LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA MONDAY MARCH 1, 2010

Tackling unruly BCL elements

They must be dealt with under the law

HE proof of good governance comes through the difficult and yet necessary actions a political administration takes in the larger interest of citizens. Where such decisions are absent, indeed where only a platitudinous mouthing of intent becomes the pattern, it is governance that suffers. In the present instance, we certainly appreciate the candour with which Local Government and Rural Development Minister Syed Ashraful Islam has spoken of a few bad elements of the Chhatra League undermining the image of the government. We also note that the minister, also general secretary of the ruling Awami League, has spoken of punishment for these trouble makers. The problem here, however, is that over the past many months a number of leading figures in the government have said precisely what Mr. Islam has been saying. The constant refrain that these unruly elements of the Chhatra League will have to pay for their bad activities has come so often, without any concrete action on the ground, that nowadays people are tempted to respond to such statements with cynicism.

That of course brings us to the crux of the matter. It is that there must be an acknowledgement within the ruling circles that these elements of the Chhatra League (and it does not matter if they are a handful or a whole legion) have been engaging in destructive activities with impunity for a long time and have been getting away with it. They have busied themselves in tender manipulation at various institutions of higher learning in the country. They have, in a good number of instances, tried to force the authorities of colleges across the country to admit students through overriding the admissions criteria and in some cases have even had principals and teaching staff confined to their offices as a pressure tactic. And, to be sure, we remain aware of the number of times factions of the BCL have gone after one another, thereby causing mayhem and fear in the educational institutions. There can hardly be anyone who will not agree that all these activities of the Chhatra League have violated the law, have indeed been of a criminal nature.

And criminal activities are expected to be dealt with under the appropriate laws of the land. It is not enough for ruling party functionaries to say that these unruly elements of the BCL will be punished through expulsion from the organisation. Of course they can be expelled. But the bigger fact here is that their activities have caused anguish to the nation because of the defiance of the law they have demonstrated. For that reason alone it must be the law enforcing agencies that must deal with these elements. We have observed that instances of ministerial pronouncements regarding BCL activities are followed by fresh incidents of unlawful acts on the part of their student supporters. Such a situation must be brought to an end, not through mere platitudes or pointless expulsions from the BCL but through the application of the law and justice.

All bright things come to quick confusion through the acts of a few bad eggs. The government must realise that unless it acts firmly against its own unruly young, its good deeds in other areas will soon be overshadowed by its failure to bring its own misguided followers to book.

Understaffed health service

The gap must be filled in expeditiously

HE situation of the public health service and the picture of health centres as a result, as revealed in a recent report in this newspaper reads rather dismal. The situation has been compounded mainly by shortage of almost 20 percent of the authorised manpower. The state of affairs hardly lives up to the government's commitment to take healthcare service nearer to the people and make it accessible to the greater majority of them, more so to those in rural areas.

It boggles one's mind to see that there is a deficit of more than 4000 doctors and double that number of nurses and health assistants. That, coupled with the deficiency at all levels of support staff, is severely hindering public health service all across the country. As it is, the doctor to patient ratio in Bangladesh is so heavily skewed against the patients that further distortions in the situation, as the present shortfall has shown, is bound to take the situation to a breaking point.

Given the fact that corruption is the root cause that has halted recruitment leading to the present state, what we find hard to comprehend is that there is very little palpable effort to resolve the problem. Can the situation remain hostage to the greed of handful of people sitting in the health ministry in Dhaka?

We feel that there is merit in the suggestion that recruitment should be decentralised to the district level. This should pose no problem provided strict oversight of the procedure is maintained all the time across the system. And we see no reason why there should be need for administrative and financial approval for recruitment to those posts that have been already approved by the government.

It is not surprising that the current situation has not only added to the public woes as far as their health is concerned their suffering has been aggravated also by corruption bred by shortage of manpower.

Fresh recruitment based on merit brooks no delay given that the current authorised manpower in the sector is already far less than what has been deemed necessary for the country.

EDITORIAL

The Baily Star

Communicating with the world

Learning English would increase Bangladesh's competitiveness in the international market for jobs and exports. Let us not abandon the demands of the international community while celebrating Ekushey February.

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

HE people of Bangladesh have just celebrated one of the most important events in our history, February 21, International Mother Language Day, a day that in the opinion of many had sowed the seeds of the liberation war. If one traces the history of the independence struggle of India against the British one would find two provinces of British India at the forefront of the anti-British struggle, namely Bengal and Punjab.

Although Mahatma Gandhi of Gujarat and Mohammed Ali Jinnah of Karachi/Mumbai/Gujarat gave the leadership, the independence, or more appropriately the partition, of British India was the result of the unified urge of the people of the entire sub-continent to be free of British domination. But then, the liberation movement of Bangladesh proved that the partition was an incomplete project and based on a fallacious theory of division on grounds of religion.

But then, if common religion or common culture cannot be the basis of nationalism, as Larry Diamond (Stanford University: Why are there no Arab Democracies -- Journal of Democracy --Jan. 2010) illustrates, can common language be a basis of nationalism? Again, can a common language yet different religions constitute a divide among nations or part thereof?

Despite the resurgence of religion as a political force, commonality of language, as in the case of Bangladesh, has proved to be the cementing factor. Regarding religion, the alarmists among the neo-liberals and ultra-conservatives, frightened by a strident Islamist movement as opposed to a self-effacing native culture, would insist that there should be a common language for all citizens of a country. The proponents of multi-culturalism contest the thesis that any one or two elements would constitute the basis of nationalism.

Samuel Huntington postulates that primacy of "culture and cultural identities -- broadly defined as civilisations -- are the primary factors that shape cohesion, conflict and disintegration within and

between nations," a thesis discredited by some academics and political leaders.

To bring about a cohesive society amidst seemingly different forces, Professor Bassam Tibi (of Gottingen University) suggests that assimilation of the Muslims in Europe rather than integration that calls for total surrender of the self through cultural conformity would be helpful.

Bangladesh, being a Muslim majority country, has to face Islamophobists' fear that by 2050 Europe would be unrecognisable because of, what they claim, due to low fertility rates among the natives, massive immigration from Muslim countries, and an assertive Islamic culture visà-vis a self-effacing European one, leading Europe to losing its Western identity.

A spate of books, such as Christopher Caldwell's Reflection of the Revolution in Europe, Gisele Littman's Eurobia, Oriana Fallaci's The Rage and the Pride, Melanie Phillips's Londonistan, has inflamed the the West, dampening the data based analyses presented by scholars like Italian Stefano Allevi, German Wermer Schiffauer, French political scientist Oliver Roy, that deconstruct the facile fear of Islamisation of Europe. The US National Intelligence Council estimates 18 million Muslims in Western Europe, or barely 5 percent of the total population. The number is even less in the European Union.

An NIC study finds that children of immigrants often emulate the culture of their adopted country with less fertility to discrimination in jobs and social exclusion by the natives, and, no less, increasing detachment from practicing religion. A 2009 Harvard University working paper reveals that over time the basic cultural values of the Muslim immigrants evolve to conform to the predominant culture of Muslim diaspora in the West is more concerned with bread and butter issues than trying to establish a caliphate in Europe.

The subject of religion in the practice of

already existing anti-Muslim feelings in

rate, declining immigration to Europe due Europe. In the ultimate analysis, the

democracy creeps in due to increasing influence of religion beyond its formerly defined border, with the conviction that



Let us not abandon the English language.

religion is bred in the bones and that Professor Richard Madeson's cultural secularism as "a move from a society where belief in God was unchallenged and indeed was unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace" may no longer be a viable option.

Similarly, Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz, globalisation's most prominent critic, has now transited to making globalisation work by eliminating negative externalities, the cost that some firms, individuals or nations impose on others, and reforming international institutions that would be equitable to the poor and the needy.

In this task we, in Bangladesh, facing the most serious challenges of the 21st century, should not abandon the English language that has become one of the official language of the UN and its institutions. A Science Citation Index report in

1997 said that 95 percent of its articles were written in English even though only half of the authors came from English speaking countries.

Linguistics Professor David Crystal calculates that non-native speakers now outnumber native speakers by a ratio of 3 to 1. As the Flat Earth of Thomas Friedman is becoming a reality with the government committed to a digital Bangladesh and millions using mobile phones and internet coupled with individualistic and inclusive approach to learning English, control is given to individual authors to write and spell as they wish within the bounds of standard conventions.

Learning English would increase Bangladesh's competitiveness in the international market for jobs and exports. Let us not abandon the demands of the international community while celebrating Ekushey February.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

Not reason Mr. Bidwai, anything but!

While we have great respect for Mr. Bidwai and his stand on various issues, especially concerning the rights of the poor and the downtrodden, it is unfortunate that he has depended on hearsay misrepresentations in this article.

K. VIJAYARAGHAVAN

T was with immense interest that we read the article by Mr. Bidwai, titled "Reason Triumphs over Bt. Brinjal," in the February 23 issue of your esteemed publication. While we have great respect for Mr. Bidwai and his stand on various issues, especially concerning the rights of the poor and the downtrodden, it is unfortunate that he has depended on hearsay misrepresentations in this article.

Mr. Bidwai keeps referring to Monsanto in his article when he refers to the Bt. brinjal project. The consortium partners involved in the Agricultural Biotechnology Support Project II that has coordinated the Bt. brinjal project in India, Bangladesh and the Philippines are the University of Agricultural Sciences --Dharwad (UAS-D); Tamil Nadu Agrcultural University (TNAU); Indian Institute of Vegetable Research, Varanasi (IIVR); the Maharashtra Hybrid Seeds Company (Mahyco); Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (Bari); and

University of the Philippines, Los Baños. Monsanto is nowhere involved in the

project. The argument that Mahyco is coowned by Monsanto is also wrong. Monsanto holds a minority stake in Mahyco and in the age of globalisation this is common. Many Indian companies also hold minority holdings in multinational firms. This isn't necessarily a bad

The chimera of corporate control of seeds and the ultimate private ownership of what is primarily common wealth is another issue that he raises. This is not a cause for concern in the case of Bt. brinjal. Food crops are usually grown as two primary variants -- open pollinated varieties (OPVs) and hybrids.

OPVs are cultivated by small and medium farmers because it allows them to use seeds culled from subsequent harvests and avoid going back to the seed seller. Hybrids, developed by manually cross-pollinating different varieties because of their very nature produce less vigorous seeds. This is true of any hybrid,

and they are grown by large commercial farmers with large acreages under cultiva-

ABSPII's Bt. brinjal project is a remarkable example of a global effort with predominant engagement by southern countries under Public Private Partnership that has involved public bodies such as state and central agricultural institutions in India, Bangladesh and the Philippines, that have got together to develop 16 OPVs of brinjal for India and 9 varieties for Bangladesh and several varieties and hybrids for Philippines. The seeds for these will be distributed by the universities at low cost and, contrary to perceptions, farmers can use seeds from subsequent harvests. The private entities will focus on developing and marketing hybrid seeds. The public bodies will thus cater to the small and medium farmers who harvest and sell their crops in the

open market. The article raises the issue of 2,200 varieties of brinjal in India. The 16 Indian Bt. versions can be seen as a gateway to further effective and useful biotechnology interventions for not merely other varieties of brinjal but other food crops too. Bt. technology has a proven track record as an effective pest management system, as has been successfully demonstrated in the case of Bt. cotton. The argument that cotton is not a food crop is valid, which brings us to Bt. corn and Bt. soya grown in the US and countries in South America. It is true that China has recently approved Bt. rice as a safe product for environmental release.

This apart, India has some of the most stringent regulations in the world when it comes to bio-safety issues in transgenic crops. The bio-safety studies dossier available for free download at the GEAC website gives detailed reports on these tests. It is a comprehensive description of all the bio-safety tests that the product has undergone. It is obvious that these tests and the fact that Bt. technology has been in use for so many years with no evidence of adverse effects on human or animal health proves that the technology is safe.

Bt. technology is a pest management strategy that ensures close to hundred percent effectiveness against the brinjal fruit and shoot borer worms. At present, the farmer uses around 30 and as much as 70 expensive pesticide sprays to confront these pests. Despite these sprays farmers face a loss of as much 60 percent of their marketable yield. The cumulative loss to the country because of these losses is close to Rs.2,500 crores for India and about Tk.750 crores for Bangladesh.

It is true that Bt. technology is not a magic bullet that will bring about food security overnight, but it is a fact that significant reductions in the above figures is a definite move in the right direction. This will go to augment investment in other crop improvement with the huge saving achieved on brinjal.

Beyond the economy, Bt. brinjal is a cost effective and sustainable solution for farmers that will enable him or her to save on pesticide use by at least 70 percent. This also translates to better health for the farmer, less contamination of ground water sources through seepage, and brinjals with low contaminants reaching the market and ultimately our dinner table.

The Bt. brinjal project is largely an example of how biotechnology, when shared equitably and respectably, can be used to reduce poverty and hunger. The very recent intervention by the highest levels of government in India with regard to the decision by the minister of environment and forests, suggests that reason will ultimately prevail.

K. Vijayaraghavan is a Regional Coordinator -- South Asia Agricultural Biotechnology Support Project II. Email: