

Challenges to our food security



Availability of food grains or even food does not in itself guarantee food security for all households or individuals in the country. Even when aggregate food supplies are adequate, a number of factors prevent poor households or individuals from having access to required food. These, among others, are: (1) income poverty, and (2) insufficient food assistance.

Food security at household level is closely linked with income poverty. Around 40% of the population lives below poverty line, and this comes to about 60 million as per present total population estimated by the government. They lack adequate purchasing power for procurement of food. Income poverty, which causes food insecurity in the households, results mainly from (a) insufficient government and private sector investment in physical infrastructure, (b) little non-farming activities in rural areas, (c) poor wages of agricultural labour, (d) seasonal unemployment of agricultural labour, and (e) high prices of foodstuffs in comparison with the increase in income level of the poor.

The situation is the worst with the destitute, sick, old and infirm who are incapable of participating in income generating opportunities. According to National Food Policy Plan of Action (NFPPA) 2008, population in this category stands at 7.8%.

Although there has been some improvement in the system of food delivery to the poor, it remains inadequate to supplement their food acquisition capacity in order to enable them to have access to required food.

Utilisation of food, including its nutritional value, is another important component of food security. Various studies on utilisation of food, including utilisation at household level, show (a) inequality in intra-household food allocation, (b) dietary imbalance, and (c) loss of volume, quality and nutritional values because of improper storage, processing and cooking practices.

The PM definitely kept these challenges in view while expressing her government's resolve to ensure food security for "every person" in the country. Bangladesh has huge potential to increase food crop productivity, fisheries and livestock despite climate change effects if right policies are followed. The government should not be complacent with "rejection" of the UNFPA report on the country's current population growth rate and total population.

It must be admitted that the country's family planning programme, that had once drawn global appreciation for its success in reducing the annual population growth rate, has lost its way in recent years. The government has not been much attentive to the field-level service delivery to the eligible couples. This programme needs immediate reactivation. Minister Abdur Razzaque was right when he said: "Booming population will directly affect the food security of the country."

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary.

food security in Bangladesh. In recent days, the government failed to maintain the food grain stocks of 10 lakh tonnes prescribed by National Food Policy (NFP) 2006, which has sent a wrong signal to the market. Coarse rice is selling at Tk. 34-35 a kilogram, exposing the poor and the vulnerable to food insecurity.

The emphasis placed on rice production has resulted in increased dependency on imports for non-food grain commodities, such as, pulses, oil-seeds and fruits, which remain unaffordable to many consumers, especially poor consumers.

The proverbial "*machhey bhatey Bangalee*" is now a distant memory because of quick disappearance of farmland and water bodies. Against the demand for 10 million tonnes of vegetables, the current vegetable production in the country is around 2 million tonnes.

Climate change and global warming are going to pose a serious threat to the country's food security by adversely affecting food production. Agricultural scientists have predicted that the country's rice production will decrease by 8% and wheat by 32% by 2050 due to climate change. Other food constituents, including vegetables, pulses and fish would also be adversely affected due to climate change and global warming.

While addressing the 65th Session of the UN General Assembly on September 26, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina thus aptly said: "Bangladesh has been adversely affected by global warming. Food security is faced with serious threats due to climate change and global warming. Though our share of carbon emissions is negligible, we are its worst victims."

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M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

WHILE speaking at a function on November 10 for distribution of agro inputs to flash-flood affected farmers of haor area under Taherpur upazila in Sunamganj district, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said: "We don't want to see that a single person is starving, we are relentlessly working for ensuring food security for every person," adding that her government took "massive programmes including lowering of fertiliser prices for development of agriculture sector and providing huge subsidy to bring agro inputs to the doorsteps of farmers."

Food security is basically defined as "access by all people at all times to the food needed for an active and healthy life." While welcoming the PM's resolve to ensure food security we shall have to bear in mind that although food security is not unattainable, it is at the same time very challenging because of a number of highly adverse factors that the country faces.

The key dimensions of food security challenges are: (i) food availability, (ii) access to food, and (iii) utilisation of food. Our discussion on challenges to food security in Bangladesh revolves around these dimensions.

Food availability is the first component of food security. In the context of Bangladesh, domestic food production is the most important component of food availability. Bangladesh has trebled her production of food grains, particularly rice, since independence, from approximately 100 lakh tonnes in 1971-72 to slightly over 3 crore tonnes in 2009-10.

But, can the present trend of food grain production meet the requirements of a burgeoning population? Population growth rate is outpacing food grain growth rate. In its "State of the World Population 2010" report, the UNFPA puts the present population of Bangladesh at 164.4 million (the government says the present population of the country is 146.0 million) and predicts that the country's population will be 220.2 million by 2050. While unveiling the aforesaid UNFPA report as chief guest, Food and Disaster Management Minister Abdur Razzaque reportedly said that the booming population would directly affect the food security of the country.

Building up sufficient stocks of food grains (rice and wheat) in government warehouses is considered indispensable for ensuring

Injustice revisited

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SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

JUSTICE or absence of justice is receiving countrywide attention. The court is there. It will take care of that. The jurists and the law experts of the country have a sensitive agenda before them. In short, I can say that a good society and civilisation is based not just on justice but also on principles to counter injustice.

Western society prides itself on justice. But in spite of their moral stance from the pedestal the world is not what it should be. Injustice savages many parts of the world. Hauteur, when it adds lethal clout to injustice, becomes a heavy cross to bear for mankind.

Israel is the most incorrigible perpetrator of injustice in today's world. The western world led by America appears to be under bondage to Israel. They are so supplicating in their negotiations with Israel! A peace negotiation for an independent Palestine constituting of West Bank and Gaza strip has been going on between the Israeli government and Palestinian representatives under the auspices of America.

A ten-month moratorium on Israeli settlements ended in September. Israel's hawkish Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu quickly ordered the building of 600 settlements in the

West Bank and 238 homes in occupied East Jerusalem. The belligerent Israeli prime minister bluntly said that there could be no negotiation on the status of Jerusalem -- it was the capital of Israel.

The US is meekly pleading for another 90-day moratorium to spur on the Middle East negotiation. Israel haughtily ignores the appeal. When two EU foreign ministers visited Israel for a moratorium on settlements they were told to look after their own house.

The preamble of UN Security Council Resolution 242, adopted on November 22, 1967 after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, emphasises the principle of international law of the "inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war and the need to work for a just and lasting peace in the Middle East in which every state in the area can live in security."

Operative Paragraph One "affirms that the fulfillment of Charter principles requires the establishment of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East," which should include the application of the main principle that Israel should withdraw its armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict.

Israel continues to blatantly flout the resolution. As of July 2009 it has built 121 settlements in West Bank with a population of 304,569, East Jerusalem has 192,000 settlers and the Golan

Heights in Syria has 20,000. The current population of West Bank is around 2.5 million and that of Gaza strip around 0.9 million. Total Arab population in East Jerusalem is 0.244 million. Israel has another 1.5 million Arab population. That brings about parity in population between the two communities.

The tragic message is that one half of the population, the Israelis, have kept the other half, the Palestinian Arabs, under occupation for more than 50 years. There was a fundamental miscarriage of justice in the birth of the state of Israel. The General Assembly in its resolution number GA 181 gave 57% of the Palestinian land to the Jewish people, who constituted only one-third of the total population of Palestine.

At the time of partition the Arabs owned about half of the Palestinian land, slightly less than half was "crown" land, and the Jewish Agency owned 8%. There were about 0.6 million Jews and 1.2 million Arabs in the land of Palestine during partition.

The Jewish settlers have been placed on the hilltops. From their vantage points they commit all sorts of atrocities on the West Bank Arab community settled in the valley below. They burn their crops, beat up their males, females and children, torch their homes, smear Hebrew graffiti on mosques and burn them. The Israeli government has stationed military force to safeguard the Arabs. But they sit idle and ignore their complaints.

Autumn is harvesting season for the Palestinian Arabs. Olives are a major crop for them. They press the oil out and keep them in jars for export. The marauding Israeli settlers have been

raiding the Palestinian Arabs during the harvest season over the years, but this year's attack was most violent and rampaging. About 0.1 million Palestinian Arab families depend on the 10 million trees there. Under protection the trees will live for hundreds of years.

The facts on the ground favour the Israeli settlers. Israeli military nearby, fortified in steel and concrete structures, view the scorched earth drive launched by the Israeli settlers on the hilltop. The olive trees are torched row after row and the raiders go unpunished.

One Israeli prime minister exhorted his soldiers to crush the bones of the Palestinian "Shababs." Now, a concrete wall shuts out the West Bank, flouting international rule. The Israeli army's sense of justice rankles in the heart when they go violently after Palestinian kids and remain impassive when the settlers torch the olive trees. The western world has different sets of rules for different communities. They hold hands with Israel but roar against Iran.

There was a leader by the name of Martin Luther King Jr. who fell victim to the malice of racists. He once said: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Israel, according to the Western press, has 46 atomic weapons. But International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) remains silent about it and has cocked all its cannons against Iran.

When Portugal left East Timor in 1975 it (East Timor) was annexed by Indonesia as one of its many provinces. The western powers put pressure on Indonesia. The UN adopted a resolution on East-Timorese self-determination. Indonesia relinquished



the occupation and East Timor became a sovereign country on May 20, 2002. East Timor today is the second predominantly Roman Catholic country in Asia after Philippines with a 0.95 million population.

Now the western world's focus is on Southern Sudan and Darfur. The government of Omar al Bashir is acting on plans of holding a plebiscite in Southern Sudan. The Internal Court of Justice made Bashir an ostracised person. His economic reforms have worked wonders for Sudan. The plebiscite is scheduled to be held in January 2011. Southern Sudan constitutes around 25% of Sudan and has a population of 8.9 million. Justice is making progress in Sudan without the mediation and assistance of its former colonial masters.

Let me come back to our region of South Asia. Famous Indian writer

Arundhati Roy brought frenzied scorn upon her when she said: "Kashmir was never a part of India." That was blasphemy in the eyes of the zealots of India. Her house has been pelted her compound has been vandalised.

But history supports Arundhati Roy, in the form of the United Nations General Assembly resolutions on Kashmir about holding a plebiscite. The resolutions on holding plebiscite in Kashmir are No. 38, (January 17, 1948), No. 39 (January 26, 1948) and No. 47 (April 21, 1948).

Kashmir is the only Muslim majority province of India, where 5.7 million Muslims constitute 97% of the valley's population. Do India's moral stripes favour granting plebiscite to the agitating Kashmiris because of the prospects of a permanent seat in the UN Security Council?

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Dealing with stalking

In the longer run, punishment alone will not be able to eradicate stalking from the society. Alongside punishment, innovative social initiatives are essential for rooting out the menace from the society and ensuring peaceful co-existence of young people regardless of gender.

SHAIKUL KAZI

THE government initiative -- which will be effective from November 10 -- for empowering mobile courts under Section 509 of the Penal Code to punish stalkers with one-year imprisonment or fine, or both, is an appropriate and much demanded step. However, mobile courts should be conducted in a free and fair manner so that no one can abuse the operation of the courts through interference.

Stalking is a social problem, which stems from mismanagement in the social structure. Consequently, in the longer run, punishment alone will not be able to eradicate stalking from the society. Alongside punishment, innovative social initiatives are essential for rooting out the menace from the society and ensuring peaceful co-existence of young people regardless of gender.

We see that teenagers or young men, who are the future of our nation, are engaged in stalking their female counterparts in parks, shopping malls, buses, trains and on the way to-and back from work. Moreover, women sometimes face sexual harassment at their workplace as well.

Development of a society is not possible without the equal participation of men and women in the work force. Consequently, peaceful co-existence of men and women in all spheres of the society is indispensable. This peaceful co-existence should be ensured at home, school, workplace and any other social institutions and programmes.

In order to remove mismanagement from the social structure and thereby to stop the birth of stalkers certain steps could be undertaken from the grassroots to the upper level. The first step in this regard could be undertaken at the family level by considering boy and girl babies as equal in the family. This equality could then be passed to school and finally to the workplace. As soon as we can ensure gender equality at these three macro institutions of the society, there will be no place for the stalkers.

Moreover, the state could formulate a policy regarding sports and recreation for the young people. Under the policy, the government could instruct schools, local government bodies (municipalities, upazillas and union parishads), and local clubs to arrange on regular basis different events and programmes for the young people. Lack of fun and amusement could make young people perverted. It is our responsibility to establish social institutions and organisations that will provide young people with opportunities to have fun and amusement.

In Finland, in each locality there is a *nuorisotalo* (youth club) where young people meet on regular basis and enjoy activities such as football, basketball, table tennis or video games. The main aim of the youth clubs is to provide young people with activities designed to keep youth off the streets. The government of Bangladesh could study the implementation of youth club model with a view to engage young people in life-building activities.

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