

CHT's potential for development still unrealised

Implementation of the accord is pivotal

THE Chittagong hill tracts with their natural endowment of resources make up a region that is capable of firing the imagination of any development planner with a vision. Apart from its contoured topography, home to a rich biodiversity of flora and fauna, being an environmental asset and tourist attraction in its own right, the potentialities for economic development the hill districts have are also immense. But unfortunately, all of this enormous possibility of the region, has hardly ever crossed the academic threshold, the rhetoric wish-list, as it were.

The accord putting an end to the two-decade-long insurgency and the relative calm that followed notwithstanding, some key provisions of the pact remain unimplemented even after 12 years of its signing. All we are constrained to say is that the fervour and high degree of importance with which the agreement was signed up to by the government and the tribal leadership lost its way, spiraling down the priority list. This is a sad commentary on the successive governments' basically balking at resolving issues that were not amenable to easy solution. But, solving difficult issues is the stuff of which the strength of a democratic government is made.

Land disputes are at the heart of the implementation issue. One of the main pillars of the accord was the return of numerous tribal refugees from India to their hearths and homes in the CHT. Their settlement remains an issue as no cathedral survey drawing the property lines has been conducted as a basis for according land ownership rights. The Land Commission has long been comatose; this has to be activated through a reform of the relevant act in conformity with the CHT accord. Apart from empowering it, it needs to be adequately manned and provided with other logistic supports.

Indigenous people will have to be given a greater voice in the regional and hill district councils with elections being held to such bodies and relevant acts amended where necessary. The gaps in coordination among regional council, hill district councils and district administrations will have to be bridged.

Our hope is the AL government, the architect of the peace accord, will speed up the process of its implementation and help pave the way for a rapid all round development of the region. The sectors that deserve focussed attention are health, education, women empowerment, promotion of indigenous culture and uplift of the relatively backward communities.

Disaster issues in school curriculum

Let content and language be in easy form

THE idea of introducing disaster-related issues in school curricula surely promises to bring a new dimension to education in the country. For a developing nation such as ours, the ubiquity of problems it faces calls for new and sometimes radical approaches toward a resolution. That necessarily brings the question of the school syllabi into focus. We are of the opinion that the national convention on Monday on disaster risk reduction through schools is a step in the right direction and one that should lead to other and meaningful steps where imbuing the young with new ideas is concerned.

Introducing disaster-related issues in the curriculum is in the broad sense an initiative toward sensitising school students about their obligations to the community. In a country regularly battered by natural disasters, it is of critical importance that apart from their normal study of subjects students be brought face to face with the realities around them. Traditionally, our young and indeed the population as a whole have observed nature's fury at work. But where an understanding of such natural phenomena and preparing to tackle them is the matter, they have generally had precious few ideas. Which is why an inclusion of the subject in the curriculum gets to be important. If such a move is undertaken, it will quite rightly be seen as a step toward involving, in the ultimate sense, the larger community in responding to natural disasters. Besides, schools happen to be sheltering the homeless in times of disaster, although they are among the most affected during a calamity as well. Of course, there is and will always be the state or the government to make policy and undertake disaster mitigation programmes, but when a community is ready to handle conditions on its own in an informed way, there certainly is a difference. From such a perspective, therefore, incorporating natural disaster issues in school curriculum looks like a purposeful move.

But let there be a caveat here, one that was pointed out by a participant at the convention. She noted that the issues, if they are to be part of the school curriculum, will need to be children-friendly. There can be no contrary opinion here. For children to absorb the issues, it will be necessary for those to come packaged in language and content that they can receive easily. Why not have the idea take root?

EDITORIAL

Of the BNP, picnics and other things

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party can, even at this late hour, go for damage control. Political parties, once old and worn out policies threaten to send them into oblivion, often reassert themselves through simple but necessary reinvention. That process can begin through its return to the Jatiyo Sangsad.

SYED BADRUL AHSEN

THE Bangladesh Nationalist Party is pretty unhappy about the Tipaimukh affair. That is quite understandable. But what surely gets to be upsetting, even a trifle irritating, is its characterisation of the planned trip to the site of the proposed dam by a group of parliamentarians as a picnic.

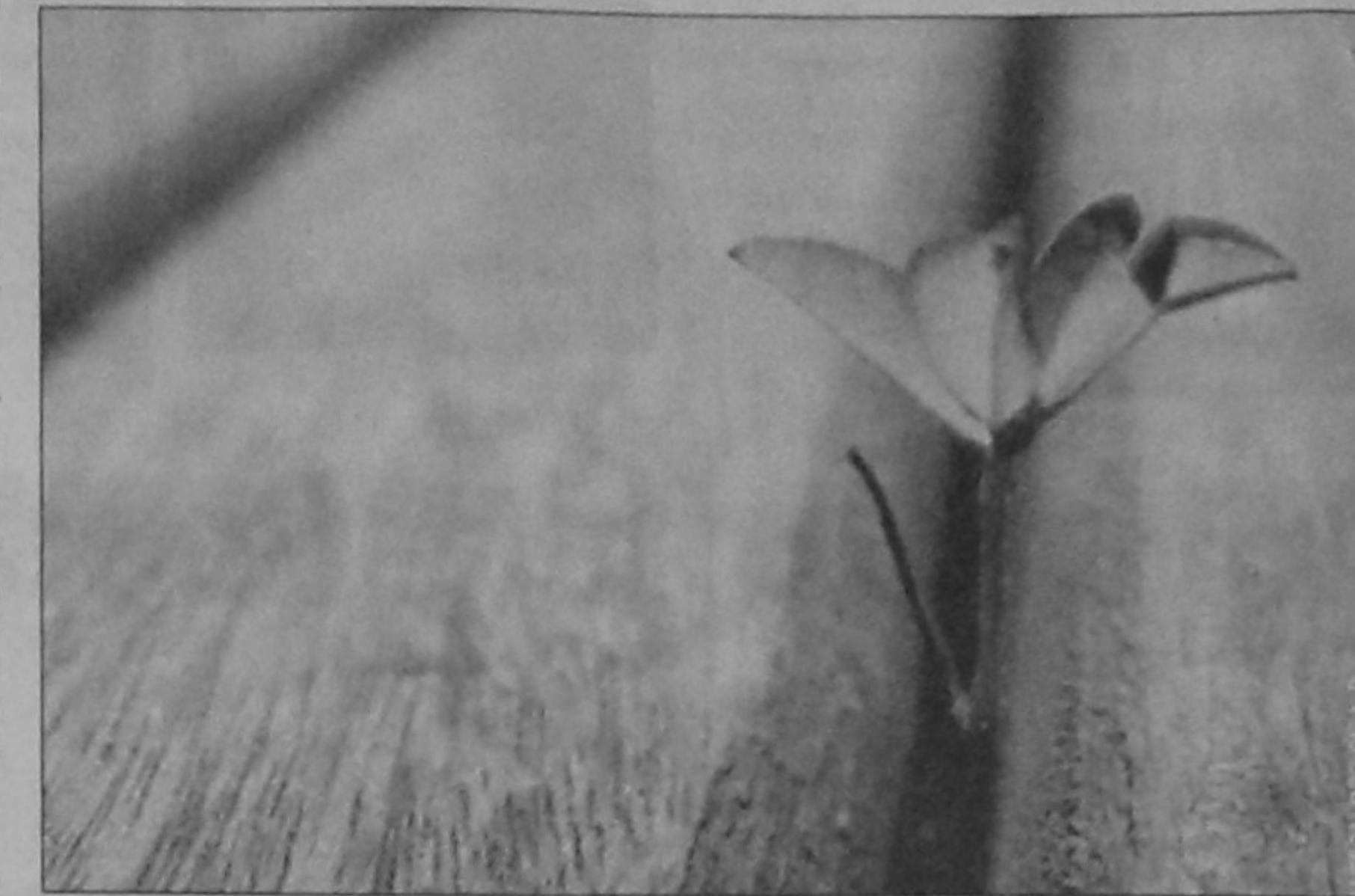
Of course, the BNP's Major Hafizuddin has since making that picnic-related remark commended the Awami League's Abdur Razzak over the latter's move to go into the entire Tipaimukh affair. Hafizuddin believes that Razzak's act demonstrates seriousness on the part of the ruling party over the issue. And, incidentally, it is a belief we share with the BNP politician. Government is, or should be, and always, serious business.

But if Hafizuddin has had cause to change his opinion on the matter of the Tipaimukh visit, Khondokar Delwar Hossain has not. He too has called the visit (which has, meanwhile, been aborted because of the rains) a picnic. Meanwhile, on a bigger and much more ominous scale, the chairperson of the BNP has warned of a movement on the issue if the government fails to uphold the interests of the country. Naturally, if any government in any country is perceived to be going against the national interest, it is in the fitness of things that the people of the country will rise in revolt and force a change in conditions. That is given. But what comes across here

is the matter of why Begum Zia and her party have constantly, often consistently, sharpened their antennae every time anything to do with India has been coming in. You think of Farakka and now you think of Tipaimukh. Of course, the rest of us have thought long and hard over these issues as well. But at the same time the rest of us have not ignored thoughts of all the other problems that have assailed us over the years.

You think here of the assets and liabilities we ought to be sharing with Pakistan. You dwell on the question of all those Biharis who opted to be citizens of Pakistan after December 16, 1971. And, most important, you wonder why the "Bangladeshi nationalists" have not been making it clear to the Pakistanis, in the way the rest of us have, that they need to express public contrition over what their soldiers did to our people in the tortuous course of our War of Liberation all those years ago.

And if recent history is anything to go by, you are left feeling absolutely horrified by all the nightmarish tales springing out of the ten-truck arms episode in the days the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its friends in the Jamaat-e-Islami exercised political authority over the state. The point we make is simple: if the BNP spots a lot of things wrong in the way the Indians have been behaving toward us, it should also be morally and ethically strong enough to go for introspection where its position on the facts we have been speaking about is concerned. A political party which goes into a selective process of analysing the issues, and those it



Can BNP re-emerge?

feels will give it mileage among the electorate, gets into the act of diminishing itself.

Let the facts speak for themselves. And those are facts Begum Zia and her acolytes need to take into cognisance if their party is to return to popular respectability. Of the facts we speak of, there is the decision to withdraw an army brigade from the Chittagong Hill Tracts, an act that promises to go a long way in restoring the confidence of the indigenous population in the state. The BNP does not see it that way, which is a pity. It has gone on believing that keeping the soldiers there is a surefire way of ensuring the territorial sovereignty of the state. And it has said not a word about all the sufferings the Chakmas and other tribal people have been put through over a period of years because of the illiberality of the state we caused to be born in 1971. The truth is that the tribals have paid a price, for little fault of their own. The truth is also that we have expended a huge degree of resources, in

terms of men and materiel, in the CHT for reasons that ought not to have been there in the first place. The Begum and her people have stayed silent on these points of historical reality. They have not explained why they have put this nation through intense psychological discomfort by their repeated attempts to distort national history -- in their public pronouncements, in school textbooks, indeed everywhere. The damage that has thus been caused to Bangladesh has been colossal.

And yet the Bangladesh Nationalist Party can, even at this late hour, go for damage control. Political parties, once old and worn out policies threaten to send them into oblivion, often reassert themselves through simple but necessary reinvention. That process can begin through its return to the Jatiyo Sangsad. It has a moral duty to be there.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. E-mail: bahsantareq@yahoo.co.uk.

Sign for stable democracy

The president's largely successful reform is the radical decentralisation that has seen a big chunk of public-sector spending and power devolved to local levels. The *reformasi* has also introduced a new sense of accountability, which has done a bit to rein in the still rampant corruption.

HARUN UR RASHID

PRESIDENTIAL election was held across the Indonesian archipelago on July 9. The Election Commission announced the result on July 25, declaring current President Dr. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, a soft-spoken former general of the Democratic Party, for another five years.

Former president Megawati Sukarnoputri secured 26.8% of the votes, compared to President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's 60.8%. Mr. Kalla received 12.4% of the votes.

Megawati boycotted the formal announcement of results from the Election Commission as she believed that there were "unresolved legal issues" over the vote, said her party spokesman Gayus Lumbuun. Vice-President Jusuf Kalla has said that he will challenge the voter list.

Indonesia is an archipelago country with about 17,000 islands, covering a total area of 1,904,569 square kilometers, divided into 34 provinces. About 176 million people were registered to vote at more than 500,000 polling stations. More than

250,000 police and 20,000 soldiers were mobilised across the archipelago.

Political observers say that all the money the candidates spent during the election campaign has been useful at a time when Indonesia's economy is cooling sharply in the drought from the global downturn. The central bank expects a decline of 25-28% for 2009 as a whole. Most economists expect GDP growth to slow to about 3% from 6.1% in 2008.

During the election campaign, head scarves (known as *jilbab* in Indonesia) for women had become an issue. This time the target of a religion-based smear campaign was Herawati, the wife of his vice-presidential candidate, Dr. Boediono, an Australian-educated economist, a former governor of Indonesia's central bank and considered clean and highly competent.

And, improbably enough, the whole affair was started by one of the parties allied with the president's coalition. The Islamic party PKS, or Prosperous Justice Party, claimed that its conservative members would be reluctant to vote for the SBY-Boediono ticket because their wives rarely wore the *jilbab* in public. Innuendo and

rumours soon kicked in.

But Herawati Boediono promptly put her religion at the disposal of politics. When the story hit the headlines, Herawati made a well-publicised visit to a mosque, wearing the headscarf and offering to wear it more often if the campaign required.

Despite all the fears about Indonesia post-Soeharto, it is turning out to be a democratic success story. "In the immediate aftermath of the fall of Soeharto, with the collapse of central authority, various actors tried to take as much as they could through violence," explains Ed Aspinall of the Australian National University. Some thought Indonesia was disintegrating. But nothing like that happened. Rather it has become a model for ASEAN countries.

The president's largely successful reform is the radical decentralisation that has seen a big chunk of public-sector spending and power devolved to local levels. The *reformasi* has also introduced a new sense of accountability, which has done a bit to rein in the still rampant corruption.

They include the father of President Yudhoyono's daughter-in-law, one of several corruption suspects at the central bank, and so many lawmakers that a judge asked if every law discussed there needed to be lubricated with cash.

The president has proved to be a steady, moderate and effective ruler. His economic decisions have been sensible and the country is proving to be one of the more resilient in the global recession. His command over the army has been firm and effective. And

his welfare policies, especially the cash handouts to the poorest as part of an economic stimulus plan, have been much appreciated.

In the latest parliamentary elections in April, the Islamic parties' share of the votes fell from 21 percent to 16. However, the militant group Jemaah Islamiyah, (JI), the al-Qaeda affiliate responsible for the 2002 Bali bombing, which wants to create an Islamic state across parts of Southeast Asia, was also blamed for a string of attacks until 2005.

On July 30, BBC reported that fugitive terrorist Noordin Mohammed Top had claimed responsibility for the twin hotel bombings in Jakarta on July 17, justifying the mass murders as an attack on American interests and labelling the Manchester United football team that was due to book into one of the hotels as "crusaders."

According to police, the casualties of the bombing included citizens of Indonesia, the United States, Australia, South Korea, the Netherlands, Italy, Britain, Canada, Norway, Japan and India.

A visibly upset Yudhoyono told a news conference that the bombings were the act of a terrorist group bent on damaging the country. Despite the bomb blasts, the Indonesian president is expected to promote the country's status as an international standard bearer of democracy and moderate Islam.

Bamister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Defeating default

The default culture, in fact, is a recent phenomenon. It was not long ago that people were, by and large, very much credit-conscious. They tried to manage their business pursuits and financial needs from their own sources as far as possible.

SAYYED HUSAIN JAMAL

LOAN default has, of late, assumed an alarming proportion -- alarming because it has touched the roots of the national economy, in as much as the finances of the aggrieved banks and financial institutions (FIs) are in disarray, and have crushed them. The result is that a huge amount of liquid fund has been stuck for a long time, which has had a three-pronged adverse effect:

- A sizeable amount remains out of circulation, resulting in stagnation, which prevents formation of capital.
- The absence of capital formation prevents industries from moving forward at the expected speed, which affects production.
- It affects banks and FIs because borrow-

ers who are regular in repayment are forced to accept loan only to keep their production going, of course, at higher cost. Once the production cost is high, consumer supply cost is bound to be high. The scenario becomes all the more vulnerable when vested interest gets involved in it.

Now that a sizeable percentage of the loan portfolios of banks, and FIs have already been classified under different categories and its average trend is increasing in every quarter, good sense must prevail among all so that the nation may get out of the morass.

The default culture, in fact, is a recent phenomenon. It was not long ago that people were, by and large, very much credit-conscious. They tried to manage their business pursuits and financial needs

from their own sources as far as possible. They used to work hard, aiming at minimum profit, and considered a "bank loan" as a great menace.

Ideally, their conviction was to die a peaceful death, having no loan unadjusted. The intense desire to live a clean life, without having to repay any loans, however big or small, kept them in a heaven in this world.

But alas! This sense of values has gradually eroded in such a proportion that no one feels ashamed of being considered as a loan defaulter. Incidentally, it is true that the business horizon has widened and business scope has grown. To cope with the robust economic needs there emerged a phenomenal change, which needs to be addressed suitably. A "beyond proportions" scenario developed, which eventually gave rise to financial indiscipline.

This sense of financial indiscipline, coupled with the desire to become the biggest and the best, started the financial storm which swept away the norms, values, and convictions that had been so carefully upheld by the older generation. Yes, in doing quick-profit business a great amount of risk and uncertainty is involved. It is like a

gamble. Once it works out it brings a fortune.

Now a big question is: will a good businessman go for a gamble or will he go for sustainable growth in his trade so that business edifice is built gradually after having consolidated its position at every stage of development?

Another factor that needs to be kept in mind is that bad days may befall any business house. Efforts have, therefore, to be made to get out of that, but under no circumstances must things be twisted in such a manner that it is tantamount to fooling people.

Bankers have to ensure that in rescheduling the existing classified loans all the conditions set by the central bank must be meticulously complied with and that the rescheduled loans must not turn into classless during the next quarter, for which strict monitoring has to be exercised.

Let us all hope and pray that some of the "old habits" of the trade circle will also be changed towards achieving our dreamland -- Sonar Bangla.

Sayyed Husain Jamal is a former MD, LankaBangla Finance Ltd.