

Dhaka at the center of climatic focus

Now is the time for action

IN the latest edition of Maplecroft's annual Climate Change Vulnerability Index (CCVI), Dhaka has taken top spot in a survey of 50 cities as most vulnerable to climate change risks. Every year, the global consultancy firm brings out the publication, where CCVI is a component and the study is based on a number of indicators. These include countries featuring more than 5 per cent annual growth rate and vulnerability is assessed based on susceptibility to weather events like drought, cyclones, wild fires and storm surges resulting in water stress, loss of crop and land lost to sea.

With Bangladesh hailed as one of the “next 11” by Goldman Sachs, there has been unprecedented interest by the international business community in investing in the country. The CCVI helps global corporations interested in expanding their operations in emerging markets with a climate risk assessment toolkit which act as a handbook for them to “identify where suppliers, assets and personnel are most at risk and plan for the long term”.

While global climate change is a natural phenomenon that cannot be controlled, governments can take measures to mitigate the risks. These include sensitisation of the general population and upgrading the capacity of government bodies so as to better cope with the risks associated with climate change. What the index has shown is that over the last three years, we have done little, in terms of policy, to take effective measures in combating the oncoming effects of climate change. Given that unprecedented changes in weather are in the offing, there is no alternative to designing more effective disaster risk reduction programmes that will work hand in hand with more stringent building regulations, better education and improved communications networks. Furthermore, as the effects of climate change transcend national boundaries, there are regional dynamics at work here. Hence, it is imperative that the international community comes forward to aid cities such as Dhaka in their impending struggle against climate-induced changes. Without these interventions, the future stability of Dhaka cannot be guaranteed.

Monitor loss of arable land carefully

Reliable statistics essential for planned farming

WHAT was known to be 1 percent loss of cultivable land annually based on 1983-84 agriculture census, no longer holds good. A study conducted in 2008 shows an increase in the cultivated land by 0.8 million hectares over the figure in previous census. Thus effectively nearly two and a half decades up to 2008 annual rate of decline stood at 0.3 percent.

In the main, however, all the statistical gymnastics give rise to a number of questions. In the first place, even the new statistic has become obsolete at least by 4 years because the last series of findings date back to 2008. Secondly, planning for agriculture was flawed because it kept out of consideration the increase in arable lands during 24 years preceding the benchmark year. Last but not least, arrangements for inputs like irrigation, fertiliser and seed or sapling could not correspond to the ground realities in terms of exact land area under cultivation.

We, therefore, endorse the views of Mahbub Hossain, Executive Director of Brac, that since food security hinges on the availability of land the government should conduct a detailed research to find out the total land available for agriculture.

The pressure of urbanisation, industrialisation and paving new roads is inexorable but the land is scarce. This being a given we have to offset the losses through adoption of a composite strategy. It should be inclusive of identifying new accretions, developing soil capital, reclaiming fallow lands and, above all, restoring grabbed lands to government hands. In this way, we can add significantly to the total cultivable area.

To top these up, we must have the right policy package whereby farmers get remunerative prices for their produces along with some incentives in order that they are beholden to farming. Besides, new storage facilities will have to be built up on a priority basis to rev up agriculture

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

November 17

- 1869
- In Egypt, the Suez Canal, linking the Mediterranean Sea with the Red Sea, is inaugurated.
- 1922
- Former Ottoman sultan Mehmed VI goes into exile in Italy.
- 1933
- United States recognizes Soviet Union.
- 1969
- Cold War: Negotiators from the Soviet Union and the United States meet in Helsinki to begin SALT I negotiations aimed at limiting the number of strategic weapons on both sides.
- 1989
- Cold War: Velvet Revolution begins: In Czechoslovakia, a student demonstration in Prague is quelled by riot police. This sparks an uprising aimed at overthrowing the communist government (it succeeds on December 29).



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

Jamaat-e-Islami and its militant wing Shibir unleashed against the police and pedestrians in the capital city and elsewhere in the country during the last week. In fact, concern has been expressed about the authority's lack of sufficient will and preparedness to handle the situation. The government has been implored to nip the menace to peace and law and order in the bud before it causes more damage.

To see things in historical perspective, Bangladesh had a share of politically motivated destructive activities, particularly following the arrival of religio-centred terrorism and the unsettling specter of suicide in the not-too-distant past. The only silver lining in an otherwise ominous scenario is that the denial mode insofar as the existence of the bigoted extremists is concerned has disappeared. The unfortunate part, however, is that, as in other sectors of our national existence, we have been disappointingly reactive in responding to the threats of internal security. The approach appears to be ad hoc and on a case to case basis.

We may have to ask ourselves if a perception has developed among the so-called religious extremist groups that the Bangladeshi state is inherently incapable of meeting their challenge and that it has become soft and indolent. We may have to ascertain if quite a few parties have developed a vested interest in a soft state, a weak government and ineffective implementation of the laws. Simultaneously, are foreign funds flowing substantially to various organisations and groups which serve, willingly or unwillingly, the long term objective of some political parties suspected to be aligned or sympathetic to the regional or international terror network?

Since destructive activities of the so-called Islamic extremists have increased, thereby demanding changes in the strategy to counter them, are we ready to seriously study the problem? This is natural because

CHING CHEONG

OUTGOING Chinese President Hu Jintao has prescribed a conservative developmental model called the Scientific Development View (SDV) for the country's next-generation leadership. The SDV, which he introduced in 2003, one year after he took power, champions a "more balanced" growth along the way to creating a "harmonious society." Taking such a scientific approach is said to help minimise conflict by narrowing the income gap, reducing regional economic disparity, promoting social welfare as well as pushing back environmental degradation.

Last Thursday, in his final major address after 10 years at the helm of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Mr. Hu hailed the SDV concept as one of the guiding principles of the country, along with Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory and Mr. Jiang Zemin's Three Represents.

In his 28,000-word report to the 18th Party Congress, Hu made 16 references to the SDV, stressing that it was key to China's success and should therefore be faithfully adhered to -- in fact placing the SDV on a par with the theories of Deng and Jiang. By doing so, he established himself as the formal genealogical descendant of Karl Marx and Mao, founders of modern communism and communist China respectively.

It is in wanting to prove himself as their legitimate heir in the Marxist-Leninist ideological heritage that Hu revealed himself to be a major source of political conservatism in China.

we do not see adequate attempts being made to examine links between terrorist groups, the conditions in which they had spawned, the politician-militant nexus and other forms of patronage these groups receive, the proliferation of small arms leading to the growth of private armies etc. The question is, are we trying to appreciate all the factors that contribute to the "quality and extent" of internal security threats?

Some say that we have not realised that in post-1975 Bangladesh, particularly during the last 25 years, there has been a phenomenal establishment of madrassahs throughout the country by persons and institutions about whose credentials not much is known. Was moral rearmament or

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spiritual renaissance the predominant factor behind such unusual increment? However, doubts would creep in as we do not see any corresponding healthy rise in public or private morality. So, the suspicion is that while the establishment, the civil society and other activists have remained in the dark about the designs and programmes of the obscurantist elements, the so-called religious extremists have grown in strength and spread their tentacles taking advantage of the ignorance and inertia.

It may be relevant to note that the state claims to stand for enlightened moderation. However, significant parts of the elite have represented the process of fight against extremist activities while some sections of the society have experienced the so-called radicalisation of Islamic thought and action. The focus is on the use of power in pursuit of policy. A section of the public has been converted to this approach. Incidentally, the liberal current of opinion has been significantly de-legitimised in the process.

The heart of the problem is perhaps

unresolved conflicts and the increasing cynicism. The requirement is a policy on conflict and support to the agenda for democracy. The goal should be denial of space for radicalised Islam and the militant tendency at its core. The religious extremists shall not be allowed to develop vital stakes in the political system for starting a radical movement in the long run.

In Bangladesh, advocates of radical path appear more determined than liberals or secularists. Secular forces hardly work with intense dedication, much less with a sense of mission. There is a threat in attempts to redefine Bangladeshi statehood in Islamic colours. Initially, there was constitutional faith in state secularism as the

defining credo of Bangladeshi nationhood.

A considered view is that the objective should be the restoration of the natural centrism of our politics. We have to remember that the state policy is under attack by religiously mobilised political forces. The place of organised religions in public life should also occupy our thoughts.

There is no denying that in Bangladesh gross poverty co-exists with democracy, a liberal constitution and disorder with functioning polity. Religious and traditional beliefs are far more tenacious than the liberals imagine. The state, at times, has been involved directly in the business of defining religion. Secularism as state ideology is unable to compete with a language of belonging saturated with religion. The compulsions of the traditional obligations of the ruler to protect state religion had to be kept in view.

There is a need to reassert the innate pluralism of our politics. This is significant because the liberal front faces an uphill task in recapturing the political as well as the psychological ground already lost to the so-called

extremist quarter. The fear is that such quarter is preparing for further round of aggressive social mobilisation with plans to embark upon politics of confrontation with a view to deriving political capital.

The so-called religious extremist activities are encouraged and sustained by an ideological inspiration. In other words, these activities are not divorced from ideology. One has to look for the said ideological moorings. In this quest, in Bangladesh, it is strongly likely that there will be some accusatory finger-pointing towards some political party. In the event of such a possibility turning into reality, the government of the day has to take tough actions without bothering about the political fallout. That would demand political sagacity of a very high order and may be a tall asking in our perilously polarised polity.

There is no doubt that the battle against extremism would be long. However, since the recent violence of the so-called religious extremists is a manifest attack on the long cherished values of the mainstream, our strategy and thought process may undergo substantial change in the following manner.

Persons or institutions having an apparent religious or ecclesiastical appearance and activity must not be out of bound for the surveillance agencies. Those creating credible suspicions must come within the ambit of threat perception and appropriate legal action shall be started forthwith. Preempting their nefarious activities should engage the uppermost attention of regulatory authority.

The aforementioned surveillance should ensure that no one is allowed to interpret and propagate a distorted version of the holy books. Our inherently religious folks must not be allowed to be misled. The so-called religious extremists committing violence should be treated like criminals and no element of respectability should be accorded to them.

As a nation, we must not suffer from any identity crisis as some mischievous quarters would like to. The Pakistanis thought we were lesser Muslims. Their "Islamisation drive" resulted in a colossal tragedy. It is time perhaps to once again show our true grit and be in real elements. Our politicians must not be heedless.

The writer is a columnist for *The Daily Star*.

Tackling reforms in China

This political conservatism is apparent when one compares his latest work report with the one he made at the 17th Party Congress five years ago.

Qian Gang, a researcher at the Centre of Media and Journalism Studies at the University of Hong Kong, is a leading expert on analysing the speeches of CCP leaders. He looked at, among other things, how often 10 key terms in the CCP lexicon, including Mao Zedong Thought, SDV, the Four Cardinal Principles, and socialism with Chinese characteris-

In the months after the Bo scandal erupted in February, there were strong calls to speed up political reform. The official *People's Daily*, for instance, pointed out in a commentary that "criticism is preferred to a crisis, and imperfect reform is preferred to a crisis resulting from the lack of reform."

tics, were mentioned in the two reports. He also found in the latest report a phrase that Hu used for the first time, when he pledged that the CCP shall not follow the "evil way" of changing our banners, referring to democratisation.

Qian's conclusion: The 2012 report was more conservative.

This political conservatism is even more obvious if one takes into consideration the fact that the 18th Party Congress was held against the backdrop of the Bo Xilai scandal. The crisis has severely battered the CCP in three major ways.

First, it showed that the monopoly

of power led to corruption at the very top. Mr. Bo's family was found to have tried to transfer as much as \$6 billion of personal wealth out of China.

Second, it showed that in the absence of checks and balances, senior officials such as Bo were able to engage, unfettered, in all sorts of extra-legal activities, including disobeying the central authorities, confiscating private property in the name of cracking down on organised crime and committing murder.

Third, it showed how the lack of a

cadres to keep watch over their family, and highlighted the danger of the party collapsing under the weight of corruption. He did not address the urgent need for political reform sparked by the Bo crisis.

If Hu's report is meant to bequeath his conservative political legacy to the incoming leadership under Xi Jinping, then there may be cause for concern since the ills that have plagued the country look certain to remain.

To most Chinese, the SDV contributed to lopsided developments -- rapid economic growth but lagging political reform.

To be sure, China's rapid ascent during Hu's decade in power has turned the country into the world's second largest economy after the United States and made it a major locomotive for the global economy. At the same time, however, the country continues to be besieged by rampant corruption, a widening income gap and serious environmental degradation. The incidence of social unrest is rising and becoming more widespread, so much so that the state now allocates more money towards maintaining domestic stability than towards boosting national defence.

In fact, to ensure that the 18th Party Congress proceeded smoothly and without incident, Beijing mobilised some 1.4 million so-called "security volunteers" to keep an eye on the city's residents.

So, if anything, this testifies to the urgent need for political reform in China and not the success of the SDV.