

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Grameen and Yunus' misery

Project aid utilisation

Speed up implementation

WHILE the current fiscal year (2010-11) year draws to its final quarter, utilisation of the project funds remains as sluggish as ever. And this has the potential to further compound the problem by impacting negatively on the project aid disbursement regime thereby slowing down the utilisation further.

That this is a matter of serious concern has been expressed candidly by the finance minister who blamed it both on the government and the multilateral donors.

It cannot be gainsaid that poor utilisation of ADP is a perennial problem with the administration's implementation machinery. It is a common experience that the finance ministers under the successive governments have been coming up with ambitious budgets with equally ambitious Annual Development Programmes (ADPs). But optimism notwithstanding, at the fiscal year's end we are invariably back to square one. As always it is inefficiency and sloth that are a spanner on the works of development. And as the finance minister has further noted, delay in decision-making due to excessive formalities at the donors' end do also impact on fund utilisation by delaying procurement planning and tendering process here at home. Add to it the shortage of manpower in the projects being implemented.

We are too familiar with these drawbacks. But except blaming the system nothing new has come out from policymakers at the top on attacking the problem effectively. It is therefore expected that the government would address the issue in earnest by strengthening the implementation machinery to utilise as much of the project assistance as possible. Meanwhile, the government needs to engage the development partners more intensely with a view to speeding up the fund disbursement process and streamlining the constraints including cumbersome formalities at their ends. At the same time, administrative reforms have to be carried out to rid the project bag of the proverbial ghost in the implementing agency.

Poor project implementation is affecting the quality of public spending. So, it is hoped, the administration would soon be able grow out of the blame culture, accept responsibility and remove all the barriers to expedite implementation of development projects with due caution exercised to ensure quality.

Colleges face staff shortage

Fill in the void

THAT the public colleges, especially those outside Dhaka and other metropolises, are in a sorry state is nothing new. But the perturbing news of acute shortage of teachers in these institutions brings to the fore a disquieting picture of an important sector.

Official records have it that around 3677 posts of teachers are vacant in the country's 253 public colleges, where some 5, 09, 137 students pursue their studies. Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) says, of the vacant posts 249 are of lecturers, 922 of assistant professors, 255 of associate professors and 151 of professors.

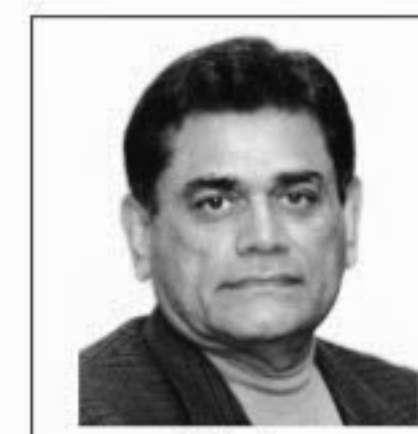
Many colleges make do with only one subject teacher running HSC, degree (pass), honours and masters courses. Teachers of other subjects or part timers from private colleges are called in to take classes.

Upazilla colleges are the hardest hit. Main reason is the slow process of recruitment of teachers by the education directorate and ministry. Also, teachers posted in these colleges manage transfers to district colleges by unscrupulous means.

DSHE officials say it takes around two years to complete the process of recruitment after placing of demands. Teachers are appointed through Public Service Commission that never recommends the number of teachers as per requirement of the education ministry.

By Education Minister's own admission, a number of posts fall vacant every month but recruitment takes a long time, leading to shortage of staff. The scenario has to change to save these colleges and protect the students' interest. Many bright careers get spoiled through this carelessness, which adversely impacts the country's advancement.

We call upon the authorities to take serious note of realities on the ground and make the process of recruitment and appointment quicker avoiding bureaucratic rigmarole. Services of teachers posted in these colleges should not be transferable for at least a minimum period of three years except in exceptional circumstances.



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

THE High Court (HC) has ruled against Prof. Yunus' writ against the government order to remove him as the MD of Grameen Bank (GB). Prof. Yunus has filed a

stay petition against the verdict.

Notwithstanding what we have witnessed in the past few months -- the well orchestrated campaign against Prof. Yunus, the HC verdict will, one hopes, bring the very unpalatable saga, which is certain to leave a bad taste in our mouth, to an end, albeit not amicable, and spare the Noble Laureate further hounding that he has been subjected to by his detractors.

It is particularly those that feel inadequate in the face of the successes of Yunus and dwarfed by the accomplishment and the accolade the man has received outside the country, that have taken up the cudgel against him. Some have indulged in vituperation for personal gratification while some have done so simply out of warped joy of being a part of the bandwagon, with only one aim in mind, run the fellow down at all cost.

It is surprising as well to see all sorts of statistics being flaunted at this particular point in time in the websites that are intended to highlight the Bank's "transgressions." We have been also flabbergasted by a letter written by the prime minister's son, not so much because of the letter per se whose tone does little credit to the writer and even less to the government he represents, but because the substance of the letter, written by someone claiming to be an advisor to the PM and reflecting the government's position, grossly contradicts the position of the government on Grameen and Yunus. For example, the finance minister's statement on the issue made to the diplomats last week that eulogised the role of GB and the leadership Prof. Yunus. Which of the two statements should we take to be the government's position?

One is surprised to see instances of "financial indiscipline" being cited now. If that be the case can the "deviation" and the fact that the Bank remained operative in



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spite of the flaw, be laid at the doorstep of the incumbent only?

While accepting the logic that a wrong can be corrected anytime, one wonders why such gross "irregularities and transgressions" passed the notice of the government, that has three members nominated by it on the board, so long? Will it be wrong to suggest that the government too is a

party to whatever "wrong" that has been done by the bank.

It is therefore hard to buy the government version that the matter resides in the realm of legality and has no political motivation, more so after the attorney general's remarks following the HC verdict. Very few will fail to notice the underlying motivation behind the government becoming so active

in correcting a "wrong" by a bank. The AG has betrayed a sense of deprivation when he begrudged awarding of the Nobel to Yunus and thought that, if anyone, the Peace Prize should have gone to Hasina and Shantu Larma. Perhaps he has an axe to grind against the Nobel Committee too.

While it is true that Prof. Yunus is not above the law, and if really any rule had been violated the government could have made an exception instead of throwing the book at him. And if ever it was necessary to make an exception this was the time. Is it farfetched to expect this from a government that has even let off death row prisoners?

But be that as it may, it is time for everyone to look dispassionately at an issue that involves the lives of millions of poor people in Bangladesh. Grameen's unique character must not be lost sight of, particularly the more than eight million marginalised that it serves. In the light of the HC ruling it devolves on the government as well as the governing body of the Bank to ensure several things.

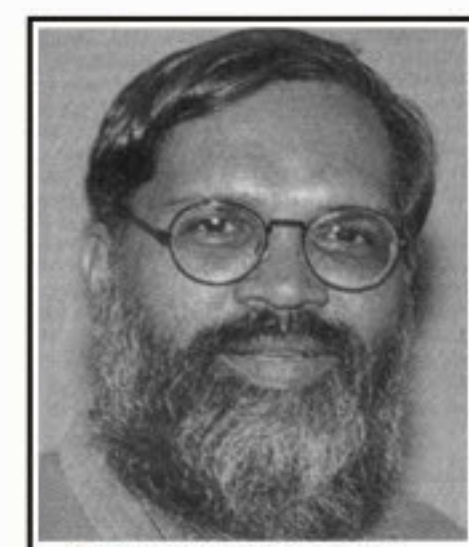
Firstly, given the natural flux that the removal is likely to create, it is essential to set in motion a process of smooth transition without causing any convolutions. Given the tremendous personal influence of Prof. Yunus on those that Grameen serves, a panic reaction stimulated by despondency, as many distinguished personalities with longtime experience in microfinance apprehend might happen, must be preempted. The last thing that the Bank can sustain, or the government should face, is panic withdrawal leading to the collapse, not only of a bank but also of a system that has been replicated in dozens of countries. The Bank's integrity must be ensured at all cost.

While we must accept the considered opinion of the highest court, many will be unable to concur with the ruling. I feel that a great injustice has been done to a person who projected Bangladesh as country that "can do." I find it hard to resist quoting what one of the barristers for Prof. Yunus said in respect of the judgment. If her contention has any merit that an illegal order has been legalised by the order of the HC, then the Appellate Division has to see that the travesty is corrected.

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PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

Typhoon of protest in Arab world



PRAFUL BIDWAI

THE whirlwind of protests that overthrew Tunisian president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt's ruler Hosni Mubarak

continues to spread unabated from one country to another. The entire Arab world is in revolt, from Yemen and Bahrain in the Gulf to Morocco and Algeria in the Maghreb, to Sudan and Djibouti in the South.

In Libya, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, in power since 1969, faces a powerful popular revolt. Sections of the army have defected to the opposition. Many ministers (including the justice minister) and diplomats have resigned.

Mr. Gaddafi has unleashed savage repression on peaceful protesters, killing over 1,000 people, and maligned them as radical Islamists and American agents. He says he will fight to "the last drop of my blood" and threatened: "Libya will burn."

Mr. Gaddafi has lost territory along a 600-km stretch along the Mediterranean Sea, including major cities such as Benghazi and Misrata, to opposition forces, which are closing in on Tripoli. His exit seems imminent.

However, the post-Gaddafi transition won't be easy. Libya has no political parties, trade unions or civil society organisations. But it has Africa's biggest proven oil reserves. So, the Western powers, led by the US, are propping up groups which would like to pursue a pro-West oil policy.

The US is mobilising planes and ships close to Libya. Neoconservatives under the banner of Foreign Policy Initiative now demand that the US militarily intervene to help topple Mr Gaddafi.

Libya's opposition rejects external intervention, but would welcome a

UN Security Council-imposed "no-fly zone."

Libya is marked by strong, distinct tribal identities. Mr. Gaddafi will finally and crucially rely on his ultra-loyal, well-armed 3,000-strong Revolutionary Guard Corps, drawn primarily from his own tribe, the Al-Gaddadfa. But its loyalty could prove fickle. In many parts of Libya, troops sent to crush protests joined the opposition.

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Mr. Gaddafi's Libya is a case of sordid mis-governance and repression. Despite the country's oil wealth, one-third of Libyans are unemployed. Neoliberal policies have impoverished Libya's people.

Yet, Mr. Gaddafi recently became a favourite of the US which saw him as "a strong partner in the war against terrorism" and a major force "to blunt the ideological appeal of radical Islam."

Mr Gaddafi's exit will send a strong signal to authoritarian Arab governments; reliance on brute force -- a Gaddafi specialty, unlike in Egypt, where Mubarak restrained the army, and called back thugs who attacked crowds on February 2 -- cannot ensure regime survival. It's best to negotiate a transition to a broad-based government while it's still possible.

The problem is that it is becoming increasingly difficult in most countries in West Asia-North Africa, which are witnessing protests ignited by popular

aspirations for democracy and accountable governance, for food security and employment, and for modernisation of society and politics.

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Some people, especially in the West, fear that Islamist radicals like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and even al-Qaeda, would gain the most if existing Arab regimes are toppled. This fear is grossly exaggerated.

The Brotherhood is a relatively moderate, non-violent organisation which believes in a degree of pluralism. In Egypt, it was only one of four components of the movement that toppled Mubarak -- the others being the youth, the radical Left, and a middle class disaffected with economic uncertainty and corruption.

The Brotherhood didn't try to take over the anti-Mubarak movement, but worked with a broad coalition, of which former International Atomic Energy Agency chief Mohammed El Baradei is the foremost leader.

As for al-Qaeda, it has played absolutely no role in the opposition movements in the Arab world, despite Osama bin Laden and his Egyptian deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri declaring many Arab dictators, including Mr Mubarak, un-Islamic and Western puppets for years.

As a US scholar puts it: "Knocking off Mubarak had been al-Zawahiri's goal for more than 20 years, and he was unable to achieve it. Now a non-violent non-religious pro-democracy movement got rid of him in a matter of weeks. It's a major problem for al-Qaeda."

That al-Qaeda could not take advantage of the turmoil in the Arab world to instigate militancy and religious fanaticism spells a strategic defeat for its jihadi ideology, which clearly has no appeal for Arab youth.

The real challenge before the popular revolts in the Arab world is how to bring about a radical democracy which empowers people. This is an unfinished task, even in Egypt, where the army still controls power. It has not yet revoked the state of emergency, freed political prisoners, or announced an interim government which can hold elections to a constituent assembly.

Meanwhile, some components of the Egyptian movement, such as that led by Google's marketing head Wael Ghonim, have sloughed off from the main body.

What is emerging is a de-centred movement, which skilfully use social network tools like Facebook and Twitter, and whose demands have expanded beyond the issues of unemployment and poverty that ignited the original rebellion.

How the transition to a radical democracy which expresses aspirations for freedom and economic empowerment will occur remains unclear. But hopefully, the movements in the Arab world will inspire similar aspirations and struggles outside the region -- just as social movements did in Latin America during the past decade.

Even if status quo-ist forces take over the Arab world's movements, and abort the transition to participatory democracy, their demands, aspirations and mobilisation methods will stay. The shock waves generated by demonstrations, strikes, self-defence committees and other forms of popular mobilisation will resonate in every country hit by neoliberal globalisation, the recent global explosion in food prices, and rising unemployment.

The Arab world could become the midwife of great changes across the globe. We must all wish the popular revolts well and express solidarity with them.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 10

1922 Mahatma Gandhi is arrested in India, tried for sedition, and sentenced to six years in prison, only to be released after nearly two years for an appendicitis operation.

1966 Military Prime Minister of South Vietnam Nguyen Cao Ky sacked rival General Nguyen Khanh Thi, precipitating large-scale civil and military dissension in parts of the nation.

1970 Vietnam War: Captain Ernest Medina is charged with My Lai war crimes.

1971 The non-cooperation movement went on in full swing in East Pakistan. Clashes between the army and Bengalis were reported from various parts of the province. On this day Bangabandhu was asked about the possibility of a visit to Dhaka by General Yahya Khan. He replied that President Yahya would be welcomed as a guest in Bangladesh.

1975 Vietnam War: North Vietnamese troops attack Ban Me Thuot, South Vietnam, on their way to capturing Saigon.