

Declining child mortality is cause for happiness

Redouble efforts to meet all the MDGs

WE are happy that our efforts in reducing child mortality in Bangladesh have been duly acknowledged by the United Nations. The world body has just presented Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and through her the people of Bangladesh, an award in this effect in New York. This recognition of Bangladesh's sincere efforts in trying to reach the Millennium Development Goals set for 2015, while clearly encouraging for us, is also a reminder for us of what we must yet do in order to tackle the remaining seven of the eight MDGs. Given that as a nation we are resource-strapped and given too that a certain sluggishness has characterised the developed world where a flow of funds from it to the developing world is concerned, the road ahead will be a difficult, if not an insurmountable one. As the prime minister has pointed out in New York, Bangladesh will need \$22.1 billion if it has to attain all the MDGs.

That said, the results of our efforts in combating child mortality should now serve as a spur toward action in the other MDG-related areas. Take as an instance the question of poverty. It is certainly a fact that in recent years the rate of poverty in the country has declined from 60 per cent to 37, which proves that we are capable of setting goals for ourselves and attaining them. But let us not be lulled into a sense of complacency here because, even as poverty has declined, the gap between rich and poor has widened. That is where one notices the imbalance. Even in the region of children's health, the malnutrition that children, especially among the poor and in the rural areas, are still prone to is a sign that we cannot rest on our laurels. Sustained efforts, together with clarity and vision in terms of policy making and implementation, are a clear necessity if these conditions have to be improved. As for universal primary education, the good news is that the rate of enrolment has been 90 per cent. The bad news, though, is that the drop-out rate happens to be 50 per cent. In other words, a positive is being cancelled out by a negative. And that is a huge wake-up call for the government, indeed for larger society, since education is the fundamental principle upon which the fulfilment of all other social aspirations rests.

The bottom line for Bangladesh, at this point, is that its success in reducing child mortality must now be followed by proactive efforts toward achieving the seven other MDG targets. Maternal health, for instance, is a wide area where the kind of results we expect to see are yet to materialise. Again, while there is little question that moves have been underway toward ensuring gender equality and women's participation in the workplace, there are yet the taboos and the inhibitions that need breaking down. Women in Bangladesh are yet vulnerable to conditions that are a clear reflection of insensitivity and, to a large extent, male chauvinism. Additionally, the environment in Bangladesh remains susceptible to predatory human instincts. Our forests continue to disappear and unscrupulous men and organisations go on denuding nature of the very elements that sustain life. It is in such areas that redoubled efforts have to be made if the targets set for 2015 are to be met. Expectations of assistance from the developed world are understandable. More important is the question of how much wisdom and dedication we can bring to bear on galvanising the nation towards achieving all the MDGs by 2015.

Three faces of the same syndrome

Preventive and remedial intervention from the highest level needed

THIS is a glaring example of triple folly making news yesterday of how vulnerable even routine governance has become to demonstrative arrogance of some ruling party elements. This is scripted by people whose position and identity should have made them sensitive and cautious about remarks they reeled off and the behaviour they showed in public.

Let us cite three news items that appeared yesterday in all major newspapers: 'PM adviser trashing RTI' (and more); 'government officials in Pabna representing for transfer en masse chagrined at pressure from certain Jubo League-BCL quarters'; and 'civil surgeon's office at Panchagarh ransacked by some Jubo League-BCL activists'.

First, we concentrate on what the PM's health adviser Dr Syed Moddasser Ali reportedly had to say while addressing a meeting at Gopalganj Sadar Hospital to discuss anthrax situation in the district. He minced no word to announce 'none outside the party' would be considered for recruitment to 13,350 posts for community clinics which is to get underway soon. We cannot remember any such statement having been ever made in public by any adviser or minister, even though traditionally ruling party loyalists have been patronised in government appointment. But at least perhaps the adviser may be credited with not having concealed what is about to happen in an important instance of bulk employment. Yet, the sheer indifference to merit, or professional correctness, even propriety consideration, is certainly hurtful, to put it mildly.

What is perhaps more disquieting is the adviser's argument for denial of information to journalists in spite of the RTI act. He purportedly said that the officials would not be able to work if they had to furnish information to journalists. The issue apparently stemmed from newspaper reports that anthrax has spread among 500 persons.

The incident in Pabna about district officials demanding collective transfer owing to pressure exerted by certain elements centered around foiling of a recruitment examination by certain Jubo League-BCL people alleging question leak.

In the Panchagarh episode last Sunday night some Jubo League-BCL activists allegedly ransacked the civil surgeon's office to loot away answer scripts with marks awarded on them.

So one sees a pattern here of people who feel close to power to stop short at nothing to monopolise public appointments. This calls for intervention at the highest party and government levels.

Of austerity, pretension and fading hope

The realities are all. Our people are ill fed, ill educated, ill at ease before our elitist demonstrations of pretension. Our villages are dying, like our rivers. Our cities are collapsing under the weight of a growing urban wilderness. Our economy has been commandeered by robber barons.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

WE could all do with a bit of austerity in this poor country. There is no good reason, at this point in our collective life, to pretend that everything is in good shape and all things are bright and beautiful in Bangladesh. It is a truth that some of our expatriate Bengalis must come to terms with.

A fairly good number of them have just told Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in Brussels how happy they are that her government has been able to keep prices within the reach of the common man in Bangladesh. Well, we do realise the limitations political partisanship can put people into, but for these people to think everything is in shipshape fashion only because their favourite political party happens to be holding political power in these times is something that puts us in a state of unease.

The realities matter. And the realities inform us that prices have gone beyond the capacity of the common man. He happens to be gasping for breath. At the other end, the frequent outages of power continue, with nary a sign that the government is in a position to do anything to reverse the condition. When fish cannot be preserved in cold storages because of this intermittent supply of electricity (listen to those in the fisheries business in Cox's Bazar), you know where the government is failing to carry out its responsibilities.

There are other realities. Housewives complain of gas shortages. The authorities decree a moratorium on gas supply at filling stations for six hours a day. On the roads, there is little sign of any easing of bad traffic conditions. And yet we are being informed, every day and every week, that things are on the right track,

that indeed they are getting better.

You wonder how. When you see the nation's prime minister leading a hundred-strong team to the United Nations General Assembly in New York, you ask yourself why that should be happening in this resource-strapped country. There are other questions that you look for answers to. One relates to the taxes that the people of the country pay. Are these individuals on the prime ministerial team not spending public money for a trip that does not make much sense for this impoverished country?

There is yet another question: what will all these people fortunate enough to share a trip to distant America with the head of government contribute to her mission? The United Nations will not be their host. The American government did not invite them. And so you have a situation where it is the money of the people of Bangladesh that is being squandered. Observe the irony. These travellers from this poor land will be telling the world, in all their political affluence, that poverty (read MDGs here) in Bangladesh is being put to flight!

Presidents and prime ministers do not have to be at the United Nations every year. There are all the ambassadors to speak on behalf of their countries, unless it is absolutely essential that their political leaders be there. We in Bangladesh really do not have much of a contribution to make at this year's UNGA. Why then are we squandering our resources on such a safari?

Austerity, ladies and gentlemen, must begin with a change in attitude, with a downsizing of government. Our diplomatic missions abroad are too many, surfeit with officers and employees who should not have been there at all.



The reality of poverty demands austerity.

Political wisdom requires that we bring austerity into practice there. Our economic conditions do not permit us to pretend to be something we are not.

Besides, these gargantuan missions have done precious little in the last few decades to push us to a higher perch in global diplomacy. So let us go for some good pruning, some necessary cuts at the bureaucratic levels. There are some embassies we need not maintain; and there are officers at some missions who are a patent waste of resources.

At home, experience tells us that big government has spawned bigger disorder and even bigger corruption. There are ministries that need not be there at all. There are the prime ministerial advisors who have no business being there when there already is an unwieldy cabinet the prime minister presides over.

Calculate the costs and you will be appalled at the figures you arrive at for maintaining individuals who have little or nothing to contribute to the country. The perks that come with power to some people are not what we need. We are in need of power that expresses itself through fulfilling its responsibility. Have a smaller cabinet, we say. Let the table in the cabinet room not resemble a cluttered space every time our gaze falls on it.

Austerity is a simple thing. If you love the country, you will know that when organisations invite the head of government and with her the entire cabinet and an accompanying bureaucracy to their celebrations of grandeur, it is not austerity they are practising. Indeed, it is that old image, on a national level, of poor, ingratiating families inviting already well-fed individuals to feasts they do not dream of arranging for themselves.

The realities are all. Our people are ill fed, ill educated, ill at ease before our elitist demonstrations of pretension. Our villages are dying, like our rivers. Our cities are collapsing under the weight of a growing urban wilderness. Our economy has been commandeered by robber barons. The widows of murdered men point fingers at men they think took their husbands' lives, only for the police to give them short shrift. Opposition lawmakers do not go to Parliament and yet rush forth to collect their allowances, insensitive to the feelings of the nation.

You despair. The old hope that a national leader -- a statesman, a father figure, a moral voice -- will arise to turn things around is slowly, painfully dying.

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Turkey sheds its military-backed constitution

Although Turkey has shed the military-backed constitution, observers say that it remains a deeply divided society -- culturally, politically and geographically. The challenge for the government of Prime Minister Erdogan is to overcome the deep division by taking appropriate steps to remove the concerns of the secularists and other minorities.

HARUN UR RASHID

ALTHOUGH Turkey is a democratic country it was saddled with a constitution drawn by its military in 1980. Finally, on September 12, on the 30th anniversary of the 1980 military coup, the Turkish people adopted a democratic constitution after a referendum.

Nearly 40 million Turkish citizens took to the ballot box to vote for a series of 26 constitutional amendments with an overwhelming 58 to 42 majority. The overwhelming "yes" vote demonstrated that the Turkish people were fed up with the successive military rule in the past and wanted to see elected leaders rule the country.

The successful outcome of the referendum led by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan demonstrates a confidence in the government and indicates a big chance for the ruling party to win the general elections, due in July 2011, for the third time.

The ruling party, although the opposition alleges that it is rooted in Islamic ideology and conservative, has been in power since 2002.

One important amendment was the abolition of the provisional Article 15 of the constitution, which does not allow trial of the members of the National Security Council formed after the military coup in 1980. On September 13, several human rights NGOs filed an indictment charge "against those who committed the 1980 coup."

Those who will be tried include former president and then chief of general staff Kenan Evren and his commanders,

as well as other officials who participated in the coup.

Before the vote, the parties held massive "yes" rallies and "no" meetings throughout the country, bringing together tens of thousands and trying to outdo one another with each show of strength. Party leaders spoke at these rallies, praising their supporters and not hesitating to take swipes at each other.

The country was heavily divided in the days and weeks leading up to the referendum, with the AKP supporting the constitutional changes and the opposition secularist Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) vehemently against them on the ground that the amendments to the Constitutional Court and the High Board of Judges and Prosecutors, a state body that appoints magistrates, raised concerns over the independence of the judiciary.

The results were divided fairly along party lines. Almost all of the 15 of the 19 municipalities that voted against were in the more liberal western and southern coasts.

All the seven cities that went to the main opposition, CHP, in the 2009 local elections voted against the referendum, while 50 of the 61 cities that voted for the AKP in 2009 voted for the constitutional changes.

Meanwhile, the predominantly Kurdish east and southeast had the lowest voter turnout, in the 30s compared to the 78% for the whole country, showing the effectiveness of the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party's (BDP) boycott.

Under the amendments, the 11-



Turkey: At a critical juncture.

member Constitutional Court will now have 17 members, of which 12 will have to vote for a constitutional change or a party closure. Opponents to the referendum, like former European Court of Human Rights Justice Riza Turmen, say that the increased number of justices is just a ploy for the AKP to plant more sympathetic judges in the court.

Meanwhile, the seven-member Supreme Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK) will be brought up to 22 members, many of whom will also be picked by AKP interests.

CHP leader Kilicdaroglu voiced these concerns Sunday night, saying: "When you look at the results you see the AKP has taken a serious step in subordinating the judicial mechanism to itself."

The secularist Kemal Kilicdaroglu expressed displeasure with the result, saying: "Today's result shows the referendum serves a two-sided polarised political system that weakens democracy. This tense political atmosphere based on polarisation cannot produce a healthy democracy."

Nationalist MHP leader Devlet Bahceli said: "Turkey has entered a risky

and dangerous dark period," and called for early elections

The United States and the European Union have hailed the results from Turkey's referendum on a package of changes to the country's military-era constitution. The White House said that President Barack Obama called Erdogan to congratulate him and acknowledged "the vibrancy of Turkey's democracy as reflected in the turnout" for the referendum.

European Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fuele said in a statement that the reforms were "a step in the right direction as they address a number of long-standing priorities in Turkey's efforts towards fully complying with the accession criteria."

Although Turkey has shed the military-backed constitution, observers say that it remains a deeply divided society - culturally, politically and geographically. The challenge for the government of Prime Minister Erdogan is to overcome the deep division by taking appropriate steps to remove the concerns of the secularists and other minorities.

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