

An important food security initiative being derailed

Many deserving ones seem left out

THE way the current vulnerable group feeding programme is being handled speaks of the very slipshod manner in which an important social safety net initiative has been embarked upon. Not only are the genuinely needy deprived, some of the allotted quantity of food grains is also ending up with the local influential ruling party men.

The matter assumes an even more grotesque character when a praiseworthy programme of reaching one lakh metric tonnes of food grain to one million of the abject poor, to ameliorate their conditions in the holy month of Ramadan, is being virtually subverted. In one upazilla for example, reportedly, the chairman was forced by the local AL leaders to allot them as much as 50 percent of the quota allocated for the seven unions of his area.

The situation as it stands now is that many to whom the VGF card has been allotted on political considerations do not fall in the category of the needy.

The programme in some places have been affected by inter party clashes and in one place the rush to monopolise VGF cards by the AL and JP respectively has resulted in the suspension of the operation.

It is a matter of concern too that the recipients, are not being given the amount of rice that is due to them, and some of the chairmen are resorting to various dubious methods to deprive the poor. That the rice meant for the poor are ending up elsewhere is borne out by the fact that police recovered 320 bags of rice, allegedly misappropriated by the local AL secretary of Nilphamari sadar thana, from his house last Thursday.

Those for whom the feeding programme is actually meant should not be seen through the prism of any particular party; and to monopolise the allotment of VGF cards and distribution list, on unalloyed partisan considerations, is not only abhorrent it also belies the government's much vaunted commitment to establish social and economic justice.

We suggest that the government conduct a wholesale review of the VGF operation so far, scrutinise the list of recipients objectively and correct the distortions. We also call upon the government to come down heavily on those that have damaged the VGF programme. Anyone found misappropriating food grains from the VGF quota must be made an example of. And this requires an oversight mechanism of the government to be put in place immediately.

Focus on anti-viral drug

Establish effective distribution channels

THE government's decision to sell the antiviral drug at a reduced rate for treating swine flu patients is a move in the right direction. The price of such drugs in the market is too high at the moment to be within the reach of poor patients. Obviously, this is a very important component of the overall swine flu management strategy adopted by the government, in the wake of the disease spreading very fast across the country.

The crying need of the hour is to have a smooth drug supply network in place. The government's plan is to distribute the antiviral drug through three drug shops at the upazila headquarters, five in the district towns and 50 in the capital. This is indeed necessary to ensure quick availability of the drug. However, the policy might have to be adjusted, depending on the number of patients and the severity of the outbreak of the disease in a particular place.

The health authorities' prime task is to prevent the swine flu from assuming an epidemic form, which will expose a huge number of ill-equipped, poor people to the viral infection. They must also see to it that the government-appointed drug sellers do their job efficiently. The point is relevant because in a situation like this, the possibility of corruption creeping in and black marketing cannot be ruled out.

Supplying drugs alone will not help contain the disease. It is disquieting to learn that district hospitals are not yet ready to treat swine flu patients. Even though some hospitals have opened swine flu units, there is no outdoor arrangement for treating the ever-increasing number of suspected swine flu patients. The health authorities cannot be oblivious of the fact that time is a crucially important factor here, since the number of infected patients can indeed go beyond control if effective measures are not taken to check the spread of the disease.

The WHO guidelines for dealing with the situation have to be followed strictly alongside providing treatment to the patients. The health authorities have to gear up the campaign to create awareness among the people in general. It seems most people are still not following the safety regulations, which include use of mask and keeping the patients away from crowded places. Adoption of such precautionary steps must be made mandatory to minimise the danger that swine flu poses.

Arrest surging crime

Now, the people are demanding to know what the government is going to do about the situation because it had made bold statements that it would bring about changes in all spheres. A failure to bring crime of any sort under control could cost not only the image of the government but also the journey towards democracy.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

A growing sense of despair, intolerance, distrust and animosity and steady erosion of values have gripped the nation. Horrifying incidents of violence and terrorism stalk the country in a manner that no sensible citizenry can comprehend. Sadly, the whole country seems to be caught in a frightening coil of fear and trauma.

Tension and fear gripped the citizenry when they learnt how Khaledur Rahman, a Jubo league worker in Jessore, was killed in broad daylight about 100 yards from the office of the superintendent of police on July 30. He and his wife and six month-old baby were going to hospital in a rickshaw. The killers swooped on them, threw the baby on the road, pushed aside his wife, stabbed him to death and left the scene quietly.

The killing of Sabuj is a chilling reminder of the total breakdown of law and order, when such a ghastly incident can take place in close proximity to the crime-busting chief boss's office. In Jessore alone, during the last seven months 69 persons have been murdered, and newspaper reports further reveal that the terrorists in Jessore are being patronised by ruling party men.

Another report published in the *Prothom Alo* on August 30 indicated that 7 alleged dacoits were beaten to death in different places of Chittagong and Kishoreganj during the previous week. With grisly incidents of crime playing havoc with the lives of the city dwellers, Dhaka, of late, has attained the dubious distinction of being the number one crime city. Violence and gangsterism of all types, as well as rampant killings, are searing the capital city in such an ugly manner that commerce has come to a grinding halt and movement has become too risky.

The traumatic, frightening and ghastly crime wave is sweeping over the country. Newspaper reports revealed that a minor schoolgirl in Charvadrason area of Faridpur district was gang-raped by a group studying in the same school. What was most worrying and barbaric was that the gang rape action was videotaped and

then the footage sold in the market for commercial gain. The incident puts to shame even the savage and carnal crimes committed in the crime-prone countries.

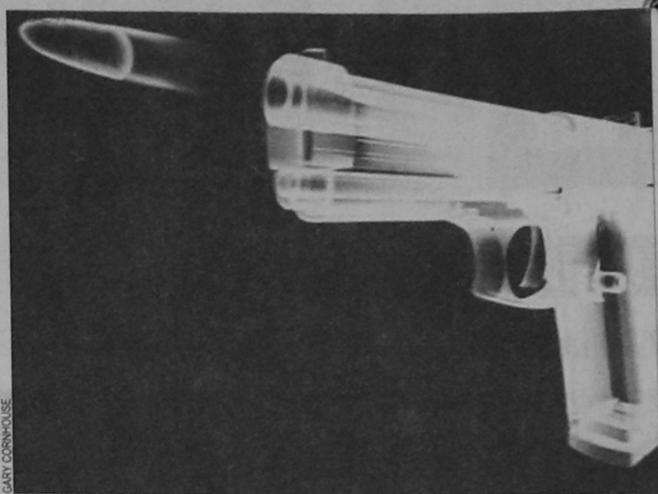
The increasing incidence of extortion in the capital city has alarmed the city dwellers so much that they are afraid to go out of their houses. Extortionists snatched Tk.4.25 lakh in broad daylight from Kaniz Fatima, a housewife on her way back home by a baby taxi on August 9, and shot her and the baby taxi driver near Mirpur indoor stadium. In another incident on August 17, extortionists took away Tk.3.5 lakh from a Dr. Sakhawat Hossain, a physician, in Green Road.

What is more worrying is that police, in almost all the cases, are clueless. And they want to know the name of the extortionist and the number of the taxicab the victim passengers were riding on when they go to the police station for filing cases. It seems that citizens, out of pent up anger and frustration, are taking the law in their own hands.

Mob justice, a most common phenomenon in sub-Saharan Africa until some years ago, has taken hold in this country. Despite the fact that law enforcers are now equipped with modern gadgets including cellular phones, fast moving vehicles and fighting devices, they sadly fail to reach the troubled spots for containing the mischief or violence. The extortionists are hacked to death before the arrival of police and, in most cases, the police never turn up.

Understandably, much of the street justice is a reaction to the country's ineffectual criminal justice system. There is a crisis of confidence in the police administration as evidenced by many a report carried by the media. One is likely to feel dismayed as the O.C. Jessore police station said after Khaled's killing in Jessore: "Khaled's death was inevitable because he was a terrorist."

People might ask that if he was a dreaded terrorist, how did he evade arrest, trial and punishment through legal processes for so long? People might want to know who those people were who stood in the way of these criminals' prosecution and arrest and played a foul game by



Crime rate is shooting up.

getting bail for them.

As far as it was learnt, the Faridpur rapists are still at large even after committing such a heinous crime because of police inaction resulting from political interference. People tend to feel that, even in these days when we are talking so glibly about ushering changes by remaining firm in our respective positions, the police take their cue from self-seeking politicians.

Winning court cases, convictions and prison sentences against even the notorious traffickers, rapists and offenders is a "Herculean task" say legal experts. The society faces an uphill struggle with a judicial system devastated by years of neglect. Even the high ups of the police administration admitted through press statements that about 75% of the criminal cases end up in acquittal of the offenders because of weak and flawed investigation reports.

The offenders enjoying protection of the political bosses routinely terrorise witnesses and thwart investigations. Sensible citizenry say in disgust that the administration needs to be reminded that there is a basic right that comes before any other -- the right to live in peace. If we can't secure this right, nothing else matters.

Mugging and robbery are soaring. One might recall a good many case in the past days where victims were gunned down in what people believed was "paid-for assassination." Shockingly, when most of the identified accused roam the streets freely,

evading police arrest, and the court cases that drag on for years end up in acquittal of the criminals, people often vent their frustration and apathy towards administrative failure in such frenzied expressions of disgust and anger.

Now, the people are demanding to know what the government is going to do about the situation because it had made bold statements that it would bring about changes in all spheres. A failure to bring crime of any sort under control could cost not only the image of the government but also the journey towards democracy.

Peace loving citizens hate the chaos and the unremitting violence they see everyday. The growing loss of confidence could even produce sudden political swings that most people do not cherish. The law enforcers now are part of the problem. Until now, they didn't serve the public but protected either political or crime bosses. Without a shadow of doubt, the prime minister also realises that the continued activities of organised crime were discrediting the administration and threatening the security of the country.

Given the fact that little had been done till now to put teeth in the nation-wide crime-busting program, the administration's full outplay of energy as well as stern action against the offenders, regardless of party affiliation, would only vindicate its initiative to bolster the image that has eroded so much.

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The bleak future of Hindutva politics

Unless the BJP returns to the politics of passion and mass mobilisation, it's likely to become a rump party, much like the Jana Sangh, albeit bigger in its Lok Sabha presence than the latter, with its 20-35 seats.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

THE bloodletting in the BJP has turned out far more prolonged and self-destructive than the party's staunchest critics, including me, had expected. Not a day passes without senior leaders calling their colleagues names which would embarrass street-level thugs. As the BJP suffers painful upheavals, its cadres lampoon their bosses as cartoon characters like Tarzan, and exhort loyalists to "bombard the headquarters," imitating Mao during the Cultural Revolution -- perhaps with equally disastrous results. Many observers are dismayed at this explosion of virulent recrimination. Some even rue the BJP is blurring its line of demarcation from the Congress, which stifles inner-party debate.

This betrays astounding naivety. The BJP has never had inner-party democracy. Its core political and organisational concepts derive from the Sangh Parivar, which is profoundly undemocratic and doesn't elect its leaders. The BJP cannot comprehend the causes of its consecutive election defeats in structural terms linked to changes in the balance of social forces, Hindutva's receding appeal and the attraction of inclusive agendas in a society as badly divided, and hence in great need of healing, as India. The Congress understood this, and won. The BJP remained stuck in Hindutva, too-clever-by-half leadership projection, caste arithmetic and image management. It's now blaming individuals for its losses.

The person who has been most ruthlessly attacked and suffered the greatest loss of stature is none other than the BJP's tallest functioning leader -- prime ministerial-aspirant-forever L.K. Advani. Mr Jaswant Singh has pilloried him for his "consuming ambition" and for not defending him against his summary expulsion from the BJP. The "Iron Man" has become the butt of inner-party jokes. He was told by RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat that he must quit as leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha. The RSS also wants

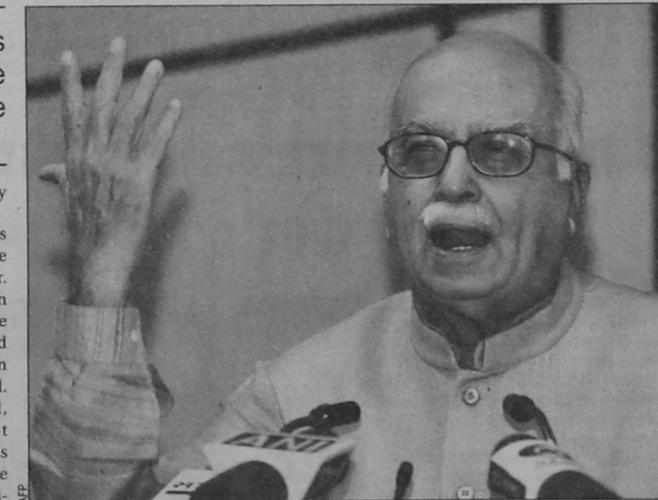
BJP President Rajnath Singh to make way for a younger leader.

This isn't a way of levelling the BJP's two competing power centres: the unelected core group dominated by Mr. Advani, and the other controlled by Singh loyalists. Mr. Rajnath Singh will complete his full term as party president at the end of 2009. He cannot have a second term unless the party constitution is amended. Singh, a provincial, petty-minded, intrigue-obsessed politician, cannot bring this about. The RSS's real target is Mr. Advani, who breached his promise that he wouldn't be the BJP's prime ministerial candidate beyond 2009. After the election results, he offered to step down as the opposition leader, but unilaterally re-surpassed that position. The RSS won't let him stay.

The BJP is in its worst-ever crisis thanks to a total collapse of organisational authority, political disorientation and strategic bankruptcy. Nobody in the BJP can arbitrate between its warring leaders. This has allowed the RSS to brazenly dictate terms to the BJP. The RSS decided that the BJP must promote leaders aged 55 to 60 years. And four such leaders duly landed at Mr Bhagwat's feet. The RSS wants the choice of the next party president to be extended beyond the Advani coterie (Arun Jaitley, Venkaiah Naidu, Ananth Kumar and Sushma Swara).

So serving/former state-level ministers are suddenly in the running. The RSS is now micromanaging the BJP. It'll probably dictate its political line. In some ways, this function is new. The RSS has doubtless messed with the BJP in the past. Sarasanghachalak Sudarshan's "midnight knock" in 1998 famously ensured that Mr. Jaswant Singh wouldn't become finance minister.

After the BJP's 2004 debacle, the RSS summarily replaced Mr. Naidu as party president with Mr. Advani. In April 2005, Mr Sudarshan publicly demanded that "there should be a generational shift in



Where did I go wrong?

BJP," and that Messrs. Vajpayee and Advani "should step aside." This directive was unambiguous. Mr. Vajpayee shrewdly ducked it by saying he held no post. But Mr. Advani refused to quit. Soon, the RSS succeeded in sacking him by using his remarks praising Jinnah as "secular" during his Pakistan trip.

What's new about the present RSS-BJP relationship, shaped by the unprecedented turmoil following the BJP's election defeat, is the scope and quality of the RSS's interference in its day-to-day affairs. Even BJP leaders without RSS backgrounds, like Mr. Arun Shourie, pleaded for this by demanding the RSS should "take over" the BJP.

This inaugurates a new phase in the BJP's evolution. As long as the Vajpayee-Advani duo was strong, and while the BJP held central power, they could get a certain degree of autonomy from the RSS in the party and government's day-to-day running -- without breaking with Hindu communalism ideologically, or the RSS organisationally. Neither leader had the conviction to put the BJP on the path of moderation or turn it into a conservative Right-wing party -- like, say, European Christian Democrats -- without its communal baggage.

The RSS adopted a low profile, but remained the BJP's mentor, political guide

and organisational gatekeeper. It conceded some policy space to the BJP in governance, especially in economic matters. But behind the scenes, it always asserted its primacy, especially that of Hindu nationalism.

A key to this was the BJP's dependence on RSS *pracharaks* to mobilise votes for it during elections. This dependence has recently grown not least because the BJP's base has shrunk. RSS leaders claim that 40 percent of the BJP's votes in the last election came from their work. The RSS influence is even stronger in the party organisation than in its Parliamentary wing. Thus, only 30 of the BJP's 116 Lok Sabha members come from the RSS. But two-thirds of its national executive members have RSS backgrounds.

That means the RSS will overtly and blatantly tighten its hold on the BJP, further damaging its credibility. Unless the BJP returns to the politics of passion and mass mobilisation, it's likely to become a rump party, much like the Jana Sangh, albeit bigger in its Lok Sabha presence than the latter, with its 20-35 seats. Even such a rump cannot be written off. But it'll be a far cry from a force that's about to come to power.

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