

Poppy cultivation in our land?

We must nip it in the bud

THE law enforcers are reported to have destroyed poppy fields in 18 bighas of land at a village in Chapainawabganj district. Similar drives were launched in some other areas in the recent past to stop poppy cultivation.

But is wiping the poppy fields clean enough of a measure to ward off the danger completely? We have to effectively prevent any future attempt at re-growing it at the inducement of vested quarters. This calls for legal action and meting out exemplary punishment to those responsible for poppy cultivation in order to deter anybody waiting in the wings to have it cultivated again.

The news is extremely disturbing for the simple reason that poppy is actually the source of developing heroin -- a drug responsible for ruining the lives of millions all over the world. One must not miss the point that poppy was grown on a modest scale in some countries before it assumed menacing proportions and engulfed those countries in a such way that the drug lords were even running parallel administrations in them. And the damage done to those societies has been simply incalculable.

The reports indicate that poppy merchants have been using various ruses to dupe the local farmers into thinking that they had actually planted some harmless oil plants. It has also been reported that some criminal groups were forcing villagers to cultivate poppy. And indications are there that outsiders might also have been involved in the process. So, there is reason to believe that its cultivation has been going on in an organised manner with the support of known and unknown criminals. And if that is true, the law enforcers and the local authorities will have plenty to answer for. Their belated awakening to the racketeering can only be partially made up for if they can effectively prevent its cultivation in future.

If we fail to nip it in the bud, before long Bangladesh might be enlisted as a source of raw material for heroin, a dreadful prospect to countenance with all the law and order problems facing us already. With drugs comes arms trafficking, a perfect combination for terrorist activities!

Given the far-reaching consequences of poppy cultivation, therefore, the threat will have to be eliminated, root and branch, and right now. The law enforcers will have to maintain constant surveillance with the help of local body leaders and make sure that poppy is not cultivated anywhere in Bangladesh.

Clouds on remittance horizon

Govt needs to have contingency measures in place

REMITTANCES have long been a principal element of the Bangladesh economy, but in the last two years, especially, with the skyrocketing in the price of essentials due to global commodity price rise, it has been the remittances sent back by overseas Bangladeshis that have kept the economy afloat and have made the difference for countless struggling families, especially rural ones.

It is therefore critical that the government focus on remittance earnings as a bulwark of the economy, and also have in place contingency measures in case there is a significant downturn in remittance earnings, as statistics and analysts indicate may well be the case in the near future.

Remittance earnings are still strong, but the rate of growth at which new job opportunities are being created is plummeting, to say nothing of the jobs that are now starting to be lost. We have already started to see migrant workers returning due to job losses.

The government needs to focus on preserving jobs and opening up new markets. While job growth has come down in countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Malaysia, job opportunities are actually rising in countries such as Oman and Qatar. We need to aggressively tap these new markets for our labour.

More critically, the government needs to take account of the fact that fewer job opportunities overseas and returning migrants means the need for greater job opportunities inside the country.

With the global economy in turmoil, it is clear that it is a risky proposition to continue to have to rely on these earnings as a way to find employment and to keep the economy above water. It leaves us extremely vulnerable to events outside the government's control and no government can relish that prospect.

Not only have overseas jobs been a boon to the economy, but they have provided a necessary safety valve for society by finding jobs and opportunities for millions of young men and women who would otherwise crowd the local job market. In the absence of this, the strains on local resources will grow, demand for jobs will be fiercer, and salaries will be kept low.

Job creation thus must be a significant focus of the government to ensure that if there is an unavoidable downturn in the transnational labour market that this does not have a cataclysmic impact on the local economy and society.

Get to the roots of the mutiny

The objective of the perpetrators was not the two defence organisations only; it was also to exploit the consequences of the political instability that they hoped would follow but, luckily for us, did not. Now that they have failed, we have to be ready for any Plan B that the enemy might have.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

WE have not quite overcome the crisis that the country was cast into on February 25 but have perhaps negotiated the initial period of the calamity. Much would depend on how the government and the two leading components of the country's defence the army and the BDR handle the situation at this very crucial period and in the next few weeks and months.

This is a critical time. The objective of the perpetrators was not the two defence organisations only; it was also to exploit the consequences of the political instability that they hoped would follow but, luckily for us, did not. Now that they have failed, we have to be ready for any Plan B that the enemy might have. That calls for maintaining internal stability and ensuring the rule of law.

As for the army, it is gradually emerging from the shock, although I dare say the trauma will take a long time to heal. One also hopes that the fact that the officers were able to ventilate their feelings to the prime minister very candidly has assuaged their nerves, if not totally placated their sorrow.

As for the BDR, it has been very severely affected. With so many officers killed, the command structure has been temporarily disrupted. And much as one would like to take comfort in the assurances of the new DG and we have no doubt that he and his officers and jawans are doing their utmost to protect our border the fact is that this

too is a traumatic experience for those troops who had nothing to do with the mutiny. It is encouraging that many of the BDR troops who fled Pikhana are reporting back. It is important that their confidence be restored along with the restoration of the command structure.

The focus of our attention now must be to get to the roots of the massacre. The government has reconstituted, very rightly, the enquiry committee. The inquiry must be done objectively, without political interference or influence and with full assistance from all the relevant agencies of the state. However, the question is whether the committee would be able to go to the roots of the incident in the seven days that is at its disposal. There are several issues in this regard that we feel should be considered.

First, what the commission is expected to do, as I understand, is to provide at best a broad idea as to why the mutiny occurred and who were the actors behind its planning and execution, internal or external. And for that, one understands, the commission is not expected to indulge in detective work. That notwithstanding, one feels that seven days is perhaps too little for the commission, even if it works overtime, to do a worthwhile job in fulfilling its brief.

There is a great deal of information that will emerge from the statements of the witnesses as also from the available official sources, which will have to be arranged into a cogent and orderly fashion that should provide the basis for a more detailed and substantive inquiry to really get to the bottom of the matter. A half-done inquiry is



Where did it all start?

of little value. The committee should be given a fortnight, if not a month, to do the minimum to justify its formation.

Secondly, the committee should at the very beginning determine the list of witnesses that it ought to hear. And that brings me to the question of its TOR which says: "The committee will look into the background ... find out reasons ... and submit recommendations."

To be able to offer a coherent recommendation in order that such incidences are prevented in future, and that our responses are sharpened in a crisis situation such as the one we faced on February 25, it is important for the commission to analyse the handling of the incident both at the political and military level, and also the sequence of command decisions and the rationale for those. And that would require taking the deposition of many high ups in the administration as well as the army. That is what one finds missing in the TOR, unless

the committee takes it as implied.

Needless to say, there are some gray areas and a few unanswered questions. I refrain from going into what, to my mind, are some ambiguities in the chain of actions that were taken and, in some cases, not taken, by all, up and down the chain of civil and military command, so as not to influence the inquiry.

But certainly participation of certain persons in the negotiations with the killers has become a matter of public discussion, primarily because of the novice manner in which they played their role.

Last but not least, the findings of the committee should be made public. Its recommendations, along with that of the military committee, should be consolidated to form the basis of further and more detailed investigation into the matter.

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Fiction is more appealing than sordid facts

There was no antidote to the plague of puns on "dog" that devastated the front pages of newspapers after the Oscars. You could see the agony on the face of the English language as it was tortured beyond reason, but that is minor price extracted by editorial creativity. The hype had only one explanation: we love the idea of winning even if it is through surrogates.

M.J. AKBAR

CHARITY, all too often, is a form of sycophancy. The rich give not because they feel for the poor but because they need something from God in an immediate transactional basis. They buy divine favour with donations. Sometimes such worship is less immaculate.

There was the odious case last year of fatcats queuing up to hand out dole to Kalawati, the widow of a Vidarbha farmer, because her poverty had been cited by Rahul Gandhi in a speech in the Lok Sabha. One hopes that Rahul Gandhi was as unimpressed as divinity for hypocrisy.

There is national schizophrenia and media dyslexia at the quixotic elevation of Indian poverty in Anglo-America. The Indian well-fed have perfected their formula; they exploit poverty when they can

(witness how they generally behave towards domestic servants, mostly children) and keep a safe distance when they cannot.

The English-speaking Mumbaikar finds it so much more pleasant to see Dharavi through Hobowood (what else would you call a partnership of Hollywood and Bollywood?) than stop at the great slum on the way to the airport. Fiction is so much more palatable than fact. It comes dressed in A.R. Rahman's music.

Indifference is the respectable face of contempt. The rich don't quite understand why there is so much fuss about calling a child a "slumdog," possibly because they treat their dogs better than they treat slum children. Is there a movie waiting to be made, titled "The Capitalist Kutta of Malabar Hill?" One thinks not.

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pages of newspapers after the Oscars. You could see the agony on the face of the English language as it was tortured beyond reason, but that is minor price extracted by editorial creativity. The hype had only one explanation: we love the idea of winning even if it is through surrogates.

Mohammad Azharuddin, the "dogstar," was welcomed on his return from Hollywood with a nation's garlands at the airport and a candlelight dinner at home. The candles were a necessity, not a romantic affectation. This was life at the base camp; Edmund Hillary can't live on the peak of Everest forever.

The poor are very sensible. Fate is consistent, for them, not fickle; it does not promise fortune. Azharuddin's parents clearly refused to invest the wages of passing glamour on upward mobility that might become unsustainable. Azharuddin ate with a satisfaction that he could not have felt for hamburgers.

The slum story of the year has appeared on the inside pages of the print medium. According to the Indian Statistical Institute's survey of the country's 575 districts, urban poverty was bleakest in Mumbai, the city that was being advertised as the future Shanghai. It added that the number of people living below the poverty line had risen

repeat, risen by 20% in the last five years. Murshidabad, once capital of Nawab

Siraj ud Daulah, described by an astonished Clive as richer than London when he saw it for the first time, is now the poorest district in the country, with 1.47% of people below the poverty line.

In a separate report, the United Nations World Food Programme says that the largest concentration of hunger in the world is in India: 230 million, or 27% of the world total. About 50% of child deaths are due to hunger.

Nearly 43% of children under five are underweight, as compared to only 28% for sub-Saharan Africa. And, 70% of children under five are anaemic, a figure that has risen by 6% in the last six years.

Television, that lightning rod of middle-class values, which screamed itself into a stupor over the Oscars, ignored these reports completely. They were not even awarded the courtesy of a crawler, the line of letters that trots by on news channels below the aggressive self-importance of the screen.

No anchor had a question as to how numbers below the poverty line have risen by 20% in the last five years when every minister of the Union of India has proclaimed that the era of dross has given way to the age of gold.

But such facts are not tele-visual news. They don't dance to the rhythm of music. Who shall dare tell the bloated that hunger is the ultimate siege within?

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Hurting the Heartland?

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HOWARD FINEMAN

A coal war is about to break out in America regional conflict that will pit the coasts of the country against the Appalachian and Midwest heartland, where cheap power from coal is considered a birthright and a crucial economic necessity.

This conflict has been rising for a long time. Its John Brown is, of course, Al Gore, who has convinced most of the Democratic leadership (and most of America) that rising carbon dioxide levels are immoral and will leave the planet a hot, heaving mess.

Following the lead of Hill Democrats and some moderate Republicans, President Obama wants to "cap" the total amount of CO2 that American power plants emit across the country in any given year, and then require companies to purchase "pollution credits" if they want to send any of the chemical into the atmosphere.

The good news, from Obama's point of view, is that the cost of the credits should encourage companies to speed up work on alternative technologies. In the meantime, administration officials are predicting that sales of the credits will generate more than \$600 billion in federal revenue over the next 10 years.

But the new tax burden it does amount to a new tax will be borne primarily in two regions of the country. The reason is simple enough: most energy-generated CO2 comes from coal-fired power plants, and most of them, and the "dirtiest" of them, are in a region that stretches along the length of the Ohio River, from St. Louis east to Pittsburgh, and in states on both

side of the river.

The administration says that it will try to mitigate the hit to customers in those places and states by engineering tax-based rebates. But the rebate idea doesn't mollify politicians many of them Democrats in states such as Ohio, Pennsylvania, Indiana and Kentucky who worry that the cost of the permits will raise energy costs for individuals and manufacturers already hard-hit by recession and job losses in power-hungry industries.

One concerned Democrat is Sen. Evan Bayh of Indiana, who sits on the Energy and Natural Resources Committee. Virtually all of his state's power is coal-generated, and he has voiced concerns about the Obama proposal. But Bayh won't get to ask questions in committee, because the "cap and trade" plan was taken from his jurisdiction and instead given to Sen. Barbara Boxer of California, a strong proponent of the idea. Sen. Harry Reid of Nevada, the Democratic leader and a strong supporter of the plan, ordered the change in committee jurisdiction.

Even though he won states such as Indiana and Ohio, Obama has yet to convincingly play to the heartland and Appalachian interior. Last fall, he infamously suggested that people in such places "cling" to their guns and their religion in troubled times. But they cling to

coal power (and coal mining), too.

These places are caught in the riptide of change. They need a more rational health-care system and a cleaner environment. Yet they are disproportionately exposed to higher taxes because they rely on the (unhealthy) commodities Obama wants to tax.

Tobacco is another example. To expand health care for children under the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP, and pronounced S-chip), Obama proposed, and the Congress agreed, to raise taxes on tobacco by \$30 billion. And yes, smoking rates are higher along the Ohio River and nearby states.

A state such as Kentucky gets hit from every direction: CO2 pollution credits, higher cigarette taxes in a state of heavy smokers and further loss of demand for tobacco still an important local crop.

I know that Obama is essentially a big-city guy from various coasts: West, East and North (Lake Michigan). I know he is an urban guy: Stevie Wonder not Taylor Swift, NBA not NASCAR. But as he hurdles from one big proposal to another, he needs to remember the heartland voters who helped make his victory exceptional.

At this point, we're all "clinging" to something.

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