

Budgetary allocation for people with disabilities

It should be revisited and enhanced

JATIYA Pratibandi Forum (JPF), in a press conference on Sunday, highlighted that there has not been any significant allocation for development of people with disabilities in the national budget, despite assurances earlier from the Finance Minister himself that several ministries would be allocated specific budgets for mainstreaming people with disabilities. Small allowances provided through the social welfare ministry is simply not enough to address the multifaceted problems faced by people with disabilities. With an estimated 16 million people in Bangladesh living with disability with insufficient state support, excluded from mainstream society, we implore the government to revisit the proposed budget and allocate the promised amount to concerned ministries.

Muhith, at a views-exchange meeting with JPF representatives on May 11, had pledged to allocate the money to a few ministries including education, local government, health and women and children affairs so as to enable people with disabilities to be integrated into society. As an Ain O Salish Kendra research notes, currently, only four percent of children with disabilities have access to education in any form; public health centres remain inaccessible to people with disabilities, and there are inadequate disabled related services in the country, such as early identification, aids and appliances, educational or therapeutic services or vocational rehabilitation. In addition, they are denied the same rights, freedoms and quality of life as other citizens of this country, with their freedom of movement severely restricted.

Under these circumstances, it is imperative that the different ministries work together to integrate people with disabilities, providing them with education, skill development training and other services that enable them to be active members of society.

How to communicate better with people

Modi's visit leaves a message

HERE is an example of how to keep public and journalists better informed. Indian PM Narendra Modi, even before his arrival in Dhaka, had tweeted a message as to how enthusiastic and delighted he was to be visiting Bangladesh. Since then he had been tweeting and posting photographs on Facebook, communicating with his people and the Bangladeshis till the very end.

Indian External Affairs Ministry, for its part, on a real time basis kept briefing their newsmen and promptly posting important documents on the website. Both the 22 deals signed between the two countries as well as the joint statement issued at the conclusion of the visit were made available on the Indian External Affairs Ministry official website and twitter account in no time.

By contrast our journalists were not served with daily briefings and faced difficulty to get any authentic news; consequently, the public too were starved of information. More importantly inordinate delays were made in posting valuable documents.

If our newsmen had to turn to Indian sources for valuable information and document, what account do our authorities give of themselves as responsible communicators at this age of digital communication? There is a lesson to learn from Modi's visit, to be sure.

India has achieved its strategic aim – have we?

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

Everybody in Bangladesh was ecstatic with the LBA which was long overdue and one can say with certainty that were the Awami League not in power, the LBA in its final form may have taken many more years to come our way. Equally true is the fact that had there not been a strong government in the centre, and without Mr. Modi's persuasive power with the other direct stake holders in India, the conclusion of the long outstanding issue would not have eventuated even now.

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A very wise man had said, "To say nothing, especially when speaking, is half the art of diplomacy." To that one might add -- to repeat the old words on a long-standing

but pressing issue without committing anything is the full art of diplomacy. Never has one heard so little being said in so many words as was by the visiting Indian Prime Minister during the two occasions he had to address the people of Bangladesh during his short visit to our country.

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The Teesta deal, scuttled by Mamata's obduracy in 2011, continues to remain hostage to the politics of Paschim Banga in spite of what Mr. Modi would have us believe -- that river waters are not matter of politics. And when he said at the very fag end of the speech on June 6 that he was confident, "with the support of the state governments in India, we can reach a fair solution on Teesta and Feni Rivers", he was only reaffirming our worry.

One had taken heart from the fact that Mamata would be a part of the Modi delegation. And although that was conditional on the Teesta not being on the agenda of talks, we were hoping that Mr. Modi might spring a surprise. Mamata's condition was met in full. The Bangladesh Prime Minister made no direct reference to Teesta, but only to the sharing of all the 54 common rivers. It is surprising that an issue whose framework for solution had been all but worked out in 2011 before the visit of the then Indian Prime Minister Mr. Manmohan Singh, and which did not happen due to the intransigence of one person, should merit only a passing reference in the comments of the two prime ministers. But then quite a few of our talk-show masters had warned us not to be so selective but be more open minded, suggesting that we should, for the time being, remain happy with the LBA and with the bright prospect that connectivity has in store for us.

Teesta will happen, as our Foreign Affairs Advisor and other optimists aver, when that might be is the question. But only Mamata, whose stunts we are not

new to, has the key to the problem. "Our rivers should nurture our relationship, not become a source of discord" are very rhapsodic thoughts that Mr. Modi had expressed; and he wants us to have faith in him. Given the experience with LBA, we have to be optimistic because, "It does not seem to be much use to be anything else."

Connectivity is a euphemism for transit and transshipment. It will certainly help integrate the region, but for India the main compulsion was of surface links, shorter and less hazardous, with its northeast. And if Bangladesh is India-locked it cannot be lost upon India that the Indian northeast is Bangladesh-locked. India's foreign policy is driven by its national interest, as it should be, the most important adjunct of which is its national security. Without a prosperous and developed northeast, the simmering problems will continue to fester. And development can be enhanced by speedy movement of goods between the western and eastern parts of India. And that movement through Bangladesh remains the only shorter and cheaper option. The same logic applies to the use of the two ports of Bangladesh. An agreement in this regard was to have been signed in 2011 but for the aborted Teesta deal. But this time we have given the use of ports without Teesta.

Nobody can contest that India should be afforded these facilities, because a developed Seven Sisters will ultimately be to our benefit. The question is, these being our strategic assets, what economic advantage can we derive from allowing India the benefits of roads and port

facilities, apart from the fact that it will reduce freight charges (for goods coming in to Bangladesh through ports, but most of the trade between the two countries occurs through land)?

Apart from the earnings from the use of our facilities, what is equally important is whether Bangladesh will be adequately compensated for the loss of its exports to the Indian northeast which will be caused by the transit and transshipment facility offered to India. Coastal shipping may boost bilateral trade but will it help offset the trade imbalance? Allowing use of our infrastructure is one way of offsetting our huge trade deficit with India, if appropriate charges are levied for the use of those facilities. Surely India can share a part of its savings that will accrue from avoiding the long and tortuous route that will be reduced to third of its present distance, between its western and eastern parts.

It is for the economic security of the northeast that India has sought and got what it had wanted from Bangladesh and thus achieved one of its strategic objectives. The question is, how much have we ensured that our long term economic and strategic interests are met?

What we have so far witnessed is India asserting its self-interest only in any bilateral negotiation. We hope that in future this approach will give way to the policy of enlightened self-interest in dealing with its neighbours.

The writer is Editor, Op-Ed and Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

A surprise Kurdish win



SYED MANSUR
HASHIM

AN unexpected victory by the Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) in the Turkish elections; in fact, the HDP leadership itself seems somewhat taken aback by this surprising turn of events. Indeed, a recent edition of The Economist carried a piece where it predicted the ruling AKP to win. The AKP has lost

its majority in parliament, first time in 13 years. That said Tayyip Erdogan's party has won 255 seats that leaves it short of 21 seats to form a majority government. Although party insiders have told the press that the AKP will not form a coalition, and rather let a minority government take power hoping that it fails to govern leading up to an early election. Whatever may be the case, the latest polls have established one basic fact and that is that the polls remain free and fair.

So, what went wrong? Could it have anything to do with the unbridled nationalistic fervour of the AKP in the run up to the elections? Critics have long pointed out that Mr. Edogan's attempts to portray his opponents as stooges of the West appear to have backfired. The merry use of words like the "crusader" and "jewish lobbies" to undermine Turkey's one national party appear to have run out of steam. The bombing of a HDP rally in Diyarbakir killing two and wounding hundreds of people did little to dampen that party's win, which took around 80 seats. Edogan's efforts to amend the country's constitution to create a super-presidency with wide ranging executive powers received lukewarm support among the electorate.

Fear of an all-powerful president is something that is more common in dictatorships rather than democracies and that was yet another nail in the coffin for the AKP. The general sidelining of the Kurds in Turkey politically has not served the AKP well. While aiming to play a greater role in the region, Mr. Edogan was loathe to support Kurds against the IS since his party is opposed to any notion of a free Kurdish state, which would inevitably involve Turkish territory.

HDP's campaign on the other hand focused on defending rights of all those groups that felt they were going to be marginalised by a two-thirds win by the AKP -- a win that would enable Edogan to bring about constitutional changes, particularly endorsing his vision of a supreme Presidency with sweeping powers. The HDP was successful in appealing to women, the ethnic minorities (other than Kurds) to the transgendered and bisexual, lesbian and gay



A supporter of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party holds a flag in Diyarbakir, Turkey, after elections on June 7.

communities, all of whom had a lot to fear from an overwhelming AKP win.

As pointed out in a recent article in *The Guardian* titled 'Turkey election: ruling party loses majority as pro-Kurdish HDP gains seats': The HDP success marked a sea-change likely to have a big impact on national politics. Shackled by the high threshold, pro-Kurdish candidates had previously run as independents in single seats to try to beat the 10% party barrier. But the HDP also successfully sought to reach beyond Turkey's roughly 20% Kurdish population, attempting to woo centre-left and secular voters disillusioned with Erdogan. "The reason the HDP has won this many votes is because it has not excluded any members of this country, unlike our current rulers," said 25-year-old Siar Senci. "It has embraced all languages, all ethnicities and members of all faiths and promised them freedom."

At the end of the day, there are lessons to be learnt here. The seeds of secularism sown by Kemal Ataturk, by the founding father of modern Turkey appear to have produced generations of offspring who appear to value a system that separates the State from religion. Today's Turkey is a vibrant nation where diversity in race, creed and lifestyle are tolerated. There is no

denying the fact that Mr. Edogan has done wonders for the economy in his 13 year stint. Yet somewhere down the line, changes seem to have crept in his leadership style. Opposition groups have been bullied into silence, freedom of the press challenged with the imprisonment of editors resulting in Turkey plummeting to No. 149 out of 180 countries for press freedom, just above Russia and Venezuela (according to a survey by Reporters Without Borders). The clampdown on the judiciary when investigations on the inner coterie of AKP's corruption surfaced were all indicative of a more authoritative style of governance -- something that seemed oddly out of place in a democratic country.

There is no reason to treat the AKP as a spent force. It won over 40 per cent of the vote and can be re-elected to power in a future election in the event it does not opt for a coalition government. What is hoped of course is that party will introspect on where it went wrong with its voter base as opposed to blaming everything on outside influences. At the end of the day, the AKP has no one else to blame but itself for the disappointment at the polls.

The writer is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

COMMENTS

"Dawn of a new era"
(June 7, 2015)

Alva Hossain

The deals should be disclosed to the public.

Tarek Mollah

LBA is not only benefiting Bangladesh, it is also mutually relieving both countries' citizens residing in each other's enclaves. However, transit, corridor and other trade facilities will hardly bridge the trade gap; solve the issue of cross border killings by BSE, trafficking and other malicious activities that have caused irreversible damage and cost many lives.

Eye Wash

Hoping for a sustainable and fair neighbourly relationship with India.

Enayet Mowla

Real progress has been made after decades of waiting. Thank you PM Modi!

Tasnuha Afroze Runa

Kindly implement these agreements quickly.

Anwar Hossain

We need to keep an eye on how much we benefit from this visit. Let's just wait and see.

Naushad Haque

I hope all deals, agreements and projects will be implemented quickly and effectively.

"Oh, Teesta!"

(June 6, 2015)

Lal Shobuz Potaka

Teesta treaty must be given due importance; rivers are the lifeline of Bangladesh.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Junior Climate Champions 2014

Recently the award giving ceremony of Junior Climate Champions (JCC) 2014 was held at Bangla Academy. JCC is an initiative taken to create awareness among high school students about adverse climate changes. This is indeed an excellent platform to nurture and groom students and to make them aware about the environment.

Therefore I extend my gratitude to both The Daily Star and HSBC for arranging such an inspiring competition for the students. Nafis Nihal Ferdaus Anandaniketan School Sylhet



PHOTO: STAR

International Day for Biological Diversity

The International Day for Biological Diversity 2015 was observed on May 22 under the auspices of the United Nations. Biological diversity or biodiversity is the term used to describe the variety of life found on earth and all of the natural processes. This includes ecosystems, genetic and cultural diversity and the connections between these and all species.

Biological Diversity Day is observed every year to create awareness about the importance of preserving biodiversity. This year's theme of the day is 'Biodiversity for sustainable development'. It is our obligation to protect the biodiversity of our planet through protecting endangered plants and animal species. The cutting of trees must be stopped to sustain our ecosystem.

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