

## Reducing poverty through unity of leadership

This will not be possible unless a consensus is built up among politicians, local leaders, and peer groups to fight poverty with unity of purpose and establish good governance as a precondition to reduce poverty.

DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

THE International Day for Eradication of Poverty was observed on October 17 in Bangladesh with solemn promises to overcome poverty through unity and combined initiative. The committee headed by the speaker organised the program to bring the treasury bench and the opposition members of the parliament together on a common platform to declare their commitments to eradicate poverty and work together to turn Bangladesh into a hunger free nation.

Poverty reduction is a step towards peace. Poverty is the major reason for unrest, conflict and crisis. It is the root of terrorism. Poverty is the manifestation of cruelty to human beings and an extreme violation of human rights. Poor people are considered as persons as being at our mercy, not as human beings with dignity. This is the most unfortunate part of poverty.

"Make poverty history" is the global call for action against poverty. Responding to this call, all nations round the world have reaffirmed their commitments to poverty alleviation and redesigned their planning approaches to achieve the targets within the shortest possible time. The Bangladesh government has also fixed its target to reduce

poverty by half by 2015, consistent with the millennium development goals. The National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction was designed by democratic governments for "unlocking the potential." Poverty being a multidimensional issue, having manifold expressions and different roots, the strategy to combat the same demands explicit and well designed programs with definite vision. There are many alternatives and approaches to combat poverty, but it depends on identifying reasons and areas of poverty accurately. In a democracy, the people's representatives can contribute effectively since they know their voters and their way of living.

According to Nobel Laureate Dr. Amartya Sen, poverty is caused by the lack of exchange entitlement in a market economy. Gainful employment is the principal challenge for the poor and the main focus for poverty alleviation.

Thus, strategies for poverty alleviation broadly encompass the redistribution and creation of assets in favour of the poor and give guarantee of employment at a reasonable wage and adoption of measures having direct benefit for the poor. This is possible when political leaders express their commitment to implement the program without corruption or discrimination.

Reduction of poverty is possible

through capacity building of the workforce through skill development and imparting of technical know-how. For this purpose, education and training for empowerment leading to gainful employment and creating opportunities for income generating activities are the most essential points in the strategies to be adopted by the government.

Besides, it is necessary to identify the reasons and areas of poverty and adopt measures appropriate and relevant to the localities. This is possible when public representatives are involved with safety net initiatives of the government and other welfare programs pertaining to social security of the poor and deprived.

For this purpose, the local government institutions are most important catalysts for implementing the programs of the government and non-government organisations. The strengthening of local bodies is, therefore, one of the pre-conditions for the reduction of the poverty.

Poverty alleviation is not a simple diagnostic treatment like using paracetamol to reduce temperature. For this purpose, the most important intervention is the establishment of good governance.

The public, by and large, must believe that good governance shall prevail in every action and that there will not be any misappropriation of allocation meant for them, and their inputs shall be treated as value for money. In this area also, the involvement of public representatives appears to be a pre-condition to mobilise public opinion and ensure their pro-active



"Make poverty history."

support in implementing the programs.

Health and family welfare activities are the most vital components of poverty reduction. There must be extensive health care services and reproductive health interventions to improve the health condition, especially of the mother and the child. Poor health is an indication of poverty. Less calorie intake than required cannot make a person capable of contributing to his empowerment for economic emancipation.

Education on primary health care and nutrition and, most importantly, acceptance of family planning methods should be treated as important measures in poverty reduction. There must be more investment to improve the health care services in hard-to-reach areas and poverty prone localities with extensive messages for adopting small

family norms. This is also possible with the unified support of the elected representatives, local bodies and civil society organisations.

For generating a source of income and involving the poor people in gainful employment in agriculture, horticulture, floriculture, fisheries and livestock etc are major areas of opportunities.

Besides, there is scope for working with a spirit of cooperation in the areas of social forestry, water and irrigation, health services, milk production, solar energy conservation, IT sector, utilisation of khas land etc.

All these activities demand the involvement of local leaders, who can make a difference provided they are committed to contributing for poverty alleviation and development of the country as a whole.

We are proud of Professor Muhammad Yunus, the Nobel laureate, for his contributions for poverty alleviation round the world as guide and philosopher.

To make poverty history in a country like ours, the vision of the nation should be "people prosperous, nation powerful, society just and civilised." This will not be possible unless a consensus is built up among politicians, local leaders, and peer groups to fight poverty with unity of purpose and establish good governance as a precondition to reduce poverty.

In the selection of the area's most poverty stricken people, identification of the deprived community and chosen activities for common benefits, consensus among the beneficiaries is needed, which, in turn, depends on the positive response of local leaders.

The manifestation of unity at the national level trickles down to the grassroots with manifold positive outcomes. Thus, the initiative of the speaker to bring both the leaders to a platform for a common cause was a noble one.

Unfortunately, it did not happen, but it should not be considered as well-nigh impossible and there should more initiatives in future since the nation demands consensus on national issues, especially on poverty reduction.

There should be more initiatives in future to work for a common cause to change the destiny of the people and make the country more respectable in the comity of nations.

Dhiraj Kumar Nath is a former Adviser to Caretaker Government.

## No sign of change!

Yes, if one wants to point one's finger to the lapses or even failures of the government without giving any consideration to the background or prevailing circumstances, there are many. But to say that there is no sign of change or fulfilment of promise is certainly too harsh and probably biased against the government.

HUSAIN IMAM

THE allegation of Awami League is that BNP has been, ever since it (AL) came to power, trying to create obstacles against the AL's government. First about the seating arrangement in the parliament, then about the BDR carnage, Tipai Mukh, Asian Highway, withdrawal of army camps from the Hill Tracts, leasing of offshore gas blocks, and lately about the credibility of the last national election that saw them in the opposition bench with less than one-fourth of the seats in the Parliament.

Given the background of BNP as a political party and the culture of our political parties in general, it is not surprising that BNP will oppose every move, right or wrong, the Awami League government takes in handling the affairs of the country, and they will look for even the slightest opportunity to undo the government efforts to do something good for the country by indulging in false propaganda and creating confusion in the minds of the people.

It is also not surprising that a section of our media and the so-called civil society, who have been beneficiaries of a loot economy that the BNP governments ran in the past, will join hands in this mischief.

It is, however, unfortunate when we see people like Dr. Zillur Rahman Siddiqui writing that he is unable to see any sign of change whatsoever, which the Awami League had promised in its election

campaign.

It is strange that a columnist like Brig (ret'd) M.A. Hafiz sees prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's recent warnings of danger from certain quarters to wreck democracy as a trick to keep a fear in the public psyche alive and to hide the fact that it took the people for a ride in the last election, a fact which is according to him vividly reflected in the unfulfilled promise of bringing about a change in the country's lot.

It is all the more unfortunate when people like Professor Muzaffar Ahmed and Professor Anu Ahmed take to the streets and call for hartal to resist the move of the government to explore the country's gas and coal fields.

What do they really want? Do they want to see that our gas and coalfields remain unexplored, our power plants and fertiliser factories remain shut and that we starve and remain in the dark for ages waiting for food and electricity?

How is it that they cannot see any sign of change in any dealings of the incumbent government? Take, for example, the case of running the parliamentary affairs of the country? Isn't it a positive sign that the parliamentary committees have been made representative and effective by this government from the very first session of the parliament?

What about the initiative of the government to ensure food security and expand safety net for the marginal people of the country? Aren't they happy that the government has given top priority to these



Bringing changes.

vital issues and the poor people of this country are able to buy rice and wheat at a price which is 30 to 40 percent lower than it was during the five years of BNP and 2 years of the caretaker government? Aren't they happy that the farmers of this country

are now able to get fertiliser at half the price it was only a year ago?

Don't they find anything positive in the government's handling of the much-needed reform of the education sector? Aren't they happy that once the reform of

the education sector, which the incumbent government has already initiated, is implemented, a huge number of students now reading in madrasas will find themselves at par and as productive as those pursuing general education? Aren't they happy that our children should now be able to read the true history of our liberation war in their schools?

Isn't it to the credit of Awami League government that they have revived the upazilla system, held the election as promised and are now trying to make it work as the centre of all socio-economic activities of the rural people, a demand the people at large and the civil society in particular have been making for long?

Isn't it a good sign that the construction of a bridge over the Padma is now a reality; construction of an underground railway system or an elevated expressway around Dhaka city, completion of 4-lane Dhaka-Chittagong Highway and dredging of the rivers and canals of the country are top priorities in the government's development agenda?

Yes, if one wants to point one's finger to the lapses or even failures of the government without giving any consideration to the background or prevailing circumstances, there are many. It has not yet been able to rein-in extortion, tender manipulation and malpractices by the party men. It has not been able to get rid of favouritism, nepotism and politicisation of administration by the party in power.

Yes, the government not been able to efficiently handle the issue of syndication or market manipulation by unscrupulous traders and businessmen. Yes, it has not yet been able to address the issue of law and order to an acceptable level.

And yes, if I am asked to single out one big failure of this government, I would say it is its failure that it has not yet been able to address the miseries of urban life, that of the capital city in particular. The capital city is now plagued with all the malaises

that can make urban life a hell. It has no pure water, no electricity, no fresh air, and practically no unadulterated food.

Its sewerage system is in total mess and its traffic system has virtually collapsed. The roads, far too inadequate for a population of more than 10 million, are in bad shape because of poor or lack of maintenance, and the pavements are either missing or mostly occupied by unauthorised traders. The city looks no better than a huge dumping ground of waste.

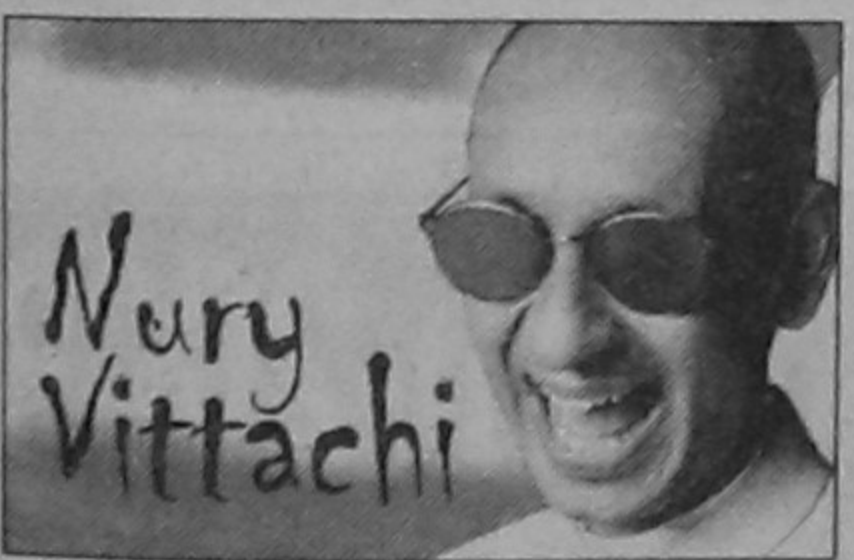
True, these problems are not of the government's making. They have accumulated and deepened into a crisis over the years because of wanton corruption, gross negligence, and misrule of the past regimes. It is also understood that the crisis of water, gas and electricity, left unaddressed for years together, cannot be solved overnight, or even in one year. The government has already announced its plan and determination to solve these problems in the next 3 to 5 years, and there is no reason to distrust them.

The 9 months that the incumbent government has been in office, is not, however, too short a time to make visible progress in addressing issues like administrative reform, good governance, law and order, monitoring and improvement of market mechanism, effective control of traffic system, repair and expansion of roads and pavements, improvement of transport facilities for the general public, control of pollution, disposal of waste, drive against adulteration of food and keeping the cities neat and clean.

These are the fields where the government could have, and in fact should have, done much better in these nine months. One may even find serious lapses in some fields. But to say that there is no sign of change or fulfilment of promise is certainly too harsh and probably biased against the government.

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## The immigration officer's smile



If you want to terrify a small child, you say: "The boogeyman's gonna getcha!"

If you want to terrify an adult, you say: "An Immigration Officer Class A (section II) civil servant is looking in your direction with a quizzical expression."

These days adults of my acquaintance seem to be scared of people in the following order, from least to most frightening:

- 1) Escaped lunatics;
- 2) Serial killers;
- 3) George Bush; and

1) Immigration officers.

People in the first three categories can't do you any lasting harm, other than beating you up or killing you. But immigration officers can make you suffer exquisite agonies of stress for long periods.

True story: a friend of mine went travelling around Asia this year with a new passport. There was a mistake on it -- his date of birth was off by one day.

On arrival in Hong Kong, he was immediately arrested for "bearing a false document" and thrown into jail. No joke. Lawyers spent weeks getting him out.

So when I got a call from an immigration officer recently, I broke out into a cold sweat. The caller explained that there were serious inconsistencies in residence application papers I had filed for Grandma, who had overstayed her visa because she was too fragile to travel. "What sort of problems?" I asked, trying to sound nonchalant. "Discrepancies," the

officer said. "Big ones."

I shuddered. I wondered whether to save time by simply turning up at the nearest jail and asking to be directed to a cell. But then the immigration officer, a young woman, said something unexpected. "We may be able to overlook the problems. Bring all your papers and come in for an interview."

I spent several days gathering every document I had ever signed, including my kindergarten paintings and the fingerprints taken when I was born, and turned up at the immigration offices.

A smiling officer said the department had decided to ignore the inconsistencies in our papers. Granny and her sponsor (me) were in the clear.

I was still marvelling at this when I found myself on a trip to Australia. Airport officials in that country are normally highly suspicious of me, possibly because of my brown skin, Islamic name



and tendency to joke about bombs. But on this occasion, the burly immigration officer was so friendly I thought for a

moment he was going to hug me. This was followed by trips to Singapore and Beijing at which immigration officials fell on me

as if I were a long-lost family member.

The climax came last week when one of my children lost her identity card and had to get a replacement. The immigration officer was not just friendly, but cool: she wore jeans, a black t-shirt and had spiky hair dyed blue.

What's going on? The best theory came from a business traveller friend. "First, I think immigration officers realized they had a terrible reputation and are really working hard to fix it," she said. "And second, they know they are among the few professions where everyone is still employed, and they want to keep their jobs."

These days, if you want to really scare an adult, tell him: "An Immigration Officer Class A (section II) civil servant is coming your way and wants to give you a hug."

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