

## Key elements of food security

PM makes her case at the UN seminar

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina while addressing a meeting on 'partnering for food security' attended by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and heads of government, state and representatives from more than a hundred countries dilated on the core food security concerns and what's more, presented a mitigation strategy.

Bangladesh can claim to have an authentic voice on the subject for some obvious reasons. On the positive side, Bangladesh had attained food self-sufficiency by putting nearly every inch of cultivable land under the plough. With the result that her needs for cereals import diminished progressively but for an interregnum of two years marked by lower global output.

On the flip-side, our vulnerabilities to droughts, floods and cyclones that had once been severely experienced periodically have now become something of a real threat -- thanks to the global climate change phenomenon. Apart from the vagaries of nature, we have also suffered through uncertainties in the global food market from which we have had to import to meet occasional deficits. Last few seasons have been crunch times with world food prices having skyrocketed and even money could not easily buy it.

Little wonder, therefore, the PM's articulation of food security concerns and the ways to mitigate them was heard with respect and attention. Her sole emphasis was on access to food of the vulnerable and marginalised groups and, that too, in sufficient caloric quantities. That brings up the issue of fair and equitable 'food governance' at both national and international level.

It's no longer a question of simple food management, but more a matter of fair and equitable distribution of the available food on a global as well as national scale. It calls for an international policy input blending with regional and national policy choices. Thus production alone is not a full guarantee for food security, there is the issue of buffer stocking with adequate silo facility with eventual off-takes in times of stresses and strains.

In specific terms, the countries would need to 'agree on and implement sustainable agricultural policies, transfer of technology and equitable and fair trade rules for food and agricultural commodities'. It's important that special and preferential treatment be accorded to the LDCs, most of which are also confronted with critical climate change issues. While adopting a global approach we cannot be oblivious of the critical need to be driven by 'specific concerns of the relevant countries'.

## Stealing books from public libraries

The management should be held to account

IT is a sickening picture that one gets from the report on book thefts from public libraries that appeared in this newspaper recently. More than 40,000 books, and that is a very conservative estimate since there is no mechanism to ascertain the exact number, have gone missing from public libraries all over the country in the last 41 years since 1968. And the list includes invaluable reference materials, rare magazines and articles. And five percent of the total books in the inventory of the 68 libraries in the country go missing every year; that amounts to as many as almost ten thousand books that go missing annually.

If a library is repository of knowledge, forced deprivation of books amounts to divesting the nation of the source of knowledge. Divesting the repository of knowledge is not just any other case of theft. We hardly realise that libraries are not made in a day or two or even months, they grow over ages. And as one sage had said, our libraries, being a disseminator of knowledge, become the cornerstone of civilisation. Thus, those who choose to enrich their personal collection, or may be just sell it for money at the cost of public interest do not realise the great damage they are wreaking on the nation.

The management of the public libraries must essentially be held responsible for the loss. Not all books and periodicals are properly documented, the system of checking and counter checking is not strictly adhered to, and the means of unobtrusive oversight is lamentably lacking in the public libraries. For example, the 12 CCTV at the central library's reading room has been out of order since long. And the punishment for stealing books is a meagre Tk250.

While no public library can stop totally books being pinched, the number in our case is far too much not to cause alarm. What is disconcerting is that it is not always the booklovers that illegally remove books from libraries. It is shocking to learn that the central public library is used as a rendezvous for drug takers who steal books to pay for drugs.

Such a situation is unacceptable. The management and oversight of the libraries must be beefed up. And those caught must be dished out exemplary punishments to deter future thefts. But at the end of the day, it is not laws and regulations but our moral compunction and social commitment that should prevent such acts from occurring.

## What about day-to-day issues first?

We are not in good shape, dear government. We were given some promises before election but today's reality makes us apprehensive of what we are going to get. That is not a good sign. So, what do you do sitting within the four walls of your cosy office room?

SHAHNOOR WAHID

DEAR government, don't you have a very, very long list of "things to do" on a priority basis to bring stability and sanity in almost all the vital sectors that affect us on a daily basis?

For example, the food sector, the education sector, the health sector, the transport sector, the energy sector, the law and order sector, the urban development sector, the rural development sector, the poverty sector, the export sector, the jute sector, the climate sector, the river management sector, the flood control sector, the drug control sector and the price control sector?

If yes, then we wonder why you suddenly decide to get busy with things that do not concern us at the moment...things you can do at a future time, if you at all want to do them. Surely, issues like evacuating the opposition political leader from her home, or bring the clock forward by one hour, or amendment of the constitution do not touch our everyday life.

Our life is not getting bogged down because of where the opposition leader resides; our life is not in jeopardy because of the caretaker system; prices do not come down if government officials wear half-sleeve shirts in office, and we are not concerned with what Mr. Jalil says every now and then.

But our life definitely gets bogged down because of intolerable traffic congestion,

price hike, water crisis, electricity crisis, rising unemployment, high maternal and child mortality rate, wide-scale drug addiction, relentless *fatwas* and rising militancy, rising criminality, river erosion, floods, prejudiced legal system and flaws in policing. So anything other than these cannot be and must not be at the top of the "things to do" list of the government.

We are not in good shape, dear government. We were given some promises before election but today's reality makes us apprehensive of what we are going to get. That is not a good sign. So, what do you do sitting within the four walls of your cosy office room? You should be out in the open with us... the people... and see for yourself how we live our lives on a day-to-day basis and how we continue to face challenges that should have been taken care of long ago.

So, please step out of the air-cooled limousines and walk with us on the pavements. Your limousines only create more traffic jams. If you walk with us you will notice the signs of "lack of good governance" everywhere. Land-grabbers, hill-cutters, river-eaters, tender mongers, price-hikers, sugar-hoarders, poison-mixers, *fatwa*-givers, traffic-anarchists and the rest of the crime syndicates are having a field day.

But, nonchalant, you keep talking about something else that has no relevance to our day-to-day existence! For example, you are talking about building community clinics

as per the original HPSP but the UHCs and THCs are not even running properly! We wonder, why don't our priorities and your priorities never enmesh?

You talk about corrupt people out to create anarchy in every sector. But it actually defies comprehension how the entire state machinery, 40-50 strong cabinet, over two hundred MPs, huge public mandate, lower courts, hundreds of magistrates, high court, supreme court, attorney general, plethora of laws, prime minister's requests, commerce minister's threats and home minister's *humki-dhamki*... are proving to be least effective against a handful of criminals!

Those guys on the other side of law seem to know all the tricks in the world to "get things done" and stay out of jail. And those who are supposed to know how to stop them and how to keep them in jail, are either too weak in the legs or just equally corrupt, ready to pick up crumbs from the floor.

Go out and see for yourself how armed goons are filling up the rivers Buriganga, Turag and Shitalakhyia right at this moment while their bosses are sipping tea with a sitting or former minister. Go to the warehouses of the suited-booted industrialists and find out for yourself how they are mixing poisonous substances with our food items while the bosses are enjoying a glass of whiskey in a local club.

At such confusing times we ask ourselves many questions and try to look for answers. Where does their power originate? Are those corrupt people more powerful than the government... the courts and the laws of the land? Do they always manage to get away by greasing the palms of the corrupt politicians, corrupt magistrates and corrupt members of the police force? Why are the existing laws not being implemented forcefully without fear or favour?

History tells us that the "Mafia Dons" of many countries used to give money to politicians and the police on a monthly basis to carry on with their smuggling of contraband items, gun-trading, hoarding, kidnapping, moonshine making, drug peddling and running prostitution networks. When things started to go out of hand some good people got together and decided to stem the rot. Ultimately, it required extreme measures to establish rule of law and bring order in society.

Similarly, the Bangladesh government will have to take extreme measures to strangle corruption once and for all if it wants to see success at the end of its term in office. But it will have to start by reigning in its so-called student activists who are on a "become-a-millionaire-overnight-through-tenderbazi" kind of rampage at the moment. Verily they are taking the good name of the party to the dirt.

Those handful of corrupt student elements or the corrupt syndicate members didn't vote this government to power. It is the people who did so. Therefore, the government will have to listen to what the people have to say. It will have to address the issues that affect the common man on a daily basis. Leave everything else for the future when there will be greater stability and you will feel strength in your legs.

Do not do politics now, dear government. Caretaker government system reform will only benefit one party in coming to power, or help in stopping the other from coming to power. It will not contribute to the growth of GDP or stop river erosion or help us eradicate poverty. If it did, then many countries of the world would have adopted it without a question. So, stop doing politics at a time when you should actually work.

Shahnour Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

## Scare-mongering in our politics

For any party in power, scare-mongering is a favourite stratagem to cover up its weak points and failures. All ruling regimes of the country did their share of scare-mongering for hushing up their bungling. It's more so for the incumbent AL government, which has not fared well in office for the last nine months and is in search of scapegoats to shift the blame.

M.A. HAFIZ

INITIATING a discussion in the Parliament on the occasion of the second anniversary of the UN-declared Democracy Day, the prime minister warned the nation of an unexplained danger from a "certain quarter" that is trying to scuttle democracy in this country. She hinted at the possible recurrence of upheavals, such as Pikhana carnage that took place early this year, as well as the military adventurism that took place in the past. However, except the government's double dilemma -- the reckless extortion and never ending lawlessness -- and its failure to stop it, there is no evidence of any quarter trying to destabilise democracy by its sinister actions -- let alone conspiring to foil it.

Against this backdrop, the PM's

harangue on the danger for democracy couldn't but seize the nation with a measure of trepidation because her warning -- to put it politely -- is indeed ominous, and the people cannot afford to undergo an ordeal of the magnitude hinted at by her. It is more so when the warning comes from none other than the prime minister, who is the most authentic source of information. It can, therefore, be safely assumed that she couldn't have mentioned it without certain proof of the looming danger. Then why doesn't the government preempt the conspiracy and bring the conspirators to book before they strike?

It is usually self-defeating to make a sweeping accusation that leads only to wild speculation, which will not be helpful in unveiling the intrigue. If anything, the PM's warning has shaken the confidence of the nation, and the flabbergasted peo-

ple are left to grope in dark to sift the fact from the rumor. As a result, the fog of confusion will further intensify.

For any party in power, scare-mongering is a favourite stratagem to cover up its weak points and failures. All ruling regimes of the country did their share of scare-mongering for hushing up their bungling. It's more so for the incumbent AL government, which has not fared well in office for the last nine months and is in search of scapegoats to shift the blame. As a convenient ploy to divert public attention from the nation's burning issues, the government has now raised the ruse of conspiracy against democracy. It is as if the people are a bunch of morons and do not understand the trick.

The idea is to keep alive a fear psychosis in the public psyche to hide the fact that it was taken for a ride by the party in the last election. The fact is vividly reflected in the unfulfilled promise of bringing about a change in the country's lot.

The PM's critique of the last caretaker government and the military dictators of the past have been bitter, but contradictory to her plea for unhindered democracy. One such dictator is the AL's ally in the ruling grand alliance, and it was the prime minister who claimed the credit for bringing in the regime that one-eleven

produced. Moreover, the military takes power from the civilian leadership when the party is unable to exercise power even if installed legally.

As far as statement that credible elections were held only before 1973 and after 1/11 is concerned she may opening a Pandora's box because it has many facets and perspectives. But yes, the election that brought the AL to power early this year was indeed a credible one and the party can be justly proud of winning such an election.

All told, observers find the PM's statements on the virtues of democracy more as sound and fury signifying little, if anything at all. The people are now more interested in her government's ability to deliver, not to scare the nation. Even if there is a threat to democracy the people of the country, who sustained it through the vicissitudes of time, can care of it and will not wait for a warning to be issued by the PM -- although she did play a remarkable role in defence of the people's voting right during the regime of the four-party alliance. The leadership, particularly in power, should give the nation hope and inspiration, not gloom and cynicism.

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

## G20 expands its role

The 100-point communiqué, issued at the end of the Pittsburgh summit Friday, stipulates concrete and specific details on the programs of action the 20 developed and emerging economies will implement to achieve strong, sustainable and balanced global economic growth.

EDITORIAL DESK

The Jakarta Post

THE leaders of the Group of 20 developed and emerging economies, including Indonesia, defied sceptics who were afraid that now the economic recession is virtually over and the global financial threat seems manageable, the Pittsburgh summit would end with weak compromises.

The G20 Summit, the third since the global financial crisis broke out last September, instead decided to expand the role of the forum, turning it into a global policy dialogue and coordinating body, thereby relegating the role of the Group of Eight industrialised nations, where developing nations are treated only as guests, not full participants.

The 100-point communiqué, issued at the end of the Pittsburgh summit Friday, stipulates concrete and specific details on the programs of action the 20 developed and emerging economies will implement to achieve strong, sustainable and balanced global economic growth.

The communiqué has two annexes elaborating the core values of sustainable economic activity and the principles of the framework for strong, sustainable and balanced global economic growth.

This agreement is quite important, especially for such developing nations as Indonesia, which had long complained that their influence on global economic policy lagged behind their economic role.

In light of this commitment, the leaders reiterated their pledge to transfer at least 5 percent of the voting shares in the

International Monetary Fund and 3 percent in the World Bank from over-represented countries to emerging economies.

They also renewed strong pledges to enforce much tighter regulations on financial institutions and complex financial products, including higher bank capital requirements, by the end of 2010.

The communiqué sets out broad principles on financial regulatory reform and the need to tackle the "too big to fail" problem by creating special insolvency regimes for financial institutions.

Certainly the G20 leaders also emphasised their commitments to reviving talks to reach a new global trade agreement by the end of 2010 and address climate change issues.

In today's highly fragile global economy, the G20 must prove itself a forum for decisive action to maintain the momentum, because any disparity between the hype and the reality is bound to upset financial markets and shake investor and consumer confidence.

But the biggest question for such a grouping with such diverse member countries, with widely differing stages of development, is whether the commit-

ments will remain weak pledges, because there is no clear, strongly binding enforcement mechanism to penalise members who stick to their old bad habits.

The G20 leaders seem to be aware of such a risk, as can be seen in their commitment to allowing more outside scrutiny over the economic strategies of member countries. This means each country agrees to submit its policies to a peer review from other governments as well as to monitoring by the IMF.

All in all, expecting much more than the 100-point communiqué of commitments from the summit is to misunderstand the nature of politics and the scale of the challenges.

The summiteers have their own historical and cultural reference points, since many of the differences defy the obvious boundaries between East and West, between old and rising powers.

The summit cannot wipe out such differences. The objective then is to align, as far as possible, national and mutual interests.

©The Jakarta Post. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement with Asia News Network.