a response to the love of the people. That was as untenable a statement as anyone can imagine, for there was something grossly wrong about the ethics behind the gifts. While those who took the initiative of making those presents to the MP (and they included businessmen and school teachers) should have realised that they were not doing the right thing, it should have been for the MP to dissuade his well-wishers from indulging in such an effusive and eyebrow-raising act.

Indeed, only a few days earlier, another newly elected lawmaker from the ruling party made a good gesture of turning down a similar gift in his constituency and clearly letting everyone know that it was something he did not appreciate. In other words, what he said was simple: that citizens could certainly show affection towards a political personality but such affection must not be marred by a needless and ostentatious display as coming up with expensive gifts. In this connection, one recalls only too well the shocking incident of a lawmaker elected to the Jatiya Sangsad in 2001 and subsequently being presented with a gold crown in his constituency. That incident remains a scandal and it should have been a lesson for future lawmakers and indeed for everyone else in the country. The entire point behind our return to democratic government at the December 29 elections was to steer the country towards economic progress and social justice. Every one of our MPs must therefore put in his or her efforts into attaining these goals.

We think that the top leadership in both the ruling and opposition parties must make it clear to their elected MPs that under no circumstances are they to accept or encourage the giving out of gifts in any manner whatsoever. Those who do or have done so already should be reprimanded and warned that such action will not be accepted or tolerated in future. No wrong signals should be given out to the nation by those it has elected to Parliament.

## Vox populi

If it does not act with the same swiftness and certainty on the issue of law and order, then all its good work in other areas may be for naught. Stern action to control crime is what people are waiting to see. You don't have to take my word for it. Just look at the polls.

ZAFAR SOBHAN

**A**N often overlooked point about the recently concluded elections is the extent to which they signal that we are perhaps now entering into a period of increased political sophistication, both in terms of how elections are conducted as well as, hopefully, how elected governments conduct themselves.

One example of this phenomena is the culture of polling that has emerged for the first time in our politics and the positive impact that such an innovation is having on our political culture.

It is very encouraging that the professional and non-partisan pre-election polls such as the Daily Star-Neilsen and New Age polls have shown their worth by accurately predicting the election outcome.

This is of immense benefit in a politically polarised country such as Bangladesh, as it is highly persuasive evidence that the elections were fair and not rigged. In a country where the losing side routinely cries foul, to have some objective measurement of an election's legitimacy is a very positive step.

Even more persuasive evidence than the pre-election polls, is Bangladesh's very first post-election exit poll conducted by IRI (with data collected by Neilsen). This poll was conducted at 150 polling stations in 150 different constituencies and involved 18,000 respondents. In other words, it was pretty comprehensive.

Their key findings of the exit poll in my view were the fact that almost everyone

polled agreed that the elections had been free and fair, and that when asked who they had voted for, the respondents' responses tallied very closely with the official results. In other words, the exit polls confirmed the election results.

Accurate polling has other advantages beyond merely being able to predict election results or confirming the legitimacy of elections. Polls can also be a useful tool for determining what the public's concerns are, and thus which direction government policy should go.

One of the frustrations Bangladeshis have always had with our governments in the past is that they have never been that receptive or responsive to public opinion.

Now, at least, the first part of the puzzle has been solved. Public opinion is no longer a matter of conjecture or re-enforcing prejudices or pushing agendas. The government now has access to scientific analysis of what the voters want.

Now, of course polls are only the first step. The second step is actually taking public opinion into consideration. But there is good reason to hope that the second step will follow as well.

What the last three elections have shown us is that the public will not hesitate to vote out of office a government that they are dissatisfied with.

The lack of ceremony with which the last three elected governments have been shown the door by the voters due to poor performance should be sufficient incentive for the government to pay close attention



Let's not go back to the bad old days.

to public opinion.

Here, again, the IRI exit poll is instructive. When asked what issues they would like the incoming government to address most urgently, prices and corruption are, or course, high on people's list, and it is good that the government is paying attention to these issues.

But, one significant concern that is not one of the AL's top five priorities (according to the party manifesto) is law and order. As it happens, law and order was a priority campaign issue for the BNP but not one of the main AL pledges. The exit poll suggests that it should be.

Indeed, casting one's mind back to the last AL term in office, one can recall that inability to control crime was one of the principal complaints that people had against the government.

Similarly, the current government has barely taken office, and what is the big issue already: law and order.

It certainly seems as though one of the unintended and unhappy consequences of

the lifting of the state of emergency and the return of democracy is an explosion of crime.

The crime has taken different forms. Political violence has returned with a vengeance. There has also been an up-tick in non-political violence such as the student riot at Titumir College on January 10. Petty extortion, toll collection, and mugging are on the rise.

There can surely be no doubt that it is absolutely in the government's supreme interest to rein in this crime, now.

The government has started well and has taken good first steps with respect to controlling the prices of essentials, especially rice.

But if it does not act with the same swiftness and certainty on the issue of law and order, then all its good work in other areas may be for naught. Stern action to control crime is what people are waiting to see. You don't have to take my word for it. Just look at the polls.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

## South Asia in focus

The region will wait in the new year for many developments in the positive direction as a sequel to the healthy trends of 2008, while it is also expected that unhealthy and divisive ones, both national and regional, will take a back seat and be discouraged in 2009. We all can look forward to a better year in 2009 for a happier and healthier time in South Asia.

ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

**T**HE curtain was brought down on 2008 with national elections in Bangladesh. The year saw significant developments in the democratisation of the South Asian region. Bhutan's monarch is seeking to involve people in governance. All this augurs well for the region. Unfortunately, the region also experienced tension between India and Pakistan.

South Asia witnessed both remarkable achievements and turmoil during 2008. While Bangladesh was free from political mayhem and instability, some positive developments took place in Nepal, where the Maoists formed the government. Paradoxically, this development was the product of a democratic process as the Maoists abandoned unconventional politics and won the parliamentary polls. Nepal also made history by becoming a Republic, ending the 240-year-old monarchy.

India remained without major problems, but had anxious moments over the government's decision to go ahead with a

civilian nuclear accord with the United States. The country withstood the specter of the fall of the government, which won a crucial vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha on the issue. Pakistan witnessed general elections that brought the Pakistan People's Party into power, which was a disaster for President Musharraf as he was forced to disappear from the scene, ending his rule of nine years.

Bhutan held a parliamentary election, giving a taste of voting to its people while the throne remains firmly in control of governance. The development was a new experience for the kingdom, but what is noteworthy is the progress towards representative rule, or at least in involving the people in the running of the country.

The Indian Ocean island state of Maldives held its first democratic elections, and Asia's longest serving leader, Mamoon Abdul Gayoom, lost to a young politician. The occasion was a milestone since it brought qualitative change by introducing multi-party politics.

Volatile Sri Lanka remained restive all

through 2008 because of the civil war. Government troops said that they were on the brink of capturing the political and military headquarters of the militants. However, the war is not over as yet as the rebels are making last-ditch attempts for a reversal of the opponent's advance. Sri Lanka also successfully hosted the 14th Saarc summit, and it certainly goes to the credit of President Rajapakse's government.

In the western front, ties between two traditionally rival neighbours India and Pakistan were in the process of normalisation. Saarc particularly the summit had fallen victim to Indo-Pakistan hostilities many a time before. A scheduled conference of the heads of governments had to be deferred indefinitely, and was made possible only when New Delhi-Islamabad ties improved.

The state of New Delhi-Islamabad relations provided encouragement to the overall South Asian political milieu, but unforeseen developments over the massacre in Mumbai not long ago reversed the process and almost caused a war. Anyway, it is encouraging to note that both are showing restraint and talking about solving problems through discussions.

Trouble-torn Afghanistan, the latest member in the Saarc family, remained as restless as before, with many observers saying that the situation was deteriorating further.

There was speculation over the polls in Bangladesh, as some quarters doubted whether the voting would eventually take place. But, belying all scepticism,

December 29 ushered in a new era of democracy. An elected government has taken over, and faces big challenges to meet the expectations of the people. What Bangladesh needs is governance devoid of corruption and other ills that have plagued the country in varying degrees.

The tenure of the caretaker government was marked by both successes and failures. One failure was the price hike of essential commodities, although international market behaviour was also partly responsible for this. The caretaker government must be credited for a number of welcome reforms, which hopefully will be strengthened and expanded in the future.

The region the most densely populated in the world -- is fighting to improve the living standard of most of its 1.4 billion people who are mired in poverty. Political problems, unbridled corruption, and lack of good governance are among the problems that thwart expected progress in South Asia. The region will wait in the new year for many developments in the positive direction as a sequel to the healthy trends of 2008, while it is also expected that unhealthy and divisive ones, both national and regional, will take a back seat and be discouraged in 2009. We all can look forward to a better year in 2009 for a happier and healthier time in South Asia.

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

## Blood does not sleep

Men die for two diametrically opposed reasons: when they value what they seek to defend, and when there is nothing worth living for. Israel has created a state worth defending. The Palestinians must be given something to live for.

M. J. AKBAR

**S**ALADIN, the greatest of Muslim warriors, died of fever and old age on the morning of March 4, 1124. He was the iconic believer.

Malcolm Lyons and D E P Jackson write in *Saladin: The Politics of the Holy War*: "The imam Abu Jafar and al-Fadil were with him on the morning of March 4. The imam was reciting from the Quran. 'It is said that when he reached the words There is no god but God and in Him I put my trust Saladin smiled; his face cleared and he surrendered his soul to God'."

On his last visit to Jerusalem, the holy city he had restored to Arab rule in September 1123, he gave his fourth son, Abu Mansur al-Zahir, some immortal advice. As his son was about to leave, on October 6, Saladin kissed him, rubbed his hair fondly and said: "Be chary of shedding blood, 'for blood does not sleep'." He added, addressing his attendant emirs: "I

have only reached my present position by conciliation."

Nine centuries later, blood has still not slept in that land. It keeps awake as a nightmare. No region in modern times has refused conciliation and invested as heavily in a nightmare.

Blood neither sleeps nor ceases; most cruelly, it does not discriminate between child and man. There is nothing new about war. But there is something new about the war raging on the sands of Israel and Palestine.

Once, blood was lost on a battlefield, with honour. Blood is now spilt on the street. Civilians are no longer exempt from the havoc of war. Both sides target them, relentlessly. The difference is this: the Qassam rockets fired by Palestinians are crackers, pinpricks, compared to the overwhelming, bellicose firepower of Israel.

Of all the images shivering in our consciousness from Gaza, none is more searing than the faces of children who have

lost their laughter. Israel is building the foundations for war in 2025; children who are five today will be adults then. Blood will not sleep.

Israel has every right to protect its citizens, but there are grave dangers in a disproportionate action that punishes a population for the actions of a government. It is only the insecure who over-react, but why would Israel, with its overwhelming military superiority, feel vulnerable? Perhaps, after throwing a chain around Gaza and delivering maximum punishment, time after time, it is unable to deal with the persistence of defiance.

Defiance is courage, and courage is admirable, but courage is not victory. Victory, too, needs a definition, and it cannot be imposition. It must be justice, and equity demands that Palestine and Israel accept that neither will disappear. Both are nations. Facts demand peace, but fear engineers an essentially unequal war, its story told in cold statistics of dead, dying and destruction.

There is more than one reason why Palestinians are still in refugee camps and Israel is a regional superpower.

Gaza is imprisoned in two concentric circles. Only one is the blockade by Israel. The larger circle is a noose placed by cynical Arab ruling cliques who feed off Palestine's despair to perpetuate their own

survival, using the alibi of conflict. When there is rage on the Arab street, as now, there is silence and wordplay in the Arab secretariat. Organisations like Hamas and Hezbollah have filled a vacuum created by military incompetence and pathetic governance. That is their appeal to Muslims beyond their borders.

Poor governance has created a knowledge deficit, and knowledge is the key to strength. An Arab friend sent me some startling statistics; the email was captioned "A time for introspection." Here are just a few: there are only 500 odd universities in the Muslim world.

The United States has 5,758 and India has nearly 8,500. Literacy in the developed world is 90% against 40% in the Muslim world. If you removed Turkey from the list, the comparison would look grimmer. High-tech goods and services constitute only 0.9% of the exports from Pakistan, and 0.3% from Algeria. They add up to 68% of Singapore's exports.

Men die for two diametrically opposed reasons: when they value what they seek to defend, and when there is nothing worth living for. Israel has created a state worth defending. The Palestinians must be given something to live for

M. J. Akbar is Director of Publications, Cover.