

Caring for those challenged

A national policy and action framework needed

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has stated in very clear terms that welfare of the physically challenged is high on her government's agenda. She has issued a directive to the authorities concerned to make sure that such people get jobs as per the quota reserved for them. It is a welcome move but there is so much more to be done, especially among the children.

In the first place, it is necessary to address the issue within the framework of a broad national policy. It is basically a rights-based issue and not something that should rest with a mere expression of compassion and disjointed efforts on the fringes. All the more because the whole world has advanced tremendously in catering for the needs of the physically and mentally challenged.

The problem that makes it difficult to create the conditions in which the autistic babies can grow up is the absence of infrastructure. Even their number is not known, as there is no database. So need-based planning and action are still an elusive goal as far full rehabilitation of the autistic is concerned.

The launching of the Centre for Neurodevelopment and Autism in Children at the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University as part of the government's plan to provide the counseling and care that autistic children need augurs well. In this context, special schools run by competent people have to be set up to provide the service that they need in an extended sense. The prime minister has directed the ministry concerned to appoint a psychologist in every school to help students. We believe the psychologist will have an important role to play in maintaining the mental health of students.

The job of helping the mentally or physically challenged cannot be accomplished by the government alone. The NGOs and the media have to come forward and make collective efforts to help these people find their rightful niche in society. At the moment, it is a much talked about issue, but very little has been done so far at the implementation level. Society has to respond wholeheartedly to address the problems faced by the physically or mentally challenged. A change in social outlook, is needed to cater to their needs. They must not be looked upon as a burden, rather they should be given the opportunities to shine in the fields of their choice.

Materially, alongside the government, local bodies and the NGOs, the private sector's corporate social responsibility must duly embrace this agenda in a collective national effort to turn the physically and mentally challenged of different age groups into useful citizens in their own ways.

Stop Biman from being a milch cow

Wrest the national carrier from the clutches of the vested quarters

THE civil aviation minister's remarks on the state of Biman in particular, and tourism in general in Bangladesh, say it all. In his rather rueful comments one noticed more than an element of resignation when at a recent seminar on civil aviation and tourism he said that vested quarters have made Biman what it is today -- a symbol of inefficiency and failure. Its viability as a commercial undertaking has been greatly dented, according to him, by the corrupt and dishonest practices of some powerful quarters, both inside and outside Biman.

We had been an unfortunate witness to the plunge of the national carrier, that had earned a degree of international repute in spite of many limitations in the late 70s and 80's, to the nadir of its incompetence and ineptitude in the last two decades. We can only sympathise with the minister and add that Biman has been a golden goose for the powers that be during every regime since our liberation, and it has perhaps laid the last of its golden eggs. And until something is done urgently, its moribund state may assume permanence.

However, we should to take some hope from the assurance held out by Mr. Quader that measures are afoot to reform the airline, and eliminating corruption and undue influence are two of the actions on the priority list. But there are a few more "must dos" without which it will be well nigh impossible to make Biman a viable concern.

The management must work to recover much of its lost ground to foreign operators. It is unacceptable that 80 percent of the local market is hogged by foreign airlines. And it has been lost due primarily to poor operational competence of Biman and shortage of aircrafts. Punctuality is not its only flaw. Tickets were sold behind the counter and artificial shortage was created from time to time to hike the price of tickets. Quite often one was told at the counter that the flight was full while in fact the aircraft was operating sometimes with less than half its passenger capacity. The in-flight service had lost its sheen since the comfort of the passengers had stopped mattering very much to the cabin staff, and the less said about the general condition of ground service the better.

The current condition of Bangladesh Biman will not countenance any stopgap measures. We feel that a long-term policy must be evolved with short and long term plans to take Biman to an acceptable level of competence. Unnecessary overhead expenses must be curtailed, and man-to-aircraft ratio, that is so horribly skewed, must be righted. Accountability and oversight must be ensured, and violations of rules in purchases must be dealt with severely. And above all, all manner of interferences, most of which come from the politically linked, must be stopped. The minister, we suggest, instead of feeling despondent and helpless must move decisively to remove the deficiencies of the national carrier.



The strongest defenders against militancy.

Militancy: Bridging gap in social resistance

It also remains to be said that greater social awareness about the consequence of militancy in the name of religion is the answer to stopping further breeding of such outfits in Bangladesh.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

THE manner in which obscurantist groups continue to organise and reorganise, maintain contacts amongst themselves, organise meetings in various residential quarters and mosques and madrasas, publish *jehadi* books and copy CDs, and provide training on making explosives and firing guns, including the AK-47, is mind boggling indeed. In a crowded country like Bangladesh, with virtually no place to hide, these people manage to stay unnoticed for years together. No doubt, they can do it because of lack of social resistance.

Various national and international media reports suggest that the militant outfits began to grow in numbers since 1991, when the two major political parties -- BNP and Awami League -- had formed governments consecutively.

Though the rise of the militants cost the country dearly, these two political parties, for "political reasons," kept mum about these groups. However, there are reasons to believe that these militant groups have been working towards consolidating their power base and establishing links with donors and political parties at home and abroad since well before 1990.

Ample research, studies and intelligence reports published in the media

suggest that during the rule of the 4-party alliance government, because of a militant-friendly administration, the *jehadi* groups grew in strength and number, established contacts with similar outfits in Pakistan and India, and spread out across the country to train young men and women on armed struggle that would lead to establishing a *khelafat* of their style in Bangladesh.

Before that they had prepared a blueprint to annihilate progressive political and civil leaders. Detonation of crude bombs by JMB in 63 districts in 2005 was a wake-up call. The grenade attack on the Awami League meeting, targeting Sheikh Hasina, was to demonstrate that they would go to any length.

Possibly, it was because of Rab's single-minded determination that the top leaders of JMB could be nabbed and sent to prison. I would like to give full credit to the DG of Rab, Hassan Mahmud Khondkar, and his team for having been able to break the backbone of this extremely dangerous fundamentalist group. Only Providence knows what damage JMB would have done to this nation by now had the top leaders not been obliterated!

Bangladesh has become a fertile land for the growth of militants, mostly because of poverty and a very weak socio-political structure. Many young people of poor families find no better ideology or

leaders to follow. They have no faith in the politicians of the country whom they brand as characterless opportunists only good at talking about democracy.

They abhor the shameless rat race of politicians for plundering national wealth. Other research studies suggest that Bangladesh has also become a safe haven for foreign militants who use the land as transit to go to India or Pakistan or to other South-Asian destinations.

According to local and foreign media reports militant groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, Tehrik-e-Jehad-e-Islami-Kashmiri, Harkat-ul Mujahideen, Harkat-ul-Jihadul Islami, Hizbul Mujahideen, Hezbe Islami, Jamiatul Mujahideen, Harkatul Ansar, Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front and Jaish-e-Mohammed are among many of the foreign militant groups that are allegedly active in Bangladesh directly or through their agents. Members of these groups sneak in and out of Bangladesh allegedly with fake Bangladeshi passports to have training on arms and explosives.

Besides, other reports claim that Myanmar-based militant groups Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO) and National United Party of Arakan (NUPA) are also active in Bangladesh.

But, it must be said that at present all these groups seem to be on the run. The unwavering resolve of the prime minister and her cabinet members on the issue of zero tolerance to militancy is bringing good results. That they mean business is evident from the recent arrest of dangerous militant Bhagne Shahid, following the May arrest of Saidur Rahman, the current chief of JMB. It has been revealed that Shahid was sentenced in absentia for his

direct involvement in the murder of writer Humayun Azad. He was also involved in attacks on police stations and bank robberies.

Inspired by the recent success, the Rab chief commented that Bangladesh was no more a comfortable place for local or foreign militants. Supported by a clear government policy, Rab and the police are apprehending operatives of JMB, Huji, Hijbut Tahiri and other militant outfits on a regular basis.

These law enforcing bodies are doing a good job and they deserve all out support from the state, including the legal system of the country, so that those dangerously armed men and women do not get any scope to get out soon.

But it also remains to be said that greater social awareness about the consequence of militancy in the name of religion is the answer to stopping further breeding of such outfits in Bangladesh. We hear of militants being given training on explosives and firearms in remote hills, forests or river banks of the country, but so far we have not seen villagers or local residents rounding up militants to hand them over to the police. They possibly do not act on their own for fear of future attacks on them.

In this regard Rab and the police public relations departments should disseminate messages through newspaper, radio and television about providing protection and giving rewards to citizens for such actions. At the same time, our embassies and high commissions in overseas countries should be more careful in giving visas to questionable characters.

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Emerging GOP schism over Afghanistan

Obama still has the House and Senate leadership from both parties mostly with him. "I don't think anybody [significant] is ready to jump ship yet," says Republican consultant Vin Weber. Democrats, moreover, may be able to take advantage of the radically mixed messages from the GOP.

MICHAEL HIRSH

NO one doubts that Michael Steele suffers from chronic foot-in-mouth disease. So when Steele, the chairman of the Republican National Committee, declared recently that Afghanistan was a war that Obama had chosen, and that America shouldn't get bogged down in a place where "everyone who has tried over a thousand years of history has failed," he initially encountered the usual reaction from conservatives leery of his leadership -- derision and calls to resign. Not only were his facts wrong, he seemed to be muddling a key GOP message. One does not allow Democrats to out-hawk Republicans.

Then a funny thing happened on the way to the chopping block. The controversy quickly died. Steele retracted part of his statement, and other leading Republicans and conservatives stepped up, if not always to Steele's defense, at least to second his skepticism about Afghanistan.

Fiery pundit Ann Coulter said that Steele was "absolutely right" and laced into neocon hawks Bill Kristol and Liz Cheney, who

were among those who had called for Steele to resign. Some GOP legislators, like Rep. Tim Johnson of Illinois -- who has long opposed funding for both Afghanistan and Iraq -- even wrote notes of support to Steele. "Since March our office has gotten 450 e-mails on Afghanistan," an aide to Johnson told Newsweek, "and only three have said 'send more troops.'"

Some newer GOP members of Congress allied with the Tea Party, like Rep. Jason Chaffetz of Utah, say doubts about the endless drain of Afghanistan are beginning to penetrate a movement that has, until now, been obsessed with the domestic aspects of big government.

"America is weary," says Chaffetz. "We're fast approaching a decade [of war] and no end in sight. And I think you have a lot of people who have less and less confidence in the president." Chaffetz, like other congressmen who have voted against Afghan funding, says more of his House colleagues are quietly cheering him on. "I had a number of members say 'I wish I had the political guts to do what you did, because I think it's right.'"

Chip Hanlon of RedCounty.com, a

California-based blogger and Tea Party activist, says the issue resonates with the "true libertarians" in the movement. While they remain a minority, they're usually the loudest and angriest at meetings, says Hanlon. "They saw Michael Steele's comments as the first right thing he said."

Now some leading conservative politicians -- especially those thinking about presidential politics -- are jumping in to question Obama's Afghan policy from a very different tack. Among them is Newt Gingrich, who is considering a 2012 run. In a speech he plans for the end of July, the former House speaker will hit the president hard, siding with hawks like Kristol.

Gingrich thinks the US can't afford to fail in Afghanistan, but it certainly will unless Obama's July 2011 deadline to begin withdrawing troops is dropped. "The morning we collapse in Afghanistan, the energy level of our enemies will quadruple," Gingrich told Newsweek. "This is not a war of choice."

The problem, he added, is that "the president's current strategy is hopeless ... If you have a commander in chief that no one believes, and a strategy that can't succeed, then I think it becomes very difficult to get people to carry water for him."

Obama still has to worry more about keeping the support of his own Democratic base on Afghanistan than the GOP. Only seven Republican House members voted for a recent bill restricting funding, compared with 93 Democrats. And while the president has been attacked by Republicans on almost every front -- health care, stimulus spending, financial reform --

for most of his 18 months in office, he's mostly gotten a pass from the GOP on the conduct of America's two wars.

But Obama's poll numbers have been plummeting, especially since the controversy in late June over critical comments by then Afghanistan commander Gen. Stanley McChrystal and his staff, and Republicans doubtless want to capitalise on that. For those on both sides of the emerging GOP divide -- the stick-it-out hawks and the shut-it-down skeptics -- the only unifying theme seems to be a lack of faith in the president and his ability to explain what success in Afghanistan will look like.

Among those who have recently chimed in are Richard Lugar, the former head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "Absent a major realignment on the ground, it's unrealistic to expect that a significant downsizing of U.S. forces could occur" by Obama's deadline, Lugar said last week.

Obama still has the House and Senate leadership from both parties mostly with him. "I don't think anybody [significant] is ready to jump ship yet," says Republican consultant Vin Weber. Democrats, moreover, may be able to take advantage of the radically mixed messages from the GOP.

But if Steele, in his fumbling way, is a harbinger of things to come, time is beginning to run out for the president. And he needs a great deal more of it if he's ever to succeed in Afghanistan.