

Court concern about population boom

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DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

THE High Court has expressed its deep concern about the over-population in the country. It issued a ruling on the government to explain within four weeks why it (government) should not be asked to take steps to control over-population, create an independent ministry and make separate allocation for population control.

Almost all dailies reported this news, attaching due importance to it since the print and electronic media were very much vocal in urging the government to give more priority to population issues. Four Supreme Court advocates filed the writ petition on public interest on the problem of over-population and successfully convinced the court to issue Rule Nisi on 15 secretaries to the government, including the cabinet secretary and the director general of family planning.

The health secretary will have to explain the trend of population growth during the last 10 years, including the budgetary provision and contributions of non-government organisations (NGO) and development partners in this sector. This is perhaps for the first time that population has been projected as top priority issue of public interest.

Most of the people advocating for development of capable human resources have highly appreciated the directives of the High Court. On the other hand, this is a challenge for the govern-

ment while the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare continues dialogue and deliberation for formulating the 2nd Health, Nutrition and Population Sector Program (2012-2017).

The draft concept paper has already been circulated to all members of the HNP Consortium. The sector-wide approach with Health, Nutrition and Population Sector Program is being implemented since 2005 although the Health and Population Sector Program was started in 1998.

In this situation, considering population control and family planning as a separate ministry or division, mobilising resources and preparing a separate budget accordingly, will be a major departure -- rather a challenge -- for the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.

It might be pointed out that in 1976 there were two divisions under the Ministry of Health and Population Control with two separate secretaries, one heading the Health Division and other the Population Control and Family Planning Division. Former secretary late M.A. Sattar headed the PCFP Division and formulated an outline of a population policy.

This was a milestone in the field of family planning, and he was successful in generating a social movement with massive public opinion in favour of family planning as per outlines. In fact, activities undertaken during the time and thereafter were so exemplary that Bangladesh

emerged as an example of success story for family planning round the world, and as a pioneer in the Third World.

Many delegations from abroad visited Bangladesh to learn about the innovative ideas adopted to make family planning acceptable to the masses, especially to the poor and uneducated, and religious leaders in particular. With financial support from the government many NGOs, specially women's groups, went door to door distributing IEC materials with interpersonal communications motivating eligible and newly married couples, peer groups etc.

The president of the country received the UNFPA award for the successful family planning program. In fact, the success story of the family planning program of Bangladesh negated the concept and wisdom of demographic wizards that education is the best contraceptive and empowerment of women helps population control as a natural phenomenon.

In 1984, in a sudden move, without any O and M study, both the divisions were merged and the PCFP Division was abolished, and advertisement about family planning by social marketing companies was stopped.

At present, the population of the country is estimated to be around 160 million. It was 40 million in 1951 and 74 million during our liberation war. Demographers say that it could have been 200 million if there were no intensive family planning campaigns. The present population growth rate of 1.39% was 3% in 1975 and total fertility rate was 6 per woman, which came down to 2.7 per woman. Contraceptive use rate increased to 55.8% as per BDHS of 2007.

Knowledge of family planning is now universal. Even so, at least two million



babies are born every year and 15,000 women die during childbirth. More than 70% of mothers suffer from acute malnutrition during pregnancy, giving birth to low weight and stunted babies, and 45% of women suffer from reproductive tract infection or sexually transmitted diseases and fistula complications. The average age of a girl at marriage is below 15 years, and around 65% of the poor take medicare from village quacks and unrecognised medical practitioners.

Besides, migration of the extreme poor

and climate refugees to urban areas is more than 6%, while 28% of the total population of the country live in 6 city corporations and 309 municipalities of the country. It is estimated that the population of urban areas will increase to 50% by 2040. Dhaka city now inhabited by 12 million people, and will be the 4th most densely populated city of the world by 2025.

There is no scope to see this population trend lightly, and there should be pragmatic steps from the government right at

this moment. In fact, Bangladesh has not been able to formulate a national health policy as yet. The formulation of the health policy should be the responsibility of the government, with input from politicians, and social and medical scientists. It should in no way be regarded as a policy of the doctors and physicians.

Therefore, the government must come forward with policy issues in terms of resource mobilisation and service delivery systems, and also more investment for infrastructure development like local

What makes one an optimist or a pessimist

Remember the famous saying: "People do not live by bread alone." Surely, we do not wish to be a nation without a soul. Now that I have said what I had to say I am somewhat relieved, and it no longer matters whether my friend brands me as a pessimist or an optimist.

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

I am often asked by my friends as to whether I am a pessimist or an optimist. My response has been: I am neither a pessimist nor an optimist. I am a realist. Our political parties and their leaderships are in total disarray, and their only capital is intense anger, jealousy and making all sorts of irresponsible remarks.

The second and the third generations too have already developed signs of decay. Starting from school-going boys and girls up to the university level, many of them have become some kind of mercenaries in the field of education, looking

for only degrees that would help them get jobs and show them the way to earn more and more money.

Discipline has never been the forte of the Bengalis as a nation. Indiscipline has gained a wider spread since we became an independent country. Our younger generations have become highly volatile and violent. The entire society today has become highly conflict ridden.

I used to take the road running through the Dhaka University campus while going to visit my ailing sister, one time professor of English at this university. For many years I had enjoyed the

ride, looking at the sights and scenes on both sides of the road, and even felt nostalgic at times. The mini garden on the road divider with multicolored shrubs and flowers made me happy each time I passed by.

But I have stopped using the road since I happened to see in our electronic media scenes of some celebrations on the occasion of Dhaka University's 80th anniversary? I saw that students and teachers alike were celebrating the joyous occasion with great fervour and zeal. After all it was once known as the Cambridge of the East.

All this is fine, but I was disappointed by the fact that not a single individual amongst the participating teachers or dignitaries came out with any statement whatsoever about the deterioration of the academic environment of the very university that was once indeed one of the finest seats of education the subcontinent.

When I drew the attention of one of my

friends to this particular aspect he gave me a smile and said that I was being rather pessimistic in my views and that he was optimistic about the future generation. I kept quiet and began to think as to which future generation he was referring to. He did not ask why I thought that our second and third generations had already developed signs of decay.

Besides, some of the people towards whom the entire nation looks to for guidance have become extremely politicised. A section of teachers, including some high profile members of the civil society, are more interested in making money and carving out a place for themselves in the corridors of power than in anything else.

I am also highly disappointed by the fact that, in all spheres of our lives, there has been serious erosion in our moral and ethical values. From the highest to the lowest deception and lies dominate the present day society. It seems that almost everyone is running after money and riches. Many of them are ready to cheat

and deceive one another in order to gain comparative advantage over the other.

Even the well-known image of our tightly knit family as a symbol of unity, discipline, love and affection is slowly and surely falling apart. There is no unified focal point of authority in many families. Never before had we experienced the horror of parents killing their babies/children on some trifle or bizarre grounds. Indeed, it is the outward expression of deep-seated social unrest and restlessness, and the utter frustration that persists in the society today.

On a different plane, there is much to be said about the rich and affluent. They have become utterly selfish, and completely oblivious to their social and economic responsibilities towards the rest of the society.

I have always taken the position that if Bangladesh is to carve out a respectable place in the civilised and the developed nations of the world, it has to improve

drastically in its practice of social justice and equality. It must stop undermining the importance and the integrity of the judiciary. The state simply must recognise the fact that our record on human rights violations is not only poor but also below the line of acceptability by any standard.

I have no doubt in my mind that someday we might see better days economically by way of modern technology, infrastructure development and access to more shopping malls, wide highways and fancy cars on our streets, yet our human resources may continue to be as poor as ever. Remember the famous saying: "People do not live by bread alone." Surely, we do not wish to be a nation without a soul.

Now that I have said what I had to say I am somewhat relieved, and it no longer matters whether my friend brands me as a pessimist or an optimist.

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Unwanted immigrants: America's deportation dilemma

For the foreseeable future, governments and intergovernmental organisations must struggle with the deportation dilemma. And until it's resolved, illegal migrants must confront the immigration Sword of Damocles.

JOSEPH CHAMIE

AS being played out by the legal battle between the US Government and the state of Arizona, the bottom line in the illegal immigration debate is whether or not to deport those unlawfully resident within a country.

Faced with the growing presence of illegal migrants -- many arriving without documents on foot, in backs of trucks, on creaky boats; others overstaying their visas; and still others having asylum claims denied -- nations from Angola to Australia, Israel to Italy and the United Kingdom to the United States -- struggle with this knotty issue.

The deportation dilemma has become more acute due to global recession and widespread joblessness at levels not seen since the Great Depression. Partly as a result, a common perception emerges throughout Europe, North America and elsewhere -- "millions of native workers without jobs and millions of jobs without native workers."

Whereas the global number of illegal migrants is large, estimated at roughly 50 million, those actually deported are considerably less (see Table 1). In the US, for instance, less than 4% of the estimated 11 million illegal migrants were deported

in 2008. While deportations have declined in some countries, such as Germany, Greece and Italy, numbers of deported have increased substantially in others, such as Canada, France, the UK and the US.

Concerning the undesirability of illegal immigration, near universal agreement exists among governments and much of the public, especially when it involves smuggling and trafficking. In fact, governments -- especially at inter-governmental gatherings such as the United Nations -- uniformly stress national sovereignty, emphasising rights to monitor borders, manage immigration and pass laws aimed at deterring illegal immigration.

However, and this is the crux of the issue, views and policies differ enormously between sending and receiving countries, such as between Mexico and the US, and within countries, such as Israel, Italy, Spain, the UK and the US, on how to deal with millions of men, women and children living unlawfully in scores of countries around the world.

At one extreme are those who contend that deportation is the appropriate and required solution: As illegal migrants are lawbreakers, they should not be rewarded with amnesty or legalisation. Relevant laws pertaining to illegal immigration

should not be ignored, camouflaged or halfheartedly carried out by responsible authorities. Illegal migrants must go to the back of the line and apply for immigration back in home countries, just as legal immigrants have done and continue to do.

Granting amnesty to illegal migrants not only undermines the rule of law, erodes public trust and constitutes a slap in the face to all those who migrated legally, this view maintains, but also encourages future illegal immigration.

At the other extreme are those who oppose deportation, and press for legalisation of unauthorised migrants. Most of these migrants, struggling to meet their most basic needs, simply seek gainful employment to support themselves and improve the lives of their families.

Identifying and sending unauthorised migrants back to home countries is costly and logistically difficult. Moreover, widespread deportations can lead to economic disruptions, breakup of families and violations of fundamental civil liberties. Unauthorised migrants should be allowed to reside and work legally in the country, proponents maintain, and permitted to apply for citizenship.

In the middle are the many who tend to equivocate on deportation, depending on circumstances. Unauthorised migrants -- and it doesn't matter from where -- who commit serious crimes should be returned to their home countries after serving jail sentences. In contrast, law-abiding unauthorised migrants should be allowed to remain and permitted to apply for citizenship.

In particular, unauthorised migrants

who arrive as children -- and those subsequently born in the country to unauthorised migrants -- should be allowed to stay in the country and become citizens.

The political will needed to implement wide-scale deportation programs is normally lacking or weak at best. Politics, voting patterns, economic interests and labour needs, especially evident in Europe, Japan and the US, push political leaders to turn a blind eye to illegal immigration, by and large evading the prickly issue of deportation.

In addition, the costs of identifying, detaining, processing and deporting are considerable. For example, the United Kingdom Border Agency spent the equivalent of about \$40 million in 2009 on chartered and scheduled flights to remove illegal migrants. In the US, simply detaining an illegal migrant has average cost of about \$100 per day.

Legal deportation proceedings, if they take place at all, frequently give rise to ethical and humanitarian concerns. Sending illegal migrants back to countries with civil conflict or searing poverty, for example, could violate their basic human rights. In some cases, if returned home -- especially to war-torn countries -- their lives could be endangered by militants and insurgents.

Moreover, expulsion of seriously ill or disabled unauthorised migrants, including those with HIV/Aids, heart disease or cancer, as well as mental illness or physical disabilities, to their countries of origin, particularly if least developed, could be a death sentence.

Even when deportation is decided by the courts and ordered by governmental

authorities, illegal migrants, especially among the EU countries, increasingly protest court decisions with defiant refusals, including hunger strikes, street demonstrations and appeals to human rights organisations, often leading to lengthy stalemates.

Taking up refuge in places such as churches and makeshift camps, some illegal migrants alongside sympathetic supporters challenge physical removal, often with attendant reporters and television crews. In response to heightened visibility and negative public reaction to these removals, some governments, such as France and the UK, deport illegal migrants surreptitiously.

Objections to deportation also arise in the countries of origin such as Mexico, which has spoken out against US deportations and the recent Arizona law. Some nations, such as China, Ethiopia, Eritrea, India, Iran, Jamaica, Laos and Vietnam, refuse to repatriate many of the illegal migrants.

Also, origin countries, such as Cambodia, El Salvador, Guatemala and Jamaica, are understandably not keen to receive deported citizens convicted of crimes abroad or linked to organised crime. And the numbers of deported criminals are not inconsequential; the US alone deported close to 100,000 criminals in 2008.

In addition to the loss of valued remittances, returning unauthorised migrants are likely to contribute to unemployment rolls, additional costs and political unrest. Besides new and uncertain economic circumstances, deported migrants often

face re-entry difficulties, including stigmatisation and depression.

As a result of their inability or unwillingness to return illegal migrants to their home countries, some governments, especially among EU nations such as Italy and Spain, have offered regularisation programs to hundreds of thousands. To reduce opposition to amnesty, legalisation programs are frequently labeled as "the last."

Legalisation is often coupled with commitments for increased border, interior and workplace enforcement as well as public information campaigns aimed at discouraging future illegal migration. However, governments acknowledge that offering "last chance" legalisation programs encourages others to try unlawful entry in hopes of being eligible for the next amnesty, as was the case following the "last" US amnesty to nearly 3 million illegal migrants passed under President Ronald Reagan in 1986.

Political leaders, especially in developed countries, are unlikely to consider amnesty or legalisation, not until the economy rebounds and record-setting unemployment rates subside. At the same time, legalisation advocates insist that governmental authorities address the plight of the undocumented migrants.

For the foreseeable future, governments and intergovernmental organisations must struggle with the deportation dilemma. And until it's resolved, illegal migrants must confront the immigration Sword of Damocles.

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