

Fresh dialogue prospect

Act out of box to realise it

IF the Awami League has offered talks to the opposition thrice, BNP has done it twice. Yet, no headway has been made in the direction of a dialogue. Amid blowing some hot air and playing to the gallery, talks remain a non-starter. But this needn't have been so.

During the mission of UN envoy Oscar Fernandez-Taranco and his team, AL and BNP seemed willing to talk. But as soon as he left both sides reverted to their rigid positioning on pre-poll government issue. The world is left surprised and the people chagrined.

Now that the BNP standing committee meeting chaired by Khaleda Zia has invited the government to arrange talks after due deliberation and fresh stock taking, one tends to take it seriously.

Accordingly, we urge the ruling party to formally respond to the BNP's call. Since the BNP is joining the budget session of the parliament, they must utilise the opportunity to present their formula and proposal on the floor of the House.

Parliament is the best platform to take issue with ruling party on such a matter of pressing national interest.

Now, the issue has boiled down to deciding on a non-partisan head of the interim government vis-a-vis incumbent prime minister being in charge of it. This is not an impossible task for the collective wisdom of the parliament to redeem.

To circumvent the whole range of paraphernalia relating to formal and informal talks, the sticking point in the whole debate needs to be taken up principally inside the parliament.

AI Report 2012

Take it seriously

THE Amnesty International (AI) report on the country's human rights situation for the year 2012 is out. It is surprising to see how constant the highlighted issues have been, and equally, how constant government inaction has been in ameliorating the situation. What has been repetitive is the denial by the government after every such report is published. Never has there been an acknowledgment that this is a concern for us.

According to the report there have been 30 extrajudicial deaths in the hands of the law enforcers and ten forced disappearances apart from widespread torture by the agencies. The state has been also wanting in guaranteeing the safety of the minorities and the rights of indigenous people. Women and girls continue to suffer torture and violence, in some instances in the hands of the police.

That a government that had promised rule of law, and zero tolerance for custodial deaths, in its election manifesto, should not only fail to stop the police excesses, but go out of the way to defend them, or deny their complicity in these, is abhorrent. Equally unacceptable is a situation where a particular community suffers from fear stemming from the perception that the government is incapable of ensuring their safety.

We know what the reaction of the government is likely to be. In fact the report starts with the comment of the PM made in January 2012 that that no human rights violations had been committed in the country. Denial of reality will not do. We demand action.

Good start for ties

NIRMALA GANAPATHY

CONFIDENT and pleasant, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang made jokes and added personal touches such as recounting his first visit to India 27 years ago as a youth leader.

He also showed little hesitation in acknowledging there were problems between India and China during his visit here. "We do not deny that there are some problems between the two sides," he said in his statement after talks with his Indian counterpart, Dr Manmohan Singh.

But while Li's visit is a breath of fresh air to a relationship that has seen tense moments, analysts are hesitant to paint it as a roaring success.

"A lot of nice things have been said by the Chinese Premier but, well, the proof of the pudding is in the eating," said Dr C. Rajamohan, a distinguished fellow at the Observer Research Foundation.

"India wants a good relationship with China but there are three issues on which the Chinese have to do something: Maintain peace on the border, second is water, and third is the trade deficit which has become so huge," he said.

But, as External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid said at the end of the Delhi leg of Li's visit: "It's a good beginning."

An immediate outcome of the visit is a meeting next month in Beijing between special representatives from the two sides to discuss how to move forward on the border dispute and look at resolving differences along the Line of Actual Control, the de facto border.

India and China are often pitched as competitors. The 4,000km-long border, along which are several areas under dispute, and dam-building on the Chinese side of the Brahmaputra river, which provides water to India's north-east, are major concerns for Delhi.

Meanwhile, the continued presence in India of the Dalai Lama, the exiled spiritual leader of Tibetans, especially against the backdrop of recent self-immolations by dozens of Tibetans, is a thorn in Beijing's side.

Analysts predict there will be progress in some areas, but express scepticism over whether the two sides can move forward on the complicated border issue, where talks in the past had yielded little results. A border cooperation agreement, which includes better coordination between the border forces, is in the works, but officials say it will take time to negotiate.

"There will be some sectors where there will be progress. On economic issues, for instance, China is likely to allow greater access to Indian goods. So there is hope there," said former Indian foreign secretary Lalit Mansingh. "The big difference is the openness to acknowledge the differences. It was too much to expect results."

Crime as a political issue

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

There is a danger, too, that legislation rushed through parliament to deal with a perceived threat from so-called Islamic terrorists may be used at a later stage against groups whose danger to the polity is far less generally accepted.



THERE is a general feeling that the government should take steps to deal with or prevent terrorism: the public have no clear idea of what might be effective against terrorism, but require that something be done. Whether the action genuinely improves public safety or not, having the fear of terrorism allayed would allow the government to claim a degree of success.

There is little doubt that the terrorist attack on commuter trains in Madrid was instrumental in the electoral defeat for the Spanish government a few days later -- the government being blamed for making Spain a target by participating in the Iraq war. Government action may even take the form of apportioning blame, with hindsight, for the failure to prevent terrorist attacks.

As in all criminal activities, a balance has to be struck between effective police action, and individual liberties which are taken for granted. Police could clear up a great deal of crimes if before big festivities they seal off any shopping mall and systematically search every person therein.

However, such operations have a grave impact on civil liberties, and would be severely disruptive to their daily lives. The public will, however, tolerate much more stringent legislation directed at the threat of terrorism, for example increased security procedures at airports, and even accept the detention of suspects without trial.

Immediately after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, the governments of Australia, Britain and the US all rushed to create a new anti-terrorist legislation. The UK, for example despite having created new

non-IRA terrorist legislation in the intelligence Service Act 1994 and the terrorism Act and the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000, published the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Bill on November 12, which became an Act of parliament on December 13, less than 100 days after al-Qaeda attacks.

The above Act creates the possibility of internment of suspects without trial, and a number of such prisoners have been held at Belmarsh Prison just outside London. Far more widely known is, of course, the American camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, which has, since 2001, been used to detain suspected al-Qaeda personnel and others without trial.

The legal validity of such detentions is at best dubious, and the effect on civil liberties of such hasty anti-terrorist legislation is not seriously challenged by the general public, who view the incarceration of government-designated dangerous people as a pragmatic necessity to preserve their safety.

Since terrorist attacks are currently being carried out by suicide bombers, it is fairly clear that any anti-terrorist legislation will have not the slightest impact on deterrence-creating severe penalties for particular offences, symbolic action to express public revulsion and enhancing public security.

Similarly, no legislation directed at the internal affairs of any Western nation can possibly hope to address the underlying grievances and problems in the Middle-East that lead to the so-called Islamic terrorism.

The most effective aspect of the type of legislation is its ability to increase police and intelligence powers to investigate, arrest and bring terrorists to trial, and the suppression of terrorist organisations. These are, however, not without a very real cost to individual liberties.

There is a danger, too, that legislation rushed through parliament to deal with a perceived threat from so-called Islamic terrorists may be used at a later stage against groups whose danger to the polity is far less generally accepted. There have been a number of instances where former terrorists have become accepted and internationally respected governments.

The African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa became the democratically elected government no more than 10 years after it was denounced by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher as a terrorist organisation, and some of the founders of the state of Israel, including later, well-respected prime ministers, were deemed terrorists by the British government which, in the aftermath of the Second World War, controlled what was then known as Palestine.

It may well be that the rush to pass anti-terrorist legislation has, as its most politically important aim, the symbolical expression of public revulsion at terrorist attacks. This symbolism is not addressed at terrorists, however, who would no doubt completely ignore it, but at the populace of state who fear becoming victims of terror and are mollified by the feeling that something is being done.

If this is the case, it follows that the more draconian the powers and punishments, the safer the public will feel, leaving questions of procedural fairness and legality aside.

The writer is a Columnist for The Daily Star.

CREATING JOB OPPORTUNITIES YOUTH

Let's give our boys a chance to be men?

SHAZIA OMAR

I met a sweet old lady in the slum yesterday. I was in Korail to oversee the recruiting of some extremely poor people for security guard jobs. Choto phupu, Zeb-un-Nissa, had passed away the week before and I was feeling particularly tender toward silver haired beauties, so when a lady (old, frail, cute) wandered in, lost in a web of worries, I asked her who she was. Here is the heart-break I discovered.

She was Assia, grandmother of Hossain, who had come to apply for a job as a guard. Hossain met the height requirement of 5'5" but he had a 'baby face.' (A face of a twelve year old boy on a man of twenty). I had seen a few baby faces around before but I hadn't realised this was a condition. Does it stem from under nutrition/ genealogy/ expired medication?) A baby faced guard isn't very intimidating to thieves and so he didn't get the job and his dadi was crestfallen.

She said she was desperate to "set him up" with a source of income because they were strapped of all cash. She had received a non-refundable grant of Tk.13,500 a year ago to set up a tea stall. Her oldest grandson looked after it. He earned Tk.200 a day but that was not enough to cover the family's expenses (rent and 3 kilos of rice a day) or secure them against evictions or fire. Thus she wanted a job (as a more secure path out of poverty) for Hossain.

Twenty women came to apply for the security jobs but the company policy was that women needed at least an SSC graduation to join. (Requirements for men were more relaxed.) The extremely poor women did not make the mark. Three had studied up to class 5, two had studied up to class 2, and the rest had never been to school at all. Only three men came for the job interview, Hossain and two others. One man was too short, the other was recruited.

I was surprised that so few people showed up for the opportunity, then I learnt that no one wanted the job because of the risks. Apparently if a robbery occurs, the guards get blamed, and this happens frequently. There are no rights in the workplace, or working legal institutions for extremely poor people, and such fear of false accusations is a real barrier against one of the few non-skilled, non-farming jobs available to them.

Eleven million children in Bangladesh are extremely poor. Over eight million youths are without primary education or skills. About half a million children live on streets, exposed to various dangers. The youth labour force will reach nearly 30 million by 2015.



The economy needs to grow and create more jobs for youths but macro enabling policies are not the solution to extreme poverty. Economic growth alone is not enough. Benefits do not trickle down to the poorest unless solutions are customised with them specifically in mind.

And we need to expand the range of skill-development options available to youths with minimum or no education.

This means we need to allocate a budget and expertise to large-scale, quick, employment-oriented skills development initiatives starting now. We need sufficient efforts here to ensure that all youths of employable age will develop 'marketable skills' within the next five years.

Government and non-government vocational training centres need to be activated and fitted with courses suitable for available jobs. School curriculums need to more diversified at secondary school level, containing academic and vocational job oriented courses.

Private sector partnerships are key to success. Donors can help. The time to act is now! We must stop the intergenerational transfer of poverty if we are to achieve our vision of a poverty-free, fully inclusive Bangladesh by 2021.

I promised sweet dadi that I would try to help Hossain find a job. She was very huggable, though bony. Our hug brought down all sorts of barriers, and out came her true story. Hossain was not her older son's son, but her younger son's son -- the treacherous younger son had kicked her and his motherless son out of the house when he married his second wife.

Hossain was inconvenient baby-faced, and his father, desperately poor also, abandoned him. Sweet dadi rescued him and brought him into her small home (and big heart), where she and he lived as a second class citizens; a burden on her older son's family income. She was getting old and she worried what would happen to Hossain when she died.

With heart breaking love, she told me that when there was not enough money to eat, Hossain would skip a meal -- and so would she -- and all night, her heart would ache for him. Sweet dadi, and your grandson, my heart aches for you. May Allah and our elected government be with you and all the 25 million others like you.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Explore alternative energy sources

Recently the government signed a deal with the Russian government to set up a nuclear power plant at Rooppur. Power generation is essential but people's safety should be given the highest priority. Many technologically advanced countries are considering closing down their nuclear plants. Bangladesh is not a technologically advanced country. In case of any accident, the consequence will be severe. The world is heading towards alternative energy sources like solar power and biogas. I would like to request the government to consider alternative energy sources instead of nuclear power.

M.A. Kashem
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Daily Star must live up to its standard

There is no doubt that The Daily Star is the most influential English daily in our country. Its news and views along with its trademark makeup and get-up draw readers. But recently it downgraded its quality and made a total transformation within a very short time. It has not only shortened the editorials but also reduced the pages of the newspaper. The longtime readers of the daily feel very disappointed. When all the newspapers of the country are selling at Tk.7 or 8, this newspaper is selling at Tk.10. The readers pay this extra money for its quality and authenticity of news. The authorities of the newspaper should consider the readers' demand.

Md. Nahid Iftekhhar
Muradpur, Chittagong

Huge loss for railway

The other day I was travelling from Kamalapur to Joydevpur on Turag Express. The train was crammed with people but only a few had tickets. When the TT showed up to check tickets, some commuters told the TT audaciously that they didn't buy any ticket. Only a few commuters were seen to buy the penalty tickets. I think only 10 percent of the commuters on that train had tickets. It's a huge loss for the railway. It should immediately take action in this regard.

Samiul Rajjil
Bangladesh University of Textiles
Dhaka

Madrasa education

To bring madrasa education on a par with the general education is a long overdue demand of the educationists, from late Dr. Quadrat-e-Khuda to the present education minister. How will a madrasa student get such education that would prepare him to join the mainstream workforce, without only being Imams of mosques? As they are not taught Bangla literature, English or even science, their education remains incomplete. However, Ershad upgraded madrasa education without improving it in line with Quadrat-e-Khuda Commission. Alia madrasas have, however, included some of the above mentioned subjects in their syllabus but Qawmi madrasas have confined their teachings only to Arabic study. There is no alternative to revamping the curriculum of madrasa education.

Ahmed Niaz
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Target 48 entities," published on May 23, 2013

Iftekhhar Hassan

Some politicians of Bangladesh are so jealous of Professor Yunus's success that they are doing all they can to destroy his reputation.

Saleh Tanveer

This is a danger signal for these private entities and will have a disastrous effect in the long run. People have to resist, or next time, some other organisation will be on the target list.

smahmood

These organisations are seriously in danger. What is the ultimate aim of the government?

Zahir Karna

If these organisations have no legal and financial ties with the Grameen Bank, then why are they so reluctant to share information about their operations?

Abidmr

I am looking forward to seeing some positive outcomes of this investigation.

"After Col Taher, there is more" (May 23, 2013)

Zaman

What about the murders that happened between 1973 and 1975?

Niloufar Naseem Sarker

The news analysis by Mr Ahsan raises the question whether killing of these dedicated freedom fighters like Taher, Musharraf, and Manzoor was a part of greater conspiracy against the independence of Bangladesh?

Khondkar Saleque

I demand fair and transparent trial of the killings of all Liberation War front commanders and other freedom fighters. The killings of Zia, Khaled, Manzoor, Huda, Haider and several others between 1975 and 1981 must come under trial.