

CROSS TALK

Social safety net programmes falling short

Large percentage of poor left out

BA NGLADESH Integrated Household Survey (BIHS), the half-yearly nationwide survey published by the International Food Policy research Institute (IFPRI) has unearthed some disturbing facts about the eighty or so social safety net programmes the government runs. What has been presented in the study is the target poor populace for these programmes which represents 40 percent of the total population ended up receiving only 55 percent of the intervention benefits. The rest 45 percent of social safety net benefits ended up with the richer 60 percent, who do not fall in the poorest or most vulnerable category. Needless to say, such results are less than satisfactory and a huge waste of government resources.

The fact that the findings of the study have not been wholly rebutted by the government goes to show that it is not without merit. What it does show is that some of the major components of programmes designed from outset to reach the truly needy, such as vulnerable group development (VGD), vulnerable group feeding (VGF) and gratuitous relief (GR) are being diverted to serve the interests of the comparatively richer segment of population. Obviously, something is not going right in terms of implementing these crucial programmes either due to ignorance or graft.

In other areas, particularly agriculture, the study highlights the steady and alarming loss of farmlands. Such decrease is unavoidable due to conversion of agro-lands for housing and industry. With both northern and eastern zones of the country reaching saturation point in terms of agricultural expansion and utilisation, special focus is needed to exploit the southern belt of Bangladesh districts where soil generally suffers from high salinity levels. Interestingly the rice research institutes of the country have developed several varieties of saline-resistant crops. These have shown success in field tests. What is now becoming increasingly apparent is that policy focus must be realigned southwards which at one time was known as the bread basket of the country. Greater research on stress-resistant crops together with prioritisation to fully exploit the southern districts could go a long way to help feed the millions who otherwise go hungry.

Crimes against humanity

Taking Syria to ICC hits hurdle

MOMENTUM is gaining in the international arena to make the Assad regime answer in the International Criminal Court for what Switzerland and 56 other states are terming as a 'failure to investigate and prosecute crimes against humanity and war crimes committed since March 2011'. The situation on the ground in Syria is deteriorating rapidly as an increasingly isolated regime turns its guns on the civilian population and atrocities becoming commonplace against a helpless populace.

Hundreds of thousands Syrians have fled their homeland to seek refuge in neighbouring countries, yet the UN Security Council remains a house divided. With two permanent representatives, China and Russia effectively blocking the UN from exerting greater pressure on Syria, the Syrian people have largely been left to fend off an organised military. The local forces (FSA) aligned against the regime to not have what it takes to bring the conflict to a decisive end.

The latest calls for making the Assad regime accountable for its actions by referring this matter to the International Criminal Court has met with stiff rebuttal by Russia. Russia views such a move to be "untimely" and "counterproductive" and would prefer to see a negotiated settlement to the 11-month conflict. The question at this juncture is fairly simple. With Syrian opposition groups steadfastly refusing to deal with, what they state as a murderous regime and with no signs of breaking the stalemate in UN Security Council, what is to become of ordinary Syrians? Have we become so numb to rise in the daily death toll, like the attack on Aleppo University on January 16 that took 87 lives?

Will the world stand by and do nothing while the UN descends into a failed organisation like League of Nations? Intervention should have occurred some time ago, before some 600,000 Syrians had to flee to other countries, and before tens of thousands of civilians had to suffer unavoidable deaths. The only thing "counterproductive" in this



MOHAMMAD
BADRUL AHSAN

IN Syed Muztaba Ali's short story Padotika, we have a schoolteacher whose monthly salary is one-third of the amount an Englishman

spends on his three-legged dog. The most telling line in the tale comes when the teacher asks his students to work out a math for him. How many legs of the Englishman's dog were equal to eight members in his family?

Those were the colonial times when foreigners ruled this country. But when schoolteachers were being pepper sprayed, gassed and water cannoned in the capital for last two weeks, they were being harassed by their own countrymen. They looked distraught, scared and frantic, a dispersed crowd of deprived people crushed between ruthless assailants and abject poverty.

A nation that has lost its conscience, we watched that ugly scene without a twitch. Teachers, who came for a little consideration, got the short end of the stick. They were being sprayed like termites and vermin; even worse, last May a teacher badly beaten by police succumbed to his injuries.

These teachers are asking for a little more money. One cannot call it greed. If you talk to them, they will tell you harrowing stories. Their house rent allowance is Tk.100 per month, which is little more than the

price of fourteen bricks. And, wait till you hear about their Tk.150 monthly medical allowance, which is the bargain price of a Benson & Hedges pack of twenty many puff away in a day's relief.

That's one of the many ironies of life and these teachers know it. They know they have chosen a profession which cannot spin money. They cannot get bribes or qualify for fat bank loans or win headline-hitting government contracts. They understand they will never get paid obscene money for their thankless jobs.

A proud country is always proud of its teachers because its future depends on them. Politicians, bureaucrats, professionals and businessmen shape the future of a country, but teachers shape them before they shape anything. We grew up respecting our teachers because we knew it.

But they have chosen their profession nonetheless either because they have a passion for it or they couldn't find a better job. By all means we shouldn't forget that we need them anyway. We shouldn't forget it's in our interest that we must keep them at least at a subsistence level, perhaps equal to what some of us lavish on our pets.

The truth is that our policymakers are not bothered. Their children attend expensive schools where teachers are as attractive as curricula, both made possible by fabulous tuition fees each student pays in a

month that can support families for a year. If you are in the mood, it's immensely more challenging than the Englishman's dog. Try figuring out how many members in a poor teacher's family are equal to a fraction of one rich student.

What about the millions of kids in rest of the country who are not so rich? Their best hope are teachers whom they can afford within their meager means. What about teachers who teach at schools which do not make good business sense? It's a metaphysical question for this nation as to who is going to support

They didn't block roads, bash cars or disrupt life by any means. They only threatened to fast until death as if to dramatise their daily dollop of dying with a sudden impact. They wanted to pick a suitable spot in the capital, which they believed was going to project their protest.

We understand the government is annoyed. It doesn't want a public spectacle of fasting teachers in this election season. The government must be thinking the opposition is instigating the whole thing, which is why it finds these teachers all the more irritating.

Yet, the government could have been more patient. A proud country is always proud of its teachers because its future depends on them. Politicians, bureaucrats, professionals and businessmen shape the future of a country, but teachers shape them before they shape anything. We grew up respecting our teachers because we knew it.

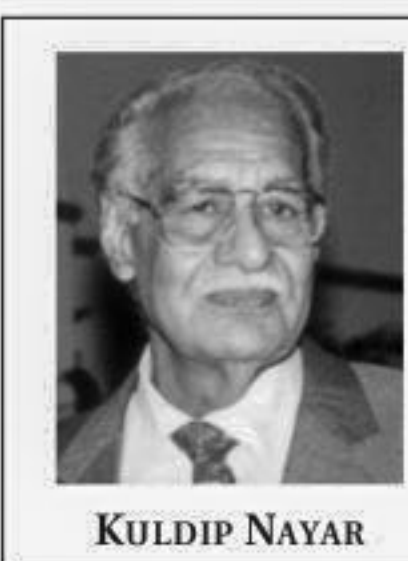
Our home minister is an educated man, who should know the same thing. He must have taken lessons from some teachers in some classrooms. One wonders if this is his idea of returning that favour by teaching those teachers a memorable lesson.

A whole lot hasn't changed since the Englishman left this country, except that the three-legged dog is now ours. We should live like one big extended family instead of behaving like a collection of tribes.

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BETWEEN THE LINES

Blood at the border



KULDIP NAYYAR

IT is an unfortunate coincidence that the border clashes and ceasefire violations between India and Pakistan have

been at a time when Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri had signed the Tashkent Declaration some 37 years ago to bind the two countries into a peace pact. He consecrated it with his death. Yet the Declaration could not avert the 1971 war, nor the subsequent skirmishes.

Strange, there was not even a mention of the Declaration either by the media or by the political leadership. It appears that the two countries have remained jingoistic. One incident happens and the entire accumulated bias comes out. Beheading soldiers is nothing new. The army on both sides has indulged in it before. What is annoying is Pakistan's flat denial of the incident. The brigadier at the flag-march meeting came with a prepared text and returned to Pakistan after reading the brief. There was no regret, no grief.

A UN probe to verify facts could have been a possibility. But since New Delhi stopped the International Court at The Hague from taking up a Pakistan complaint against India on the plea that the two countries settle their disputes bilaterally, it could not bring in a third party.

However, the incident is too serious to be left at that. India should make the evidence public, particularly when it is alleged that Hafiz Saeed, the Lashkar-e-Toiba chief, was at the border before the clashes. Pakistan on its part should order a probe. Maybe, it is the doing of irregulars who, regrettably, seem to constitute part of Pakistan's combative force. The country is already experiencing violence from within.

The Taliban are killing 20 to 25 Pakistanis daily and there is no place which is beyond the range of their guns.

When there is unabated domestic violence and when Pakistan is fighting against the Taliban in the Federal Administrative Area, it is not understandable why it should open a front with India. In fact, Islamabad has withdrawn some forces from the Indian border to fight on the west. Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) has declared publicly that it would concentrate on the threat posed by internal forces instead of engaging India. Therefore, there is no question of unnecessary hype.

New Delhi should realise that Pakistan is its front state. If it ever goes under, India would be directly

maturity in his response. But the government's decision to keep the new positive visa policy on hold will only lessen people-to-people contact, which is essential for better understanding. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's statement that business with Pakistan cannot be as usual is understandable when the BJP is demanding a harsh reply. Yet my experience shows that Islamabad resiles from its rigid stand if and when New Delhi steps back and reflects. We have to learn how to live with intransigent Pakistan. Ismail Khan, Director General of Trade in Pakistan occupied Kashmir, said that trade and travel across the ceasefire line would remain suspended until the skirmishes subsided. This is an

I wish the two sides would consider the ceasefire line sacred. This was converted into the Line of Control (LoC) through Shimla Agreement. The then Prime Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, hailed it as the "line of peace" in an interview to me. And it has been seldom violated for the last two decades. Blood at the border has scotched even a limited hope.

threatened by the Taliban and face the danger of destabilisation. The policy should be how to retrieve Pakistan from the hopeless situation it is in. A weak Pakistan is a threat to India, however powerful.

Any escalation of tension or a suitable retaliation at an appropriate time would only aggravate the situation. A dialogue is the only way to improve the situation and it should never be suspended or downgraded. There is no option to talks. Pakistan foreign minister Hina Rabbani Khar, otherwise irresponsible in her statements, has said emphatically that the dialogue between the countries should not be affected by skirmishes at the border. Indian Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid has shown restraint and

unwise step which will hurt Pakistan as much as India.

For some reasons, former military officers on both sides have turned out to be more hawkish in their comments. I was shocked to hear Admiral Iqbal of the Pakistan Navy reminding India about the Muslim rule in the country for 1,000 years. Equally jingoistic was the suggestion by a retired army major general that the solution to India's problems with Pakistan was through a military action. Both should realise that the engagement of the two countries would not be a street brawl. They have nuclear weapons and the worst can happen.

Civil society in both the countries has proved to be disappointing. Instead of analysing the situation

dispassionately, they have supported the stand of their country. Regrettably, civil society is always on the side of the establishment whenever there is a clash on the border or when a dispute assumes dangerous proportions. Were the two civil societies to put their weight behind peace and call a spade a spade, their voice would matter.

New Delhi's estimate that the ceasefire violations were meant to give cover to terrorists to sneak into Kashmir may be true. But the security forces in the valley are strong enough to chastise them. The fallout of tension affects the people in Kashmir. They feel more insecure. The killing of elected panchayat members has made 30 others resign.

On the other hand, the image of the Hurriyat leaders gets more tarnished. Most Indians link their visit to Pakistan last month to renewed ceasefire violations. They are held responsible for requesting Pakistan to internationalise the Kashmir problem. Such moves by the Hurriyat alienate even the liberals in India who want a solution that respects the special status given to Kashmir in the Indian constitution.

What the ceasefire violations have done is a blow to relations between India and Pakistan. They have been improving for the last few years and would have been strengthened after the resumption of trade and the new visa policy. The clashes on the border have pushed the two countries to the starting point. There should be a way to go forward. Hockey and cricket players should not be barred from playing.

I wish the two sides would consider the ceasefire line sacred. This was converted into the Line of Control (LoC) through Shimla Agreement. The then Prime Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, hailed it as the "line of peace" in an interview to me. And it has been seldom violated for the last two decades. Blood at the border has scotched even a limited hope.

The writer is an eminent Indian journalist.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

January 18

1913

A Greek flotilla defeats the Ottoman Navy in the Naval Battle of Lemnos during the First Balkan War, securing the islands of the Northern Aegean Sea for Greece.

1919

World War I: The Paris Peace Conference opens in Versailles, France.

1974

A Disengagement of Forces agreement is signed between the Israeli and Egyptian governments, ending conflict on the Egyptian front of the Yom Kippur War.

1976

Lebanese Christian militias overrun Karantina, Beirut, killing at least 1,000.

1978

The European Court of Human Rights finds the United Kingdom government guilty of mistreating prisoners in Northern Ireland, but not guilty of torture.

2009

Gaza War: Hamas announces they will accept Israeli Defense Forces's offer of a ceasefire, ending the assault.