

Improving social indicators

Govt must narrow the gaps

WHILE Bangladesh has made significant progress in terms of improving social indicators such as a higher completion rate of primary education and access to drinking water, there are regional disparities in areas such as children's nutrition, access to sanitation and maternal healthcare. This has been revealed from the key findings of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2012-2013 conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS).

The study finds, for instance, that two out five children under the age of five to be stunted and three in every 10 to be underweight. Malnutrition in children from the poorest families is also quite high – 52.8 percent. There are, moreover, divisional disparities – poorer regions are more affected by malnutrition and stunting. Barisal, for example, has the highest proportion of stunted children while Khulna has the lowest. Similarly, Sylhet has the lowest rate of providing skilled birth attendants for deliveries while Khulna has the highest. Differences in the use of sanitation facilities are also significant between better off and poor households.

Although overall enrollment and completion rate in primary schools have increased, the survey has found that one in four children are not in primary school, with more boys going without any schooling than girls.

The BBS survey should help the government to identify and reach out to the more vulnerable regions of the country where families are poorer and deprived of basic rights to nutritious food, healthcare, education and proper sanitation, among others. The government's target to fulfill the MDG goals can only be realised if it can improve social indicators of all households and in all districts. Proper distribution of resources and vigorous programmes to address the gaps will help to smoothen out the inconsistencies in developmental efforts.

Substandard wheat for social safety schemes

Why must the poor be at the receiving end?

DESPITE concerns and criticisms from different quarters about the "substandard" quality of wheat imported from Brazil, the government is going ahead with its plans of distributing the wheat under different safety net schemes, such as Test Relief, Open Market Sales and Food for Work programmes. For instance, 500 tonnes of low-quality wheat was distributed for social safety net schemes meant for economically disadvantaged populations in Kushtia on Sunday, even though, a day earlier, ruling party lawmaker, Abdur Rouf, from Kushtia-4 constituency (Kumarkhali-Khoksa) had refused to store the imported wheat in warehouses, arguing that he had checked samples of grains and found it unfit for human consumption.

Of the 1.5 lakh tonnes of imported wheat -- which the Bangladesh Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR) itself has denoted as substandard -- one lakh tonne has been allocated for the poor. Are we to assume that the low-quality food grains, rejected by numerous quarters, are being pushed down the gullets of those who have little power, knowledge or choice to turn them down? The police have already refused the share allocated to them as rations, but who, if not the government, will take care of the interests of the poor?

The government report to the HC has claimed that the imported wheat is, in fact, edible since its quality is within the admissible parameters. However, given the scandal surrounding the import itself and amid apprehensions about attempts to cover up the incident, we must wait for the HC order on the subject of import of wheat.

EID FESTIVAL

The season of manmade disasters

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

THAT time is upon us again. Not just to witness people hitting markets for shopping, but also to see them leaving in droves for homes to see their dear ones. It is that time when we see the harrowing scenes of people hanging from rooftops of trains and pedestals, people standing in motor launches back to back like stacks of bamboos, or people packed into buses like potatoes in a sack. But these are not the only scenes that await us this season. In fact, we would be lucky if we were to see only these images.

Unfortunately there will be more shocking reports and scenes -- images of people getting trapped in water vessels, buses, and other transports and losing lives. They will be facing these inadvertently, not due to their fault, but the carelessness and sheer negligence of the people they entrusted their lives with. If the past is any guide, there will be motor launches that will capsize, buses that will collide or fall into ditches, and people who will fall like stones from train rooftops. There will be deaths and injuries, which perhaps could have been avoided.

Why do these accidents happen every time there's a festival? We do not need a body of experts or consultants, or a cabinet sub-committee to tell us the reasons. They are simple and cannot be overstated. People suffer in travels, by any means, not only because there are serious shortages of transports. They suffer because they are mismanaged, an artificial crisis of availability is created, and profiteers gang in to take advantage of people's needs that must be met within a specific period of time.

In the public sector this mismanagement has been proverbially orchestrated in train travels with conniving officials and in the private sector by profit seeking vehicle owners, in collusion with the regulatory agencies. People in desperate times seek desperate measures. They take these life threatening journeys in vehicles, some of which are indeed one-way tickets to hell, because they have no alternatives. They squeeze into trains, buses, and launches because they want to go home, to celebrate the festival with their loved ones. They pay whatever they are asked, they board vessels they are shown. No one ensures that the vessels or vehicles they board are fit to ply. No one ensures that they are not price-gouged.

Yet, every season people are assured that the regulatory agencies are at work to ensure the safety of vehicles or vessels for their travels. We are assured that trains will run on time, tickets are aplenty, buses will ply and not overcharge, and our launches will not capsize. But the reality is otherwise, it's déjà vu all over again.

According to a study conducted by the Accident



PHOTO: STAR

Research Centre (ARC) of BUET, road accidents claim on average 12,000 lives annually and lead to about 35,000 injuries in Bangladesh. Motor launch disasters took more than 4000 lives in the last thirty eight years. Road accidents happen not just because the roads are congested, but also because the operators are, in many cases, ill-trained, over-worked and the vehicles they ply are in states of disrepair. Launches capsize because they are not fit to operate, and are crammed beyond capacity.

All this points to the role of the regulatory agencies, including law enforcers, in preventing these disasters. Unfortunately, most observations on why these disasters happen directed attention to lax or ineffective regulation and supervision of the vehicles by the people entrusted with the tasks. To complicate matters, sometimes the nexus of transport owners with political parties and party officials, made enforcement of the regulations more difficult.

Accidents during festival times happen in all countries. But accidents in most other countries usually happen from carelessness of the vehicle operator. In cases where public transportation is involved, governments take serious actions holding to account those who are responsible, and take measures to prevent recurrence of such disasters. In our country, however, majority of the accidents occur because of a failure or inaction in our

regulatory and enforcement mechanism. All accidents invariably lead to formation of an enquiry committee, and reports that pile up somewhere in a filing cabinet. No discernible follow-up happens, and such disasters are endlessly repeated.

Accidents and transport disasters concern real human lives, real families. These are not just statistics that fill up an annual report. There have been many recommendations in the past from professional agencies, domestic and international, to manage these preventable disasters in a visible and effective way. In the long term these require improving our roads, waterways, ensuring safe plying of vehicles that have been properly vetted and strict enforcement of regulatory measures for all kinds of transports. But in the short term, can we expect to see some visible improvement to allay the travails of holiday travellers? Could there be more supervision to end syndication of train tickets? Can a greater availability of buses and motor launches, and a more rigorous inspection of rickety transports and unsafe launches be ensured?

Politics should not be allowed to interfere with the safety of public life. With Eid holiday upon us, I sincerely hope our government means it when they talk about ensuring safe travels for people this season.

The writer is a political analyst and commentator.

BNP: Defiantly dismissive of its ailments

SHAHNOOR WAHID

ALL is not well with Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) at the moment and this is no big secret. On many occasions in the recent past it shot itself in the foot but instead of looking within they chose to blame others for it. Therefore, when some senior leaders of the party say that BNP will rise again from the ashes like the proverbial Phoenix, it clearly sends the message that it is down, if not totally out. But Khaleda Zia, the party chief, fails to come to terms with the ground reality and remains defiantly dismissive of the many ills that grip her party. The malaise afflicts the party from the grassroots level to the top; as such, Khaleda Zia's rhetoric of toppling the incumbent government through spearheading a people's movement blatantly belies the concerns of the senior leaders about the party's present unity and strength. Such dichotomy existing between the party chief and senior members becomes conspicuously discordant, especially at a time when many of the senior leaders of the party remain detached by choice from the central office and many of whom are reportedly in a state of incommunicado with the chief.

The reference to the Phoenix by the senior leaders rings almost apocalyptic in tone. What did they mean by it? Perhaps there is a late realisation among them that BNP has burnt itself out pretty badly during the three-month long blockade and the ensuing spate of murder and mayhem on the roads since January this year. They fought vengeful

yet unrewarding battles against the common people on the roads, killing them in mindless arson attacks on passenger vehicles. They killed common people—people who looked up to politicians for bringing peace and harmony in society so that they could work and change their lives.

When in conversation, many senior and mid-level leaders of BNP, on condition of anonymity, express their disapproval and frustration over the three-month long fiasco—the blood-

central command. To become an effective force, it has to become a cohesive whole under a band of experienced and dedicated generals led by a clever commander-in-chief.

Khaleda Zia's desperation to get a stronghold in politics becomes conspicuously manifest when she, instead of depending on the strength of the party and a well-crafted manifesto of governance, now seems to depend more on divine intervention to gain power. She told her followers the other day that

attention of young voters. Among the educated and enlightened present generation, there is little enthusiasm about late BNP founder Ziaur Rahman in comparison to the appeal of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the architect of Bangladesh. The party has not been able to offer anything exciting to the tech-savvy young generation in this technology driven world.

That BNP and its high commands remain oblivious to its present ailments became glaringly patent when Khaleda Zia went to attend the iftar party organised by her coalition partner, Jamaat. It undoubtedly brought a twist to the BNP saga. Political watchers of the country as well as many senior party members were under the impression that the top leadership of the two parties were slowly but steadily drifting apart. They are now busy trying to deduce what kind of message Khaleda Zia wanted to send across by attending the iftar party. Is she trying to say that the alliance is as strong as ever? Or is it just a courtesy call to say hello to a one time strong ally? Political pundits say that she gained no political mileage by attending the iftar party.

It appears from the open as well as passive opinions of activists and followers at different tiers of the party that they are not happy with the way BNP is being run. They want it to rise again from the ashes and become a force worth reckoning. But they have no idea how that will happen. It seems the top leadership in BNP will have to face tough challenges from within after Eid.

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letting frenzy. Khaleda Zia's bunkering down in her office for three months is not considered by many as the best political strategy.

It appears BNP is being run on an ad hoc basis by some lone rangers. They pop up from here and there and release some statements in the name of the party chief. But they can hardly send ripples through the still water. It only proves the point that a political party cannot be run properly and effectively by some lone fighters in the absence of a

everywhere, everyone was praying for the end of the present government and therefore its days are numbered! Well, there is no harm in calling for divine support but in politics one needs some clever moves and some tricks up the sleeve to win votes.

BNP will need to do a lot of homework to remain a political party worth the name. There is a veritable lack of ideology in the party to attract young followers. The present stock of leaders lacks the magnetism to draw the

COMMENTS

"NO ONE KILLED FELANI"

(July 5, 2015)

Yusuf Bhuiyan

Of course no one killed Felani; she was killed by herself and also hanged on the fence by herself!

"Police made arson attacks: Claims Khaleda"

(July 5, 2015)

Akm Wahiduzzaman

It's very much possible because in almost every incident of violence, the miscreants were able to flee the scene without any problem. We have also read in newspapers about arsonists having links with the ruling party.

Sabina Ahmed

Some arson cases of 2015 show the AL's connection to these horrible crimes.

a) On February 4, four BCL leaders were severely injured during making petrol bombs at Roopnagar, Narayanganj. Eye witnesses said that after the explosion, several BCL and AL leaders came to the scene and removed evidence of the explosion (Jugantor, 5th February).

b) On January 10 at 2:15 pm, three bombs exploded in front of the central AL office on Bangabandhu Avenue in Dhaka. An AL activist named Sadik was arrested red handed for this. However he was released later (Jugantor, 11th January).

So who's the criminal now?

Ibrahim Zaman

Please don't lie during the holy month of Ramadan.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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What kind of friendship is this?

We are shocked and disgusted by the news that Amiya Ghosh, the BSF Jawan who brutally shot and killed Felani, has been acquitted again of the charge although he admitted to the shooting.

How could the Indian government allow this?

In the last five months, 15 people have been killed, 8 tortured and 38 injured by the BSF. What sort of message is India sending us? Is this friendship?

Nur Jahan

Chittagong

Keeping the city clean

Being a resident of Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC), I have been witnessing some action programmes aimed at cleaning up the city. Measures have been taken to improve the drainage



system by cleaning the drains and clearing soil/dirt from the inlets of the covered drains. Some motivational programmes have been taken to make people conscious about the importance of cleanliness. Meanwhile, I have noticed that the soil removed

from the drain's inlets is kept in a heap by the side of the streets which ultimately moves to the inlets with rain water only to block the drains again.

To do things more efficiently, I would like to suggest the following:

-- All tasks relating to one job should be done at one time.

-- Community workers' teams should be formed to keep vigil so that people do not throw garbage/dirt to places other than the designated ones.

-- Motivational campaigns should be launched to create awareness about not throwing garbage to the ground from the apartments

-- Start imposing fines on those who spit or urinate where there are not supposed to.

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