

## Follow through on deliberations at DCs' conference

*Expeditious and balanced outcome is now imperative*

ON the second day of the three-day conference of deputy commissioners in the capital, a session dominated by their exchange of views with different ministers, the DCs focused on the multi-faceted tension triggered between government officials on the one hand and MPs and upazila representatives on the other relating to control of various aspects of development programmes. These programmes include food for work, vulnerable group feeding (VGF) and vulnerable group development (VGD). This inevitably led to a lack of coordination in field level activities, according to the DCs. Such a conflictual situation, we believe, is putting up roadblocks to implementing development programmes.

The DCs have demanded amendments to the Union Parishad Act, Upazila Parishad Act and District Parishad Act. It is worthwhile to note that in the first place the government had amended these laws, empowering MPs with supervisory authority over the functionaries of the local bodies. Local Government and Rural Development Minister Syed Ashraf Islam has said that the standing committee on his ministry is seized of the prevailing complexities and is trying to find solutions to these issues. Earlier, in an editorial on this specific subject, we had pointed out that in light of practical experience the amended laws might still need to be fine-tuned to strengthen the working of the local government system.

On an equally important note, so far as governance and service delivery issues go, the district level officials have to ensure maximum and effective coordination in combating extremism, maintaining law and order and ensuring the provision of other services to the people.

Following the recital of problems by the DCs, what the government must now do is go for a serious and concentrated consideration of the various views expressed at the conference. Here we would urge the government to seek the opinions of academics, former civil servants and members of civil society and take these on board towards adopting a solution-oriented work plan. That to our mind is the crux of the matter. It must now be ensured that the ideas and recommendations which have come out of the DCs' conference are not consigned to oblivion but are instead worked upon. In effect, expeditious study and balanced implementation should now be the priority.

While on the subject, we cannot but note with distress the suggestion made by some deputy commissioners that they should be given the right and authority to remove temporarily from office elected upazila officials in certain circumstances. The idea is silly at best and outlandish at worst. At a time when the national effort is on a building and consolidation of democracy, the suggestion that appointed government officials should be empowered to remove elected public representatives from office sends out a very disturbing signal. It can only intensify the very conflict the DCs themselves have been feeling so distraught about.

The nation expects a judicious and positive outcome from the DCs' conference. Let the momentum that has been generated not be lost, for it is the future of government and how it functions that are of the essence here.

## The HC directive is well timed

*Call for preparedness against earthquake should be heeded*

THE high court rule issued Monday on the government to procure equipment for rescuing victims of earthquake as well as to form a committee on the issue in case one strikes any part of the country in the future has awakened the nation to a spectre looming large for long. This is a welcome move by the highest seat of justice of the country.

Bangladesh is no stranger to natural calamities like cyclones and floods. Due to their frequent visitations and the destructions they cause, the preparedness against them is understandably better. Even though an earthquake is nothing new to us, yet we remain in a poor state of preparedness to face it. Meanwhile, earthquakes of rather moderate intensities occurred in Sylhet, Rajshahi and Chittagong including one of 5.6 on the Richter in the capital city. In November 7 of 2007, a 6-degree quake jolted Chittagong and Khagrachhari districts. The tremor even cracked open a fault in the hills of Chittagong and Khagrachhari.

Experts are of the opinion that a series of minor tremors are but a precursor of yet stronger earthquakes of more devastating consequences. Who knows then that the milder earthquakes of the previous years do not portend a quake or quakes of fatal consequences?

But how did the authorities and all others concerned respond to those earthquake incidents? Well, immediately after those earthquakes, one could see a flurry of activities and enhanced level of awareness among the public, in the media and within the government circles. Though there were a lot of talks, but nothing of much substance emerged afterwards. Gradually people forgot about those quakes and along with them the need to get prepared against any future earthquake of destructive consequence.

Consider the fearful scenario of a temblor of devastating intensity striking the capital city of around 15 million with its old and new buildings jam-packed with people. What is worse, apart from old, dilapidated buildings, there are also new structures, including the high-rise ones, many of which are not earthquake proof. The very thought of it sends shivers down the spine!

So, we have hardly any time to lose regarding our preparedness against any future earthquake. The government needs to swing into action without delay and take all necessary measures in this respect. Those cover awareness campaign among the people, holding of civil defence exercises, conducting regular drills at workplaces and educational institutions and so on. Capacities of the existing fire-fighting units have to be increased with more men and materials. Simultaneously, a strong monitoring mechanism has to be installed to ensure that the buildings are equipped with necessary in-built anti-quake measures.

## Only change is constant

We are looking for digital solutions to analogue problems. Confined to the past, how can we open the doors to the future? Change can't change anything, if constant holds it back. It's said that only constant is change. Other way around for us, the only change so far has been one resounding constant.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

EVER since Thomas A. Edison recorded the human voice in 1877, the music industry has gone from strength to strength. But according to Larry Starr, who teaches music history at University of Washington in Seattle, it still grapples with the same old uncertainties after all these years. Who owns the music? What rights pertain to artists? What rights pertain to the companies? It means, and he sums up, that form changes but the issues remain constant.

Superimpose music on politics, and uh, it's an exciting fit for us! In this country, we are dancing to the music of change as signboards go up and down, renaming public buildings. The government appointments are being jiggled to reflect the change in power. There have been many instances of supersession in senior postings to enforce the overriding will of the new government.

The political landscape also has undergone change. It's now dotted with spheres of influence, clear evidence of who runs the country. Members of the ruling party control unions, federations, committees, neighbourhoods, streets, bus depots and toll-gates.

So, there have been plenty of changes, but what do they show? Do they show that the constant has changed, or the change has been constant? Two political parties held their national councils last week. Both parties unanimously re-elected their incumbent chairpersons. The national council of one party even went so far as to empower its re-elected boss to fill out 45 positions of its

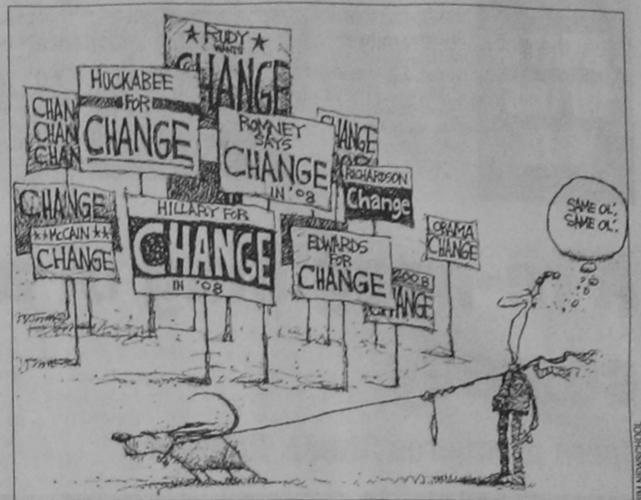
Central Working Committee.

The story of the other political party is even more hilarious. Re-election has stoked the ambition of its chairperson, who now wishes to cling to his post for the rest of his life. If the national councils were aimed to exorcise these parties, they have been more deeply possessed. BNP's national council is likely to follow suit in December. It will also re-elect the sitting chairperson. Is there anybody who wants to bet?

It means, all those changes are beginning to look like a huge constant. Lord Buddha says that when everything changes, nothing remains without change. This is where it goes over the head. Change changes change, and the spinning wheel goes back to where it started. From constant to constant, it's apparent that everything is going to remain the same.

Thus, the small steps of constant aren't formulating the giant leap of change. Then how will this nation make its transition from analogue antiquity to digital demarche? Let us say, the country will be plugged to computers from end to end. Let us say, we are going to have a clockwork country, which will be thoroughly connected. But does it mean all that are walking now are suddenly going to run?

In other words, can the surging tide of change crash over the undertow of constants? The same old retribution, favouritism, extortion, intimidation, corruption and personality cult mean the boat has never left the dock. Even with a cabinet stacked with new talent, it reminds us more of hackneyed hubris than fresh vigour. One of the cabinet members



resigned lately, speaking of a deadlock. New players and old game is what he said.

That being what it is, the only change is that the country has changed hands. We have got old wine in new bottle, old scruples in new slogans, and old leaderships in new coronations. The change of hands has failed to change the hands of change.

American novelist Ellen Glasgow has said that the only difference between a rut and a grave is their dimensions. The question is whether our politics is trapped in a rut. If it's going in circles, then is it going anywhere? Has our politics become a stagnant river choked by the debris of contentious past?

Interestingly, our rut has its dimensions, which are equivalent to the combined dimensions of two graves, which belong to two of our greatest leaders. If the country is divided today it's largely because we are divided over them. It's their roles in the Liberation War, their names on signboards, and their influences over people, which have

woven together a surface of conflict under which there is a churning cooperation of thriving interests.

Perhaps it's worth undertaking a study as to how these interests flourish while the country roils with contentions. Perhaps this is where lies the secret to the insurmountable puzzle why this country doesn't change in spite of changes. The river flows, the boatman rows, but why doesn't the boat go anywhere?

It's because the boat is still tied to the dock. We are looking for digital solutions to analogue problems. Confined to the past, how can we open the doors to the future? Change can't change anything, if constant holds it back.

It's said that only constant is change. Other way around for us, the only change so far has been one resounding constant.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a columnist for The Daily Star. Email: badrul151@yahoo.com.

## Science based technology education

We need highly qualified and skilled manpower for solving the unwanted problems. Now we need to reach higher education, particularly science-based technology education, to everyone, even those living in rural or remote areas.

LUTFOR RAHMAN

IN the new semester that started in early July 2009, I have been given the responsibility of teaching communication engineering and data communications to the students of B.Sc. engineering in Computer Science and Engineering Department in a private university in Dhaka. The interesting thing is that the students are employed in private firms or government, semi-government or non-government organisations (NGOs). They have completed their four years diploma courses in relevant subjects from private or government polytechnic institutes. Their classes, both theoretical and practical, start from 6 pm.

I am also responsible for teaching computing to the students of MBA, who hold responsible positions in government and non-government offices. Some of them work very hard in factories or places where the environment or financial remunerations are not attractive. Many of them travel a long way by bus from their work places and they seem very tired when they enter the classroom.

As a senior professor with academic and industrial experience at home and abroad, I

understand their psychology and their problems. Some are so tired that it is difficult to draw their attention to the topics I lecture on. This situation reminds me of conditions thirty years ago when I was abroad, working in an electronic industry and attending classes in the evening. In those days technology was not that developed.

Though the students work hard and spend a big part of their earnings for the university degree, they are still very happy because they have the scope to get higher education. Just two decades ago there was no chance of higher education for diploma holders from the polytechnic institutes in Bangladesh. They are more interested in a degree than in anything else. The reason is that a B.Sc. Engineering degree will enable them to get a better job or a promotion. The situation is the same for students of business administration.

It is a good sign that the rate of higher education in different disciplines is increasing day by day, but the universities do not have enough capacity to accommodate them all. More than half a million students are passing out every year from the general education, madrasa and technical educa-

tion boards.

Everybody has the right to get education, including higher education. But, in practice, rural students are deprived of higher education. The reasons are very much related to distance, finance and time. Most universities are located in Dhaka city or some divisional towns, where the guardians from rural communities cannot afford the expenses for their kids. Being engaged in other activities, many interested students from rural communities cannot spare time for higher education.

In the present age, higher education is encouraged in most countries. Even in Thailand, 50% of the students are getting the scope for higher education, and the number is as high as 90% in Korea. What benefit will it bring for us if 100% students are given tertiary level education? The answer is -- the world is moving towards a complex and unknown direction. We observe change in almost each and every sector. Some changes are bringing welfare for the society but others are creating unlimited problems that are very difficult to solve through traditional or local processes. Intellectuals of the global society predict that only highly skilled and well-qualified scientists will be able to solve the global problems that are being created due to abnormal growth of technology. As such we need highly qualified and skilled manpower for solving the unwanted problems. Now we need to reach higher education, particularly science-based technology education, to everyone, even those living in

rural or remote areas.

Technology has made possible things that were not possible even 100 years ago. We need to take an initiative, for which cooperation and assistance from the government is crucial. Developed countries have already taken the initiatives and recently African countries have been trying to implement the program. Two recent events, held in France at Unesco headquarter and Maastricht in Netherlands, have made things clear to the participants.

My participation at the Maastricht event gave me an immense opportunity to learn how to start the project of enabling all for higher education. The events also gave me opportunities for meeting world famous talents and experts who made the innovation effective for the whole world. The innovation is transforming the traditional university campus-based education to home-based education.

If the project is started in Bangladesh, there will be only one university for administrative purposes like admission and examinations. As a senior citizen and an academic, I believe this project will be highly effective for Bangladesh for various reasons. The respective ministry and the concerned authorities are therefore suggested and requested to look into the matter as soon as possible.

Prof. Lutfor Rahman is Founder VC of Science and Technology University in rural Bangladesh. Email: lutfor@agni.com.

## Mullah Baradar: In his own words

Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar has been in day-to-day command of the Afghan insurgency ever since the Taliban's founder and leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, disappeared from view roughly three years ago. Newsweek hand-delivered a list of questions for Baradar to a senior Taliban source. Within days, the Taliban's chief spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, telephoned Newsweek asking for an e-mail copy of the questions. A few weeks later Mujahid e-mailed to Newsweek what he said were Baradar's answers in Pashto. Excerpts:

How would you describe the Taliban's current position on the ground in Afghanistan?

Our losses are very few. It has become transparent to all Afghans that foreigners have come to our country as invaders and not for the welfare of Afghans. In every nook and corner of the country, a spirit for jihad is raging.

What is your reaction to the large increase in U.S. forces this year?

Statements about the increase in troops do not affect the mujahedin at all. In fact,

Americans are demoralised in Afghanistan, and they don't know what to do. [The Taliban] want to inflict maximum losses on the Americans, which is possible only when the Americans are present here in large numbers and come out of their fortified places.

How long are you prepared to fight?

The history of Afghanistan shows that Afghans never get tired of struggling until they have freed their country. We shall continue our jihad till the expulsion of our enemy from our land.

Who is leading the Taliban movement?

Respected Amir-ul-Momineen (leader of the faithful) Mullah Mohammed Omar. We are acting on his instructions.

Are you in direct contact with Mullah Omar?

Continuous contacts are not risk-free because of the situation. [But we] get his advice on important topics.

What about his health?

He is hale and healthy and is not only taking part in, but also currently leading, the jihad.

The United States and Afghan president Hamid Karzai say you and your commanders are largely operating from Quetta in Pakistan. Is that true?

This is baseless propaganda. The Shura's area of operations is inside Afghanistan.

Are some Taliban involved in secret talks with the Karzai government?

Not a single member of the Taliban is involved in talks.

Would you support talks at some time?

What would be the topic of the talks and what would be the result? Our basic problem with the Americans is that they have attacked our country. They are offering talks, hoping that the mujahedin will surrender

before them. We see no benefit for the country and Islam in such kind of talks.

What would be your conditions for talks if they were to take place?

The basic condition is the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan.

If breaking ties with Al Qaeda were a condition of a peace accord, would you do that?

Our decisions are made on the basis of our national interests.

Is Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency giving you support or advice?

This is venomous propaganda that has no facts behind it.

What about reports that Pakistani intelligence is advising you not to enter into peace talks at this time?

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is independent and sovereign in its decisions and agreements. It is not taking any dictation from any group or government.

Do you fear that Pakistan would stop you from using its soil?

They have not given us permission to use their land even now.