

Global Hunger Index

We have a long way to go

THAT Bangladesh has gone two notches up from the 70th position to the 68th in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) this year is good news. The government deserves a word of appreciation for their steadfast commitment to raising food output. We are also happy to note that it has fared better than India on a range of social indicators including reduced child mortality rate.

We believe, however, that we are still far away from reaching the desired level. The GHI report says Bangladesh, along with other countries in South Asia, has the highest prevalence of underweight children which is 40 per cent. Quite clearly, in spite of the little progress in terms of better access to food and improvement in child mortality rate, the country's hunger scene is yet to be lifted out of what the said report terms the 'alarming range'.

Given the country's food production capacity has nearly reached self-sufficiency in the past few years, we are dismayed to learn that problems related to undernourished and underweight children still persist. Evidently, the situation owes largely to poor distribution chain and unscientific food preservation system. Every year quite a huge amount of locally produced food items gets rotten due to lack of modern preservation facilities. Add to that the malaise of large-scale food adulteration, what we get to eat is also unsafe.

As a joint study by the government and USAID has recently revealed, child malnutrition has a lot to do with changing food consumption pattern in rural areas. In villages, people in general and children in particular consume more rice and less protein-rich items such as meat and fish, and milk and milk-based products. Although lack of knowledge on nutrition is partly responsible, increasing economic hardship in the face of soaring prices of essential food items has played a bigger role in this. Resultantly, as scientific researches have shown, child malnutrition visibly bears upon adulthood, manifesting itself in the form of lack of physical fitness, which takes its toll on the economic life of the entire nation.

Undoubtedly, child malnutrition is an overarching problem for the nation. It is upon today's children that we rest our hope of building the country and taking it ahead in the international arena. Likewise, generations of undernourished children will only set the country on a regressive course, stunting social development and economic growth.

Therefore, while controlling the food prices effectively, the government must strengthen the distribution chain and food preservation system so as to ensure better access to protein-rich foods both in villages and the underdeveloped areas in cities.

The Nobel for the EU

A recognition well deserved

THE Nobel Prize for Peace this year has, to our happiness, gone to the European Union. Indeed, it makes sense that the prize should go to an organization which, unlike so many other regional or continental bodies, has made its presence effectively felt in the lives of the people of Europe. Given the historical background behind the formation of the European Common Market, which was to transform itself into today's EU, it is remarkable that Europe has so assiduously and surely reinvented itself. No one who witnessed the tragedy that was the Second World War could ever have imagined that a time would arrive when integration among the nations of Europe would lead to the enterprise the EU is today.

Beginning with limited membership, the EU has in recent times expanded beyond anyone's imagination. But that again is only natural given that the fall of communism in eastern Europe was followed by a beeline on the part of former members of the Soviet bloc for entry into the EU. Earlier, there was a time when a number of attempts made by the British to enter the Common Market were rebuffed by the French under Charles de Gaulle. All of that is now in the past. It is only membership for Turkey which remains a key issue with the EU today. In the years since the EU began to expand, Europeans across national borders have come together politically and economically, to a point where the EU has often served as a model for such regional groupings as Asean, Saarc and the African Union.

There is little question, though, that there are yet a number of issues that bedevil the EU, the foremost being the economic recession which has laid such nations as Greece low. Yet even here the concerted effort made by the body towards a collective approach to the issue has left people around the world impressed.

The EU has by and large been symbolic of hope. The Nobel gives a new shine to that hope. It also sends out a message to those global regions where unity of purpose among

Any end to political blame game?

MO CHAUDHURY

POLITICAL blame game is the practice of scapegoating the competing political parties for any failure or untoward event and unpopular outcomes in general. The purpose of this commentary is to explore why blame game continues to be a popular political trick and if there is a way to end its hold on politics in Bangladesh.

According to the Harvard Business Review Blog Network, researchers find that, in the end, blame game is not beneficial at the personal, group or organisation level. One explanation of this counterproductive behaviour is the virus of goal contagion, namely, one is driven to protect ego or self-image because others are doing the same. The prescribed remedial steps include constructive criticism, ownership of failure and learning from mistakes.

Given that the war rooms of political parties are quite astute, we would have observed more prevalence of such practices in politics if blame game were counterproductive in this arena. Instead, blame game has become the most anticipated strategy in politics perhaps because the electorate is not astute enough to see through the blame game maneuvers and/or not informed enough to determine true culpability, may view the blame game as a socially acceptable practice, and may not have a meaningful alternative choice (when all viable parties practice the blame game). The greater these electorate deficits are, the more aggressive the political parties may be in using blame game as a politicking tool, ultimately leading to a poor state of democracy and governance.

That blame game has taken a crushing hold on politics in Bangladesh with all of its ill consequences for the country is amply demonstrated by rampant blame and counter-blame by the ruling regime and the opposition alliance in the

context of a series of recent controversies (Grameen Bank and Dr. M. Yunus, Padma Bridge financing), alleged scandals (railgate, Destiny, Hall-Mark and share markets scams), and crimes (Sagar-Runi murder, abduction of BNP MP Mr. Ilyas). However, the most blatant episode of blame game broke out following the September 29 Ramu-Ukhia incidents of violence against the Buddhist minority.

Let us explore the political landscape of Bangladesh that continues to permit and incentivise blame game even when it is utterly irresponsible, insensitive and disgraceful, like the latest one. First, despite steady strides in literacy and political awareness of the population, the vast

(as witnessed in Ramu-Ukhia) and political spinning (like the ensuing blame game) more cost effective and time efficient than ever before. What is possible, however, is to leverage the same technologies to improve the transparency of governance of the state and that within the political parties and the judicial process.

The Padma Bridge financing crisis is a glaring example where inadequate and sporadic release of pertinent and often conflicting information has spawned a multilateral and global blame game that has been detrimental to the country's vital interest. Learning from that experience, a multi-party and multi-ethnic taskforce to oversee the investigation of the Ramu-Ukhia incidents can

goal contagion, such as constructive criticism, are also rather foreign to the political landscape of Bangladesh. Despite seemingly endless cycles of blame game and practically non-existent diligence to mitigate this infection, there is no electoral evidence that the population is sufficiently disturbed regarding this matter. Based on widely reported public sentiment, the Ramu-Ukhia centered blame game, however, appears to have shattered that complacency. If public outrage about this proceeds unabated, there is hope that blame games will finally start to recede.

Lastly, the trend of electoral alliances has practically confined the electoral choice to two grand alliances that are equally happy and mighty combatants of blame game. Since each knows that the other won't relent and there is no other viable alternative than these two grand alliances, neither has any incentive to stop blame game. In principle, an election act that prohibits electoral alliances (while permitting post-election coalition government in the absence of absolute majority) has the potential to dislodge the current grand alliances, and thereby to make room for political parties that can commit to healthier democratic practices and no blame game. But in reality, the prospect for such an act is quite slim since neither of the two grand alliances has any incentive to initiate such an act.

To conclude, the most promising path of making blame games unpalatable and politically unworthy to the political parties is for the people to remain united and unrelenting in expressing their disdain for the Ramu-Ukhia political blame game. If this blame game is not immoral, what is? If now is not the time to eradicate the virus of blame game in Bangladesh, then when is?

The writer is a Professor of Practice in Finance at McGill University, Montreal, Canada. Email: mo.chaudhury@mcgill.ca.

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majority of the electorate and even the grassroots party activists are still not savvy enough to decipher top level political maneuvers and theatrics. That a possibly fabricated blasphemous photo on Facebook succeeded in unleashing violence against the Buddhist community indicates that the electorate will remain quite vulnerable to manipulations like blame game for the foreseeable future.

Second, due to technological advancement and affordable access to communication networks (TV, mobile phones and internet), information now travels across the land at an unprecedented clip. Unfortunately, so does misinformation, making malicious campaigns

significantly improve the transparency, speed and credibility of the process, and thus save the victims and the population at large from the agony of a protracted blame game.

Third, blame game does appear to be a socially acceptable practice in Bangladesh. The political leaders and holders of high offices over many regimes have consistently declined to take ownership of their failures. Hitherto, no leader of a major political party has voluntarily taken the responsibility of a colossal electoral defeat and resigned, and no minister has yet voluntarily resigned either for massive governance failures or to make room for unhindered investigation of such failures.

Other efforts to cure the virus of

Only by the constitution

I.A. RAHMAN

PAKISTAN army chief Gen Parvez Kayani has earned the nation's gratitude by reminding it of the blessings of the constitution, some of which have not been duly appreciated by even the celebrated teachers of constitutionalism.

He scored maximum marks in the art of brevity when he announced the military's pledge to operate within the constitution and support every constitutional measure -- in just 17 words.

Since the general used the word "Balochistan" quite a few observers were led to believe that he was responding to Mengal's six points presented as a precondition for joining Islamabad's efforts to woo the angry Baloch. There is no reason why the army chief should have a debate with a disgruntled Baloch leader, especially when he is obsessed with the so-called disappearances that don't concern the military at all. Even if they did, a brief press release by the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) would have been enough.

Plainly the general's endorsement of only constitutionally justifiable political actions offered happy tidings to the country's entire population. A simple deduction will prove that if extra-constitutional action cannot be allowed in Balochistan it cannot be contemplated in other parts of the country, that are free of both unpatriotic people and mischief by foreign hands.

This clarion call lent fulsome support to the judiciary's campaign to uphold the constitution, a campaign that it has hitherto conducted single-handedly and with a single-mindedness rarely witnessed in judicial history the world over. It was a clear warning to those who justified usurpation of power with tales of

scenarios for which the constitution, according to them, offered no solution. Perhaps the resolve to avoid anything unconstitutional has been steered by the Supreme Court's 2009 decision -- that any judge validating a putsch will share the dock with the usurper.

There is, however, the small problem of interpretation. As in the case of all great documents, people holding conflicting views on any issue can find corroborating text in the constitution. When the chief justice of the Supreme Court declared that every third missing person in Balochistan had been abducted by the Frontier Corps (FC) he was acting within the limits of the constitution. The same

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privilege could be claimed by the head of the FC when he repelled all talk about his force's involvement with enforced disappearances as sheer calumny.

The security forces have repeatedly clarified they have nothing to do with enforced disappearances in Balochistan or anywhere else. If any security official, by accident or because of a chink in his armour, can be blamed for disappearances, his action must be in accord with his oath to defend the constitution.

Similarly, the right to a fair trial has recently been put into the constitution and the proposed fair trial act is also said to be constitutionally valid.

The people of Pakistan should thank Providence for a constitution that can reconcile what may appear to be irreconcilable concepts. Didn't former president Ziaul Haq declare the marriage between the constitutional guarantee of minorities' equal rights with separate electorates to be a holy match made in heaven?

A bigger problem is that the elevation of the constitution as the final determinant of what is politically sound and what is not could arouse strange ideas in the bosoms of the riff-raff. They might start arguing that if the constitution arms the authorities with coercive powers, it should also enable an ordinary citizen to enjoy his rights.

For instance, the right to equality

right. Many cannot understand why this amendment should take longer to implement than a directive to put the people of Balochistan at the tender mercy of the FC.

However happy one may feel about the transfer of the right to education from the principles of policy to the fundamental rights chapter, it is impossible to avoid the thought whether it will take another 37 years before the right to health will be recognised as a fundamental right and the state obliged to guarantee it to all citizens.

There is a danger that the more ambitious agitators that have infiltrated civil society might confront the rulers with Article 38 of the Constitution -- "the state shall secure the well-being of the people, irrespective of sex, caste, creed or race, by raising their standard of living, by preventing the concentration of wealth and means of production in the hands of a few to the detriment of general interest, and by ensuring equitable adjustment of rights between employers and employees, and landlords and tenants."

But when will we stop putting everything on the plate of the judiciary or the military?

Why can't the millions of the unemployed, the coolies, the daily wagers, the vendors and hawkers, the tillers of the land and the women sweating in homes and in fields, who were described by Iqbal as hewers of wood and drawers of water, and in whose interest a separate homeland was supposed to have been demanded, accept the responsibility to turn the constitution into a living symbol of their aspirations?

After all they should also learn to do something for themselves.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

October 14

1882 University of the Punjab is founded in a part of India that later became West Pakistan.

1933 Nazi Germany withdraws from The League of Nations.

1949 Chinese Civil War: Chinese Communist forces occupy the city of Guangzhou (Canton), in Guangdong, China.

1981 Vice President Hosni Mubarak is elected as the President of Egypt one week after the assassination of the President of Egypt, Anwar Sadat.

1994 The Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, The Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzhak Rabin, and the Foreign Minister of Israel, Shimon Peres, receive the Nobel Peace Prize for their role in the establishment of the Oslo Accords and the framing of the future Palestinian Self Government.