

## Poverty reduction trend impressive

### Skills improvement and investments needed

AS published in a leading Bangla daily, a study brought out by the General Economic Division of Planning Commission, poverty has reduced to 24.47 per cent. That still leaves an estimated 40 million people living in poverty. While it is claimed that the substantial social safety net programmes of the present government contributed to this success, significant problems remain. It is argued that while such programmes are good in the short run, it is skills development working hand in hand with state investments and social safety net programmes that can bring about long term change in poverty reduction.

The historical data presented point to a gradual reduction in poverty over the last decade. There is however some speculation as to how far this scenario is a reality, when we take into account the fact that, according to the same Planning Commission, about 64 percent of poor people remain outside the purview of social safety net programmes. This data would put the number of poor people at around 24 million.

Data discrepancies aside, there has been impressive reduction of poor people living in Bangladesh. We would perhaps have a better picture had specific information been available as to exactly how many people are benefitting from social safety net programmes. Despite this, from the latest survey published by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics in 2010, at least 24 per cent of all households in the country have access to at least one type of social safety net programme.

## Overflowing prisons

### Taking a toll on inmates and prison management

THERE has been a surge in the number of prison inmates in the recent time, with the escalation of political violence and intensification of law and order operations. In the last 37 days alone, 13,000 people have been arrested in 700 cases, with 8 percent of cases being of a political nature.

Reports suggest that prisons are now accommodating on average three times as many inmates as their actual capacities, leading to severe shortage and mismanagement of food supply, sanitation, health and other facilities. Even though the Jail Code dictates that each prisoner is entitled to 36 square feet as living space in jail, that same space is now being shared by at least three inmates. It is deplorable they should be denied humane treatment, irrespective of the severity of their crimes.

Even in ordinary times, the condition in the prisons is dire. The number of under trial prisoners is almost double the number of convicts, with many ending up serving more time than their eventual sentences just waiting for their trials to be over. The recent arrests of an overwhelming number of political inmates further complicates the situation, raising the question of how long they must wait, and in what conditions, till the trials are completed.

The current situation may well lead to a breakdown of an already unwieldy prison management. Without systematic prison reform, more budgetary allocation for prisons is unlikely to benefit the inmates. Meanwhile, the government should consider if sweeping arrests is a sustainable solution to addressing political violence.

## COMMENTS

**“Fix politics to save economy”**  
(February 9, 2015)

**S. M. Iftekhar Ahmed**  
Such strikes have been carried out since the birth of this country, so why is the business community suddenly demanding that they be banned when it should have been done many years ago? To me, this seems more like a publicity campaign.

**M. Ashraf**  
Ban strikes and blockades; then what will the government do when they become the opposition in future? Business people need to stop funding politicians to stop this violence. Stop the money and the show will stop.

**“Civil society for a national dialogue”**  
(February 9, 2015)

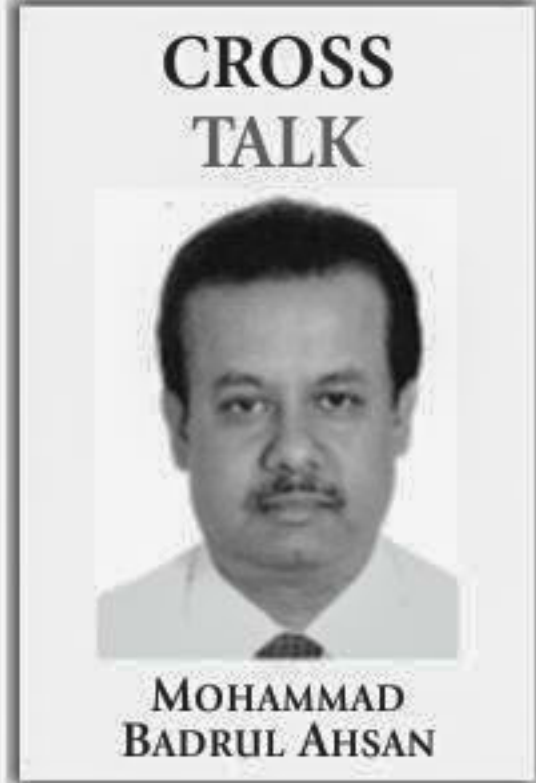
**Tipu Sultan**  
Civil society's effort is not welcomed by AL because anything having a prospect to derail them from power frightens them. They can do everything for holding the power.

**Deep**  
The politicians of our country lack the quality of foresight. We, the people are in abyss dismal state frightening the risk of life in every moment, pondering the future of our next generation and finding hard to manage daily breads. But the leaders lacking in foresight are plotting new tricks to remain or regain power over the corpses of common people.

**“Saudi jobs up for gentle workers”**  
(February 10, 2015)

**Raihan**

# A dialogue of the deaf?



**CROSS TALK**  
Signed by a former chief election commissioner, the well-meaning letter carried with it the sentiments of sensible people. Politicians should realise it's sheer stupidity to kill the rodents by burning the house.

But what kind of a dialogue are we talking about? Let us say both sides will agree to come to the table. What will they discuss? Who will moderate that discussion? What will be the agenda of that meeting? Will they debate the issues or kill time dozing off behind the closed doors?

This nation is suddenly overcome by this dialogue fetish. Everybody wants a dialogue between the two sides as if it's the silver bullet that will kill the beast. Dialogues in the past proved futile. A dialogue may not prove more useful in the future. Yet it's the only hope for a respite from our atrocious politics like ceasefire puts war on temporary hold.

China's founding father Mao Zedong once said that politics is war without bloodshed while war is politics with bloodshed. If we are to believe these words of wisdom, what do we call this terrible madness? People are burned alive, others beaten, hacked and shot to death. Bands of warriors roam the streets destroying property and vehicles, at times indistinguishable but for their banners and uniforms. If this is politics, why on Earth do we need war for bloodshed? The difference in our apocalyptic context is a matter of degree, not of kind.

In reality, politics and war have a thin line between them. Politics is smoldering war, and war is erupting politics. All wars come at the end of political failure, and

politics is when wars are contained before explosion. Millions have died throughout history, because armed confrontation was precipitated by misguided politics.

Throughout history nations have erupted in violence in their struggle for existence. Some of them fought for freedom from foreign occupation, others wrestled with demons hiding inside their own population. Palestinians are fighting to recover their land from Israel. Syrians are drawn into a civil war over who should run the country. Americans engaged themselves in Afghanistan and

Iraq under the pretense of eradicating terrorism. Libyans are killing each other from the teething pains of governance after Gaddafi.

Politics has made and unmade nations, latest example being the bifurcation of Sudan in 2011. The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 giving birth to 15 independent republics. Wars have done the same thing. Two World Wars redrew the map of the world, nations born and banished in territorial shuffling while the British Empire was reduced to stump. A fledgling independent Kurdistan only

looks imminent as the natural byproduct of war in Iraq.

Alternating between politics and war, nations behave like animals. Dogs heal their wounds by licking. Crocodiles secrete an enzyme that heals their wounds. But we also have the carpenter ants which in their defensive behaviour resort to self-destruction and explode themselves by violently contracting their abdominal muscles.

Where do we place ourselves in that range of instincts? Our leaders aren't surely modest enough to admit their mistakes and lick their wounds. The political process doesn't secrete an enzyme that can cure a crisis. That leaves us with the carpenter ants and their suicidal streak. By any standard and by all means, our politicians are destroying this nation in the name of building it.

So what will a dialogue achieve? The French have coined the phrase dialogue de sours, which means "dialogue of the deaf" in English. It's a discussion in which each party is unresponsive to what the others say. If the politicians are not responsive to each other in the street, parliament, social gatherings and anywhere else, what is their chance of acting differently when sitting around a table?

In a truly democratic country, politics is supposed to be a dialogue unto itself. Leaders are meant to exchange views, agreeing to disagree and disagreeing to agree. And that is possible when they approach with an open mind motivated by the best interests of the country. That they aren't even amenable to the idea of sitting down to discuss that possibility indicates that we may not be ready yet to take our affairs in our hands.

In the middle of the 8th century, a king was democratically elected in Bengal and fourteen centuries later the inhabitants of this land are embroiled in a bitter power struggle. Politics has progressed through centuries but that pioneering process got reversed. Those, who auto-elect themselves to power, tend to become kings.

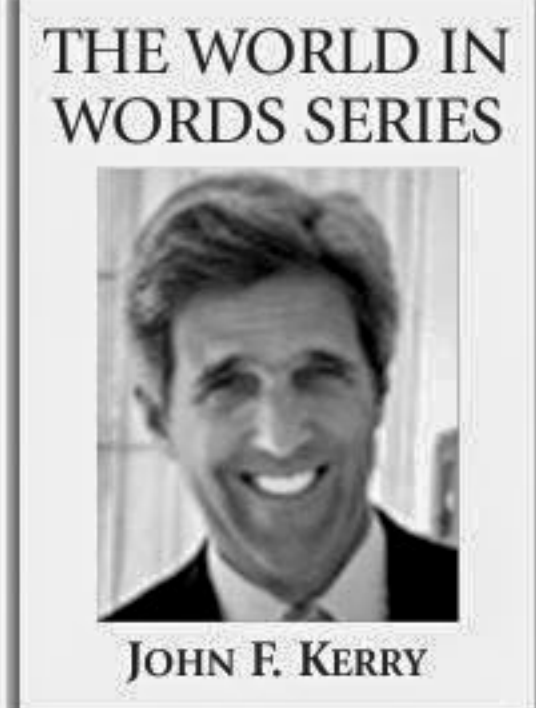
A dialogue will be successful only if our politicians bring their agreements to the table, leaving their differences at the door.

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## PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

# Challenging disorder



**THE WORLD IN WORDS SERIES**  
grown both stronger and more expansive, so has democracy, prosperity, and stability in Europe, the United States, and around the globe.

But, though the transatlantic relationship today is as strong and as critical as ever, there is no question that we are in the midst of a defining moment for our partnership. We are facing multiple tests, two of which are especially worthy of attention, because they test international law, multilateral mechanisms, and the global order that we have spent the last 70 years working to build and maintain.

The first test is obviously Ukraine, where Russia has endangered the security landscape of Eastern and Central Europe, first through its illegal occupation of Crimea and now through its overt and brazen effort to destabilise eastern Ukraine.

This challenge recently led me back to Kyiv to meet with President Petro Poroshenko, Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, and Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin, while German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande visited Kyiv and then Moscow in pursuit of a plan to de-escalate the situation. We all agree that military force will not end this challenge -- diplomacy will.

But the longer it takes, the more the world will have no choice but to raise the costs to Russia and its proxies. The US, France, Germany, and our allies and partners will stand together in support of Ukraine and in defense of the fundamental principle that international borders must not be changed by force, in Europe or anywhere else. There is no division among us whatsoever on this fundamental conviction.

The second major test is the rise of violent extremism. ISIS's new video showing the brutal immolation of a captured Jordanian pilot represented a new low in depravity. And last week, the United Nations reported what so many already knew: that this evil group crucifies children, buries them alive, and uses mentally disabled young people as suicide bombers.

ISIS is not alone among extremists. Last month, Pakistani officials showed me time-stamped photos of the Army Public School in Peshawar before and after the Taliban killed 145 people (including 132 children) in December. The school's assembly hall, filled with students sitting attentively in their chairs, was transformed into a death chamber -- blood, broken eyeglasses, scattered textbooks, torn jackets, and lifeless young bodies. The school's principal tried to save her students. When challenged by the murderers, she pointed to the children and said: "I am their mother." Those were her last words.

The world cannot and will not wilt in the face of such extremism, wherever it exists, whether in the Sahel, Nigeria,

Iraq, or Syria. Today, the international coalition fighting ISIS has grown to more than 60 active members. Since September, we have retaken 700 square kilometers of territory. We have deprived the group of the use -- and resulting revenues -- of 200 oil and gas facilities. We have disrupted its command structure, undermined its propaganda, taken out half of its senior leadership, squeezed its financing, damaged its supply networks, and dispersed its personnel.

Consider the case of Kobani, on Syria's border with Turkey, which was threatened with annihilation after ISIS captured more than 300 nearby Kurdish villages. The militants already controlled large swaths of the city itself, and both they and the world's media expected an easy victory. But, thanks to diplomatic cooperation among coalition partners, targeted air strikes, and on-the-ground support from Iraqi Kurdish forces, the militants were driven out, after losing roughly a thousand fighters.

But defeating ISIS is only the beginning. The fight against violent extremists will not be decided on the battlefield alone. It will be decided in classrooms, workplaces, houses of worship, community centers, urban street corners, and halls of government. And it will be decided by the success of our efforts to stop terrorist recruitment; address the intolerance, economic hopelessness, and exclusion that help create vacuums which extremism fills; and create credible, visible, and empowering alternatives to violent extremism in countries where it is prevalent.

In recent years, it has been fashionable to look at challenges like these and pontificate that the international system is somehow unraveling. I strongly disagree. In fact, I see the opposite. I see countries working together to negotiate new and far-reaching trade pacts, covering some 70% of global GDP. I see the world working together to end the Ebola pandemic. I see work to achieve a peaceful resolution to the threat posed by Iran's nuclear programme. I see cooperation to reach an ambitious global agreement on climate change, and to curb the strife in places like the Central African Republic, Colombia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Yes, these are challenging times. But I see countries around the world reducing extreme poverty, improving maternal healthcare, aiding child nutrition, expanding access to primary education, and increasing life expectancy. More people have attained -- or are reaching for -- prosperity than at any time in history, and, despite the threat that violent extremism poses, the percentage of people who die violently has reached a low for the modern era. All of this has happened or is happening because of the strength of the international order. We just need to help bring that reality to the places where today it feels a million miles away.

We are fortunate to be the descendants of innovators, of doers, of people who overcame slavery, plagues, depressions, global wars, and totalitarianism -- people who were utterly unafraid of great challenges and were most effective when put to the test.

Now it is our turn. The tests that we face today compel us to prepare and to plan, to unite, and to defend our collective future from the atavistic paranoia of terrorists and thugs. The future still belongs to the universal values of civility, reason, and the rule of law.

The writer, former US Senator from Massachusetts and Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, is US Secretary of State. This commentary was adapted from a speech delivered at this year's Munich Security Conference.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Enact laws to stop violence

Calling strike, or hartal is the democratic right of a political party. But it should be done in a peaceful manner. Similarly, to observe or not to observe a strike is also the democratic right of every citizen. Nobody can force anyone to support or not to support these political programmes.

The ongoing hartal-blockade has forced ordinary people to pay the price. Many have been killed and wounded, properties have been damaged. I think the responsibility for these losses lies with the political party or group who calls strike, blockade or hartal. Hence, they should compensate for the damage. We urge the government to enact laws regarding this so that the political parties become more cautious before declaring any political programme.

**SD Alam**  
Motijheel, Dhaka

### Few points to observe

After reading the letter of Scott Elliott 'Power is their ultimate goal' published in *The Daily Star* on February 8, 2015, I have to write a few words because the writer seems unaware of many facts prevailing in our country which cannot be compared with India and Sri Lanka.

There was a violent agitation by Awami League and its allies for a caretaker government to conduct the general election and on the face of it, the then BNP government brought the bill in the parliament and passed it. After that a number of elections were held and people accepted those. But suddenly Awami League government abolished it without consulting the opposition, may be they got a hunch that they may be defeated if the election is held under a neutral government.

Mr. Scott Elliott mentioned about the opposition winning the mayoral elections but those cannot be compared with the general election in which power is transferred from one party to another.

We wait five years to cast our votes, but alas! We were deprived of our rights as Awami League came to power in a strange way for which the people are suffering.

**Nur Jahan**  
Chittagong