

## Our priorities after Copenhagen

Building capacity and ensuring transparency are crucial

**T**HE Daily Star round table on post-Copenhagen priorities on Saturday has clearly brought home to us certain realities we in Bangladesh need to handle where climate change is concerned. In precise terms, now that the accord, however flawed, is there, it is time to move from generalisations to specifics. This is especially true of Bangladesh, one of the countries most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Indeed, with projections of as much as one-fifth of the country being lost to the ravages wrought by carbon emissions, there is certainly no time to lose. The options are limited or are not there at all. In other words, adaptability is not an option but a necessity for us as also for other vulnerable nations.

Most important from here on, and on an immediate basis, is for Bangladesh and similarly affected countries to fine tune their arguments on dealing with climate change in these post-Copenhagen circumstances and thereby improving their negotiating capacity vis-à-vis the developed world. It is of critical importance that the case for LDCs, indeed for such regions as Africa, be presented forcefully as the Copenhagen accord gets into the implementation stage.

Where Bangladesh is concerned in these coming weeks and months, all the internal preparations necessary to deal with the crisis must be in place. Capacity building in terms of ensuring adequate expertise and technology as well as institutions and the necessary infrastructure must be the fundamental concern today. Trained and efficient manpower is a crucial factor here. The good news here is that the Bangladesh government is already seized of the problem and indeed, as was pointed out at the round table, has mobilised some of its own funds, to the tune of Tk. 700 crore, to handle the climate change threat.

Of bigger import is the matter of the \$10 billion per year that the country will be getting over the next three years for purposes of adaptation, plus the \$100 billion that will come in after 2020 to help it handle mitigation and adaptation. These funds must be made efficacious and productive use of in improving infrastructure and ensuring adaptability. Priority areas will have to be marked out in order to make certain that the funds will be utilised in well-defined, optimal manner. Most significantly, it will be transparency and accountability that will be called for.

The nation will expect to be kept informed, constantly and continuously, of how and where the funds are being utilised. And that, obviously, can be ensured through bringing together the pool of talent that we have in Bangladesh today, across the spectrum, in the environment region. Every effort must be there to make sure that bureaucratic impediments do not mar the goals we set ourselves and also those we believe are in the interest of our survival as a country.

## Nahid redeems his pledge

His highly creditable success should prove inspiring

**S**ET against failed track records of the National Curriculum and Text Book Board (NCTB), or for that matter of the Education Ministry in reaching text books to schools ahead of academic session, what the education minister has pulled off is a truly remarkable feat. Whereas school-going children could hardly lay their hands on school text books even well into the first quarter of an academic session, they are left profusely elated at the scent of the new books on their very first day in school.

Just how much of an outstanding success it is, is borne out not merely by the fact that something traditionally messed up has been set right for the first time but also because of daunting odds the task was arrayed against. An insurmountable looking obstacle came in the way of book publication when huge quantities of printing paper were gutted, upsetting printing schedules. In our rather peculiar context where a laid back attitude feeding on all sorts of excuses rules the roost, Nahid has proved where there is a will, there is a way -- to the hilt.

The massive nature of the undertaking is amply illustrated by the sheer number of books targeted to be distributed -- 19 crore of them. Besides, we know of the government's offer of text books free of cost to the primary students, but this year books have been made available for free to the secondary-level students as well. Quite clearly such a stupendous multi-faceted operation involving various agencies called for impeccable synchronisation, coordination and alignment of activities to yield the outcome it has.

The more we think of what we have been losing in terms of education at the foundation and grooming levels through delayed academic sessions,

## Growing old without maturing

We continue nursing unrealistic dream of achieving this or that and tend to throw a tantrum and dig in our heels instead of moving on. For thirty years we have fixed our eyes on two first families of our politics -- without realising their limitations. If this continues indefinitely, we will never be a mature Bangladesh capable of doing business with the world and the globalised international community.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

**W**E, the people who matter, hardly grew in Bangladesh although the country has grown pretty old, whizzing past thirty-eight years eventful years of its existence. In the early seventies, the constant refrain used to be that of war ravages that did not let the honey and milk flow together in "Golden Bengal." We have lived much longer in independent Bangladesh than we did in united Pakistan, which we hold responsible for all of our woes. We now enjoy all the freedom to fashion our destiny and turn the country of our dream into a greener pasture. Yet, nothing seems to have changed much beyond geographical bifurcation.

We still remain one of the poorest countries of the world and one of the odd few dozens of least developed countries (LDCs). Our socio-economic indexes are grim. After billions of takas wasted in assorted projects to alleviate poverty, the poor have now joined the ranks of the destitute. Regime after regime dangles before us the carrots of developmental surge and a magic "change." After what we have experienced, both the promises have become a mockery; and we received the rude shock of disillusion. After the deluge was over we found ourselves where we were decades ago. In fact, we have lost the diplomatic support we once had.

The world is heartily sick of disputes, and wishes that we could just put the mat-

ters to rest and move on peacefully. The Americans want us to conform to their values, including democracy. It's not compulsorily required elsewhere, rather the wavering of other countries will satisfy the Americans because that will give them mediator's role they are fond of.

Looking around we see many signs that our country has grown older, but has failed to grow up. We remain too immature as a nation to reflect on where have we gone wrong and what needs to be done to set matters right. We live from one day to the next, confident in the expectation that the generous elders would look after us -- no matter what transgressions we commit.

We are a terribly impatient people. Living in the present we want everything now, so our politicians demand regime change whenever they are not in power. Unwilling to wait for incumbent government to complete the term of office they plot to overthrow the ruling party so that they can grab power.

This refusal to follow the rules and allow a government to complete its tenure is rife among the media as well. Thus, we can see the eagerness among TV chat show panelists and their hosts to welcome the new actors in our political circus. Isn't it per-

fectly reminiscent of the drama we witnessed in the wake of one-eleven. In fact, we can almost see these people searching for the prospect of more political upheaval to crash open the door of new opportunity.

We just cannot understand that, above all, we need a period of political stability and tranquility, and we desperately need consensus to fight a common enemy -- under-development. Despite the identified danger we continue to squabble like kids and cretins. Far from developing a common front we tear down the foundation. We are doing everything we can do to destroy our political rivals, destabilising the entire political system in the process.

Faced with unpleasant reality some kids escape into fantasy. Likewise, we continue nursing unrealistic dream of achieving this or that and tend to throw a tantrum and dig in our heels instead of moving on. For thirty years we have fixed our eyes on two first families of our politics -- without realising their limitations. If this continues indefinitely, we will never be a mature Bangladesh capable of doing business with the world and the globalised international community.

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## Unacceptable state of the ship-breaking sector

There are laws regarding protection of workers' health and safety. But, it is all in vain. Should the nation wait for more painful deaths in the yards before it calls for action?

MOHAMMAD REAZUDDIN

**H**OW much is a human life worth? 21 workers died in 2009 in Chittagong ship-breaking yards. The death of 5 workers in an oil tanker explosion at a ship-breaking yard in Chittagong on December 26 is still fresh in our memory. There have been hundreds of meetings and seminars, but nothing has changed.

The High Court orders, on the writ petition of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyer's Association (BELA), seeking environmental and occupational justice, have been challenged by the owners of ship-breaking yards. The situation is deteriorating day by day, but there is nobody to take action against the damage done to the environment and the health and safety of workers.

Ship-breaking started in Bangladesh 20 years back. It allows materials from the ship, especially steel, to be reused. In addition to steel and other useful materials, ships (particularly older vessels) contain many substances that are considered dangerous. Asbestos and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) are typical examples. Asbestos was used heavily in ship construction until it was finally banned in most of the developed world in the mid-1980s. Currently, the cost associated with removing asbestos, along with the potentially expensive insurance and health risks, means that ship-breaking in most developed countries is no longer economically viable.

Removing the metal for scrap can cost more than the scrap value of the metal itself. In the developing world, shipyards operate without the provision for personal injury lawsuits or workers' health claims, meaning many of them operate with high

health risks. This is what is happening in Bangladesh. Protective equipment is sometimes absent or inadequate. Dangerous vapours and fumes from burning materials are inhaled, and work is done in dusty asbestos-laden areas. Death traps are always near.

Bangladesh has become dependent on ship-breaking for its domestic steel requirements. The salvaged metal is melted down and recycled into construction materials. A significant proportion of building construction is done with metal taken from ships. Because of the recurrent accidents and casualties, the Chittagong ship-breaking yard is a highly hazardous one.

The number of accidents and casualties at the yard is believed to be the highest in the region. Workers cut steel plates without eye protection. They don't wear uniforms, protective gloves or boots. Occupational health and safety is clearly not a priority for the owners. The workers' desperate need to find employment to support their families means that their livelihoods take precedence over their lives.

It is also sad that in addition to the health and safety issues, workers work extremely long hours for little pay. They have no entitlement to sick leave, annual leave or overtime because they are hired on an hourly basis, and they have no idea whether they'll have work the following day. Add to this the number of people seeking jobs, which gives the contractors and employers a huge advantage over the workers. This has also made it difficult for them to organise themselves as they are threatened with their livelihoods if they join, or try and form, a union to bargain for better conditions.

With such a power imbalance, the government needs to develop policies and legislation to protect their life and ensure



Working under life-threatening conditions.

their safety and fundamental rights. Apart from the health of the yard workers, ship-breaking has also become an issue of major environmental concern in recent years. The beaches are strewn with chemicals and toxic substances.

We want to believe that there are ways and means to prevent these deaths and improve the working conditions. What is required is establishment of a good scrapping and cleaning system in the yard under strict surveillance by the national environmental agency, supported by appropriate legislation. Ship-breaking can be carried out in a closed and controlled system like a dry dock to prevent exposure of workers to hazardous waste and contamination of the environment.

In good scrapping yards, workers are well-protected. They are trained for the job, follow a plan of work and wear protective clothing. Ships are also certified as gas-free for hot work. There are responsibilities of the shipping industry as well, which must build clean ships without toxic materials.

The ships also need to be designed for easy dismantling without health and environmental risks. When ships are in the dock, hazardous substances should be replaced by clean alternatives. Before sending the ship for scrap, owners must clean their ships of hazardous materials and present a complete inventory of the remaining hazardous materials.

Bangladesh is a party to various international conventions, like the Basel Convention, MARPOL convention etc., concerning trans-boundary movement of hazardous wastes and movement of ships. It is also pledge bound to comply with the rules and regulations under the ILO convention relating to labour rights. There are laws regarding protection of workers' health and safety. But, it is all in vain. Should the nation wait for more painful deaths in the yards before it calls for action?

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## Sense and absence

It was a politically sensible holiday, for he still has a slightly nebulous status, party-wise: he is certainly not a member of the audience, but not quite the equal of the Manmohan-Pranab-Dikshit-Antony group. Absence can have its uses.

M.J. AKBAR

**D**OES it matter that there was no tribal or Muslim on the dais when the Congress celebrated its 125th anniversary? Or that the history of the party has now been co-opted into the history of the Nehru-Gandhi family, with token homage to Mahatma Gandhi and throwaway references to titans of the first two decades of our nation-building process?

The second has become, in truth, an irritation to commentators rather than voters. Those who support the Congress have already conflated the party with the family, a process that began during Mrs. Indira Gandhi's time and has matured during Mrs. Sonia Gandhi's leadership. So has the party structure. The Congress voter believes that the two Mrs. Gandhis do the best that they can for the poor, which is at least better than the rest. And the party identifies the family with something other leaders have not been able to provide: electoral success.

Lal Bahadur Shastri did not live long enough to translate his sturdy promise into

Lok Sabha seats. And while Narasimha Rao may have, in his own estimation, saved the nation from economic ruin he could not save the Congress from political ruin. The family is safe anchor for those Congressmen who want to be in power for twenty years or the end of their lives, whichever comes quicker.

But the first has to be a problem. There is, of course, always an element of tokenism in any high-table seating arrangement, but those tokens have value, which is why they are preserved. Sonia Gandhi, Dr. Manmohan Singh, Pranab Mukherjee, Mrs. Sheila Dikshit and Motilal Vora were natural claimants, although it did not go without notice that there are three Brahmins in the group. The presence of A.K. Antony had nothing to do with either Kerala or his Christian faith; it was proof that Mrs. Gandhi holds him in high esteem. J.P. Aggarwal sat there as host, but Mukul Wasnik was given space because of his community, marking this pleasant and decent person as the Dalit face of the future. Rahul Gandhi did not sit on the dais, presumably because he was away on holi-

day. It was a politically sensible holiday, for he still has a slightly nebulous status, party-wise: he is certainly not a member of the audience, but not quite the equal of the Manmohan-Pranab-Dikshit-Antony group. Absence can have its uses.

But not every time. The absence of a tribal or a Muslim was not out of choice. The ranking Muslim cabinet minister is Ghulam Nabi Azad, a Kashmiri. Muslims of the Gangetic belt, from Hardwar and Saharanpur to Kolkata via Patna do not identify with him; and this is where the bulk of the faithful live.

The absence of tribals is an even bigger problem, for one of the main reasons for their growth of Naxalites in the tribal belt is their conviction that they have been marginalised by the larger political formations. Unable to offer a face of its own, the Congress was forced to co-opt Babul Marandi in the Jharkhand elections. It did well, but would have done better if it had built its indigenous tribal leadership.

While the home ministry might launch its armed offensive against Naxalites, sensible politics demands a parallel dialogue with the communities that constitute the strength of this opposition. There are no Congress leaders who can play this role. Muslims are quiet now, but if passions do rise over job quotas, Congress will face the same difficulty with its strongest vote base.

Complacency is never a good idea, and the BJP has sent a signal that it just might be getting its act together. Its new leader Nitin

Gadkari has sent two interesting signals. He invoked Deen Dayal Upadhyay's concern for the last man in the queue, a reversal of the impression that the party could not look beyond the first man in the queue. The second is a collage: he served chicken at a reception at party headquarters; he used a line from a Hindi film song at a press conference; and, in his individual capacity, he is a bit overweight.

While weight and temperament are not necessarily correlated, it is generally true that men who eat more than they should are also tolerant of human indulgence. Think the laughing Buddha. Think Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, who wanted men about him who were fat and was wary of yon Cassius with his lean and hungry look. A chap who can chow down with the best, and listens to film music is unlikely to be rigid, although the jury must remain out on this question till the end of this year.

There will be many battles in the decade ahead, some fierce, others lukewarm. But while we are engrossed in the high drama of the Naxalite revolt, economic upturn-downturn, minority-poverty definitions, watch out for the subliminal conflict between Rahul Gandhi's fashionable stubble and Gadkari's film song quotations. Chorhon kal ki baatein (forget yesterday), said Gadkari at the press conference, which was fine: but does he have a nai kahani (new story) for the naya daur (new age)?

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