

Social safety net

Assistance must go to the actual needy

THE realisation that holistic progress of the country will remain a far cry if the socio-economic conditions of the vast number of poor people are not addressed has found due expression in the 2009-2010 budgetary allocation. It needs to be said that poverty of nearly half the population continues to eclipse many of our development endeavours. Ever widening gap between the rich and the poor with less opportunities for the latter to have access to resources contributed to perpetuating poverty in Bangladesh. The Finance Minister and his team, therefore, deserve accolade for outlaying various strategies aimed at bringing down poverty rate to 15 percent by 2021 from the existing 40 percent. Expansion of the social safety net to increase the number of beneficiaries is one such strategy that is intended to protect the poor from vulnerability.

Among the key features of the safety net programmes, providing special allowances to different underprivileged sections; employment generation; food security based activities to better manage the impact of natural disasters; and providing education, healthcare, training, and technical assistance to the unemployed would prove to be pragmatic interventions for removing some aspects of poverty. What catches our attention is the substantial increase in budgetary allocation for some of the vulnerable groups. For example, the allocation of Tk. 331.2 crore (presently Tk. 61.2 crore) for destitute women; 67 percent increase in the monthly allowance for the insolvent freedom fighters; significant allocation for insolvent disabled persons, low-income breastfeeding mothers, orphans and street children; and fund allocation for employment generation scheme for the hardcore poor are worth mentioning.

As it appears, the social safety net programmes intend to invest huge sums of money, most of which would be done in the rural areas, and among the underprivileged segments. Now the question is, which government agencies would ensure identification of the actual beneficiaries and proper distribution of the money at the grassroots level? We say this because in this country, past records of management of government funds are not too clean. Lack of accountability and transparency in the handling of allowances for the poor and vulnerable people is a major corruption we could hardly address over the years.

Our experience says that throwing massive amounts of money at a given problem does not often bring desirable result unless the fund is administered well with due accountability. Since social safety net programmes would mostly be implemented in the rural areas, the union parishad (UP) chairmen and members would have major roles to play in preparing authentic lists of actual beneficiaries. We are aware of the existing undercurrent of conflicts between the UP chairmen and the members of parliament (MPs), hence any undue interference from the MPs in the preparation of the lists might abort the good attempts at the very outset. These pertinent issues need to be viewed in the light of ground reality before getting into the action phase.

CHT land commission in a limbo

Make it functional to implement the peace accord in full

SINCE its formation more than a decade ago on the heels of the advent of the historic Chittagong Hill Tracts accord, the five-member land commission headed by a former Chief Justice has consistently been at odds with the immediate environs, to remain functional, let alone deliver land settlement decisions. It was envisaged and also empowered by the accord to resolve land disputes which have been at the heart of discords between the indigenous people and the plain land settlers. As such its successful functioning is considered pivotal to a fuller implementation of the peace accord.

True, two-decade-long insurgency of the outlawed Shantibahini and its political wing Parbattya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS) came to an end by virtue of the peace accord marking surrender of weapons by the insurgents and return of tribal refugees from the Indian state of Tripura. These developments, however, coincided with the issues of land ownership rights and settlement coming to the fore across the board. While the settlers from the plain lands added a dimension to the situation, the returnee tribals and the domiciled ones had had their own claims to settle.

It is surprising how a commission so elaborately structured was allowed to be gradually dysfunctional. Apart from a former Chief Justice heading the commission, Chairman of CHT Regional Council or his representative and an additional commissioner were to work as members. Furthermore, depending on the area it works, a chief of either Chakma or Bomang or Mung circle and one of the chairmen of three hill districts will co-opt as its members, thus making the commission a five-member body.

As applications from the indigenous people and Bangalees pile at the offices of circle chiefs and DCs and thousands of cases pend before the courts, the commission has yet to carry out the all-important survey to determine land rights on a firm footing.

It seems to us that the tribal elements in the commission and the rest have not been in an exactly ideal relationship with each other. The former land commission secretary Dipen Dewan claims that he had a difference of opinion with the then chairman of the commission on recruitment of manpower. More seriously, the tribal leadership is demanding reform of the land commission, even that of the peace accord implementation committee. We think that since an AL government had authored the peace accord, it is in the best position in its second term to be judging the merit or otherwise of such demands of a fundamental nature. However, we would urge the government to bring the full weight of its political will behind the task of carrying forward the unfinished agenda of full implementation of the peace accord with due emphasis laid on effective working of the land commission.

For credible investigation

As of now, twenty teams of investigators from CID are working on the case. Eight teams, each consisting of four members, are interrogating the accused and suspects, while others are organising the seizure lists prepared during the collection of the exhibits.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THERE is an apt saying to the effect that justice hurried is justice buried. In the same vein it could be said that investigation expeditious does not necessarily mean investigation efficacious. The painfully exacting task of criminal investigation in complex cases runs the risk of being perfunctory if speed is the uppermost factor bothering the investigator.

The above observations have been prompted by the statement of a prominent minister to the effect that the charge sheet in respect of the BDR mutiny and murder case would be submitted within two months. Before one ventures into the enormity of the BDR incident insofar as it relates to the number of culpable individ-

uals and the huge body of evidence, one would be well-advised to remember the cautionary words of our law minister that it is the investigation of the CID that will be acceptable to the court of law.

The indication is quite clear, that while other executive and administrative enquiries into the incident may help to acquire some perspective of the ghastly occurrences, the evidentiary foundation will have to come from investigators empowered under the law.

It would, therefore, be appropriate to try to understand the sheer magnitude of the incident and the parameters of the tasks for booking the guilty under the law. Going by newspaper reports, one finds that even more than three months after the incident it is not known as to how many BDR jawans and outsiders were

involved and, as yet, there is no credible evidence about the alleged instigators of the mutiny.

According to information allegedly obtained from CID sources, as reported in newspapers, up till now 460 persons have been arrested in connection with the mutiny and murder and of them 30 are outsiders who are likely to be charged for aiding and abetting the mutineers. Reportedly, 141 persons have made judicial confessions implicating themselves. Till now, the crime scene officials of CID have collected a staggering number of 50,000 exhibits.

Further, it has not been possible at this stage to indicate the number of persons who would be treated as accused, but some sources say that such numbers may run into a few thousand, of which 3,000 have reportedly been identified; of them many have been absconding and their number reportedly stands at 1,000.

As of now, twenty teams of investigators from CID are working on the case. Eight teams, each consisting of four members, are interrogating the accused and suspects, while others are organising the seizure lists prepared during the collection of the exhibits.

Nobody can perhaps say at this stage as to how lengthy the charge sheet will be and if at all it can be submitted in a few months time.

The above comments are not meant to justify any delay or any procrastination on the part of the investigating agencies whose personnel, while being aware of the national urgency of speedy investigation of BDR carnage, are actually grappling hard to conduct a credible investigation under the law. Doing the detection job lawfully to be able to stand the test of law in an open civil court is, undoubtedly, an exacting job. One has to remember that our laws are loaded in favour of the accused and courts often require fool-proof evidence to justify conviction.

The sheer magnitude of the BDR carnage relating to the number of victims and accused persons, the staggering number of exhibits, the marshalling of evidence by checking and cross-checking and finally writing the proceedings in the diary and filling in judicial forms should convince us that fixing a definitive time table now for completion of this huge investigation may not be in the public interest.

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Moving forward with difficult expectations

Obama made good use of quotations from the Scriptures, especially from the Quran. The blend helped to emphasise his belief that the differences were not insurmountable. In this context, it was useful to affirm that the stakeholders from both sides 'must not be prisoners of the past' but 'move forward' on positive elements.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE speech delivered by US President Obama in Cairo on June 4 was in the mould of President J.F. Kennedy. The speech was meant to have been delivered within the first 100 days of this new Administration. It took a little longer, but it was worth the wait. In more ways than one, it has initiated a new conversation that need not end.

One has to admit that Obama's stress on the civilisational aspects, references to Islam's contribution in science, mathematics, architecture and literature in the Islamic world as well as within the United States was significant. It reiterated the common bonds that could contribute towards the re-building of bridges based on mutual respect and the forsaking of differences. One has to agree with him that 'no single speech can eradicate years of mistrust.' However, it is true that we need to make a sustained effort to move forward based on equal partnership.

Obama made good use of quotations from the Scriptures, especially from the Quran. The blend helped to emphasise his belief that the differences were not insurmountable. In this context, it was useful to affirm that the stakeholders from both sides 'must not be prisoners of the past' but 'move forward' on positive elements, not dissuaded by negative stereotypes. He was also quick to caution the real need of not ignoring 'sources of tension' which were becoming stains on our 'collective conscience.'

Violent extremism (not 'war on terror') was used as alternative phraseology. United States and its 'relentless' fight against this phenomenon was explained as arising out of her quest for maintenance of international peace and security. There was also the awareness that mere exercise of the military option would not resolve the continuing crisis. This cognisance was an improvement over the past Bush Administration.

The address recognised that economic and social dimensions contribute towards the overcoming of conflict situations. This was particularly welcome. One can only hope that this will be reflected in Afghanistan where the conflict arising out of violent extremism has exacerbated because of corruption and lack of socio-economic opportunities within the vast rural and arid hinterland. The resurgent Taliban have been exploiting this factor to their advantage in recent months both within Afghanistan and also in the bordering tribal regions of northwest Pakistan.

Obama reiterated his decision to withdraw all US troops from Iraq before the end of his term. Good, but responsible stability will be difficult to sustain there without ensuring more even handed treatment of the Sunni and the other minority populations. Yes, Iraq is a sovereign country. Nevertheless, the US Administration has to be resolute in ensuring that all parties and communities within Iraq are treated fairly and have equal opportunity.

After that came Israel, Palestine and the Arab world. Obama was frank about the 'unbreakable' nature of the bilateral bonds with Israel and tried to infuse a sense of perspective and balance with regard to the degree of suffering already undergone by the Jewish community.

He then compared that with the need for also providing equitable justice to the Palestinian community. He referred to Israel's sense of insecurity but also underlined the need for compassion for the Palestinians. Obama, then most importantly, reaffirmed US support for an independent Palestine State, living in peace and security, existing side by side with an independent Israel.

He also indicated that Israel should desist from further expansion of its settlements in the occupied territories in the West Bank. In this regard, he was reiterating what Israel had already agreed to in the past and what later became the basis of the roadmap for securing peace in the Middle East.

It may be mentioned here that since taking over, Netanyahu has not accepted the calls by major powers to engage in processes that would help bring about peace. Instead his actions have been aimed at only protecting the interests of Israel with absolute disregard for the environment within which it exists.

It was at this point that Obama also revealed his astute political instincts. He knew that this gesture of support for an independent Palestine might be seen as a tilt towards the Islamic world. So, he told the audience and the world that his next stop would be Germany where he would be paying his respect to the millions of Jews who had perished in different prisons during the Second World War. Such a gesture was obviously aimed at mollifying the Jewish lobby back home and also in saving the face of Israel.

President Obama and his team have difficult days ahead. They are up against a wall of obduracy created by the new Israeli

Administration. In recent meetings with senior US officials and President Obama, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has sought to de-emphasize the Palestinian talks and focus on stopping Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

However, now after Obama's Cairo speech, it should be clear to Israel that Obama believes that the ability of the USA to confront the major challenge of Iran will be affected by the US ability to demonstrate progress in the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian arenas.

The world after his speech in Cairo, will expect the US to be committed to its stated role of honest broker. It will also ensure that the Muslim community will view US activities being consistent with elevated moral standards. That in turn will also deplete support for extremism against the USA.

The world will now wait eagerly for concrete details and the manner in which US Special Envoy Mitchell will tackle the problem and translate words into action.

We have had some straight talk from President Obama. He has touched on many important aspects- promotion of democracy, observance of rule of law, upholding of human rights including women's rights, support for Muslim entrepreneurs, religious freedom, universal nuclear disarmament and the need for the Islamic world pursuing high technology. Obama has very correctly underlined the need for a new beginning and called for an end to suspicion and discord.

He has raised difficult expectations. There will be severe challenges from entrenched partisan agendas. Nevertheless, all that can be overcome with suitable political will. Lots of hard work will have to go in to ensure there is no erosion of credibility. The Islamic world will also have to step in to allay fears and to ensure success.

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OPINION

Misleading brotherhood

Mind you. They conveniently cast aside the "brotherhood" masquerade, and perpetrated the heinous atrocities on us, the Bengalis, in 1971. We stood up on the ruins and started from scratch, but the brother state extended no help.

MD. ALI AKBAR

REPORTEDLY, one "brother" state has launched a diplomatic offensive to scotch our planned trial of the '71 war criminals. Shame on it! Isn't that meddling in our sovereign right to act?

While battling the Islamist radicals in their home ground, how could they move brazenly to rescue some hated elements, of about the same ilk, who had committed heinous crimes against humanity in 1971 in Bangladesh?

Understandably, they are out to protect their quislings of 1971, but without a moral ground. Will they forgive the Taliban's reported cruelties against their countrymen? They talk of Islamic brotherhood. Is their brotherhood feeling only for those who helped them in carrying out the barbaric genocide? Then, what is left for the remainder 99% other "brothers"?

Let's look back. When the talk of war criminals' trial came up, this "brother" state missed no time in sending an envoy who straightaway advised us to forget the old issue for good. We chose to let it go

without a fuss for the sake of decency to the visiting guest. We thought they would not move any further. That was not to be.

Some days later, we got a hint that the "brother" state wanted further discussions. We saw nothing wrong with that. But, we could not imagine that one fine morning we would wake up to hear, to our disbelief, that they have approached the UN and the US formally to pre-empt our planned war criminals' trial.

Back in 1971, it was in the garb of this brotherhood (?) that they swooped on the unarmed Bengalis in the dark of night and carried out history's worst carnage in the then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. Their marauding soldiers, with the help of their Bengali lackeys, whom we call traitors, had killed our loved ones and looted and ravaged our motherland.

What good will their present move do? Why so much "brotherly" love for their accomplices of '71, even 38 years after our independence? Is it aimed to maintain the dubious nexus many think they have with their '71 collaborators in Bangladesh?

If that is the case, there must be a deeper, sinister motive behind it. It is

strongly likely that the "brother" country had so long been nurturing those elements as proxy to execute some design, which might be to undermine our security and safety.

Riding on these local cohorts, they seem to play dirty politics by providing all manner of support to Indian insurgents, thus pushing us into India's bad book. Our premonition is that they seek to retaliate against India for the latter's historic support to us.

They want to antagonise India against Bangladesh so that relations between the two become strained and, gradually, Bangladesh gets realigned with the "brother" state. And enough has been done to that end since the '75 bloody change-over.

The brother state's ultimate political goal is supposedly to avenge its debacle in 1971, and to install a subservient regime in Bangladesh that would dance to its tune. Now that the unfolding mysteries of the ongoing enquiry into the 10-truck arms haul point accusatory fingers to an ISI link, it lends credence to our apprehension.

There is also a creeping suspicion about their embassy's part in the scandal. At whose green signal could they dare to make our land a conduit for smuggling arms to an Indian state? Was the plot to be executed with the clandestine help of some alleged war criminals then at the helm?

Notably, the "brother" state has followed double standard as regards their much-vaunted Muslim brotherhood, sidetracking the repatriation of the stranded non-Bengalis. Will these rootless Muslim brothers' appeal continue to fall on deaf ears?

Mind you. They conveniently cast aside the "brotherhood" masquerade, and perpetrated the heinous atrocities on us, the Bengalis, in 1971. We stood up on the ruins and started from scratch, but the brother state extended no help. They flatly denied our legitimate right to the state assets they laid their hands on, for which we also had paid during our common statehood.

It was believably due to their defamatory preaching that Saudi Arabia and allied Muslim states balked at recognising us as a brotherly Muslim state. It took us a long time to break the "lesser Muslim" image the unkind "brother" country had given us.

Our erudite columnists' recent exhortations to the "brother" state to apologise for the '71 barbarities created little response. Now, notice they have greeted the plea with an unwelcome bid for external pressures to be brought to bear on us for abandoning the '71 war criminals' trial. Beware of the misleading "brotherhood"!

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