

Hygienic food is our right

Polluters must be made to pay dearly

READERS must understand that by selling healthy foodstuffs it is not doing any favors to the people. In fact it is our right to get healthy, hygienic and nutritious food. And being deprived of that is in a way being deprived of our right to life. The administration should understand too that it is for them to ensure that the merchants, in whatever eatables they deal in, must conform to the highest level of quality of food. It is regrettable that the consumers have been constantly taken for a ride by the sellers. Regrettably, the need for the interest of the consumers has been so neglected that the common people have accepted the idea of consuming unhygienic food as a fait accompli. Profit motive on one side and lack of obligation of the administration, in this case the city corporations, on the other, have combined to post the most serious hazard to the quality of health of this and the coming generation of our people. A case in point is the drive to ensure formalin-free kitchen markets. A very lofty effort by the FBCCI to have these markets free of formalin mixed items has failed primarily due to lack of oversight. We wonder why leave the use of the testing kits, provided by the FBCCI free of cost, to the devices of the kitchen-market committees? What we are talking of is a serious health issue which if not attended with commitment stands to put the quality of health of the large number of Bangladeshis at great risk in the long run. Would the administration wake up!

Acid violence still uncontrolled

Police and community need to act

THE incidence of acid throwing that wreaks lethal damage on human person by rogues reflects adversely on two levels: Preventative inadequacies of the community we live in; and to make matters worse, there is a huge policing and legal application deficits. As for the community, whilst parental authority has dwindled; teachers and elders shy away from standing up to bad guys, it will take some organised collective initiative of society to ward off repression of the weak and vulnerable. The brewing of an acid attack should be noted and nipped in the bud by a societal or local government intervention. On police and prosecution levels, there is a good deal of work to be done. And this is why. An overwhelming number of perpetrators of acid violence, the most macabre crime that a male member of society can commit against a girl or a woman, remain at large, giving two hoots to law enforcement. The Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF) puts the figure of the attackers at 88 percent of the accused over the last 12 years roaming free. How weak the prosecution side has been is amply illustrated by the following data: Out of charge sheets submitted in 1,128 cases, only 293 accused received punishment whilst, 1,687 were acquitted. To round off the abysmal failure of law enforcement one has to only look at the conviction rate. In altogether 1,891 cases, 13 persons received death penalty, but none has yet been executed. To say that 85 attacks last year have been the lowest in 12 years means we have a long way to go to get the menace over with.

Education budget still inadequate

MASUM BILLAH

EDUCATION is undoubtedly a major driving force for development in any country. There is a direct relationship between education and poverty alleviation. It is true that the government has increased budgetary allocations to the education sector over the years, attaching top priority to it, but the allocation this year is still far behind the expected level. In terms of percentage of GDP, Bangladesh spends 2.2% for education which remained almost static for the last few years. The Unesco declaration says that the allocation for education should be at least 20% of the national budget and 6% of the GDP. This clearly shows that we lag far behind this global standard of allocation. The Maldives spends around 8.5%, Vietnam around 6.6% and India 3% of their GDP for education. Again, the education sector witnessed a rapid growth with the increase in students, teachers and intuitions in the last decade. But increase in the allocation for education has not been proportionate. This sector received Tk. 29, 213 crore in the fiscal year 2014-15, which is 11.66% of the total budget and 10.96% more than the revised budget of the outgoing fiscal year. An allocation of Tk. 13, 673 crore was set for the primary and mass education ministry and the rest for the education ministry. The percentage of total allocation, however, does not match the figure five years ago. In the revised budget for 2010-11 the percentage was 14, which slid to 11.4% in 2012. In the 2012-13 fiscal year the percentage stood 11.1%. "The allocation is not sufficient even for implementing the fundamental commitment like the National Education Policy 2010 and National Skills Development Polity," educationist Raheda K. Choudhury said. It is good that the government has understood that political interference has seriously downgraded our education, which the minister vows to remove. He said: "We will exert our highest efforts to make school and college management system more democratic, participatory, accountable, transparent and free from partisan interest. The system of forming committees in schools and colleges will be changed to free the intuitions from political interferences and corruption." There have to be clear guidelines in this matter. He also talks about quality of medial education which is very important at this juncture. We are producing thousands of medical graduates every year through our public and private medical colleges but fail to produce quality doctors. We spend a lot of our national money every year for treatment outside the country. We must think of this issue also very seriously.

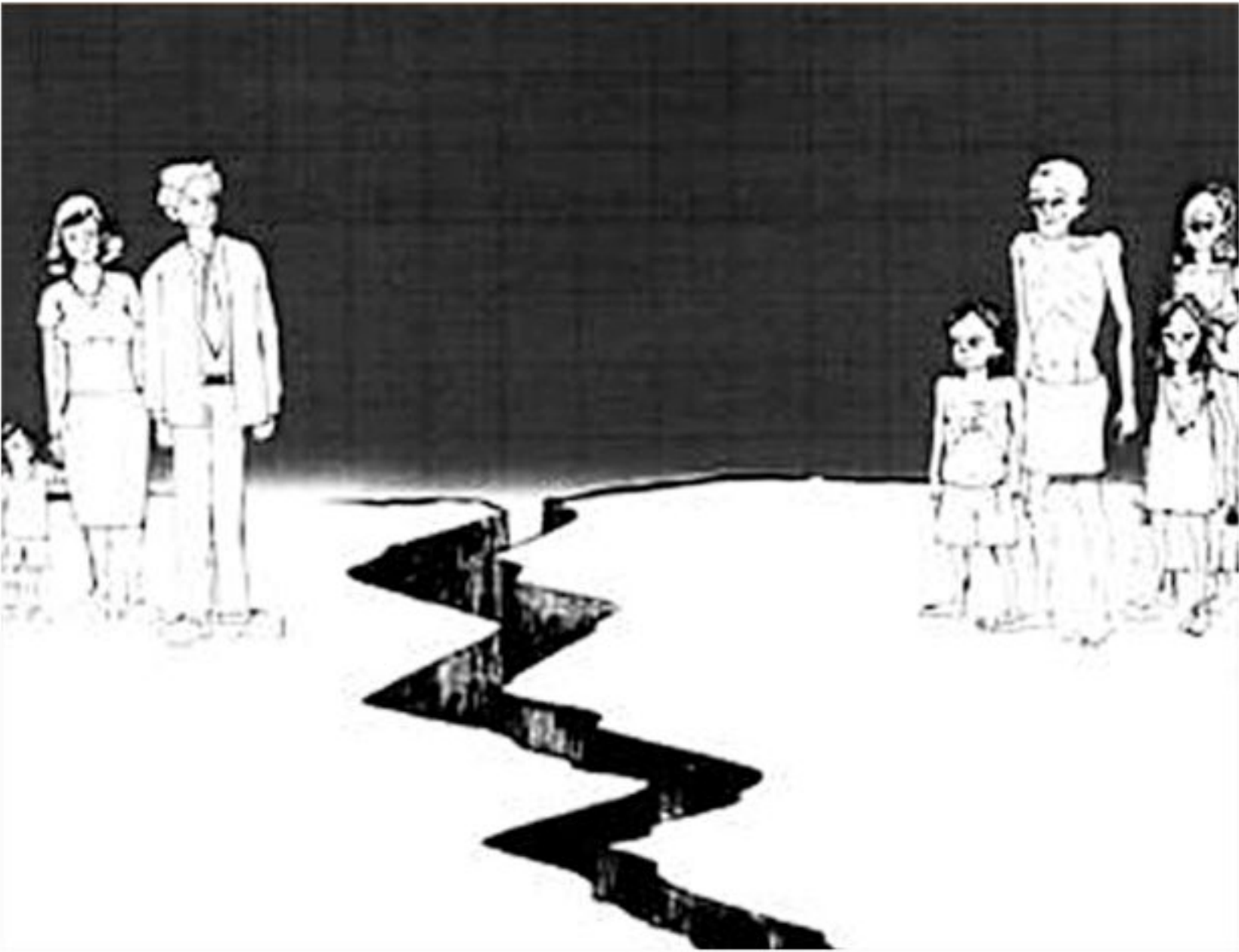
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Poverty reduction a chimera?



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

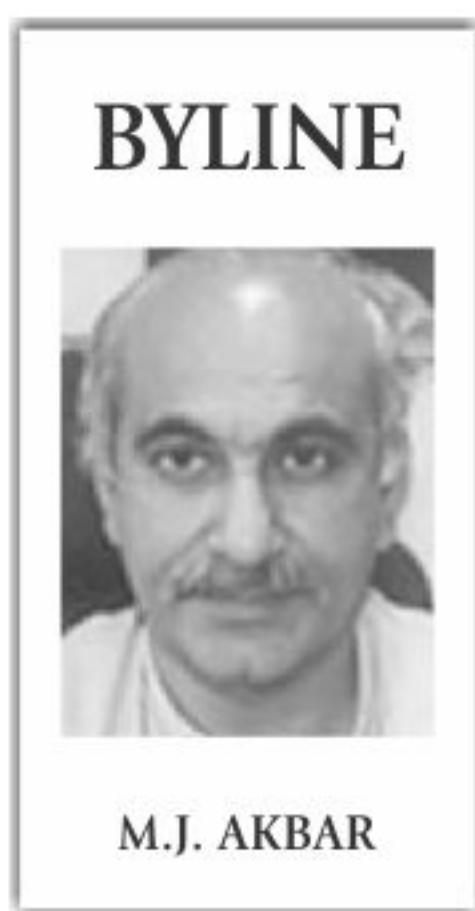
GOING by Finance Minister A.M.A. Muhith's June 5 budget speech, poverty rate, in general terms, has come down remarkably over the past five years from 33.4 % in 2009 to 26.4% as of now. Over this period, extreme poverty, too, reduced from 19.3% to 11.9%. Poverty in absolute terms, that is the actual number of poor people, had fallen from 63 million in 2000 to 55 million in 2005 and 47 million in 2010. Experts, however, have raised questions about the authenticity of the poverty rate figures, especially for the years after 2010, the year when the last household income and expenditure survey was conducted. Even so, it is heartening to know that poverty is declining both in relative and absolute terms. The figures provided in the budget speech show that the rate of extreme or absolute poverty has declined by 7.4 percentage points during the last five years. And it has been claimed that the fall in the poverty rate has largely been due to the government's pro-poor economic measures, which are reflected through budgets that adopt inclusive growth policy by allocating generous funds for education, health, addressing malnutrition, sanitation, with particular focus on the poor and the marginalised in the shape of safety net programmes. The public investments in development projects, infrastructure buildings and so on also create jobs for the poor. In the 2014-15 proposed budget, too, Tk. 15 billion has been allocated to mitigate extreme poverty. People living in the chars and haor areas will get special attention in the budget. Public investments in health, education, etc., as well as in development projects, do certainly have their long and short term impact on poverty alleviation. But it must also be recognised that the hundreds of Non-Government Organisations (NGO) working directly with the poor to help them out of poverty have their contribution in the poverty reduction statistics provided by the finance minister in his budget speech. But even after being flooded with all these eye-catching statistics on poverty reduction, can we put our hand on our heart and say that we are convinced? What do these figures generated by academic researches on poverty really tell us about the actual status of the poor in Bangladesh? Poverty rate, for example, is defined as the ratio of the number of people that fall below the poverty line and the total population. But what then is the poverty line? According to Wikipedia "it is the smallest amount of



money a person or a family needs to live on, to buy what is needed." So, people, who don't have this 'minimum amount of money' fall below the poverty line and should be classified as poor. This minimum amount of money to live on, too, will vary from society to society and from time to time. What this minimum income is to a person in an industrially developed nation, may be like a fortune to one in a low income country like Bangladesh. What should we call a garment worker? Does her/his income lie above or below the poverty line, or should she/he be called poor person or not? With the ever-rising cost of living the position of the poverty line is also sliding down constantly. So, those living above the poverty line are joining the rank of the poor with every passing day. And those who were categorised as poor yesterday are becoming absolute or extreme poor today. Now let us see how our poverty researchers define the 'absolute' or extreme 'poor.' According to UN declaration from the World summit on Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995, absolute poverty is "a condition characterised by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education, and information. It depends not only on income, but also on access to services." What percentage of our population are deprived of the above stated basic human needs? Analysing the proposed budget, Zillur Rahman, Executive Director, Power and Participation Research Centre, said about 25 million people live in extreme poverty, while the World Bank Economist Zahid Hossain put the figure at 60 million. Clearly, there is no consensus about the actual number of people living in extreme poverty in Bangladesh. According to 2010 statistics, 31.5% of the total population lived below the poverty line at that time. May we now infer from these figures that the number of today's extreme poor has far surpassed the number of just poor in 2010? Then what will be the total number of poor come to at the moment? And given the shifting trend of poverty line attributable to ever rising cost of living the number is increasing rather than decreasing. With the widening of the rich-poor gap, especially, driven by the nouveaux riches' insatiable greed to grab everything, land is transferring hands fast in the countryside. So, the poor are fast becoming landless and marginalised. They are gradually becoming absolute poor. The poverty reduction measures and their outcomes as detailed in the budget speech fly in the face of these stubborn realities. More than mere budgetary allocations, what is most needed for poverty alleviation is a strong political will to reverse the rising trend of pauperisation.

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The post-Nato war has started



M.J. AKBAR

A shadow war does not begin with an ultimatum. It is conducted by militias, not a military. It is not fought in the name of a nation or under conventions signed at Geneva; it uses barbarism and terrorism in the pursuit of ideas that seek to destroy the existing order in the search of some fantasy. Its violence spreads across dozens of geographical dots that, in the terrorist's mind will connect and form a picture some day. The opening offensive of the post-Nato era in south and central Asia has been launched. It is entirely logical that this should coincide with US President Barack Obama's speech to graduating cadets of United States Military Academy, West Point where he told the class of 2014 that they would be the first batch since 9/11 which would not have to go to war in either Afghanistan or Iraq. The message has been heard loud and clear by those who have been fighting much before 9/11 and will continue long after American troops (although hopefully not America) have abandoned the field. Who are they? They are best described as Taliban Plus, an alliance of different Taliban groups and ideological compatriots like Lashkar-e-Taiba as well as individuals and officials who share such objectives but feel that they are more useful to the cause without the advertisement of a label. India is a primary enemy, and our mission in Herat was a first target. The objective was not mayhem for the sake of mayhem. The attack was designed for greater psychological impact. One clue is in the timing. The aim was to hold Indian diplomats and other staff hostage, and negotiate with Delhi for their lives, at precisely the moment when Delhi was going through a significant transition in government. Imagine the challenge to India and the test for Narendra Modi, who had campaigned on a tough approach towards terrorism, if Indians were being killed, one at a time, while he was taking his oath of office. Consider the permutations and combinations of behaviour within regional governments. How many Saarc leaders could have, or would have, come, assuming that Modi still wanted to send out invitations? Think about the rage in Indian public opinion, doubtless doubled by some gloating from Pakistani hawks who find such a regular platform on Indian television channels. Would the

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jangling of raw nerves have led to street violence in our country? We do not know the answers but the questions should certainly be in the thoughts of India's security leaders. It is fortunate that Prime Minister Modi has chosen Ajit Doval as his National Security Adviser. Ajit Doval has been a hero of our intelligence services and seen how the same hostile forces tested the Atal Behari Vajpayee government with the hijacking of a plane that ended up in Kandahar. Herat failed thanks to the valour of our paramilitary troops, but we can be absolutely sure that the Modi government will be tested again, and sooner rather than later. The terrorist war against India has three obvious dimensions. Taliban Plus views the presence of India in Afghanistan, even within the confines of diplomatic activity or the larger embrace of developmental projects, as a form of "malignant intrusion" into "Islamic space" no less reprehensible than the Soviet or American intervention. For those who drove out the Soviets and Nato, India must seem like a pushover. It does not take any extra insight to note that this position would be backed, vocally or discreetly, by the majority of Pakistanis. Those who need evidence can check out TV panel discussions. The second target is the Kashmir valley of course. There was an upsurge in violence after the establishment of the Taliban government in Kabul, which in turn was largely due to the presence and leadership provided to the Taliban by Pak military officers. When the Americans launched their war in Afghanistan, Islamabad sought and obtained time to bring back its soldiers and officers from Taliban ranks. The third dimension is destabilisation of India's secular democracy, which is an attractive alternative, particularly for the young, to the theocratic model offered by Taliban Plus. One wonders why this very obvious reality does not cure many Pakistanis of their schizophrenia. They are hugely mistaken if they think that Hafiz Saeed and his colleagues only have an agenda for India. They have an agenda for Pakistan as well; and while they will not be able to change India they have a fair shot at turning Pakistan into a theocracy. But this post-Nato war will not stop at South Asia; it will draw in China and central Asian "stans" as well. China is beginning to sense the scope of this threat, but the Chinese take their time over any change in policy. Facts will engineer this change. There just might come a moment when, acting out of their separate national interests, India and China find themselves on the same side of a complicated battlefield.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Mahbubul Alam's death a big loss to journalist community

With profound sadness I read about the death of Mahbubul Alam, former editor of The Independent, former adviser to the caretaker government of Bangladesh in 2007 and doyen of the Bangladesh newspaper industry. It grieves me that although we maintained regular contact spanning a period of 15 years and shared many anecdotes and laughs together, I knew nothing about his ill health. It was a subject never mentioned in our conversations and I've never known him to complain to any degree. There are some editors of Bangladeshi publications whom I admire and respect enormously -- both professionally and personally -- not just for their God-given talents in creating and producing a commercially viable publication, but one that benefits society, individually and collectively. Mahbubul was one of those -- a giant among giants. His demise is a big loss to the Bangladesh newspaper industry and nation at large. I know I will miss him greatly and only wish that I had thanked him more often for all the support he gave to my anti-corporal punishment in schools campaign, which he was the first to promote and encourage. May Allah embrace him eternally. Sir Frank Peters On e-mail

Govt should apologise for question paper leakage

It is alleged that some of the question papers of this year's HSC examination have been leaked. Many noted citizens are trying to address the issue. But the authority is in the denial mode regarding the issue. Question paper leakage is a serious matter that concerns the fate of nearly 10 lakh students. We hope the authorities concerned will at least apologise for the lapse which resulted in the leakage of question papers. Zabed Wali Chittagong

Who says police is not dutiful?

Bangladesh police are often accused of being irresponsible. But it is not always true. Recently six cell phones and all the money from our moneybags got stolen from our house. I made a call to my stolen phone and the thief answered. He said he was caught by the police. After the conversation, he switched off the phone. I called another number and this time a police officer of Shah Ali Thana answered the call. I immediately informed him what happened. The officer asked my location and after a few minutes a police car arrived. They told us that they had caught the thief near their check post at Mirpur-1 and found six mobile phones with him. We provided the police with all the necessary proof and they handed over the phones to us. We were amazed. We often complain that police are very irresponsible. But it will be very unkind of us to blame all of them. Md. Shirazur Rahman Lecturer, Dept. of English Bangladesh University of Business and Technology

Comments on news report, "Goal higher, route unclear," published on June 6, 2014

MH Khan He is betting on macro economics. That is his vehicle and the present perspective suggests that he would be successful in his betting.

"Contain violence, grow economy" (June 6, 2014)

Monju Huq We share the views of Mr. Muhith about the destructive politics that was perpetrated on the whole nation before the last election and the damage it caused to human lives, properties, industries, transportation, communication, education, infrastructure, health systems, export and import and overall economy. We would, of course, like the opposition to carry out its political activities in a manner that it does not adversely affect overall public life and economy of the country.

"Amnesty to breed more black money" (June 6, 2014)

Akhtar Shah No kidding!

Mofi Between July last year and April this year, the NBR received only Tk 26 crore through this facility! If this is the figure, then I wonder if we are embracing more harms than benefits!