

Work culture in foreign missions

Focus should be on result-oriented performance

THE foreign minister's upbraiding of Bangladesh's overseas mission staffs for their poor coordination, which is impacting the job markets there for local manpower, can hardly be gainsaid. If truth be told, a harder look at the Bangladesh foreign missions would reveal lapses in their performance record other than the one the minister has identified. And the lack of coordination among the different sections of the missions is also not the only shortcoming they suffer from, although clearly it is a major one.

However, what is commendable about the foreign minister's talking-to to the diplomats concerned is that she appears to have put her foot down in the matter. Since the earning from the remittance made by the expatriate workers is a major source of the country's foreign exchange reserve, the diplomatic staffs working abroad should put their best efforts to explore new openings for our manpower in the host countries. Their primary responsibility remains, though, to be more focussed on protecting and promoting the interests of the expatriate workers in the host countries.

Though the remittances sent home by the expatriate workers in the last financial year is still robust, there is no room for complacency either. For at the same time, the market for manpower has also dropped drastically by 47 per cent. The negative upshot of this sudden decline will be felt in the future through a decline in the volume of remittance, unless we take necessary efforts to arrest such downward slide. This is under any circumstances an issue of concern that cannot be made light of. To avert this trend, the foreign missions need to work round the clock and develop their capabilities relating to public relation (PR) with the host governments and the potential private organisations abroad. And to succeed in their objective, there is no alternative to the entire mission's working as a single whole.

While stressing the importance of a harmonious work culture in our overseas diplomatic missions, it is also necessary to place trained officials in the manpower importing countries, especially the strategic ones. Needless to say, new curricula tailored to the need of the emerging job markets should be the focus of those trainings. If brought under closer scrutiny, it would be found that other countries excelling in overseas job markets have the edge on us in this particular respect.

In the circumstances, the government will need to have a fresh look at our foreign missions and revitalise them as potential outposts abroad harnessed in the greater service of the nation.

Tackling famine in the north

New varieties of crops will ensure food security

EVERY year we hear tales of famine like situation in a number of districts in the northern part of the country around this time of the year when source of work and food supply begin to dwindle dangerously. This is the time, September-November, when thousands of young men are forced to migrate to other corners of the country in search of work, leaving their wives and children behind to pass a couple of months in semi-starvation state.

But this year a piece of good news has reached us from Nilphamari to boost our morale. It's a story that was made to come true by a group of scientists of the country and farmers of the famine-prone areas. Young men will not have to migrate this year as they already have started to harvest new rice varieties of BRRI Dhan-33 and BINA Dhan-7 in full gusto, which will feed the people of the six districts for the next two months. And then the same farmers will harvest aman paddy to keep their rice bowls filled.

Traditionally, after aman paddy plantation in mid September, workers of five monga-prone northern districts of Rangpur, Kurigram, Nilphamari, Lalmonirhat and Gaibandha sat idle because of lack of employment in the Bengali months of *Ashwin* and *Kartik*. Marginal farmers also do not have any stock of rice left to feed the family, which often forces many to sell the little possessions they have and migrate for good.

This year, thanks to the scientists who spent hours after hours in the laboratory for the breakthrough, farmers of the monga-affected areas cultivate two new varieties of paddy as they can be harvested during the crisis period, about two months before aman harvest. The new rice varieties can be planted in mid June and it takes only 110-115 days to mature and produce an average yield of 2.4-2.5 metric tonnes per hectare of land.

We believe there is no way we can handle some of our core problems without delving deep in scientific research. There is no denying that to feed the ever growing population, we shall need to find alternative crop varieties besides the ancient ones. These new generation crops will rise above flood waters, grow in dry land and mature in the most adverse environment. The government should support the scientists who are engaged in such research works.

Tackling those shadowy figures

Care has to be taken to ensure that the instructions of the government of the day are not diluted and enforcement officials must not believe that business may continue as usual. In such circumstances, the commitment by the ruling regime to an agenda of comprehensive non-partisan law enforcement involving structural problems would be essential.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THERE is no denying that the December 2008 general election of Bangladesh was an outstanding feat in the annals of democracy in our part of the world. The Awami League won the polls with a thumping majority. The verdict at the hustings was loud and clear. There is, therefore, a surge of expectations amongst the electorate from a government that comes as a result of such clear mandate. However, the premonition that is lurking in many hearts is whether those in charge of managing the affairs of the State are faltering or getting stalled on account of the malevolence of not-too-visible elements.

Under a scenario as above, many questions arise. The first query may relate to the slide in crime and order situation. Concerned citizens keep on asking as to why law and order situation would deteriorate when government's control is undisputed and unquestioned? How credible are the fears of people that in several pockets, persons of criminal disposition end doubtful antecedents in league with delinquent enforcement officials are responsible for the

inactions in protecting life and property? Are some such people asserting their authority by telling the mischief-makers that they need not be afraid of the police station and the lawmen that have been taken care of? Are some people visiting the police stations without cogent business, only to show their clout to the unsuspecting public? These allegations need to be probed to assuage the fears of the citizens.

A serious area of mal-functioning will definitely be the authority's inability to ensure fairness in the process of submission of tenders for development activities in many areas of the country. If student and youth bodies affiliated to the ruling party are scaring away bona-fide businessmen and contractors as alleged, then who would guarantee durable and credible progress? Work orders obtained under duress will only multiply people's woes. In the process the authority's writ over order and development would be harmfully diminished. These are bad signals for a democratic society.

The erosion of good governance under circumstances as above cannot be denied. Suspected arrangements to extend political patronage to partisan elements are under-

mining bureaucratic discipline, eroding accountability, promoting inefficiency and encouraging pervasive corruption.

We have to admit that a poor state of law and order is endemic to the system of governance. The failure to address the structural sources has meant that shadowy elements have been operating with immunity from law enforcement agencies. There are reasons to suspect a collusive and mutually rewarding links between them.

The ruling party enjoys a special privilege in nurturing and protecting its own mastheads. As a result, the problem in law enforcement has become systemic. Since the problem is considered to be embedded into the working of Bangladesh's political system, regime changes may bring a limited impact.

It has been felt that unless each political party commits itself to marginalize the masthead elements in its working and to apply the law of the land, without reference to the political colour of the wrongdoer, attempts to restore order would not be real. Simultaneously, the structural constraints within the machinery of law enforcement cannot be ignored.

The mutually beneficial relationship between deviant public servants and political parties has given rise to strong vested interests in many areas. In such areas there is very limited prospect that police will move, suo moto, against the major criminals. They will be active if they receive categorical, unambiguous, political orders to clean up an area and are threatened with the prospect of dire action if they do not comply with such orders.

Care has to be taken to ensure that the

instructions of the government of the day are not diluted and enforcement officials must not believe that business may continue as usual. In such circumstances, the commitment by the ruling regime to an agenda of comprehensive non-partisan law enforcement involving structural problems would be essential.

The entire cultural and institutional basis of law enforcement will have to be overhauled. Such a process could be resisted from within the agencies that would be able to draw upon support from within the political system and from interest groups who have benefited from a system of personalized law enforcement. Thus a political consensus will have to be built up so that one party cannot take political advantage if a ruling party seeks to impose structural changes in the machinery of law enforcement.

Reaching a political consensus as above will require an ongoing dialogue between civil society and political parties where all issues including those of just law enforcement will be publicly examined and credible solutions sought to establish a reform supportive environment. In other words, the political cost of malfeasance governance will have to be realized by the political players.

The need for making a decisive assault on corruption resulting from administrative inefficiency demands urgent attention. The aspects of governance lie at the very heart of building a sustainable democracy which is no less paramount a goal than realizing sustainable development.

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Geneva Convention's relevance for human rights

The Geneva Conventions, it must be understood, are part of the fabric of international human rights law, and must be zealously protected. In this context, it is totally unacceptable to suggest that unlimited interrogation, secrecy, and incarceration without trial in a maximum-security cell is part of creating national security.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

JURISTS from around the world recently observed the 60th anniversary of the Geneva Convention (on August 12, 2009). While doing so, as expected, some brought up once again the debate about its relevance, whether there is need for change and also if some of its provisions should be re-examined within the context of a changing world.

Any discussion of the principles contained in the 1949 Geneva Convention requires, however, that we take cognisance of the agreements reached earlier at Geneva on August 22, 1864, on July 6, 1906 and on July 27, 1929. This is necessary because it demonstrates the gradual evolution of the principles, as the strategic situation changed in conflict situations. The only constant factor that however gained greater focus despite change was the humanitarian aspects related to war.

It may be recalled that the Second World War, which concluded in 1945, and had encompassed the whole of Europe, the USA, parts of the Middle East and North Africa and large swathes of the Far East and South East Asia, underlined once again the need to re-assess the existing principles related to combat. International jurists were persuaded by their desire to mitigate the 'evils inseparable from war' and to put an end to unnecessary hardships. It was felt that time had come for greater respect for the human personality. This humanitarian character lent a special ethos and meaning to the Geneva Convention eventually

agreed upon in 1949.

I am delving into the past to point out that this Convention of 1949 was a major move forward. The victors as well as the vanquished of the Second World War, both realised that human rights were the concern of the all mankind. The deplorable genocide that had led to the death of more than six million people of Jewish faith was partially responsible for this. The first step in this regard had already been undertaken by the General Assembly of the United Nations, meeting in Paris on December 10, 1948. It adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 'as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms.'

It was this awareness about the implications of modern warfare that prompted the emergence of the 1949 Geneva Convention. It was this realisation that eventually persuaded all sixty-four parties to agree on the addition of a common preamble that would guarantee and ensure protection for those not actively engaged in hostilities from the effects of war. Article 3 of the First Geneva Convention also clarified that this would apply without any adverse distinction arising out of race, nationality, religious belief or political opinion.

The Geneva Convention has since become the basis for contemporary rules of engagement in the conducting of conflict and for providing protection for wounded

members of armed forces in the field and at sea, prisoners of war and civilians. It is the universal nature of this Convention that has persuaded more countries to have signed up to it than there are members of the United Nations. This in turn has saved hundreds of thousands of lives over the last sixty years.

However, despite the general consensus to abide by this convention, many of the state parties have flouted some of its provisions under different pretexts during new, evolving, types of armed engagements. Such deviation has also been supported by their senior government functionaries. They have advocated that the process of conflict has changed and that the convention is unable to respond to these new types of engagement.

This controversy gained special momentum after the terrorist events of 9/11 and the creation of the Guantanamo detention center. Even the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which has strong historical links to the conventions, was forced to seek clarification over what constitutes involvement in modern conflict, in which rebel groups increasingly disguise themselves among local populations, and "far too many civilians" risk becoming "lawful targets."

It would be difficult to dispute that warfare has changed over the past 60 years. Today's conflicts are more likely to occur within states than between them, and those involved are increasingly likely to be fighting for an ideology than a country. From Palestine to Afghanistan, Sri Lanka to Iraq, the distinction between soldier and civilian has become blurred.

At the same time it is clear that tampering with the wording of the conventions could cause additional problems, permitting governments currently in breach of their requirements to legitimise their positions.

Nevertheless, one has to admit that the Convention has survived a "difficult phase" in the years following the September 11 attacks. It took more than four years of litigation

for the US government's position on the treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo to be deemed illegal by the US Supreme Court. It has ruled that those held at the prison should be held in accordance with the convention. Even then, some in the USA have disagreed with the court's decision. A rhetorical broadside against the Third Geneva Convention was fired after their decision by White House Adviser Dan Bartlett. Nevertheless, Barack Obama, the US President deserves credit for having made it clear the Guantanamo's detainees should be protected by the conventions.

The Geneva Conventions, it must be understood, are part of the fabric of international human rights law, and must be zealously protected. In this context, it is totally unacceptable to suggest that unlimited interrogation, secrecy, and incarceration without trial in a maximum-security cell is part of creating national security.

The conventions have become a foundation stone for a dynamic body of international humanitarian law and that it needs to be respected in its totality. It would also be appropriate to mention here that this Convention is not static as many have accused it to be. The addition of the Geneva Protocols, which were approved in 1977, and more recent treaties banning the use of land mines and cluster munitions are evidence that the conventions are taking note of changes in the manner in which war is conducted today. We have to praise its endurance as a corner stone for ensuring human rights and also see how it can be carried forward by addressing issues like deaths of unarmed civilians through use of prohibited ammunition (recently in attacks on the civilian population in Gaza) or through suicide bombings. It might be useful as such, to convene another international debate of state parties to the Convention to find solutions and necessary codification for this purpose.

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OPINION

'No sign of change!'

MOHAMMAD ZAMAN

THESE are some comments on Captain Husain Imam's op-ed piece 'No sign of change!' (DS Oct 21)

Yes, there is a change. Mere victory of AL against corrupt ochlocracy of BNP is a sea change. Defeat of anti-liberation forces of Jamat is also a great change. But is it all that the nation was hoping for?

No there is no change in the political culture in Bangladesh. Instead of *din bodol* we witnessed *sorkar bodol*. And who cares about that? Isn't corruption still rampant? Hasn't the "BNP-ochlocracy" replaced by the "Awami-ochlocracy"? Isn't it true that the label of "*dol*" has been replaced by the label of "league"?

Isn't it true that every inept government, when faced with a difficult issue, instead of looking for a solution, tends to blame a grave conspiracy against democracy itself? The former did it. And the present is doing it... This is no change!

Capt Imam has questioned the activities

of Prof. Muzaffar Ahmed and Prof. Anu Mohammad. And that is perfectly fine, because you have the right to speak out. Prof. Muzaffar is a very sane voice. He has been demanding public accountability for long. Just like you, he has certain opinions. And Anu Muhammad; well, doesn't he have the right to voice his concern on national issues? This is the very crux of democracy. Didn't beating him up demonstrate the government's moral bankruptcy? Yes, I also despise hartal. I also would like to explore and develop our natural resources. But I am not going to beat an honourable man just because he disagrees on some technical details.

Yes, the noises from the parliamentary committees are refreshing. But the parliament itself is dysfunctional -- thanks to BNP childishness plus Awami lack of magnanimity. Does Captain Imam honestly believe that any MP is going to deliver on promises with the Article 70 of the Constitution intact?

The AL did not revive the upazilla system. AL, during its previous stint, in fact,

weakened the upazilla system, and the BNP regime abolished it. The upazilla system was revived by the military-backed government. Contrary to its electioneering promise, AL essentially decapitated the whole concept of local governance by enhancing the power of the local lawmaker.

Underground railway, elevated highway, Padma Bridge, 4-lane Dhaka-Chittagong highway are all great concepts -- but still nascent. Success of the AL government will be judged by the manner they approach and realise those great concepts. If their approach is based on sound planning and if the execution is transparent and free of prevailing corruption, yes, AL government shall deserve every kudo that one can muster. Until then, let's not count that as an Awami success.

Prices of essentials almost always follows the simple economics of supply and demand. Helpful governmental policy is a plus and can affect the price marginally. I shall not measure the success and failure of the AL government on this issue alone. Yes, if they can rein-in their party goons and

reduce chanda bazi and toll, it can have a salutary effect on prices of daily essentials.

On the education front, I believe that the government is on the right track. If this education reform goes through, as expected, it will have far reaching effect for years to come. Just trying this, I agree, is a success! And luckily, we do have an education minister who is honest, thoughtful and efficient.

Capt Imam mentioned a number of failures of the AL government at the tag end of his article. Given the relative youth of this government, I shall defer any comment on those. To my mind, the biggest failure of this government is its failure to deliver on its promise for "din bodol."

Parliament still remains dysfunctional. Corruption is still pervasive. And, above all, government of the people and by the people, still remains loyal to a single party. I don't see my desired change.

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