

Graft-ridden service sector

Change must start from within

THE picture provided by the survey titled, "Service Sector Corruption: National Households Survey 2010," conducted by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), is stunning, to say the least. The households surveyed shared their experience of 13 service sectors and the period covered was between June 2009 and May of this year. What is even more disconcerting is that this is only the tip of the iceberg. To paraphrase the comments of the chairman of the Anti-Corruption Commission, this was not the full picture of corruption in the country but only a part, and that prevalence of corruption was more than this survey has revealed.

It is not that we have been taken completely by surprise by the survey report. What causes the shockwave about the TIB report is not the existence, of which we are all aware, but the extent to which corruption has permeated in every nook and cranny of the government and non-government service institutions in Bangladesh. It is startling that more than eighty percent of the households in the country had to pay for services they are guaranteed to receive, and which the service providers are obligated to provide, free of cost.

It may be in order to quote some figures just to put the issue in perspective. For example, the survey has revealed that 71.9 percent households directly paid bribes for services and that on an average each household paid Tk 4,834, which adds up to Tk. 9,591 crore. It is mind boggling that 88 percent of households that sought service at courts said they had experienced different types of corruption and harassment at the judiciary. And according to the survey, although most people had to cough up money when seeking the services of the judiciary, the frequency of bribe-taking puts the law enforcement agencies on top of the chart of most corrupt service sectors although the incidence of graft taking in the law enforcement agencies has decreased in the last three years.

While corruption per se is one of the challenges to good governance and stunts government efforts to deliver the goods to the people, the main cause of our worry is the involvement of two major institutions of the government, that are considered the two most important apparatus for providing good governance, in corruption -- the judiciary and the law enforcement agencies. When rule of law becomes rule of men, and when money is used to buy justice, there is very little confidence that the public can repose in the government to ensure its security. And when people suffer from insecurity, nothing can stem the erosion of public credibility about the government.

Admittedly, corruption cannot be made to vanish overnight if it can be made to vanish at all. But the government has to lead the way by showing that it will not countenance corruption. To start with, the oversight agencies must be strengthened, the corrupt at the higher echelons must be held to account, and last but not the least, acknowledge rather than deny that corruption exists, as was done so creditably by the Chief Justice recently, and promise to reform from within.

Early signs of export growth hope-giving

Need for sustaining momentum

WE have it on the authority of the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB) that the country's export outlook is brightening at a steady pace. The traders also sound upbeat about the rising trend. Not surprisingly, the reason for this buoyancy is ascribed to what is seen as a somewhat rapid recovery of the major importing countries from recession. The latter had whittled down demands from the western economies.

But there is a performance factor too, insofar as meeting the order schedules and demand specifications goes. This does credit to the workers, manufacturers, exporters, banks, transporters and customs and port authorities. Without their combined efforts the export growth couldn't have been attained.

What is the size of the export growth and what does it imply for future? Overall, in the first five months of the fiscal, 35.80 percent growth in export has been recorded over the level of the corresponding period of last year. The highest rate of growth at 40.30 percent has been notched by the frozen food sector, followed by knitwear product at 36.56 percent, woven garments at 35.83 percent and vegetable and allied products at 28.03 percent.

The next half of the fiscal is poised for further growth on account of two factors, one very consequential and the other no less so in a particular area. The exports to Eurozone are set to increase significantly with the introduction of the zero tariff facilities for Bangladesh by the EU taking effect in January, 2011. As a matter of fact, export volume is likely to grow from end-December itself keeping in view the forthcoming zero tariff access. In the coming months a spurt in demand is expected as the western economies emerge free of lingering effects of recession. Basically, the EU's relaxation of the rules of origin under the GSP for the least developed countries will enhance Bangladesh's accessibility to Eurozone. Moreover, Bangladesh garments are finding new destinations in Japan, South Africa, Latin American countries, Australia, New Zealand and China.

As for the second factor to push up export it will happen in frozen food area. The EU is likely to relax the strict nitrofurantoin test on shipments of shrimps from Bangladesh.

All these positive sound bytes raise our hopes for a handsome export growth by the time the fiscal year draws to a close. But bright as the trends may be we should be obliged to ensure steady energy supplies and keep the port functioning smoothly and efficiently. The overarching imperative is, however, made up of two elements: worker unrest is to be avoided and hartal ought to be eschewed.

Challenges to police professionalism

The spectre of unregulated political intervention in police work has to stop. While intervention is inevitable and necessary to some extent there is an imperative need to specify where government interference is justified and where it is not. The issue of setting up a security/safety commission to ensure police operational autonomy deserves serious attention.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

LAW enforcement and order maintenance, the two prime regulatory functions shall, for all time to come, occupy our thoughts and actions. The important question, however, in Bangladesh is, will the so-called public order maintenance and political intelligence collection take up most of the time of our police with little left for crime prevention, crime detection and service provision. In other words, how shall we venture to meaningfully contribute to organisational renewal and revitalisation and the nurturing of professional skills?

A dispassionate expert view is that the inherited colonial system has been expanded and strengthened but continues to perform its repressive role and political surveillance functions at the cost of its proper role. Some say that internal incentives do not exist to professionalise the service, insulate it from group conflicts in society and enable it to act in a non-partisan manner. Further, the police work on inadequate pay at lower levels and are corrupt in many levels.

Some experts opine that the politicians do not want to professionalise the police service because control over it is central to political conflict in a divided society. Such experts comment that although our polity adopted a written liberal democratic constitution, it did not feel any unease in retaining the colonial administrative, police and judicial struc-

tures. There were almost no pressures to recast the system to meet the changed situation.

Under above circumstances, the colonial-repressive character of our police remained because the governing elite of a supposedly decolonized society willingly retained the inherited organisation by ignoring justified demands for change. In effect, our system displays a relationship of control, coercion and surveillance over a subordinate population.

A police structure partly military and partly civil within a single organisation became the basic structure of the Indian police system. By mid-1930s, police coercion became a vital instrument of State policy. For the British Raj, crime and politics were inseparable; defiance of State authority was a serious crime and a prelude to rebellion, and therefore, political resistance was a crime or a likely occasion for crime. The political purpose behind the origin of Indian Police needs to be understood.

The question is, have our political leaders, who occupied positions of power after the departure of the alien rulers, remained enamoured by the administrative and police system and enjoyed exercising power and authority, oblivious of their own demand for far-reaching administrative reforms?

A worrying thought is, if we are witnessing a scenario in which both the public and police are caught in an increasingly norm-free, unpredictable and unjust environment? Is policing being transformed from the professional



imposition of a coherent moral consensus on society into an intensely partisan political activity?

It is time to ask if the alleged partisanship of the police has resulted from lack of professionalism and accountability within the organisation. There is a suspicion that the alleged political misuse of the police is the direct result of internal organizational problems and poor performance.

In order to render our police into a service organisation, we have to look at the Police Act, 1861 that prioritises collection and communication of intelligence affecting the public peace. Our penal code prioritises offences against the State and the maintenance of public order. The procedural code begins with the arrest of persons and maintenance of public order and tranquility before investigation and trial.

It is time to acknowledge that we have failed to introduce administrative changes in tune with the provisions of our republican constitution. The police largely remain in its colonial mould. It would be pragmatic to appreciate that the blanket power of superintendence

vested in the political government by the Police Act, 1861 is not appropriate in a democracy.

The role of intelligence agencies needs to be redefined to protect the fundamental right to freedoms of association, expression and movement. There should be a review of the authoritarian powers of police that are manifestly antithetical to the democratic spirit.

The spectre of unregulated political intervention in police work has to stop. While intervention is inevitable and necessary to some extent there is an imperative need to specify where government interference is justified and where it is not. The issue of setting up a security/safety commission to ensure police operational autonomy deserves serious attention.

There would not be significant positive gain by putting all the blame on the political class, ignoring the insular and lukewarm role of police leadership. The tendency to follow the line of least resistance to please the politicians has to stop.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a columnist for The Daily Star.

Mob violence, criminality and state of affairs

The festering malaise has not taken root in the society all of a sudden and without rhyme or reason. Unmistakably, the gap between rich and poor is widening. And this trend is alarming. It influences the state of affairs obviously towards lawlessness and terrorism, and if the trend continues it could threaten the "dream" of the party in power and the aspiration of the suffering people.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

DURING the past years the country's problems, as vast and varied as its population of 160 million, have proliferated, raising questions about the future course. Two most pressing issues, in fact, are population growth and recurring food deficit with consequential rise in the price of food grains and other essentials. Exacerbating the problem is the shrinking of agricultural land that has come down to 60 lakh hectares from 90 lakh hectares in the last 30 years.

With cyclones Aila and Sidr washing away 1,700 km of embankments, causing inundation of agricultural land with saline water, agricultural output as well as livelihood situation in vast parts of those areas have been hit hard.

Development efforts and structural reforms have not made any significant headway even two years after the present government came to power. Expressing her dissatisfaction over the poor performance of some ministries, in last week's cabinet meeting, Prime Minister Sk. Hasina cautioned her cabinet colleagues that the government's honeymoon period was over and the people would judge and evaluate the government most critically in the remaining three years of its tenure.

There seems to be a growing sense that the idea of Bangladeshi nationalism evinced through patriotic feeling, sagacity, commitment and sacrifice by the teeming millions is under unremitting pressure from many quarters.

Although the country is outwardly calm, there seems to be a mood of despair, anger, and resignation. Actions taken here and there fall far short of what the people are beginning to demand. The economic situation in the country is far from satisfactory. People in cities possibly have enough to eat, but in the rural areas we meet people who can not afford one square meal a day.

With birth rate still higher than the developed countries and per capita income the lowest, the greatest challenge facing the government is to feed the people. At the same time, unemploy-

ment is surging upwards. Even in small towns, vacant places in front of the roadside shops and street corners are crowded with idle men, many of them educated, at all hours of the day. What should they be doing? There is nothing for them to do other than gossiping and indulging in last-social activities.



In the last two decades industries disappeared and population outstripped food production, leaving in its wake almost 40 million people making a desperate bid to eke out a living. The country's political leaders, embroiled in partisan conflicts and power mongering, could hardly know when and how a whole generation of hungry, disillusioned and disgruntled youth force turned into a trade that proves so costly for the nation.

A sense of alienation of the youth force from national activities, a feeling of deprivation, and a lack of participation in national rejuvenation programme are the primal reasons for the country's slide to crime, drug addiction, trafficking in women and children, abduction and extortion.

All across the country, gangs operate with near impunity practicing fraud and extortion, conducting illegal trade,

bribing and corrupting officials and murdering anyone who gets in their way. Mugging and robbery are soaring. A report published in the Prothom Alo on November 26 last said that in Dhaka city at least 30 extortion victims who sustained grievous knife and bullet injuries in the third week of November have been admitted to hospital. Another report published in the same daily on November 11 said that Masud (24), a hijacker, was beaten to death in the night of November 8 while abducting a

woman and snatching her ornaments and money.

What people see these days is that when most of the identified accused roam the streets freely evading police arrest and the court cases that drag for years end up in acquittal of the criminals, people, mostly of poor means, who can hardly afford the cost of court cases often vent their frustration and apathy to the administrative failure in such frenzied expression and anger. True, most people exhibit their frenzied behaviour as a protest against the helplessness and inaction of the administration in dealing with the crime.

Despite the fact that law enforcing agencies are now equipped with modern gadgets including weaponry, cellular phones and fast moving vehicles, they have sadly failed to report to the trouble-spot for containing violence. In most cases atrocities are fueled by some over-zealous masterminds and provocateurs who leave the troubled spot after troubles have intensified. Shockingly, in absence of police inaction people seem to have accepted "mob justice" as the only effective way to

punish the robbers, looters or hijackers and kidnappers.

Understandably, much of the mob justice, or street justice as we may call, is a reaction to the country's ineffectual criminal justice system. There is a crisis of confidence in the police investigation as evidenced by many a report carried by the media. The dropping of a charge by a trial court in Dhaka, on the recommendation of the public prosecutor, against Osman Gani sarkar, a principal accused in the Mirpur businessman Aftabuddin killing on December 25, 2005 has raised many questions.

A report published in Prothom Alo on December 22 indicated that efforts are underway to drop charges on political consideration against some charge-sheeted accused in the killing of engineer Abdul Hamid Biswas, a resident of Dakshin Khan in the city, who was shot dead in his house on January 29, 2005 while offering resistance to looting in his house. Reports further revealed that Abdul Hamid Biswas settled in Dakshin Khan after working for 20 years in the Middle East and he had no affiliation with party politics.

People tend to feel that police take their cue from politicians, while politically sponsored thugs are accused of looting, and murdering people. And surely as long as politics in this country is greased by money and prosecution remains vulnerable to political influences, fair trial and conviction of the criminals will remain a distant dream.

For the last few years, the peace loving citizens in the metropolis and other cities and even rural places have watched a wave of terrorism, murder, looting and extortion spree by some frenzied and disillusioned youth folks in the country. The restoration of democracy did not herald an era of peace, prosperity and harmony as expected. Every day brings fresh violence and atrocities as if a long simmering vengeance and animosity bottled up under high pressure has suddenly been unscrewed. Now this appalling situation has galvanised people and the silent majority is waking up from deep slumber.

The festering malaise has not taken root in the society all of a sudden and without rhyme or reason. Unmistakably, the gap between rich and poor is widening. And this trend is alarming. It influences the state of affairs obviously towards lawlessness and terrorism, and if the trend continues it could threaten the "dream" of the party in power and the aspiration of the suffering people.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET. e-mail: aukhandk@gmail.com