

A challenge to food security

The catch is in nutritional content of the diet

THE commonly held view that the country has become self-sufficient in food needs to be evaluated with a caveat, according to a survey carried out last year on the state of food security and nutrition in Bangladesh.

National Food Security and Nutrition Surveillance Project (FSNSP), which conducted the study, found that despite quantitative increase in food grains production, 60 per cent of the households with 10 million children suffered from food insecurity last year. The more alarming aspect of the finding is that 80 per cent of the households among the lowest income bracket of the population were hard hit by food insecurity.

Though the survey report relates to the state of food security in 2010, it gives one no reason to think that the outlook may be better this year. For there is still no sign that the driving causes of food insecurity, such as, high food price, poor nutritional content of the food consumed by the poor and the bottlenecks in accessing food by the poor have changed for the better. So, until now food security remains the same, if not worse for the section of people under review.

The survey also found that some 45 per cent of the children under five are suffering from chronic malnutrition. So, the government needs to undertake community-based programmes to improve child feeding practices. The community-based feeding programmes should give emphasis on addressing the problem of malnutrition for both the child and its mother, as good health of the former implies good health of the latter.

As the survey result has shown, the government has to ensure that the poorer section of the population are having access to food at an affordable price.

That necessitates taking steps like arresting food price hike, improving distribution of food and increasing buying capacity of the poor through creation of more rural employment. At the same, the government should also expand its safety-net programme in keeping with rising level of inflation.

The new challenge to food security, therefore, requires the government's focused approach to addressing the problem of nutrition.

Oil spillage in the Bay

Why no monitoring and clean up?

THE shocking part of the latest oil spill in the Bay off Sitakunda in Chittagong, is not that it may have spread over a long stretch, what is totally unacceptable is the lack of confirmed knowledge through any monitoring, let alone a contingency plan to clean up this dangerous mess.

The Daily Star's investigation on Tuesday revealed that boatmen, fishermen and people travelling between Swandip and Chittagong have often seen such oil spills. Last year this paper reported another spill in the same area which just happened to be spotted by a pilot and his passengers when his plane was flying over the area. The spilling therefore, is quite a regular menace that has been virtually allowed to happen.

While the Department of Environment has found some foreign ships guilty of spilling oil and has even fined them for the transgression, it is becoming quite apparent that the regularity of such spillage can be attributed to two sources: the ship breaking industry where ships, including oil tankers, are dismantled without any regard for the chemicals and oils that may leak out; and leakages while unloading stolen oil from oil tankers waiting at the dockyard.

We know what havoc oil spills can wreak on aquatic life as well as the soil where it eventually seeps into. But what are we doing about cleaning it up? We have an impressive Environment Conservation Act (1995) and the DoE has the authority to punish polluters but so far there seems to be no mechanism to remove the spilled oil from the land.

Oil spills are common disasters all over the world but in many countries the government, environmental organisations and people in general have worked together to clean up the slick from the land when it reaches it. For Bangladesh, the measures to be taken are simple. The DoE has to be vigilant about further spills and the spillage from local sources of this insidious poison have to be

A movement for population control

MOHAMMAD MOHIUDDIN ABDULLAH

THE role of a population policy has come to be widely recognised as a vital element in the development process. The increasing weight placed on population control programme is clearly demonstrated by its widespread incorporation into national development policies designed to directly or indirectly influence the demographic character of the population. The socio-political, economic and psychological issues surrounding the growth and distribution of the world's population are critical problems of a complex social system.

Population explosion, which has been declared as number one problem, could not be given due importance in the improvement of the family planning programme as a whole. Emphasis has to be put on achievement of demographic goals with the help of effective organisational structure and management system.

It is important to distinguish between administrative and service integration under the integrated programme of health and family planning. The former implies that an umbrella organisation has administrative control over a mixture of specialised services; the latter means that specialised services are linked together at the point of delivery. In Bangladesh, the family planning programme has been integrated with the health programme, which met much opposition. Family planning personnel are suffering from frustration, which hinders implementation of population control programmes.

The office of the Director General (DG) of Family Planning is overburdened with administrative responsibilities rather than implementation, monitoring and evaluation of different programmes. The inadequate attention paid by the DG office to programme performance hampers the progress of the programmes and target achievement. This is due to lack of proper supervision on the one hand and the inexperience of the DG and directors of the Directorate of Family Planning, who are deputed administrative cadre officials, on the other.

With the increased number of field workers and family planning personnel in the district, upazila, union and ward levels, there has not been any corresponding increasing in supervisory level at any level. They are not managed under proper supervision and control. Dual administrative control of family planning (FP) personnel is one of the major causes for non-achievement of target.

There is no career planning for the FP workers of all categories, starting from the ward level to national level. This results in frustration and no job satisfaction among the family planning personnel, which hinders the effective implementation of FP programmes. There is no appropriate transfer/posting or promotion policy for the FP officers/auxiliary staff, which has become a major cause of frustration, resulting in poor performance which in turn leads to non-achievement of targets.

The main constraints in implementing FP programmes are: lack of assignment of clear functional responsibilities with time-bound target to field workers, inadequate supervision of staff at all levels, inadequate utilisation of existing health and FP facilities, weaknesses in the operational capabilities at various levels, frequent transfer of top level officials/staff, administrative difficulties and delay in removing staff with a poor performance, over-ambitious targets, lack of sufficient community involvement, lack of cooperation of health personnel at all levels etc.

Functional integration of FP personnel with health frustrated the FP officials/staff, which in turn adversely affected implementation of programmes as well as non-achievement of the targets. The current state of programme impasse has often been attributed to dislocation, anomaly,

lack of definitive chain of command, administrative and financial struggle, frustration and poor morale associated with integration process. Centrally controlled administration delays decision-making process, which hurts programme implementation directly. Field workers of FP, like FPA, FWA, FWV, UFPA, along with TBA, who are the real agents of change of the programmes, are not working.

Political commitment for population control programmes is the need of hour, and the National Population Council chaired by the PM should be reintroduced to evaluate and monitor the programmes. Donor-driven programmes should not be implemented. A separate ministry or division for FP should be created immediately for smooth operation of the programmes. Conditions should be created immediately for effective decentralisation with strengthened support and supervision at the field level. There should be sufficient power/authority commensurate with the responsibility at all levels in the field

organisation, and the headquarters should not get involved in details of the field activities beyond the requirements of programme inspection, evaluation and monitoring.

For successful implementation of the strategies, structure and process of planning control, human resources and information handling would have to be appropriately modified. In order to maximise the workers' morale and efficiency, immediate attention must be paid to meaningful job description, salaries and incentive payments, career development, performance appraisal, supportive supervision, increasing commitment to the organisation, participation in decision-making, improving community attitudes and strengthening of personnel administration system.

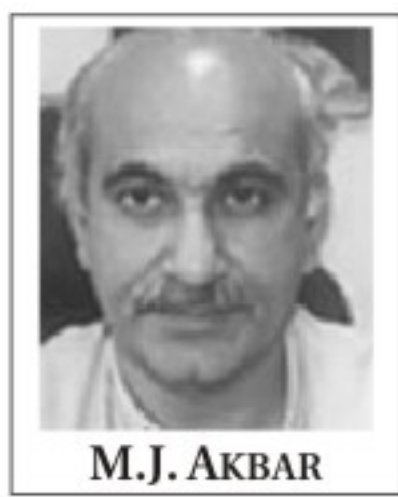
The family planning programmes cannot take place in isolation from the rural people, and is any effort is made to divorce it from there the whole exercise will be rendered ineffective and pointless. The initiative of the programme must arise from rural people, but presently there exists a wide gap between the level of awareness and acceptance of FP practices in rural areas due to ineffective management system. Leaders from the national to the local levels have an important role to play in changing the value system, which is fundamental to acceptance of the small family norms. Once the effectiveness of a programme is well established, the question of its efficiency becomes very relevant.

Socio-economic development is the central factor in the solution of population and related problems, and the population factors are very important in development plans and strategies and have a major impact on the attainment of development objectives. The interrelationships between population, resources, environment and development are factors of paramount importance that have to be taken into consideration in formulation of strategies for development.

The successful implementation of FP programmes in Bangladesh depends on separate effective/ hierarchical organisational structure and efficient management of the programmes on the one hand and planning, finance, budgeting which determine the volume of national and human resources available for programme implementation and the level of motivation, skills and knowledge of FP workers and staff members, on the other. So thought should be given to creating a separate ministry/division, decentralising the management system, removing administrative and financial constraints, motivating workers, enlisting community participation, facilitating better coordination, introducing intensive supervision etc. Steps should be taken to initiate what can be termed a genuine "population movement," generating a nationwide mobilisation of all concerned and at all levels.

The writer is a Joint Chief (Rtd), Planning Commission. Email: dr.abdullah.bd@gmail.com

BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR

SPOKESMEN do not speak for themselves; they are their masters' voices, or they don't remain the voice for very long. Ministers, similarly, do not propose dramatic, or drastic, policy options without implicit clearance from their boss. This is standard practice. Kapil Sibal is not solely responsible for the proposed censorship of social media, currently the most effective communication system on the net.

Censorship is generally the last temptation of self-delusional governments who want to console themselves with the illusion that their error is not misrule but vilification. The alibi for censorship is always national interest, of course. During the Emergency the government promoted whispers that CIA had bought out those journalists who did not crawl at its command. Now that KGB has died along with the Soviet Union, and CIA has become a bit of an ally, such insinuations do not wash.

These days, the cause becomes communalism when what you really want to do is erase cartoons that demolish the sainted image of party leaders. This is an apt moment to stress that Indian media has rarely, if ever, hurt religious sentiments. When Europe was busy printing scurrilous images of the Prophet of Islam in the name of freedom, Indian media knew that freedom is not an excuse for irresponsibility.

Delhi's transitory rulers have become cleverer, if not wiser. They think they can get away with surrogate censorship, by twisting one arm of media at a time, often through direct executive authority, or by the more palatable solution of ego-inflation or bank balance generosity. Individual journalists are pressurised through instruments of investigation in order to silence criticism. Owners of media feel the icy hand of power on their neck, sometimes disguised as a pat on the back.

There are rewards for being faithful, from baubles to material benefits,

himself with the explanation that Vietnam was the first war in modern times fought without censorship. He told the Washington Post: "Without censorship, things can get terribly confused in the public mind."

This is what worries the powerful most, that people can get "confused" by the truth. They want to eliminate debate, questions and consequent accountability because their greed for office is limitless. They sanitise media under their control, like Doordarshan and All India Radio, thus castrating its credibility. Then the scissors come out for media they do not control.

Censorship is generally the last temptation of self-delusional governments who want to console themselves with the illusion that their error is not misrule but vilification. The alibi for censorship is always national interest, of course.

although the number of reward points required for payoff does tend to keep rising. Media managers and writers know this. Those who can't stand the heat get out of the kitchen -- and walk straight into the air-controlled comfort of the politician's drawing room. Others, who honour the dharma of journalism, do not make a fuss about discomforts or denial.

Ministers can get addicted to bullying even when the environment is peaceful. When the weather becomes turbulent they slip into a war mentality. William Westmoreland, the only American general to have lost a foreign war comprehensively, consoled

If censorship of the net was nothing more than a technicality -- switching off the servers, for instance -- it would have already happened. A democratic government does not, however, have the arbitrary authority of a Muammar Gaddafi or Hafez Assad, or the anonymous muscle of a Chinese Communist Party. Artificial arguments have to be used. But the government of India will soon discover that the net does not bend as easily as some of its collaborators in private sector communication.

The miracle of social media is its unique combination of individual voice and mass audience. It is a con-

versation with millions. How do you censor a teashop? In 1975 Mrs. Indira Gandhi could imprison the opposition and pockmark the front page with blank space, but she could not lock up every teashop. Social media is the largest teashop in human history.

There remains the vital question. Sibal is the spokesman; who is the master? Somehow Dr. Manmohan Singh's name does not seem to be the answer. He would not recognise an emoticon.

A pattern can be observed. The Congress is concentrating all its efforts on the UP Assembly elections, which have become Rahul Gandhi's pole for a vault into the PM's chair. Serious political decisions are being made to improve Congress fortunes. Ajit Singh would never have had any chance of joining the cabinet had it not been for the possibility of an electoral alliance in west UP.

Rahul Gandhi is aware that the Anna Hazare movement has made brilliant use of social media to spread its anti-establishment message. Hazare has publicly blamed Rahul Gandhi for weakening the proposed Lokpal legislation. The government can do nothing about Hazare. Is it trying to censor the internet that carries Hazare's message?

If this is the logic behind Kapil Sibal's idea, then here is some breaking news. Get real. This teashop has no walls.

The writer is Editor of The Sunday Guardian, published from Delhi, India on Sunday, published from London and Editorial Director, India Today and Headlines Today.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 15

1256

Hulagu Khan captures and destroys the Hashshashin stronghold at Alamut in present-day Iran as part of the Mongol offensive on Islamic southwest Asia.

1791

The United States Bill of Rights becomes law when ratified by the Virginia General Assembly.

1961

In Jerusalem, Adolph Eichmann is sentenced to death after being found guilty of 15 criminal charges, including charges of crimes against humanity, crimes against the Jewish people and membership of an outlawed organization.

1978

U.S. President Jimmy Carter announces that the United States will recognize the People's Republic of China and cut off all relations with Taiwan.