

Handling the population issue

Investing in women to yield rich dividends

INVESTING in women as a way of advancing the cause of national development looks like an eminently sensible idea. And that is what the observance of World Population Day this year has been all about. There can hardly be any arguing with the fact that a rising population threatens to put at risk all strategies related to economic progress in the country; and this despite a declining population growth of 1.39 per cent at the present time. And in spite of the rate of reproductivity now being 2.7 per cent as compared to 6.3 per cent in 1971, there are some rather obvious reasons why the population issue needs to be handled in a more streamlined manner. Foremost among them is the question of how men more than women are dealing with the population control programme at the various tiers of society. For instance, it has been suggested that of the 55.8 per cent of those who employ family planning methods, a meagre 5.2 per cent happen to be men. In other words, the apathy of men toward family planning as opposed to the greater sense of awareness of the issue on the part of women is a stark reality.

It is here that the idea of women's education buttressing the overall programme of population control, indeed turning population into a productive factor in societal life gains significance. Both the theme of investing in women as well as the principle of girl's education being a weapon against poverty (the latter being the theme of the United Nations Association of Bangladesh) only add greater weight to the role women can play in this respect. Over the past many years, women have made quite considerable strides in education and have made remarkable inroads in various employment sectors in the country. There can be no denying such a reality. And yet there cannot be room for complacency here, for the simple reason that there are still very large areas where the message of population control needs to reach. We are especially referring to rural regions here where a conspicuous decline in medical facilities, a near absence of instruction on family planning, et cetera, have lately proved to be worrying. When the health minister himself speaks of a need to beef up the population control programme in such regions as Sylhet and Chittagong and also in chars, slums and haor areas, the question of what remains to be done becomes clearer.

AN of this takes us back to thoughts of an expansion in women's education. The focus of such expansion must be in the rural regions where, for all our delight in a decline in gender discrimination, powerful pockets of male chauvinism remain to keep women circumscribed in their activities. There is no question that educating women is a first step toward empowering them at various levels of society and politics. In its turn, empowerment leads to a bigger sense of responsibility through giving women a decision-making role in the family. The result is an improvement in living standards for all.

All of the above are of course fine as sentiments. What truly needs to be done is for these ideas to be transformed from platitudes into tangible realities.

BDR-BSF conference

Time to turn words into action

THERE is no question that better cooperation is needed between the Indian BSF and our town BDR border guards, and it is in the interest of both countries that a climate of calm prevails along the border.

It is thus that we have high hopes for the DG-level meeting between the two border security forces currently on-going. However, there have been many such meetings in the past and we feel that the time is long overdue for real action to be taken for a definitive improvement in the situation.

The principal problem, from our point of view, is the number of unarmed Bangladeshis who are killed every year through BSF firing. This year so far 55 Bangladeshis have been reportedly killed. Indeed, the current meeting takes place against the backdrop of the shooting dead by BSF on Saturday of three Bangladeshi cattle traders at the Benapole border.

That the death count should be so high should shock any conscientious person, of whatever country. These killings somehow occur with an appalling frequency, and can only serve to cast a shadow on Indo-Bangladesh relationship which is entirely avoidable. And avoided this must be, since both countries are committed to good neighbourly ties.

There are standard well laid-out procedures for dealing with any issue that may arise along the border and it can be resolved through a process of consultation on the ground rather than resorting to any lethal unilateral action creating tension along the border.

Other ideas that are on the table need to be followed up on as well. If we have better communication and coordination between BSF and BDR, this will help obviate untoward incidents besides importantly helping in terms of controlling drug and human trafficking, as well as smuggling, which both sides have an interest in curtailing.

In addition, we think the idea for sports contests and other friendly meetings between the two sides will go a long way to defusing tensions and creating a congenial environment on the border.

But the truth is that these things have been discussed time and again. This time we need to change rhetoric to reality. Stopping the killings would be a good first step.

Truants rule the roost

In our parliament, it is not the case of abstention but of truancy on the part of the members. Most of them do come and sign in to be eligible for pay and allowances. They step into the House for a quick appearance and then depart to do the errands in the town or elsewhere.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

ACCORDING to a Transparency International, Bangladesh (TIB) report, there has been a wastage of about Tk5 crore 42 lac in the 39-day first session of the much-touted ninth Parliament. The wastage is attributed to truancy in our Parliament, resulting in the lack of quorum. The wastage occurs as the speaker has to keep the sitting adjourned till the quorum can be achieved. In the meantime, the running of the parliamentary establishment costs on an average Tk35,000 per minute. It is learnt that their are five such sessions in a year, i.e.25 sessions during the tenure of a government. At the present rate, that will result in the loss of over Tk100 crore. Isn't it deplorable on the part of those whose conduct and callous attitude make the loss inevitable!

As expected, the speaker refuted the TIB finding in a quick riposte. This is the usual response from the people in politics. Even when Bangladesh earned the dubious distinction of being the world's most corrupt country for the first time during the last regime of Awami League, its reaction was dismissive. To wriggle out of the ignominy it questioned the bonafide of TI's rating for Bangladesh. The Germany-based research outfit stuck to its guns, as has the TIB about its findings -- notwithstanding even the prime minister's displeasure.

However, the basis of the TIB finding, i.e. lack of quorum, is more or less a worldwide phenomenon. Many members of the British House of Commons do not show up everyday. But they are absentees, not truants. There are also those who do make an appearance but spend a lot more time chatting with colleagues and friends in the lobbies and cafeterias than they do on the floor of the house. They are obviously truants. It is the same way in most other legislatures, including the US.

But truancy is indeed pervasive in our political culture. It is more common among the members of our Jatiyo Sangshad than it is among legislatures in most other democracies. It must be rare, if it has ever been the case in recent times, that the speaker of the House of Commons has adjourned a sitting for lack of quorum. The speaker of our Sangsad, by contrast, adjourns a meeting almost every other day for lack of quorum, although he does not concede to this fact.

In our parliament, it is not the case of abstention but of truancy on the part of the members. Most of them do come and sign in to be eligible for pay and allowances. They step into the House for a quick appearance and then depart to do the errands in the town or elsewhere. They have little interest in the issues that some of their colleagues may be debating on the floor of the House. On those rare occasions when they do speak they are unprepared and irrelevant, thus proving



Students skipping classes?

themselves to be enfants terrible.

Political observers believe that politics, including parliamentary politics, is still in disarray because the nation's institutions are wanting in maturity and efficacy. Perhaps the only exceptions are the military and the bureaucracy. They are relatively stable and somewhat organised, although their efficacy also can be debated and is open to scrutiny.

Our military has by now come of age but, after independence, has never fought a full scale war, which is the only way by which its efficacy can be tested. It has, however, taken part in its share of skirmishes in auxiliary roles like peace keeping, if not in war. Our bureaucracy is notorious for its corruption and incompetence. It has greater expertise in finding reasons why something cannot be done than in doing it.

But the worst lot is definitely our politicians. Even after a seismic upheaval for them they learnt no lesson. It's not only the wastage

in the name of parliamentary exercise, there is also much to be desired as to its quality. So far, it has been a one-sided exercise where the treasury bench members parrot their indoctrinated eulogy for the country's first family. They are so obnoxious that one has to hear and see them to believe. The organisations and individuals compete with each other in devising ways of showering praise on them. As a result, the priorities of political reforms are reigned.

Because of the ineptness of the parliament, which is subservient to the executive, the latter has overtaken the administration and more often than not calls the shots. Perhaps foreseeing this failure of parliament Harold Laski famously said: "... government has become an executive dictatorship tempered by fear of parliamentary revolt."

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Politiconomy of CO2

For Bangladesh, the inclusion of tax provision in the CAT bill and the possible moratorium on imports from uncontrolled CO2 emitting countries or imposition of tariffs on goods from CO2 emitting factories of a country is a concern to be reckoned with.

ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

POLITICS, Technology and Economics -- which I call politiconomy -- are innately inseparable from almost all human activities -- and greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide (CO2) -- emission is a perfect example of that disquisition.

The G8 summiteers in L'aquila, Italy agreed on July 8 to a goal of limiting global warming to 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 Fahrenheit) and cut its greenhouse gas emissions by 80%, but failed to persuade China and India to halving it by 2050.

According to UN report on climate change, (1) average global temperatures rose by 0.7 Celsius in the 20th century, (2) temperatures will rise further, by between 1.1 and 6.4 Celsius during the 21st century, depending on individual government actions, and (3) nearly 90 percent of that CO2 will result from burning fossil fuels.

The target of 2 Celsius was set following the aforesaid global temperature trend and EU's 1996 estimate that perilous consequences of many island states being wiped off the map is expected to begin with a rise in temperature by 1.5 Celsius. The EU estimated that the target could be achieved with world GDP

losses of at most 2.5% by 2050 with a loss of annual growth by at most 0.05%.

On June 26, the US House of Representatives narrowly passed a cap and trade bill (CAT) to restrict CO2 emissions to 83% of 2005 levels by 2020 and to 17% by 2050. Cap refers to a specified amount of "pollution allowances", limit sanctioned for a government facility or a private enterprise over an area or an entire country. Trade refers to selling the leftover or unused "allowances" of any enterprise in the open market to whoever is exceeding their legal cap. As such, a CAT is also called allowance trading or pollution credits. The G8 countries also proposed the creation of a global carbon trading market -- possibly patterned after the US CAT bill -- and a fund financed by rich nations to pay for technological renovations.

How'd the CAT system work? Overall goals of air quality are set for an area and explicit sources of air polluting entity (such as power plants, waste incineration facilities, manufacturing plants etc.) are allocated a certain number of allowances, measuring the amount of various pollutants that the facility is permitted to emit. However, depending on how rapidly a given facility adopts the new pollution reducing technologies, some facili-

ties will exceed their limit and others will pollute less and save allowances, which can be purchased by facilities exceeded the cap. Critics argue that CAT system relies profoundly on achieving breakthrough in clean energy technology.

Although buying up such pollution credits from less polluting enterprises allow some entities to pollute more, the overall pollution cap for a region or the entire country will be preserved. This entails the undesirable outcome that some parts of the country are exposed to degraded air quality than other parts. Besides, CAT system creates a new, intricate market for trading emissions that's vulnerable to abuse. However, the system is designed to reward pollution conscious facilities while allowing time for renovating other facilities with latest pollution inhibiting technologies.

One concern of the CAT bill, yet to be debated in the Senate, is a provision to tax imports from countries that are resisting adoption of carbon-filtering measures. The bill's sponsors feel that the tax provision is absolutely necessary to prevent job losses in industrial states.

President Obama rejects the tax provision as it would send a protectionist signal in a period of declining global trade. Critiques, however, argue that the bill -- even if the tax provision is jettisoned -- will put US industries at a competitive disadvantage relative to their foreign counterparts, and a carbon tariff is an inexorable fait accompli.

Nobel laureate economist and NYT columnist Paul Krugman argues that without the tax, goods produced by US corporations

under the CAT provision will be more expensive relative to those produced by their foreign competitors, which aren't saddled with the burden of extra cost and regulations.

Another negative aspect of the CAT system is that business's cost of purchasing "pollution credits" from the government to emit CO2 would be passed on to consumers in the form of higher product prices. For example, it's much cheaper to generate electricity from carbon-emitting fossil fuels than from wind and solar sources.

President Obama insists that the CAT bill will create more jobs building windmills and solar panels than it will destroy in the coal, oil and natural gas industries and in the industries dependent upon them. But Charles River Associates, a Harvard-based economic consulting firm, estimates the net loss of jobs at about 2.5 million a year.

The dilemma with wind and solar energy for Bangladesh and other developing countries are that they're much costlier than coal, oil or natural gas -- and thus economically unfeasible unless subsidised by rich nations or domestic resources are redirected from other much needed development projects.

For Bangladesh, the inclusion of tax provision in the CAT bill and the possible moratorium on imports from uncontrolled CO2 emitting countries or imposition of tariffs on goods from CO2 emitting factories of a country is a concern to be reckoned with. However, there's enough time interlude for modernisation since the CAT bill -- with or without the tax provision -- will be triggered in 2020.

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Obama's LBJ moment

With health-care reform working its way through Congress and climate-change legislation within reach for the first time ever, it's time for Obama to get in touch with his inner LBJ.

ELEANOR CLIFT

HIS poll numbers may be sinking, but six months into his presidency, Obama retains the admiration and the trust of voters. To be sure, they're not as admiring of his policies. The attacks from critics about unsustainable debt and big government have taken their toll. Voters question whether his policies will work, and many wonder whether he has what it takes to work his will on Capitol Hill.

White House officials say that Obama doesn't draw lines in the sand. Maybe he should. If political capital is measured by popularity, Obama still has plenty. What he doesn't seem to have is a willingness to spend it. With health-care reform working its way through Congress and climate-change legislation within reach for the first time ever, it's time for Obama to get in touch with his inner LBJ.

Obama's Zen-like avoidance of confrontation gives way too much leeway to Democrats. A case in point is New Jersey Sen. Robert Menendez's moves to block the nomination of Carlos Pascual to be ambassador to Mexico, first reported in the

Mexican press. Using his senatorial prerogative, Menendez can put what's called a "hold" on the nomination.

The Cuban-born Pascual helped write a report while at the Brookings Institution, a liberal think tank, urging normalisation of relations with Cuba at the conclusion of a three-stage process. Menendez is virulently antinormalisation and takes it out on Obama initiatives that touch on Cuba, however tangentially.

Meanwhile, Mexico is on the verge of becoming a failed state with its weakening economy, a violent drug war, and the looming threat of another deadly outbreak of the H1N1 flu in the coming months. It's an important country with implications for US national security, and the administration needs a capable ambassador there.

Why should US-Mexico relationship bear the burden of one senator's antiquated position on Cuba? Can't Obama bring the hammer down on recalcitrant Democrats like President Johnson would have done? This kind of tit for tat goes on all the time in Congress, and the way a Hill veteran explained it to me, Obama's reluctance to take on Menendez stems in part from won-

dering what demands the senator might make in return, and is it worth giving him a political IOU to cash in for who knows what?

When I point out the Founding Fathers designed our system so that a single senator could have this power, he quipped that "Florida should have two senators, not three." A spokesman for Menendez says a hold cannot be placed on the nomination until it is voted out of committee, and it's the senator's policy to not comment on holds, his or anybody else's.

It's not Obama's temperament to lean hard on people, and he doesn't know his prey the way President Johnson did as a former Senate majority leader. LBJ had compromised and bullied and legislated for years, and he knew everybody's sweet spot, when to cajole, when to threaten.

Obama's got Rahm Emanuel, a cleaned-up version of Johnson. It's not the same, but will have to do. With unemployment climbing and 12,000 people a day losing health insurance, Obama cannot allow universal health care to slip away yet again.

If a Democratic president with commanding majorities in both the Senate and House can't make it happen this Congress, the Democrats will take a hit in the 2010 congressional election, and the losses will be deserved.

This is an LBJ moment where Obama's legislative skills will be tested. Just as Johnson signed Medicare and Medicaid into law along with sweeping civil-rights legisla-

tion in the window that was open to him after the assassination of Kennedy, Obama's standing in the country is high enough that he can still ride the wave of the election that swept him into office.

The steadily increasing number of people without jobs and health insurance is scary and their cry for change will only grow louder. The true unemployment rate is probably twice what the government records as people get discouraged and fall from the statistics.

Still, Obama is making progress. If you close your eyes and listen to the cable-television ads, it sounds like the early '90s all over again with recycled attacks on socialised medicine and government-run health care.

But this July is very different from the summer of Hillary Clinton's discontent. The interest groups are relatively quiet, and the bills are being written.

At a comparable point during the Clinton administration, the legislation was almost dead, with Democrats heaping dirt on the corpse along with the Republicans. According to Congressional Quarterly, Obama is on pace to exceed Clinton and even LBJ in getting Congress to vote his way, in part by carefully picking his fights. Victory born of caution falls short of expectations but beats defeat any day.