

## Striving for MIC status

*Well-thought-out strategy is need of the hour*

HAVING got used to the appellation of LDC (Least Developed Country) for our economic status since 1975, it sounds exhilarating when the finance minister AMA Muhith makes a strong case for upgrading it to a Middle Income Country (MIC) at the fourth LDC conference of the UN to be held in Istanbul in May next year. But what advantage the country and its people will gain from such enhancement of status under the new category of MIC?

Sure enough, Bangladesh must lay its claim to any place on the world stage that it has truly earned. And if by being categorised under the rubric of an MIC means a markedly improved standard of living for the common people, then the government must press ahead with such aspiration.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has ranked Bangladesh as the 48th largest economy of the world in 2009 with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of US\$ 256 billion, while its growth rate (GDP) was estimated at 6 per cent. Interestingly, the IMF's ranking does speak positively for the economy. Meanwhile, the economy has also made some progress in terms of improving the human development index (HDI), which is due to reduced infant mortality rate, better gross secondary school enrolment record and adult literacy records and other indicators relating to human capital status. Similarly, the factors that determine the economic vulnerability criteria, such as demographic growth rate, export volume, preparedness against natural calamities, contribution to the GDP from the industry and service sectors vis-à-vis agriculture and so on have also undergone some improvement over the years. However, the per capita income at US\$ 750 per head is still well below graduation threshold of US\$1056.

So, in spite of some positive developments on the economic and human development fronts, Bangladesh will still have to go a long way to achieve its longed-for status as a Middle Income Country (MIC). And to cap it all, the best performance that Bangladesh needs to make on its way to the longed-for status of a Middle Income Country will be to concentrate all its efforts on vastly improving its human development capital as well as reducing the ever widening income gap between the poor and rich through proper distribution of the Gross National Income (GNI) among the population. For the aggregate income of a nation is apt to hide the extreme poverty of the majority of the population, while a handful among them might be enjoying the lion's share of the benefits of economic growth.

While striving for reaching the status of an MIC, we cannot lose sight of the fact that it is the quality of life of the population that should be the primary focus of all development activities. It is, therefore, expected that the present government would devise its strategy accordingly to achieve the status of an MIC within the next two or three decades.

## Making Bangladesh's women feel secure

*Rhetoric must be translated into action*

THE figures say it all. Between January and September this year, no fewer than 434 incidents of stalking of women have been recorded in the country. In the same period, 22 women, unable to resist their tormentors, opted to commit suicide. Note too that other instance of shame in the period we speak of: 34 fatwas have been issued in different regions of the country over incidents involving women -- and this when there are clear High Court directives against fatwas. Overall, these figures inform us of all that we as citizens yet need to do where guaranteeing the safety and security of women is concerned. There is little question that a clear degree of awareness has been created among the populace regarding the menace of stalking or sexual harassment of women throughout the country. The spirited manner in which citizens have been coming together to combat the danger is out there for us to see. It is a condition that should make us feel happy, for seemingly matters are under control. But are they?

Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, which at its news conference on Wednesday to mark International Women Repression Resistance Fortnightly duly reminded the nation of the worries which yet remain. Add to that the efforts being expended by the Campaign to Work with Men and Boys, a network of 32 NGOs engaged in securing justice for women, towards ensuring an end to stalking and sexual harassment. Both the organizations have served clear notice that the movement to make our women safe in every sense of the term must move from rhetoric to concrete action. While one may feel happy at all this sense of awareness on the issue being raised, one will also understand the thought that unless the government moves swiftly and unrelentingly against stalkers and others who abuse the rights and dignity of women, not much will be there to demonstrate our collective seriousness about the issue. The Bangladesh Mahila Parishad has urged the authorities to go for a tougher handling of the menace facing women through a full and unfettered application of such laws as the domestic violence act. One must note here that when we speak of the problems women face in the country, it is not merely the matter of stalking but a whole range of abuses both in the home and outside as well that they are confronted with. At this point, we cannot reassure ourselves that our enhanced awareness of women's rights has in a significant way led to a decline in violence against them. The suicides and the fatwas issued by unscrupulous men are a sign of the mindset yet remaining resistant to attitudinal change in our society.

Whilst expressing solidarity with the Fortnightly, to be observed between November 25 and December 10, we look upon this as one more opportunity for a meaningful push to be given to the movement against violence perpetrated on women. Let us not delude ourselves: unless we begin to see results (and those can be ensured only with a tough administration in charge), we cannot convince ourselves that Bangladesh's women --- at home, in the workplace and on the roads --- are safe and that their dignity and reputations will no more be trifled with.

## The house of discontent

The fact remains that if Khaleda Zia is guilty of keeping that house, Hussein Muhammad Ershad, who gave her that house, should be guilty of giving it. In April 2009, the former strongman bragged in front of reporters that he had given the house because he was concerned about Khaleda's two sons. He also said that had he known she was going to pursue politics, he would not have given her the house.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

NICCOLO Machiavelli, the father of Machiavellism, contends that men are so inclined to obey their immediate needs that a deceiver will never lack in victims for his deception. Now that the government has got us to believe the cantonment house given to Khaleda Zia was an ab initio scam, we know a deception took place some thirty years ago.

The two-time, arguably three-time, former prime minister finally reconciled with the naivety of the widow of an assassinated president when she was evicted from that house on November 12. The irony is that while the victim got what she rightly or wrongly deserved, the deceiver out there is having a ball.

Much of this country now looks like a Machiavellian proposition. For those who don't know, Machiavellism is the political doctrine which denies the relevance of morality in political affairs and holds that craft and deceit are justified in pursuing and maintaining political power. We are so doggedly focused on political power that any means justifies the end.

Rewind history and in 1981 Khaleda must have been inclined to obey her immediate needs after the brutal killing of her husband, and her mind, like that of any mother in the world, must have been full of concern over the future of her two underage children. So it may not be fair to blame her entirely for accepting a sprawling house inside the classified zone of Dhaka Cantonment.

Those who allotted her that house should have known better. But it appears that they had something up their sleeve. All that time their original intention was to pull a fast one on the people of this



country and defraud the bereaved family of a fallen leader.

From the very onset, the cantonment house was used as an excuse to implement the clever ruse of an upcoming dictator. The size of the house didn't bother anybody when it was given away, because who could be concerned over a few acres when there was a bigger fish to fry. It was a small trade-off for the entire country, all of its 56,000 square miles.

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also said that had he known she was going to pursue politics, he would not have given her the house.

It's another story that this chameleon-like man pretends to be a late bloomer. But Khaleda didn't lose that house because his decision to give was wrong. She lost that house because his very giving was unlawful. Here, nobody is questioning the judgment but the intention. It was a mischief done in bad taste.

By his own admission, Ershad was the

country more than once. True, her sons may have amassed fortunes by questionable means. True, the family could afford to give up that house as a gesture of reasonableness. But that they didn't do it only shows that they are mere mortals like the rest of us.

Many of us mortals have stolen from the public, which they never bothered to return. And here we are talking about a house that was given with the sanction of the state. Khaleda could prove she was magnanimous by giving it up of her own

volition. But that she didn't do it could question her magnanimity, not her right to live in that house.

The government should have served notice on the Cantonment Board and the then army chief instead of the occupant of the disputed house. Only after it was sorted with them, could the government turn to vacate the premises. By that time one would have expected to see some incrimination of those who gave away public property for political gains.

On November 12, this nation witnessed yet another watershed in national depravity. One who had been cheated was found guilty, and one who was guilty is reigning free.

True, the one-time housewife moved on to become the prime minister of this

man behind that illegal action. In that case, if Khaleda was evicted, he should have been convicted. And convicted he should be on two counts. One is for committing a grief-stricken family in 1981. Another is for giving away a parcel of government land without competent authority.

French writer Jean-Paul Sartre writes: "I hate victims who respect their executioners." It is too late for Khaleda to realise, but that is the actual story of her house. She had taken a gift from a man who she alleged to have had a hand in her husband's killing. If she is wondering what she did to deserve the embarrassment, this was her original sin.

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## Respond sternly

Warning of the possibility of follow-up attacks by the North, Lee also urged the armed forces to unite and retaliate with "manifold firepower." To prevent another provocation, it is necessary to mete out stern punishment. In this respect, it was right for Lee to call for a "formidable response" to make North Korea incapable of provoking the South again.

EDITORIAL DESK, *The Korea Herald*

NORTH Korea fired on Tuesday (November 23) a barrage of artillery shells toward South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island near the West Sea border, killing two South Korean marines and two civilians and wounding more than a dozen soldiers and civilians. The South Korean military responded by firing some 80 shots toward the North using its K-9 self-propelled guns.

The North's attack is an obvious act of war. As South Korean President Lee Myung-bak said, the provocation is "an invasion of South Korean territory." In particular, it was the North's first artillery firing on a populated area in the South since the Korean War. Lee said it was unpardonable for the North to shell civilians on the island. For indiscriminate attacks on civilians, Lee said "a response beyond the rules of engagement" was necessary.

Warning of the possibility of follow-up attacks by the North, Lee also urged the armed forces to unite and retaliate with "manifold firepower." To prevent another provocation, it is necessary to mete out stern punishment. In this respect, it was right for Lee to call for a "formidable response" to make North Korea incapable of provoking the South again.

The ostensible reason for the North's artillery attack was a maritime exercise the South's navy was conducting near the western sea border on Tuesday. The 'Hoguk Exercise,' one of South Korea's three major annual defense exercises, began Monday (November 22) with some 70,000 troops participating.

According to reports, the North sent a message to Seoul denouncing the exercise earlier in the day.

However, the maritime drill is nothing more than a pretext. The Joint Chief of Staff dismissed the connection, saying the North's artillery landed well south of Tuesday's drill location. What are the North's real motives? First of all, it could be an attempt to intimidate the South into giving up its hard-line policy toward the North and accepting its request for economic aid.

North Korea has recently sought to restart six-party nuclear disarmament talks after a two-year hiatus. But few in the South believe it is ready to give up its nuclear weapons programme. Rather, it is seeking to use the talks as a means of having international sanctions on it lifted and improving ties with Washington. But Seoul and Washington have refused to engage in talks for the sake of talks and demanded the North first show sincerity by fulfilling previous pledges to curtail its nuclear programme.

Rebuffed by Seoul and Washington, the North sought to up the ante last week by unveiling its new uranium programme, which would pose a more serious nuclear threat than its existing plutonium programme. It showed US scientists its new "stunning" uranium enrichment facility with some 2,000 centrifuges.

But this apparently failed to make policymakers in Seoul and Washington move in the direction the North wanted.

Playing down the North's latest advances in uranium enrichment, Washington officials flatly said they would not be "drawn into rewarding North Korea for bad behaviour."

Then came the artillery fire on Yeonpyeong Island. The attack could be seen as the North's desperate attempt to get the talks started and secure economic aid from the South and US. North Korea is, for all intents and pur-



poses, an economic basket case. Remember Kim Jong-il had to visit China twice this year to get aid. But he reportedly failed to win as much support as he needed. He had no other place to look to than South Korea and US. But to his frustration, Seoul and Washington have been adamant in demanding action toward disarmament.

Another motive behind the provocation may be to consolidate the power base of Kim Jong-un, the youngest son of the North Korean leader who recently emerged as the heir apparent. Transferring power to the junior Kim is a rocky process because he lacks legitimacy.

Furthermore the continuing economic difficulties in the North have fueled discontent among the public. The best way to distract people from the reality and have them close ranks behind the young leader is to heighten tension on the Korean Peninsula.

The North knows well how to do this - trigger a conflict. The firing on Yeonpyeong Island clearly shows how the North views the South. It must be thinking that it can always provoke South Korea with an attack and get away with it, just as it did when it destroyed the Cheonan corvette in March this year.

Although the North killed 46 sailors on board the fateful ship, it received no censure. This probably emboldened it to conduct another act of war against the South

without fear of retaliation.

That being the case, it was right that President Lee ordered a stern response to the North's unprovoked attack. He ordered the military to punish the North "through action," not just words, saying it was important to stop the communist regime from contemplating additional provocation.

Yet while it is necessary to respond sternly to the North's provocation, Seoul officials should always keep a level head. They should make sure that they do not play into the hands of the evil regime in the North. For their part, the public needs to brace for the North's continued belligerent action down the road. They need to be prepared to cope with emergencies resolutely and with composure. Politicians should stop partisan bickering and help the nation overcome a national crisis in unity.

Pyeongyang leaders should realise that their blackmail strategy no longer works. They would never be able to get what it wants from the South if it relies on threat and force. If the North continues to use the old tactic of extorting concessions from the South with military threat, it will only get despise and condemnation. The only way it can revitalise the economy and thereby maintain its fragile regime is to give up its nuclear ambitions. Otherwise, it will only accelerate its ruin.

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