

## List of land grabbers before JS

*There can be no alternative to swift action*

THE placing of a partial list of land grabbers by the minister of state for environment in the Jatiyo Sangsad last week brings to the fore once again an issue of intense public interest. In the past few years, much has been said and written about the predatory manner in which individuals and organisations have gone about commandeering public as well as privately-owned land across the country. To the shock of the nation, these land grabbers, instead of feeling ashamed, have been acting as if it is the usual thing to seize property from others. No one could have said it better than the minister of state for works who, at a meeting with REHAB representatives a couple of weeks ago, lambasted these land grabbers in public.

That the present government is seized of the issue and making a serious move to hold them to account is a very welcome development. Now that the list of land grabbers has been placed before the JS, we believe it is an absolute necessity for the government to go all the way towards ensuring that all the seized land will be freed of such grasping hands and restored to their original conditions. The list covers only a hundred acres of a total of 11,700 acres grabbed in Gazipur. There are two points that must be made here. The first is that if 11,700 acres have been commandeered in only one district, one can only imagine the extraordinary levels to which land must have been grabbed in all the 64 districts of the country. The second point here is that the government must institute action against these land grabbers swiftly and in an effective manner. There would be little point in taking incremental action. It is quite clear that tens of thousands of acres are in the grip of land grabbers. Now, if the authorities move too slowly (such as through acting over a hundred acres and the like), the momentum to clear the land of those who have seized it might simply fizzle out. Let that happen, we urge the government to do a couple of things here. First, let a full, comprehensive list of illegally acquired land (along with the names of the predators) be prepared and made public through the JS; and, second, let the judicial and administrative machinery be swiftly readied towards an eviction of the grabbers.

The partial list presented in the JS last week mentions 47 individuals and 22 organisations behind the land grabbing in Gazipur. It is but a sign of something more sinister, namely, the nexus that has developed between land grabbers and individuals within the administration itself. For years there have been reports of collusion between land grabbers and corrupt elements in the land administration structure. It is now time not only to evict land grabbers but also flush out these corrupt elements in the administration itself, for they have been as responsible as anyone else in making the real owners of land as well as the government suffer from such brigandage. Let a full and meaningful inquiry be initiated into the scandal and let the results be followed by purposeful action in the public interest. Those who have stolen land and have then tried to put a gloss on their expropriation by various means must be brought to account. The culture of plunder needs to end here and now. If it does not, hordes of new robber barons will sprout and simply seize the country from the millions who constitute this people's republic.

## A positive story of specialised healthcare

*The tempo of service should be maintained*

IT is good to see that a prominent Bangla daily has highlighted a change for the better that has come over the National Heart Institute and Hospital. When public hospitals, even specialised ones, have often hogged headlines for wrong reasons ranging from rusty costly equipment through perfunctory care to broker tyranny, the National Heart Institute is making positive vibes as a premier public healthcare institution. This deserves attention.

More so because, only less than a couple of years ago it had all the ills that are known to bedevil public health complexes to which ordinary citizens flock hoping for affordable care. Allegations were rife that brokers in collusion with some doctors or officials weaned away hapless patients to private clinics, or apologies of them, of their choice, denying legitimate treatment at the heart institute. Also physicians were alleged to have directed patients to diagnostic centres with commission skimmed from them. Ward boys and nurses were said to have patients bed down on the floor in lieu of cash. More seriously, pacemakers, rings and valves which are critical elements in the treatment of heart impairment cases would be sold out at double the price.

Since then a change in the administration has resulted in a marked improvement of management from which other hospitals in trouble can take a cue. For instance, contracts with suppliers selling food at high prices were cancelled. The cleanup operation included curbing absenteeism, dereliction of duty and transferring just a minuscule of employees out of Dhaka. They are usually a minority thriving on administrative slack and flaunted political linkages which when divested they drop like fallen leaves.

Since the improvement in the national health institute catering to the need for specialised treatment at affordable prices among the ordinary citizens has gathered momentum, it must be maintained by all concerned.

## Old habits die hard

They should learn that the slogans of xenophobia and threats to our religion, and stoking of fears of invasion from other countries do not show political maturity in an age of globalisation and bilateral cooperation for mutual benefits -- but old habits die hard!

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

ONE of the most outstanding outcomes of the recently concluded India visit by our prime minister was the agreement with India to fight terrorism and organised crime. This has been long overdue, and we should be grateful to the prime minister that she had agreed with India on an array of agreement that includes extradition of criminals and elements charged with terrorism.

We are all aware of the spectre of terrorism that haunted us in the early part of this decade, and Bangladesh was in the brink of becoming of a safe haven for the elements that have wreaked havoc on another country in the subcontinent with which we were yoked four decades before.

Close to our country, eastern side of the border, we have elements that not only threaten peace in the neighbourhood, but also can potentially bring down our own stability. For years the earlier political government either turned a blind eye to this threat or indulged in the growth of these elements for short-term political gains.

In not too distant in the past, we witnessed helplessly as these malignant forces terrorised parts of the country and mowed down many innocent lives. The foreign press was telling us how we were allowing our territory to be used by religious militants intent on bringing about their version of government by coercion. Yet our government that time chose to turn a deaf ear to these alerts, and continued to claim that we were safe and that these calls were nothing but false alarms. It is only after repeated pressures from our external donors that our government that period made some half hearted moves to contain the extremist elements.

To our great dismay and distress, however, we find again a similar mindset surfacing to oppose the agreement that seeks to prevent the terror threat from rearing its ugly head. The agreement to save the subcontinent from the threat is being attacked along with other mutually beneficial agreement of collaboration between our two countries by the current government's opponents in false pretense of patriotism. A pragmatic, timely, and beneficial agreement is being painted as a sellout and an anti-national accord by its opponents.

To me nothing is more anti-national and more self-destructive than pandering of old politics that gives sanctuaries to the armies of death and destruction created by the elements bred by hatred and bigotry. This kind of politics has been responsible in



Combating terrorism requires mutual cooperation.

the past for the emergence of groups like Harakatul Jihad al-Islami Bangladesh, Jamatul Mujahedein Bangladesh, Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh and Ahl-e-Hadith Andolon Bangladesh who infused political violence in Bangladesh with the language of jihad and tactics borrowed from terrorist groups abroad. It created an enabling environment for the emergence of militant groups by normalising the use of violence to express political disagreement and promoting a culture of impunity. It gave sanctuaries to the elements who were working across our border to destabilise their own government. This kind of politics

thrived on only one slogan -- that of a perceived conspiracy hatched across the border with internal agents to destroy our "religion." Mark the word "religion" -- because the politics of this kind put religion above the country.

There is opposition for opposition's sake, and there is opposition because of some fundamental differences in belief and ideology. The opponents of this kind articulate their differences in political debates in the established forums such as the parliament as we can see other established democracies around the world.

The most dangerous kind of opposition is of a third kind. It comes from people who

allowed our masters to arm and equip a military to its teeth.

Any opposition to this policy was muzzled or termed as anti-national. In fact, our first attempt at seeking equality for our language and culture was dubbed as nothing but a compromise of our national sovereignty. Any attempt to befriend the neighbour was viewed as downright anti-national.

Living in peace and harmony with neighbour is a cardinal aspect of nation's foreign policy. One of the pre-determinants of this concept is to weed out causes of common woe, and the threat of terrorism of late has been a

indulge in politics of agitation and instigation by fomenting phobias, and raising slogans to stoke people's base instincts of fear and suspicion. The easiest of these instigations -- and we have seen it in the past -- is rumours of conspiracy against religion.

From Pakistan days we had seen repeatedly efforts by our masters to lay out conspiracy theories to prevent a better understanding with our neighbour and accommodations for mutual benefits. The policy of confrontation based on a publicly fed fear of an invasion by that country of our "religion and culture"

common woe of both our countries.

Our political leaders in the opposition would serve the country better if they were to understand the fundamental conditions of survival, and show more pragmatism in their choice of slogans. They should learn that the slogans of xenophobia and threats to our religion, and stoking of fears of invasion from other countries do not show political maturity in an age of globalisation and bilateral cooperation for mutual benefits -- but old habits die hard!

Ziauddin Choudhury, a former civil servant in Bangladesh, now works for an international organisation in the US.

## The fight against poverty

The state, the most democratic one included, listens only to the voice of the powerful in society. So, until and unless the poor have their political rights and organisational power, the task of poverty alleviation will remain a pipe dream and an exercise in futility.

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

POVERTY is a major issue of concern among the development thinkers worldwide. The different forums of the UN, the World Bank/IMF and the international aid and development desks of the governments of the rich nations traditionally dedicate a certain percentage of their national budgets to mitigation of poverty, especially in the less and least developed countries.

In addition to this, numerous aid agencies and non-governmental bodies banking on private donations have long been engaged in poverty alleviation activities all in the poverty-prone regions in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The Church, too, invests considerable fund and effort in the same pursuit.

Meanwhile, before the economic crash swept across the globe, the very rich nations were talking of committing huge

amounts of funds to eradicate poverty once and for all from Africa and the other worst poverty-stricken parts of the world. However, the tone of that aggressive campaign appears to have died down in the aftermath of the global financial meltdown.

But the apparent waning of the aggressive altruism evinced by the very rich nations ahead of the financial crash aside, endeavours at fighting poverty are continuing full steam ahead here and elsewhere in the world.

Traditionally, Bangladesh has been a recipient nation, as it is one of the least developed countries on earth. Obviously, it has been in the donor nations' list of prospective beneficiaries. They and the relevant aid-giving bodies have been providing aid to the cause of removing poverty from Bangladesh.

Over about the last four decades since Bangladesh's creation, they have put in

billions of dollars through various government and non-government programmes to this end. But considering the size of their financial involvement in the cause, the extent of success is hardly enviable. That makes the critical observer to question the efficacy of the entire effort at fighting poverty in Bangladesh.

In fact, poverty alleviation activities have become a fully-fledged industry, though its real achievements in terms of delivery of the goods remain a big question mark. It is not just through the aid money that resources are flowing into the economy to address poverty. Business and industry have also undergone significant developments creating fresh job opportunities for the unemployed.

These are in turn expanding the market for new goods. New job opportunities are being created. A section of the poor are definitely getting its benefit from jobs as well as self-employment opportunities thus generated. But then the question remains as to why poverty is still the number one problem of the country, and why have we to be perennially doomed to the status of a least developed economy.

There are no end of debates about the very question of poverty and the approaches to alleviation. And along with these debates, there are also the different theories and the models. The various government and non-governmental agencies are pursuing those in practice. But poverty still remains, as it were, the most incompressible problem before the development thinkers and the practitioners of its various theories and models.

To Irene Khan, the former secretary general of Amnesty International, poverty is not purely an abstract, economic issue. On the contrary, she considers it as an issue related to human rights. She thinks if the poor are empowered enough, they would be able to take their own decision on how to lift themselves out of the trap of poverty.

In her book titled, "The Unheard Truth: Poverty and Human Rights," she asserts that deprivation, insecurity exclusion and powerlessness that characterise a poor person's life have their origin in the denial of human rights they are entitled to. So, according to her, the first thing to do is to empower the poor person and enable her/him to assert that right.

This is no doubt a novel way to approach the complicated question of poverty. She

identifies this critical component of the whole gamut of issues that constitute poverty and stresses that it should be taken into account before devising a proper strategy to fight poverty effectively.

But in the same breath she also admits that there is yet another social scourge, corruption, which eats into the nation's resources. Who are the most corrupt elements in society? It is the elites who are engaged in this corruptive practice and they are, to a large measure, responsible for depriving the poor of their due share of the national resources.

But the social elites do not only steal a nation's resources through corruption, they also own the assets and create new assets using their social power. In the process, they dispossess the poor of whatever small assets they have and exploit others who work for them in the fields, factories and different workplaces run by them. The upshot of it is that the vicious cycle of pauperisation prevails and further intensifies in society. There is really no mystery in it.

If truth be told, it is this particular aspect of poverty that should have been at the focus of all the discourses on this seemingly difficult subject. For no one will ever hand the poor their right as a gift. It is an issue of who holds the power to lord it over others.

The owning classes, who make the elite, will not just surrender their power to the poor without a fight. Here the state has a big role to play. But does modern state, even the democratic one, ensure that right of the poor?

The struggle for poverty alleviation, therefore, cannot be separated from the poor people's political struggle for political power. That is the way to establish their rights, both human and economic. And it is the organised poor, who are also the empowered.

The state, the most democratic one included, listens only to the voice of the powerful in society. So, until and unless the poor have their political rights and organisational power, the task of poverty alleviation will remain a pipe dream and an exercise in futility.

Will the poverty thinkers also allocate a part of their energy to this side of the apparently intractable problem of poverty alleviation?

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The least protected need the most help.