

BCL violence deplorable, unwarranted

Govt. must clarify its stance

W E note with concern the latest unwarranted attack of unruly BCL activists on BNP activists who had gathered in Bakshibazar before Khaleda Zia's appearance there in two graft cases. Around 200 Chhatra League men, armed with iron rods and sticks, lunged at several thousand BNP supporters, turning what was a peaceful demonstration of support to a combat zone that left at least 45 people injured.

What is equally, if not more, reprehensible is that the police, instead of stopping the aggressors, teamed up with them to drive away the BNP men from the area. Even those that sought refuge at DMCH were not spared, and were beaten by BCL and pro-government staff.

It goes without saying that such violence, orchestrated by ruling men and seemingly endorsed by state authorities, signals a grave danger for an already vulnerable democracy. This year has witnessed a rapid shrinking of democratic spaces with repeated attempts to foil opposition demonstrations through state-sponsored violence and other means.

The question arises as to whether the BCL men acted independently or at the bidding of the government. If it is the former, the government and the prime minister herself, who has already warned her party men to behave themselves, must outline what actions will be taken against the hooligans.

The government must remember that the right to assemble is a constitutional right, which can only be suppressed at the cost of a democratic system and the credibility of the government. No party with a claim to long democratic traditions can afford to tolerate such actions without being described as autocratic.

Alarming loss of farmlands

Land use law sorely needed

AS per a study carried out recently by an economics professor of Dhaka University, the country is losing nearly 2,100 bighas (1 bigha = 33 decimals) of land per day. That translates into 700,000 bighas lost over the course of a decade since 2003. In a country with a massive population of over 160 million people, this is hardly good news. While we may have attained self-sufficiency in food production, the loss of precious farmland in the absence of a land use law opens up opportunities for misuse of this extremely precious resource. With no demarcation of land, i.e. zoning, farmlands are being lost at an alarming rate. According to the study, 80 percent has been gobbled up by housing projects with about 17 percent going to make up for infrastructure that is ancillary to residential areas by way of schooling, communication and so on.

Cropland is also being diverted to non-traditional farming such as growing of tobacco and shrimp farming. Shrimp cultivation alone has become a major headache for environment as it requires infusion of salt water that has taken a massive toll in the southern districts of Bangladesh where large tracts of land have lost productivity altogether. These are some of the problems that beset policymakers. With large corporate bodies vying for farmland for conversion into commercial projects, not only are we looking at long-term loss of food production, but also an increasing trend of landless among the marginalised farming communities. Time has surely arrived to formulate a law that will protect farmlands from being grabbed and utilised for other purposes.

OIL-SPILL IN THE SUNDERBANS Are we missing some vital facts?

A. K. M. AMINUL HAQUE

THERE have been numerous comments and suggestions in both print and electronic media about the impact of the furnace oil-spill in the Sunderbans. But all these seem to miss out three very vital facts from the impact list.

These are: (1) The littoral and sub-littoral zones that include the zone between high tides and low tides and include the vegetation and undergrowth are the spawning ground and nursery for most of the marine fish species. The residue oil sticking to the vegetation, and also getting absorbed in the sandy layers underneath in the affected area, is bound to seriously affect the spawning of the marine fish species drastically, impacting the population of fish species, which will have a negative effect on human nutrition, livelihood and foreign exchange earning of the country.

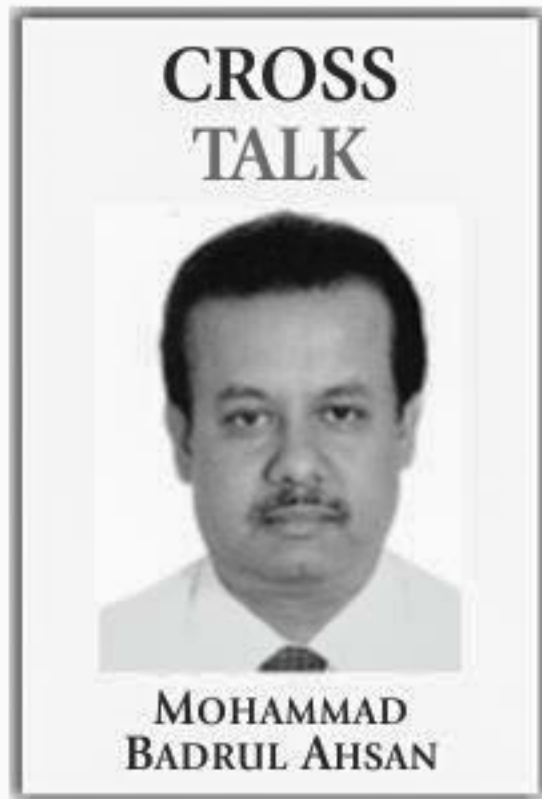
(2) *Hilsa*, our national fish of great importance and economic value, ascend freshwater rivers, like the Padma, for spawning purposes. Their migration up the sweet water rivers from the saline water environment of the sea in guided mainly by olfaction -- extra-sensitive faculty of smell -- and partly assisted by equally sensitive lateral line organ. The smell of furnace oil even in minutest quantity in the water is enough to divert the fish, which avoid the current flowing through the Sunderbans and search out sweet water streams of their choice -- in other rivers outside the region.

(3) The life of pelagic and benthic forms depending on planktons are at stake due to this tragic spill-out of furnace oil. And we will be well-advised to remember that the oil-contaminated water of the Sela River is not going to remain the exclusive property/liability of the Sunderbans in Bangladesh; through 'courtesy' of tides and the peculiar property of the ocean current system, this water is going to circulate throughout the whole world's ocean system in greater or lesser degree!

When Unesco and RAMSAR representatives are here, we draw their attention to the vital issues raised above.

The writer is a National Professor, founder of the Faculty of Fisheries, and former Vice-Chancellor of the Bangladesh Agricultural University.

When income inequality hurts economic growth



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

CROSS TALK

hurts economic growth.

That's why making many people rich doesn't diminish poverty. Instead it promotes polarisation and concentration of wealth. Big businesses are built, luxuries abound and decadence stalks a society. The poor gets upgraded as poverty moves from the belly to the brain. The howl of deprivation gets shifted from mouths to souls.

The OECD concludes that the single biggest impact on growth is the widening gap between the lower middle class and poor households. The rising income has to chase growing needs as luxuries continue to transform into necessities. Absolute poverty soon cedes place to relative poverty. Better fed, clad and housed, the poor still fail to afford an investment in education. They lag behind like their ancestors, and inequality persistently resists growth.

How exactly does it happen? When the children from poor families don't have access to education opportunities, it holds back their chance of social mobility and limits their scope of skills development. The vicious circle sets in for those whose parents have low levels of education, because their educational outcomes deteriorate as income inequality rises.

So, the OECD experts argue that the anti-poverty programmes cannot do enough unless cash transfers and increasing access to public services, such as high-quality education, training and healthcare are also fostered as essential pillars of social investment. In other words, poverty alleviation is bound to remain an elusive goal if a country does not engender greater equality of opportunities for its citizens.

There are numbers to prove the point. The OECD study estimated that Mexico and New Zealand lost more than 10 percentage points off growth due to growing inequality. The cumulative growth rate in Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States could have been 6 to 9 percentage points higher had income disparities not widened. Sweden, Finland and Norway have been similarly impacted. The exceptions are Spain, France and Ireland where greater equality helped increase per capita GDP.

JAMMU AND KASHMIR ELECTIONS The politics of polarisation

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYAR

Conference. Perhaps this paid dividends.

Unfortunately, the State which has been an example of secularism for the rest of the country has been somewhat polarised. The PDP won in the Muslim-majority Valley. However, the most blame is that of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). It has tried its best to polarise the society. It started a hush-hush campaign that the State's integration meant little when the Hindus had no say in the affairs of governance. So electrifying has been the result that the party has jumped from 11 seats in the last election in 2008 to 25 seats.

It is obvious that the polarisation in the State has changed the complexion. Jammu has become a base of Hindus and the Valley that of Muslims. Incidentally, the BJP did not get a single seat as predicted by Omar Abdullah, although it has increased the vote.

The problem is not new. By electing the Muslims from the Valley, the Kashmiris enjoy a vicarious satisfaction of being separate from the rest of India. The candidates who sustain this illusion get the support. However, this is nothing new.

The National Conference (NC), founded by Sheikh Abdullah, a popular leader in Kashmiri even when it was a princely state, disseminated this idea when the state integrated with India after the lapse of British paramountcy in 1947. Maharaja Hari Singh, the Hindu ruler, had the option to stay independent or join either India or Pakistan. He preferred to stay independent.

I have no doubt that Jammu and Kashmir, a Muslim majority state, would have come to Pakistan if it had been patient. The Maharaja declared independence and entered into a standstill agreement with Pakistan. India refused to follow suit because it appeared to harbour some other ideas.

Impatient Pakistan sent troops followed by the regular forces to take over the Valley by force. The Maharaja sought India's military support to ward off the Pakistan onslaught. The then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru refused to extend any help until the State acceded to India.

The Maharaja had no alternative except to sign the instrument of accession. The Indian forces flew to Srinagar in the nick of time because the Pakistani troops were almost in the precinct of the airport. Had the Pakistani forces not indulged in looting and delayed their departure from Baramulla so as to arrive in Srinagar before the Indian forces, the history of Kashmir would have been different.

The integration of Kashmir with India was done hurriedly, although Sheikh Abdullah was fully behind

An African proverb says that if you want to go faster go alone, but if you want to go far go together. The rich cannot expect to enjoy bounteous growth, expecting trickle down to pull up the poor. They cannot keep their governments, banks and regulators in their pockets and then expect the economy to have healthy rounds of growth. Accumulation of wealth can be a lonely pursuit like the struggle to overcome insolvency.

Investment and employment generation are necessary conditions, but their benefits aren't fully harnessed unless income distribution is a managed goal. If GDP grows, that growth must spread out amongst all citizens failing which wealth accumulates in a few hands like fat around the waist. This fat increases the risk of diabetes, heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure and certain cancers in a nation's body.

It throws cold water on the proponents of economic liberalism, the ideological belief in organising the economy on individualist lines, meaning that the greatest possible number of economic decisions is made by individuals and not by collective institutions or organisations. Many a knight have emerged in Bangladesh, who are riding the hobbyhorse of free market economy and jousting their entrepreneurial lances to justify profit-mongering as economic crusade. They tend to signify all their mischiefs and manipulations with the homilies of foreign exchange earnings and employment generation.

This is not to undermine the achievements of our business community but to underscore the fallacy of our policymakers regarding national prosperity. It's true the venture capitalists amongst us have turned around the economy, their hard work and acumen lifting a traditional economy out of misery. In fact, it's they who have built the momentum that has given this economy its buoyancy.

But our policymakers have been blindsided by this buoyancy, mistakenly convinced that what's good for the business is also good for the economy. They are evermore disillusioned between business as a means of nation building and nation as a means of business building. Starting from the national parliament to stock market to export processing zones, this country has been reduced into a life support system for the lust for business.

Last week a business magnate said on television that it was pettiness of the state to worry so much about who was moving how much money out of the country and buying second homes abroad. His words reeked of the same selfishness that characterised the plunder of this country by colonial hands, which didn't see anything wrong if the wealth of this nation ended up in Rawalpindi or London.

The writer is Editor, *First News* and an opinion writer for *The Daily Star*. Email: badrul151@yahoo.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

BCL's excesses vis-à-vis govt.'s silence

Factional clashes of BCL in public universities have become common nowadays. The recent killings in CU and SUST and the subsequent carelessness of the government indicate that BCL has gone beyond the control of AL.

We can well realise the reason of the government's indifference. These BCL cadres along with the law enforcing agencies foiled the opposition party's rallies before and after the farcical January 5 election. The government needs them badly to hold on to power.

Sohel Rana Raj
Lecturer of English
Alamgir Mansur (Minto) Memorial College
Mymensingh

Indian HC should control its visa agents

I read the letter of Abraham Junaid of Monash University, Melbourne, Australia a few days ago about the Indian visa agents' tyranny. It is very true that the system of online visa application for getting Indian visa has become completely useless in Bangladesh, as everything has to be done with the help of the corrupt agents who charge exorbitantly. I am sure the Indian High Commission in Bangladesh will look into the matter and take immediate action to solve the problems.

J.T. Mohammad
Uttara, Dhaka

Doubling govt. servants' pay ill-conceived

100% pay hike for the government employees does not seem to be a judicious decision. If implemented, this would have many negative consequences: the private sector employees will demand pay increase, the house owners will double their rent; and the prices of essentials will increase as well. A garment worker, who get 5000 taka per month as salary, and a class four government employee, who get 8000 taka per month will have to buy the daily essentials at the same price. The garment workers and those outside government service with limited income will be adversely impacted by this hike.

Ahmed Niaz
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Comments on news report, "100pc hike proposed," published on December 22, 2014

Manzoor A Khoda

If this new proposal is implemented, I hope both corruption and frustration among the civil servants will decrease.

Molla A. Latif

Reduction of corruption is out of question. If the entire salary structure of every sector cannot be synchronized, it will be disastrous. If this scale is implemented, private sectors will also have to increase their pay structure. And the business sector will derive the money from people by increasing the market price of every commodity. Ultimately, people will suffer.

"Jute genome decoder Maqsoodul passes away" (Dec. 22, 2014)

Saleh Tanveer

I am very shocked at this great scientist's premature passing away.

"Capital flight triples in a year" (Dec. 18, 2014)

Snr Citizen

Bangladesh Bank must have some screening and monitoring in halting this practise at the earliest.

"Moosa has \$7b in 'frozen' Swiss account" (Dec. 19, 2014)

OpeeMonir

This man is up to getting a clean chit from ACC. It will be interesting to watch how ACC deals with him. It will be interesting to watch this drama.

"Freedom in the air" (Dec. 20, 2014)

Molla A. Latif

It is highly informative. Everyone must read and see it.

"Peshawar killing spurs Pakistan executions" (Dec. 20, 2014)

Mahboob Hossain

By killing innocent children, Taliban proved themselves to be the worst enemy of Islam and Muslims. Most likely they are the agent of CIA or at least working like CIA.

"27 bullet-hit as villagers clash in Natore" (Dec. 20, 2014)

Hovercraft

Where are all these guns and bullets coming from?

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.