

# Good, but huge work remains

Low fertility rate disguises bigger problem

THE UNFPA has commended Bangladesh for reducing population growth. The acknowledgement may be a good cheer for the government, but the fundamental problem remains. The population control issue has effectively gone out of national thought process over the years. The size of the national population is too large, so that even a lower growth rate adds critically to the numbers.

The logistical supplies, population counselling and follow-up service providers' networks have all been allowed to be wrapped up in the delusional belief that the population problem has been overcome. We allowed ourselves to be caught up in a mental trap there.

A significant weakness remains in terms of child marriage which works wholly for early child birth and offsets the steps taken half-heartedly to promote controlled parenthood. The time has most certainly arrived to reinvigorate the door-to-door family planning programme—one that was initiated in the '70s. It had its share of successes in that the programme went beyond mere distribution of contraceptives at village level. Such tested and proven programmes need to be re-introduced with the aim of capping growth at the lowest possible digit.

Though the UNFPA has sounded upbeat about the fact that couples in Bangladesh will most certainly have not more than two children per family, there is little reason to be complacent over it. A fundamental rethinking at policy level is required to bring family planning back into the centre of national discourse as an undimmed priority agenda if we are not to aggravate already adverse land-man ratio and meet the basic needs of the people.

# Evicted indigenous families

They should get back their homesteads

TO satisfy commercial appetite of land robbers, indigenous Chak community is being systematically evicted from its ancestral abode at Naikhangchhari upazila in Bandarban. The ostensible purpose is to appropriate the land for rubber plantation.

No law permits arbitrary expulsion of any people from their ancestral lands. The Chak community have the rights to their habitats like any citizen of the country.

This is thoroughly unacceptable that the police did not take any action because no formal complaint was lodged with them.

The hapless people fled their homes because of continuous intimidation, occasional forays into their homesteads by armed muggers and threats to their lives. This has been going on over the past many years.

Under the circumstances, they dared not lodge official complaint for fear of their lives, a fact that the police could not have failed to notice.

Actually, the police should have of their own volition taken note of the incidents and extended their protection to them.

Quite clearly, these evicted people are not in a position to return to their homes without a protective umbrella spread over them by the local administration.

Protection of indigenous people is a sacred trust of the government. So, the administration from the highest level should investigate the matter, punish the offenders in an exemplary manner and take urgent steps to return the homesteads to the evicted indigenous families.

FROM FOREIGN PRESS

Rohingya row

EDITORIAL DESK: THE BRUNEI TIMES

THE prime thing for the simmering Rohingya issue though Myanmar has been racing with its reforms, establishing trade and diplomatic ties with the Western world and even hosting the much touted World Economic Forum on East Asia recently is the prevailing prejudiced psyche against the minority Muslims, who are looked upon as alien "Bengalis" despite their existence in the country over decades.

In spite of global outcry over the persecution of the Rohingyas, sporadic violence and social ostracisation continue unabated. Last week, in a clash with the forces, three Rohingya women were shot dead at a refugee camp in Myanmar's Rakhine state. This apart, from time to time, one gets to see reports of rickety boats laden with Rohingya asylum-seekers getting capsized in the rough seas.

But what was appalling was the reiteration by Myanmar's Minister for Immigration and Population Khin Yi, last week, of the government's resolve to go ahead with the two-child policy norm for the minority Rohingyas, despite its vehement condemnation by the UN as well as the country's democracy icon and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. This measure, which the government believes would ease the unrest, is not only retrogressive but also negates its reformation and inclusive policies.

Discussing the racial issue in Yangon, a two-day meeting of senior Buddhist monks on Friday appealed for peace, while accusing the media of tainting the Buddhist community for the sectarian violence. Stating that all Buddhists want to live in peace, the meeting shied away from categorically condemning the anti-Muslim raids.

It's clear that in spite of its reformative zeal, Myanmar's human rights record has been found wanting. And this is exactly why several rights advocates urged US President Barack Obama government not to extend new trade benefits to Naypyidaw. It's time for Myanmar to take quick remedial measures for harmonious coexistence of all sections of society.

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# Nation will not let Grameen Bank be snatched away from the poor women

MUHAMMAD YUNUS

THE Grameen Bank Commission is going to organise a workshop at BIAM Auditorium on July 2 to discuss its recommendations for legal changes to the Grameen Bank structure. It has been announced that Finance Minister Mr. A.M.A. Muhith will deliver his valuable comments about his experience in this regard. There will be a discussion with experienced and distinguished persons of the country at the workshop, on the eight-page working paper of the commission entitled "The Future Structure of Grameen Bank: Some Options."

The working paper proposes three options:

- To restructure Grameen Bank in the form of Bangladesh Shilpa Bank as a government bank, with 51% or more shares in the bank being held by the government. Government would also have the majority seats on the board of directors of the bank.
- To transform Grameen Bank into 19 or smaller Grameen Banks, following the structure of the Bangladesh Rural Electrification Board. Each of the separate 19 Grameen Banks would be separately registered. There would not be any legal relationship between them. Each would have its own independent management structure. The current Grameen Bank head office will be given the responsibility of becoming the regulatory organisation for this new Grameen Bank family. This apex regulatory organisation will provide registration to each of these nineteen small Grameen Banks. This apex body will control and supervise all of the small Grameen Banks. It will coordinate among the small Grameen Banks family at both the national and international level. The small Grameen Banks will cover the costs of running the apex body.
- Grameen Bank may be transformed into a private company-like organisation, other than a cooperative or credit union. Under this option, the Commission envisages a problem in registering Grameen Bank under the Companies Act -- that of holding Annual General Meetings with the huge number of Grameen Bank borrowers (currently 8.4 million). This Annual General Meeting is an indispensable requirement of the Companies Act, and there is no way to avoid it.



**What is the reason for this rush to change the law?**

Grameen Bank is a unique institution created under a unique legal structure. The effectiveness of this legal structure has been successfully demonstrated over the last 30 years by the organisational efficiency and power of the bank's operations. What offence has Grameen Bank committed that it must be broken into pieces? Someone has to explain this.

The Grameen Bank Ordinance with amendments up to 2008 is a beautiful legal structure for the fulfillment of the ideals and objectives of the bank. Any change in this structure will be devastating for the Bank. The amendment in 2008 included provisions to open Grameen Bank branches in urban areas and for the election of Grameen Bank chairman by its own board of directors, rather than be appointed by the government. These provisions stood cancelled as the present government did not ratify them at the start of its term.

The current legal structure has led Grameen Bank to the peak of global recognition, won it the Nobel Peace Prize, brought a ray of hope into the lives of 8.4 million women and their children, and made poor women the owners of a nationwide bank. This legal structure has been recognised, celebrated and replicated around the world. What fault has the Inquiry Commission found in this legal structure

that it is now recommending to throw it into the trash can? Will the Commission kindly explain this to the nation?

Grameen Bank has been built with the funds of the poor women. How can the Inquiry Commission propose to hand over the majority shares of an organisation which is owned 97% by private citizens to the government? This is nothing but snatching.

The people of Bangladesh know very vividly whether the bank will prosper or be doomed to failure if its ownership is given to the government and its board run by government people. People are interested to know what real objective the Inquiry Commission has in its mind in making these strange and destructive proposals.

Not only are 97% of the shares of Grameen Bank owned by poor women, the bulk of the bank's lending operation is financed through their own funds. These poor women have deposits of over eighty billion taka in the bank. Will the Inquiry Commission explain to the people of the country why a bank that operates with its citizens' own money surrender 51% or more of its shares to the government, knowing fully well that will be extremely risky, to say the least.

Some enthusiastic people must have inspired the Inquiry Commission to make such recommendations on the basis of the "grand success" of the government in managing Sonali Bank.

Please do not try to snatch the poor people's bank out of their hands. There is no reason to believe that it will be a pleasant experience for the government to engage in a char-grabbing fight with the 8.4 million poor families, by changing the law with a stroke of a pen. There should be no reason to expect that the people of the country will sit idly by and watch the organisation that has brought them recognition and glory across the world be grabbed, broken into pieces and destroyed.

This Bank does not take any money from the government nor from any donor organisation. It is a fully independent institution. The Bank is owned and managed by the poor women borrowers. It has been run very smoothly throughout its entire history under the present legal structure. Nothing has occurred so far to make it necessary to change this legal structure. There has never been any doubt raised in

anyone's mind about the quality of management of the Bank; rather everyone has taken pride in it. No question has ever been raised in the media. The Central Bank has never questioned the quality of the bank's management, rather it has praised it each year. The borrowers have been pleased about the way the bank is run. Now, all of a sudden, the Inquiry Commission has come up with a bizarre proposal that the bank's legal structure should be replaced by a new one. But why?

Let Grameen Bank proceed on its glorious path with the existing law. If the law is replaced as proposed by the Commission, it will lead to a national disaster. Every option that the Inquiry Commission has proposed will result in disaster for the bank. We must make sure to protect this bank, keeping in mind that the fate of 40 million poor people is linked with it.

The people from whom their prized possession is being snatched away are citizens of this country. We should not forget that they are also voters. Nationalising or breaking into pieces a world-renowned privately owned institution of the poor, will be a case of extreme abuse of power by the government. The recommendations offered by the Inquiry Commission are not worthy of any serious consideration. Nonetheless, these recommendations are extremely destructive. We must work together to resist them.

Long live Grameen Bank. Let the power of poor women prevail.

The writer is Founder, Grameen Bank and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate. . . . .

# City corporation elections -- AL's Catch-22

STRATEGICALLY  
SPEAKING

Brig Gen  
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN  
ndc, psc (Retd)

loss, there are some positive features that the AL can not only take comfort in but also flaunt as a success story.

An AL victory would have given the BNP the chance to term the elections as unfair and rigged and the ground for which they had already started preparing through a pre-mid day press conference on the day of election. It proves either that the BNP was unsure of the final outcome or very certain that the results would be tampered with. If it is the former then it is no credit to a party that claims grassroots links yet is unable to read the pulse of the voters.

Coming to the reasons for the debacle, while there has been no attempt by the AL to dismiss the BNP victory outright, there have nevertheless been efforts to ascribe various reasons to explain away the results. From giving the most incredible slant, of victory to what was an electoral debacle, to blaming the defeat on opposition propaganda and use of religion, to the loss being that of the 'bad people' in the party and not the party itself.

Are the results a reflection of the achievements of the erstwhile mayors during their tenure or of the coalition government's performance so far? Or is it the religious card, which some media think had dominated the pre-poll campaign?

One finds it difficult to put the blame entirely on the defeated candidates alone because, going by the reports, all of them had done a fairly good job during their tenure in office. That being so the only other plausible conclusion is that the voters were influenced by the ruling coalition's achievements or rather non-achievements, and that what-

*The AL has lost many a political mileage in these elections, but will the PM's making a virtue out of the defeat cut much ice or dilute the opposition's call for an impartial set up to run the national election?*

ever achievements it might have had, were either not projected adequately or that those were overshadowed by the government's record of poor governance.

As for the religious card, all the three factors, Hefajat itself, the Shapla episode and the so-called atheist issue were made a weapon of the electioneering foray. The question is how decisive these factors were in the final outcome. And a corollary to it is why did not the AL anticipate and counter these?

We have to accept that in Bangladesh religion has come to be an important factor. Not only had the military rulers used it to reinforce their hold in running the state, the two major political parties have not let go of any opportunity to exploit it either. We have it demonstrated in the sartorial preference of the party leaders at the beginning of an election campaign, or their beginning the campaign from a particular city.

If it is the opponent's propaganda that did the AL in, should it not have expected the opponents to use these to their advantage, particularly when its actions had created grounds for speculations? As for the good works at the local level if any, the benefits should be obvious to the people and do not need 'propaganda' for projection.

And if religion and Shapla incident were exploited then what is it that convinced the people to vote against the AL nominees?

It is all very well for the AL to put a brave face by calling the result a victory for it because to the AL it has demonstrated that a free and fair election can be held under an incumbent government. The AL has lost many a political mileage in these elections, but will the PM's making a virtue out of the defeat cut much ice or dilute the opposition's call for an impartial set up to run the national election?

The fact is that the outcome of the government's performance in the last four years has come home to roost. And the sooner the AL and its partners, who, by the way, would never garner more than 0.2% votes on their own, should internalise and rectify. And, given the little time between now and the general election, very deft and pragmatic corrections would be needed to recoup lost grounds.

The writer is Editor, Oped and Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

## Engaging with arts

Actress and arts activist Jane Alexander recently received the 2013 Radcliffe Medal, which recognises someone "whose life and work substantially and positively influenced society." Jane Alexander, who is a "warrior for the arts," in her deliberation, highlighted some important and thought provoking issues. She urged the listeners to engage with the arts, either on their own or with their children.

Jane during her remarks called for more arts funding and education in public schools. She observed that the recent educational movement toward focusing on science, technology, engineering, and math, known as S.T.E.M., should instead be a concentrated effort to generate S.T.E.A.M., with an added A for arts.

While appreciating and congratulating Jane Alexander, I would like to emphasise introduction of creative arts studies at the universities in Bangladesh as elsewhere.

**Professor M Zahidul Haque**  
Dean, Faculty of Agriculture  
SAU, Dhaka

## Request to Hon'ble Speaker

Congratulations to Dr. Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury for becoming the first female speaker of Bangladesh. We hope and trust that she will make us proud by her performance and conduct the parliamentary sessions in such a way that it would be impossible to blame her for showing favour to anyone.

We watch the parliamentary sessions with interest but become very disappointed with the interruptions caused by the telecast of BTV news. We miss the proceedings for a considerable period of time.

So, we fervently request the honourable speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury to take urgent steps so that we would be able to watch the proceedings without interruption. People have the right to know what is being said in the parliament. They must not be deprived of it.

**Nur Jahan**  
Chittagong

## Terrorism and Muslims

Terrorism is nothing new and happens for different reasons. Throughout the world, there are many types of terrorism. Often some people think Muslims are involved in terrorism, which affects the innocent Muslims around the world.

Terrorists are taking away lives and happiness of people. But they are not aliens; they come from ordinary families. It's our duty to be aware and give our children proper lessons so that we can reduce future terrorist activities.

**Aafra Fatema Karim, Sazia Ahmed**  
Students of The Aga Khan School, Dhaka

## Pakistani three pieces

I am writing this letter as a concerned citizen of the country. I don't know whether you have noticed or not, nowadays Pakistani 'lawn' three pieces are devastatingly alluring our fashion markets, especially small boutiques. The falling popularity of handloom and cotton printed fabrics are shocking. The source from which the three pieces are being imported is also questionable. Marketing and advertising of these fabrics are spreading day by day using Facebook. The result may be a fall in production of local fabrics in our fashion industry. As a national daily, may I request you to investigate and report on this matter?

**Kawsary Perveen**  
Architect

## Comments on news report, "Target total govt control," published on June 18, 2013

### Sagar Dhar

Why is the government so allergic to Grameen Bank? This finance minister has not succeeded in his job, and during his tenure he has not shown anything to prove to the contrary. So, any suggestion from the ministry is a kind of joke. They should oil their own machine.

### Saleh Tanveer

This is abuse of government power.

### Sharif Uddin

The government can rather consider giving away the control of Sonali Bank and other failing government banks.

### Francis Arif

It is a shame that the government has chosen to meddle in the affairs of a successful organisation like Grameen Bank. It can rather reform the failing sectors.

### Aumi

There goes the help of millions of poor villagers. Total government control would mean government practices and slow bureaucracy, which would stagnate the financial help.

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## "AL lawmaker uses abusive words at JS" (June 18, 2013)

### Raf Chow

We know what would be the next -- PM's own grandparent will be insulted as a tit for tat. Do we really want to elect this people?

### Shujon

Please stop this. We don't want this type of abusive use of language in the parliament anymore.