

Launch strike withdrawn Safety of passengers is at issue

THE launch owners have finally climbed down from their position that nothing short of an apology on the part of the government (for penalising a number of launches) was acceptable to them. The wildcat indefinite strike was withdrawn yesterday after the two sides managed to reach an understanding on how things will be run in future.

Nevertheless, a number of questions need to be answered to get at the bottom of the issue. The launch owners had said they would call off their strike provided the shipping secretary visited the Sadarghat terminal at 9am on Monday, examined papers of the launches put on the spot and should he find them in order publicly apologise to the media. We believe the launch owners were asking for too much.

They were not merely calling the shots and asking the government as represented by a secretary to a ministry what he should do but also choreographing the sequence in which he should bow down before the public. The owners' condescension knew no bound: since shipping minister Akbar Hossain had 'undermined their prestige' before the public by saying that 'many a launch plied without proper authorisation', they couldn't ask anything less than an apology by a secretary on finding the papers of the launches in question valid to defend their honour.

All of this stemmed from the fact that at the directive of the shipping minister, magistrates had started scrutinising documents of launches together with their loading of passengers and goods. Chagrined, the launch operators went for a sudden strike since August 12 calling, among other things, for the removal of the magistrate who found some launches on the wrong side of the law.

Basically, what were the issues here? Were the launch owners trying to settle scores with the minister, secretary or the IWT chief on a prestige issue revolving around a few launches? Or was it a move to scuttle government efforts at streamlining the inland water transport sector? Earlier on, the shipping ministry caved into the launch owners' pressure against the restrictions the former had proposed to impose on night-time movement of launches. Now, the government was sought to be brow-beaten in an extensive manner to keep off the corrective measures. This was atrocious.

We believe it is the launch owners and operators who should say 'sorry' to the public on two counts: first, because of hartial that subjected the people to great hardship; and secondly, because of the accidents galore which left a huge number of people dead.

So, the issue here is safety of thousands upon thousands of passengers duly ensured by scientifically manufactured river-crafts, trained up navigators and serangs and installation of safety devices like hydraulic steering and echosounders. There can be no compromise on the issue. We urge the government to stand firm in favour of safety to launch travellers.

Dhaka at risk

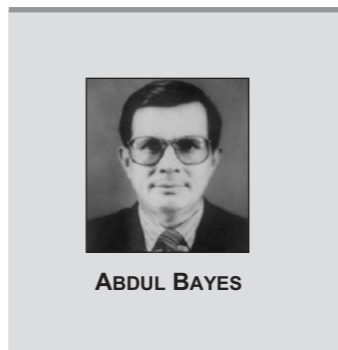
How we guarantee the safety of buildings?

WHENEVER there is an earthquake in any part of the country, mild or somewhat strong, serious concerns are expressed about the vulnerability of our capital city Dhaka. And now Dhaka being at the top of a UN-authored 'Earthquake Disaster Risk Index', the apprehension of an impending danger can only intensify. The reason for Dhaka being so damage-prone is something that has been talked about for a long time. In fact, the low standard of materials used in construction work in the capital came under severe criticism many a time before. But we would like to know -- what has been done to check such built-in faults.

There are laws, there are codes which are to be followed while constructing a building, but is there any effective mechanism to ensure that the construction companies complied with them? If they had been found with irregularities, then do we know whether they had been punished or whether any precautionary measures had been taken to ward off any recurrence. We want to know. Do those who are living in high-rise apartments in various parts of the city know how safe or unsafe their abodes are? Have the builders given them any safety guarantee? We want to know that, too.

Someone going to buy an apartment ought to know a few things. Though the estate agents usually mention in their promotion booklets that the buildings are foolproof, we don't know whether there is a mechanism in the government to authorise such claims. All these thoughts, all these questions crop up only because tales of malpractices and corruption plaguing the construction sector have often been heard. But seldom has anything been done to set things right. Let's have some concrete answers to the questions raised. As part of a tangible action-plan, we would like to see steps taken to strengthen flawed and weak buildings in Dhaka and Chittagong so as to minimise the risks of damage if, God forbidding, a strong earthquake strikes.

Netrakona-3 by-election must be fair and free



ABDUL BAYES

BY the time this write-up appears in the press the by-election of the constituency, called Netrakona-3, shall be in its full swing. It may be mentioned here that the seat fell vacant following the demise of Mr. Nurul Amin Talukdar who bagged it in the last general election by defeating an arch rival from Awami League, Mr. Jubed Ali. In a recent research article on Netrakona polls and its palliatives, Mr. Nazim Kamran Choudhury delved deep into the details of the election-related developments in that constituency over a decade or so (DS August 2, 2003). Appreciably, he relied on research to read the mind of the constituency which, I must admit, is rarely in evidence on the subject. But while one would, possibly, agree with him on most of the points that he made, his "faith" in the Election Commission (EC) as of now seems to be misplaced. Mr. Choudhury's benchmark banks on 2001 general election. Even without contesting his premise on the part played by the EC then (when more things were said to have moved around heaven and earth than possibly we could know), one could possibly ask what happened afterwards?

The last few 'minor' elections are pointers to the question posed. The Mayoral elections particularly that in Rajshahi bears no tall-order testimony to the triumph of the EC as well as its captain. The Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Mr. M.A. Sayed, allegedly, had to stay out of the office for few days. As we could watch on television, one officer of the EC assumed the all-powerful responsibility of feeding the press with the alleged "false" and "fabricated" facts. During that period, we remember, even the CEC made

some comments about the utter 'helplessness' of the Commission due to reasons quite known to the public. Even he hinted at how the government was not allowing EC to work at its will. As a result, the election was held in due time but every one knows well what happened then and who actually got people's mandate.

Mr. Nazim Kamran Choudhury has mentioned that the CEC in

three more minor cases. But arguably, those sporadic successes were more due to the inner conflicts of BNP rather than the neutrality of the EC itself. Again, for giving some credit on this count to the CEC, one should not take it as a leverage to do "something" in Netrakona by polls.

My main aim of writing this note is not to contest Mr. Choudhury but to confirm some of his conclusions. Two of his observations are worth

view is also in consort with democratic norms. The question is, would that happen?

I come first to the last remark. There is no reason why Awami League should not take the result in a relaxing mood provided the election is free and fair. Back in the mind an experience of "Magura" variety and of the last general elections where its candidates and supporters were hacked by army and police

opposition Awami League. Therefore, it is quite likely that in the case of a debacle, the party would raise complaints about 'non-neutrality of EC', 'rigging' etc. Besides, in the case of opposition parties in developing countries -- and especially in Bangladesh -- the word 'defeat' can rarely be found in their dictionary. But things roll on whether the opposition parties accept the verdict or not. In a few days, the opposition

since BNP-Jamaat alliance in power has got a vast majority in the parliament. Again, it would matter very little even in terms of the popularity in the country as a whole -- excepting the fact that it sends a wake up signal. But contrary to our contentions, "over enthusiasts" inside the government might think that the defeat might matter most as a point of prestige and therefore no stone should be left unturned to get it. They might also argue that any opposition to the "rigged" results could be severely dealt with by the government that holds a "brute" majority.

We hope critics do not win the race this time. The "Magura" nightmare should be the lesson for the government. That was historically a seat of Awami League and several elections proved that. But the then government attempted to rewrite the history by making every arrangement that would suit their candidate. Justice A. Rouf had to leave the station seeing that election was not being held by the EC but by the government. At last the government candidate won the seat but the government lost the power in the face of a people's movement that was mooted from the menace of Magura by election.

We therefore expect that both the EC and the government would lean on past experiences to take lessons from. It should be ensured that Ministers behave as per the rules of the EC, government party behaves as per the rules of the EC, government party behaves as per the norms of the democratic devices and the rule of law is applied across the board. The minority community should be allowed to vote freely without any fear. Equally, the opposition parties should also see that their activities do not fall outside the boundary of the EC rules and regulations. And finally, we would like to see that the CEC comments on the results or allegations, if there is any, but not an officer of EC.

We do not want to see another "Magura" type election. And we do not also want to see that crimes committed in a particular constituency costs a government dearly. We want democracy to survive. Both government and the EC have a role to play in realising our dream of a free and fair election.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics, Jahangirnagar University.

BENEATH THE SURFACE

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Magura by-election was forced to leave the station. This time, we mention, the CEC was 'forced' to leave the office. The periods are different but the common factor is that, on both occasions, the CECs were not allowed to act as per the rules of the constitution but were forced to fall upon the whims of the administration. The classic example in the history of Bangladesh elections, perhaps, is the *Sandip Pourashava* elections where the guns and the goons forced voters to stay out of the exercise and the election could not be held at all. What about the recently held UP election? So can be said about other elections in other organisations where EC is not involved but the attitude of the party in power and its followers towards free and fair election is very much in evidence. *Ipsa facto*, by and large, faith in the CEC has already started to fade. And also the hope that the present government could deliver the goods properly seems no more on the horizon. And it would be a Herculean task to regain the 'faith' unless some extraordinary steps are on board.

Of course, the critics of our arguments could point to the election of Narayanjan Municipality where the candidate from opposition Awami League defeated the ruling party backed candidate. And so in two or

three more minor cases. But arguably, those sporadic successes were more due to the inner conflicts of BNP rather than the neutrality of the EC itself. Again, for giving some credit on this count to the CEC, one should not take it as a leverage to do "something" in Netrakona by polls. My main aim of writing this note is not to contest Mr. Choudhury but to confirm some of his conclusions. Two of his observations are worth

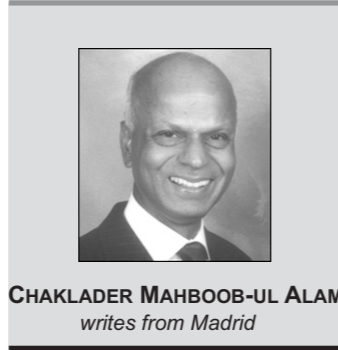
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Palestine : Hudna and the Road Map to peace



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM
writes from Madrid

IT was too good to be true. In the Middle East, peace is always an elusive matter. Yet for the last three months, there had been a kind of relative peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The number of total death fell dramatically. Israeli troops and tanks were withdrawn from some of the Palestinian towns and villages, some roads were opened to Palestinian traffic making life slightly easier for them, people on both sides of the border even looked somewhat relaxed. When at the insistence of Washington, the new position of a prime minister for the Palestinian Authority was created and Mahmoud Abbas, a quiet politician, came to occupy that position, very few expected that he would be able to persuade Hamas and Jihad Islamica to stop carrying out suicide bombings against Israel. But against all prognosis, the Palestinian prime minister succeeded in obtaining an agreement to a cease fire (Hudna, in Arabic) from these groups, provided Israel stopped targeted assassinations and military incursions. Some even thought that this time the peace process would be given a chance. Many hoped and prayed that this temporary lull would turn into a permanent peace. But alas, like a mid-summer night's dream, all this has now come to an abrupt end and I am not surprised.

Anyone who has covered this conflict for any length of time and has any knowledge of Sharon's

track record in politics will not be surprised either. Last week, the Israeli army in two separate incursions killed four Palestinians, two of them leaders of the Palestinian resistance. If Sharon thought that these targeted killings and incursions would go unanswered, he was mistaken. Within hours, the Palestinians carried out two suicide bombings sending a clear message that every Israeli terrorist action will produce a similar reaction from the Palestinian side. The Israeli action even provoked the

settlement network is not simply a few temporary outposts like those evacuated by the Israeli government in the past few months as a means of gaining some international support. It is a collection of small towns, industrial and commercial areas, schools and colleges, roads and public services. When one travels around the settlements, it seems they have put down roots for good." The Israeli government has not only not dismantled any of these settlements but also according to Ethan Bonner

Prof. John Dugard of the University of Leiden, Netherlands, "it (the Wall) is manifestly intended to create facts on the ground." If the wall were built along the Green Line (pre-1967 borders), one could accept Israel's rationale for building this wall, i.e., security. This wall, built on Palestinian territories, when finished, will be more than 650 kilometres long. It delves deep into Palestinian territories and snakes through the West Bank to include many Israeli settlements. The Palestinian villages and farmlands

Here lies the crunch of the issue. Sharon's strategy is to complete building the wall which will include many important settlements on the Israeli side of the Wall (thus, in effect annexing almost half of the occupied territories) and declare the Palestinian side of the Wall, which will be reduced to a rump as the Interim Palestinian state. Needless to say that he hopes this emaciated interim Palestinian state, perpetually dependent on Israel for its survival, will eventually become the de facto permanent one. Sharon

is built on wrong premises. It focuses on Palestinian resistance to occupation but not on the 36-year Israeli occupation itself. According to this plan a complete cease fire (Hudna) on the Palestinian part is not good enough. The Palestinian Authority or whatever is left of it must also disarm and destroy the Palestinian resistance groups (a civil war will be inevitable), thereby eliminating the possibility of organising armed resistance again. Once it is achieved, as John V. Whitbeck, an expert on Middle Eastern affairs ironically points out, "then (and only then) Israel will choose, of its free will, to end the occupation, withdrawing to pre-1967 borders, vacating the settlements, sharing Jerusalem and agreeing to a just settlement of the refugee issue." One would be a fool to believe a word of it and I think the Palestinians are not fools. I agree with John V. Whitbeck, when he writes, "they (the Palestinians) recognise that the real American objective is not peace, but at best simply quiet--Palestinian acquiescence in the occupation and acceptance of whatever terms Israel may wish to impose on a defeated and demoralised people."

If the president of United States, even at this late stage does not change tack and address the fundamental problem, i.e. the 36-year occupation of what is left of the homeland of a humiliated people and not their resistance to this occupation, he will be perceived as someone who was simply beating about the bush and not really sincere about bringing peace to this battered region of the world. It is simple to understand that once occupation is ended under an international treaty guaranteeing the pre-1967 boundaries, the casus belli will disappear and therefore, the resistance will cease automatically. The United States certainly has the power to make it happen but has its president got the courage and conviction to take such a bold decision?

LETTER FROM EUROPE

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Hezbollah to fire rockets at Israeli towns from across the Lebanese border.

Although the so called "road map" to peace is a heavily biased plan in favour of Israel, Sharon is defaulting even on the few commitments Israel is required to carry out. Let us have a look at the plan. Cessation of terrorist activities (I suppose, terrorism perpetrated by both sides) and a halt to all settlement activities are the primary requirements under the first phase of the plan. Leaving aside the overall military occupation of Palestinian territories, we have just seen that Israel is continuing with its policy of targeted assassinations. As I write, news of another targeted assassination is coming in, which I am afraid, will trigger further retaliatory actions from the Palestinian side.

According to Prof. David Newman of the Ben Gurion University of the Negev, "the

of the *New York Times*, on July 31, "approved 22 more housing units in Gaza in violation of the American-sponsored peace plan." It should be pointed out that this approval only refers to Gaza. Now the question is: How many more housing units are being built in the West Bank and how many more troops and tanks being deployed to protect them and the by-pass roads?

The second phase of the road map envisages the creation of a temporary Palestinian entity (I must emphasise the word "entity" because it is not a state) with provisional borders. Sharon has shown great interest in this phase of the plan, hence his rush to build a wall (known as the Apartheid Wall) along these provisional boundaries, chalked out, of course, by himself. What is the ultimate objective of this wall? The objective is territorial annexation by making these provisional borders as permanent political boundaries... According to

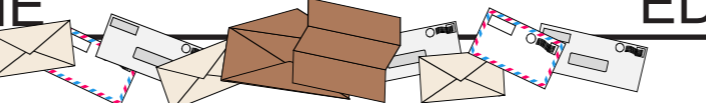
falling between the Wall and Green Line will, in effect, be annexed. Therefore, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians living in these towns and villages (Qalqilia will be completely surrounded) will either be forced to move to the other side of the Wall (Palestine) or live in virtual prison camps with high fences and Israeli checkpoints, which would look more like cages. Even Colin Powell, the US Secretary of State recently commented, "The fence is developing in a way that will make it very difficult to reach the next stage of the road map." Needless to say that all this goes against the Fourth Geneva Convention, the United Nations resolutions and the international law.

What is the third phase of the plan? The third phase provides for the creation of a viable (meaning more or less along the Green Line) and independent state for the Palestinians by the end of 2005.

hopes that in this manner he will complete his grand design: re-create the biblical state of Greater Israel with the whole of Jerusalem as its capital; keep a good number of his beloved settlements on conquered land; give security to his people; maintain the Jewish character of Israel by getting rid of the Palestinian population, which is growing at a much faster rate than the Jewish population and last but not least in importance, be hailed in the United States as the great statesman who was able to push the vexing and often embarrassing Palestinian problem out of international limelight.

Now the crucial question is: Will the United States allow Sharon to get away with all this? Although recently some encouraging signs have come out of Washington indicating a mild change in the Bush administration's policy towards the Palestinians, I am rather sceptical about it because Bush's peace plan

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Mind your language

Referring to the letter "Mind your language", published in The Daily Star on August 6, 2003.

Professor Quazi Abdul Mannan got disappointed by the use of informal language during an interview on Channel I between two cultural personalities of our country. To my perception the professor is unduly concerned about the manner in which the interviewer and interviewee addressed each other. I think, in this age of development, we better be concerned with more serious issues rather than such matters like how one addresses others in a talk show. In fact, our TV programmes should have more light events. Talk shows are one such area where we can improve on. Presently it seems that our programme producers can only think of songs, dance and film-songs for entertaining the viewers. Each talk show should have certain

characteristics to attract its viewers. Here, if our interviewer prefers to address her guests as *Tumi* or *Tui* and thus can make the programme more interesting, and can involve the viewers more, what's the harm? As for Tim Sabastian, I find it utterly revolting to watch an interviewer bullying his guests and not allowing him to complete the sentences or express his points clearly. An interviewer is there to keep the interviewee on the topic. He cannot force him to say what he and the programme producer already have decided. For example, if the question is, "Should the Iraqis be free?", the answer is invariably, "Yes." Tim Sabastian of Hard Talk will make sure his viewers get the view that the freedom to Iraqis is only possible when it is dished out by the Americans on a plate with a McDonald logo on it. I think that the reference of Hard Talk is ill matched. Tim has a

mandate to fulfill. But our Shampa Reja and Sadi Mohammad had nothing of that sort when they gossiped over a cup of tea for the purpose of entertainment only. Nurur Rahman Zigatola, Dhaka

Swell in price, poor in trouble

Bangladesh is a developing country and most of the people here are poor. Existing crisis of rampant unemployment and financial downfall in the recent times, like rising price of commodities has become a sinister headache for the people of lower income group who are in much trouble unlike the affluent class. Poor people have to fight against poverty, they constantly struggle for their survival. The recent price of commodities and necessities are beyond their reach. But what role is the

government playing in this regard? The government seems to have no pragmatic rules and regulations controlling or determining the prices of the daily necessities. Needless to say, a businessman has to pay to the extortionists regularly. If they refuse to pay the demanded money, they receive death threats. And allegedly the law enforcement agency maintains a relationship with the extortionists. Government's stoical role in toll collection is also very disappointing. On the other hand, transport cost of commodities is so high that market price including both retail and wholesale price rises with it. Again, the drivers have to pay tolls on their way. As a result, prices ultimately go beyond control. Besides, some dishonest businessmen occasionally create a deficit of particular commodity by stocking. But the government always remains silent in such cases. In this unbearable situation, we, the

general consumers demand immediate and pragmatic action to lessen the rising price. Government must regulate price of every commodity through effective and adaptable price chart in the markets of Bangladesh. The government, the economists and businessmen should initially identify the causes behind the price rise and try to stabilise the rate keeping in mind that there are lots of poor people in this country and they have every right to live. Palash Podder Department of Sociology, Jagannath Hall, DU

Liberalising alcohol policy

I fully endorse the views expressed by Dr. Syed Nasrullah, urging the authorities to liberalise the alcohol policy. This will not only have a soothing effect on our health sector,

it will also enrich the government treasury, increasing revenue from a hitherto neglected sector. Dr. Nasrullah put forward his views very carefully encompassing all the related aspects. In support I place the following in furtherance.

People who are well off enjoy the drinks in posh clubs, hotels and bars. Others illegally procure those from various unauthorised sources and sometimes the unauthorised liquors are quite dangerous. We know that people have died in many cases after drinking unauthorised liquors. The students and the youths allured by the 'charm of forbidden' go for heroin, cannabis and most commonly phensydl. I have come across addicts going for bizarre materials like Zambak, Savlon, dried lizard tails, wild insect bite etc. Experts estimate that illegal import of Phensydl costs thousands of crores taka annually.

But if alcoholic beverages are produced in the country and made available to the public, the hazardous addictive materials will lose their charm and the government will earn huge revenue and definitely crime related to drug trade will reduce. We may examine the position in our neighbouring countries in this regard. In India Phensydl is available in all the pharmacies and can be purchased without a prescription. But because of availability of regular alcoholic beverages the misuse of the cough syrup can be hardly noticed. Needless to say my argument to liberalise alcoholic policy is not to propagate alcoholic drinks in a predominantly Muslim country, rather to deter abuse of drugs. MSH Uttara, Dhaka ***

This is in reference to Dr. Syed

Nasrullah's views that policy of alcohol should be liberalised. In many Muslim countries there are liberal policies for consuming alcohol or even doing business in this field, for example: Pakistan, Turkey, Malaysia and Egypt. As Bangladesh is a moderate Muslim country there should be no restriction on this issue and it's also going to benefit the economy of the country. But I have always failed to understand that why Islam has restrictions on alcohol? Why is it considered as something bad? What are those ingredients that make alcohol bad for Muslims. I will be more than happy if Dr. Syed Nasrullah answer this question or anyone else who knows it well. Faiz Dhaka