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FOUNDER EDITOR
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Misappropriating poverty money

Hold those at fault to account

It might seem elevating for the spirit that public money worth billions of Taka is being funneled through various government, semi-government or autonomous bodies with the altruistic goal of reducing poverty. But closer examination of where the money is finally landing may sometimes reveal a not-so-inspiring picture of reality. A recent report in a leading Bangla daily has exposed how those in charge of an autonomous anti-poverty organisation under the Rural Development and Cooperative ministry have been plundering the poverty money instead of lending it to the poor.

With seemingly everyone's hand, from the top of the management to the field level worker, in the till, it is hardly surprising that half of the supposedly five hundred thousand poor borrowers of an astronomical sum of Tk. 411 crore have defaulted on their loans. In fact, many of these loan recipients are fake, while others, far from being members of the targeted poor households, belong to the local gentry, tout groups and even field workers of the organisation, not to mention the relatives of highly placed officials of this 'poor-friendly' organisation.

One wonders how many such organisations flaunting their anti-poverty signboards are squandering public money while the condition of the real poor in whose name this money is mobilised has been going from bad to worse. Ironically, those at the helm are taking false pride in the country's continued success in eradicating poverty.

Hopefully, the government would keep a closer watch on the organisations working for poverty alleviation and hold the officials found misappropriating the money for the poor to account.

Downturn in remittances

Take recourse to finding new markets

DESPITE alarm bells going off for some time now, authorities are yet to be proactive in exploring new labour markets for our expatriate workers. The latest figures show a downtrend in inward remittances, which has fallen by about 25 percent in the current fiscal and stands at approximately \$2.32 billion. We have stated this before, and we will state it again, with our traditional labour destinations in the Middle East facing economic downturn, the government must prioritise the search for new markets.

With the number of expatriate workers from Bangladesh shrinking drastically by 33 per cent over 2012 to 2013, there is no room for complacency. Our missions abroad have labour officers. All majors player in the international labour market, ranging from India to the Philippines, have dedicated departments in their foreign missions to look after the welfare of their expatriate workers. In a highly competitive market, such countries vie with one another to secure for their citizens new work opportunities and markets in emerging and developed economies. We have been very fortunate to have had easy access to some of the largest known markets for many decades now.

It falls upon the government to do something about this situation. Without the precious foreign exchange earnings, the economy will suffer. Major infrastructure projects, most of which will be built by foreign contractors, will require payment in foreign currency. It would be wise for authorities to act before the downward trickle

Living in the Twilight Zone

CROSS
TALK



MOHAMMAD
BADRUL AHSAN

ually exploited. It's a People's Republic where people are last in line in their own homeland.

Three million people died and two hundred thousand women were violated so that we could have our own nation state. Every time politicians talk about patriotism, they forget their words ring hollow when people aren't at home in their own motherland.

It can be argued in so many ways, but the truth is that people are worried. Ask them not about which of the two main political parties is better than the other. Ask them not about which of the two patriarchs of these two political parties had declared independence. Ask what they think about the future of their country. Ask what they think about the absurd election where half the parliament members got elected without an election and the other half got elected by the brute minority.

Ever since January 5 the country has been drifting. Last six months have alienated people farther from their dream than any other time in recent history. Power had been grabbed in the past as well. Military dictators have come and gone, flouting the constitution and holding people at gunpoint. But this time people are most miffed because the betrayal comes from those whom they had trusted most.

A large part of it's a sense of betrayal because it has been done in their name. The military rulers grabbed power through coups and everybody knew the political power for them grew out of the barrel of a gun. Even if they tried to change afterwards, people may have liked them or not but they never forgot those rulers had snatched power.

This time it has been done with a sleight of scurrilous hand. God knows, people aren't convinced of how power has returned to the same hand. Every voter who hasn't voted knows that truth. And it's not about who has come to power this time but how they did it. People don't feel involved in the mandate being used in their name.

If we are to compare this government to a carnival, the organisers alone are enjoying its fanfare failing to attract

visitors. The unpleasant truth about the whole thing is that people probably don't have a great deal of interest in who runs their country. They know they're no more relevant for democracy than campaign is for product quality.

In their frenzy for power, politicians are destroying the very foundation of why people ought to be the source of all power. In the ultimate analysis our martyrs didn't sacrifice their lives to change their rulers only. They had also died because they wanted to change the way they were ruled. They wanted to be the master of their own destiny.

From time to time, that aspiration of the people has been disrupted by usurpers. People have been sidelined from politics, their will subverted first by the whims of their military leaders and now by their civilian leaders, all of whom are their own countrymen. If the ruling politicians are drawing sustenance from unilateral political disarmament of their opponents and are actually convinced that they could pick who should sit in the opposition bench, they should know it distorts democracy so much as match fixing ruins a game.



Our politicians are now having exchanges over mid-term elections. The ruling party wants to go the whole nine yards of this term. The opposition vows to topple the government anytime soon. Both sides have been trifling with the most critical juncture of Bangladesh's history that threatens to unravel its politics.

In fact, it should be the only issue keeping the politicians busy if they could understand its full implications. Marinated in despair for too long, this country has the possibility of going towards anarchy. It's not for nothing that democracy has been the chosen form of government across the world. No other form allows people to choose their rulers.

That choice was compromised on January 5 and our leaders should quickly make amends. When people are denied voice in their country and government, it leads to dissatisfaction and bitterness. Nothing will get fixed unless the fix is fixed first. Politicians should restore democracy, without which nothing will be the same again.

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COMMENTARY

A job well done

FROM PAGE 1

country and to our people if we do not fully understand the importance of what has occurred earlier at the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) and now at the PCA and give the government its due for the maturity, dexterity and professionalism with which it has handled a vital issue at the international level, an issue that lies at the core of much of our future advancement in the natural resources sector, especially energy.

Sheikh Hasina's government must be duly commended for the farsighted decision it took, back in 2009, within a year of being elected to office, to take both Myanmar to the Germany-based ITLOS that settled the dispute in March 2012, and India to the PCA that gave its verdict this July.

The need for arbitration was very simple. A serious look at the map explains it all. Our coastline is a unique and complicated one. The Bay of Bengal juts into a landmass buttressed by India on the west and Myanmar on the east, with Bangladesh being at the northern tip. It is surrounded on three sides by three different countries and it does not need any special expertise or knowledge of either geography or geology to realise that conflicting claims on sea boundary will be natural in such a setting.

We may recall that we have had serious disputes with both these countries on a few occasions when gunboats came dangerously close to one another, with naval conflict appearing too close for comfort with Myanmar. With India also show of force did occur when she compelled an international oil company to withdraw. With increasing prospect of oil and gas being discovered in this part of the ocean it became exceedingly important that some sort of legally binding understanding be reached with both our neighbours for any peaceful exploitation of the ocean resources.

The critically important aspect of the two verdicts is that we have resolved our maritime disputes with India and Myanmar in a peaceful, equitable and legally binding manner. We must remember that there are only a handful of international laws that are binding, as states very seldom agree to surrender their sovereign rights on any matter. The fact that the ITLOS and PCA verdicts are binding on Myanmar and on India is a matter of great advantage to us. These verdicts are "binding" only because Myanmar and India voluntarily agreed to accept them regardless of what the judgment would be. Here in lies the victory of our diplomatic initiatives. It is to the credit of Bangladesh that it was able to convince both Myanmar, a country without much regard for international law and diplomatic niceties and India, a country with a clear preference for bilateral negotiations to solve disputes, especially with neighbours, to not only go for the arbitration process but also to accept the binding nature of the verdicts.

We should express our sincere gratitude to both Myanmar and India for agreeing to go for the arbitration, that they could have easily declined to do, in which case we could have done absolutely nothing about it. They could have chosen to leave the disputes hanging as they were over the last several decades. Hence the significance of our legal victory and the justification to felicitate and com-

mend our government, our diplomatic apparatus --- at that time led by then foreign minister Dipu Moni --- and the legal team that we had hired for a brilliant piece of diplomatic and legal work.

Much of the significance and especially its legal relevance to Bangladesh's economic growth was lost to the public when, after the ITLOS verdict on the dispute with Myanmar infantile, bombastic and patently unbelievable claims were made about what we had "achieved". Instead of publicising it for what it was -- a historic judgment from a court of law that significantly upheld vital aspects of our national interest, and for which our government and legal team needed to be praised, we shamelessly turned it into a propaganda campaign, laughably terming it as "Sheikh Hasina's conquest of the ocean" (Sheikh Hasina's Samudra Bijoy). It was as if Sheikh Hasina had led something like a naval expedition that engaged the Myanmar navy in an epic sea battle and wrenched from the occupying 'enemy' some vital parts of the ocean that belonged to us. The government's noise-machine went on overdrive and claimed "Bangabandhu gave us Green Bangladesh and his daughter has now given us Blue Bangladesh" comparing (and thereby insulting) what was a valiant fight for our freedom, leading to the martyrdom of hundreds of thousands, to what was a well fought legal battle in a German court.

The cheap nature of that propaganda at that time prevented the more sober, well thought out and learned praise for the government for what was a very significant legal victory for the country, likely to contribute greatly to a peaceful exploitation of our marine resources. Thankfully the propaganda that followed the PCA judgment relating to India has been considerably muted and hence made us look less childish.

The present attempt by the BNP to belittle the latest judgment on our dispute with India is pathetic to say the least. With 19,467 sq km out of 25,602 sq km coming our way, with all our oil blocks being protected and, finally, with all the 10 oil blocks claimed by India being given to us to still say that Bangladesh's interest was frittered away is nothing but a reflection of a damaged mind incapable of judging facts and pathologically driven to find an Indian advantage even when the advantage is ours on the basis of evidence.

The BNP leadership does not seem to understand that what they are discussing is a verdict from the Arbitration Court. It is NOT a negotiated agreement. It is the collective verdict of internationally reputed legal experts appointed as judges of the PCA who, after having heard the arguments of the legal teams of Bangladesh and India, came to certain conclusions. In those conclusions obviously some Indian points have been recognized. But overwhelmingly the verdict upholds our interest, and does so in such a manner that the Indians have accepted it.

Of all the things that Sheikh Hasina's government has done so far, the handling of the arbitration cases against Myanmar and India have been the most professional. It has been a job well done. Bravo.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Israel, stop the carnage

Would Israel come to its senses and stop killing innocent children, men and women in the Gaza strip? Israel, stop your ghastly military action immediately on innocent civilians and restore human rights and values.

Professor M Zahidul Haque
Department of Agricultural Extension & Information System, SAU, Dhaka

Thug in police's garb

Mollah and Mahmud's front page report and photograph, published on 15th July, depict as foul a deed as one can imagine. Have our police turned into killers? No civilised society can accept this. Sadly, we are living in a country where law enforcers are law breakers and murderers!

The government must take this brutal murder of a citizen by a member of the police seriously. I would urge your daily to follow up on the matter and keep your readers updated on this.

Frustrated Bangladeshi
On e-mail

Reducing Shakib's punishment

Shakib Al Hasan has been banned for six months from taking part in any competitive cricket for breaching rules. No doubt this is a harsh judgment on BCB's part. Shakib has been dubbed as the best all-rounder of the world and he should be given due respect that he rightly deserves. Banning him for six months will harm Bangladesh cricket more than it will harm the player.

We hope the authorities will lessen his punishment.

Zabed Wali
Chittagong

Comments on news report, "Chickens, eggs made risky," published on July 15, 2014

Saidur Rahman

They try to destroy formalin-tainted foods, but don't try to stop those who are supplying formalin to the farmers. They are concerned about question leaks so they decide to minimise the gap between exams, but don't try to find and stop those who are causing this.

By 2021, this land will be full of sick people with liver cirrhosis, kidney failure, heart problem, cancer and many other diseases.

Fareed Wakil

"However, if we have information about anyone making adulterated poultry feed, we can take action," said Dr Mozammel Hoque Siddiquee, director general of the department.

A classic government answer...a perfect answer of inaction. To stop this practice they just need to inspect and monitor regularly, which is not a difficult job. But if they sit in their offices waiting for 'information', our health will be compromised.

Nasirullah Mridha, USA

Why don't they check the poultry feed regularly? It seems no one cares about public health.

"Custodian of law or killer of law?" (July 15, 2014)

Mofi

Will this news be forgotten or action will be taken against these culprits? The cruelty of the police personnel involved is mind-boggling.

Hyder

I strongly urge the authorities concerned to go for a fact finding mission and award the culprits their due punishment.

Akhtar Shah

This little boy is scarred for life! The trauma he has endured will haunt him for ever. God bless him.

No good complaining about the police as nothing will ever happen. "Narayanganj's Nur" is still in India, while murdered 7's families are still waiting for justice! So much for friendly relations!!

These examples of brutality give Bangladesh a reputation that is shameful.

Aasfisarwar

Bangladesh police has been unleashed by this illegal government to terrorise the people and prolong their rule.

Deep Purple Blue

Brutal. When will our law enforcers stop behaving like goons?

"Netanyahu's terrorism" (July 15, 2014)

Selim Reza

I can't understand what the task of United Nations is? Is there any humanity left in the world? Innocent children are being killed by ferocious bombing. What a shame!

Zman7

Well written. But who will stop Netanyahu? Is there any truly powerful figure in this world to stop him?

The out-dated education system

TAHMID SAMIUL MOWLA

THE general perception of the society has changed. We do not value education as it should be, rather we tend to evaluate the financial or "political affluence" of a person. In order for us to develop further and keep expanding the social and economic choices for the people, we need a reform in the education sector.

Even though schooling is quite easily accessible in the cities, attending school in the rural villages is quite difficult. We have only a handful of small underdeveloped schools in the villages, and the opportunity of getting an educated is further weakened by the poverty of the people in the rural areas. Not only that, rural people fail to acknowledge the fact that educating their children would not only improve their financial position in the long run but would also provide the opportunity for their children to break free from the curse of poverty.

To add to that, it is not only the infrastructure of the school and the financial conditions that play an effective role in the education sector of our country but the lack of qualified teachers providing service in the rural schools further increases the gravity of the situation. Whether this is because qualified teachers prefer exploring their options in the city or whether they believe that they are not properly valued in the rural areas is a matter that needs to be looked into further.

Most of us have heard the phrase "Education is the backbone of a nation." It is unfortunate that we live in a society where most people don't pay any heed to this, which is why not much of our efforts go into "sincerely" educating the mass. Rather, the education ministry seems to believe that anyone who can write his name is "educated." To make matters worse, in order to achieve greater passing rates in the board examination of 2014, illicit leaking of questions has become a menace. This is detrimental to the both the students who opted to sneak a peek at the questions, and also the nation as a whole. Furthermore, this also morally weakens the youth who will one day be leading this country. They fail to acknowledge that education is not just a document with grades, rather it is the capability to overcome the various problems we face daily. The purpose of education should not be perfect scores but the effort to make this world a better place to live in.

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