

## CHT peace accord emerging from back burner

*Fresh approach to implementation on the card*

THE parliamentary standing committee on Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs at its first meeting in Bandarban, significantly held outside the legislative capital, has disclosed a couple of steps signalling a change in style and approach to the implementation of CHT peace accord. In the first place, the government has recast the national committee for implementation with deputy leader of the House Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury as its chairperson. Secondly, the Land Commission is being reconstituted to inject dynamism into the body considered crucial in sorting out land settlement issues.

Although the peace accord's major achievement was restoration of peace in the region by ending two-decade long insurgency and blood letting in 1997, there is reason for despondency in the fact that even after 12 years of its signing some vital provisions of the accord remain unimplemented. As a result, we have observed exploitation of ethnic people continuing in some form or shape, and what's more, full potential for the region's growth remains unrealised. Now, the ambience at present in the hilly region for addressing the unfinished agenda couldn't perhaps be any better. AL government, the architect of the accord, is back in the saddle again and can only be expected to carry the process forward. As if to add to the atmospherics, AL candidates have won all the parliamentary seats in hill districts.

The formidability of the task, however, cannot be underestimated. The issues like land settlement, democratisation of administration, strengthening of tribal voice and all round development remain, platefully. Elections to regional and district councils where tribal people are to have preponderant representation and say will have to be held to make them truly representative in character and functioning. The Land Commission has yet to carry out survey and settle ownership rights. Need we say that a satisfactory solution of settlement issues holds the key to unlocking a whole range of prospects for peaceful and constructive coexistence between tribal people and settlers?

The hill tracts are a region of vast possibilities. It has tremendous prospects for private sector involvement and NRB participation in a large variety of development projects based on its natural resources. In the context of the economic meltdown we should be making serious efforts at diversifying the economy by seizing any new prospect for development. Let's unlock the CHT treasure-trove with determined vigour.

## Body to probe BDR jawan deaths

*A step in the right direction*

THE decision by the government to form a three-member committee to probe the recent instances of suicides and deaths of some BDR jawans is a welcome one. It is so because of the apprehension that has grown in the public mind about the deaths, especially at a time when investigations have been underway regarding the carnage carried out by mutinous BDR jawans at Pilkhana on February 25 and 26. Although the deaths have been explained away as plain suicides and in some cases as a result of cardiac arrests, the fact that these deaths have been reported when the BDR is especially in the spotlight has naturally led to a number of questions being raised. That the government remains sensitive to the issue and is indeed responsive to public concerns is therefore to be appreciated.

The three-member body, as we learn, has been directed by the authorities to submit its report within the next fifteen days. We expect that the committee will go quickly and effectually into its task through collecting the details relating to the deaths of the jawans and coming up with a report based on an objective analysis of the happenings in order to answer public concerns on the issue. With a very large number of BDR men now in detention in connection with the tragic happenings of February, it is important that nothing be done, even unwittingly, which can be perceived to be detracting from the main thrust of the investigations.

The goal, for the entire nation, is for a calm, considered examination of the circumstances and the manner in which the military officers attached to the BDR were so ruthlessly murdered in February. That goal must then lead to another, which is a proper dispensation of justice through identifying and punishing the guilty. A full and comprehensive inquiry can only strengthen that process.

## The end of the free market?

Freedom isn't the cure to all of life's challenges; often it's the cause. The free market is free to exploit, greed and gluttony being staple diet. The consumers aren't its cause but effect. Obesity included.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IF you have been putting on weight, Peter Ubel, US physician and behavioural scientist, says you shouldn't get upset. Obesity, he says, isn't a result of genes, but of genes interacting with modern markets. You aren't to blame for that bulge pushing your belt, evidence that when capitalism meets human nature, it leads to misery and harm. Freedom to choose is accompanied by freedom to make bad choice. The free market, he says, isn't a viable proposition.

Ubel sticks to his guns because the free market is flawed. One of its fundamental assumptions is that human beings make rational choices. Not true because consumers succumb to the lure of high fat even when they are overweight. Despite high prices of gasoline, professionals drive from homes in suburbs far from their workplace. Most ludicrous example is the statutory warning written on cigarette packs. Smokers smoke despite the knowledge that smoking is injurious to health.

The other assumptions are also equally incorrect. The companies are dishonest

and people don't have the necessary skills to intelligently evaluate the products and services they choose to purchase. So, the buyers buy paper clips, which slip off papers easily. They buy light bulbs, which burn out fast. The soap melts away at the mere touch of water.

If these things sound familiar, you must be halfway convinced that free market doesn't protect consumers. Buy a mobile phone; warranty expires the moment you step out of the store. Buy a refrigerator; the warranty might say free service but the handy person doesn't make that house call in one lifetime. Cheap and wasteful products are inevitable, when the market forces force the consumers, not the other way around. Sellers take buyers for an atrocious ride.

The bottom line is that unregulated markets allow people to make money at any cost. The recent financial meltdown is an outcome of that unrestrained freedom. Mortgage brokers made home sales without checking credit. The higher the house price, the more money they made in fees. Even better, they had no risk.

Banks that underwrote the mortgages were quick to unload the mortgages to

avoid their risk. Secondary "financial institutions" either sold those mortgages in bulk or turned them into bonds to be sold. They passed on their risk and took huge cuts. Brokerages that bought and sold those bonds made money on every transaction. They never held any risky mortgages.

In the flurry of risk-avoidance, nobody bothered that the real estate was way overvalued. The bond rating companies were paid handsomely to say the bonds were high grade. The law firms made sure it was all technically legal. Lobbyists got very wealthy carrying the messages between the government and the greedy manipulators.

Communications firms took hyena's share of lion's kill. They praised the free market, and made heroes out of maverick businessmen, worshipping them for creating "innovative risk diversification systems." In essence, what it meant was to pass the buck on to pension funds and other investors, the slaughtered lambs of a deranged system.

It's, therefore, argued that the end of free market isn't only inevitable, but it's also desirable. But the economists can't agree amongst themselves. There are those who would like to argue that the free market has not been free since the New Deal. University of Virginia's Robert F. Burner claims that the financial free market in the United States ended after the creation of the Federal Reserve System in 1912. But then Nobel-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz argues that September 2008 marked the end to

neoliberalism and deregulation as the fall of the Berlin Wall did to communism.

Again, Ian Bremmer, president of the consulting firm Eurasia Group, claims the state already functions as a leading actor. Thirteen of the largest oil companies are owned and operated by governments. Governments control three-quarters of the world's energy reserves. The Sovereign Wealth Funds are state-owned investment portfolios, which account for one-eighth of global investment, double the figure just five years ago. The combined assets of all such funds exceed the assets of all the world's hedge funds. Wherever the free market stands on the scale of being, Peter Ubel suggests a middle ground. Markets should be designed to take account of human nature. A government needs to move beyond informing consumers to persuading them.

Because, it's not enough to tell what has high fat contents unless people are convinced to avoid them. More reasons, says Ubel. The government can set building regulations to encourage stair walking. It can design commuter roads to promote bicycle riding. The structure of tax code can give incentives for rational saving.

Freedom isn't the cure to all of life's challenges; often it's the cause. The free market is free to exploit, greed and gluttony being staple diet. The consumers aren't its cause but effect. Obesity included.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a columnist for The Daily Star. Email: bgrdul151@yahoo.com

## Conserving our biological diversity

Available sources suggest that introduction of alien invasive species of flora and fauna were deliberate in Bangladesh, primarily, to increase productivity to meet the needs of a huge population. Almost all of the alien invasive species in Bangladesh possess the characteristics of high growth rate.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

MAY 22 is observed as the International Day for Biological Diversity (IDB) all over the world. The theme for the IDB in 2009 is Invasive Alien Species -- one of the greatest threats to biodiversity, and to the ecological and economic well-being of society and the planet. The theme provides the parties, which have signed the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and those dealing with invasive alien species, opportunity to raise awareness of the issue and increase practical action to tackle them.

According to the CBD, biological diversity means the variability among living organisms from all sources including, inter alia, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems, and the ecological complexes of which they are part; it includes diversity within species between species, and of ecosystems.

What are invasive alien species and why are they a big threat to biodiversity, ecology and economy? What measures and steps should be taken to tackle the problem?

According to various studies, invasive alien species are plants, animals, pathogens and other organisms that are non-native to an ecosystem, and which may cause economic or environmental harm or adversely affect human health. In particular, they impact adversely upon biodiversity, including decline or elimination of native species -- through competition, predation, or transmission of pathogens -- and the disruption of local ecosystems and ecosystem functions. For instance, native to the Amazon basin, water hyacinth has invaded tropical habitats worldwide blocking waterways, decimating aquatic wildlife and the livelihood of local people and creating ideal conditions for disease and its vectors.

Suggestions made by the experts to tackle the problem globally, include: preventing the establishment of potentially invasive species through customs checks, inspection of shipments, and

setting quarantine regulations to try to limit the entry of invasive species; developing economic tools and incentives for the prevention of introductions; and educating the general public and raising their awareness.

The CBD, which was signed by representatives of more than 150 countries including Bangladesh at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992, "places a duty on States Parties to conserve biological diversity within their jurisdiction, as well as outside their jurisdiction in certain cases."

Biological resources and diversity form the basis of both the ecology and economy of Bangladesh. Its rivers and other inland water bodies, its marine water bodies, forests provide habitats for its fauna and flora. According to Bangladesh State of the Environment Report-2001, there are nearly 10,000 species of plants, animals, and microbial organisms -- a good percentage of which are found in abundance. But that does not provide any room for complacency.

A number of species of fauna and flora are endangered or critically endangered. Available studies suggest that there are 54 species of inland fishes, 8 amphibians, 58 reptiles, 41 resident birds, and 40 mammals, which are threatened throughout the country. Among the marine and migratory species of animals 4 fishes, 5 reptiles, 6 birds and 3 mammals are threatened. Among the plants, 96 seed-bearing plant species are threatened.

The depletion of biodiversity is the result of various kinds of human development interventions and activities, especially in the areas of agriculture, forestry, fisheries, urbanisation, industries, chemicals, minerals, transport, tourism, and energy.

More important and relevant to the topic is the introduction of some invasive alien species. A study on Sunderbans shows that over the past decades, invasive species have spread significantly in the mangrove ecosystem. Of the identified 23 invasive species, 19 are native or naturalised to Sunderbans mangrove. The study thus suggests that invasion in Sunderbans is still at controllable stage.

Available sources suggest that introduction of alien invasive species of flora and fauna were deliberate in Bangladesh, primarily, to increase productivity to meet the needs of a huge population. However, some of them were introduced for decorative or ornamental purposes. Almost all of the alien invasive species in Bangladesh possess the characteristics of high growth rate.

To conclude, the rich biological diversity of Bangladesh is crucial for survival and progress of her people. So, the need for conservation of her native fauna and flora can hardly be over emphasised. Extreme care is also required to introduce any alien species.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is Former Secretary to the Government.

## Re-inventing friendship with India

Given her historical tie with us, it is only natural to expect India to be way more responsive to our problems than we saw she has been. Let us scratch our heads over what held her back.

MD. ALI AKBAR

WITH the stunning electoral victory, India's secularist Congress-led UPA is back in power. We may see it as an opportunity to pursue our interests with the incumbent Indian government in continuation, and are upbeat on the prospect of realising the same. We should, do our part to woo our next door neighbour into doing what it ought to.

We must do unto India what we want to have her do unto us. We should address the factors that have, putatively, irritated India. It is most ironical to not yet have in place a relation of mutual trust between our two states, despite the fact that India, like a friend in need, stood by us during our war of independence in 1971.

Given her historical tie with us, it is only natural to expect India to be way more responsive to our problems than we saw she has been. Let us scratch our heads over what held her back. It is more than time we resort to everything it takes to remove all suspicion creeping into our bilateral relation, if only for our

larger national interest. Of course, India should do the same.

One, however, has to trace down the less-than-optimal, mutually beneficial Indo-Bangladesh relation to our disquieting past. With the unfortunate, bloody change-over in 1975, it was sought to turn back the wheel of our secular, democratic march forward, and to bring about a paradigm shift in our political existence and relation with India.

Those well conversant with the topsyturvy forced by the powers that be at that time would affirm that actions were taken that might have estranged India. There was re-emergence of religion-based politics that was banned after our independence. Thanks to the then government's patronisation of Islamic fundamentalism, the secularist politics was mauled/battered, and thrown by the wayside.

In an unimaginable turn of events, the nation was split into two by floating/invoking "Bangladeshi nationalism" as opposed to "Bengali nationalism" that was indeed the mantra of our independent nationhood. In the changed ambience, the defeated anti-

liberation elements reorganised and entrenched themselves in Bangladesh.

In fact, the neo-nationalism had its sustenance feeding on covert malice to India. As it transpired from the evolving aspect of neo-nationalism, the ruling clique was all set to whip up anti-India sentiments.

It was, increasingly, manifest that the ultra-rightist forces defeated in 1971 could not forget the ignominy of defeat. In their frantic bid for revenge, they, albeit from behind the scenes, contributed to straining our relation with India. And, tit-for-tat, the issues of Farakka and the CHT insurgency arose.

Farakka gave birth to the troubling Ganges water sharing dispute, which remained unresolved until a land-mark accord was signed between 1996 AL government and India. Similarly, the long drawn-out CHT insurgency, in spite of claiming many lives, was kept burning until it was settled by the last AL government through a historical peace accord with the PCJS.

The 1996-2001 AL government was acclaimed for the bold steps to have the two intractable looking issues resolved, by taking India on board. Much the same way, we have to now again win the trust of India.

Particularly, the ongoing 4-phase re-enquiry into the buried case of 10 truck load-of-arms-and-ammo haul in

Chittagong is expected to open up a Pandora's Box, as it is suspected that the consignment of arms was to be routed through Bangladesh to Ulfa (United Liberation Front of Assam). It is alleged that some individuals in the then government diverted the case by causing a flawed investigation report to be submitted by the concerned enquiry officers.

Now, with some top ex-NSI officers taken into custody, it is widely apprehended that some top brass in the then regime might come under scrutiny, based on information elicited. It seems unlikely that the alleged intelligence functionaries would have dared to risk their necks without high level government backing.

It is argued that the huge cargo of seized arms and ammo was not consigned for any terror outfit within Bangladesh, as we are not aware of any terror group that may have either expertise or extensive network to consume/use such a large quantum of sophisticated, lethal arms.

We must do the needful to establish strong understanding. If the arms mystery is unraveled, and its behind-the-scene backers unmasked, it would serve as a concrete evidence of our good will and help win back India's confidence to help resolve our outstanding issues.

Md. Ali Akbar is a Deputy Secretary to the Government.