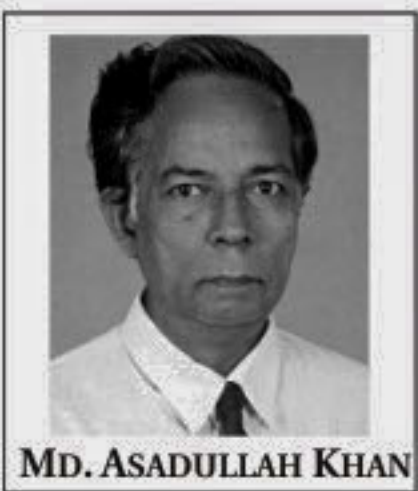


BITTER TRUTH



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

EVEN though the government has been in power for the last three years with such an impressive majority, it has failed to meet the expectations of the people. Blame ministers' inaction, blame inter-party tension or divisive politics, whatever may be reason, the government's decision making cell has been acutely paralysed over the last two years.

Perhaps the finance ministry, whose job is to keep tight control and strict vigil over wasteful expenditure, has failed in its job. With Padma bridge construction, metro rail project, Teesta water treaty all in limbo, and border killings going unabated, the government's performance card has sunk low.

And even though the finance minister admitted belatedly that the financial health of the nation was not okay and he was worried about the price hike of essential commodities, the people have felt the crunch of price spiral after the price-hike of power and fuel. Since economics is seldom, if ever, divorced from politics, economic policy of the government must relate to the core constituency -- the burgeoning middle-class.

The strength of the middle-class, both political and economic, has to be recognised by any government. At a time when the price hike of essential commodities as well as abnormal rise in transport fares have hit the poor people hard, the fixed income group, including those without jobs and retired people, find themselves in a bind. Though funds were made available for many projects and the power sector in the past years, the agencies concerned could hardly utilise these allocations because of administrative red tape, snags in contract award and delay in implementation. That meant dwindling cash flow affecting the lower and middle class citizenry.

To ignore such facts or to remain oblivious to people's sufferings and hardship and to live by slogans and rhetoric is to court disaster. Ideology, politics and power must not dull our common sense or rob us of pragmatism. The economic strains in any country exacerbate strains in the rank and file of the population and pose a threat to the growth of democracy and good governance.

Noticeably, the country is sliding into a

morass of crime and administrative breakdown. True, the government's damage control units are out on the job but it is difficult to mask the truthcrime rate is spiraling up and endemic corruption is throttling growth. It is time the ruling party recognised the dangers of letting radical forces take control of things and ride roughshod over the principle of sacrifice and spirit of the Liberation War. In the quagmire of dirty politics, those who suffer are the country's hapless millions. The portents are grim but the end results could be apocalyptic.

The people, however, have not failed to notice that a storm has been brewing, not only along party lines but also on other fronts. This constant sniping has got to stop. It should be brought home to those self-centred politicians and zealots that this is not only undermining the government but also the state, adversely affecting foreign investment and national development and consequently cutting jobs.

People also feel that the administration has flip-flopped on major policy decisions, allowing the divisive forces to gain ground. The dream of lifting the country's backward economy seems to have been battered by continued agitation, protests, rallies, road marches and hartals. Because of shrinking donor assistance in development projects and lack of commitment by the officials involved in such works, the value of taka continues to plunge and foreign confidence is dwindling.

A series of bomb blasts and discovery of explosive materials brought to the fore the destructive forces beneath the surface. But history has shown that militancy on one side breeds in the other. People fear that the country is heading toward confrontation. The unrelenting feuds and skirmishes in the campuses of the universities that often lead to armed fighting, taking toll of vibrant and

young lives, are indications of the deepening fissures that have developed among different ideological groups in the society.

Reality has betrayed expectation. There have been intra-party conflicts, killings and lootings and, topping them all, a new dimension has been addedsecret killings. The government made pledges to root out terrorism and must face down this mafia group without fear or favour. Ironically, the criminals'

acted upon. True, the PM serves citizens who are profoundly weary of economic hard times, and people are hardly interested in anything that does not contribute to their well being. There is evidence that the poverty reduction schemes hardly reached the really poor. With 14 lakh unemployed people adding to the already 20 million during the last 4 years, according to a BBS source, the poverty situation looks bleak.

Unless there are reforms in education, population control, health care, job creation and proper management of financial institutions, no government can achieve the desired goal. The realisation of the government that business magnates holding more than one post of director in financial institutions must resign from other organisations after retaining one such directorship, although very late, is welcome.

The government has to focus on the monumental task of repairing the economy. There is time for the government to make multi-party democracy work, produce what people need, and put an end to official corruption and red tape. The nation can be both happy and sad, Mr. Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of *The Daily Star*, told the gathering at the 21st anniversary celebration of the daily, because 70% of the population is below 40 years of age. We can be happy that we

have such a big work force that can be utilised to chart out a prosperous future for the country. We must at the same time feel sad that the vast potential is going astray because of lack of opportunity, guidance, motivation and proper nurturing of their talents.

Shockingly, the weakening moral standard and authority of some politicians only increase arbitrary power of officials at different tiers of administration. People feel all this

has led to a situation where bureaucrats are either indifferent to citizens' sufferings or shy away from their administrative responsibilities.

The demand of the shipping minister to legalise extortion on the roads not only sounds queer but seems to be a monstrous move in a country ruled by law. Without mincing words, it can be said that any move to legalise extortion will mean legalising corruption. Extortion on the roads, as the commerce minister indicated, pushes up the price of essential commodities.

With a little commitment and honesty of purpose, we could have solved many of these problems much earlier. Even 40 years after independence, we cannot provide our people the basic needs that most developed countries take for granted, but many of us can afford luxury vehicles, apartments and air conditioned shopping malls studded with high-cost and low-utility items. Most of our people, on the other hand, live in conditions that would have been considered horrific by 19th century standards.

I recall the pleasant experience I had while visiting Malaysia as a Commonwealth Fellow some years ago. Starting from the airport to manufacturing plants, universities, tower buildings and the roads and bridges, I was fascinated to see the flawless work done in every place and the facilities created. On my questioning as to how this country reaped such excellent progress in the same span of time that we have been through my guide, a Malaysian university officer, told me that in Malaysia 90% of the funds allocated for any project are actually utilised, while this may not be so in other places.

A recent report published in *The Daily Star* showed that 67 tonnes of rice and wheat allocated for small-scale repairs of mosques and schools in Sadullapur of Gaibandha district were totally misappropriated without any work by the contractors in collusion with the upazila chairman. Interestingly, one official who had the courage to unearth this corruption racket was transferred to Chittagong Hill Tracts! With such scams and corrupt practices going around, how can we hope that we can put this country on the road to progress, self-sufficiency and development?

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Caught in the rut



With cams and corrupt practices going around, how can we hope that we can put this country on the road to progress, self-sufficiency and development?

Courage and compassion of Rawshanara Begum

QUAZI SAJJAD ALI ZAHIR

MEGHALAYA is the abode of the cloud. Its population comprises of the Khasis, the Jaintias (of Austric origin) and the Garos (of Bodo origin). It was in Meghalaya, amongst the Khasi hills, marked by its ease of access, that the British set up their headquarters in the northeast region in Shillong.

I was in Shillong where I met Professor Bidhu Bhushan Dutta who, in 1971, was a lecturer of St. Anthony College of Shillong, and who was deeply involved in helping Bangladeshi refugees and freedom fighters during the Liberation War. It was Professor Dutta who facilitated my meeting with Chief Minister Dr. Mukul Sangma, noting that, as a freedom fighter in the bordering areas of Assam and Meghalaya in 1971, the latter would be glad to grant me an audience.

Through Chief Secretary Mr. W.M.S. Pariat, in the Government of Meghalaya, my meeting was scheduled on the same day. In our meeting, I laid out the reason and plans for my visit. In April 1971, thousands of refugees from Bangladesh poured into the village of Ampati, which is about four kilometers west of Mahendraganj bazaar and near the branch of the Dalu river.

The refugee camps were soon filled beyond capacity, and the new arrivals began moving further inland. The mass influx of refugees soon led to tensions between the incoming desperate populations and the local Garo tribes, who were concerned that the refugee camps would become a permanent settlement, and the refugees would not return to their original homes. Consequently, Garo land-owners began preventing refugees from setting up camp, leaving large numbers of people in a state of desperation.

It was during this desperate period, at a time when Indian government assistance had yet to reach Ampati, that a wealthy local woman intervened, providing not only food and clothing, but also offering her own land for refugees to live on. Every morning, she would walk to the camp with her five year old son clutching her fingers and her servants, who carried food and supplies for the refugees. The refugees could also go and visit this lady in her home in case of any emergency.

When there was an epidemic in the refugee camp, she personally nursed the sick and the dying. She made

burial and cremation arrangements for those who passed away. Even when the Indian government relief finally came to the Ampati camp, she continued with her noble work, and even encouraged her young son to eat meals with the refugee children.

It was this remarkable story of a woman, whose courage and compassion in a time of inhumanity, that made me not only interested to meet her in person but also anxious to document her contributions to support a desperate people during a terrible war. The CM was sceptical about the possibility of tracking down a woman whose name I did not know, but I was insistent. At least, I believed that if she was no longer alive I could at least meet her son and thank him personally for the services his mother provided so selflessly for my people.

For a few moments, Dr. Sangma and I sat in silence. He then slowly stood up from his chair, and I thought the meeting was over. To my surprise, I saw he had tears in his eyes. CM Dr. Sangma put his hand on my shoulder and said: "Col. Sajjad, you do not have to go to Ampati anymore. You are talking to the son whom you have travelled so far to meet." Words failed me. I just stood and stared, not knowing what to say. I begged him to say more.

"My mother's name is Rawshanara Begum," he began. "She belonged to a Muslim family in the bordering village of Bongaon in Assam. My father Binoy Bhushan Modok and my mother were both students in Cotton College of Guwahati. Both came from wealthy families. My father was two years senior to my mother. They fell in love and after my father's graduation he married my mother and brought her to Ampati. It was a difficult time for my mother -- she was a Bengali Muslim who had to adjust to the Garo Christian community. But she was patient, and through time, she won over the heart of the community by providing social services and teaching at a local Garo school, where my father also taught. Slowly, she became very popular in Ampati."

Dr. Sangma further went on to say that the information I had managed to collect about the refugees from Bangladesh was correct. He still remembers the days of 1971. "My mother used to tell me that only through sharing experiences with the poor and the desperate, sharing meals with them, would I develop a sense of belonging with them. She was particularly concerned

about the girls and women who lived through the horror of genocide and the traumas they endured. When I grew up, I wanted to become a doctor to help the poor. Looking back, I realise it was those experiences of my childhood that were responsible for the decisions I have made as an adult. Like my mother, I started treating poor patients free of charge. Slowly I got into politics and as a twenty-eight year old, I became a Member of the Parliament in the Ampatigiri Constituency. I was the minister of home and education at thirty-eight and became the CM at the age of forty-five. All her life, my mother wanted me to become a people's man and I work every day to be the kind of man she wanted me to be." He added that his mother used to say sometimes that nobody from Bangladesh remembered her. "She died three years ago. She would have been so happy to meet someone from Bangladesh who knew about Ampati and the difficult days there."

I was humbled by the story I heard, and the enduring legacy of a woman whose generosity of spirit could only be rivaled by her determination and her moral courage. It was the story of how even in the midst of despair, inhumanity and cruelty, noble acts of compassion made a difference in the lives of strangers. It was the tale of one individual who went against the sentiments of her time and her community and responded to her conscience, lending a helping hand to those in need. It was the story of one who offered not only comfort and dignity to a people without home and hope, but who till today guides the destiny of her son.

Rowshanara Begum made a moral choice to identify with the hungry, the sick, the homeless and the desperate; she chose to give dignity to people denied their self-worth and their humanity; she chose to respond to a higher calling of service and to her conscience, at a time when so many were silent. Her determination to protect and preserve the sanctity of life in the darkest hours of man's inhumanity to his fellow-beings is a reminder of the moral choices that we should have the courage to make in times of crisis, and the urgent task to uncover significant yet forgotten contributions of private citizens to our struggle for independence. Only then can we truly honour such selfless acts of compassion and remarkable courage.

The writer, a Bir Protik, is a retired Military Officer and a freedom fighter.

Give peace a chance

THE STATESMAN

WHETHER or not the Western sanctions on Iran have begun to bite, Sunday's frenetic Anglo-American diplomatic effort to stall an Israeli pre-emptive strike on Iran underscores the heightened tension in the wake of President Ahmedinijad's placing of centrifuges in a nuclear reactor.

Rather than precipitate the crisis, both sanctions and diplomacy two-track strategyned to be given a try. A conflagration in the region, indeed to open another flank of the Arab revolution, is fraught with chilling downsides and is much too awesome even to imagine. An Israeli war with a nuclear-armed Iran could lead to a new Cold War in the Middle East, as William Hague, the British foreign secretary, has warned.

A lot hinges on Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, whether or indeed for how long he is prepared to give diplomacy a try. It will not be prudent for Israel to attack Iran's nuclear facilities at this juncture. Sanctions and diplomatic initiatives must be tried out to convince Tehran not to pursue a nuclear programme with military intent.

A military strike may even be premature and it must be open to question whether a clash of arms will achieve Tel-Aviv's objectives.

In a critical coincidence, Sunday's US appeal to Israel comes in parallel with Iran announcing the stoppage of oil exports to Britain and France. This could well be a pre-emptive retaliation against the European Union's decision to boycott Iranian oil from July.

A similar threat has been advanced to six other European countries, which together account for 18% of Iranian oil exports. To a limited degree, the economic war can be said to have begun. Both Israel and Iran must hold their fire; the centrifuge is not a toy. The early 21st century concert of Europe and America must pursue the road to peace. The Arab world has been in ferment for a year; the Middle East can't afford another war.

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