

Giving food to the hungry

We are on the right track

THE good news is that Bangladesh has halved the number of those of its people who have been going hungry. Such information, coming against the background of the Millennium Development Goals set for 2015, should be occasion for good cheer. And it is. Now that the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation has officially listed Bangladesh as a nation which has successfully reduced the number of its hungry citizens from the 58 per cent noted in the base year of 1990 to 31.50 per cent in 2010, and that too well before the target year of 2015, it will be quite reasonable to suppose that we can move ahead in handling other priorities. At this point in time, the figures for those living below the poverty line have dipped to about 29 per cent.

This is no mean feat on the part of the country. And it demonstrates certain basic truths, among which is the presence of good, focused leadership in certain areas. In recent years, for all the difficulties we have faced on other fronts, we have seen our agriculture remain stable, thus giving the country a solid base from which to forge ahead. Now that hunger is being tackled, that our efforts towards an amelioration of poverty are being acknowledged by such global bodies as the FAO, we know only too well that the achievement is but a call for the momentum to continue. Being one of twenty countries to have halved the number of the hungry, Bangladesh can only go ahead.

This achievement makes us proud. It boosts our sense of optimism.

Avoidable train stoppages

Political consideration getting an upperhand?

HOW do we justify the decision to put in place unnecessary railway stoppages? That is precisely what seems to have happened at Comilla's Hasanpur rail station. It is an unscheduled stop, and one that has been apparently granted at the behest of the minister concerned. Although he says a public demand has been met, such a claim is not, however, borne out by the lack of financial viability of the stoppage. Indeed, as a prominent Bangla daily report reveals there have been 23 such 'unnecessary' stops along intercity train routes that Bangladesh Railway has had to accommodate during the tenure of the present government.

Apart from pleasing politically influential personages, such additional, albeit unnecessary stoppages, have done little to increase the revenue of the railway. On the contrary, it has added to the operating cost and created administrative and logistical complications for the railways which needs to whittle down its losses. It appears throughout history that, public representatives have been under the impression that being "elected" automatically grants them carte blanche to secure government services to their constituencies. Nothing wrong about serving one's constituency but political consideration should not be allowed to get the better of economic judgement.

Railway is not alone. The same trend had been seen in the past pertaining to construction of bridges and culverts to please one or the other political heavyweight and then having been abandoned, halfway through or partially done which amounted to sheer waste of national resources. Until the collective mindset of those elected to power changes, nothing else will.

Dumps on the roads

BA^{NG}LADESH'S political landscape has not changed much over the past 42 years. More so, the politicians over the years have not changed either. With a polarised environment, political parties have remained constant, each with its positive and negative agendas that seem to have over taken the sense of logic and common sense. One does not have to understand who or what group is in power. They also remain the same and stagnant.

No parties compromise, nor do they follow through their agenda and promises to the people. In recent times this unnerving atmosphere created by those who feel it necessary to create imbalance has created a disjointed feeling among the masses.

No one seems to know when this impasse will end. These are the dumps on the political roads. How do we overcome this tit for tat tactics and insults hurled in public and parliament that is unbecoming of the positions held by those in power and those that are vying to get back their power?

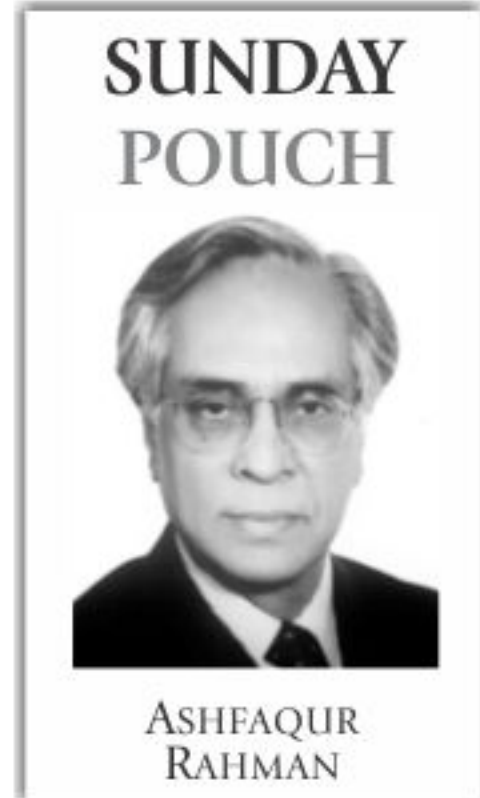
About a month ago, the parliament elected the first woman as Speaker of the House. Now there are three women in positions of high power. Some might argue that the power and authority of these three women are not equal. That is, one rules, the opposition rebukes and argues their point, and then the third tries to make peace between the two.

Although the tenure of the speaker is in its infancy, there is a strong possibility that the three women might come to a compromise. What needs to happen is a sit down between the three in private discussions, and have them come out with a proposed solution. As rickshaw puller can pull people and goods over the never ending bumps and pot holes throughout the streets of Dhaka -- and that itself is a difficult task -- the rickshaw puller gets his job done and gets compensated for his efforts.

There are many dumps and pot holes in the political arena, and if a rickshaw puller puts his mettle into his daily activity, so can the three women who do not have to put the same physical strain on themselves to overcome the current impasse. I'm hopeful that eventually a compromise will be reached.

The writer is based in New York.

Dreams about the four cities!



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

THE residents of four key cities of Bangladesh -- Khulna, Barisal, Rajshahi and Sylhet -- are likely to know the results of their mayoral elections. By tomorrow if there is no mishap, the picture would be clear as to who would be in the driving seats in the four cities for the next five years. These lucky people will have the opportunity to carve out their names in the history of these cities. But all this will depend on whether they have the good of the electors in their hearts. However, if they revert to 'business, as usual' and resort to political chicanery and pettiness which characterised many of the city leaders in the past, then we may as well forget any bright future for these cities.

Bangladesh is a big country by way of population. Dhaka, the capital has 15 million people. Chittagong our second biggest city has 7.5 million. But after these two cities the rest dwarf in population. Khulna, which is the third largest city, has just over a million people. The other three, where mayoral elections were held yesterday, have less than a million. These four cities, including Khulna, we can therefore call 'second tier cities.' But make no mistake; these cities are becoming important hubs of growth. Spurred by trade, investment, and in many cases by indigenous innovation, they are moving ahead. The government with its limited resources have been building airports, improving railway connectivity, water routes as well as telecommunication infrastructure. The result has been spurts of development not seen in these cities for many years.

But these have not benefited everyone who live in these cities in equal measure. The cities remain in many respects in the backwaters. Modernity in many areas is still a far cry. Road infrastructure as well as conversancy service are poor and need to be attended to swiftly in order to bring them into the 21st century. Standard hotels and guest houses are few and far between. Shopping malls and wet markets are still archaic and there is immediate need to upgrade them. Cultural activity and recreation for the residents are yet to attain a level of vibrancy that would add to the quality of life of the citizens. It is not because there are no talents available. But necessary infrastructures have not been built. There is so much to do and so many opportunities but so little action.

There are systemic difficulties in our local government structure. For one, governance is much centralised. The central government in Dhaka controls most of the subjects that matter most to the citizens of these cities. Financing as well as taxation to raise revenues are similarly controlled. In very few areas do the local authorities enjoy autonomy. Hence they have very little latitude in deciding their own fate. This is not always the case in other countries. In the United Kingdom the cities are considerably empowered. China is one country where the city government can take

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decisions that affect the daily lives of the citizens in that city. Even attracting foreign investment to a city in certain sectors is left to the city fathers. It is time we also start giving thought to such proposition.

But let it be known that second and third tier cities around the world develop their own dynamic style that carry them forward.

Take the case of Khulna city. Historically it has been host to important state owned industries like jute mills, shipyard, the newsprint mill, etc. Around these industries have grown small and medium enterprises and services. So the city is host to a new form of industrial structure, commonly known as 'flexible specialisation.' More recently, the focus has shifted from industries to firms. There is now little connection between causality and characterisation. The city planners and the new mayor has to understand this changing dynamism in Khulna and set the city compass anew. Khulna is also considered a port city. The port of Chalna is only a few kilometers away. So the dream of building Khulna as a hub-and-spoke type city with the port being the hub and various related industries being the spokes need to be envisioned for it.

In a similar fashion, the cities of Barisal, Rajshahi and Sylhet need to be configured, stylised and designed to meet their own dynamic growth factors. While doing so, the city leaders must take into consideration the element of 'stickiness' of a particular type of industry or service in that place. Thus in Sylhet, if tourism is the main adhesive, the city fathers should visualise attracting industries related to tourism to that city.

When a city structure is identified, planned and worked at, then it would be easy to run the race towards development. Second tier cities in Bangladesh should be renamed as 'cities with first class opportunities.' Here the government is slowly building new infrastructure. New banks, markets, financial services as well as new talents are gathering there. It is incredulous to see new private academies, private universities, clinics and hospitals setting up shop there. With new roads and faster transportation links, these places are likely to go far in the very near future.

So the elected leaders of these four cities must realise that they cannot enjoy a 'business as usual' frame of mind. They have miles to go. The central government in Dhaka must give these elected city governments a helping hand. Never mind if the mayors have the support of the government of the day or the main opposition parties. The relay race is on and the government needs to pass on the baton as fast as possible. The race for economic emancipation can only then be won.

While congratulating the winners of the mayoral elections, we must not ignore the losers. They also ran and the elected mayors must enjoy their confidence too in order to pave the way for inclusive development. In fact the losers have another opportunity to run for office in the next five years.

We cannot afford to overlook these beautiful and historic second tier cities of Bangladesh anymore. Let the new leaders adorn, modernise and beautify them further.

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| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

Can Pakistan make peace next door?

AHMED RASHID

IN the spring of 1992, as the Communist government in Afghanistan started imploding after the collapse of the Soviet Union, seven Afghan mujahedeen leaders, pumped full of CIA money, gathered in Peshawar, Pakistan, to discuss how to take over Afghanistan and share power peacefully.

The man who brought them together and patiently sat with them was Nawaz Sharif, then only 43 and in his first term as Pakistan's prime minister. A simple man, by no means an intellectual, but with enormous patience and a wily street-smart grasp of politics, Sharif wanted to be a peacemaker. He nearly succeeded.

Now, 21 years later, he has returned to power at a time when a new round of negotiations on Afghanistan have fallen apart. A year before America's much-anticipated withdrawal from Afghanistan, talks with the Taliban don't seem to be going anywhere, which is bad news for those who hope for a political solution. Sharif's return to the scene may be their best hope.

Sharif's carefully brokered 1992 power-sharing deal ultimately collapsed because of sabotage by Afghan warlords and Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence agents, who played a double game.

While one section of the ISI helped Sharif broker his talks, another tried to stage a coup by smuggling hundreds of fighters loyal to the extremist warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar into Kabul. The plot failed, but it sparked the bloody Afghan civil war that would last a decade and lead to the emergence of the Taliban.

Pakistan's Army has managed the country's policy on Afghanistan since 1978. It must now start sharing the burden with civilian leaders. The army should enlist Mr. Sharif to talk to the Afghan Taliban, whose leaders are mostly living in Pakistan.

Until now, the only Pakistani officials with access to the Taliban have

been ISI officers, whom the Taliban have come to intensely dislike because of perceived micromanagement of their affairs.

Sharif, whose government was seated on Wednesday, could change the equation and help the Taliban climb down from their refusal to resume talks with the United States by marginalizing hard-liners and empowering those Taliban leaders seeking peace. He may also be able to strike a better relationship with the cantankerous president of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, than Pakistan's military leaders have achieved because of years of mistrust.

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It is not a question of wresting power from the military and the ISI, but of creating a partnership in which the military concedes negotiating power to a civilian prime minister. Bringing the Afghan Taliban to the table would also have a powerful demoralizing effect on the Pakistani Taliban, who are far more extreme than their Afghan comrades and seek to overthrow the Pakistani government and impose Islamic law.

Pakistan's military, which has lost several thousand soldiers to extremist groups, says it is now keen to talk to the Afghan Taliban but doesn't seem to have a road map or willingness to take the initiative. (Last year, the ISI freed 26 Afghan Taliban prisoners it was holding and urged them to play a role in the peace process. Instead, they all disappeared.)

The key to ending the war in Afghanistan, allowing American forces to exit honorably, holding credible Afghan presidential elections and negotiating a power-sharing deal between Karzai and the Taliban is to generate momentum for a cease-fire

agreement.

Secret talks between the United States and members of the Taliban foundered last year because America refused to grant the Taliban the confidence-building measure it wanted: freeing five Taliban commanders from Guantanamo in exchange for an American soldier.

The Pentagon and the CIA were opposed to the talks from the start. It didn't help that President Obama refused to empower two successive envoys -- Richard C. Holbrooke, now deceased, and his successor, Marc Grossman. As a result of the failed talks the Taliban are now more divided than ever, and hard-liners who want to pursue permanent war are ascendant.

After five months of delay, Obama has appointed James F. Dobbins, a veteran diplomat, as the new American envoy. But Dobbins won't succeed unless he has adequate support from the White House.

Obama has an enormous stake in a peaceful resolution to the Afghan conflict and a safe withdrawal. But for that to happen he must empower his diplomats to explore every avenue for talks with the Taliban and even take risks by freeing the Taliban prisoners he holds.

Pakistan's generals also have a stake. They understand that they can't continue in their old ways, that they can't pursue a foreign policy based on support for Islamic extremists that undermines the state and the army itself while making enemies of neighbors and frustrating close allies.

But the army has yet to discover how to turn the ship of state around, how to develop a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy and how to use democracy and nation building as tools to fight insurgency.

Sharif could be the man for the job -- if the army will let him do it.

The writer, a journalist, is the author, most recently, of "Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of America, Pakistan and Afghanistan."

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Economic black hole

The figures given in "Liberal act, little gain," (TDS, 9 June) were quite interesting. In 42 years, from 1971 to April 2013, a total of black money worth Tk. 3,575 crores was declared and 1,407 crores tax collected. However, in less than 2 years between 2007 and 2009, 9,683 crores were declared and 911 crores tax collected. This means that 72% of black money was detected and 65% tax collected during the last caretaker government.

The inference is obvious. In the entire history of all Bangladeshi governments -- fascists, dictators, democrats and democratic/dictators (1991-2013), only the last CTG (2007-09) were really serious about going after the black money purveyors in the short time they were at the helm. That leaves the 'paltry' sum of 415,194 crores (according to the FM) floating around in a black hole insatiably gulping down all the white money. There is thus sufficient scope for 'compromises' open to this and successive governments.

Sikander Ahmed
Niketon, Dhaka

"Nationalism in the sub-continent"

This refers to Mr. Nurul Huda's write-up under the above title (TDS 08/06/2013). I have enjoyed reading it, but I feel that the author could have added several other points. Firstly, the author points out that the 19th century invention of Indian tradition conveniently bypassed the long period of Muslim rule. But as a matter of fact, this was not bypassed, this was treated as a period of tyranny and repression against the Hindus and Hinduism. Secondly, he mentions how British government encouraged the Hindu-Muslim divide in the second half of the 19th century through the policy of "divide and rule." But he could have also pointed out that the government had adopted a pro-Hindu policy and instigated the Hindus against the Muslim rulers earlier in the 19th century. Thirdly, Mr. Huda does not mention that the idea of a golden Hindu past in the ancient period was the invention of the orientalisists like William Jones, Colebrook and Max Muller.

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Allocation for R & D in agriculture

The other night while I was surfing through the TV channels, my attention was drawn to a business talk show on RTV, wherein Prof. Dr. Md. Shahidur Rashid Bhuiyan, Pro-VC of our university (the two other participants were Mr. Shykh Shiraj and Dr. Zafarullah) was commenting on the proposed budgetary allocation in the agriculture sector. He put emphasis on the need for undertaking a long-term programme with adequate financial support to promote research and development (R & D) activities in the field of agriculture. This way future challenges like cultivating crops under stressed conditions, for example, drought, salinity, water stagnation, etc. could be faced through breeding tolerant varieties. Prof. Bhuiyan also suggested providing special privileges and incentives to agricultural scientists so that they do not opt for better jobs abroad.

While supporting Prof. Bhuiyan's views, I would sincerely call upon the government to materialise the above proposal in the greater interest of the country.

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Comments on news report "Hunger halved well before MDG time," published on June 14, 2013

Monju Huq

All credit goes to our very hard-working and devoted farmers supported and facilitated by the ministers of agriculture and food under the close supervision of the prime minister.

Binodbangali

Well done, Bangladesh! Congratulations to everyone who worked hard to make Bangladesh a better place.

niloufar sarker

Bangladesh in many respects is doing tremendously well. Even economically we were doing quite well before the Hefajat, Jamaat and BNP unleashed destructive activities to ruin it.

Sara

Good news... in the middle of all the political strife and shutdowns. The conditions of the poor majority of the country are improving in spite of the whole mess... so heartwarming.

AB

Hunger halved or BPL redefined? Given how we put statistics over people, chances are that the 'powers that be' must have reduced the BPL benchmark to bring that line graph down.

Raf Chow

Great! Just word of caution regarding GM crops which is slowly taking away the regenerative seeds from the hands of the farmers to big companies.

Vikram Khan

The UN award should go to 'the people of Bangladesh' and not to the prime minister.

Saleh Tanveer

This is testament to the hard work of the people of Bangladesh; they have achieved this milestone in spite of continuous bad governance by consecutive governments.