

## Leakages in the distribution of school textbooks

*Strengthen monitoring mechanism to identify loopholes and punish offenders*

REPORTS have it that illegal trade in primary and secondary school textbooks, meant for free distribution among the students in the districts and upazilas, is going on in the different book markets of the city. Such sales by some quarters in the market in collusion with a section of dishonest education officials in the districts have put a clear challenge before the government's stated policy of zero-tolerance against any irregularities in the distribution of the textbooks by the end of this month.

This is a serious matter to reckon with as it even flies in the face of the strict stand taken by the education minister against a district education official defaulting on implementing the government's declared objective.

The three-member high-powered committee formed to identify any instances of irregularity and corruption in the distribution of textbooks and ensure their supply by January 31, is already facing the deadline. It appears, the reported irregularities point only to the fact that the mechanism to monitor the distribution of the textbooks has not been able to detect the loopholes through which books are finding their way into the black market. To all appearances, some quarters are bent on frustrating the government's commendable effort at fulfilling the declared mission.

The developments call for making the monitoring mechanism stronger and foolproof. In fact, however strict and determined the minister concerned and the monitoring team may appear to be, the desired delivery of the goods depend on successful identification of the sources of the irregularities through which the books are leaking into the market. As the chairman of the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) is learnt to have pointed out, hoarding of primary school textbooks in the district offices is behind the availability of illegal books in the market. It is not hard to understand that irresponsible elements in the district education office are behind holding back the distribution of the books in due time. It is, therefore, the task of the monitoring team to identify them and bring the offenders to book. In a similar vein, it will also be necessary to identify and penalise the printers, publishers and binders, if any, who might be illegally printing copies of the textbooks in the market.

The government, the education minister to be specific, deserves kudos for this huge undertaking of supplying some 190 million textbooks to the school students. Thankfully, the target has been met, excepting some irregularities delaying the work at certain places. But under any circumstances, the task has to be completed. So, it will be expected of the authorities that they would be all out to complete the task within the deadline.

## Addressing nation's housing problem

*Novel ideas from home and abroad should be encouraged*

FACED with the crisis of ever shrinking land-man ratio, meeting the constitutionally guaranteed basic human need of a shed over every citizen's head is becoming a big challenge before the policymakers. The challenge is still bigger in cities, where rural migrants--people dislodged from their village homesteads for various reasons, environmental or otherwise--are flocking to in droves and landing in the unhealthy shanties.

To meet the challenge, the government has plans for low-cost housing for the poor. The methods of making low cost residences for the low-income groups follow the conventional building technology. But since Bangladesh is also a frontline state braving the fallout of climate change, its building technology needs also to meet the added challenge of adapting to it.

Many new ideas to address the problem of housing the low income and those rendered homeless have been floated from time to time. Most of these approaches are meant to meet the post-flood or cyclone rehabilitation exigencies and, hence, follow the traditional practice of making low-cost sheds with a mixture of corrugated iron sheets, wood and bamboo. Others use low-cost versions of the conventional materials and technology for more durable structures in the urban setting.

Amid this welter of ideas, novel ones that at once meet the criteria of economy accommodation and that of adaptability to climate change are also placed on different occasions.

A Bangladesh-born Canadian architect recently made one such suggestion. She has come up with the novel idea of a 'lift house project,' in which a section of the building's structure can float on water during floods, while the other section made of ferro-cement always remains fixed to the ground. The materials used to build the duplex house can be obtained locally and are within the reach of the very poor. This house designed by Prithula Proshun, a graduate in architecture from the Waterloo University of Canada, has the added feature that it is a self-contained unit with community toilets, facilities to collect and conserve rain-water, produce its own power from solar energy and bio-gas through recycling wastes produced by the residents themselves and so on. The design has been conceived with an eye to the particular environment of Dhaka city.

Riddled with endless problems, Bangladesh's need for such new approaches to solve those cannot be gainsaid. Housing is just one of the problems clamouring for urgent attention. Authorities should listen to such honest suggestions from experts both at home and those from among the diaspora. They deserve to be recognised and encouraged so that that the nation can benefit from their expertise and experience.

## Graduating from the LDC framework

We have traveled many miles with our friends from the LDC group but time has come for us to implement our own exit strategy and part ways. This does not mean that we will be out of the mainstream of globalisation. We will still interact with the developed and the developing worlds and seek the benefit of technological assistance and investment.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

WE have recently had an important regional conference in Dhaka -- the 'Asia-Pacific Policy Dialogue' -- on the 'Brussels Programme of Action.' It was of particular interest to me as I was closely involved on behalf of Bangladesh (as its Ambassador in Brussels) in the deliberations carried out during the Third UN Conference on the LDCs held in May 2001 in that city.

The objectives of that summit meeting, attended and co-chaired at that time by the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, was to ascertain how we could meet the specific needs of the LDCs and help them eradicate poverty and hunger and also improve the living standards of their people.

The meeting in Dhaka, that concluded a few days ago, was jointly organised by the Bangladesh government and the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. More than 70 representatives from nearly 20 countries of this region participated along with officials from ESCAP, WTO, UNDR, WIPO, UNIDO and the ITU. The discussions focused on reducing poverty through promotion of substantial and inclusive development, promoting food security through sustainable agriculture, enhancing share of LDCs in global trade, aid and financial flows and promoting their productive capacity. There was also an exchange of views on how to best protect the environment and reduce vulnerability of the LDCs and develop their human and institutional capacities.

The conference concluded with a broad-based agreement on how the LDCs of this region would address the above issues during the next LDCs conference to be convened in Turkey in 2011. Emphasis was particularly given to the need for achieving regional integration. It was felt that this measure would assist the LDCs in building their productive capability by providing them with access to larger markets and linkage with regional production chains, necessary for narrowing the development gaps. Bangladesh, in particular, rightly pointed out the need, not only for South-South, but also triangular cooperation, where regional bodies and international organisations can help strengthen the capacities of the LDCs. This approach, I believe, would be particularly helpful in harnessing the opportunities and benefits that may arise from regional and sub-regional cooperation.

There was also consensus on another important point -- the need for LDC representation on the Financial Stability Board, established by the G20. This was considered necessary so that LDCs can be part of



Indicators are positive.

the efforts being undertaken pertaining to the reform of the international financial architecture.

Similarly, there was accord on the need for LDCs being assisted through transfer of technology and finance so that they are able to adopt a new development strategy based on green growth. It was felt that such a measure would help the LDCs to overcome the acute vulnerabilities to which they had been exposed due to the international financial crisis as well as climate change. Such a view was consistent with their demands for being given priority (in the provision of resources) that were made during the COP15 Summit held in December 2009 in Copenhagen.

There was also recognition of the fact that the LDCs had not been able to fully use the preferences accorded to them for lack of supply capabilities, poor infrastructure facilities and adequate resources. It was also stressed that the restrictive rules of the preferential agreements had prevented them from developing their full potential.

For more reasons than one, the 11-point Dhaka Document will represent a turning point and will be expected to help in effectively addressing the development issues and challenges facing the Asia Pacific region.

We now have a common prescription. We also know the areas and factors that will have to be emphasised on by our govern-

ment in our dealings with our development partners in the long-term as well as in the short-term leading up to Turkey.

In recent months, Bangladeshi economists have been focusing on the need for us to adopt an inclusive, comprehensive and sustainable development strategy so that we can climb the ladder and eventually exit from the LDC group and enter the lower middle income category of countries as has already been done by Sri Lanka and the Maldives. There have been differing fore-

casts about when such an objective might be achieved. However, there is general agreement that it needs to be sooner than later, especially if we are to re-brand our image as a country that is democratic and suitable for foreign direct investment. There is also belief that we can do it.

Latest financial reports have indicated many positive factors about Bangladesh. We have made remarkable progress in macro-economic management despite a range of constraints, both internal and external. There has been acceleration of economic development, gradual decline of budget deficit and high rates of growth in both export and import. The country has posted a US\$1.7 billion current account surplus in the July-November period of the current fiscal year. There has also been a steady rise of our foreign exchange reserve (which has crossed US\$10 billion) thanks to the remittances received from our millions of migrant workers.

Due to the prevailing international financial crisis, our GDP growth might have marginally come down to about 5.9 per cent from 6.21 per cent but, at the same time, we have been able to restrict any growth in the rate of inflation. The revenue-GDP ratio which stood at 10.92 per cent last fiscal year is also projected to be 12.2 per cent by fiscal 2012. The trend in government expenditure in the priority social sectors, like human development, building

rural infrastructure and poverty reduction has also been increasing. We have also made important strides in achieving gender parity in primary and secondary education and have also reduced the child mortality rate. All these factors have helped us to improve our position within the Human Development Index.

The World Bank in its 2010 trade logistics report has been critical of our poor customs clearance process and automated tracking system but has also acknowledged

progress in many other areas. In fact, it has included Bangladesh in a group of 'most significant' over-performers along with China, India, Thailand, Vietnam, South Africa and the Philippines.

There is no denying the fact that we are moving forward. Our present emphasis on regional connectivity should also enable us to constructively engage in the promotion of our strategic interests.

We have the necessary political commitment. However, what we still need is bipartisanship in the fulfilment of our national interest. We will achieve more within a shorter time frame if this can be juxtaposed with good governance, eradication of corruption and upholding of the due process of law.

We have traveled many miles with our friends from the LDC group but time has come for us to implement our own exit strategy and part ways. This does not mean that we will be out of the mainstream of globalisation. We will still interact with the developed and the developing worlds and seek the benefit of technological assistance and investment. However, by 2021, the 50th anniversary of our independence, we must be seen not just as a poor country with potential but one that is able to function without being reliant on external aid.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador. E-mail: mzamir@dhaka.net

## JU: Convocation and commitment

The development of a university is the expansion of a frontier of knowledge on multidimensional fronts. That requires new departments, halls and dormitories. Let us commit, on the day of convocation, to making JU a university of international repute where the sword of words is mightier than the words of the sword.

ABDUL BAYES

THE 4th convocation of Jahangirnagar University (JU) is to be held today, on Saturday, January 30, 2010. The university that I proudly headed once is about 40 years old. It implies that the campus so far embraced one convocation every 10 years. This is undoubtedly not good news as far as formal awarding of degrees to the students is concerned. In other countries, and even in private universities in our country, convocation is considered to be an integral part of the performance of the university. Convocation is a dream for students and that dream should not be dashed to the ground.

However, the first convocation of JU was held with Professor Amirul Islam Chowdhury as the VC; the second one took place under my stewardship as VC, the third with Dr. K. Mustahidur Rahman and the fourth is going to be held under the leadership of Dr. Sharif Enamul Kabir -- the present VC. By and large, out of four, three convocations are under the Awami League rule. The campus already assumed a festive look all around with colorful festoons, clean roads and more importantly, the exuberance of the graduates in collected gowns they would wear on the day of the occasion. The campus is waiting to welcome the guests, including the Hon'ble Chancellor Mr. Zillur Rahman (President of Bangladesh), who will confer the degrees, and the chief justice of the Supreme Court

to serve as the convocation speaker.

It may be mentioned here that JU is the only residential university in the country, and possibly, in Asia. Quite obviously, the number of teachers and students here, on 720 acres of land, is relatively small about 6000 students and 420 or so teachers. It is one of the greenest campuses in the world with unique land topography. The lakes here harbour birds that come from distant lands. There are sloppy roads as there are sleepy breezes.

Unfortunately, however, the university could not expand, as expected, in the face of the paucity of funds for development of the faculties. When I was VC in 2000, and served only for fifteen months (before I was thrown out by a caste that dates back by 200 years), I could harness Tk.400 million from the government for the development of the university. This amount was higher than the amount the university reaped home from 1970-2000. I am grateful to Sheikh Hasina's government, which was in power at that time, for taking special care of this university. Since 2001, all development work stalled, as funds did not flow as were required in subsequent periods.

The university now comprises five faculties and two institutes. The Business Studies Faculty (with the departments of marketing and of banking and finance) and two institutes -- the Institute of Business Administration and Information technology -- were opened during the last year,



Ready for the task.

under the present VC.

In some of the VCs of public universities in our country, I always observe a sheer negligence of duties to the institution of which they obtain guardianship. Allegedly, they think that they should maximise their tenure of office by recruiting as many teachers (Voters!) as possible, by hook or crook. Recruitment of teachers for the sake of 'group politics' to me is a zero-sum game! If you lose power, the pawns jump out of your boat as quickly as possible to parade with the new VC. In fact, I reckon, the prime functions of a public university VC should be to mobilise development funds from different sources (especially from the government), impose an academic calendar on his colleagues and students, so that session jam is contained and create a condition of teaching and research in the campus. The VC should see that classes and examinations are held regularly; teachers perform their duties,

and students abstain from the politics of money and muscle. Finally, a VC should always think that his competence should justify the chair he is sitting on, and not the other way round.

This year's convocation of JU is worth its celebration on many counts. The most recent first year admission test was completed very quickly with results coming out within hours of the examination; new examination rules were formulated to cut the session jam and new halls and dormitories are in the pipeline. The development of a university is the expansion of a frontier of knowledge on multidimensional fronts. That requires new departments, halls and dormitories. Let us commit, on the day of convocation, to making JU a university of international repute where the sword of words is mightier than the words of the sword.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics (former VC) at Jahangirnagar University.