

Jute sector's new prospects

Policy backing needed to spur growth

It augurs well for shoring up the jute sector that needs to find a strong footing. Export of raw jute and jute goods registered an increase during July-September quarter against the recession-hit backdrop of the world economy. Compared with figures for the corresponding quarter of last fiscal, export of raw jute this time marked a significant growth by 28 percent. However, insofar as the export of jute manufactures went, the growth is rather modest -- 5.18 percent.

This overall growth in export earning has helped jute farmers receive remunerative prices this year. This is a good news but the peasants maybe enthused to produce more jute next year, something that policy makers would do well to bear in mind and cater for in the future.

The increase in exports signals a rise in international demand for eco-friendly products amidst concerns over impacts of climate change. While there is a positive message to read into such a development, this has given rise to certain concerns that need to be addressed in order that we can maximise the benefits from the current trend.

With India and China importing raw jute from Bangladesh to manufacture sacks, yarns and bags for international market the local jute industries have an issue with increased raw jute prices and supply constraints weighing down on their production lines. Bangladesh Jute Spinners' Association says that local jute mills could shutter down if jute supplies were not ensured. The calculus of profit obviously favours jute goods fetching \$900 per tonne as against \$600 through raw jute export. Realistically, we should be striking a balance between export of raw jute and that of jute goods.

There is perhaps a basis on which we could do the balancing in terms of providing policy and logistical supports to bolster the jute sector as a whole. The country produced five million bales of jute this year, of which around two million were used up by local jute mills and raw jute exporters put together. The market should have another three million bales for use, according to knowledgeable circles who are quick to add that a segment of jute traders might be into hoarding to make a quick buck.

In this context, it seems imperative for the government to conduct a survey of raw jute stocks in order that favourable equations can be worked out between export of the golden fibre and that of goods manufactured from it.

The vanishing rainforests

Deterrent punishment to plunderers

The front-page Daily Star story on cutting and robbing of trees of Kalinga forest in Srimongol, one of the largest and most pristine rainforest reserves of the country, tells aplenty of how it is either sheer inefficiency or shameful corruption on the part of the officials and staff members of the forest department and the law enforcing agencies that has made possible the outright plunder of forest resources. Kalinga forest and the conjoined Rema forest covering an area of about 1,795 hectares form the biggest tree-cover after the Sundarbans. But Kalinga forest today has been reduced to a pathetic silhouette of its former beauty. And it is beyond comprehension that what poachers could not do in last ten years, they have done it in just one year!

The work of destruction continues as of today in perfect partnership between greedy forest officials and illegal loggers under the protection of some bigger godfathers who operate from behind the curtains. The powerful robbers make sure that no patrolling by forest guards is done during logging and the forest officials do not bother to number and record tree stumps to get a clear idea of the scale of illegal felling of trees. It is a further disconcerting revelation that in fear of investigation from the head office the local officials recently cleared off all logs and branches from the forest and that some of the stumps were dug out to hide signs of logging. It is quite obvious that the perpetrators show no qualm or fear for the law of the land.

The forest reserve of Bangladesh has already hit a dangerous low because of relentless felling of trees and turning of forest lands into agricultural and industrial plots. Experts fear that further depletion of forests would trigger a serious ecological and environmental disaster throughout the country and that the damage repair cost would turn out to be many times more than what the robbers gained by selling logs.

We urge the authorities in full earnest to implement the relevant laws to save our forests in consideration of the need of our future generations. Severe punishment to corrupt officials and their agents will deter further attempts to plunder forests.

First step taken towards restoration of rule of law

The nation needs to wipe off the stains from its collective conscience. This needs to be accomplished for the sake of future progress of democracy. Everyone, whatever his/her political persuasion or profession, has to be aware that breach of law will mean accountability and punishment.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

TRUTH and justice prevailed on 19 November, 2009. It took over 34 years to reaffirm that no one is above law. This was possible because of patience and perseverance. It also demonstrated that given political will, the judicial process can operate efficiently despite barriers put in place through political maneuverings.

Many in the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, including their former Law Minister have now asserted that the recent judgment has been a fair verdict. Like many others, I wonder why they did not, in the first place, understand the iniquitous nature of the indemnity provision.

It is particularly disappointing that political parties, one after another, for the sake of politics, undertook the steps that they did, to perpetuate injustice and lend credibility to murder. So-called eminent lawyers without a straw of conscience also connived in this process. I also recall in this context how the former BNP Foreign Minister downplayed the importance of concluding this trial when asked about it during one of his trips abroad.

Many have written and expressed their happiness and satisfaction over the judgment. I fully endorse their sentiments. However, I consider that this has only been the first step towards full accountability. I have observed more than once in my column, over the past few years, that what happened on 15 August was not only a transgression of law but that it also unleashed a chain of inci-

dents that took place only because some felt that they were above the law.

It was directly this supposition that led to the brutal killings within the Dhaka Central Jail on 3 November, 1975, the so-called popular uprising on 7 November, 1975, killings, coups and counter-coups between 1976 and 1981. It culminated in the murder of Zia-ur-Rahman and a few others in Chittagong. A hasty trial led to the punishment of several who were associated with this assassination. Unfortunately, the reasons for the mutiny and the names of the principal actors remained a matter of debate.

In the meantime conscious efforts were undertaken by the powers that be to clean the Augean stable. The dumping ground, as usual, was our Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The unfortunate practice of finding berths in this Ministry and our diplomatic Missions abroad for personnel no longer acceptable within the branches of the Cantonment was put in place.

This trend of violence in politics gathered momentum over the years. We have seen the use of grenades and murder through different means during the past political regime. Every time after the incident, efforts were undertaken towards cover-up by the relevant law and order agency responsible for carrying out necessary investigation and inquiry. This happened due to politicization of the concerned agency and their personnel. Justice was denied.

Classic cases in this regard have been that of the 21 August grenade attack on the Awami

League leadership in front of their party headquarters a few years ago and the murder of former Finance Minister SAMS Kibria. Recent confessions continue to reveal the association of the wrong kind by important players of the past political regime.

This belief in lack of accountability, most certainly encouraged the terrible slaughter of officers from the Armed Forces by certain Bangladesh Rifles personnel earlier this year on 25-26 February.

I take this opportunity to recall here my discussion with an eminent psychologist after this incident. Interestingly, he asserted that such a 'disaster' was a consequence of our not having carried out the War Crimes Trial. He pointed out that lack of delivery of justice against those guilty of genocide, murder, rape, arson and other cognizable offences had eroded our moral standards and shattered the principle of accountability. Quite correctly, he underlined that this had not only affected our principles of governance and encouraged corruption but had also contributed towards breakdown of the institutional process through politicization.

It is because of this that I am observing today that the judgment of 19 November has been the first step towards restoration of the rule of law. It is a measure towards the right direction.

The government will now have to move forward with determination. It will not be easy. The efforts must not also be tainted with any hint of vengeance. Equity and fairness must characterize the process. The incidents will need to be addressed carefully and without any emotion.

It would only be proper to initiate as soon as possible all steps pertaining to the establishment of a War Crimes Trial. We have already approached the United Nations and several other agencies to help us in this regard. They have agreed to do so. Their assistance will impart credibility and will enable us to con-

duct the trial with transparency.

The next is the extradition of those who have had sentences passed against them (related to 15 August, 1975) and are now in hiding abroad. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Home and the Ministry of Law need to coordinate effectively in this regard.

After that comes the completion of all investigation, inquiry and judicial action pertaining to the murder of several others in different parts of Dhaka on the fateful night of 15 August. This is required for full closure.

Restoring national dignity also requires a speedy review of the jail killings. Those guilty must face justice and be punished. There has been inordinate delay in this regard through judicial machinations. We need to conclude the trial process.

In the same vein, the government needs to address the unresolved issues of the killings that took place between 2001 and 2006.

I know that all the above will be tough tasks, more so, because of the need to complete the trial of those charged with mutiny within the BDR. Six Special Courts have been constituted for this purpose and the dynamics of trial has already started. Several Deputy Attorney Generals will be working as Law Officers. The whole world will be monitoring the trial very carefully. Credibility must be ensured particularly after the deaths of several BDR personnel in custody due to 'heart attacks'. We must not create any situation that raises controversy.

The nation needs to wipe off these stains from its collective conscience. This needs to be accomplished for the sake of future progress of democracy. Everyone, whatever his/her political persuasion or profession, has to be aware that breach of law will mean accountability and punishment.

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Care for children must for economic emancipation

Unless we can affirm the right of the children to a life free from exploitation, neglect and abuse, guaranteeing access to food, healthcare, and education and ensuring protection, our commitment to democracy and national prosperity will remain a distant dream to be realised.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE landmark study by the UNICEF that some 3.3 crore children -- about half of the child population -- are living in abject poverty while one in four children is deprived of four basic necessities, made public in Dhaka in recent past, has come as a pathetic reminder of the state of the children in the country. Unquestionably true, as the lead consultant Prof. Abul Barakat said, that majority of the Millennium Development Goals that are related to children will remain unattainable without giving proper attention to children.

According to UNICEF about 67 lakh and 84 thousand children in the country are engaged in hard labour that include 4 lakh 34 thousand male children and 3 lakh 33 thousand female children between age range 5 and 9. According to some investigative reports, children aged between 5 and 12 work hard for at least 12 hours at a stretch, featuring one of the worst

Samuil, a 12 year-old boy hailing from Nilphamari is now working in a motor workshop in Mirpur to support his mother and two tender aged sisters. While narrating the sad plight of the family, he explained how his father abandoned them in a miserable condition. Finding no meaningful job to stay alive in the native village, his mother with her two kids came to Dhaka. His mother is working as maid in some houses but her earnings are hardly enough to keep them alive. Samuil would not disclose the amount he gets per day as per directive of his employer. That only underscores the fact as to how these children are being exploited.

Like many other children, Mamun (12)

and Sumon (8), two brothers work in a rope factory in Keraniganj and both of them earn Tk 100 per day. These tender aged boys risk serious health hazards. Besides jute particles, they children are also exposed to micro-fibres that might cause fibrosis of the lungs, as one professor of National Institute of Chest Diseases hospital said in a recent interview. These children work under conditions of slavery or semi-slavery with no legal or medical protection.

Newspaper reports about brutal torture on domestic helps by employers in the big cities and even small towns of the country have gained alarming frequency. While there is widespread call for an end to forced child labour and repression on children, some affluent and educated families in the capital and other major cities have hit headlines for torturing domestic helps. Report published in The Daily Star on November 26 last of brutal torture on Nazma, a domestic help in a house at Sakthira, by her lady employer is really horrifying. For all humankind, it is shameful and criminal that there are more than 30 million exploited children in the country. We see them rummaging in garbage for a scrap of food or groping in darkness for a place to sleep.

Report published in The Daily Star on November 3 last indicated that coastguards rescued 46 boys from a fishermen's colony at Dublar Char near the Bay of Bengal. Report also indicated that these tender aged boys were brought there from different districts for forced labour.

Although the number of children initially enrolled in primary schools ranges up to 75 per cent of the total, almost 60 per cent of them drop out, mainly due to poverty. Only

40 per cent can somehow cross the primary stage of schooling. The report made public by the Mass Literacy Campaign, an NGO, points that if the present trend continues, only 20 students out of 100 enrolled at the primary level in 2010 will be sitting for the SSC examination in 2019.

While other countries in the world talk about the need to invest in their youth, much of Bangladesh has converted its youth into a pernicious capital investment: too many children are working in different fields, and in most dreadful jobs. In a host of small scale factories and workshops, it is children who dip match sticks into phosphorus, mix the gunpowder for fire crackers, roll the bidis, weave the carpets and are engaged in tannery factories dealing in toxic chemicals, welding machines, glass factories, motor workshops, re-rolling machines, shrimp processing factories and hazardous ship breaking industries.

Despite the fact that child labourers have been withdrawn from garments sector following international pressure, there are still thousands of children eking out a living under oppressive situations in other vocations. The number of children doing such odd jobs as splitting stones for the construction works, or picking trash from the streets or packing groceries, working as hotel boys and rickshaw pullers or coolies or helpers in bus and railway stations etc. far outnumber those -- say, about 10,000 child workers withdrawn from the garments factories years back.

Grim accounts of poor girls under 14 being taken away from around the country and sold to brokers and brothels are pouring in with sickening frequency. In spite of the fact that the country has strict laws to stop such abuse, we have hardly been able to ensure protection to these teenagers.

The city's garbage dumps are home to many of them. These rubbish pickers spend their days sifting through mountains of stinking refuse, looking for recyclable objects. Doubtless, children make the best scavengers, they can scurry more easily among the piles of garbage. But how can society and the administration face such a

cruel fact that God's best creation, because they were born poor or with no father and mother to support them in the formative years of their lives, are destined to end up in garbage dumps or in cardboard shanties?

These unfortunate children, often the product of broken homes, victims of recent climatic upheaval and river erosion trek into the big cities like Dhaka and Chittagong with hope to have a living and shelter. But a life on the pavement is the only fate they meet in the long last. True to every sense of the term, most of our children live in a state of violence, persecution, rejection and forced labour. In this sad setting, the only escape for many is drug and other anti-social activities.

With the enactment of stricter laws as well as stringent enforcement that would put an end to child abuse, repression and trafficking, one can only envision a happy and prosperous future for the country. Because if children were happy, educated and did not suffer deprivation, diseases and malnutrition, there would be no terrorism in the country.

Despite the success we have attained in immunization, because of the commitment of the agencies concerned and use of radio and television for dissemination of information, the children of the country suffer inexorably. Presumably, penicillin and vaccines are no antidote to the abuse, neglect and denial of opportunity to these teeming millions who continue to lead a life of misery, squalor and exploitation because they were born poor. The war to be waged in our country is to force the affluent section of the society to pay more attention to the needs of these neglected youngsters having no families, no parents and no support. Unless we can affirm the right of the children to a life free from exploitation, neglect and abuse, guaranteeing access to food, healthcare, and education and ensuring protection, our commitment to democracy and national prosperity will remain a distant dream to be realised.

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The significance of Naxalite movement

The thrust of the Naxalite movement has become 'military' action rather than people's action for social transformation. The policy of individual annihilation followed by it is as flawed as the government policy of trying to liquidate activists and leaders in the hope of liquidating the movement.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

EVENTS across our border indicate that despite continuous State action the Naxalite movement characterized by violence has expanded to new areas and has developed significant capacity for military action and striking power. It has been the considered view of many in India that the sharp inequities in society have contributed to the attraction of the Naxalite movement to the dispossessed and marginalized population.

The lessons learnt from the Indian experience are that the unfinished business of agrarian reforms and elementary livelihood problems of the millions remain to be addressed; that the massive transfer of forest and agricultural lands to corporate interests to develop industrial, mining and infrastructure projects and agribusiness is a serious cause of concern to the rural poor; that the brutal suppression of even peaceful articulation of demands by industrial and

agricultural workers in the recent period has lent legitimacy to the use of violent methods by the aggrieved.

The methods used by the government to tackle Naxalite militancy inevitably leads the police to attack the entire rural poor community in the name of tackling the militancy of a section of the community and such methods are counter-productive.

The Naxalites have registered significant practical achievements in specific areas such as curbing feudal practices and social oppression; confiscating and redistributing ceiling surplus land; ensuring more equitable access to village commons; enforcing payment of higher agricultural wages; eliminating the stranglehold of landlords, money lenders and contractors; providing protection to the rural poor from harassment by forest and police officials.

The Naxalites, for the most part, are seen to have been involved not in overthrowing the State, but in practical struggles for land, wages, dignity, democratic rights and related goals

that can be pursued effectively by open mass actions, which does not need violence. Their success and popularity have more to do with open mass movements than armed actions.

The lesson is thus clear; that brutal repression is no answer to the Naxalite movement; that the Naxalite ideology must be fought politically; that Naxalite criminal actions must be dealt with under the existing criminal and human rights laws; and that Naxalite social base, which springs from exploitation, inequality and injustice must be countered by purposeful political and administrative action to implement the promises made in the Preamble and the Directive Principles of State Policy of the Constitution.

Police repression is attractive and easy to adopt by a government armed to the teeth with paramilitary forces, arms, equipment, firepower and mobility. However, police repression only goes to strengthen the Maoist thesis on the class character of the State. It is counter-productive and helps to increase the mass base of the Naxalites, which arises out of the failure of the State to deliver the developmental goals as mandated by the Constitution.

The authorities viewed the Naxalite issue as a law and order problem, ignoring the fact that it is essentially an expression of the people's aspiration to a life of dignity and self-respect. This led to physical liquidation of people in so-called 'encounter', repression and harassment of people by illegal deten-

tion, torture and false cases, suppression of democratic activities, unlawful behaviour towards democratic organizations and encouragement of vigilante groups.

The political leadership of the state shifted its burden to the police, encouraging them to indulge in 'encounters' which are nothing but custodial and targeted killings. The extinguishing of human life and the right to life by the government itself constitutes violation of the provisions of the Constitution, which require the State to protect life and liberty.

The thrust of the Naxalite movement, on the other hand, has become 'military' action rather than people's action for social transformation. The policy of individual annihilation followed by it is as flawed as the government policy of trying to liquidate activists and leaders in the hope of liquidating the movement. The movement today connotes a confrontation between the police and the Naxalites, each with its own agenda of violence. The democratic space has shrunk fast; the State and the society are brutalized.

Naxalite violence is an outcome of the failures of the development policy to address the concerns of the weaker sections of society in tune with the imperatives of the Constitution embodied in the Preamble and the Directive Principles of State Policy. These failures have led to a crisis of legitimacy of the State.

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