

## Prioritising demographic explosion issue

*Ensure manpower quality, put lid on numbers*

**D**ESPITE development and other related issues taking centre stage, the concern over demographic explosion seems to have receded to the background. But the air of nonchalance notwithstanding, the population bomb is ticking away all the same as before.

Actually, the population control measures adopted in the past need to be reviewed in a fresh light to identify the flaws, avoid their repetition and take a new set of programmes for planned parenthood. Equipped with the advanced knowledge on people's reproductive health and the new innovations in medicine and technologies that go with it, we should move in a new direction.

Population growth, unless it is checked before it is too late, will have its negative impact on all the fronts of our endeavour to prosper. The runaway population growth has already begun to put pressure on the arable land for agriculture. The total amount of agricultural land has now come down from 9.0 million hectares in 1971 to 7.0 million hectares. And clearly, the lost land has gone into creating space for the expanded settlements for the rising population in the form of new urban centres, houses, roads, factories, you name them. At the same time, the urban population has been growing at a tremendous rate due mainly to city-ward migration of the rural people, who are adding to the number of slums already existing in the cities. The irony is, the subhuman conditions under which the internal migrants live make a caricature of all our development efforts.

So, a renewed attention to the issue of population is an absolute imperative even for an effective development planning where utilisation of human resources is of prime importance.

But before adopting an effective human resource development planning, we need to know the present size of our population. Whatever figure on population we have now is an extrapolation based on the last population census carried out in 2001. That calls for holding a fresh population census soon. That is more so, because another decade is coming to a close at the end of the current year, as we have been holding census every tenth year.

With a precise knowledge of our present population and their distribution according to age, geography, sex and other criteria, it will be possible to take the next course of action for nation building.

To turn the growing number of unskilled population into an asset rather than a liability, the suggestion of a demographic expert made at a recent seminar on 'population explosion' in the city is worth noting. The idea was to concentrate on population management and shift part of the burden of human resource building from the education ministry to a separate authority suggested to be created for the purpose.

The need for a rethink of the old issue of demographic explosion, therefore, cannot be overemphasised. All future planning for the nation's socio-economic development must, therefore, hinge on our policy on population management.

## Food safety concern

*A well-defined, mandated authority needed to address it*

**N**EITHER the BSTI, the DCC, the commerce ministry, the business representative bodies nor any other authority have been able to make any impression on the public mind that the food we eat is safe for human consumption. The reality is starkly to the contrary.

The memory of child food contamination and its fallout is too fresh in our mind to be amnesiac about. Added to that scandal which laid bare the risk that child health has been prey to, is the whole lot of toxic fruits, vegetables, fish and poultry that we consume on a daily basis. They pose serious hazards to public health and the future of our progeny.

In recent months dreadful details about edibles mixed with toxic chemicals have emerged from various laboratory tests and to the plain eye sending shock waves across the nation. It is a nightmarish thought to entertain as to how dehumanised the dealers in food have become with profiteering getting the better of a minimum social commitment on their part.

While the phenomenon of chemically mixed food has been pervasive, the revelation about it has been rather sporadic and accidental in that only when mobile courts carried out raids that a hue and cry would be raised over the horrific magnitude of food adulteration. The usual rituals have been to impose fine on the recalcitrant and publicly destroy contaminated food stuffs including fruits. Then when the dusts settle, adulteration is back with vengeance and unsafe edibles have to be swallowed all over again.

Little wonder, the incidence of liver and kidney diseases as well as of cancer is reportedly on the rise judging by the number of patients suffering from those landing in hospitals nowadays.

In this context, a specific recommendation from the seminar titled "Immensity and Horrible Effect of Toxic Food: Our Role" organised by the Poribesh Bachao Andolon (POBA) on Wednesday merits consideration. The speakers have urged the government to form a food safety council to check on food products in the market for their toxicity in an organised bid to apply a brake on hazardous food stuffs. We endorse the idea of a separate authority provided it is well constituted.

The council should not be a mere advisory body but one that will be empowered to initiate legal action against the menace of adulteration in any form or shape. Thus, it needs to be constituted with representatives from relevant professional groups, scientific community, civil society leaders and law enforcement authorities. That holds the key to end tokenism by way of a drive against food adulteration.

## Challenge of counter-terrorism strategy

The aim should be to ensure that the security forces have the required assistance in their task of bringing terrorists before the courts, and that the integrity of the legal system is maintained. The strategy has to ensure that executive power is utilised to sap a terrorist organisation of its material base, stopping routes of material replenishment and seizing its existing assets.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

**C**ONCERNED individuals and organisations have been thinking and deliberating for quite some time upon the urgency of adopting a counter-terrorism strategy for Bangladesh that continues to remain affected by the scourge of terrorist violence. Political leaders and regulatory bodies have sought effective administrative tools and enhanced legal cover in the campaign against terrorism.

Cynics say that the establishment has been humming and having on the subject without actually taking a deep hard look into the complex subject and, as such, we do not have an effective strategy in place.

Adopting a counter-terrorism strategy, and that too in a sharply polarised polity like ours, is no easy task. One has to remember that, as a legal concept, terrorism lends itself far too generously to interpretation. In fact, we have amongst ourselves those woolly haired liberals who confound incidents of straightforward violence with a prolonged enquiry into the backdrop. There are quarters that seek a political statement in acts of plain terror.

On another end there is a quarter that is quite unabashed about fighting terror with terror. Such quarter would like to use every available resource, and does not mind suppressing liberty if that is required to fight terrorism.

An issue that engages many right-thinking people is whether we have an unusual situation that warrants taking draconian measures as part of a strategy. Incidentally, in a country almost fanatic about privacy and related issues such as constitutional safeguards for individual liberties, the passage of the United States Anti-Terrorism Act of 2001 would under normal circumstances have been unthinkable.

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Coming to specifics, the above-mentioned American law legitimises the use of technology as a "neutral standard in intelligence gathering," giving the government absolute powers to monitor private communications and access personal information.

However, a strategy that is likely to affect every citizen and may provide the executive an alternative to the existing penal and Criminal Procedure Code and might infringe on the right to information must be accompanied by a wider public debate.

While adopting a counter-terrorism strategy, we should take note of the fact that terrorist groups are now using a careful mix of ideology and violence to achieve their ends. Similarly, the question of divorcing acts of terror from the context may have to engage the minds of people tasked to prepare a strategy paper.

In our situation we have to admit that terrorism had increased in its very nature and, therefore, changes in strategies to counter it are logical and natural. Our strategy adoption process has to examine, amongst others, links between terrorist groups, the conditions in which they had spawned and the politician-militant nexus and other forms of patronage these groups receive.

The factors contributing to the quality and extent of terrorist threats have to be taken note of. In preparing a strategy, we need to think whether the executive, in tracking down terrorists, should be subject to the same bottom line of judicial review or be given special status. Some would say that the courts should not be oblivious of the practical needs of the government.

The issue of terrorism and human rights, one need to know, has befuddled even the United Nation organisations. Therefore, can there be an across the board guarantee



Counter terrorism force personnel in Iraq.

of human rights to all, irrespective of the means the terrorists use to achieve their ends, or whether such terrorists respect the human rights of the community they allegedly like to serve.

While preparing a strategy, we should bear in mind that a scenario cannot be countenanced where all the human rights are reserved for the terrorists while authorities dealing with the menace are arraigned regularly on grounds of violation of human rights. We have to delineate the parameters that harmonise the defence of a pluralist polity with respect for human rights.

As a matter of caution, the legal interpretation of terrorism laws must not be the personal turf of the government of the day and must not be subject to personal prejudices or opinion. The law must not foster fear among sections of the population.

In countering terrorism and the accompanying mindless violence, legal and operational arrangements would necessitate some loss of liberty and human freedom. However, the objective should be to depart

as little as possible from internationally agreed principles and from the traditions of natural justice.

The aim should be to ensure that the security forces have the required assistance in their task of bringing terrorists before the courts, and that the integrity of the legal system is maintained.

The strategy has to ensure that executive power is utilised to sap a terrorist organisation of its material base, stopping routes of material replenishment and seizing its existing assets.

Our strategy may consider focusing in greater detail on expanding the category of proscribed organisations and on lawful use of interception as an investigative tool. It needs to concentrate on skimming powers of arrest and shortening the period of detention without trial and allowing robust judicial scrutiny. It would be up to the ingenuity of the government to turn proposals into real enforceable acts.

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## No ideal solution on Kashmir



The valley volatile with death of demonstrators.

It would be useful to find out what the solution was that Vajpayee and Nawaz Sharif had reached to make the former say: "We were almost there." Former foreign minister Mohammad Kurshid Kasuri announced at Delhi that they had reached a settlement. What was the solution? And the most important part is whether the Kashmiris would accept it.

KULDIP NAYAR

**W**HAT is happening in the Valley lends credibility to the Kashmiri diaspora that met at Washington a few days ago to ask for early, peaceful solution to the Kashmir problem. I was one of the participants at the conference, which was convened by the Kashmiri-American Council and Association of Humanitarian Lawyers. Emotions apart, the diaspora was concerned over the future of the land of their origin.

All agreed, as is the general belief in India, that delayed political solution of the Kashmir problem was responsible for the eruption of occasional violence or protests in the state. The participants expressed grave concern over the deteriorating human rights situation in Kashmir and demanded the appointment of a commission to go into the causes of current vio-

being the year old election in which they participated to the extent of 60% -- to sort out the long outstanding problem of autonomy. But the two did not do so.

Where did things go wrong? My experience tells me that the more a political party or the administration at Srinagar goes nearer to India the greater is the resentment of people who want to preserve their own identity. A government that is seen to be challenging New Delhi is liked because it gives them a vicarious satisfaction of being independent.

Sheikh Abdullah, a popular Kashmiri leader, understood this. He did not question Kashmir's accession to India but placated the Kashmiris by criticising New Delhi for eroding the state's autonomy. For example, he would say that the Kashmiris would prefer to stay hungry if the atta from India was meant to trample upon their right to stay independent. It may have been fiction but it worked.

Even Jawaharlal Nehru, the Sheikh's friend and supporter in political battles against the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, did not understand his rhetoric and detained him without trial in south India for some 12 years.

Still Nehru realised rather late that the tinkling of autonomy by New Delhi had taken the shape of separation and strong pro-Pakistan tilt. He released the Sheikh and sent him to Islamabad. Unfortunately, Nehru died when the Sheikh was in the midst of talks with General Ayub Khan, Pakistan's martial law administrator.

Till then, Kashmir was a problem between India and Pakistan. They held talks and fought wars but reached nowhere. The Shimla agreement converted the ceasefire line into the line of control. But the two failed to go further because of their domestic compulsions.

The Sheikh returned to power and entered into an accord with then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, which restored some autonomy that New Delhi had appropriated in his absence. But the Sheikh did not have a free hand because the bureaucracy and the intelligence agencies, by then strong, did not want him to succeed. They treated "me like a chaprasi (peon)," the Sheikh often told me.

His son, Farooq Abdullah, much less in stature, tried to retrieve the situation by asking New Delhi to go back to the terms of accession, the centre retaining only three subjects, defence, foreign affairs and communications. The successive governments at New Delhi felt that they could not go back as they feared a backlash.

Former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was the only person who foresaw the danger in not reaching a settlement. He set up a back channel, which almost found

a solution when Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was ousted by General Pervez Musharraf, head of the military's coup.

I was reminded of the promise Nehru made to the Kashmiris that they would be given an opportunity to decide what they wanted to do with their territory. I told them that Nehru had rejected the demand for a plebiscite in his lifetime. His reasoning was that Pakistan, by joining the Cento and Seato, the two military pacts against the Soviet Union during the cold war, had changed the context of the undertaking.

In the eighties, the Kashmir problem became an issue. The Kashmiris too claimed a place on the table for talks on Kashmir. Rigged state elections in 1987 drove the youth from ballot to bullet, which Pakistan was willing to provide. The following 10 years saw a running battle between the Kashmiris and the security forces. Thousands died on both sides. The result was a further hiatus between the Kashmiris and New Delhi.

Three things happened. One, the anti-India Kashmir leadership constituted a joint body, All Hurriyat Conference. Two, a secular movement acquired an Islamic edge, particularly because of hard-liner Syed Ali Shah Geelani. Three, the pro-Pakistan tilt changed into a resolve for independence, the slogan which Yasin Malik, the first militant in Kashmir, raised. Today, that sentiment prevails in the shape of demand for Kashmiris deciding their own destiny.

The demand for independence may be genuine, but independence is not possible. I wonder even if Pakistan would agree to an independent, sovereign state when the chips are down. I opposed the demand at the Conference in Washington on two counts: first, India would not agree to another partition on the basis of religion, second, borders could be made irrelevant but not changed. I also cautioned that Jammu and Ladakh would not go along with the valley to the point of secession.

Yet, it would be useful to find out what the solution was that Vajpayee and Nawaz Sharif had reached to make the former say: "We were almost there." Former foreign minister Mohammad Kurshid Kasuri announced at Delhi that they had reached a settlement. What was the solution? And the most important part is whether the Kashmiris would accept it.

Both India and Pakistan must persuade them to accept autonomy because independence does not seem to find favour from either New Delhi or Islamabad. It can tell upon India's integrity. The Kashmiris should realise that independence is not an ideal solution.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.