

Let's have credible UP polls

Pay heed to army deployment request

EGO-PLAY is no longer an exclusive preserve, more precisely, a compulsive obsession, between the government and the opposition. Strange, unprecedented and unheard-of things are happening centring around Chief Election Commissioner's request for army deployment during UP polls. That it does not always take two to make an ego-play, one side being enough to stage it, has been exemplified. The issue of army deployment has given rise to an open conflict of opinion between the chief election commissioner and the government machinery. This has also generated an embarrassing dissension between field officials and ministry-level functionaries. There can be differing perceptions within the government of the law and order situation but for these to come out in this fashion is certainly something of a novelty. We would only like to interpret it in terms of the seriousness being reflected by all concerned to make sure that the UP elections are held neutrally, freely and fairly.

Whose views do we lend credence to regarding the congeniality or otherwise of the UP election environment? The obvious answer to that question would be: the men-on-the-spot. An overwhelming number of field level officials from various divisions, districts and sub-divisions in series of meetings with the chief election commissioner supported army deployment to ensure credible elections. They think this is needed in spite of the presence of Police, BDR and Ansar on election duties.

Even an apprehension has been expressed by some of field level functionaries that with the pull-out of the army from the joint operation, the old *satans* have started reappearing on the scene.

Although we are of the view that law and order will have to be basically maintained by the normal instrumentality of law enforcement, like the police and civil armed forces, elections are a different kettle of fish. If, in the opinion of the Election Commission, the army's services need to be utilised for ensuring credible polls such a view must prevail. We now have the latest assessment of the electoral atmospherics, just eight days before the polls, from the horse's mouth: district, sub-divisional and thana officials, who would act as returning or asst returning officers. The chief election commissioner had written a letter as early as on December 29 to the Prime Minister seeking army deployment in the light of his reading of the situation afield. It is her political secretary who apparently took it upon himself to respond negatively to the CEC's request one time too many. Then, not before January 9, did any formal 'no' to the CEC's overture come -- through a special cabinet meeting. Now, the CEC's views and those of the field-level officials have converged; so, what is holding the government from deploying the army?

The home minister and home secretary seemed to have improvised a compromise formula, saying that the army will be acting as 'striking force' on a short notice, if and where deemed necessary. Even helicopter will be on a stand-by. Why not deploy the army then? Except for saying it will be 'unprecedented' if army were deployed for the UP polls, the government has not bothered to explain in public its reasons for the negative response.

The elections are at least a seven-week-long exercise, involving polls to 4228 union parishads. Even though such polls are not held on party tickets they constitute by far the most important electoral process at the grassroots. Major political parties scramble for a weightage in the outcome of such polls. The UP polls have always served as a barometer of public confidence in political parties at the most extensive local levels. The best way to ensure this would be for the government to let the chief election commissioner exercise his constitutional obligations in the best possible manner.

However, one cannot help being convinced by the way the government has been turning a deaf ear to the CEC's repeated SOS calls that its reactions are politically motivated. Things can be done by executive force but to earn credibility in a test-case situation respect for public opinion would be crucial. The people and the media are baffled as to why, in the matter of elections, the opinion of the CEC is not holding good.

Our well-wishers



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

THE old timers will remember the story they were told when young. It does not make the rounds anymore, like many other stories, having been overtaken by television, video games, internet and other blessings of the electronic age. Visuals are in, stories are outdated. But this story has to be told to remind those who heard it long ago and for the benefit of those who are not likely to know it, ever. It is about a Brahmin who bought a goat from the market and was walking it home. On the way some crooks saw him and hatched a plan. One by one they sidled up beside the Brahmin and expressed shock that he should be taking a dog by a leash. When he heard the same expression of shock and surprise from the fourth man in quick succession the Brahmin started feeling embarrassed and became doubtful about the creature that was following him. Eventually, he let it go. The four rogues had a feast that day having hoodwinked the gullible Brahmin.

The people who are coming from abroad to advise us to export gas without further delay are not rogues. They are important persons known for their ranks and many achievements in their respective areas. But like the rogues in the story they come in the guise of well-wishers. The strategy is also the same. They have come one after another without raising any suspicion about a concerted plan to persuade Bangladesh to change her mind on gas export. It is a modern version of the psychological assault resorted to by

the four unsavoury characters in the story. For them the reward may not be a feast but those who are sending them will take care of that suitably in recognition of the services rendered.

The first to try talking us out of our resolve to hold on to the only mineral resource we have was, of course, the man who is now one heart beat away from the White House, Dick Cheney. As the senior executive of the oil company that employed him, he made frequent visits to Bangladesh to take stock of

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was so ecstatic that he publicly welcomed him through a newspaper article. But this being beside the point let us ask: what was the mission of Kenneth Arrow in Dhaka? It was ostensibly about sustainable development, the other side of environmental concern. But lo and behold! Before long he was talking about gas and the desirability of exporting it. Why would a Nobel laureate be interested all on a sudden in gas export by Bangladesh? Because the oil lobby wanted him to be, that is why. Nobel laureates

signals to the starry-eyed beneficiaries ('stakeholders', is the currently fashionable jargon) he makes it plain that instead of going through the beaten track, Earth Institute (post-modernists beware!) does not seek to treat soil depletion, climate change, epidemic disease and social upheaval (euphemism for terrorism) as distinct phenomena. As the write up in *Time* magazine mentions, "the 800 scientists of the Institute (it is multi-disciplinary, remember?) study the links among such problems and work to translate

(while being steamrolled!). Use it and develop it -- it is very important to generate power and boost export". Now that sounds like the words of an experienced well-wisher. All the more endearing, because he was giving his advice free, with no consultancy fee attached (he is of course already paid by, ah! well, you know by whom).

It is obvious that we have reached a stage in this alternately blunt and subliminal persuasion where gas can no longer be kept hanging fire, literally and figuratively. We have to take a decision soon to put an end to this interminable coaxing and cajoling by people who must be at a loss working out their opportunity cost (what they would be earning elsewhere if they were not on this mission in Bangladesh). More importantly, decision will be forced on us by default and we would be no better off than the poor Brahmin in the story. It, therefore, makes immense sense to have our wit about and calculation ready for an homegrown decision that promotes both short and long run interests. The overriding consideration should be to get the maximum out of a non-renewable natural resource that has multiple uses. There is a basis for taking the decision objectively now. The Gas Utilization Committee's recommendations appear sensible and sound. But before a decision is taken, the report should be made available to cross-section of the people and their opinions should be invited through mail, personal interviews and, of course, round table conferences, so beloved these days. Remember what Jeff Sachs said on Monday: "what is important is to do things transparently". Now, these are the words of a real well-wisher. Can't say if he had his tongue in the cheek when the words were spoken.

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IN MY VIEW

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the gas reserve and prepare the ground for early export. His arrivals and departures in an executive jet was a regular fixture in Zia International Airport in the not too distant past. Election as Vice President left his mission unfinished but it was never out of steam. Joined by another member of oil industry's favourite club, Bush Jr. in the White House, Dick Cheney's mission to Bangladesh was not to be derailed.

But even before the Texan cowboy's conquest of the White House, through chicanery in Florida's vote counting, the oil lobby found a willing accomplice in Bill Clinton. He came to Bangladesh during his South Asian trip only for a day. In the tight schedule of that brief visit, he exhorted Bangladesh government to be ready and willing to export gas. When told that export would be feasible after ensuring reserve for fifty years' domestic requirement he argued that new energy technology would emerge within that period making gas less attractive or make it just another among many alterna-

tives. Bangladesh was suddenly being courted with all ardour by the greatest power in the world, like an earnest suitor. The effect produced was as flattering as it was confounding.

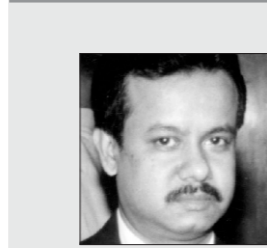
With the change of guard in the American administration, pressure on behalf of the oil companies came through institutions like World Bank, which together with the UN, has become the dignified errand boy of America. But the oil lobby is not so unimaginative as to use the same dramatic personae in this passion play. How about pressing into service a few heavy weight economists? -- they must have wondered. In spite of their devotion to a dismal science and their chronically lacklustre performances economists seem to be still enjoying indulgence of a wide swathe of educated people, if for nothing else, for their role in post facto analysis. So when Nobel laureate Kenneth Arrow came to Dhaka representing an environmental outfit, intellectuals, particularly economists, went head over heels. One of his former students

ates are also ordinary mortals and they need fund, well, for research, particularly sustainable development.

Hot on the heels of Kenneth Arrow (did he hit the bull's eye? He ought to have, with a name like that!) now comes Jeffrey Sachs. He is not a Nobel laureate yet, but will be one one of these days, what with the connection and network that he has built up so methodically. From the point of view of this lampoon, Jeffrey Sachs has one thing, and a very important thing, in common with Kenneth Arrow: he is also involved with sustainable development (beg your pardon, if you cannot sustain interest in this threadbare subject any longer). Among other things, he is the Director of Columbia University's Earth Institute (mother earth, open up!) and in that capacity "heads a huge, inter-disciplinary effort to keep poor countries build sustainable economies" (what a relief, these words in *Time* magazine's write-up dated January 6, 2003). But instead of sending wrong

their insights into actions. "Don't sit agape while reading this and don't hold your breath either. Translating insights into action is no child's play and it takes time, my dear. Meanwhile, Jeffrey Sachs comes on a whirlwind tour of Bangladesh to bedazzle and oblige his fellow travelling economists (of lesser ilk unfortunately) with generous photo ops and shoulder rubbing. But watch his words carefully. He, too, has spoken about opening up new competitive areas, including energy (where else can Bangladesh be competitive? RMG? Forget it, Sachs said in so many words in the roundtable). So in the strategy to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of Bangladesh energy has become a very important factor. Discarding the binary position of "on the one hand --", so favourite with economists, Sachs put it bluntly to his audience: "there is no sense in keeping energy under the ground for 20 years (20? Who reduced it from 50?), what is important is to do things transparently

What is in a name?



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

"WHAT is in a name?" was the question asked in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The answer was: "that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." If the same question is asked today, the answer will not be the same. Instead one would hear more of what Marshall McLuhan, the Canadian communications scholar, said in the early 60s, "The name of a man is a numbing blow from which he never recovers."

History bears out Marshall McLuhan. General Joseph Hooker was known as "Fighting Joe" in the Unionist Army during the American Civil War. Popular legend has it that once he had rounded up prostitutes in Washington area during the war. Henceforth, his name was permanently attached to the oldest profession on earth. The word hooker, today, means prostitutes in the American lexicon.

There are many more examples of names becoming common noun. Mirzafar is a synonym for treachery in Bengali language. Etymologically, it has been derived from the

name of Mir Zafar Ali Khan, who had conspired with the English and betrayed the last free Nawab of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Likewise, the term boycott comes from the name of the Irish land agent Capt. C. C. Boycott. He was asked by the Irish Land League in 1880 to reduce rents after a bad harvest, and when he refused the tenants avoided any communication with him.

Names are often evocation of bizarre human conditions. Narcissus was a youth in Greek myth, who

while traditional Chinese naming practices were very complex. Chinese males were given different names at various points in their lives, in addition to a surname and sometimes a generation name. In some instances, the Chinese used names to identify the generation of the bearer.

For the Africans, names were labels used for almost everything, which suited their fancy. Names describe the order in which siblings were born, for example, Mosi is "first

names. Who remembers Josif Vissarionovich Dzugashvili? He became famous as Stalin, the adopted name, which means, "steel" in Russian. Ernesto Guevara went down in history as Che". It means chum or buddy in Italian language.

Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh changed his name like a chameleon changes its colour. In his last days he was endearingly called Uncle Ho, but his birth name was Nguyen Sinh Cung, which was changed to Nguyen Tat

on them.

If name brings luck, it also brings misfortune. It is believed that the Pakistani soldiers executed a teacher of Dhaka University in 1971, because they had mistaken him for his namesake. A name can also be embarrassing, as the saying goes in Bengali aphorism, if of a blind child is called Lotus-eyed, or a dark-complexioned girl is called Snow-white. We shall not find too many people in today's world who would like to name their sons Adolf Hitler or

like tombstone is in death. Name is the existence of a man in absentia, the incorporeal persona that others carry of him with them. Name is the fragrance of man that is carried across the distance of time and space by the wind of familiarity. Name is the licence plate of a vehicle of flesh and bones that runs on the steam of blood and travels on the course of destiny from dust to dust.

Think of a man without a name, and it's hard to define his existence. He is reduced to one in many, just another bubble in the eternally churning ocean of life, a wild flower in the jungle that doesn't stand out. A man needs a name and a man needs a face, and unless one is put to another, he doesn't have an identity. John Keats had once written to Richard Woodhouse, "Apoet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence, because he has no identity; he is continually in for and filling some other body." Without a name, a person is simply one continuous strand of life that fills body after body. Name prevents that dilution, and gives man his personality.

If you remember Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, you would know what I mean. Identities often collide within one person and split his personality. It becomes difficult to recognise the night's man in the morning and vice versa, when only names come to the rescue of those who have to deal with it. Name matters in the end, and the rose smells as sweet as the name you call it.

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CROSS TALK

Name is the mark of a man in life like tombstone is in death. Name is the existence of a man in absentia, the incorporeal persona that others carry of him with them. Name is the fragrance of man that is carried across the distance of time and space by the wind of familiarity. Name is the licence plate of a vehicle of flesh and bones that runs on the steam of blood and travels on the course of destiny from dust to dust.

fell in love with his own reflection in the pool, and hence, narcissism entered psychoanalysis as a term, which means erotic gratification derived from admiration of one's own physical or mental attributes. The Bible tells the story of Judah, who had asked Onan to unite with his brother's widow to preserve his brother's line. Onan, however, wasted his seed on the ground whenever he had relations with his brother's widow. Onanism, henceforth, entered history as a term that stands for masturbation.

There is something interesting about the naming customs, which vary from people to people. Many Indonesians use just a single name,

born", Kunto is "third born", Nsonowa "seventh born", and Wasswa "first of twins". Traditional African names often reflect the circumstances at the time of birth. Mwanajuma is "Friday", Esi "Sunday", Khamisi "Thursday", and Wekesa "harvest time". Some African names describe the parents' reaction to the birth and others describe the newborn or its desired characteristics. Vocabulary words are also often used as given names. For example, Sefu means "sword" and Tau is "lion".

There are people who changed their names in the course of their lives, and are remembered by their nom de guerre or revolutionary

Thanh. In 1923 he took the name Nguyen Ai Quoc, meaning "Nguyen the Patriot", and two years later changed it to Ly Thuy. He adopted the name Ho Chi Minh or "the enlightened one" later in his life.

A very few people in the world know a former schoolteacher named Saloth Sar, but most people would quickly recognize Pol Pot, the butcher, who had ordered the death of millions of Cambodians. Ironically, Pol Pot is a name, which had no independent meaning, but was chosen because it was common enough among rural Cambodians (the Khmer). His name eventually pervaded the hearts of his countrymen for the horror he had unleashed

Benito Mussolini, because these are men, who never recovered from the numbing blows of their names.

What is in a name? If you ask that question today, the answer is that a rose smells as sweet as the name you call it. A name is to fame what fire is to glow, a sort of branding that creates the perception of a man to those who know him. Name tells if you are black, white, Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Jewish. Name tells if you are German, French, Dutch, Slav, Arab, urban or rustic. Name is the telltale sign of a man's personality, the *fascia signage* of an enterprise that walks, talks, dreams and thinks.

Name is the mark of a man in life

OPINION

Winter woes and insensitive authorities

OMAR KHASRU

THIS sort of miserable winter with bone curling chill comes once every five or six years. I suppose we should count our blessings that we do not have to face the nearly unbearable arctic misery every year. Thank goodness for that. Those of us, with the warmth of heavy winter attire and comfortable dwelling, feel cozy and yet complain and harangue about the cold perhaps should think about the street people, including women, children and old folks as well as the poor and the destitute, bereft of warm winter clothing, comfortable living or snugabode.

Let's face it and be candid, blunt and honest. Despite tall talks, grandiloquent verbosity, grandiose claims and elaborate plans by successive governments and excessive NGOs, this country is yet to make a noteworthy dent in poverty and attain a smidgen of success in poverty alleviation. The poor, the dispossessed and the deprived are currently and mostly bearing the brunt of winter miseries. Little bonfires lit in street corners, huddled masses and a longing for the sun

are testimony of this. The situation in the rural areas and in north Bengal must really be a lot worse, something the Dhaka elites and powers that be find difficult to comprehend. Nor do they particularly care. The Prime Minister distributed blankets to the poor and the homeless in the dead of night. Other ministers are seen on BTV News wrapping blankets around the underprivileged in their constituencies. These are all well and good. But the fact is these are at best token gestures, patchy, symbolic and anecdotal. These gestures do not make a whole lot of difference in the collective misery of the lot. These actions, frankly, do not amount to a hill of beans in greater scheme of things.

According to a recent CNN news item, about 500 people have died in the current cold wave. It is unfortunate but the truth of the matter is, in a poor, poorly governed and botched managed country like ours, people die for reasons that they do not need to in this day and age. It is true for infectious or untreated diseases, it is true for horrendous road and work related accidents, and it is equally true for unexpected bone chilling winter effects.

Could the government and the NGOs have done something about it? Absolutely, indubitably and for sure. How about providing shelters, as is the norm in cyclones and tidal waves in the coastal areas, in schools and government buildings, especially at night time in most affected areas such as the northern districts? The mercury in some areas in north Bengal dipped below 5 degree Celsius. Most schools have been in winter recess or have been shut down due to severe cold. In Sierra Leone, Bangladeshi peacekeeping soldiers have received tributes and accolades for building roads and shelters for people in the war ravaged country. As the army action to curb crime and terrorism was in progress, could the Army Engineering Core not be used to build temporary shelters for their own poor, homeless, utterly helpless and suffering compatriots?

What is the value of human life in this country? Will the government, rather than banging its empty and vacuous drum on state controlled media, appeal to the wealthy and privileged to assist the poor with food, clothing and shelter? Will the main opposition party, rather than

the drivel about senseless, and gratuitous destabilising mass movement to oust the government, indulge in the welfare task of helping the needy? Will they ingratiate themselves by good deeds rather than empty self serving fallacious words? And will the indoctrinated, sanctimonious and self-righteous, wrapped in a time warp inconsequential left wing parties, rather than phony moral outrage and tautological do good utterances get out of their metaphoric plush living rooms and provide much needed assistance to the distressed lot? And finally, will the NGOs, rather than bickering among themselves and playing a dirty power and influence peddling game in terms of a prim and proper hokey umbrella organisation (ADAB or not), get down and dirty to the nitty-gritty and utilise the bulging coffers to alleviate the misery, torment and hardship of the needy and provide solace, relief, hope and valuable gift of life? These are all rhetorical questions and most of us already know the answers.

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Discrimination against children with disabilities

JULIAN FRANCIS

ON 3 December every year, the International Day of Disabled Persons is observed around the world and a few days later, on 10 December, International Human Rights Day is celebrated. The two are linked in many ways as all over the world basic human rights continue to be denied to children and adults with disabilities.

Barely a month after these two days were observed in Bangladesh by the government as well as many NGOs, my attention has been drawn to a BSS news report on 6 January 2003 in which it says that the official textbook on Social Sciences, used by ninth and tenth grade pupils and approved by the National Curriculum and Text Book Board, contains inflammatory comments about children with disabilities. The textbook, which will, no doubt, influence the minds of many young people, should be

withdrawn immediately. What is written with respect to children with disabilities is both false as well as very damaging. The teaching of the textbook says that children with disabilities are likely to become criminals. At a time when educational experts around the world are encouraging 'inclusive education', here is a textbook encouraging discrimination and hatred and this very discrimination goes against the spirit of the Constitution of Bangladesh. Articles No. 15, 17 and 20 of the Constitution refer to every citizen's right to, for example, education, medical care, social security and work.

I am particularly angry to read news like this because my life has been enriched over the years by many friends in Bangladesh who have disabilities, people who have struggled through heart-breaking discrimination during their formative years but who are now holding down jobs, contributing much to society as a whole, and taking a full

part in their respective communities. My fury at reading this false teaching is much more because growing up and living with a brother and a son, both with severe learning disabilities, my life has been further enriched. Neither my brother nor my son has been able to work, but they have brought much joy and happiness to other family members and their peers.

Sweeping statements, which do not appear to have been checked by appropriate experts, can do untold damage to the minds of young people who read them in textbooks. Over 10 years ago, when I assisted in the writing of Bangladesh's National Disability Policy, I visited a number of government-run primary schools where an attempt was being made to integrate groups of children with hearing disabilities. At that time it was seen as a very progressive programme and had beneficial results on all the children, particularly on those children who did not

have disabilities. They learnt how to be more tolerant and less discriminatory. Now, it seems, all that good work is not regarded as valid any more.

Anywhere in the world, poverty can drive people to crime in order to survive but there is absolutely no evidence that children with physical or mental disabilities are more likely to grow up to be criminals than children who have no disabilities.

Children with disabilities need both understanding and facilities for their education and future life. They do not need the prejudices and teachings of a bygone era to turn society and their fellow pupils against them. I sincerely hope to hear an announcement very soon from the Ministry of Education and the National Curriculum and Text Book Board that this textbook has been withdrawn.

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