

New scheme to boost agriculture

Implement the projects quickly

SEVERAL very timely projects have been taken up by the government, the ministry of agriculture in particular, to increase production and indeed save agriculture in Bangladesh. One such plan would help mechanise farming in Bangladesh and another, if implemented without delay, would help prevent reduction of cultivable land that is being lost to urbanisation to the tune of almost 1 percent annually. The other project is related to bringing more land under irrigation.

Converting to new and scientific method of farming in Bangladesh through modern inputs has been long overdue. For far too long, dependence on the old faithful to till the land has restricted farming in our country to the primitive ways. To this end the government will provide 25 percent subsidy, to invest in technical inputs that will not only enhance production, but also ensure prevention of loss of food grains, a five percent post-harvest wastage of up to as much as 35 lakh tons per year due to the existing means of harvesting.

A very significant development in this regard is that the plan under "Enhancement of Crop Production through Farm Mechanisation" which has been approved by ECNEC, would require more than four farmers of lower and middle income groups to come together to qualify for the subsidy. This, we are certain, will lead to large scale farming, something that has not been in practice, and which has affected the overall food grain productivity in Bangladesh. Although the plans would be restricted to a limited number of districts initially, we hope that the entire country would be brought under the ambit of this plan eventually.

The idea of making it mandatory to obtain permission to construct houses or industries on cropland is very appropriate. Population pressure, as well as the need to industrialise, has led to extensive urbanisation which has caused the amount of cultivable land to come down to 77.65 lakh hectares in 2007-08 from 80.31 lakh hectares in 2002-03, a very significant drop. And the sooner the idea is legislated and legal measures put in place in the regard, the better for agriculture in Bangladesh.

The agricultural ministry's plan to bring about 389,000 hectares under irrigation is also very commendable. We have, however, a comment to make in this regard. While there is a plan to sink deep tubewells for the purpose, we feel that the minister's stress on use of surface water for irrigation should be given due weightage. Given the effects of deep tubewells on subsurface water and water table, reliance on surface water seems to be the best option for us.

Bullying girls at roadside

Community, police need to be on guard

ANOTHER teenaged girl has killed herself as neither her family, nor the community could protect her from the tyranny of her tormenters. Naspia Akand Pinky, a 14-year old ninth grader from the Shyamoli Ideal Technical School and College, could not stand anymore the disgrace she had to digest everyday on her way to school at the hands of a street-corner bully Murad and his cohorts. Her repeated complaints to her parents about the daily harassment she had to suffer were of little avail. So, she decided the ultimate.

Pinky's sad end at such a tender age is not just another unwanted death of a hapless girl. It is an indictment against a society that has become brutalised and aloof towards the suffering of its own members. And in most cases, it is the women who become the victims.

The reports in the newspaper speak volumes for that, because on her last day that she was being tormented by the wayside rogues, the people around the place did not come to her rescue. Neither was any member of the law-enforcing agencies there to help her out.

The tragedy sends a very distressing message to society. It is that its young members are gradually losing their faith in its power to protect them.

It is, therefore hardly surprising that the list of other young girls like Pinky, for example, Simi, Mohima and Trisha, dying under similar circumstances is getting longer. So far, the culprits who were behind their deaths could not be brought to justice.

Pinky's sad demise flies in the face of our socio-moral values that we traditionally stand for. It also poses serious question before the law-enforcement institution. Could such harassment of a school-going girl by roadside bullies leading to her death take place if there were regular police patrols at the major trouble spots in the city?

So, it is not only the community, the state, too, has failed to protect its young female member like Pinky and others.

It is, therefore time the community at large shook off its apparent lethargy and protected its own young members from the tyranny of the roadside scoundrels. At the same time, the law-enforcers, too, cannot forgo their responsibility to become more active and bring the girl-teasers to book.

We hope, the criminal who forced Pinky to take her own life would soon be arrested and given exemplary punishment, so that, in the future, no other troublemaker dares to torment any other girl at the street corners.

Behind law enforcement on campus

Student outfits are found to be frontal and instrumental in achieving the so-called political objectives through confrontationalist and agitational postures and actions. In such a scheme and under the situation obtaining in our environment, rash and indiscreet elements would often receive preference compared to sober and saner elements.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

HERE is justifiable concern and fear on account of the ugly violence that was witnessed in Dhaka University on January 18. The Daily Star editorial of January 20 takes serious note of the grave situation, specially the police inaction, urges political parties to realise the gravity of the matter and reminds them of their responsibility to stop such excesses by the students.

It is the aspect of the alleged police inaction in campus that this writer will focus on. One may have to agree that law and order maintenance or law enforcement in the educational institutions cannot be done in the usual or normal policing way in any society for obvious reasons. In other words, while dealing with young passionate minds a great deal of care and circumspection have to be displayed. The political guardians and all citizens would expect and demand that.

For historical reasons, the very sight of law enforcement personnel in educational institutions was an extremely unwelcome spectacle for a long time. The precincts of schools and colleges were considered sacred and entry of police therein amounted to a desecration of a holy site.

For socio-political reasons, in post-liberation Bangladesh, the unavoidable co-existence of police and students in the campus did not raise many eyebrows.

In fact, in the altered scenario, heads of educational institutions, including vice-chancellors of prime universities, have often sent requisitions for deployment of police personnel, at times indicating the quantum and composition of such personnel. This was an unfortunate development with which we continue to live. However, the appearance of police for control can provoke a volatile student crowd into dangerous violence. This dimension needs to be kept in mind while criticising police inaction because fatalities in campus seriously disturb and inconvenience a political government.

The above has been mentioned not to condone the enforcement deficits witnessed on Monday last. The question is, was there an intelligence failure because there was no forewarning about the impending clashes? If that is so, whose fault is it? Beyond that, the important question is, shall educational institutions be treated as affected or disturbed areas where search, arrest and surveillance shall be regular phenomena?

Coming to specifics, shall police interpose between fighting groups of students

in the campus? Some would suggest extensive preventive arrangements that should include keeping feuding student at safe distances. How desirable and feasible would that be? Let us not forget that the water cannon, for instance, with its obviously unfriendly military appearance, tends to provoke.

At the other end, there is often a temptation to reduce police presence in an area during "high tension" periods in an effort to reduce the opportunity for claims of provocation. However, it has been found through experience that this strategy is almost always counter-productive. In fact, this is often exactly what the criminals in a riot-prone area want the police to do. It allows them to consolidate their illegal activities in an area, with blatant criminal activities leading to further alienation of law-abiding elements against the police.

Under a situation as above, what course of action should be undertaken to prevent and ultimately stop the unfortunate violence in educational institutions? Are we actually prepared to look very carefully at the underlying causes of the conflict? Do our leaders reflect a concern with the causative factors at least as much as with tactical control of conflict situations?

There is a considered view that under our existing socio-political circumstances it is quite difficult for the saner and more sensible elements of the young population to join movements for social change. Since nature abhors a vacuum, it is only practical that vacancies resulting from the unwillingness of the desired lot are automatically filled in by ill-motivated desperados. The situation has turned vicious and the training ground for constitutional politics witnesses detestable wheeling-dealing. Brawn takes precedence over brain at the forma-

tive years.

The influence, positive or negative, of students on national life is felt by all. Some observers are of the view that there is, thus, a desperate effort to rise to, and cling on to, positions of authority in student organisations. This is natural as student outfits are found to be frontal and instrumental in achieving the so-called political objectives through confrontationalist and agitational postures and actions. In such a scheme and under the situation obtaining in our environment, rash and indiscreet element would often receive preference compared to sober and saner elements.

Coming to specifics, one may dare say without fear of contradiction that gone are the days when a potential student leader was mostly one of the top-notch intellectually, and was credited for high moral standards. He was honourably different and could draw respect and admiration. We now see some student leaders who are more known for their knowledge and application of the use and misuse of firearms and are adept at negotiation of tendering process and maintaining liaison with shady non-students. There is not much effort to discourage such immoral practices and, in course of time, these tainted youngsters turn into promoter-distributors of illegal favours.

In dealing with campus violence it would be proper to expect that the state must not be stripped of its benevolent character and the government should not appear less than representative by reason of tragic partisan action. Those in charge of the affairs of the state should stand on a high moral ground and ensure the creation of desirable political ethos befitting a democracy.

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Politician versus soldier

Some opinion polls predict that Rajapaksa is in the lead, while others claim the opposite. The election has polarised the Lankan polity. As the campaign moves ahead both the leading camps have been flexing their muscles. In some areas violence has been reported. More violence is feared as Election Day approaches.

MAHMOOD HASAN

SRI Lanka's President Mahinda Rajapaksa is in an elated mood. Sri Lankans will go to polls to elect a new president on January 26. Rajapaksa is delighted because, in May last year, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was finally defeated and the dreaded Vellupilai Prabhakaran was killed. The bloody civil war had lasted for 26 years, claiming more than 88,000 lives. Riding on the wave of popularity, Rajapaksa has called for a fresh election two years before expiry of his current term, and is confident that his mandate will be renewed.

Although there are 23 candidates running, the top two contenders are incumbent President Rajapaksa and former Army Chief General Sarath Fonseka. The entry of Gen. Fonseka in the fray has made the upcoming election significantly interesting. Never before in Sri Lanka had a retired army officer contested the presidential elections.

Percy Mahindra Rajapaksa (64), a lawyer by profession, leads the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA). The center-left UPFA has 105 seats in the Parliament of 225. Rajapaksa has been in politics for the past four decades and was prime minister under former President Chandrika Kumaratunga till his election as president in November 2005. The decimation of the LTTE has significantly boosted his popularity in the predominantly Sinhalese (75%) community. Hindu Tamils, Christians and Muslims constitute 25 % of the island's

minority population.

On the other hand, General Gardiweva Sarath Chandralal Fonseka (59) was a professional soldier for 39 years. He is a national hero, under whose command the Sri Lankan armed forces vanquished the LTTE. Soon after the war he was made chief of defense staff (CDS) in July 2009 -- a post that Fonseka did not really relish as it was devoid of powers.

During the fourth Elam war, which routed the LTTE, President Rajapaksa had given full support to his commanders on the ground. Gen. Fonseka was given full freedom to draw up plans to bring an end to the war.

After the war, an unseemly row erupted between the president and the general, as to who was the actual architect of the victory. President Rajapaksa, as supreme commander of the armed forces, duly claimed the credit. Gen. Fonseka, who coordinated the army, navy and the air force, also highlighted his role in ending the insurgency. This put the two men on a collision course. The tussle eventually led to the premature resignation of Fonseka on November 16, 2009, two weeks before his retirement.

The issue here is balance of state power. During the war it was tilted towards the general. He is accused of trying to prolong his grip over that trend and even make it permanent. The president quickly moved to rein in the commanders and reassert civilian supremacy over the military. When

Gen. Fonseka retired, Rajapaksa went ahead and appointed the less powerful Air Force Chief Roshan Goonatilleke as the CDS, in addition to his normal duties.

While the two men squabbled, the opposition political parties, looking for a popular winnable candidate, approached Gen. Fonseka to run for the presidency. The general agreed to be the "common candidate" of the United National Party (UNP) and Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP -- meaning People's Liberation Front).

UNP is the largest opposition party in the current parliament, having 82 seats. It is considered to be a pro-capitalist center-right party, led by the veteran opposition leader Ranil Wickremasinghe. On the other hand, the Marxist JVP, which was one of the major parties allied with the UPFA during the 2004 parliamentary elections, has broken away and has joined the opposition.

It has to be acknowledged that the credit for defeating the LTTE rightfully belongs to President Rajapaksa. None of his predecessors succeeded in resolving the Tamil national aspirations. When the Tamils formed the militant LTTE and started the insurgency successive governments were unable to put it down. External powers manipulated to keep the insurgency alive. Had it not been for Rajapaksa's political determination and courage to ignore the pressures built on him -- particularly by India and US -- the insurgency would have continued unabated. Thus, his claim of victory over the LTTE appears more appropriate.

Was it not Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who was credited for India's victory over Pakistan in 1971. General S.A.M. Manekshaw, who led the war, was promoted to the rank of Field Marshall in recognition of his services to the nation. In all wars the credit for winning or discredit for losing, goes to the political leader at the helm of the nation. General Fonseka appar-

ently overlooked this aspect.

The issue that will dominate the election discourse is simple -- it is corruption in the government. Rajapaksa is accused of installing a dynastic rule. The president's three brothers, two sisters, including their children, and cousins have all been placed in important government positions. Shiranthi Rajapaksa, the first lady, is also not to be outdone. Her brother and nephews too have got important government assignments. There are allegations that all these relatives of the president are involved in widespread corruption.

General Fonseka is a national hero but his biggest handicap is that he has no political experience. He may be able to thwart that criticism by arguing that he has served the nation for four decades and knows the ropes of the government. He is being supported by UNP, which ruled Sri Lanka from 1978 to 1994 (Jayawardene, Premadasa, Wijetunge). His catchy election slogan is "to restore, not plunder," which points to the corruption allegations against Rajapaksa.

Some opinion polls predict that Rajapaksa is in the lead, while others claim the opposite. The election has polarised the Lankan polity. As the campaign moves ahead both the leading camps have been flexing their muscles. In some areas violence has been reported. More violence is feared as Election Day approaches.

The international community has been accusing the Sri Lanka government of war crimes and massive human rights violations over the army's conduct during the campaign against the Tigers. Whoever wins the next polls will have a formidable task at hand. The state of emergency has to be lifted and the minority communities, particularly the Tamils, have to be brought into the mainstream of development process by ensuring equal opportunities.

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Bangladesh-India accord

A group of politicians have expressed their desire to reject the accord as they feel that it has either ignored or, even in some areas, acted against the interest of the country. This kind of sweeping allegation is certainly not tenable.

A.B.M.S ZAHUR

SEEMINGLY there were high hopes attached to the outcome of the Bangladesh-India summit held on 11-13 January at New Delhi. What is, however, realistic about the outcome of the meeting is an expectation of the opening of an era of enhanced friendship and cooperation between these two close neighbours after a period of 34 years (1975-2009). This, after so many years, of course, requires further building of mutual trust and confidence.

The South Asian regional cooperation (Saarc), aimed at developing the spirit of close cooperation and friendship among South Asian countries, could not achieve its goals. Thus, the only option left for Bangladesh to solve its long outstanding issues is face-to-face dialogue with India.

The AL regime continued for five years (1996-2001) in the past. At that time, it was not possible for AL to take any bold steps, like developing the spirit of friendship with India, because of the slim majority of the party in the parliament, non-cooperation of the then opposition party BNP and the not-so-appreciative government in India, the BJP-led one. Things are now seemingly most favourable for AL: a thumping majority in the parliament and a government in India led by Congress, which assisted us during our struggle for independence.

Both India and Bangladesh need a great deal of conscious will and effort to shake off a feeling of mistrust and develop sufficiently strong confidence in bilateral relations. The distribution of gains from economic cooperation appears to have been evaluated. India attaches much

importance to transit facilities through Bangladesh as a means of further integrating the northeastern states with the rest of India.

Bangladesh considers its vital interest to be in the water-sharing arrangements of the common rivers and getting greater access for its exports to the Indian market, given its large trade deficits with India.

Both Bangladesh and India have agreed to increase cooperation in a wide range of fields like security, power, trade, connectivity, water sharing and resolution of long-standing bilateral issues and concerns.

On January 12, 2010, a fifty-point joint communiqué was issued in New Delhi to solve all issues through cooperation and mutual understanding. In regard to the proposed Tipaimukh dam, New Delhi has reassured that it will not take any step that may hurt Dhaka's interests. The issue of sharing Teesta water may be settled by the end of the year.

It may be premature to draw any conclusion about the accord. Total resolution of the issues in the agreement may take considerable time. The issues -- like the Tipaimukh dam, Teesta barrage, allowing

utilisation of Chittagong and Chalna ports -- need further study and deliberation.

Mutual trust and confidence cannot grow overnight through some agreements. For them to grow, these agreements need to follow quick resolution of the major sensitive issues. Otherwise they may be trapped in bureaucratic and political complications.

However, all of us should appreciate the urgent need for close cooperation with India and try to receive the benefit from Indian ascendancy, which ultimately play a critical role in increasing investment in our country. Lively discussion on the accord is now needed in the parliament for the sake of quick economic development and alleviation of poverty.

A group of politicians have expressed their desire to reject the accord as they feel that it has either ignored or, even in some areas, acted against the interest of the country. This kind of sweeping allegation against the AL is certainly not tenable. Any allegation whatsoever must be grounded on proof.

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