

'Cessation of Hostilities' in Syria

Give peace a chance

DESPITE the many questions swirling around the 'cessation of hostilities', brokered by the US and Russia and backed by the UN Security Council, in Syria including whether a truce will eventually take hold, the plan offers a glimmer of hope. The development in the five-year-old war, that has seen more than a quarter of a million people killed, many more injured and millions displaced, could forestall a looming humanitarian crisis for a half million Syrians at risk of going hungry. And a truce allowing aid in besieged pockets of the country could put off a second wave of refugees to spill into Turkey and on to Europe. Still some way from a formal ceasefire, this may be the most realistic outcome diplomats were able to secure given the complexity of the Syrian conflict. Simply put, the focus is now on allowing humanitarian access to war ravaged cities and creating conditions for further negotiations to take place without the persistence of war that has ground to a stalemate, with the Assad regime, IS, an array of rebels and Kurdish fighters at each other's throat for years.

Time has come for Moscow and Tehran who, have bolstered the Assad regime, and the West, Turkey and some Gulf States, who back the rebel groups, to come to the realisation that the status quo is untenable for much longer. Peace can only be achieved by understanding among all stakeholders, not by outside force.

The international community, building on the pause to the bloodshed, should now exhaust all options to carve out a more formal ceasefire agreement.

Save us from the mosquito menace

Why the lack of timely action?

ONE wonders why the government service providers, particularly those that are supposed to provide the city dwellers with amenities and comfort, almost always fail to take appropriate actions at the appropriate time to meet their obligation. We are told that the anti mosquito drive of the Dhaka City South Corporation could not get off the ground due to lack of chemicals. The reason proffered is unconvincing.

When such operations are a regular yearly affair carried out in a particular season of the year, every year, that the corporations should have fallen short of the ingredient to work with, defies logic. When it is a matter of health of the people, such excuse is lamentable and inexcusable. But lack of chemicals is one aspect of the issue. How does one reconcile with the fact that most of the water bodies with stagnant water, and that is where mosquitoes breed, have not been cleaned up as yet. By the own admission of a responsible person in the Corporation, the cleaning drive by the corporation should have started long ago. Why did it not?

We are happy to note that a crash drive has been launched by both the city corporations which we hope will offer some relief to the city dwellers. But it will be our expectation that more attention would be paid in future to the timely procurement of essential ingredients to fight a menace which, if not contained timely, may assume serious epidemic proportions. Timely actions by the relevant departments must be ensured and failure do so must be dealt with severely.

Quick implementation for quick results



MACRO MIRROR

FAHMIDA KHATUN

WITH the fiscal year crossing its halfway mark, discussions on the implementation status of annual development programmes (ADP) come into the limelight. Recent figures of the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) of the Ministry of Planning reveal the slow pace of ADP implementation during the first seven months of FY2015-16. The current fiscal year's implementation rate of 28 percent utilisation of the allocated resources from July-January is the lowest in the last eight years. Of the total allocation of Tk. 100,997 crores for the current fiscal year, ministries and departments could spend TK 28,750 crores till January. Just the year before, the implementation rate during the same period was 32 percent of total allocation.

The cycle is of course the same every year. ADP implementation is slow during the first seven or eight months, the size is then readjusted downward and finally, the implementation process gets expedited towards the end of the fiscal year to fulfil the target. This year, as IMED shows, ten ministries and divisions are implementing some mega projects, namely the Padma Bridge, metro rail and nuclear power plant. But these ministries could spend only about 30 percent on average of their allocations. These are the ministries and divisions which have received 73 percent of the total ADP allocations in the current fiscal year. Obviously, when large projects in the large ministries are slow, the overall performance gets affected. But there are weaker performers too. Seventeen ministries and divisions spent less than 20 percent of their allocations.

Slow implementation is not a unique problem to only Bangladesh. This is the case with developing economies around the world. Lack of institutional capacity and other complexities, including the bureaucratic issues, make the full and timely implementation of development programmes difficult. Neighbouring India, with a larger size of the economy and a faster rate of growth, faces a similar problem. Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi is unhappy with the lethargic bureaucracy and the speed of implementation of development programmes. In March 2015, he launched a multi-purpose and multi-modal platform called Pro-Active Governance and Timely Implementation or PRAGATI. He interacts with the high officials through IT-based PRAGATI, which aims to address grievances of common people, and monitor and review important programmes and projects of both central and state governments. Mr. Modi directly communicates through video-conferencing with officials, and also reviews the progress of important infrastructural projects under important sectors such as road, railway, coal, power and energy, in an effort for quick delivery of government programmes. Success of this initiative is yet to be observed, but it would surely help improve

accountability and track the progress of the work.

In Bangladesh, attempts have been taken to improve our ADP performance through initiatives such as regular meetings with the project directors and mid-term review of implementation status. The concerned ministry is aware of challenges of ADP implementation, and has the willingness to remove associated bottlenecks. The Minister of Planning informed last year that project directors would be appointed through interviews, and they would be provided proper training so that they can deliver their tasks. He declared that projects which got extended once would not be extended for the second time, and a project director cannot be the project director of more than one project. The minister also directed to set implementation targets for every three months. These initiatives have not yet seen any results. For monitoring

appointment of project staff, land acquisition and procurement have always been concerns that impeded timely launching of projects. Because of this delay, the absorption capacity of projects reduces significantly. As there is an urge to fulfil the quantitative targets in a short time, the qualitative aspects of ADP get less attention, resulting in poor project outcome. Delay escalates the cost of projects. So the cost of services incurred by the people goes up, and the intended benefits are minimised. Public expenditures on development programmes also create avenues for private investment which is essential for job creation. If ADP is not fully implemented and their quality is not ensured, private investment will suffer.

After all, when implementation of the bulk of the development programmes are to be completed during



the implementation of priority projects, the Parliamentary Standing Committees and Public Accounts Committee could also take an active role.

But the success of any initiative towards improving ADP performance will require addressing the inherent problems of structural issues and implementation of reform measures. Time and again, the issue of improving institutional capacity of the line ministries to implement ADP, and of the IMED to effectively monitor and evaluate has been brought up. Implementation of projects is inextricably linked to the initiation of projects. The timeline of project implementation is affected by its delayed take-off. At the very early stage, problems related to completion of project proposal, setting expenditure targets and preparing a good feasibility study, take away a lot of time before the projects are approved. Tendering,

the last few months of the fiscal year within the same administrative structure and with the same level of capacity, one cannot guarantee the quality. Development projects, particularly the mega ones, involve huge investments. Efficient utilisation of such a large amount of money in a poor country such as Bangladesh is critical. But it is not only about spending the money and making structures. Implementation of development projects is also about achieving sustainable development objectives. The immediate objective of infrastructure building may be achieving higher growth, but the ultimate objective is to fulfil the need of every citizen of the country. This underscores the importance of an effective delivery mechanism of ADP.

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Political violence, "rational ignorance", and "political illiteracy" in Bangladesh

STRANGER THAN FICTION



TAJ HASHMI

THERE was yet another shocking headline in this daily (February 22): "Priest killed, devotee shot". Some "unknown" assailants raided a Hindu temple, slit the throat of a priest, and shot a devotee at Panchagarh in northern Bangladesh. This wasn't a random violent crime. Of late, there is nothing exceptional about premeditated attacks on minority communities or on people holding divergent views on religion and politics across the country.

Unfortunately, many Bangladeshis, first of all, don't consider such violence as politically motivated; and secondly, people are no longer that vocal against random or selective killing of people by criminals, terrorists, or law-enforcers unlike their predecessors, who wouldn't remain quiet at any violent attack on fellow citizens by anybody. This was the norm across Bangladesh up to the mid-1980s.

Although the average Bangladeshis still take interest in local and national politics, their interest is dwindling. Firstly, the bulk of Bangladeshis seem to have become thoroughly depoliticised; and secondly, they don't know whether politics has everything to do with violent attacks on minority communities, women, writers, journalists and others.

This apathy has nothing to do with the victims' religion, political views, gender, or profession. The number of unresolved killings and "disappearance" of people has desensitised people; and to some extent, this apathy may be attributed to what political scientists consider "political illiteracy" and "rational ignorance", which have devastating effects on political order, social cohesion, democracy, and freedom. Desensitised, apathetic, apolitical, and ignorant people throughout history have succumbed to absolute dictatorships in the name of religion, racist nationalism, or communism.

I'm going to elaborate these concepts with regard to the prevalent political culture of Bangladesh. Despite what

many Bangladeshis say about themselves as being one of the most politically conscious people in the world, the overwhelming majority of people in the country are actually among the least politically conscious, and disillusioned people anywhere. Most decent people in society have shunned politics altogether, and rogue and corrupt elements have filled in the void.

While in some cases, the least desirable people have become politicians and fabulously rich through the "profession of politics", hardly anybody ever raises this question, and nobody seems embarrassed about this weird state of affairs in the country! On the one hand, people's lack of interest in raising questions about people's illegitimately acquired wealth and power through politics is fear-induced; on the other, it also reflects people's political apathy or "rational ignorance", and "political illiteracy".

The understanding of "rational ignorance" and "political illiteracy" requires an understanding of what democracy and politics are all about. People everywhere learn about the intricacies of politics not only from textbooks, but also from enlightened politicians. What's Bangladesh today is no exception in this regard. People here used to learn about democracy, people's rights and responsibilities, and about politics in general from political stalwarts like A.K. Fazlul Huq, Maulana Bhashani, H.S. Suhrawardy, and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. There was a dialogue between leaders and their followers; they understood each other, and learnt a lot from each other too. Not anymore!

One of the most famous political scientists, Robert Dahl, believes everything in human relationship in power perspective is political. He thinks politics in a democratic setup is what "A" is getting from "B" to do what "A" wants through rational or manipulative persuasion, inducement, influence, authority and power. Since coercion and the physical force to back it up are integral to autocracy, democratic politics is all about effective participation, equal voting rights for all, and inclusiveness.

Thanks to the prevalence of unethical politics in Bangladesh, people in general don't trust politicians. In a society devoid

of mutual trust and respect, politics in Bangladesh is all about what "A" can get from "B" in the most unscrupulous way. Thus people here believe it's irrational to learn anything more about politics – especially from politicians – as they see no benefit in politics.

Renowned economist and political thinker Anthony Downs's theory of "rational ignorance" is very pertinent to our understanding of political apathy in Bangladesh. In his seminal work *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, he has defined political apathy as "rational ignorance" of people when they find the cost of learning something more expensive than any potential benefit from what they learn. This has consequences for the quality of decisions made by large numbers of people, during general elections, where the probability of any one vote changing the outcome is very small.

"Rational ignorance" perpetuates blind political support or loyalty among citizens to particular political parties, X, Y, or Z. The loyal voters are too lazy to investigate if the old policies of their party has changed, or not suitable in the present, or the new leaders are less honest and capable than their predecessors.

What famous German playwright Bertolt Brecht has defined as "political illiteracy", is the next most logical stage of a "rationally ignorant" nation. Despite the popular perception in Bangladesh, thanks to the manipulative and corrupt politicians, the overwhelming majority of people in the country are among the most "rationally ignorant", and "politically illiterate" in the world. The fatal combination of "rational ignorance" and "political illiteracy" has turned the brave nation of Bangladesh – which in our recent memory was a nation of freedom fighters – into a nation of supine underdogs and conformist subalterns.

It's time that politically conscious and patriotic elements in the country tell the people nothing is more important to know than the reality that everything that affects our living is political. We need to pay heed to what Brecht has said in regard to "political illiteracy":

"The worst illiterate is the political illiterate, he doesn't hear, doesn't speak, nor participates in the political

events. He doesn't know the cost of life, the price of the bean, of the fish, of the flour, of the rent, of the shoes and of the medicine, all depends on political decisions. The political illiterate is so stupid that he is proud and swells his chest saying that he hates politics. The imbecile doesn't know that, from his political ignorance is born the prostitute, the abandoned child, and the worst thieves of all, the bad politician, corrupted and flunky of the national and multinational companies."

Politically apathetic people lose their sense of belonging to a nation, or even to a bigger entity called humanity, which are larger than their families, clans and ethno-religious communities. They become apathetic self-seekers, most unwilling to do anything for collective benefits of people not related to them by blood or by mutually beneficial ties. German pastor Martin Niemöller has beautifully narrated what happens to perpetually apathetic people in totalitarian countries.

Niemöller – who spent seven years in Hitler's concentration camp – wrote a poem about the fate of politically indifferent people from his own experience: "First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out – Because I was not a Socialist.... Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out – Because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me."

Unless Bangladeshis shun political apathy, doctors fight for journalists and truck drivers; engineers defend garment factory workers' rights; professionals fight for equal opportunities for all; men fight for women, and women for men; rich fight for the poor, and poor for the rich, the country will remain politically inert, socially backward, and economically stagnant without any rule of law and equity. I believe political apathy is the mother of all evils in Bangladesh. There's hardly anything in life beyond politics. We're all related to each other in power perspective.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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PHOTO: STAR

Bangladesh beat UAE

In their second match in the Asia Cup, the Tigers played brilliantly against UAE beating them valiantly by 51 runs. It was nice to see Mahmudullah play a spectacular innings after a long time. I wholeheartedly congratulate the Tigers for their first victory in the tournament. Best wishes for the upcoming matches.

Akib Sumon
BAU

COMMENTS

"Students want raising of govt job age limit to 35"
(February 27, 2016)

Smiths Lorenz

It's a logical demand, so don't arrest them.