

Our leaders' priority list

RIFAT MUNIM

THE Honourable prime minister at long last has eaten humble pie. In a view-exchange meeting with the Khulna district unit of Awami League at the Gono Bhaban last week, she admitted that the "strict" government measures prior to BNP's March 12 rally caused public sufferings. But what she said thereafter was rather an act of self-defence than a confession. Without recognising the heavy-handed measures as undemocratic, she rather asserted that the measures, including those of equipping BCL activists and pro-AL labour wings with sharp weapons and ammunitions, were necessary to ensure public safety and welfare.

Be that as it may, her concern for public safety and welfare is indeed consoling. But considering her address to her party faithful on March 14, one can only say that public concern or welfare was the last thing that was in her mind. Quite the contrary, issues that in her speech were repetitively highlighted were clearly aimed at realising her party's ideological and political goals, having very little to do with public safety or welfare. If anything, a hasty riposte ignited with vitriol of the worst kind topped her priority list. This is not merely self-contradiction; this is a very well staged show, to organise which lakhs of taka was squandered, and one must ask why. To ensure the uninterrupted inflow of pro-AL activists; to make us believe that these party faithful represent the public in general and that her rally has attracted more people than BNP's.

As the show began to unfold, she offered her most predictable interpretation of BNP's ultimatum to resume the caretaker government (CTG) system. As we all know, the bottom-line of that interpretation is that BNP with its persistent demand for the CTG is trying to foil the war crimes trial. Although people from all walks of life including all the leading intellectuals and think-tanks of the country have deemed the CTG a prerequisite for a fair election,

she stuck to her guns and declared that despite all surreptitious machinations, the war crimes trial must go on.

Then she addressed a number of other issues such as BNP's past failures. Interestingly though, she took a lot of care to omit some of her own government's remarkable failures, especially how her docile BCL students in the past three years have turned the highest echelons of education into virtual battle grounds, with Abdul Aziz Khan being the latest victim at RUET; how it was her Jubo league wings that have turned development activities across the country into a farce by rampant tender manipulation; how her government's myopic decisions about fossil fuel-based rental power plant have met with runaway inflation; and last but not least, how alleged corruption in some ministries has stalled our infrastructural development immensely.

In fact, it won't be an exaggeration to say that her speech, for the most part, was dedicated either to misinterpreting BNP's demand for the CTG or bringing Khaleda Zia down with personal attacks and accusations of corruption. Of course, not all of her accusations are misplaced. Many of them are based on facts. Even proven corruption charges of some junior BNP leaders along with their close proximity to militant outfits was no news to us, which was why they had to pay the heaviest price in the last parliamentary election.

One could also say when it comes to a riposte in politics, retorting to opposition leaders or referring to their past track records is an indispensable strategy in democracy. Such political practices, however, amount to luxury in our case. Ours is a country where manmade degradation of environment is precipi-

tating risks to an already disaster-prone region; where public sufferings know no bounds because of corruption, step-motherly attitude towards villages, unplanned urbanisation and misuse of government fund. At such a critical time, the PM in her speech invested most of the time in revealing BNP's past failures or in relating all its political issues to foiling the war crimes trial. This is not only unreasonable, but also a complete disregard for people's real concerns, their insurmountable sufferings. Or is this a red herring to divert people's attention from their real problems?

Our political parties should try to reach a national consensus based on the most definitive moments of our history such as the liberation war and restoration of democracy.

Should we then think that the BNP is coming up with a pro-people agenda? The opposition can flatter itself by thinking something in the positive, but we as people cannot. Just consider the basic features of all the agitations, demonstrations, hartals and rallies that it has organised since the 15th Amendment to the Constitution. All those have been centred singularly around the CTG issue. In spite of all its validity, BNP's over-emphasis on this issue could not be overlooked as if the country has had no other problem.

In fact, BNP too could not care less about public sufferings and has always been busy upholding its own agenda. Take for example the basic healthcare facilities which are becoming unaffordable even for the middle class, leave alone the lower classes. This deterioration of healthcare has never been one of BNP's issues for spearheading a people's movement. There perhaps has been only one instance wherein it voiced people's concern and took to the street in protest at inflation, that too, by calling a hartal and inflicting immeasurable sufferings on people.

Then consider the show in which

leader of the opposition had delivered her speech two days earlier than the PM. Apart from giving an ultimatum to restore the CTG, she promised people infrastructural development and uninterrupted power generation, which are over-used methods of pre-election campaign. She tantalised the poor by saying that free healthcare services would be provided to them. But again it resembled the hollow promises made during pre-election campaigns. In the final analysis, BNP too is concerned more about its party interest than those of the people.

Both of the shows have come to an end only to make us prepare for an even bigger one. The BNP-led four party alliance will continue to play its CTG card while the AL-led fourteen party combine will fight back with its war crimes trial card. Any Bangladeshi who believes in the independence of this country must say that the masterminds behind the ethnic cleansing and genocide in 1971 must be tried otherwise the high-priced independence will turn out to be a matter of mockery.

In much the same way, any Bangladeshi who believes in the restoration of democracy in late 1990 must say that the CTG system is by far the best model to conduct a free and fair election in a democratic manner. While both of these are valid agendas, none of the coalitions should use these as political cards because if they so do, paying virtually no heed to other important economic and infrastructural concerns, it is the people who will be stuck in the middle of their conflicting issues. If they really care about practicing what they preach, they should try to reach a national consensus based on the most definitive moments of our history such as the liberation war and restoration of democracy. Finally, it is only expected that our political parties will set more people friendly issues as their agendas and take them forward rising above their narrow partisan interest.

The writer is Senior Editorial Assistant, *The Daily Star*.
E-mail: rifatmunim@gmail.com

Politics of despair

AMEER SOBHAN

WHEN the AL was voted to power by a sweeping majority in December 2008, there was a sense of shared hope and optimism shared by many across the country. There, right then, was the opportunity for a new style of politics to emerge that would be dictated by the interests and welfare of the people rather than the vested interests of a few self-serving demagogues as seen in the past. Election Day, itself, seemed like a day of celebration akin to any other festival in the country. That fantasy of a stronger, more politically stable Bangladesh has, since then, ruthlessly unravelled.

The unfortunate display of brutish sense exhibited by the government to restrict the opposition's right to voice its demands has discredited any future claims the AL might make to highlight its efforts to uphold democracy. From the ban on Facebook a few years ago to the blacking out of a select few TV channels that were going to air the BNP's rally just a few days ago, AL has slowly carved out a blemished record for itself as far as free speech is concerned. For a political party that came to power with an overwhelming consensus, that is unfortunate. For regular citizens like me who wish to make their opinions heard, that is downright scary.

Both the AL and the BNP need to come to terms with the fact that their vitriol-spewing ways both in and out of Parliament need to end. If either party

Both parties have driven the people of the country into a quagmire with no visible respite. It is now time for our leaders to think in terms of the welfare of the people who voted them to power.

wants to rehabilitate its image and credibility, some modicum of concession on either side is imperative.

As the party in power, the AL must learn to take criticism constructively instead of adopting a bellicose attitude towards any inkling of disapproval directed towards it. Be it members of the opposition party, the media or even a citizen everyone should be able to express their mind without fear of reprisal or retribution. The people have lost their appetite for the personal vendettas that have become a staple of Bangladeshi politics and the AL's efforts to justify its actions do not lend verisimilitude to its cause but instead create distaste in people.

Right now, the government wields the means to bring about substantive positive change if only it chooses to. If it truly was apprehensive of a violent outbreak during (or after) the BNP rally, a more sensible (and civil) approach to restrict chaos would have been to deliver a set of publicly announced guidelines to the BNP that would allow them to voice their demands peacefully by hosting a rally without impeding the lives of ordinary citizens.

These guidelines designed along the interests of the citizens of Dhaka could have included a mutually acceptable location and time for the rally to be held that would least affect traffic or cause any sort of distress to people on the roads. If the BNP violated any of the pre-agreed conditions or in any way create a situation that would affect the daily lives of citizens, legal action would be taken against the party members held responsible. Had the AL chosen to go down this route, it would have had the support of the people and the unfortunate means it had to resort to suppress the voice of the opposition would not have marred its image. Of course, mistrust and the shunning of any and all constructive dialogue have become so deeply engrained into the way both parties work that the basic civil discourse required for agreements such as these to be reached would be out of the question.

The BNP, on the other hand, should debate the issue of an interim government to oversee elections in Parliament, just as political parties in a functioning parliamentary democracy should. It should exhaust each and every last legally acceptable means of placing its demand for a caretaker government before choosing to go for ill-fated attempts such as the recent mass rally. In the event that its voice goes unheard through legally acceptable channels, rallies and protests to put forth their demands will then not only make sense but may perhaps have the support of the people.

Both parties have driven the people of the country into a quagmire with no visible respite. It is now time for our leaders to think in terms of the welfare of the people who voted them to power. By working collectively, both parties can make politics a healthy and constructive means of attaining better standards of living for the thousands of impoverished people in this country and make Bangladesh a glowing model of a country working hard to break free from the shackles of poverty. Although many of the ideas put forth here may appear unrealistically idealistic, perhaps they could still function as a starting point?

The writer is a student of International Studies and Communications at Monash University.

Food security or safe food security?

FARHANA AFROSE JAHAN and SHAMMUNUL ISLAM

THE World Food Summit (1996) defined food security as: "Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life." This definition covers three major areas: sufficient, safe and nutritious food for all. But in recent times, emphasis is given mainly on having sufficient food for all and accordingly on producing more and more food. This overshadows two other major aspects of food security: safe and nutritious food. It is hard to guarantee food security if it is not nutritious and safe. We have to keep in mind that market availability alone cannot guarantee food security.

Production of more food is determined by use of GMO seeds or hybrid seeds, excessive use of chemical fertilisers and chemical pesticides, use of chemicals in food preservation, etc. The necessity of getting more food is putting the other two factors of food security under threat. Food becomes unsafe because of the chemicals, and unsafe food cannot be nutritious. The major reason for food insecurity in Bangladesh is poverty, which is both the cause and outcome of food insecurity.

In Bangladesh, 31.5% of the population lives in poverty. They lack the means to acquire sufficient and nutritious food and are likely to be food insecure, and may have to sell or consume their productive assets for satisfying their immediate food needs. This undermines their longer-term income potential and pushes them below the poverty line.

Another reason is the impact of climate change. Every year, floods,

cyclones, erosion, and droughts cause extensive damage to crops, houses, livestock, and household and community assets. Disasters hamper physical access to food, destroy crops, and make markets temporarily dysfunctional, which can lead to an increase in the



QUDDUS ALAM/ DRINK NEWS

We need sufficient food, we need safe food, we need nutritious food, but we must make sure that we are not left with huge food stock but a sick and disabled future generation. Let's save our agriculture and also save our next generation.

price of essential foods. Natural disasters directly affect household food security status by undermining their asset base and, indirectly, through loss of employment opportunities, increase in health care expenditure and in necessary food expenditure. The most important issue is the change in agri-

cultural methods and preservation. The excessive use of chemicals in cultivation and preservation makes food unsafe.

We need to increase rice production from 32.257 million tons (2009-10) to 49.07 million tons in 2050 to meet the

demand of 194.353 million people. The attempt to increase food production has resulted in the use of GMO or hybrid seeds and losses of many of our local variety seeds. At the same time, some multinational companies are luring farmers into using specific brands of seeds, which call for excessive use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. They are responsible for destroying micro-organisms in the soil, resulting in loss of the soil's natural fertility. At the end of the day, the farmers produce unsafe food at a very high cost.

Excessive use of chemical fertiliser can also have a debilitating impact on public health through the consumption of chemical substances and toxins as the foods become contaminated by microbial pathogens. The effect on children can be very significant ranging from physiological to developmental. We eat food to stay alive, but risk our lives by eating food which is highly contaminated with chemicals. Chemical fertilisers not only harm public health but also destroy the ecological balance. They prevent environment friendly insects and birds from coming and sitting in the crops fields, thus hampering the natural process of pollination. The definition of food security gives equal emphasis on all three components. But, in reality, the practice in Bangladesh does not guarantee that food security will guarantee safe food. If we secure our food by putting our lives under threat then the increased production of food will be meaningless. More productive and resilient agriculture needs better management of natural resources such as land, water, soil and genetic resources through conservation agriculture, integrated pest management and agro forestry. We need sufficient food, we need safe food, we need nutritious food, but we must make sure that we are not left with huge food stock but a sick and disabled future generation. Let's save our agriculture and also save our next generation.

sive use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. They are responsible for destroying micro-organisms in the soil, resulting in loss of the soil's natural fertility. At the end of the day, the farmers produce unsafe food at a very high cost.

Excessive use of chemical fertiliser can also have a debilitating impact on public health through the consumption of chemical substances and toxins as the foods become contaminated by microbial pathogens. The effect on children can be very significant ranging from physiological to developmental. We eat food to stay alive, but risk our lives by eating food which is highly contaminated with chemicals. Chemical fertilisers not only harm public health but also destroy the ecological balance. They prevent environment friendly insects and birds from coming and sitting in the crops fields, thus hampering the natural process of pollination.

The definition of food security gives equal emphasis on all three components. But, in reality, the practice in Bangladesh does not guarantee that food security will guarantee safe food. If we secure our food by putting our lives under threat then the increased production of food will be meaningless. More productive and resilient agriculture needs better management of natural resources such as land, water, soil and genetic resources through conservation agriculture, integrated pest management and agro forestry. We need sufficient food, we need safe food, we need nutritious food, but we must make sure that we are not left with huge food stock but a sick and disabled future generation. Let's save our agriculture and also save our next generation.

The writers work at the Food Security Cell of Emence.