

Negligence to a project for disabled

It can't be countenanced

It can only be termed as apathy on the part of the implementing agencies, and by implication, the ministry concerned that a 35-million dollar donor-funded project has not quite got off the ground. This appears even more disconcerting when one considers that the fund is to do with a project for the welfare of the disabled and for the disadvantaged children.

The 5-year project, having two components, 'Disability and Children at Risk,' and 'Promotion of Services to the Disabled Persons of Bangladesh,' remains a non-starter because the Department of Social Service could not meet the donor deadline to set the project in motion. The launching date has been missed, and as of today the former doesn't have a project director, and recruitment of manpower for the latter under an independent body -- the Jatiya Protibondhi Unnyan Foundation, is yet to start, more than four months after the deal was penned.

Both the projects are specific to two very vulnerable segments of society, and when one of those segments -- persons with disability, accounts for ten per cent of the population, one finds it very disheartening to read that the project has not made any headway, reportedly, because of the failure of relevant government officials to do their bit to get it off the ground.

How does one rationalise this lack of action? Given that we suffer from resource crunch for our development projects what cannot be accepted is that the much-needed fund could be reverting back to the donors because of our inability to put the required personnel in place on time. This is a special project having to do with the disabled and disadvantaged children, and we wonder why not one of the two bodies, entrusted to carry out the project, could ensure that the deadline for commencing the job was met.

One needs hardly emphasise the importance of the project. There is urgent need to address the problem of the large number of children facing various types of hazards in their daily life. And there cannot be a more unfriendly environment than what we find in our country for the disabled to go about their daily chores. No wonder that so many of them feel utterly neglected.

The ministry must urgently intervene so that implementation of the project gets quickly underway. We also feel that those responsible for lack of action must be asked to account for it. It is also essential to set up an oversight body in each ministry to watch over the implementation of the donor-funded projects.

Dr. Wazed Mia's passing

The nation loses a man of great simplicity and integrity

WE mourn the passing away of Dr. MA Wazed Miah. In his death, the country has lost not only a man of remarkable integrity but also a scientist of national as well as international repute. It is these two attributes which in his lifetime created for him the good reputation that in his death endures. Noted for his academic and intellectual brilliance, Wazed Mia perhaps could have gone further than he did as a scientist. But the kind of man he was, maybe he did not quite feel that way about himself. The self-effacing about him was all.

As the spouse of one of the foremost political figures in the country, he played his role as the ideal companion to her and indeed was Sheikh Hasina's constant source of strength as she immersed herself in the wide, volatile world of politics. As the son-in-law of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Wazed Mia was witness to some of the momentous events in the history of this nation. Yet he was never involved in politics. Even so, in the trying times when Bangabandhu and then Sheikh Hasina faced one obstacle after the other, he provided strong emotional support to the family he had married into.

Wazed Miah's patience and strength were tested in the period immediately after the tragic happenings of August 15, 1975 when it fell on him to deal with the trauma in which his wife and his sister-in-law found themselves in foreign land. For the next six years, as he and Sheikh Hasina, with their children, lived a life of exile in India, Dr. Wazed Miah remained the one pillar of strength for his family. It was fundamentally his strong encouragement and support that left his wife free to pursue her political career. As a husband, as a man with his own career to handle, he opted to remain in the background, so much so that he never gave anyone any opportunity to question his integrity as an individual. His proximity to power, both in Bangabandhu's era as also in his wife's time, failed to arouse in him any urge to derive any advantage from his situation. The nuclear scientist was meticulous in maintaining his individuality and certainly did not allow it to overlap with the broader role Sheikh Hasina had assumed for herself in national politics.

Wazed Miah was a decent man, a gentleman to the core. That he inspired respect in everyone was demonstrated clearly when the leader of the opposition rushed, once news of his death came through, to comfort the prime minister. It was a flickering moment. But it speaks of the huge degree of respect the scientist enjoyed -- and enjoys -- as a person.

Motorway to nowhere

All efforts have so far been inconsequential. The only visible result is that Bangladesh is sinking deeper and deeper into an abyss with more and more people coming to live under the poverty line, and the end of the tunnel is nowhere in sight.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

BDHANGLADESH was born poor and, today, after almost four decades of its sovereign existence, poverty lashes at the vast multitude of our population with full fury. It is not that the people at the helm have, at any point of time, been oblivious of the problem. Rather, the leaders have been copious in their promises and pledges to deal with the menace at all costs. Economists and experts burnt late night candles to measure the depth and dimension of poverty with all earnestness.

Researchers and scholars have brainstormed the issue. The government and its planners, as well as aid representatives, are exasperated with the vastness of the scourge. Animated discussions are still taking place, with the pundits and self-help gurus delving into its complexities.

However, all efforts have so far been inconsequential. The only visible result is that Bangladesh is sinking deeper and deeper into an abyss with more and more people coming to live under the poverty line, and the end of the tunnel is nowhere in sight.

Poverty has, however, been an asset for some who intelligently cash in on it. It comes handy for third world leaders to devise a "case" for increased aid money, of which mostly they and their cronies are beneficiaries. The chronic poverty gives enough bargaining chips to aid dispensers for imposing stringent conditionality. It is to the advantage of a rich few, a patron-client relationship in domestic politics.

There's more. The poverty and related problems provide the academics spanning new topics to discuss -- and researchers find themes for writing their treatises. Scores of students have obtained degrees on poverty alleviation from reputed seats of learning in the west.

Thousands of NGOs are floated in the name of fighting poverty, illiteracy and disease. Officials of IMF, World Bank and ADB play with the figures to prepare their baffling statistics. The subject allows the elite to get together frequently in the city's posh convention centres and be in the limelight to put on intellectual gloss.

Public debates on national issues are few and far between in our country, but the theme of poverty alleviation somehow enjoys currency. The seminars and round tables on the subject are largely attended by people least exposed to poverty and, as a result, their knowledge about it is at best surreal.

The views expressed by a group of pseudo-experts who are often called upon to speak on the topic are often stale and stereotyped -- repeated many times earlier -- and the discourses are invariably reduced to platitudes. The recommendations are vast and varied, ranging between utopia and mere phraseology.

Notwithstanding some positive fallout of the exercises, in terms of dissemination of awareness, the great ideas generated during the deliberations are rarely carried to a point of fruition -- let alone their implementation on the ground. Each time a roundtable on poverty alleviation is held its



The hand remains empty in spite of all the talk.

salient points buzz across the selected circle for a couple of days before they die down.

The biggest problem in the poverty alleviation exercise is perhaps its credibility. Not only that, most of the participants of these exercises have never been known to show any serious concern for the poverty of the masses, they are also not prepared to pay any price for its alleviation if that means paring down their own perks and privileges and parting with their vested interests.

The problem is that most of us would welcome an end to poverty, but hesitate when it affects our interests and comforts. We have lofty ideas, but retreat into our cocoon of self-preservation when the question comes of sharing either affluence or poverty with the deprived.

The romance of poverty and love for the poor are nothing new in our part of the world. During the heydays of leftist politics its heady brew intoxicated even the scions

of the aristocracies. Belying conventional wisdom, the young, idealised sons of the landlords often led the peasants' uprising. But then it was little more than springtime flirtation.

Today, we are trying to accomplish the Herculean task of poverty alleviation only through lip service. It is a "mission impossible." More so, when the situation has been further exacerbated by widespread economic disparities, unjust distribution of wealth, chronic corruption, bad governance and stratification of society into groups, classes and vested interests.

Poverty and the related problems need to be viewed in their entirety. They have to be fought on multiple fronts and all at one time. No patchwork, half-hearted efforts, and piecemeal programs can really alleviate poverty. Yet, that's what we are doing, if anything at all. No wonder, the goal has eluded us all these years.

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Demystifying BDR tragedy

To frustrate such ugly designs, the government would do best to press ahead with its agenda. As a must-do, it has to demonstrate its strong will to demystify the tragedy and punish the killers and their backers.

MD. ALI AKBAR

THE protracted enquiries must throw light on the BDR tragedy, as the gruesome murders of more than 58 army officers at BDR headquarters on February 25 came as a bolt from the blue, dealing a body blow to our armed forces. The ongoing enquiries will be soon concluded, but the lingering trauma and shock from the worst ever tragedy will haunt us for long.

No words of sympathy or cash dole can truly soothe the grief-torn hearts of the bereaved, as they have to carry the burden of grief and the saddest memory throughout their lives. Only through a proper enquiry and trial can they find true solace at heart. Hardly had the new government taken over when it was faced with this ordeal and exposed to jolts and jitters, but it did not lose its way. It formed a non-party enquiry committee, and the army was

authorised to conduct a probe separately.

The CID was ordered to investigate the multiple crimes committed, and the commerce minister was tasked with coordinating investigation. Unfortunately, some of his comments were met with mixed reactions, albeit he clarified his position with partial retractions.

Besides, FBI and Scotland Yard teams came to provide the much-needed technical support in the probes. Appreciably, a due process of law was set up, and the latest time extension made to help delve deep into these matters. Now, would it not be wrong to doubt the reliability of the enquiries? The authority's clear intent to mete out the sternest of punishment to the killers and the masterminds is on record.

As against our bleak record of enquiry and trial of such killings, the government may take it as the right occasion to bring in a difference by ensuring justice, as most people hope it will. The assuaging of the

army officers' sentiments and consoling of their families by the prime minister, with a firm promise of justice, struck the right note.

The number of people visiting the enclosed corner at the roundabout near Pikhana to register their heart-felt love and mourning for the fallen heroes brings to the surface the people's collective demand for a trial.

What did the human chain programs by the sons and daughters of army families indicate if not empathy with the bereaved in this hour of their deepest pain, and a call for justice? Besides, the candlelight prayer offered by thousands symbolises our heart-felt cry for a true trial. Appreciably, the prime minister herself feels the depth of the pain. There is, therefore, no reason to suspect that the trial may be misdirected. We believe the enquiry committees will bring out the truth without being distracted.

We had better refrain from showing any extra-sensitivity to the ongoing enquiry. Random comments that might muddy the enquiries are not also desirable, whatever sources they may emanate from. The committees will surely pinpoint what went wrong, and who did what, so their findings can lead to a fair trial of, and exemplary punishment to, the killers. For objectivity, they need to weigh up all the views, facts

and figures that are surfacing.

One significant angle points to the grisly murders being linked with a "grand plot" aimed to strike a deadly blow to the army leadership, and push the army and the BDR into a vortex of mistrust, thereby threatening our national security.

One other view relates to the suspicion that the ultimate goal of the orchestrators of the tragedy might be more sinister and vicious -- that is to embitter the government-armed forces relation, and then to destabilise the country.

The third view is that the conspirators may have sought to keep the new government bogged down with the enquiry and trial, and thus distract the government from its agenda of changing the fate of the people, and to derail its move for war crimes trial in particular.

To frustrate such ugly designs, the government would do best to press ahead with its agenda. As a must-do, it has to demonstrate its strong will to demystify the tragedy and punish the killers and their backers. Otherwise, the image of the government might receive a serious knock. The killers cannot have the impunity to get away with wreaking the havoc they did.

MD. ALI AKBAR is a Deputy Secretary.

The pay scale conundrum

Low revenue leads to low salary, and low salary leads inevitably leads to widespread corruption. Many honest government employees thus languish in hardship and find things really difficult to cope with in this land of regular and drastic price hikes.

KAZI S.M. KHARUL ALAM QUDDUSI

THE government is supposed to announce a new pay scale soon. Speculations based on the proposed recommendations of the Pay Commission thus abound, leaving some in an upbeat mood. The highest proposed basic, Tk.45,000, at least sounds good for the higher officials in the state service. However, the lowest proposed basic, Tk.4,000, is strikingly low in comparison.

The lower groups, thus, have every reason to express frustration at the Tk.41,000 difference in the proposed framework. This is, however, just one side of the coin. On the other hand is the salary structure of officials of the rank of secretary compared to their counterparts in the private sector, where the latter are drawing salaries ranging from lakhs to millions. What can one make of this?

Is this, indeed, not a world of relative poverty on top of absolute and hardcore poverty? Though there is no alternative to a fat amount of money in leading a respect-

able life these days, our high officials can at least find solace in the fact that they are somehow enjoying a reasonably prestigious life. In fact, the motivating power of pay and emoluments is universal insofar as salaried employees are concerned.

Governments in Bangladesh have never been able to pay the public servants a satisfactory salary. While the governments' sincerity towards providing its employees with an attractive salary remains to be studied, politics with the pay, especially with the national pay scale, is very popular with the governments in Bangladesh -- which has, so to say, become a classic conundrum for the public employees.

The governments have always been found keen on reaping benefits from a pay revision, no matter what benefit it brings for the government employees. That is why they declare a new pay commission well before declaring a new pay scale. What is more, publicity is geared up. Consequently, speculations become increasingly intensified and the government employees get carried away.

To my mind, the publicity on the part of the government serves two objectives. One is to win the government employees' support and sympathy and the other is to provide the businessmen with a launching pad to go for a mad drive. Thus, the wily businessmen increase the prices of commodities and essentials even before the formal declaration of a new pay scale.

Later on, however, they increase prices in phases since a pay scale is usually implemented in phases. Consequently, the real value of the pay increase gets defeated and the new pay scale fails to produce tangible betterment. As has been noticed for ages, a new pay scale improves the living conditions by only a little.

There are serious allegations that in the cases of senior and midlevel employees, the salary provided by the government is spent in just the first ten to fifteen days, and the lower level employees live virtually from hand to mouth all the year round. But, the basic necessities have to be fulfilled somehow. Thus, service orientation makes way for corruption.

This is not to mean that a handsome salary is a guarantee of honesty, but it is believed to be a disincentive against corruption. Admittedly, corruption, an avoidable malady, is eating into the vitals of this country.

Millions of dollars have been misappropriated by the corrupt cartels, depriving the national exchequer and preventing the

government from providing an attractive salary package to the government employees.

It is, in fact, a vicious cycle that plagues corruption-ridden countries, not least Bangladesh: Low revenue leads to low salary, and low salary leads inevitably leads to widespread corruption. Many honest government employees thus languish in hardship and find things really difficult to cope with in this land of regular and drastic price hikes.

There is no denying that, to keep the government employees' composure undisturbed, they have to be provided with a competitive salary. Otherwise, the crooked ones in unison with the greedy and needy political incumbents will not only eat up whatever comes their way but also ensure optimum use of their guiles to extort more and more from whatever sources.

The bottom line is that the government can provide much sought-after relief to the government employees from the age-old pay scale conundrum by forming a permanent pay commission, as promised by the grand alliance and proposed by the latest pay commission, which, like many other countries, would revise pay of the public employees from time to time on the basis of inflation.

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