

Time for decisive action long overdue

Govt. must safeguard the Sundarbans' future

FIVE days after the devastating accident, we are appalled at the government's lackluster attempt at containing the oil spill in the Sundarbans, despite repeated and urgent appeals from different quarters to speed up the clean-up operation. The government began its tedious manual operation four days after the incident, deploying only 200 workers -- a delayed move that, according to experts, is totally inadequate in containing the oil spill which has now spread across at least 350 square kilometres of the region.

Government bureaucracy, irresponsibility and lack of coordination on the part of different authorities have compounded the danger the Sundarbans and its inhabitants are in. The government is yet to make a decision on whether it would take the international assistance offered by UN and other agencies; another bureaucratic delay that would heavily cost the nation. Decisive action is long overdue.

We are disheartened that instead of taking responsibility for the present and future of the Sundarbans, the government is shirking its duty. The shipping minister has downplayed the catastrophic magnitude of the spill, arguing that it "won't harm the world's largest mangrove forest that much." His flippant remarks about the oil spread and its impact is a cause for concern as it signals the authorities' refusal to accept responsibility to safeguard the Sundarbans.

Why this coercive method?

Be respectful to child rights

THIS is downright violation of child rights in the name of rehabilitation of so-called street children of Karwan Bazar. Some social welfare directorate officials with police help on Saturday randomly picked up and forcibly hauled a bunch of boys and girls on to a parked microbus. The fear-stricken children raising a hue and cry, the jostling crowd came to their aid, resisting the move to take them away.

Neither the social welfare staff nor the policemen could furnish an official order on demand from the public. What is more to the point is that the children are not destitute or homeless, at least most of them were not. This became clear when a parent, relative or guardian came forward to own them up.

Even if they were rootless and floating, that was hardly the way to commence a social rehabilitation programme to take them under any caring wing. It was inherently ill-conceived, unplanned and entirely reliant on coercive methods. It was thoroughly unannounced as though a raid was being carried out on some criminals.

It could have been positively purposeful move for street children had it been backed by survey, data collection and mapping about pockets of destitute children across the metropolis. Actually, without any spadework done such a move should not have been undertaken in the first place. Besides, importantly, local body representatives should

NO FRILLS, RESULTS

Ever the Russian way

EDITORIAL: THE STATESMAN (INDIA)

ALTHOUGH in his own way Vladimir Putin is more forceful, perhaps even more colourful, than several of his international counterparts, he regales in a no-frills image. And so it was there was less hype and media glare about his brief trip to New Delhi compared with recent visits of other dignitaries -- but more "take away", for both countries. The string of agreements signed would, for India, appear something like Santa's sack of goodies -- nuclear power plants, dual-use helicopters, crude imports as well as the re-routing of some diamonds for cutting/polishing. What Mr. Putin secured was Indian support, politically and commercially, at a time when Moscow has been shunned by the "West" and the sanctions it has imposed are beginning to hurt. And that could require New Delhi to find its feet on the diplomatic tightrope it will have to traverse in the revived Cold War.

That a leader of the breakaway Crimea travelled with Mr. Putin -- though not included in his official delegation -- would not have gone unnoticed in Washington, Berlin and London. The global situation, however, would not allow them to shun an "emerging" India, as they had done in the initial Cold War stand-off. What must also be noted is that in contrast with other recent diplomatic action this was not a Modi-driven show. Mr. Putin made that clear when meeting Sonia Gandhi -- which South Block had chosen not to pre-publicise.

Another reflection of it not being a Modi-show was that the Indian prime minister took the "time-tested, old friend" line. As well as a declaration that Russia would remain the prime supplier of military equipment to India despite recent flirtations with the "slick-marketing" western producers. And Moscow's response was positive: the plan to produce some 400 Kamov Ka-226 civil/military helicopters in India was right up the "make in India" street, with the possibility of third-country exports. There are, however, hurdles to be cleared on the defence-supplies front. Problems have arisen with the SU-30 MKI combat aircraft, and work on the FGFA (fifth generation fighter aircraft) has remained grounded.

Russia's move toward upgraded military links with Pakistan is another sore point -- could that be the Kremlin's way of letting India know that its new focus on American arms would result in Russia seeking other markets? Mr. Putin has left the query hanging in the air. Some sales pitch that.

BANGLADESH'S DEVELOPMENT STATUS

Middle income vs LDCs

FAHMIDA KHATUN

FOLLOWING the media briefing on November 27 to launch UNCTAD's Least Developed Countries (LDC) Report 2014, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) faced criticism from two ministers of the present government. Having read media reports and such displeasure, many have expressed their curiosity on middle income and least developed countries. In this connection, this write up attempts to make a few issues clearer.

First of all, CPD, neither at the media briefing nor on other occasions, say that Bangladesh cannot become a middle income country by 2021. As a matter of fact, CPD expressed its hope back in 2007, much before many did so. Thus, Goal 3 of "Bangladesh Vision 2021" published by CPD in August 2007, that emerged from a consultative process with participation of people from all walks of life across Bangladesh in 2006 reads: "We believe that Bangladesh has the potential to join the ranks of the middle-income countries by 2021" (p 14). Later, CPD was happy to see that the Sixth Five Year Plan (2011-15) of Bangladesh spelt out the objective of becoming a middle income country by 2021. Similar hope was expressed in the election manifestoes of 2008 and 2014 of the ruling Awami League. It is noticeable that none of these documents referred to coming out of the LDC status by 2021; they only highlighted the middle income status.

It is well known that for operational lending activities, the World Bank categorises countries in four groups: low income, lower-middle income, upper-middle income and high income countries. According to the World Bank, a lower-middle income country will have a per capita income between \$1,045 and \$4,125 and an upper-middle income economy needs to have a per capita income between \$4,126 and \$12,745 in FY2015. This is calculated using the Atlas method of the World Bank and updated every year.

However, such classification, based purely on income, does not capture the structural strength and weaknesses of countries. Even with high income, a country may be an LDC due to its weaknesses in social progress. Thus, based on economic and social indicators, the UN categorises countries into three groups: least developed, developing and developed countries. The Committee for Development Policy of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) establishes the LDC status of countries every three years based on three indicators: (i) per capita income, based on three years' average; (ii) human asset index (HAI), based on nutrition, adult literacy, child mortality and school enrolment; and (iii) economic vulnerability index (EVI), based on natural shocks, trade-related shocks, physical and economic exposure to shocks, population size and remoteness.

A country can graduate from LDC category if it meets at least two graduation criteria during two consecutive triennial reviews of the LDC list. However, a country can opt for coming out of the LDC list if its per capita income is double the graduation threshold at the time of such review. For example, Equatorial Guinea, even having an income of \$14,320 in 2013 has the LDC status. Among Saarc countries, Bhutan with a per capita income of \$2,460 in 2013 is also an LDC. Both these countries have achieved the income threshold for graduation a few years back. Thus, even after being a middle income economy, a country may not graduate from LDC status unless requirements are met adequately.

Bangladesh was included in the LDC list in 1975. According to the most recent review of the LDC list in March 2012, Bangladesh is still an LDC. In 2013 per capita income of Bangladesh was \$900 while HAI and EVI were 32.4 and 54.7 respectively -- all of which were below the graduation threshold. One should not confuse here that

using 2005-06 base year, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics estimated per capita income of Bangladesh in 2013 at \$1054. And UNCTAD LDC Report 2014 uses World Bank's Atlas method for consistency.

The next review for graduation from LDC status will be held in 2015 where Bangladesh is not included. So the earliest that Bangladesh can achieve the eligibility criteria is the 2018 triennial review. Given its trend of progress, particularly in per capita income and HAI, we can expect that Bangladesh will achieve the eligibility for inclusion in 2018 triennial review. Then the process will take the following course. During 2018-2021, Bangladesh's development progress will be monitored and UNDESA will prepare an impact assessment of its graduation, while UNCTAD prepares a vulnerability profile for the Committee for Development Policy. Bangladesh will then be invited to present its views to the Committee based on which the Committee may recommend its graduation. Assuming that ECOSOC endorses the Committee's recommendation and the UN General Council takes note of the decision of ECOSOC in its session in the same year, then Bangladesh's graduation will take effect in 2024. The period 2021-2024 is the grace period during which Bangladesh has to prepare a transition strategy while the Committee monitors progress.

Coming out of the LDC list is surely the most coveted desire of every LDC as the dignity of a country is attached to this. Once graduated from LDC, a country can stand side by side with globally influential groups and can uplift its image. However, LDCs currently enjoy a number of privileges which will be discontinued after graduation. These include duty free-quota free market access, extension for compliance with TRIPS agreement, and access to targeted aid and support measures. Of course, once the ongoing Doha Round negotiation of the WTO is completed, duty will reduce for all countries. Moreover, bi-lateral trade agreements are already offering low or zero tariff access for exporting countries. Hence, the faster Bangladesh makes progress the better prepared it will be to withstand the

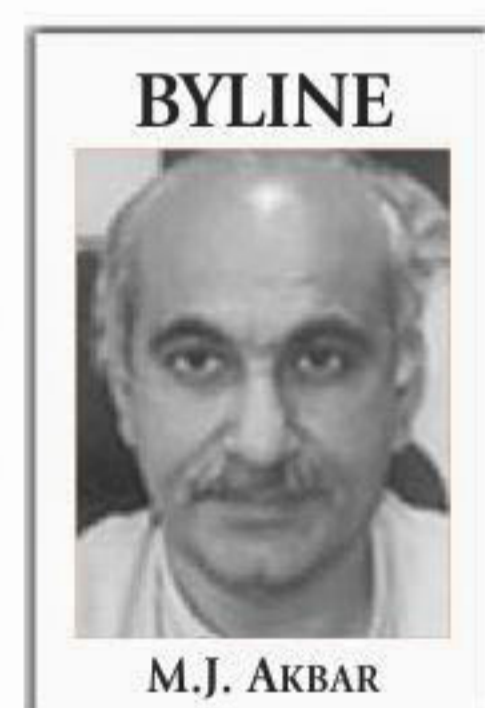
impact of elimination of various special and differential treatments.

At the media briefing CPD discussed development trends of LDCs, their progress towards achieving MDGs and the need for structural change and productivity growth for fulfilling post-MDG agenda. It was mentioned that a number of LDCs could not attain the desired progress that calls for transformation of their own economies and change in the global economic system. Bangladesh's achievement in the area of GDP growth, exports, remittances, food self-sufficiency and MDGs is remarkable. However, infrastructural bottlenecks, political instability and lack of good governance stand in the way towards faster advancement. For sustainable development Bangladesh needs to have a structural transformation towards more productive manufacturing sector and increased productivity of labour and capital.

Thus the view that CPD is not hopeful about Bangladesh's becoming a middle income country by 2021 is totally wrong. Also CPD's comment on Bangladesh's graduation is based on facts and figures. It seems that some of us have mixed up various groups of countries categorised by various international agencies. However, CPD is not upset with the debate on the graduation of Bangladesh. CPD believes that constructive criticism on development policies can contribute towards a participatory, inclusive and accountable development process. Therefore, CPD welcomes debates on development policies. It has the professional strength and attitude to respect rational criticism that is based on full information on CPD's work.

The writer is the Research Director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD).

A straight answer to an elliptical curve



BYLINE

M.J. AKBAR

LEGISLATION is not always the best way to resolve a social problem with a contentious history of a thousand years, but governments are not always in control of events. Sometimes, events control governments. The Agra incident, where some fringe hardliners sought to "reconvert" a handful of Muslims, surviving under many forms of pressure including poverty and immigration,

brought to the surface a simmering undercurrent of community relations.

The Union government's response has been straight, forthright and devoid of fudge. It has tackled the problem at source, and asked all parties to cooperate in passing a law that bans forced conversions. The operative word is 'forced.' There should be no problem with this, either in legality or morality. No faith permits this. The Quran, in instance, is very clear. Surah 2 Verse 256 says, categorically and unambiguously, "Let there be no compulsion in religion." In his authoritative translation, Abdullah Yusuf Ali explains, "Compulsion is incompatible with religion because religion depends upon faith and will, and these would be meaningless if induced by force..." If force was used in the past, it was wrong, and in any case it can have no place in a democratic society and polity. Neither does force have any legitimacy in the liberal embrace of Hindu doctrine and philosophy.

It can be argued that such a law needs the support of institutions other than Parliament. The government should enlarge the ambit of discourse to solicit intelligent opinion from religious leaders with credibility, and complete this process within a specified time limit. We will know then who stands where. But the final responsibility for legislation rests with Parliament, and political parties represented within it.

It is surprising, therefore, that the parties most vociferous in protest, initiated by Congress and its patriarch Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, have been relatively muted in their response to the idea. Such an anti-conversion law would make any future Agra-style episode a straight criminal offence. It would check conversions through inducement by any faith, whether Hinduism, Islam, Christianity or Buddhism. One assumes this was an objective of parties like Congress, Samajwadi Party, the various Janata Dals and the Marxists. In fact, with their scepticism about religion, Marxists might have been expected to support the

government idea immediately. Instead, there has been implicit pushback. Why?

The principal voices in government, beginning with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, have made it as clear as language will permit that the job of an elected government is good governance, and not encouragement of any form of religiosity. The party President, Amit Shah, stressed this firmly at a public discussion hosted by a television channel on Friday. Finance Minister Arun Jaitley has said this to anyone who will listen. Today's India wants, and demands, a route map towards prosperity, not the politics of emotionalism and discord. Common sense suggests that prosperity cannot come without peace, and peace begins at home.

Every public apparatus comes with its own form of excess baggage, but baggage should not become an obstacle to the journey. Where does our present Union government want to go? What is its horizon? Where does it want to be by 2019, when it will have to ask for a fresh mandate? There is no confusion about the answer. The prime minister said in his very first speech in the Lok Sabha that if government was not for the welfare of the poor then what was it for? The last general election was won on a simple message: development for all. For all. This includes minorities. The prime minister said repeatedly that he wants Indian Muslims to hold a Quran in one hand and a computer in the other. No part of the central message has been altered by an iota. Those who dilute or confuse this message are not doing a focused prime minister any favours.

Lost in the extraneous din has been the fact that the government has been able to reset the compass on reform in this session of the House. The change in insurance regulations should be sufficient as a hint to sceptics; the coal bill has been passed despite the usual noises from the Left that this upturns nationalisation. A final holdout from Mamata Banerjee's Bengal is the last hitch in GST, but this too shall be resolved by the monsoon session. The Bengal chief minister's worry is not the nation, or its economy, but the fact that CBI has been able to link the Saradha scam to her transport minister, Madan Mitra, who is very close to his chief. Unfortunately, she thinks that a scream is sufficient as an answer, but the voter is wiser than that.

Religion, ideally, should be a matter restricted to one's private life. In public life there is one book, the Constitution. In politics, there is one duty: the greater good of the people.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Congratulations to the BD judge!

Supreme Court Justice Muhammad Imman Ali has been given one of Europe's most prestigious awards for his invaluable contribution towards the protection of children in Bangladesh. The International Juvenile Justice Observatory (IJJO) presented the Juvenile Justice without Borders International Award to him in Brussels, Belgium in the presence of his family members as well as diplomatic and other officials representing over 50 countries. IJJO supports international advocacy on priority child issues and focuses on child-friendly justice, violence against children, mental health issues, prevention of delinquency and other topics related to juvenile justice systems and children's rights.

On January 13, 2011, the Supreme Court Justice distinguished himself by prompting action of the ministry of education that led to immediate prohibition of corporal punishment in all educational institutions throughout Bangladesh. He was the driving force behind the implementation of laws relating to juvenile justice and the ultimate enactment of the Children Act 2013.

Sir Frank Peters
One e-mail

We condemn police action on female students

The news that male cops grabbed female students by the hair, manhandled them, and charged baton on them indiscriminately (TDS Dec. 4) came to me as a great shock. This happened during a demonstration staged by diploma medical



PHOTO: BANGLAR CHOKH

technology and pharmacy students of Barisal which left at least 22 injured. This incident indicates that women are not safe even from the law enforcing agencies. We condemn such police brutality and at the same time demand exemplary punishment to the policemen involved so that this kind of shameful incident doesn't happen in future.

Zihad Hawlader
Jahangirnagar University

Where corruption rules

We have developed a culture of blaming the government for everything bad, especially corruption. But we fail to realise that some of our actions are also corrupt and reflect how morally bankrupt we are as a nation. An example will explain it better: My printer wasn't working, so I transferred the pdf files I needed to print to my flash drive and went to DCC Market at Gulshan-1 to have the printouts. Usually four pages cost BDT 24, that is BDT 6 per page. That's the normal rate around that particular area. But instead I was charged BDT 10 per page, totalling to BDT 40. After paying the bill, I asked the shopkeeper why he was taking tk 16/- more. The shopkeeper shrugged his shoulder and replied, "Well, I just took it." I was both surprised and furious but there was nothing I could do because if I had argued with him, the shopkeeper would have gathered the Market Samity members and harassed me. So I did not say anything more and left the place.

Raqib Ahmed Asif
One e-mail

Comments on commentary, "Human Rights or Human 'Farce' Day," published on December 12, 2014

Shadhin071

Very nice and truthful article, the situation is much worse though. People are suffering and want to get rid of this government.

Dev Saha

Point taken! However, we all are equally guilty. We give power to certain people and they get spoiled with their enormous power.

"Badal banned for life" (Dec. 10, 2014)

Shadhin071

I think Mr. Badal is right and he has every right to express his dissatisfaction with the BCB committee.

Xunaed

You can get away even after doing corruption in Bangladesh, but you can't escape if you point fingers at those who are involved in corruption! Mr. Badal isn't a saint but I think he has true passion for cricket. If his allegations are even remotely true, the future of Bangladesh cricket is at risk!