

BNP on govt's role in Copenhagen

In public positioning on an international issue it should show greater maturity

WE cannot but help being surprised at Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)'s statement on what it termed 'complete failure' of the government to project Bangladesh's case at the UN climate summit and its inability to utilise the opportunity of leading vulnerable and least developed countries in Copenhagen. Such a reaction not only reveals a lack of information but also reflects a lack of basic understanding of what went on in the climate conference; indeed, what was the climactic inter-play of international diplomatic currents and cross-currents that shaped the final outcome as it emerged.

We accept that the opposition has a right to criticism; in fact, one of its major obligations to the electorate is to point at the government's failings and pitfalls. But to be credible it ought to be substantiated by facts, not reeled off as mere generalisations. Especially, insofar as international conferences of such complexity and magnitude as that in Copenhagen went, there is no room for any knee-jerk reaction or criticism for criticism's sake. It ought to have been well informed and grounded in reality and based on facts and understanding of the basic dynamics building around the mega event.

In another remark, the former prime minister and leader of the opposition went so far as implying that the prime minister was pleading with a begging bowl. Demanding funds for adaptation to climate change can in no way termed as such.

The BNP statement has faulted Bangladesh delegation for not bringing up Farakka and Tipaimukh issues in the conference. We are at pains to understand how such bilateral concerns could have been conceivably raised in a multilateral forum. As for the Ganges water sharing accord, the BNP-led government was at the helm, for five years of the accord; and what is its track-record of success as far as articulating Bangladesh's grievances over the release of its share by India? For that matter, what initiative did it take to review the accord for which a clause exists, far less any effort to rewrite it? On the Tipaimukh question, Bangladesh and India are busy discussing it bilaterally on the basic premise of 'nothing would be done to harm Bangladesh's interest'. It seems set to come up during Sheikh Hasina's visit to India early next month. To raise it at Copenhagen would have grievously compromised our position in the coming summit.

We are very happy to note though, the BNP is taking an energetic interest on climate change issue. The party has considerable resource base with experts, environmentalists, economists and negotiators, aside from its experience in governance for two terms. They can and should tap in on such a repository of knowledge so that they can prepare a well-formulated position paper on the issue to go public with and try and win support for it.

Principally, we think that a true measure of its concern over climate change and what Bangladesh's negotiating position ought to be can be gauged if the party takes its place as the opposition on the floor of the House. Only the other day the opposition leader vowed once again for making the parliament effective but in order for such a statement to sound credible, this one time at least, she owes it to the nation to end her boycott of JS. She should have her say at the right forum on the climate change thereby contributing to Bangladesh's negotiating positioning in the context of the inadequate Copenhagen outcome.

Beefing up food security

Concentrate on the next boro crop

IN a fairly representative dialogue held on Wednesday, the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) engaged with the agriculture minister and the deputy minister, the senior joint secretary of BNP and a sprinkling of parliamentarians, agriculturists, economists, members of farmer organisations and bureaucrats to put across some recommendations on food security in a particular context.

A drop on global food output and consequently an increase in foodgrain prices are on the radar bringing in a fresh concern for us. Even though Bangladesh has significantly raised cereal productivity she still has to import a critical amount of rice due to one or the other kind of natural vagary. With the global outlook on food turning bleak following Philippines announcing that it would import food from the global market and India already placing restrictions on exports, Bangladesh has reasons to be apprehensive about import of cereals at high costs. But if we manage to get a sizeable *boro* crop we would be able to meet such an eventuality.

There is, however, a lesson to be drawn from last year's record *boro* production at 1.78 crore tonnes: small and marginalised farmers who had contributed hugely to the bumper crop failed to reap dividends on their labour and investment owing to a decline in prices on the domestic market.

In light of such an experience, the farmers might be diffident in taking to *boro* cultivation on a scale they had in the part year. Since the government aims at a higher output level of 1.9 crore tonnes this year, the issue of farmer interest would assume an added importance. In such a context, CPD recommended that the government announce a procurement price well ahead of the harvesting season to influence the farmer's decision on *boro* plantation. This is the time when the farmers are preparing for the irri season and if they should opt for more of cash crop at the expense of *boro* acreage its production will be affected.

The need for an advance indicative procurement price is there, but exactly at what viable level it should be fixed or whether it would be adjustable down the road will have to be determined through a further expert discourse with the stakeholders.

Creation of job opportunities pivotal to stability

The country's move towards industrial growth that will provide employment opportunities to thousands of Bangladeshis seems to be very slow. With the country now producing about 3,700 MW against the demand of about 5,000 MW, the energy pressures alone threaten further growth of industrial plants, stifle the operational line of the existing plants and breed social chaos and political instability.

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WITH the country racked by political infighting, prices of food items shooting up, and inflation mounting, the news item that some 30,000 Bangladeshi workers from Kuwait and thousands others from Oman are being repatriated is most disquieting. During the last 11 months, some 68,000 Bangladeshis working in Malaysia and Saudi Arabia returned to Bangladesh and about 2121 working in the Middle East and Saudi Arabia died.

While celebrating the "record forex earnings ceremony" by immigrant workers, the Bangladesh Bank governor indicated that forex reserve, largely attributable to 65 lakh immigrant workers' remittances, had exceeded \$10 billion.

At a function organised by the expatriate welfare and overseas ministry, speakers expressed concern about the way workers at home and abroad fell victims to harassment and deceit by the manpower agents. Alongside the hardship of the workers, pathetic state of living, deprivation, and torture by the so-called employers have come to public attention. The vast mass of unfortunate, nay gullible people, have fallen in the trap of manpower agents, operating in most cases illegally.

Political leaders and the party in power can't remain oblivious of the gigantic issue of people's life and living and can hardly avoid being in the turmoil bubbling in the whole countryside. A report in the *Prothom Alo* on November 7 said that Jewel Rana paid Tk.2,10,000 to manpower agent Emasek Pvt. Ltd., and got a work permit for Malaysia. But his ordeal began after landing in Malaysia.

After serving prison terms in Malaysian jail for months, he returned home empty handed. Jewel Rana might consider himself fortunate that he has been able to come back alive, but reports revealed that there are at least 6,500 Bangladeshis now languishing in different jails and concentration camps in Malaysia, Oman and Saudi Arabia for illegally entering these countries.

It would be naïve to think that the

country can be turned into an oasis of peace, stability and prosperity while the teeming millions are steeped in squalor and poverty. What is envisioned now is that the future of a country that was once so tantalisingly rich in promise seems to be fraught with dangers. Against the backdrop of 8,32,000 workforce who went abroad for overseas job in 2007, and 8,75,000 in 2008, the number going for overseas jobs in 2009 came down to 4,51,571, mainly because of world recession of workers among other factors. The biggest number, about 26,000 returned from Saudi Arabia this year.

Many of the returnees are now pulling rickshaws and running tea stalls on roadsides in Dhaka. Many immigrant workers, including women, died in foreign lands after being subjected to inhuman torture and physical abuse. Mahesh Sarkar went to Malaysia after selling his homestead land, but he could not get any job there as the work permit he got from the manpower agent was fake. Consequently, he was put in a concentration camp and he passed eight months in appalling misery, almost without food and bare necessities of life. He died in the Bangladesh High Commission shelter house in Malaysia in October 2007.

If the rural areas with their vast populace are not strengthened with job opportunities, which means creating infrastructural facilities for industries based on rural produce, these people will be descending on the metropolis in increasing numbers.

The economy of the country is undoubtedly in a bad shape. The past government undertook a reform and restructuring programme for Rupali Bank, Agrani Bank and Janata Bank in 2004, and about Tk.130 crore was spent in the last five years as consultants' fees, but their financial health remains as it was in 2004. Consultants were appointed for Sonali and Janata and a management group was working in Agrani, with precious little being achieved. The move to sell off Rupali Bank ended in a fiasco. On the other hand these four banks have written off default loans to the tune of Tk.6,398 crore to the detriment of the

economy. People who crafted these policies of exempting loans and spent millions of taka for overseas trips and other lavish expenses with no fruits should be held accountable to the nation,

Even as a number of other countries are dismantling their state-run economies, Bangladesh remains mired in a mixed pattern that has ceased to contribute anything worthwhile because of lack of initiative, incentive and entrepreneurial dynamism. The Freedom Fighters Welfare Trust, established in 1972 by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman through allocation of 19 industrial establishments with the avowed desire that the profits accrued from these concerns would help the martyred and wounded freedom fighters and their families, is now in dire straits and 16 of these industrial plants have been closed down.

The present AL-led government that values contribution of the freedom fighters must form a probe body to find out as to why and how all these profitable concerns had to be closed down. The committee will identify the person or groups who swindled state fund and installed junk machinery valued at Tk.35 crore in 1983 in the Multiple Juice Concentrate Plant at Kalurghat in Chittagong.

The government should immediately take some performance-based measures to encourage banks and non-banking financial institutes to issue loans to SMEs (small and medium enterprises) on easy terms and nominal interest. To be sure, the vast number of unemployed youth in the countryside can be rehabilitated by a steady infusion of loans by the government agencies and NGOs in line with the ACCION, a self-help NGO group operating in Santa Domingo in Peru. The administration might take note of what William Burrus, executive director of ACCION, said about encouraging the small initiatives. Burrus observes: "The large infrastructure projects are needed but that should not be the way we define development and certainly that should not be the strategy for helping the poor." In his view "the best way to do that is by putting the money in their pockets so that they can help themselves." With Korea, Taiwan and India having achieved tremendous economic growth by sourcing capital for SMEs, the government should not waste time in crafting modalities for issuing such loans to enthusiastic young entrepreneurs.

In this context, the proposed project titled "Promoting Decent Work through Migration," to be launched in July next year by the ministry of manpower and

overseas welfare, as indicated in a newspaper report on December 20, at a cost of Tk.25 crore through utilising the skill and expertise of the returnees in skill development and other related sectors is a laudable venture.

We have to reach out to enthusiastic entrepreneurs like Asaduzzaman Manik of Sreepur village, Gazipur with money and equipment. He has succeeded in producing electricity from paddy husk and has lighted three hundred houses by utilising one-third of the amount of power produced with one of his three machines with World Bank assistance.

No overseas job seekers, especially women, should be sent abroad as domestic help or labourer for washing the floors and streets, cleaning the toilets and removing garbage. The government must set up skill development training centre at every district and train up people in different trades, and only successful trainees should be sent abroad as per requirement of the host countries.

At the same time, mere issuing of loans or credit facilities to SMEs or individuals willing to set up an industry or run a business will not help unless the government can ensure smooth supply of power and gas. Because of acute gas shortage, smooth supply cannot be ensured, and the government may have to give more subsidy to diesel used for power generation in industrial units during outage.

The country's move towards industrial growth that will provide employment opportunities to thousands of Bangladeshis seems to be very slow. With the country now producing about 3,700 MW against the demand of about 5,000 MW, the energy pressures alone threaten further growth of industrial plants, stifle the operational line of the existing plants and breed social chaos and political instability.

With so many obstacles standing in the way, a comfortable climate for investment seems to be difficult to achieve. Many foreign investors are continuously assessing and evaluating the political situation and availability of power before committing funds for setting up plants. Investors from within the country are undecided. They have neither planned to grow nor to go away. Economists believe that until a solution to the lingering political infighting is found and power situation eased, most investors will look elsewhere for less risky options.

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Copenhagen and beyond

In Copenhagen, Bangladesh has been made a showcase of climate change impacts and vulnerable population. It has both positive and negative impacts. The perceived negative impact is that many foreign investors may not take the risk of investment in Bangladesh. The positive impact is, lots of sympathies have been generated among rich nations to support Bangladesh.

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THE outcome of the Copenhagen Summit is just a few loose pillars on which we have to build our safe home. We will have to make sure that these pillars get tightened as quickly as possible, by making a legally binding agreement. The 193-nation conference ended with delegates simply "taking note" of a US led climate deal that included limiting temperature rises to less than 2°C. The vast majority countries wanted a legally binding treaty to protect the planet.

The deal forged by President Barack Obama with China and several other countries sets up the first major program of climate aid. But it offers few specifics and nothing more than the already pledged emission curb. The next 12 months leading up to the next meeting in Mexico will show whether the process is able to regain some of the hopes that were invested in it before Copenhagen.

It is imperative that all nations act now to make the Copenhagen Accord a stepping-stone to a new climate treaty that will replace the Kyoto Protocol. The good thing in the Copenhagen Accord is that now all major emitting countries will have to commit to taking action and solidify the agreement, and by the end of January 2010 those commitments will be brought forward and established officially in the Accord (appendix i & Appendix ii).

Countries representing more than 85% of the global warming pollution will commit domestically and internationally to reduce their emissions. The ball is now clearly in the court of the developed nations to live up to their historical responsibility to the disadvantaged

nations to cut back the greenhouse gas emissions and help them adapt to climate change.

The reporting of emissions and nationally appropriate mitigation actions every two years, as well as the international consultation under defined guidelines, will hopefully add transparency to developing country commitments, as well.

On "Adaptation" the Accord recognises enhanced action and international cooperation. It identifies the least developed countries (LDC's), small island states and Africa as the most vulnerable countries, who are in the need of urgent assistance.

However, it did not outline measures or specify any dedicated fund for meeting adaptation needs by these countries. This is clearly a drawback. Establishment of an Adaptation Fund and channeling around \$50 to 100 billion per year was a demand of the most vulnerable countries including Bangladesh. This has not been met.

The Accord provides that the rich countries will contribute \$30 billion of climate aid over the next three years and \$100 billion a year from 2020 to developing countries. But this money is not for adaptation alone. Again, it does not speak anything for the period from 2012 to 2020 -- whether the flow of money would be there or not.

Under the current funding pledge, during 2010 to 2012, the adaptation activities are likely to get a smaller share as mitigation, afforestation, REDD plus, technology transfer and capacity building activities will also be funded from this fund. This scenario shall also be the same when there will be \$100 billion from the year after 2020, as the funds, basically are directed to lure China, India and similar



other countries for their mitigation action and tech transfer activities.

A good portion of the fund shall be dedicated to Indonesia, Brazil and some other Latin American countries for their afforestation and REDD plus activities. A very small fund will be left for adaptation and capacity building activities, for which all the vulnerable countries including Bangladesh will compete. This is what the reality is on adaptation front.

In the future, negotiations towards COP 16, to be held in Mexico, LDCs should therefore again raise the demand for an earmarked Adaptation Fund with predictable and sustained financing. If most vulnerable countries like LDCs cannot achieve this, they will be losing the battle in the long run, as bulk of climate aid money in the current arrangement under Copenhagen Green Climate Fund will go for mitigation.

Bangladesh, as the most vulnerable country, can take the lead in this respect. In the meantime, Bangladesh can prepare itself to access the fund; whatever is available now, through submission of projects. We have a good number of identified projects in our National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) and we have also long list of programs in our National Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (NCCSAP).

While we will prepare ourselves for the post Copenhagen negotiations, we must parallelly prepare ourselves to develop full range of projects based on NAPA and NCCSAP so that we can readily submit when the opportune moment come.

In Copenhagen, Bangladesh has been made a showcase of climate change impacts and vulnerable population. It has both positive and negative impacts. The perceived negative impact is that many foreign investors may not take the risk of investment in Bangladesh. The positive impact is, lots of sympathies have been generated among rich nations to support Bangladesh.

We must exploit their sympathies and intentions to support bilaterally. Our leadership has been able to draw admiration for its positive work including announcing the strategy for low carbon development, massive afforestation efforts, establishing an 'Adaptation Fund' from its own resources, developing a National Climate Change Strategy & Action Plan, among others. This has boosted the country's image.

We must maintain the momentum and seize the current and future opportunities.

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