

## Still a low score in fighting graft!

*ACC should be strengthened, party workers reined in*

Someone who follows media reports on how the government is faring in fulfilling one of its electoral pledges -- the fight against corruption -- hardly needs any special research to know what is happening on the ground. So, one is hardly surprised to see a disappointing report from the Transparency International (TI), which comes up with its findings on the country's performance on combating this menace this year.

The score at 2.4 out of 10, according to TI's Corruption Perception Index (CPI), is nothing to write home about. Oddly though, the present score on the CPI Index card is identical with the one we had last year.

But what does this signify? It means the government has not been able to make any progress in addressing the problem of corruption during the last one year. And while we are standing on the same spot, our close South Asian neighbour Bhutan has made substantial progress in fighting the scourge with its score at 5.7.

The TI, however, pointed at some factors behind this state of affairs. Those include uncalled-for role of the public representatives in the government's procurement process and the practice of undue political interference in the day-to-day administrative affairs.

Similarly, the leniency shown by the government towards the black money holders by allowing them to whiten their money at a nominal tax has proved to be a disincentive to the otherwise honest and law-abiding taxpaying citizens.

Add to these the culture of grabbing of rivers, forestlands and khas lands by the different vested groups including activists and supporters of the ruling party. To cut the long story short, the political corruption has only supplied the last straw to the pervasive administrative corruption.

To make things worse, the government, rather than strengthening the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) further, has made some moves that may, if materialised, go to cripple it. The report of the committee, for example, that the government formed last year towards making the ACC transparent and accountable is a classic case on this score. These include certain recommendations like the provision of seeking government permission to sue a public servant, or that of making the anti-graft body accountable to the president, or of robbing it of its status as a statutory body and so on.

However, given this unenviable record in addressing corruption thus far, the result could be worse than what we have now from TI.

There is no gainsaying the glaring fact that corruption has further spread its tentacles in every sphere of the administration and society. To stem the rot, the government would do well to revisit its electoral pledges, especially on combating corruption.

To that that end, the first thing it must do will be to rein in its party activists and the public representatives elected on its ticket and allow the administration do its job according to rule. At the same time, it should allow the ACC to function as a self-governing body with no political strings attached so that it may work without fear or favour.

## Expected arrival of new cabs

*Has the homework been done?*

On the very face of it, the talk of importing 6,740 new taxi cabs for the capital by this year looks like a classic case of misplaced emphasis. It smacks of a sense of desperation, too. The causes for such pessimistic remarks are not far to seek. In the first place, there are severe constraints in road space that is already overflowing with traffic causing ever increasing levels of congestion, leave aside the excruciating hardship for the commuters, loss of man hours and damage wreaked on the economy. Where, for god's sake, is the room for nearly 7,000 new transports in addition to the new buses being planned to ply?

We are given to understand that a new policy is under preparation with inputs from all stakeholders so that we deem it fit to proffer our own suggestion in the light of the failed earlier taxi service of which 80 percent vehicles have gone kaput. For a time, a lot of enthusiasm marked the launching of the taxi service in 1999. Then flawed financing, arbitrary daily deposit rate, uncontrolled fares, lack of security, overuse of transports and dearth of parking and servicing facilities made the experiment a failure. However, one sees the potential for efficiently run, easily available, non-refusing taxi service that is at the same time affordable as an alternative to private cars which are put to road at a rate of 200 new vehicles per day.

We wonder why we get our basics wrong and our emphasis pattern flawed? First and foremost, we need to recover one-third of our total parking space in the city currently lost to illegal occupation through setting up of shops and various crafts. We know of land shown as parking space attached approved designs for building but which were leased out to shop owners to set up their business. These are legally actionable offences. Some time back these were identified and effort made, only halfheartedly though, to recover the land parcels meant for parking vehicles lost to illegal occupation. This is a doable option provided the authorities are serious and determined to restore the spaces to parking. Simultaneously, multi-tier high-rise parking levels will have to be built up in the private sector through bank financing.

The overarching need is for building a mass transport system without which a capital city cannot simply function.

## MDGs: Challenges for Bangladesh

Reaching the targets will be a great challenge for Bangladesh. But it is not impossible. We have to give emphasis on employment, women empowerment, and education. If we can develop in these areas then it will be easier to reach the MDGs targets.

SAYEED ARMAN

TEN years have passed since the United Nations adopted the Millennium Declaration, which gave rise to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In September 2000, world leaders endorsed the Millennium Declaration, a commitment to work together to build a safer, more prosperous and equitable world. Since then, countries around the world have worked tirelessly to reach these goals.

A few countries in Asia have been very successful in implementing these goals; others have made satisfactory progress and a few are still lagging behind the rest. Bangladesh received the UN award for its remarkable achievements in attaining the Millennium Development Goals, particularly in reducing child mortality.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina received the award at a colourful function at New York's Astoria Hotel on September 19. Nepal, Cambodia, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Rwanda also received awards. But that does not mean that we are in a good position. Consulting a few different sources one can begin to understand what's going on in Bangladesh with regard to the MDGs.

**Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger:** With regards to poverty, Bangladesh is on track. But when it comes to achieving full, productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people, we have made slow progress. That figure has gone up from 48% in the base year to 58.5% (current status).

Here, our target is ensuring employment for all. When it comes to removing hunger our progress has been very satisfactory. But the issue of child malnutrition, which is still around 50%, needs closer scrutiny and is one area where we can still do a lot to improve the situation.

**Achieving universal primary education:** This is a sector where progress has been commendable. Most regions of Bangladesh have primary enrolment ratios above 85%, and many even above 91%; in comparison to the base year percentage of 60 this is a great leap forward.

ward.

However, we must also keep an eye on dropout rates, and even though in 2009 the primary completion rate was close to 80% there is little scope for complacency. Adult literacy is also on the rise and that bodes well for our future, with rates going up from 37% in the base year to 72% now.

**Promoting gender equality and empower women:** The target is to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015, while also empowering women. The ratio of girls to boys in primary education, secondary education and tertiary education shows that we have mixed success.

Though the proportion of seats held by women in the national Parliament has increased, our target remains for it to eventually be 33%. On the flip side, the share of women in wage employment in the non-agriculture sector is quite low. We should try our best to even the playing field for them.

**Reducing child mortality:** The picture is mixed here. We have to consider the target from three different positions. They are under five mortality rate, infant mortality rate and proportion of one-year-old children immunised against measles.

There were 146 mortalities per thousand live births in base year, and in 2010 that number was down to 67. But our target of 48 is still to be achieved and we have only five years to do so. The number of one-year-old children immunised against measles went up from 54% in the base year to 88%, the last year for which information was readily available. Infant mortality rate (per 1000 live births) target is 31. But now it is 45.

**Improving maternal health:** Here, progress is now satisfactory. The target is to reduce the maternal mortality ratio by three-quarters between 1990 and 2015, but the ratio in Bangladesh has declined from 547 to 348 per lac.

Most of these deaths could have been avoided if care and access to emergency obstetric care was more readily available. Achieving this target (144) will be very challenging, but not out of reach. We



have the structural facilities and just need to develop a system to use them properly.

**Combatting HIV/AIDS and other diseases:** This is an area of great concern. Only 15.8% Bangladeshis aged 15 to 24 have some knowledge of HIV/AIDS. Malaria is also a worry. It has been said that the death rate associated with malaria per lac population was 0.37 in 2000 and now it is 0.11. If that is to be believed then we seem to be on track there.

**Ensuring environmental sustainability:** We have not really taken this issue fully. There is much that we can do differently. The first being putting it on our list of national priorities along with education and health, because it is just as important. Consumption of ozone depleting CFCs in metric tons was 195 in base year. The target is 0 but now it is 155. It's a great challenge.

**Developing a global partnership:** It seems like Bangladesh is not sufficiently active in developing global partnerships.

At present, Bangladesh is trying to build regional partnerships, and while that may be a good sign there is still much left to be done on the international scale. We need to be more active here.

The Millennium Development Goals that have to be achieved by 2015 correspond to the world's main development challenges. The MDGs are drawn from the actions and targets contained in the Millennium Declaration that was adopted by 189 nations and signed by 147 heads of state and governments during the UN Millennium Summit in September 2000.

Reaching the targets will be a great challenge for Bangladesh. But it is not impossible. We have to give emphasis on employment, women empowerment, and education. These are the focal points. If we can develop in these areas then it will be easier to reach the MDGs targets.

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## New balance of power in the Middle East?



The highlight of the trip, however, occurred on October 14 when Ahmadinejad travelled to the south of Lebanon, just a few kilometres away from the Israeli border, as he toured southern Lebanese villages destroyed during the 2006 conflict.

HARUN UR RASHID

IRAN'S President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad arrived to a rapturous welcome in Beirut on October 13 for a landmark visit that takes him to the border of Israel and is seen as a boost for its ally Hezbollah.

The visit came upon the invitation of Lebanese President Michel Suleiman. This meant Lebanon wanted to strengthen ties with Iran, an emerging regional power.

The leader was greeted by tens of thousands of Lebanese as his convoy made its way from the airport toward the presidential palace under a shower of rice, sweets and rose petals.

Along the old airport road, that carried the president to the Lebanese presiden-

tial palace, towers of speakers blared in unison, playing songs in Arabic and Persian written for the occasion.

Standing upright in an open black truck, Ahmadinejad clapped his hands as he acknowledged the delighted crowds, many of whom had been waiting several hours to catch a glimpse of the 53-year-old leader.

Ahmadinejad waved and smiled to the men, women and children who lined the roads outside the airport screaming "Khosh Amadi" (welcome in Farsi) and "Allahu akbar" (God is greatest) as they waved Iranian flags.

"The enemies of Lebanon and Iran are terrified when they see the two nations standing alongside one another," Ahmadinejad told Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, who greeted him at the

airport, the official Iranian news agency IRNA reported.

"Iran and Lebanon have common points of view. Both countries are against the occupation, aggression and crimes committed by the Zionists," he said.

President Ahmadinejad met with President Michel Suleiman and Prime Minister Saad Hariri as well as a number of politicians. Official banquets organised in his honour reportedly did not include Western ambassadors.

Ahmadinejad was accompanied by Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki and a delegation of business leaders. A number of agreements in the energy and water sectors were signed.

Ahmadinejad's first visit since his election in 2005 will highlight the clout Iran wields in Lebanon through Hezbollah, considered Tehran's proxy and by far the most powerful military and political force in the small Mediterranean country.

The highlight of the trip, however, occurred on October 14 when Ahmadinejad travelled to the south of Lebanon, just a few kilometres away from the Israeli border, as he toured southern Lebanese villages destroyed during the 2006 conflict.

He stopped in Bint Jbeil, a Hezbollah bastion devastated during the war, and in Qana, targeted in 1996 and again in 2006 by deadly Israeli air strikes.

Iran has been a major donor in the reconstruction of southern Lebanon following the month-long 2006 war, and Ahmadinejad received a hero's welcome in the area.

The president's trip also came at a sensitive time in politically turbulent Lebanon.

Hezbollah is locked in a standoff with Prime Minister Saad Hariri over unconfirmed reports that a UN-backed tribunal is set to indict members of the militant group over the 2005 assassination of Hariri's father, ex-premier Rafiq Hariri.

Tensions over the tribunal have grown steadily in recent weeks, raising fears of renewed sectarian violence, and the Lebanese prime minister was preparing to announce a new government after

granting concessions to his rivals in the Hezbollah-led opposition on key cabinet posts.

The two-day official trip has sparked criticism among Lebanon's pro-Western parliamentary majority, who see it as a bid to portray the country as "an Iranian base in the Mediterranean."

The United States and Israel, which have sought to isolate Iran over its nuclear programme, have also expressed concern and reportedly attempted to persuade the Lebanese government to cancel the trip.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, on a tour of the Balkans, sent a thinly veiled warning to the Iranian president. "We reject any efforts to destabilise or enslave tensions within Lebanon. And we would hope that no visitor would do anything or say anything that would give cause to greater tension or instability in that country," Clinton said.

President Ahmadinejad sought to depict his country as an ally of the entire nation, not just Hezbollah. But analysts say Ahmadinejad's dramatic arrival only exacerbated fears among many Lebanese -- particularly Sunnis and Christians -- that Iran and Hezbollah are seeking to impose their will on the country and possibly pull Lebanon into a conflict with Israel.

Analysts say that Saudi Arabia and Egypt had influenced political events in the past in Lebanon, but it seems they have given up Lebanon as they are trying to save Iraq from Iranian influence. However, the visit of the Iraqi Prime Minister Nour al-Maliki to Iran on October 19 demonstrates Iran's rising influence in Iraq.

Furthermore, the young, astute Prime Minister of Lebanon Saad Hariri has realised that, given its geography and political history, it cannot have strained relations with Syria and with the new power in the region, Iran.

While Iran gains strength in Lebanon and in Iraq, the dynamics of balance of power has changed in the region.

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