

No one cares?

The danger is that growing disparities in wealth and living standards will undermine the sense of community and optimism that have kept the country from being riven by class resentments.

Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

WITH recession gripping the country, followed by global economic turmoil and the closure of a number of industries, joblessness has surged. An ominous addition is that thousands of workers are returning home from Malaysia and some countries in the Middle East.

Other than the garment factories, which employ about 30 lakh people, the employment situation in the country is hardly assuring. On the trade front, continuing deficits with India, the main trade partner, has also caused a slump. The erection of buildings and superstructures does not mean that there is an economic boom.

Although the wealthy are doing somewhat better, most middle class and lower middleclass Bangladeshis are feeling squeezed. The present price spiral of essential commodities has added to their woes and agonies. It is not true that they are not crying for relief, as some ministers have hinted, but their voices have been drowned in the rhetoric indulged in by self-seeking politicians.

Government policies towards poverty alleviation are good on paper but the implementation is flawed. The economic boom, if there has been any, has not distributed its benefits evenly. In the past few years, the rich have gotten richer and those in the middle have gotten squeezed.

This is a very sorry state, and an unmis-

takable signal that the country is plunging into a situation, which no government, even with democratic mandate, can perhaps control. The people would not have resented the rich getting richer but the poor must not get poorer. But this has not come to pass.

The yawning gap between the rich and the poor is growing wider by all indications available. We don't know how it will impact the reform measures that this government wants to undertake, but the stark reality is that it may threaten the "dream of alleviating poverty," which we have cherished so long.

Bangladesh has been mostly dependent on agriculture. But because of our failure to give proper thrust to this sector, the rural landscape unveils a shocking litany of poverty, joblessness and deprivation that continue to drag the country down.

We attack poverty through subsidies along with some schemes and measures that are palliative. People have seen how such subsidies given to the farmers during the tenure of the last CTG went down the drain. If the amount could be invested in building irrigation canals, wells, dams, rural roads, and water-harvesting projects, it would have triggered multiplier effect and transformed the economic landscape of the country. Alas! We do not invest money, we simply spend it.

The fixed income group, retired people and employees of private firms find themselves in a bind.

Momtazul Islam, a retired govern-

ment employee living in a rented house in the city, having still four members dependent on him, faces a grueling battle with his savings, a small pension and a pension benefit he has put in a bank. Hundreds and thousands others like Momtazul are passing their days in extreme hardship by slashing expenses on food items.

Compounding the crisis is the non-performing power sector, which is not producing enough power to keep the existing industries viable. At the moment, gas crisis is the biggest problem. Nasiruddin Biswas, owner of Nasir group of industries, who plans to set up several new industrial units, now has second thoughts because of the gas crisis. In such a scenario, the crime situation will take an ominous turn.

The middle class is gradually getting extinct as most of its members fall prey to poverty. Educating the children puts the middle class families under ever-increasing strain. The cost of studies for a student either in an English medium school or private university is about 40% of the median family's total income.

But many parents feel they have no choice. A college or university diploma, once the passport to upward mobility is becoming a necessity just to avoid falling out of the middle class.

Ironically, during the last decade, wages or incomes rose less than the prices of essentials, putting the taxpayers in higher brackets and forcing them to pay higher bills on gas, electricity, water, and municipal taxes. The double dilemma of increasing prices and taxes cut down the purchasing power of the middle class and more so of the poorest section of the society.

The trend toward inequality is rife with the potential for social conflict, not just between classes but within the middle class itself. The differing prospects for



Manifestation of the economic disparity.

university educated people and those who go no further than high school is one potential source of antagonism.

Another is the growing cleavage between young and old -- while younger couples wonder if they can ever buy a house, some people of their parents' generation are thought to be sitting on a gold mine.

Many of them bought a 10-katha piece of land for just Tk.80,000 thirty years ago, which is now worth much more than that. This growing inequality could threaten even those who benefit from it, by putting an end to the economic expansion that the nation needs so much.

The danger is that growing disparities in wealth and living standards will undermine the sense of community and optimism that have kept the country from being riven by class resentments.

What the government could do, and should do right now, is offer social security net to the unemployed youths, in line with the advanced countries, by levying proportionate taxes on the richer section. The decision of the government to take on terror socially and politically, as indicated in press report on August 24 last, by involving the unemployed youths in various development works and different

trades through small loans is a very laudable step.

Today the soaring prices and the diminishing value of our currency have eroded even the minimum standard of life. The middle class is the largest section in the society. Given proper incentives, ideal conditions of employment, and last of all, better housing and schooling facilities for children, they can provide a steady support to the demand for national development and economic growth of the country.

Md. Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET.

A champion of democracy

His innovative "sunshine policy" towards North Korea led to connected roads and railways across the shared border. South Korea built an industrial park under his leadership in North Korea and two million South Koreans visited North Korea during his time.

HARUN UR RASHID

SOUTH Korea has been in mourning for former President Kim Dae-jung, who was buried on August 23. He passed away on August 18 at the age of 84. His personal courage in standing up to the military government in South Korea made him a symbol of universal human rights.

Kim Dae-jung was a unique leader, who survived a death sentence and an assassination attempt by military dictators. He became the president in 1998 and continued until 2003.

He was kidnapped in 1973 by agents of an intelligence agency from a hotel room in Tokyo, from where he was leading the movement for democracy in South Korea. Five days later he was dumped, bruised and shaken, at the gate of his Seoul home and was placed under house arrest.

He was South Korea's best-known politician, whose career spanned the country's evolution from a war-torn dictatorship to one of Asia's most prosperous and democratic nation. He was

the first opposition leader to take power in the country. He was often praised as the "Nelson Mandela of Asia."

News of his death brought an outpouring of condolences, including from those who disagreed with the liberal leader on how to deal with reclusive North Korea, which has for decades been a destabilising factor for Asia's fourth largest economy.

"We have lost a great political leader," said President Lee Myung-bak, a conservative rival. "His accomplishments and aspirations to achieve democratisation and inter-Korean reconciliation will long be remembered by the people."

In Seoul, mourners burned incense and laid white chrysanthemums at a makeshift site outside City Hall. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who served as a vice foreign minister in Kim's administration, and former president Kim Young-sam were among the leaders who paid their respects at the hospital.

President Barack Obama also extended his condolences to Kim's family and the Korean people, saying Kim's "personal sacrifices on behalf of

freedom are inspirational and should never be forgotten."

In an unusual move, North Korean

leader Kim Jong-il has reportedly sent a condolence message to the family. In the message he said: "Though he passed

away to our regret, the feats he performed to achieve national reconciliation and realise the desire for unification will remain long with the nation."

North Korea indicated on August 19 that it would send a delegation to the funeral of Kim Dae-jung. It has been reported that five North Korean special envoys would make a one-day trip for the funeral, bringing with them a wreath from the North Korean leader. Kim Dae-jung was buried on August 23 at a cemetery in southern Seoul.

Kim became a symbol of the South Korean struggle for democracy and the dream of reconciliation and eventual reunification with North Korea, like divided Germany and Yemen were reunited into one country.

When he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000, it was in recognition of his struggle as a pro-democracy campaigner as well as his vision in overcoming five decades of hostility to meet the North Korean leader. "In my life, I've lived with the conviction that justice wins," he said in accepting the honour. "Justice may fail in one's lifetime, but it will eventually win in the course of history."

He re-shaped the economy of his country by cleaning up debt-ridden banks and conglomerates.

He had the determination and courage to fly to Pyongyang in 2000 to meet the reclusive leader Kim Jong-il of North Korea. That was the first summit

between the top leaders of South and North Koreas. Although criticised for his visit to North Korea, his meeting with the North Korean leader led to an unprecedented détente on the divided Korean peninsula.

His innovative "sunshine policy" towards North Korea led to connected roads and railways across the shared border. South Korea built an industrial park under his leadership in North Korea and two million South Koreans visited North Korea during his time.

His liberal politics and policy of rapprochement with the North was taken on by his successor Roh Moo-hyun, who held a second summit with the North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in 2007.

But in his final year, Kim watched as voters turned against the liberal policies he had inaugurated by electing the conservative Lee, the current president, whose hard line toward the North saw the "sunshine policy" plunge back into the freezer.

And in May, Kim's successor as president, Roh, committed suicide amid a graft probe.

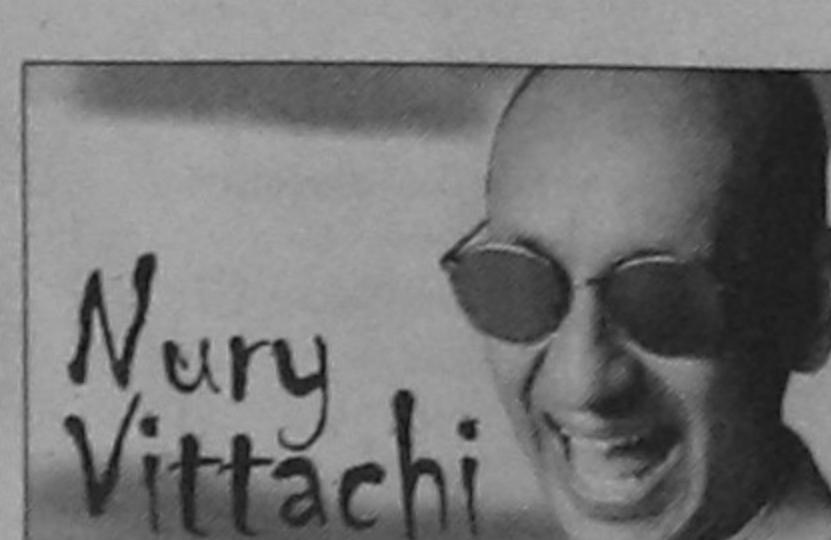
"This year has been especially hard for us as we have lost earlier in the year yet another political leader, former president Roh Moo-hyun. We feel as if we have lost both the root and the spirit of our democracy," the opposition Democratic Party said.

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



Kim Dae-jung

Revenge is sweet for the servant who employs the employer



night shift.

He pointed out to me that a few places were open: bars. Hanging around outside one of these was a "dancer" called Alice who told me she worked 13 hours a day, seven days a week: a 91-hour week! But she wasn't the hardest worker on the planet. Her sister, a domestic helper, is on duty from 7 am to 11 pm six days a week, 96 hours!

I really think there should be some correlation between how hard people work and how much they get paid. If there was, the best-paid jobs in the world would be, in order: 1) Domestic helper. 2) Babysitter. 3) Security guard.

And the worst paid job in the world? A year ago, that post should by rights have gone to a guy I know who went to work at 11 a.m., just in time for a lunch break, and then spent the afternoon playing golf. His title? Chairman of the Board. But he's been shunted aside because of the

recession. Hah! Serves him right.

Consider this: the downturn has caused people all over Asia to sack their domestic servants. But in Macau, many maids have ended up working alongside their former bosses in casinos.

In several cases, the maids ended up higher on the ladder. Revenge must be such fun. "Hello, ma'am. Remember when you woke me up at midnight to wash your toilet floor with my tongue? Now it's my turn to find little jobs for you to do." Sweet.

China's spring airlines may sell tickets in a "standing-room only" section, the press reports. Have you seen how little space there is in between seats in Chinese domestic airlines? We're already pretty much standing up.

The Bush administration paid millions of dollars to private firm Blackwater to murder people, but they failed to find a single person to kill, the New York Times

revealed. They should have asked me. I have a long list.

Property magnate Donald Trump took out a lawsuit against author Timothy O'Brien for describing him as a multi-millionaire instead of a billionaire. A judge ruled against Mr. Trump, saying that opinions were free. If Mr. Trump does not like to be called a multi-millionaire let's use a more accurate term to describe him, such as "a pompous dork with the world's worst haircut." Better?

A pair of Israeli newly-weds who kissed after getting married in Rajasthan, India, were fined the equivalent of US\$22 for lewd behaviour. How can a place, which takes prudishness to such extremes, have a population explosion? Do husbands and wives stay in separate buildings and FedEx ova and spermatozoa to each other?



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