

Combating corruption

Corruption

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GOVERNMENTS of some developing countries suffering from deep layers of corruption have come to believe that if they cannot combat the debilitating malaise, they should at least hold seminars and international conferences on it with some leading public figures waxing eloquent.

Such conferences have a two-fold advantage: they impress the aid-weary donors that the host country is serious about fighting corruption; and enable their own people know that it is not confined to their country but afflicts many other countries as well. Funding for such conferences can be had from the donors.

Now following the three-day conference on the UN Convention Against Corruption in Islamabad in April this year, another three-day international conference has been held in Lahore. The focus this time is on corruption in South Asia which inhabits a fifth of the human race, with over 40 per cent of them living below the poverty-line of a dollar a day.

The emphasis now, they argue, is not on punishing the corrupt or recovering the loot. It is on prevention. And that is indeed proper as long as the corrupt are not allowed to get away with their loot and plunder while occupying high offices in the land. They say we need rule of law and good governance to stamp out corruption or prevent it. Along with them, we need an honest judicial system and an efficient police force. Without such robust and efficient institutions corruption cannot be checked.

The World Bank and the Asian Development Bank are willing to provide loans carrying almost zero interest for administrative and legal reforms. But it takes far more than money to bring about such reforms and sustain them. The political will has to be there to combat corruption. Otherwise it will again be a case of good money thrown after the bad, and yet no real reform.

Many of our economic and social ills stem from our political disorder. Dr. Kamal Hossain, former Bangladesh foreign minister, spoke on the first day of last week's conference on political corruption. The corrupt, he said, used their ill-gotten gains to contest the elections. And once in office they practised more corruption. And Bangladesh has been topping the list of the countries with utmost corruption for several years, according to Transparency International of Berlin. Bangladeshis are agitated by this adverse categorization but have done very little to change the conditions.

Political corruption is in plenty in Pakistan. In the political arena the choice is not between the corrupt and non-corrupt but between the less corrupt and more corrupt.

The mainsprings of corruption and causes of poverty vary from one country to another in South Asia. In Pakistan, a major cause of corruption and poverty is its enduring feudalism with its varied tentacles. The people in the rural areas of Pakistan, while suffering from the poverty that is excessive and causes helplessness, have to pay the local officials to get anything done by them. The officials expect payments to do their duty. If not paid, they deny the non-payers their

rights. The police is of no help to them, except at times. Their young women face the threat of molestation and kidnapping any time if the family elder is weak and helpless.

For sometime now there had been talk of no corruption at the top. Even if that is true or partially true, millions of people at the grass-roots level have to pay bribe to the officials far beyond their means for no fault of theirs but only to save their skin. According to feudal tradition you get nothing for nothing; you pay for any favour done to you or for your rights to be protected. People pay as the police can't protect them. In fact, if anyone in the rural areas contacts the police for help he has to pay an amount demanded by the cops.

The judiciary is not helpful either. The legal procedure is cumbersome and costly. And it takes ages for the judgment to be

are collected abroad. The money can't be brought to Pakistan for fear of exposure and forfeiture. They have acquired homes and villas there, bought shares and have shifted a large part of their earnings to tax havens around the world as it suits them. The mighty corrupt have no fear of exposure. The corrupt are large in number and feel very friendly with each other. The non-corrupt in such a merry crowd seem nitwits or clueless men.

In spite of all incentives given to overseas Pakistan the men who make earnings by exporting heroin or other drugs will not bring their money home through official channel. They will continue to use the Havala system to ensure non-detection. Large scale corruption is as old as Pakistan. It began with grabbing evacuee property by non-evacuees. Then came licence and permits for commercial imports, followed by contracts for large projects given in a partisan manner.

In developing countries, new projects funded by the public sector offer opportunities for corruption. The large inflow of foreign aid funds has created a new class of the rich or made the rich richer. The high taxation of the earlier years has promoted massive tax evasion and made the mercantile community far richer than it would have been. The top tax rates have come down steeply since then.

Then there were lands to be allotted. They were both agricultural lands as well plots for houses in the cities and towns. The plot-snatching still continues very lucratively. The Governor of Punjab Lt. Gen. Khalid Maqbool, who inaugurated last week's conference, has called for a holistic approach to corruption, and not surgical application of law. What is imperative is that the holistic approach is truly holistic and sustained until real results are produced. Picking persons on a partisan or political basis for trial will not do.

Dr. Kamal Hossain says that a study in India showed that 50 to 60 per cent of the persons contesting elections were feudal lords. And they did not believe in fair electoral practices. Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz has promised to improve the efficiency of the police and the judiciary, or at least eliminate the abuses on their part which are too many. Now that the official control over the economy is going to be less and less following increased privatization, corruption in the official sector should also become less. And if there is more transparency in government transactions, the opportunities for corruption will be further less.

There is no social sanction against the corrupt in Pakistan. In fact there is envy and a race to compete with the corrupt by the less corrupt. There is no or little exposure of the corrupt. The ultra-rich flaunt their wealth and material success which induces others to join the race.

This would not have happened if the corrupt had been punished and stripped of their ill-gotten wealth. There is a conviction the corrupt can get away with their wealth and more can join the race lucratively. So what we need is not more conferences on corruption but more effective means to punish the corrupt and effective steps to prevent corruption though rule of law, good governance and transparency in all major official transactions.

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delivered. The junior staff of the judiciary demand payment for any small work done. So the ordinary person involved in litigation has to either pay to the judicial staff or submit to the Jirga system, however unjust.

Another source of corruption is "selling" of jobs by influential persons. Members of parliament, including the Senate and the provincial assemblies were given a quota of government jobs to make money. Such jobs are sold at high prices. And those who buy these jobs practise corruption from day one and some of them are frank in admitting that they had become corrupt. Benazir Bhutto once said when she agreed to give a few jobs she hardly expected the deluge to come.

The wronged officers, whose juniors are promoted to higher offices, feel they are free to practise corruption to make up for the lost status. Former chief justice, Sajjad Ali Shah, in his book "Law Courts in a Glass House" narrates how judges are promoted totally out of turn. Such appointments are bound to demoralise the judiciary.

There are officials who argue that if a businessman can make a lot of money "out of my signature on a piece of paper", why should not they want a better life for themselves and their families? Some of them argue they would do anything to get the best education in the world for their children as the education system in the country is grossly deficient. And some of the officials have sent many children abroad for higher studies at a heavy cost.

Corruption has become so widespread the political system is pretty tolerant of the corrupt. Hence the new emphasis on prevention rather than on punishing the corrupt and covering the loot. The corrupt officials are extremely nice to their political bosses and very helpful to them. As a result, such ministers are not able to act against the corrupt officials.

For some years now the corrupt earnings