

## Behind the extensive operation

Democracy has to allow the interaction of different shades of opinion or divergent views to ensure the vibrancy of a pluralist society. However, that does not mean that there will be freedom to convert the entire country into a theocratic dispensation by application of force and intimidation. There is a challenge to our way of life.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

EVEN a casual observer can notice the unfortunate and manifestly overheated discourses on the propriety or otherwise of the alleged large-scale search and arrest of individuals in the wake of the gruesome killing and mayhem at Rahshahi University. The accusations and counter accusations relating to the tragedy have acquired an intensely political colour giving rise to heightened tension and thus rendering the task of pragmatic analysis very difficult.

Concerned citizens may wonder if we are only witnessing principally reactive measures that have limited effectiveness in striking the core of the problem and thus failing to provide durable remedies. One may like to know if we have seriously looked into the phenomenon of the rise of violence and extremism in our socio-political life.

There is a considered view that in Bangladesh we have been perilously late in responding to the threats of extremism on ground. Though unfortunate, the growth and muscle flexing of obscurantist elements has not been limited to the tenure of one political regime. In fact, cumulative inaction resulting from a lack of appreciation by policy-makers about the mindset and modus-operandi of the extremists has brought us to the present state of affairs.

To recollect, we have to admit that the reality of the threat of violence and subversion from some religious outfits and institutions was abundantly clear from the first quarter of 1999. The attack on eminent poet Shamsur Rahman, the planting of extremely high-powered bombs at meeting place and helpad in Kotalipara under Gopalganj district where the then Prime Minister had official programme, the discovery of huge explosives and bomb making materials at Sonar Bangla Soap Factory at Gopalganj owned by Mufti Hannan (now in custody), the attack on Communist Party meeting at Paltan Maidan and at the Bengali New Year cultural function at Ramna Park, to mention a few, were credible evidence to the steadily growing mischief making potential of the extremist groups.

Whether extremist elements have

flourished due to the support and encouragement of ruling parties and the establishment may be a matter of probe, but the threatening reality is that they have not been under effective surveillance. The determination and deadly attack at the state apparatus with attendant panic are adequate proof of the unhindered growth and sustenance of persons and organisations who want to upset the constitutional way of life. Our failures of yesteryears are manifest reality.

We may have to ask ourselves if a perception has developed among the extremist groups that the Bangladeshi state is inherently incapable of meeting their challenge and that it has become soft and indolent. We may have to ascertain if quite a few parties have developed a vested interest in a soft state, a weak government and ineffective implementation of the laws. Simultaneously, are foreign funds flowing substantially to various organizations and groups which serve, willingly or unwillingly, the long term objective of some political parties suspected to be aligned or sympathetic to the regional or international terror network?

What may be done to countervail the malevolence of the extremists concerns every right-thinking Bangladeshi but equally, if not more significant, is what kept the state apparatus in a deep slumber while the bigots carried on virtually undisturbed. There is a creeping suspi-

cion that there never was a dispassionate appreciation of the real threat scenario. In other words, was there no effort to pinpoint the threats posed to our democratic polity and by extension to our independent national existence? These questions should bother us because patriotic citizens of the People's Republic of Bangladesh must know that.

Under the circumstances, while action against genuine suspects will not prejudice our democratic credentials, the reasonability and credibility of information has to be verified to prevent misuse of power. The foundation of suspicion should be upon some definite fact. At the same time we have to remember that police may interpose to prevent the commission of cognizable offence and they have to operate on the basis of reasonable suspicion themselves being no magicians.

Care has to be taken to ensure that the fall-out of arrest does not result into encouragement and development of a culture of political vendetta. Our political leaders have to adopt a moderating posture.

Democracy has to allow the interaction of different shades of opinion or divergent views to ensure the vibrancy of a pluralist society. However, that does not mean that there will be freedom to convert the entire country into a theocratic dispensation by application of force and intimidation. There is a challenge to our way of life. This must be realized by the mainstream political parties who are pledge-bound to uphold, protect and preserve our constitution. Therefore, the enemy must be caught by the forelock and be dealt with under the law. A sovereign republic born out of a historic struggle entailing epic human sacrifices demand that. We must not fail.

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Freedom fighters' wards demand trial of war criminals.

## Global financial crisis: The aftermath

The most urgent short-term worry that we now face is inflation in the wake of recovery. Early signs of inflation are already with us, with both food and non-food prices becoming volatile once again. Pretty soon we may revert back to the situation of 2007-08 when volatile food and energy prices worldwide, sent sharp shocks deep into our domestic markets.

K.A.S. MURSHID

LET me first put on record that Bangladesh came out very well from the global financial crisis due to the nature and extent of its integration with the world economy and its basic economic structure. Bangladesh benefited from low import prices, which helped to curb inflation. It benefited from increased market share for its RMG exports and has been able to position itself very well in the world market for RMG. Domestic factors also helped, including excellent agricultural performance and 'bumper' food harvests. Remittances held up -- and not just for Bangladesh. Overall, the world remittance market performed reasonably well despite the recession.

Another important channel for transmission of shocks is the exchange rate. This too was stable, remaining close to its equilibrium value, particularly against the US dollar. In addition, the net effect on the budget was positive due to a favourable movement in the terms of trade. In short, Bangladesh was not only able to minimize impact it was actually able to reap some concrete benefits as a result of the global crisis.

Let me hasten to add that as always there are losers, concentrated especially in a few export sectors like leather, jute goods and seafood. Although a stimuli package was put together (quite small by world standards - around 0.5-0.7% of GDP) this appears to have been of limited value. It should be noted that there was some late effects on exports, imports, remittances, and investments during the first two quarters of fiscal 2009-10, after a stellar performance in fiscal 2008-09. The negative indicators have now reversed, and even if the overall performance in fiscal 2009-10 is somewhat moderated compared to the previous year, this would still be a good outcome, especially when compared to many countries in the neighbourhood.

It is essential that we now look boldly forward. The way ahead for Bangladesh is to press home its advantage in labour-intensive exports. At the same time we need to create jobs at home through expansion of domestic demand so that our young people do

not have to migrate out of compulsion. This kind of migration comes at a high personal and social cost that disrupts families and lays bare the socio-economic fabric of the community, leaving it vulnerable to all manner of predatory behaviour.

In addition we need to position ourselves carefully in the rapidly changing regional market. Asia is emerging as another, perhaps the most dynamic centre of world economic power, and it is important for Bangladesh to gain a foothold in this market as early as possible. In other words, Bangladesh should steadily move towards greater South-South trade in order to move out of its excessive reliance on a few destinations. The proposed Bangla-India move for greater connectivity and trade would be an excellent entry point to begin on this new journey. In broader terms, a new international division of labour with a greater focus on South-South trade will help moderate the effects of future cyclical downswings like the global recession.

Domestic rather than global forces have weighed much more heavily against Bangladesh in the recent past. These are likely to continue to constrain our performance in the short to medium term. I of course here allude to the energy crisis, low demand for credit, poor investor confidence and a low savings-investment and tax-GDP ratio. It has been suggested that there is huge excess liquidity in the financial system, especially with the public sector banks. One may note as an aside that many private banks have been competing madly for deposits, offering up to 10% interest to attract savings, thus raising doubts about the excess liquidity contention. It is likely that much of this liquidity has actually gone into the volatile stock market chasing paper rather than creating wealth in the real economy.

While demand and "high interest rates" are often blamed for poor investment levels (and thus lower GDP growth), the real culprits are likely to be poor governance, weak institutions, lack of gas and electricity, and an excessively costly approval process for new investments -- leading to poor investor confidence. Analytical studies at the

BIDS Policy Resource Programme suggest that interest rate spreads in Bangladesh are not particularly wide, and is well within regional norms, although there is certainly room for efficiency improvements. I may observe in passing that policy studies emanating from the country's research centres should receive more attention from relevant agencies to inform policy decisions in a more systematic manner than would appear to be the norm.

The most urgent short-term worry that we now face is inflation in the wake of recovery. Early signs of inflation are already with us, with both food and non-food prices becoming volatile once again. Pretty soon we may revert back to the situation of 2007-08 when volatile food and energy prices worldwide, sent sharp shocks deep into our domestic markets. This is especially worrying in the light of unsettled food markets in Bangladesh, occurring in the face of 'bumper' harvests and large public food stocks. The Honourable Prime Minister cannot therefore be faulted for thinking that food markets are being manipulated by unscrupulous traders engaged in speculative trading.

There is however, another plausible, and perhaps more likely explanation -- unreliable food production statistics. It is difficult to understand why rice prices remain high even after a 'very good harvest', seeming to be almost entirely determined by world or Indian prices. For a country that is a relatively small importer of rice, this appears somewhat puzzling. While this could make sense in years of deficit production, it makes little sense in years of surplus -- unless of course, the surplus is purely an illusion created by poor quality statistics. It would seem that while poor data manages to confuse policy makers and economists, traders are rarely impressed!

Rapid inflation is a real worry and needs to be reined in quickly so that recovery is not thwarted. Food price spirals need to be tackled through large off takes from government stocks targeting poor rural and urban areas, and if needed, followed by a tightened monetary stance. Bangladesh seems to have forgotten the fine art of food stock and food price management that it was good at once upon a time. Perhaps it should adopt a page from the Indonesians who have done an exceedingly good job at reaching food self-sufficiency, keeping prices stable and efficiently targeting subsidized food to the poor.

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## Can't we arrest the decline of Dhaka city?

In the absence of a vision, Dhaka has lapsed into a beehive of filth, congestion and urban blight. With things going so awry, it boils down to the fact that most of our big cities, especially Dhaka has suffered at the hands of the policy makers.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

ONCE again Dhaka has attained the dubious distinction of being the second worst polluted and unlivable city of the world by a survey conducted over 140 cities by the Economist Intelligence Group, an organisation associated with the UK based journal, The Economist. The finding of this survey reveals that Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe ranks the first position in the worst cities' category. Shockingly, Dhaka, once the hub of dream and optimism of the country, has already descended into a nightmarish metropolis. People here now feel like being driven away by an accelerating deterioration in the quality of life: clogged thoroughfares, eye-stinging smog, polluted landscapes and streets, vanishing parks and lakes, crowded yet unaffordable housing, overcrowded schools and colleges, also hospitals, polluting industries and spiralling crimes.

The very qualities that lured millions to this city in good old days have disappeared. People now conclude that Dhaka has descended into a spiral of environmental and social calamities.

The citizenry are living in an environmental crisis, an air pollution emergency of an unprecedented nature. Despite the fact that regulations exist, indifference, inaction, and failure in taking punitive measure against the offending vehicle owners and drivers fouling environment with noxious fumes has deteriorated the situation. The air in Dhaka city exceeds the safe level and the dust-load in the air is the highest in the world. A World Bank study suggests that the soaring pollution level in the capital city is causing premature death of about 40,000 persons every year.

The picture is grim. Garbage has posed a major threat to health and sanitation of the people. The amount of garbage generated daily in the city comes to about 3500 tons and thanks to DCC, it can pick up only 44 percent of the total output. In many cases garbage is not picked up in the teeming city suburbs. Filthy water and human excreta along with other waste in choked drains stagnate till the rainy season washes a part of it into the river Buriganga, Shitalakha and adjoining city lakes and wetlands.

The sewage system covers only 30 percent of the city population. Sewerage network with a lone waste treatment plant at Pagla has a capacity of treating 1.20 lakh cubic metre of sewage a day. About 15,000 tonnes of human excreta is generated every day by about 10 million city dwellers of which 6,000 tonnes is treated at the Pagla plant and by soak wells linked to septic tanks of the residents. Most worrisome, over 9000 tonnes is dumped into the rivers and water bodies surrounding the capital.

The crisis of governance is particularly marked at the city corporation level. Whereas urban governance demands a coherent, coordinated and dynamic set-up, most of our big cities, especially Dhaka has been saddled with fragmented, fractured and imbecile authorities incapable of and least willing to tackle core problems.

Apart from people living on jobs in government and private agencies, at least 20 lakh people including construction workers, hawkers and those working in different garment factories and other industries in and around the city live in slum shanty houses with no water, electricity, cooking gas and toilet facilities. As the capital city unfolds, population increases, and industrial concerns

expand. The slum and squatter population has been increasing at more than double the general growth rate of urban population.

It is not only the absence of amenities but also the unclean way of life and utter disregard for civic obligation that make these slums extremely filthy. Anyone visiting the slum areas of Kamarpara, Sinnirtek, Diabari Aminbazar near Ashulia and Mirpur would find to his horror the most unhygienic and primitive way people, mostly river erosion and disaster victims, are living there.

Some five to six persons including infant babies of the same family are living in one room shanty covered by C.I. sheet in low land that remains submerged during rainy season. The women folk walk about a mile to fetch water that costs Tk. 2 per pitcher. With no works and no facilities for schooling, the grown up boys of 10-18 age range are moving aimlessly in the area, some of them taking drugs in broad daylight.

As one walks from Baridhara to Banani to Gulshan to Uttara to Dhanmondi and even to old city areas, one would only find absence of urban discipline. Norms of organized civic life have been violated with impunity. Illegal encroachments and unauthorized constructions have become rampant. Land and building mafias have cropped up every where, not sparing even the rivers. Rajuk in recent time has catalogued about 5000 illegal encroachments and constructions that sprouted without any shadow of doubt with the knowledge and approval of its previous bosses.

With rivers and lakes polluted, roads potholed, air fouled and land and parks encroached upon and unauthorized and illegal construction of malls and apartment blocks going apace unhindered, leaving no space for breathing, defying Rajuk regulations and building code in collusion with corrupt officials, the city now presents a dismal look. With seven persons of the same family dying of asphyxiation in a raging fire in an apartment at Japan Garden city in the Mohammadpur area because of lack of

fire safety devices the other day, it seems all such high rise buildings in the city are just highway to hell.

After the liberation of the country, our policy makers should have evolved a clear urban vision. Unfortunately those at the helm did not show any real ingenuity, competence and commitment. They became more imitative than creative. They failed to regenerate and resuscitate the Bangladeshi mind. The Dickensian blight and haze that hang over the capital city today is nothing but a fallout of a fake and foggy vision.

There was ample scope to give Dhaka an urban vision. If, under an inspiring urban vision, Buriganga water had once again been made crystal clear, if a green vista had developed along the water front and if the excessive trade and industry had been relocated, Dhaka would not only have regained its glory but also emerged as a thriving and a dynamic

centre of modern civic life. It would have become a symbol of resurgent Bangladesh.

In the absence of a vision, Dhaka has lapsed into a beehive of filth, congestion and urban blight. With things going so awry, it boils down to the fact that most of our big cities, especially Dhaka has suffered at the hands of the policy makers. That the development of the city should not have been entirely left with either Rajuk or DCC. There should have been a super monitoring committee invested with proper authority to investigate, coordinate, adjust and correct lapses, loopholes and fraudulence resorted to starting from plot allotment to carrying on unauthorized constructions.

The future seems daunting. Demographers estimate that between 2010 and 2030, Dhaka city will add another 10 million at least to its present figure of 16 million. The blueprint that

can be prescribed at the moment has two facets -- involving the mindscape and the landscape. City expansion and creation of facilities beyond the present city limits with all connectivity with the nerve centre must start without any further delay.

Dhaka city, the focal point of the nation must experience an awakening that should stir people and create in them an inner urge to rebuild this great old capital.

Overcrowding, noxious fumes, unhealthy slums, power shortage, water shortage and contaminated water have all played a part in turning this city into a choking hell. But public reaction to all these human factors is mostly mute. And surely unless the public takes an unanimous stand, Dhaka's decline will continue.

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It's here, there and elsewhere in the city.