

ARMY CHIEF TO END CORRUPTION CULTURE

The Daily Star
12 July 2007

Army Chief Gen Moeen U Ahmed yesterday tabled a broad seven-point proposal for fighting corruption, which suggests simultaneous efforts for dismantling a 'culture of corruption' including a continuous anti-corruption drive, strengthening of law enforcement agencies, and the appointment of a parliamentary ombudsman.

Moeen hoped 'in the near future the interim government will introduce a Right to Information Act' and review the Official Secrets Act, so that 'corrupt officials cannot hide behind the cloak of secrecy and escape punishment'.

Moeen also said if one goes through the records, they will see the present government has already achieved what the previous governments could not in 36 years.

He made the comment when reporters asked him to evaluate the caretaker government's first six months in office, on his way out after speaking at the opening ceremony of a workshop for lawmakers on 'Curbing Corruption in South Asia', organised by the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption (Gopac) at Hotel Radisson in the capital.

The government is also using South Asian examples from Pakistan and India, alongside others, as 'useful guides' to design legal frameworks and to set up codes of conduct against corruption, said the general.

But he identified 'creating a moral high ground against corruption' as the biggest challenge, 'as many people have become accustomed to underhanded ways'.

For South Asia, he said the major areas of corruption have been major defence deals, development projects, election funding, politically sponsored criminality, abuse of power, money laundering, and human and drug trafficking.

Moeen also slated foreign donors saying, "Foreign aids or investments have political and strategic considerations attached to them rather than having the economic needs and policy reforms of the recipients as priority issues." He added, "In some cases, about 40 percent of these aids are spent by their consultants or experts."

In his seven-point proposal Gen Moeen said there must be a parliamentary ombudsman in order to strengthen parliamentary oversight of state activities, and to ensure that lawmakers do not only attend the parliament and tow the party lines, but also stand up and express their views to spark genuine debates.

He also recommended creation of a 'moral high ground against corruption', ensuring exemplary punishment for all guilty of corruption, establishment of an independent and neutral judiciary, socially boycotting the corruptionists, reorganisation of and a pay increase for the police force, and continuing 'regular' drives against corruption and its agents.

The General also said lack of transparency and accountability can largely be 'attributed to a lack of political will which is a direct consequence of the confrontational nature of politics'.

When an audience member suggested that individuals be prohibited from participating in elections once they are found guilty of corruption, Moeen said the Election Commission is looking into the possibility of it.

"You can bring as many reforms as you want, but if you don't educate your voters then they will elect the same people again," he said adding that voters should be informed of the consequences of voting for the corruptionists.

"We must educate voters so that parties cannot buy votes and voters do not have to sell their votes. A voter will have to know that by voting for the corrupt, they will be eating one very good meal, in exchange for going hungry for five years," he said.

Moeen said, "Every effort has to be undertaken for rectification and prevention and for building the system around a legal basis," a part of which, he said, will be the introduction of a Right to Information Bill.

Referring to a Transparency International Bangladesh report, Moeen said, "Right to information is limited [in Bangladesh] making it far more difficult to uncover corrupt activities and to follow through with prosecutions."

"I hope that in the near future the interim government will introduce a Right to Information Act of our own so that corrupt officials cannot hide behind the cloak of secrecy and escape punishment," he added.

Asked why a Right to Information Bill needs to be passed, Moeen said government officials abused the Official Secrets Act 1923 to cover-up corrupt practices. "The days of secrecy are over," he said adding that satellite pictures of even army bases are available on the internet nowadays.

"We have to revisit the Secrets Act and take proper action.... We need to define secrecy," Moeen said adding that greater regulations need to be worked out for ensuring transparency.

Moeen also credited the press freedoms behind much of the success of India's economy, and accountability in the United Nations.

The army chief said the Indian and Pakistani examples in fighting corruption will be a 'useful guide'. He cited Indian press freedom, establishment of Central Vigilance Commission for receiving general complaints on abuse of power there, and legal protections for government whistleblowers there to enhance transparency.

An audience member asked Moeen, why lessons have to be taken from the 'military government' of Pakistan, prompting Moeen to retort, "Let me reassure you, the army is not ruling the country. Anyone can think anything they want. As I said before, some people smell a rat in everything."

"But it is always good to take good examples, what is wrong with that?" he asked adding, "Regardless of their form of government, if a state is doing a good job, pick it up and implement it!"

"The important thing is for us to judge what is good for us, and then we can borrow good policies and plans from anywhere else in the world," he said.

Asked about the nature of an impending legislation on political funding, Moeen said no one previously asked the political parties to disclose their finances in Bangladesh's history, but now the 'people are asking about the source of the money, and if their accounts are audited or how they are using the money'.

He said the Election Commission (EC) will 'make it into a law' once it discusses the matter with political parties.

When former BNP lawmaker and ex-agriculture minister MK Anwar from the audience suggested that improvements in the education sector is an imperative for creating informed voters and to strengthen the moral fabric of the population, Moeen agreed, but added, "My question to you is, your party was in power for the last five years, why didn't they do anything? If you addressed these problems then the problem would be reduced by now."

However, Moeen went on to say that the education sector itself has become very corrupt and that the country is full of 'ghost schools and teachers'. He said in those ghost schools, teachers take their wages from the state but never attend classes and the money pumped to improve the schools never reaches the schools.

"No one has looked into this in the last 36 years, but it is better late than never, so let's come together to fight," he added.

We are also learning from the experiences in South Korea, Singapore and Malaysia.

Regarding the Anti-corruption Commission (ACC), he said the reconstituted commission had to fill the gaps in the faulty previous act and at the same time had to root out corrupt ACC officials who had been using the regulatory commission as a platform for their misuse of power.

Referring to Tuesday's comment by Moeen that even NGOs are 'apparently' corrupt, an audience member pointed out that NGOs have been the 'driving force' of 'positive elements' in the country.

Moeen replied, "Yes, NGOs are doing a good job, but, let's face it, some are making money. If they do a good job, let's congratulate them, but if they're doing bad things, I'll be the last person to congratulate them."

Speaker Jamiruddin Sircar opened the workshop and also presented a paper on corruption while Kuwaiti lawmaker Naser Al Sane, and the vice-chair of the Arab regional chapter of GOPAC also spoke on the occasion.

Source: <http://www.thedailystar.net/2007/07/12/d7071201022.htm>