

## Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury's departure regrettable

### ACC must carry on with same zeal

It is with deep regret that we note the departure of Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury from the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC). The resignation of the ACC chairman clearly raises a number of questions, the answers to which have not been provided by either Chowdhury or the government. There is, though, the subtle feeling that not everything had been going well for the ACC chief since the general elections in December despite his apparent belief that the new government would give him the cooperation necessary to continue the drive against corruption. The retired general met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and then emerged to tell waiting newsmen of the satisfactory nature of their talks.

One cannot say with certainty that the ACC under Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury did not stumble in some areas. Indeed, at times it appeared that the commission became overwhelmed with the cases it was filing against allegedly corrupt politicians, businessmen and others. But such an assessment does not detract from the fact that General Chowdhury's stewardship of the ACC made a huge and positive impact. In a society where politics increasingly came to be mired in corruption, Chowdhury and his colleagues at the ACC began their job with missionary zeal. The ACC went resolutely after people suspected of corrupt dealings; it was a job that cut across party lines. For the first time in Bangladesh's tortuous history, the message went out that individuals and institutions could not indulge in bad deeds and then expect to get away with their act. For a country that for years had earned the sobriquet of being among the most corrupt of nations globally, the ACC's drive was clearly aimed at turning a new leaf. The ACC instilled hope in the nation.

We regret Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's inability to withstand pressure, if any, to have the ACC chairman quit. We feel that she should have resisted that in line with her message of change. It is now our hope, though, that the government will ensure that a post-Chowdhury ACC will be as assertive as it was under its just departed chief and that the anti-corruption drive will not slow down. At the same time, we feel that nothing should be done or said, especially by those in power, which might raise questions about the future of the ACC. In this context, the happiness that the minister of state for law exuded on Thursday about Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury's resignation was disappointing and in less than good taste.

Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury is to be credited for creating awareness about corruption throughout the country. A man of decency and integrity, he has earned the enduring respect of the nation. Only time will tell whether his actions inaugurated a process of positive change.

## Polythene layer underneath Buriganga

### SOS to save the doubly polluted river

A polythene stratum measuring about ten feet in thickness is said to be embedded under a certain stretch of the Buriganga. The river remains terribly polluted from domestic and industrial wastes discharging into it, anyway. The polythene comes as an aggravating factor, especially given the shallowness of the river.

The sheer quantities of garbage dumped into the river have turned this arterial water course of a lifeline to city dwellers into an environmental nightmare, of monstrous proportions indeed. We have so far explained the murky and stinky waters in terms of toxic industrial wastes and variegated sewers that pour into the river. But now it seems trashed polybags depositing on the river bed pose a far greater danger to human health than ordinary garbage. While the latter is absorbed into the environment, polythene being non-biodegradable, is permanent garbage.

There is a whole range of recycled polybags that makes brisk business along the river bank. From the string of used polybag washing and drying activities is blown away a good proportion of polybags into the river water. The main bulk that is recycled, need we say, is hazardous to public health. Furthermore, the Dhaka City Corporation lories offload all manner of wastes, much of which find their way into the waters.

We find that the concern was put on the agenda by the environmentalists as far back as in 2002. In that year, 17-point recommendation of the Save Buriganga Taskforce comprising inter-ministerial and civil-society representatives contained a point on disposal of polythene deposits underneath the river. Some four years later, when a BIWTA survey revealed a huge polythene deposit, the then chairman of the organisation thought that a special cutter machine was needed to be imported to clean up the riverbed, but obviously this was not acted upon.

It is relevant to point out that Abdullah Abu Sayeed has recommended that three mobile teams be formed to operate whole time keeping vigil over people dumping wastes and the ways in which they do so in order to warn them off. RAB and police could be co-opted to give teeth to the mobile teams.

All the same, the need to have a thorough-bred strategy to combat the invasion of polybag again can hardly be overemphasised.

## Unauthorised firearms in unlikely places

Those areas where the JMB supremos let loose a reign of terror to secure their command and influence, must come under sustained enquiry.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE recent haul of arms and ammunition in a madrasa at Bhola once again proves that the ugly hands of so-called religious extremism have not remained inactive. There are credible indications to believe that links with regional and international terror networks, in the guise of charitable or ecclesiastical work, have been maintained with a view to causing fratricidal fissures in our democratic polity.

If one browses through media reports of the not-too-distant past one will come across reports relating to the existence of many hundreds of strongly motivated workers, including suicide bombers, that have remained underground defying the security dragnet. The worrying part is that, as per confessional statements of arrested terrorist leaders, such fugitives can launch deadly attacks.

In such a scenario, anti-extremist operations should have been strengthened, and a continued campaign was necessary to bust the terror network and destroy the menacing arsenal. It is also important to locate the origin of the arms supply and financial support and to hunt the patrons/harbourers of the so-called religious terrorists.

In Bangladesh we cannot be oblivious to the fact that the terrorists displayed their potential by carrying out simultaneous bomb attacks in 63 districts and killing at least 35 people in other attacks. The nation has already paid a very heavy price by ignoring them or entertaining doubts about their mischief-making capability.

It may be pertinent to remember that the JMB terror network had established several training centres in north and north-western Bangladesh. There were reports of the horrendous acts of JMB operatives that show their authority and writ in those areas. They had the temerity to declare the activities of some NGOs and cultural organisations illegal, and at places did not allow the local people to observe national occasions. They compelled villagers to pay toll and grow beards.

Therefore, those areas where the JMB supremos let loose a reign of terror to secure their command and influence, must come under sustained enquiry. The terrorists and their trainers, patrons, collaborators and harbourers must be dealt with under the law.

The ominous rise of religious extremism in Bangladesh, whose inhabitants suffered unprecedented sacrifices to de-link themselves from religion-based Pakistan, remains a paradox of contemporary his-

tory. A dispassionate analysis and explanation of this contradiction may indicate the action that will be necessary to counter and arrest religious obscurantism and keep us steady on the democratic way.

Looking back, one will find that we were not so conspicuously religious under the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Many of us have not realised that in post-1975 Bangladesh, particularly during the last 30 years, there has been a phenomenal growth of madrasas. At the same time, many apparently religious institutions have been built by organisations/groups whose credentials are not known.

Was moral rearmament or spiritual renaissance the predominant factor behind such unusual growth of religious institutions? Doubts creep in as we do not see any corresponding rise in public or private morality. So, the suspicion is that while the establishment, the civil society and other activists have remained in dark about the designs and programs of the obscurantist elements, the so-called religious extremists have grown in strength and spread their tentacles taking advantage of the ignorance and inertia.

During the last couple of years, when the media international and national pointed to the potential danger, the authorities brushed it aside as another effort to vilify a democratic government. When the situation became unbearable there was still not a well-thought plan to arrest and contain the menace.

There is no doubt that the battle against extremism will be long. However, since the

activities of the so-called religious extremists are a manifest attack on the long cherished values of the mainstream, our strategy and thought process should undergo substantial change.

Persons or institutions having apparent religious or ecclesiastical appearance and activity must not be out of bound for the surveillance agencies. Those arousing suspicion must come within the ambit of threat perception and appropriate legal action should be started forthwith. Pre-empting their nefarious activities should engage the utmost attention of the regulatory authority.

The surveillance should ensure that no one is allowed to interpret and propagate a distorted version of the holy books. Our inherently religious folks must not be misled. The so-called religious extremists committing violence should be treated like criminals and no element of respectability should be accorded to them. Institutions imparting religious training and the madrasas should be a focal point for inspection and monitoring with a view to rendering their students into employable individuals.

Last but not the least, as a nation, we must not suffer from any identity crisis as some mischievous quarters would like us to. The Pakistanis thought we were lesser Muslims. Their "Islamisation drive" resulted in a colossal tragedy. It is time, perhaps, to once again show our true grit. Our politicians must not be heedless.

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## Clinton's travails in a maze

The agenda appears to have included dipping into the muddy quagmire of Middle East peacemaking and trying to find least common denominators towards a 'comprehensive' Arab-Israeli peace.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has been busy to say the least. She has just finished extended trips that have seen her having discussions with the leaderships of Japan, China, Indonesia, Egypt, Palestine, Israel, Turkey, Belgium, Russia and the Nato. Her entire effort appears to have been directed at listening in and explaining the Obama administration's approach to the many prickly foreign policy issues that confront today's US State Department.

As expected, the agenda appears to have included dipping into the muddy quagmire of Middle East peacemaking and trying to find least common denominators towards a 'comprehensive' Arab-Israeli peace. There have also been efforts towards finding constructive areas of engagement with post-Georgia Russia (by hitting the 'reset' button) and ascertaining views as to how to move the global economy forward despite the lingering international financial crisis.

Her visits have quite correctly been described as a form of 'testing the waters.' This has also been interpreted as an extension of President Obama's campaign promise to engage rather than isolate protagonists as has been the feature

during the Bush administration's tenure.

This decision has added interest and brought forth the prospect of inter-active relations in international affairs as opposed to unilateral diplomacy. This has already been reflected in the context of Syria. US envoys are at work exploring better ties with that country as part of an expanded Arab-Israeli peace.

This innovative approach was also evident in her remarks at Brussels's Nato Headquarters. We also saw the new US administration's first public overture towards Iran by inviting Tehran to the latest Conference on Afghanistan. This has been followed by President Obama's recent initiative with regard to this country.

This positive element with regard to Iran has also been noticed in recent clarifications made by Mr. Dennis Blair, US National Intelligence Director with regard to presence of 'highly enriched uranium' in Iran. It may be recalled that a few days earlier some controversy had been generated through comments made by US Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff and Israel's top intelligence official Amos Yadlin. Both of these senior officials had hinted that Iran had enough 'fissile material' to make an atomic bomb

and had also 'crossed the technological threshold.'

Some Palestinian analysts have however not found any encouraging elements in Clinton's policy towards their issue of establishing an independent Palestinian State.

I am sure that Clinton understands that the recent attack on Gaza and the emergence of a more hawkish attitude within Israeli domestic politics has made the political scenario, regarding Palestinian statehood, that much more complex than before. Matters have further exacerbated because of renewed Jewish settlement expansion in the occupied territories and the razing of homes in Arab East Jerusalem.

The 'unlawful' attitude of Israel in employing discriminatory municipal and security policies against Palestinian residents in East Jerusalem has already been acknowledged by the European Union. Clinton, in her news conference in the West Bank was only mildly critical of Israel.

At the same time the Arab leadership also needs to promote greater functional understanding and cooperation within the different factions in Palestine so that there is accountability in governance within that territory. Hamas needs to also re-think their views and be more pragmatic to achieve the eventual objective.

Those responsible for policy formulation and decision-making in the USA, Europe, Israel and the feudal Arab countries must understand that the best way to combat militancy and instability in this important strategic region would be best achieved by helping the impoverished

Palestinians realising their dream. It will require greater political will on the part of Israel.

It has been announced that President Obama has decided to remove all US combat troops by the end of August 2010 and all troops by the end of 2011. Any success in sticking to this ambitious time frame will however depend on the prevailing situation inside Iraq as well as continued stability in Iran and South East Turkey. This equation is still quite delicate and will need careful handling.

Secretary Clinton has many things on her plate. The issues will include strategic re-think over future Russian participation in Central Asia and Eastern Europe, possibilities within Nato, re-planning about the eroding governance structure in Afghanistan and Pakistan and solution of the problem in Cyprus.

Latest developments in the bordering regions of these two neighbouring countries have strained US relations further. Absence of secure, new and safer supply lines for Nato troops has also endangered their continued presence in Afghanistan. There is also the issue of deteriorating India-Pakistan relations at a time when India is going to have another general election.

Clinton has, till now, suggested that during her watch, she will try to have a more meaningful, participatory engagement with the rest of the world. We look forward to such an initiative.

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## Recession and our policy response

Our policy response must start from the preparation of the budget. Besides, the procurement of essential items and industrial raw materials should be planned well ahead of time. Banks, insurance companies and the housing sector should develop their own packages to overcome any crisis.

DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

THE government has constituted a forum comprising of renowned personalities to assess the impact of recession, which has started to affect our economy adversely, and suggest measures thereupon. Already, thousands of workers are arriving from Malaysia and the Middle East. The foreign minister has gone to Malaysia to resolve the issue of cancellation of visas of 55,000 workers.

BGMEA and the Chambers of Commerce have requested the government to initiate a bailout plan of Tk 6,000 crore to protect industries from the impending danger of output reduction and possible retrenchment of employees. The finance minister observed that the government preferred offering subsidies to direct cash incentives. "The government will need a lot of foreign aid and pro-active private public participation to address the harsher days ahead," he added.

The developed countries declared packages to safeguard their economy but, in most cases, they have failed to get tangible

results. In the USA, the number of unemployed people has reached around 15 million, and insurances, banking institutions, automobile industries and housing businesses are in great financial crisis. The Japanese and Indian economies are facing a great challenge due to reduction of exports. Unemployment in the UK is increasing rapidly, with a similar situation in Italy and Australia.

World Bank President Robert B. Zoellick has cautioned the finance ministers of G-20 countries about the worst economic recession in coming days. According to him, the world economy might be more dismal than the prediction of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other financial organisations and experts. Many experts say that the recession might be more damaging than that of the 1930s unless developed countries take pragmatic approaches to overcome the catastrophe.

The Great Depression was a worldwide economic downturn, starting in most places in 1929 and continuing in some countries upto 1940, but in most places took normal shape in 1933. It originated in

the US, and historians often use October 29, 1929 -- known as Black Tuesday as the starting date of the stock market crash.

International trade plunged by half to two-thirds, as did in personal income, tax revenue, prices and profits. Countries around the world were hit hard, especially those dependent on heavy industries. Most countries had to set up relief camps and underwent political upheavals. Political demagogues emerged and dictators like Hitler and Mussolini took over power and started the Second World War.

The shocks of the depression were so serious that GDP fell by 27%, unemployment rose to 25%, and price level fell by 26%, creating a situation where one-fourth of the population were found fasting day after day.

Post-World War II has witnessed about 11 recession and contraction periods on average for 11 months. The recessions of 1948-1949, '53-'54, '57-'58, '60-'61, '73-'75, '79-'80, '81-'82, '90-'91, '97-'98, and 2001 affected the world economy adversely.

Bangladesh's economy, price level, employment and politics have felt the impact of the recession in 1973-75. Since the media at that time was not so open or investigative, the people of Bangladesh could not even understand what had happened. Oil prices rose from \$2.60/barrel in 1973 to \$11/barrel in 1975. GDP growth around the world was on average -3% and unemployment increased to +9%.

This time the government is taking precautionary measures. In 1974, the

government was blamed for exporting jute bags to Cuba, and the ship loaded with rice for Bangladesh was diverted elsewhere to teach Bangladesh a lesson. No one can say what might happen when the impact of recession is felt in the near future, and opportunists get the chance to manipulate and mislead the mentors.

Thus, it is time now to adopt fiscal measures to overcome any situation resulting from the recession. Our policy response must start from the preparation of the budget. Besides, the procurement of essential items and industrial raw materials should be planned well ahead of time. Banks, insurance companies and the housing sector should develop their own packages to overcome any crisis.

The IMF has proposed raising its fund to \$50,000 crore to improve its capacity to overcome the recession. Development partners working in Bangladesh have already started to downsize their budgetary provisions for grants, loans and project assistance.

Professor Md. Yunus, Nobel Laureate, has made a clarion call to all to get united to fight against this impending danger. Apart from the fiscal and economic policies, there should be a consensus of political parties and intellectuals to overcome the situation.

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