

Our poverty reduction success

Need for sustaining the trend vigorously

WHAT has been a prevailing notion finds authentic confirmation in the World Bank's latest poverty assessment report. The WB flags Bangladesh being right on track to be reaching MDG target on poverty reduction to 28.5 percent by 2015. There is a caveat though—'provided that the country maintains its current pace of poverty reduction.'

The remarkable pace in poverty reduction which places us at a vantage point in pursuit of the agenda has been the cumulative result of a combination of factors. These include leadership focused on the poverty cut-back over a long period of time, irrespective of party in power; rise in income levels as workers moved from agriculture to manufacturing and service sectors; and from self-employment to salaried jobs. An increase of women participation in labour force topped these up.

The credit principally goes to the peasantry, workers and NGOs particularly devoted to education and micro-finance as the building block of horizontal progress.

That such a status could be attained against stunning odds of natural calamities and political and intermittent labour unrests reinforces the hope that were we to contain such negative factors, much more substantial overall progress would have been achieved.

There are three more points claiming urgent consideration. The first one relates to a greater reduction in inequality; the second concerns itself with growing working age population at 25 percent between 2000 and 2010 that needs skill development for acquiring demographic dividends; and last but not least there is a dire need to raise the nutritional standards of the populace.

Optical fibre for rural areas

Proper infrastructure needed

THE government has approved Tk.499 crore for upazila level optical fibre network development project. The project aims to bring optical fibre network to our rural areas taking the technology front one step further.

It is certainly positive news and potentially it could add a lot to other project work which require high-speed Internet connection. A boom in handheld portable devices to perform research utilising our rural resources has already happened through different organisations like Grameen-intel or Brac. The new reach will help the mechanisms in these initiatives as well.

However, we cannot overlook the fact that we do not get sufficient power in all upazilas. And, of course, there are many other bridges to cross before the optical fibre network can actually benefit us, like literacy and education standards, which do not include knowledge in technology for the common person.

One thing to keep in mind will be that the government does not go too ahead without setting up proper infrastructure and resources. We can assure modern technology but if it does not help most people then the project will be just another half-baked plan.

N.Korea's puzzling overture

EDITORIAL DESK: THE KOREA HERALD

ORTH Korea's abrupt offer to the United States for high-level talks has left many puzzled on its intentions.

In a statement issued by the National Defence Commission on Sunday, the North proposed that the two sides meet to discuss issues of mutual interest, including easing military tension in the Korean Peninsula, replacing the armistice that ended the 1950-53 Korean War with a permanent peace treaty, and the US vision for a nuclear-free world.

The agenda it suggests is nothing new. So what prompted Pyongyang to propose talks to Washington? Did it make the offer expecting that Washington would accept? Or did it have other purposes in mind?

Washington has repeatedly stressed that it will not engage in talks with the North unless it shows clear signals that it is serious about abandoning its nuclear programmes.

US officials maintained this stance as to Pyongyang's unexpected overture. "We'll judge them by their actions, not by the nice words that we heard yesterday," said Denis McDonough, President Barack Obama's chief of staff.

In the statement, the North does reaffirm its commitment to denuclearisation, recalling that achieving a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula is one of the key deathbed instructions of Kim Il-sung, the founder of North Korea, and Kim Jong-il, his son.

Notably, it is the first time that the North has renewed its denuclearisation pledge since Kim Jong-un took power. The young leader has until recently vowed to pursue a dual-track strategy of nuclear buildup and economic development.

Yet the statement calls into question the credibility of the denuclearisation pledge by justifying the North's possession of nuclear weapons. It argues in a contradictory fashion that the North's nuclear armament is intended to make the entire Korean Peninsula free of atomic weapons.

In short, the statement contains little that would make Washington interested in reopening dialogue with Pyongyang. The North's true intentions will manifest themselves later.

One motivation may be its desire to get out of the stranglehold of international sanctions imposed on it following its launch of a long-range rocket and the third nuclear test. But as the White House official noted, the North should be under no illusion that it would be able to "talk their way out of the very significant sanctions."

Whatever the North's intentions may be, it will not be able to elicit a meaningful response from Washington unless it is genuinely ready to disarm and open up to the outside world. What Pyongyang should do now is to focus on talks with Seoul to normalise the operation of the Gaesong industrial complex.

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STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD
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Concerns over anti-terror legislation

NEWSPAPER reports indicate that the recently amended anti-terror law has received flak from human rights activists, jurists, security analysts and civil society leaders, for having provisions that could violate human and constitutional rights. Provisions in the amended law include sweeping power to law-enforcers and the central bank to confiscate and seize properties and bank accounts of a suspect without prior permission from the court.

In addition, the law enforcers have also been empowered to instantly start investigation and file a case against a suspect. Besides, videos, photos, audio clips from social media and the Internet could be considered as evidence against a suspect, disregarding the Evidence Act. Concerns have been expressed that the amended law is likely to seriously impact citizens' democratic, human and fundamental rights as incorporated in the constitution.

While the expressed concerns merit our attention this scribe would like to put across the practitioners' view to help gain an understanding of the type of anti-terror law that our society can live with. To start with, it needs to be impressed that any legislation of this kind necessitates some loss of liberty and human freedom. The aim, however, should be to depart as little as possible from internationally agreed principles and traditions of justice. The objective is to simultaneously ensure that the security forces have every assistance in their task of bringing terrorist before the courts and that the integrity of the legal system is maintained.

While agreeing to the necessity of effective anti-terror law, we have to forewarn ourselves about the addictive effect of anti-terrorist measures because once introduced into the body politic it is difficult to contemplate giving them up. From an international standpoint the terror law has perhaps failed to achieve the goal in many places, but there is a distinct possibility that the laws have not failed; they have just been unable to keep pace with the changing nature of terrorism.

Experiences in the last two decades have shown that terrorism methods have been adopted by people who pursue a growing range of political or more broadly ideological or religious ends. One might argue that the existing legislation is no longer adequate.

Coming to instances of draconian terror legislation, one could refer to the British Terrorism Act of 2000, according to which even a person who attends a meeting which a member of a proscribed organisation has addressed can be arrested. Quite naturally, the power to proscribe has been associated with fears that it "infringes on the rights of freedom of association and expression." In Germany, it is an offence to participate in a terrorist organisation. Under Article 129A of the German Penal Code it is illegal to form or be a member of an organisation which engages in murder or other specified criminal activities. This article 129A is the basis of almost all terrorism related prosecutions in

Germany.

One has to remember that the power to confiscate property or money in the anti-terror legislation is for sapping a terrorist organisation of its material base, blocking routes of material replenishment and seizing its existing assets. The idea is to pre-empt a terrorist act. One may have to appreciate that interception of communication is essential to the collection of intelligence about terrorist organisations. The central idea behind strengthening the laws on interception to allow the government intrusive rights is to collect evidence to charge terrorists who plan and direct terrorist activities, but do not actually execute them. In Britain, the lawful interception of communication has been allowed for more than two decades.

While interception has played a crucial part in investigation it also carries with it the risk of creating a 'surveillance society.' It is, appropriate, therefore, to allow the use of intercepted material as evidence only in cases that are terrorism or narcotics related. In our parlance, interception to gather terrorism-related information has covert undercover tones. This mindset has to change because in many countries facing threat perceptions lower than ours, interception has become a valuable tool in criminal investigation.

We may benefit by discussing the level at which interception can be allowed. A considered view is that this should be scaled down to the level of superintendents of police and equivalent rank in other units that are paramilitary. A desirable approach could be to order the interception by an enquiring judge to make the entire process above board, as is the case in both France and Spain. When intercepted evidence is presented in the court even tough defendants may have to plead guilty.

In the US, criminal convictions otherwise unobtainable have been secured through the use of intercepted material. The effort, therefore, should be geared towards making the use of intercepted material qualify as admissible evidence in court. It might just make nailing suspects much easier and objective.

The whole idea of expanding the powers of the police is to enhance the pre-emptive element in combating terrorism. In other words, the police need to be given an opportunity to act against suspects under surveillance instead of waiting for the surveillance to reach fruition before actually carrying out the arrest. However, pre-emptive arrests are quite often used indiscriminately by security forces. Therefore, such powers, if not used in a discreet manner, might be counterproductive.

One way of making the police more meticulous in the application of anti-terror law is by introducing the threat of punishment if the letter of the law is not followed. The whole idea is to lay down so complex a set of rules that the law enforcers are careful not to transgress it. Failure to comply with the rules could be treated as contempt of court.

It is indeed difficult for enforcement effectiveness to advantageously and credibly co-exist with the maintenance of civil liberties. It might be desirable, therefore, to sacrifice enforcement effectiveness, at times, at the altar of civil liberty. The objective, however, should be to secure a balance between the two in the greater interests of a democratic polity.

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

Reformist president, cheery outlook, anxious neighbours

M. ARIF IQBAL KHAN

PRESIDENT-elect Hassan Rohani won 50% popularity in an election with 50 million voter turnout.

Thousands of Iranians are celebrating the victory of liberal camp following 8 years of hardline direction. Rohani is known as the "diplomat sheikh" for his intellectual, scholarly and liberal outlook. With the re-emergence of reformists Iran looks united, cheerful, and determined.

Western media for the moment have given a seal of satisfaction on Iran's choice. Rohani's biggest credential is that he is a "reformist" and a "moderate." Exactly what does it mean to be a reformist in Iran?

Let's first look at two important concepts about modernisation and the role elections play in the political evolutionary theory. They are, (i) religion inevitably leads to totalitarianism, and (ii) use of the electoral process means secularisation. A theocratic state would presumably result in totalitarian control. Elections work to resist the emergence of authoritarianism and military dictatorships (so common in less developed countries) and introduce secularisation. Do these hypotheses hold true?

The first idea was promoted on the webpage of a TV channel in an article titled "The Logic of Democracy" by Creston Davis and Santiago Zabala. The second was projected in a research paper under the heading "Democratization Theory and the 'Arab Spring,'" published in the April 2013 edition of the Journal of Democracy.

Speaking in Toronto in January 2013, veteran journalist Robert Fisk stated that people in the Muslim world did not have much faith in democracy. Fisk said that they saw "Western democracies" supporting the worst kinds of tyrants -- Hosni Mubarak, Saddam Husain, Colonel Muammar Qaddafi and others -- in Arab and Middle Eastern countries. While covering the events in Tahrir Square not once did Fisk hear calls for democracy. Arab Street's anger was felt everywhere except in places where it mattered the most. Going back in time, imperialist Reza Shah was superimposed by foreign powers after the overthrow of hugely popular elected Prime Minister Mossadegh. From that episode it was understood that national interest, not democracy, was the real agenda of foreign powers.

One former US State Department policy advisor, and current Brookings researcher on Iran, admitted in a subtle way in an article analysing the upcoming presidential elections in Iran that "with the registration of prospective candidates, the campaign promises an utterly fascinating ride through the unpredictable politics of the Islamic Republic ... four years ago, many observers -- including myself -- argued the blatant orchestration of Ahmadinejad's re-election had all but extinguished the relevance of the electoral dimension of Iran's convoluted governing system. Then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and many academics forecast that Iran was descending into a military dictatorship. So many of these predictions now appear off the mark, as external analysts and politicians all too often find when interpreting Iran."

The battle at the polls between two broad groups, liberals and conservatives, proved to some extent the universality of the right to choose without prejudice to faith. Media reports on election-day tell of enthusiasm amongst people. If elections are meant to demonstrate the independent

will of the people then there was evidence to back it up with sufficient numbers.

Not to be mistaken, Iran's liberals are not opposed to the current ruling system. The revolution that evicted the Shah also brought a new political concept on the world stage, which has allowed politicians and clerics alike to rise to the top. Vilayat-e-Faqih -- the rule of the jurisprudents (religious scholars specialising in law and jurisprudence) -- was constituted through a referendum after the revolution in 1979.

It is necessary to know that in Iran it's not the president but the Supreme Leader, Ar-Rahbar, who has authority on every aspect of the government. Iran's first Supreme Leader Imam Khomeini (rh) was succeeded by Ayatollah Ali Al Khamenei who had earlier served as president from 1981-1989. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei is the key decision maker in selecting the Guardian Council, a powerful committee of 12 jurists who screen presidential candidates, supervise elections, and approve candidates to the Assembly of Experts and to the Majlis (parliament). The Guardian Council is like a constitutional court, charged with the interpretation of law. Any Bill passed by the Majlis has to be reviewed by the Council. Current chairman of the Guardian Council is Ayatollah Jannati.

President Rohani is a Mujtahid (legal expert), not an Ayatollah (cleric), and he rose through the ranks of the religious establishment in Iran backed by his political party Combatant Clergy Association. His reformist ideas could be grossly misunderstood as a "game changer." To go against Ar-Rahbar is just as good as one signing on his warrant of political antiquity. Iran's policy towards Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Israel will not change strategically. Relations with regional countries will be as before, with increased caution for next few months at least. Diplomatic relations with Egypt may be a new objective which will take longer to materialise as Iran and Egypt have chosen to back opposing sides in Syria, which again holds the potential to alter the balance of power in the region.

Israel, in particular, will have a lot more to worry about the soft power approach of the new president. Mr. Rohani is likely to make more friends internationally. For Israel it would be easier to show a hardliner as the belligerent radical face of a country and a threat to regional stability rather than a moderate reformist using the language of peace. Israeli politicians will need to refine their strategy to keep the pressure up on Iran economically and diplomatically.

At the heart of Iran's international issue is the nuclear stand-off. Iran's nuclear technology is a matter of the highest concern for the country's pride and honour. Such a high level national strategic issue will be left to the Ar-Rahbar to decide on.

Economy and social order are the key areas where a reformist president can make the most impact. Using the diplomacy of soft power will help strategise more ways for lifting economic sanctions which are choking his country. Iran has abundant natural resources in oil and gas but due to a variety of reasons GDP growth was -1% for 2012 (est.), inflation was 32%, unemployment 12%, and a growing population of 75 million will keep policy makers think aloud about social, education, healthcare and public employment projects to lift the economy.

The writer is a Director, Financial Excellence Limited.

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Freeing society of drugs

Bangladesh is flooded with different types of contraband drugs because of its geographic location. The demand of drugs has skyrocketed with the ever-increasing number of drug addicts in the country in recent times. Taking drugs has become a fashion among the young members from the affluent class. Many people are engaging themselves in drug trade as they can earn quick bucks from it. Drug peddlers are changing their modus operandi frequently to



dodge the law-enforcing agencies. In spite of the law-enforcing agencies' efforts to bust drug racket, drugs have pervaded every corner of the country. We all should work sincerely to stop this illicit drug trade. We hope people will come forward to help the police build a drug-free society.

Molla Mohammad Shaheen

ASP (Sadar Circle)

Moulvibazar

TDS in its full flair

I just wanted to thank the folks at The Daily Star in getting back in its full flair. You guys are doing a great job. The new format and layout is hugely better. This is impressive.

Akhtar Hossain

Sugar land, Texas, USA

Corruption at UZ education office

Despite honest endeavours and call by the education minister to discourage corruption, it remains rampant in this sector from the headquarters down to the upazila level. As a member of a government primary school management committee, I have personal experience of how it happens at upazila education office. Whenever an allotment is made for repair, renovation and purchase of essentials, officials concerned make sure to get a slice of the cake by creating inflated vouchers with help of the head teacher. In the case of 2011's allotment, the same happened. The upazila office warned the headmaster that no member of the committee should see or query the office about this foul play. An upazila has more than 15 schools, and if this unfair practice continues, it will seriously hamper education of children.

Anonymous

On e-mail

Wooden scooters

Your short "Oddly enough" column on June 17th, titled "Wooden scooter," had a small picture and a brief description of wooden scooters, a mode of public transport in the Philippines.

We should bring one and try to make it locally for use in the Chittagong Hill Tracts as well as at other places where suitable. It is environment-friendly and can replace the expensive fuel-guzzling motor scooters.

I would request you and all other dailies to publicise this matter in our national interest, so that such cheap and clean transports can be introduced in suitable areas of Bangladesh.

Engr. S. A. Mansoor

Dhaka

CTG and mayoral poll results

I am worried to see the news item that people have voted for the caretaker government (CTG). The caretaker issue is rather dead now because the city elections were held under an elected government in power, who failed to win any of the 4 city corporation elections. The failure reflects the failures of the outgoing mayors of these 4 cities to change the quality of lives of their constituents.

Nothing can stop people from getting their candidates elected. The time is over to ask for a caretaker government now.

Quadir

CA, USA

"No legal reasons to exclude Abul" (June 19, 2013)

Jewel

We