

## Child nutrition for healthy generation

### Prioritisation and multi-sectoral approach imperative

THE centrality of multi-sectoral approaches to upgrading nutritional status of children has been emphasised at a roundtable organised jointly by this paper and Management and Resources Development Initiative (MRDI) on Saturday. Actually, neither in public discourse nor in government policymaking, child nutrition gets the priority it has always deserved. Whereas in reaching other MDG goals, we are moving apace, in terms of child malnutrition we are lagging behind.

The statistics sound very bleak: Almost 36 percent of children under-five are underweight and 41 percent of all children in the same age group shows stunting in consequence of malnutrition. When we have such a vast number of malnourished or undernourished children we are looking to a stunted future. So many babes with impaired physical and mental faculties conjure up the image of nearly half of the adult population being at a debilitating disadvantage to contribute to the nation's future.

But the problem, pervasive as it might be, is eminently solvable provided we hit the nail on its head i.e. we have an effective coping strategy. First and foremost, nutrition must be treated as a high priority agenda rescued from the sidelines. Secondly, the unwieldy, lopsided and scatter-brain approach needs to be replaced by a coherent and coordinated policy and operational strategy. This should involve public health and social welfare authorities, NGOs, local government bodies, communities, and in no small measure, the media for disseminating the right messages in a massive awareness-building programme across the country.

## "Students or rogues?"

### Why are the authorities so helpless?

THE Islamic University campus in Kushtia was turned into a mini battlefield on Saturday due to a three-way clash between the student wings of the three political parties. They were not many in number, but the violence they wrought was enough to terrify the others. In the process several of these rogues, passing off as students, were injured.

The nature of the incident at Islamic University was not the first of its kind to have occurred there. And such clashes between student wings of major political parties have been taking place for a long time, having severely intensified over time. The types of lethal weapons used in Islamic University, and in other universities too, reconfirm our suspicion that the universities have become a den of weapons, most of which, we believe, are also illegal. The question is how come lethal and illegal weapons can be so easily stocked in the campus, and the university authorities are unable to do anything.

Unfortunately, partisan handling of such matters has led to the decline of the academic atmosphere in most of the universities and colleges in the country. These errant students are a disgrace to the students' community; but regrettably are backed by the politicians for political profits.

We would hope that the university authorities would rise above their partisan interests and ensure a peaceful academic atmosphere for the vast majority of the students who have nothing to do with such activities. Otherwise, they may soon become a disgrace to the teachers' community.

## Why are our PMs like dictators?

KALEIDOSCOPE



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

HOW power is transferred from one government to the next is an indicator of whether we are talking about a democracy or a dictatorship. While at the end of its term a democratic government hands over power to the next elected government peacefully and smoothly, no such transitional mechanism exists in a dictatorship. So transition of power in a dictatorship, unless it is along the family line as in a dynasty, is always violent and bloody.

Even if the running of a democratic government may often be bumpy and dicey, the transition of power is not, or should not be. At least, that is expected in a true democracy.

Judging by our experience of transition from one government to the next, since the middle of 1990s, what should we call our system of government? Can we, honestly, call it a democracy? If so, why is then each of these transitions has been marked by violence, political uncertainties and unwillingness of the party in government to create the condition of peaceful transfer of power, through elections?

However much our two major political parties, the ruling Awami League and the opposition BNP, may cry hoarse to the contrary, the front they have been presenting before us so far cannot be one of democracy. And one is not surprised why we are again facing the same old crisis of power transfer through a credible election with the participation of all parties.

To get over the present crisis eminent jurist and one of the main authors of our constitution, Dr. Kamal Hossain, recently urged the president so that the constitution might be amended to frame a poll-time government to hold next general election. However, there is a condition. It is that if the political parties are agreed, the suggested constitutional amendment would be a matter of two minutes, Dr. Kamal argued.

The first question is who will bell the cat, that is, bring the two political parties, especially the two major camps led by the ruling AL and opposition BNP, to the table for talks?

The second question is, as the clause (3) of Article 48 of the constitution provides, can the president do anything without being advised by the prime minister? So, even if the president desires to play a role, then he will have to seek advice from the prime minister, who is also the president of the ruling party.

So the prospect that the president from his exalted

position might act to amend the constitution for getting over the crisis gets narrowed down by his constitutional limitations.

We are again back to square one. The solution to the ongoing standoff is again hinging crucially on the goodwill of one of the parties responsible for the crisis!

Apart from that, as the presidents are elected in parliament with the ruling party's backing in the prevailing system, by implication, they are expected to remain loyal to that party. So far, they mostly lived up to such expectations.

Small wonder we have no instance of a president who could rise to the occasion in the crucial hours of national need during all these years.

We know the fate of Dr. Badruddoza Chowdhury, as president of the republic during BNP-led government (2001-2006). He had to leave office of the president in utter disgrace as he tried to act as someone over and above the party.

Even Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, who was made president by Awami League government (1996-2001), fell from grace since he proved to be of no help when the AL was

defeated in 2001's election. Ironically though, Awami League had initially taken credit for being non-partisan in its choice a president who was not a member of the party. But that show of generosity evaporated when the moment of truth arrived.

But more important than whether or not the presidents wills to play a role in the crisis, is if both the major parties are willing to bury the hatchet. So far as our experience goes, they have never, of them-

selves, come forward to resolve the crisis.

The fundamental question, then, is why these two political parties must be forever at daggers drawn, behave in the most irrational manner holding the entire nation and its people hostage, while third parties at home and abroad will have to scratch their heads over how to bring them together to save democracy.

It is time we thought seriously about the issue and get to the root of the problem.

Excessive power in the hands of the prime ministers has turned them into dictators. This element of dictatorship in our prime ministers has been coming in way of smooth transition from one elected government to the next. Constitutional experts need to look into the causes of our PMs' becoming dictatorial and come up with suggestions to remove those. One obvious factor is the Article 70 of the constitution that has been stifling intra-party democracy in the name of stopping floor-crossing. President's role as a titular head of the republic is another.

Lawmakers should be able to express their dissenting voice within their party and the presidents should be able to exercise some semblance of power.

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## DEMOCRACY WITH RIGHTS FOR THE POOR

### Food Bill is a first step

 PRAFUL  
 BIDWAI  
 COLUMN


PRAFUL BIDWAI

the resources] or not. We have to do it."

The NFSB has invested public purpose and legitimacy into the UPA's corruption-ridden, shoddy and often appalling performance. It put the Bharatiya Janata Party on the mat. BJP leaders were reduced to making thoughtless statements about the Bill as "vote security", not food security.

The BJP has nothing to offer but obscurantist programmes like building a temple at Ayodhya and predatory pro-corporate agendas, with Narendra Modi's rabidly communal leadership.

The Bill is open to the criticism that it doesn't go far enough. Instead of universalising subsidised food provision, it confines it to two-thirds of the population. It limits the grain quota to five kilos per capita per month instead of the 35 kg per family demanded by right-to-food campaigners. This puts small households headed by single women at a disadvantage.

A Public Distribution System covering the entire population has proved superior and less leakage-prone than one targeting "below-poverty-line" (BPL) groups. The relatively well-off select themselves out of the PDS.

Besides, "targeting" misses up to 40 percent of the poor who don't possess BPL cards. The National Sample Survey reveals that 51 percent of virtually landless rural people (possessing less than one-hundredth of a hectare) have no ration cards; less than 23 percent have BPL cards.

Identifying the poor remains a problem. Nevertheless, the NFSB's broader coverage -- and the attractive formula of rice at Rs 3 per kg, wheat at Rs 2, and coarse grains at Re 1 -- is a step towards reducing acute hunger. It creates a right for the poor.

However, Right-wing commentators, including neoliberal economists, big business, and media writers/anchors, have attacked the NFSB as recklessly "populist". Some claim it won't relieve the malnutrition prevalent among one-half of Indian children.

The critics say the NFSB will entail "wasteful" expenditure of Rs 1.25 lakh crores. This will aggravate India's fiscal crisis and further depress already faltering GDP growth. Eventually, this will work against the poor.

These arguments are specious, elitist and misanthropic. Apart from failure to tax the rich, India's fiscal deficit is attributable to government profligacy -- a huge gap between current revenues and spending, high interest outgo on public debt, massive subsidies, and unproductive projects.

India's current economic slowdown is explained by the

global recession, withdrawal of "hot money" by speculators, falling domestic investment, greater capital outflows, and panic from the falling Rupee. None of these constitutes a legitimate argument against the NFSB.

The NFSB's likely additional annual expenditure will be just about Rs 30,000 crores, a fraction of all subsidies totaling Rs 2.6 lakh crores. Fuel subsidies -- largely enjoyed by the rich -- alone claim Rs 1.6 lakh crores.

Even greater are the Rs 5.74 lakh-crore tax write-offs and exemptions for affluent people, industry and exporters -- a sum larger than the entire fiscal deficit.

Surely, spending just 1.25 percent of GDP on food security isn't exorbitant: India spends about the same on the Central paramilitary forces and three times as much on the military. Feeding people cannot be such a meagre component of comprehensive or human security.

There's another way of seeing the NFSB -- an investment in people, or as delayed compensation for spending their own money on healthcare and education because public expenditure on these has repeatedly fallen short of the targets, respectively 3 and 6 percent of GDP.

Some critics argue that the NFSB should focus on high-protein foods, not cereals. True, the share of cereals in total food expenditure has fallen. But cereals and pulses still remain nutritionally central. There's a strong argument for boosting the consumption of pulses, a relatively cheap protein source by including them in the PDS.

Some economists have proposed that the PDS should be replaced by cash or Direct Benefits Transfer (DBT) because that will be cheaper and more efficient, and give the beneficiary "multiple choices". As the "sovereign consumer", s/he can buy eggs or meat instead of grain.

But there's no such thing as a free market with abundant choices in rural South Asia. Often, the state alone can deliver essential commodities.

The proposal assumes that all people have bank accounts, or that "Aadhar" (digital unique-identity number)-based cash-transfer will work flawlessly.

But just about 40 percent of Indians have bank accounts. And "Aadhar" is full of holes. Its iris and fingerprint scans are unreliable. Identity cards have been issued bearing pictures of trees and dogs; men have been misidentified as women.

Worse, DBT is itself deeply flawed -- as shown by a major scandal involving DBT-based delivery of state-sponsored insurance and health schemes for farmers. Insurance company ICICI Lombard has been accused of recruiting fictitious beneficiaries, collecting premiums on bogus certificates, and rejecting genuine damage claims.

Right-wing criticisms of the NFSB are thus fallacious. They reveal a dogmatic reluctance to make the state accept responsibility for providing public goods, and an obsession with corporate-oriented "free-market" solutions.

This elitist approach militates against the public interest and will perpetuate dualism in a society marked by obscene and growing inequalities. India's rich are among the lowest-taxed anywhere, with a top income-tax rate of just 30 percent -- compared to 50 percent-plus in the UK, Spain, Belgium or Sweden.

Only 3 percent of Indians pay the income tax; and there's no death duty. This must change. Our elites must realise that India's poverty has damaging consequences for them; and that they can help decrease poverty. The NFSB, despite its limitations, will hopefully help raise such awareness.

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## LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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### What happened to Sagar-Runi murder case?

It has been more than one and a half years that the gruesome killing of the journalist couple Sagar-Runi has taken place. The whole nation was in great shock after the couple's murder in their own apartment. But as time passed we overcame the trauma and unless it's their death anniversary or some seminar on journalists' rights, we do not make much reference to them anymore. The law enforcement agencies that boldly claimed to be making progress in finding the killers right after the couple's death have failed miserably. Is the Sagar-Runi murder going to be another unsolved crime that our law enforcement agencies can not figure out?

And what about the disappearance of former lawmaker and BNP organising secretary Ilias Ali? He's gone missing for over a year now, and there hasn't been any progress in his case either. There was chaos and repeated strikes called by the opposition party right after his disappearance; but then dust gathered on the case. Now, I'm not saying that BNP should be calling more strikes, but shouldn't this be a wake-up call for the power players of our country to make a more effective and accountable legal system? Instead of playing the blame game, BNP and the government should have cooperated when the unfortunate events happened.

Jean Zinath

On e-mail

### Allow free thinking

It is a matter of great satisfaction for the freedom loving people in the country that at long last a demonstration took place at Dhaka demanding allowing Taslima Nasrin to return to her homeland. We claim that ours is a society where tolerance is practiced. In reality writers such as, Daud Haider and Taslima Nasrin had been banished from the country for expressing their opinion. Humayun Azad, another radical author faced assassination attempt. No democratic country should suppress the views that are unpalatable to a group of people professing fundamentalism. Reactionary forces can not take the country towards advancement. Let us raise ourselves to face the challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Ahmed Shah

Dhanmondi, Dhaka

### TDS should keep to its standards

When this newspaper suddenly drew curtain on some of its very popular supplements, many regular readers became dissatisfied. But recently we have found many new things and changes in the newspaper that made us delighted. TDS has introduced some new supplements which are very updated and informative. But sometimes some vulgar pictures are getting published in Star Showbiz which is not acceptable at all, as the readers of TDS range from teenagers to elderly citizens. We hope The Daily Star will maintain its standard.

Md. Nahid Iftekhar  
Muradpur, Chittagong

### Comments on news report, "Indian court acquits accused BSF soldier," published on September 7, 2013

Shahin Huq

This judicial farce will be an impetus for the BSF to kill more and more Bangladeshis. Shame on those who sell statements to serve Indian interests in the region and shame on those who betray the poor people of Bangladesh!

Sheikh Monirul Islam, Opee

India did what is best for their country's image. We need to do the same to protect our own interest. For that even if we have to go to international court, please take the opportunity. This is a great issue to expose the real India.

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### "Dr Kamal for constitution amendment" (September 7, 2013)

Mahboob Hossain

Thank you, Dr. Kamal Hossain for telling the truth without any hesitation. Let the election be held fairly under a neutral caretaker government. If need be, constitution should be amended. We should not allow the government to rig votes.

Nds

Meaningless call. Nobody believes that the president will pay any heed to this call.

Fazlul Bari

It is interesting to read about the engagement of Dr. Kamal Hossain relating the emerging crisis of Bangladesh facing for modality of conducting elections.

Khondkar Saleque Sufi

With all respect to Dr. Kamal, may I ask him what will be the acceptable government to him? BNP boycotted almost entire tenure of present parliament. They are trying to protect the war criminals, sponsoring religious fanaticism. People know about Jamaat, JP leadership and other satellite parties. In this situation what should be the composition of an acceptable interim government?

## Riddle of RMG

FAARIA TASNIN

POST the Rana Plaza tragedy, questions hovered around peoples' minds as they tried to predict the fate of the Readymade garments (RMG) industry. Will foreigners boycott our products? What if the RMG industry takes a nose-dive pulling the Bangladesh economy with it?

The revelations of recent statistics give insights that are quite different than one may have expected. Knitwear and woven exports have risen by 25 percent and 27 percent respectively in July 2013 compared to the same time last year. When we look at annual figures, total garments exports in fiscal 2012 was around US\$19 billion and it leaped to approximately US\$21 billion in fiscal 2013.

So how do we make sense of it all? Didn't the Rana Plaza disaster have any adverse impact on the garments industry? In order to understand this, a depiction of the overall RMG scenario must be portrayed. 'Price' and 'capacity' are two of Bangladesh's hard advantages which enables its spread into the heart of the world market for RMG. According to Worker's Rights Consortium, per hour minimum wage in Bangladesh is US\$ 0.24 - lower than Cambodia (US\$ 0.45), Vietnam (US\$ 0.53) and China (US\$ 1.26). In terms of capacity, the country has a total of 5,400 garment factories that is far higher than in Indonesia (2,450), Vietnam (2,000) and Cambodia (260). Low wages and high capacity coupled together lure foreign buyers and makes it difficult for them to boycott Bangladesh and hence RMG exports continue to rise.

Prospects of Bangladesh's RMG are further strengthened as China is losing its appeal in the RMG realm due to labor shortages and higher wages. Bangladesh is expected to gain much of China's share. However it should be borne in mind that, future factory disasters will further taint the image of Bangladesh garments; once the end-buyers turn their backs, it will be difficult to get them back.

A factory revealed that foreign buyers are slashing prices of garments every year. Price of some garments now is 40 percent lower than in 2005 whereas overhead costs are rising day by day. In addition, factories compete with one another and undercut prices further. Profit margin is slivered and leaves little resource for renovation of factories. If factory disasters continue to occur then it will leave a negative impression on the products making it difficult to fly off the racks. Buyers will move out despite advantages in capacity and wages. Once the supply chain splits, it will be difficult to put it together.

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