

Realtors into land grabbing!

Mere accusations are not enough

WE appreciate the candid manner in which the Minister for Housing has laid bare the nefarious practice of grabbing private and public lands by some real estate owners and land developers, at a meeting with the office bearers of REHAB and BLDA. The issue has become a sore point for both the government as well as the public. He has hit the nail on the head but he should not stop here.

Needless to say, the housing construction sector has taken the form of an industry that has not only catered to the housing needs of many but also employs a very large number of people of various categories, not to mention the fact that nearly 2 million people are dependent on the industry. Unfortunately, there is little by way of control mechanism that a sector such as this should be subject to. And if only the government and the housing companies could harmonise their activities the benefit to the people would be much more than what it has been, apart from the fact that many of the concerns expressed by the minister at the meeting would have been addressed including the housing needs of the lower income group.

The result is in large part the unplanned construction of buildings without conforming to the laid down criteria. The ecology and environment and the public at large are suffering the consequences.

The motivation to make a quick buck, building on encumbered property and other shortcut methods, have caused, and are still causing, distress to many buyers of modest means who have sunk all their life's saving into buying a flat. This the minister has also expressed very frankly. And there are reasons enough to conclude that in this dubious act the housing and real estate owners and land developers are not alone. There is nexus between the relevant agencies of the government and the realtors. Had it not been so, the low lying areas which are really the catchments of Dhaka city, would have been spared the clutch of these people.

We therefore feel that merely ousting the land grabbers from the associations of the builders and land developers is not enough. The minister should go further than merely pointing out the defaults and initiate actions against the defaulters and make examples out of them. Furthermore, a national housing policy should be formulated and the 2004 land development rules should be updated to meet the requirements of the time. There is also the need to make arrangements for quick remedy of the grievances of the buyers who have fallen foul of the housing companies and land developers.

AL's tough stance on BCL

Action awaited now

IT has been reported that the Awami League high command wants tough action to be taken against the unruly BCL elements responsible for violence in educational institutions. The prime minister herself has spelt out the party's position on the issue in clear terms. Obviously, the situation has turned critical and there is perhaps no alternative to the pure law and order approach to defuse campus tension, which sometimes degenerates into senseless bloodletting.

Without question, the AL leaders and ministers' realisation that the culprits have to be brought to justice is based on a correct assessment of the ground reality. The BCL troublemakers, even divided among themselves, are not only causing harm to academic atmosphere but also bruising the ruling party's image.

It is obvious that the ruling party is left embarrassed by their errant activity. Yet the unruly elements could not have gone so haywire without support from certain quarters from within the party. So, exhortations and warnings just might not be enough, the links between such student activists and their patrons need to be severed.

The general secretary of the BCL has pointed out certain organisational and structural weaknesses of the student outfit. The BCL committees in different institutions have been there for a long time without election being held, and in some cases there is no committee at all. So, the BCL has to overcome its own organisational limitations before it can blame outsiders and intruders for violence on campus.

Again, the signs of the party distancing itself from or severing connections with its unmanageable student activists, might sound positive, but refraining from doing anything organisationally may also give the unruly elements the license to carry on as they pleased.

The ruling party's directive to the law enforcers to be tough on the BCL lawbreakers is indeed a welcome response, but it must also be ensured that the law enforcers get an absolute freehand to work without any inhibitions. In other words, the ruling party has to live up to its promise of sparing none when it comes to enforcing the law. Obviously, the honesty, commitment and neutrality of the police will be a crucially important matter when they deal with the elements operating in the name of the ruling party.

Self-criticism: A healthy sign

Somehow the mohajote government has broken the myth this time by engaging in evaluation of its one-year stint in power and accepting the fact that despite some success in one or two sectors they fell short by miles in many others. So, in a sense, it was refreshing to read that some of the senior ministers openly admitted that the government could have done better and that it could not see success in controlling the markets of essential commodities and containing tender manipulation by party workers.

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WHEN a government learns to criticise its own failures and accept credits with due humility, there is no reason why it should not be able to do better tomorrow than what it has done today. As far as Bangladesh is concerned, one has to say that no such phrase as "self-criticism" exists in the dictionary of the politicians. Self-criticism or admission of failures in public is like inflicting a mortal blow to the political career of a politician, or credibility of a party.

In fact, self-criticism is considered in this country as an act akin to committing suicide that would only strengthen the hands of the opposition. Hence, politicians and political parties always remain in a denial mode when others point fingers at their faults. To hide their despicable acts of deception and contemptible acts of corruption they prefer to blow the trumpet themselves, with a ferocity that would even make Goebbels turn in his grave in disgust.

Somehow the mohajote government has broken the myth this time by engaging in evaluation of its one-year stint in power and accepting the fact that despite some success in one or two sectors they fell short by miles in many others. So, in a sense, it was refreshing to read that some of the senior ministers openly admitted that the government could have done better and that it could not see success in controlling the markets of essential commodities and containing tender manipulation by party workers. Such frank disclosures took place in a discussion meeting organised by Awami Jubo League to mark the Victory Day last month.

In the meeting, senior minister Matia

Choudhury had said that prices of essentials often increased, as the government could not install a mechanism to monitor markets properly and that tender manipulation occurred during the last one year. One must appreciate the minister for her remarks aimed at alerting party workers and the administration. She also had blamed the conventional rules of public procurement regulations for tender violation. Such criticism should lead to bringing reforms in the procurement system as well as reining in the student wing of the AL.

Matia Choudhury, as expected, at the same time exposed the sunny side of her government by talking about agriculture production, distribution of cards, food and cash under the social safety-net programs like the VGF Food for Work, Test Relief and others. She further pointed out the success in conducting Hajj operations this year.

Another senior minister, Abdul Latif Siddiqui, said something in the same meeting that we have been saying for years together. He talked about changing the mindset and behaviour of the political people to bring in changes. What he meant was that Awami League leaders and activists at every rung of the party will have to change their mindset to build a "digital Bangladesh." Now, our question is, will the AL top leaders be able to do that? Nevertheless, we appreciate the minister for accepting the fact that things within the party must change to bring about qualitative changes. It is good to see that the two leaders have not lost their jobs for such frank admission.

While we appreciate such open acceptance of cruel realities, we need to do our own evaluation of certain facts and figures. It is true that the sector that the



Setting a welcome trend.

government could not tame yet is the market of essential commodities. The commerce minister tried various measures but nothing worked, and prices kept climbing high and he came under severe criticism. The cruel reality in this case is that import and marketing of essential commodities are controlled by some vicious syndicates that would rather watch people die of starvation in order to spite the government. What can a lone minister, surrounded by a highly politicised administration, do to take control of the situation?

Food price has always been a lethal weapon in the hands of the opposition and, as such, the government should have tried many other options. People have suggested starting ration shops for the lower income groups, or setting up hundreds of TCB outlets, in the model of the private sector department stores, to offer quality commodities at controlled price. Nothing, however, has transpired till date. This is an option still open to the government and hopefully the commerce minister would think seriously about it. Many businessmen would come forward to open up stores if TCB supplied them commodities regularly.

Health and family planning sectors

remain in bad shape and the nation may have to pay a heavy price if the government fails to take immediate steps to solve some pressing issues. Order must return at any cost to the roads in the city and highways to remove irritation from the minds of the commuters. The experimentation with traffic lights and their duration at various points has already gone far enough to make people lose their sanity. Summer is coming and we have no idea what the electricity supply situation will look like.

The government, to be able to paint a brighter picture at the end of the second year of its tenure, must keep in mind that people begin to stir and agitate when they find getting food, healthcare and easy transportation extremely difficult. Therefore, pay attention to the basics to keep the masses happy. Do not waste time cooking up gargantuan projects by borrowing money from Tom, Dick and Harry. Do more of that soul-searching and take steps accordingly. Sharpen your instincts about what people want and what they don't.

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2010 to decide how world is governed

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WILL discussions and decisions on global issues like the economic crisis and climate change be made in a democratic way or through small groups of countries, which traditionally have been dominated by rich nations? This question on "global governance" has been debated for years. But 2010 will be a crucial year in defining the answers.

After the Second World War, the United Nations emerged as the premier organisation for addressing issues including peace and security, development, finance, trade, health, food and the environment.

Within the UN system, security was an exception, with an undemocratic Security Council in which five major powers have permanent membership and veto rights. With the veto power, a single country can reject actions agreed to by all others.

There has been a tussle in the division of powers between the UN General Assembly, where all UN member states are grouped and where decisions are taken according to the majority but which has little implementing power, and the Security Council which is an exclusive group but has the power to impose sanctions and authorise military action.

Starting from the 1980s, however, the authority of the UN over economic issues declined as developed countries led a move to "reform" the UN by downgrading its functions, while tremendously upgrading the authority of the IMF and World Bank.

These institutions used their leverage to impose unpopular policies on a large number of indebted countries. They replaced the UN as the main global economic actors.

Meanwhile, the major developed countries formed their own institutions, especially the OECD think-tank and then the Group of 7 whose annual meetings became the focus of decision-making. The G7, which later became the G8 when Russia was included, became the most powerful economic bloc.

When the world financial crisis erupted in 2008, President George Bush of the United States convened the G20 with a first meeting in Washington. More G20 Summits have been held, in London and Pittsburgh in 2009, and they made decisions on issues related to the global economic crisis.

Big developing countries, including China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa, are included in the G20, and there was speculation after the Pittsburgh meeting that the G20 would replace the G7 and evolve into the forum where the "major" countries -- developed and developing -- would discuss and decide on issues starting with finance.

This, however, has not gone down well with developing countries, since they are not in the G20, and neither has the mandate of the G20 been agreed to by all countries.

The UN General Assembly President, Miguel Descoto of Nicaragua, took the initiative to convene a UN Conference on the Financial and Economic Crisis in June 2009, with the aim of getting what he called the G192 (since the UN has 192 member states) involved.

Many developing countries argued that the G20 did not have the legitimacy and that only the UN with its universal membership could be a democratic forum.

Ideas were proposed for formation of a Global Economic Council inside the UN, that would include a group of countries appointed by the UN membership



Still worth its weight.

representing various regions. Such a council could best discuss and decide on issues where developing countries' interests are represented, and would have the legitimacy that the G20 lacks.

This year, the working group tasked with following up on the UN's economic conference will have the opportunity to discuss not only economic issues but also a strengthened role for the UN and the possibility of an economic council.

In climate change, the venue for international action has been the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, which has over 190 member states. It was the UNFCCC that organised the 2007 Bali conference and the 2009 Copenhagen conference.

President Bush, who was not fond of the UNFCCC although the US is a member, organised his own process, the Major Economies Forum (MEF), which only included 15 to 20 countries with the most emissions.

The developing countries (including many of those in the MEF) have been unhappy that the MEF constitutes an alternative to the UNFCCC, and have constantly asserted that the UNFCCC was the sole legitimate forum on climate change.

With the messy conclusion of the Copenhagen conference, when a document arising from a meeting convened of political leaders of 26 countries was not adopted by the plenary, some developed countries are now considering shifting negotiations away from the UN and into smaller groups like the G20.

On January 8, a meeting of leading European Union officials (including the new EU president, the European Commission chief) reportedly discussed a new strategy, including pursuing a climate deal through the G-20 rather than the UN.

This report indicates that the developed countries are tempted to move away from the democratic UNFCCC into an exclusive group, which will be easier for the developed countries to influence because they have a disproportionate ratio of the members of this small group and also shape the agenda.

Moving from the UNFCCC into a small exclusive group would be a major setback for the UN and for multilateralism. It is also counter-productive because climate change is a global problem that requires the cooperative actions of all countries.