

## Tipaimukh dam

Bangladesh must be consulted as promised

ONE cannot recall that Bangladesh has been consulted by the upper riparian India before the plan for Tipaimukh dam project was given a go-ahead in the neighbouring country. As a co-riparian our opinion should have been sought before such a structure was contemplated to be built on a common river.

We are concerned for more than one reason; most primarily, for the unmitigated disaster that the project might bring about that has been echoed not only by experts and environmentalists from Bangladesh; the fear of an environmental disaster of the dam is shared equally by the Indian experts, particularly from its Northeast.

Rivers are our lifelines and their unpredictable behaviour is a gamble we have to take every year. The consequence of the Farakka barrage on our life system brings into stark focus the dangers of tinkering with nature. And this reality was brought out immensely clearly at a seminar organised by several Bangladeshi non-government organisations and participated by water experts and environmentalists of the countries of South Asia and other countries including China that was held in Dhaka recently.

We feel that there is much merit in involving all the stakeholders in a project like this. And where countries are undertaking planning and projects based on basin system one wonders why we as a stakeholder of the Brahmaputra basin system should have been left out of a project that involves integrated management of water resources and which also has the potential of serious consequences on the ecology of the region.

It is also worrisome that not enough information gets to be exchanged in matters related to management of common water resources when there is indeed a mechanism in the form of the Joint Rivers Commission (JRC) in existence. While there is a need for further reinvigorating the JRC, it would also be well for the Bangladesh government to express our apprehension to India not only about the deleterious consequences of the project for Bangladesh as well as the people of the Indian Northeast, the fact that we were not even consulted must be strongly registered with the Indian government.

## Orphaned by highway accident

The speed demon better weep

WE are deeply shocked at the loss of yet several valuable lives in a road accident which took place the other day on the Dhaka-Sylhet highway in the early hours in which two senior executives of Petrobangla and their wives died instantly. The drivers and the inmates of the truck which rammied into the microbus carrying the ill-fated officials also died.

This accident is twice more tragic since two seriously wounded minor children of the officials who survived the horrific accident are currently lying traumatised in a specialised hospital of the city where they are recovering from the injuries they had sustained. Lying in the hospital beds these unfortunate young children are still looking for their parents with sad vacant eyes among the visitors who daily throng the hospital. Given regular support in the coming years, one still wonders as to what chances do these children have in growing up and leading a normal life of which joys and happiness are also an integral part?

We will all die someday, but deaths in the way their parents died are tragic in more ways than one. It not only leaves a traumatic effect on the lives of the rest of the family but also leaves behind a memory that is hard to reconcile with. Verily, it also becomes a tragedy, the burden of which is also carried by those who survived, through the rest of their lives.

It is high time the administration took serious steps in raising the level of highway safety to a point where commuters do not willy-nilly step into the waiting jaws of death.

# Toppling of government: Still a pipedream



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

TO state the obvious it must be admitted that Begum Khaleda Zia, our prime minister, is powerful head of the government. She relishes unbridled power and -- significantly -- she acquires it herself. She has no pretensions to greatness and neither does she waste time in collecting cheap doctorates or any other accolade from abroad. Instead, she minds her own business as politician and nurtures her power base to build up a formidable party apparatus which, in last election, catapulted her to power with two-third majority in the parliament -- a feat matched only by a few. Such power makes it's wielder usually lofty and magnanimous with proclivity for bold concessions to resolve political dispute, if any, with love, compassion and large heartedness.

Belying, however, such notion when the prime minister on 21 December last threw off her calibrated reticence -- long considered her forte -- and gave way to tantrum with the loss of her equanimity it was a disaster for she then spat fire and brimstone to lash out at her political opponent with the threat to sue her treason and cautioned Sheikh Hasina for not repeating her 'provocative speeches'. In no

time the gauntlet thrown by the prime minister was picked up -- as the offended leader of the opposition, in a quick riposte, returned the shot charging her rival for the protection of the Islamist militants and promotion of militancy by the alliance government or part thereof. The baffled public was non-plussed at the sudden eruption. A fresh consternation swept the country already shaken by an ominous rise of militancy taking its

there are visible signs of decay, stupor and decrepitude due mainly to inefficiency, inexperience, inaction, indecision, adhocism and expedient measures under political compulsions.

The alliance government wanted to eradicate terrorism and corruption from the country. Four years after it came to power both are raging in full fury. The terrorism was thought to be one of the

corruption in Bangladesh? The less we talk of it, the better it is. Even the donors cast aspersions on our morality!

Added to these ignominious failures are now the threat of 'Islamist militancy', a legacy of our clerics' unlicensed use of Islam for their temporal pursuit in the past. It is about to assail now the rampart of our statehood. The most dangerous dimension of the problem is the establishment's arcane nexus

final year of the government the party cadres -- expecting pre-election bonanza -- are prowling the corridor of power. Amidst this relentless competition for sharing the largesse or having a bite at the national pie a consumption happy society is splashed with luxury cars on one side and sullied with destitutes on the other. There is apparently a competition to derive benefits as much as possible from the windfall of incumbency!

about -- not even a nincompoop opposition camp. It is evident from the way it is trying to effect a fall of the government. But the antic, putting the cart before the horse, will not work. In other words no mass upsurge can ever click without organisational consolidation -- an area still untouched even by the party like Awami League. A patchwork through selective political visits, mass contact or odd press briefing will not cut the ice. The old stalwarts of Awami League cannot but be aware of the way Sheikh Mujib brought about the cataclysm that swept away once powerful Ayub Khan. To carry the message of six points to the people he moved like a messiah touching each obscure hamlet in all remote corners of the country.

That's how the seeds were sown for the upsurges of late sixties even if the sparks were provided by a few intrepid young leaders of the day who are still there in the ranks of Awami League. The present government in league with religious right who opposed our independence has over the years developed a high stake in their survival in power. With a clever combination of political skill, their fixed share of popular votes and a Machiavellian strategy it will fight back rather hard. Today's AL riddled with endless schism, indiscipline and disunity is hardly a match for the odds arrayed against it.

Awami League will have to organise itself following the footsteps of Bangabandhu before undertaking any venture in present political milieu. It may be a long haul. But that's the way.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

## PERSPECTIVES

The present government in league with religious right who opposed our independence has over the years developed a high stake in their survival in power. With a clever combination of political skill, their fixed share of popular votes and a Machiavellian strategy it will fight back rather hard. Today's AL riddled with endless schism, indiscipline and disunity is hardly a match for the odds arrayed against it.

toll in last few months.

And in the meantime the country's prevailing political crisis deepened and was compounded by continuing decline in all sectors of governance. Notwithstanding an upbeat mood in the BNP, proven skill in winning elections, organisational alacrity and an advantage of incumbency the government led by it has been habitual poor performer. As it was in its earlier term of rule even this time its failure have piled up beyond any proportion. In public eye its chronic inability to deliver has already made the government a liability for the nation. Look at any field of the statecraft or nation-state building whether it is health, education, industrialisation, environment, communication or banking -- everywhere

ordinary law and order issues by the authority who totally ignored its socio-economic and moral dimensions. As a result, its flame might have been temporarily doused but its smoldering fire still exists. No wonder we still come across terrible incidences of terror-crimes even after the special law enforcing forces mowed down so many terrorists with their 'crossfire'.

The image, if any of Bangladesh, is smudged with an ubiquitous corruption permeating the country's body politic and social fabric with hardly a spot without sleaze. During the alliance rule alone Bangladesh topped list of the world's most corrupt countries for four consecutive years -- an index of how the BNP-led government dealt, if at all, with the monster. The

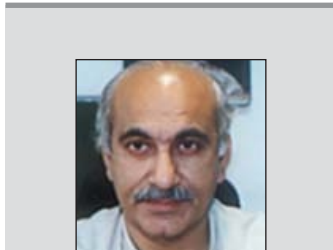
with the militants who revealed in more than one way their Jamaat-Islami background or connection. Many more dangers await us unless the BNP can remove this albatross from around its neck. Those will be in addition to our everyday trials and tribulation wrought by the government's misrule: the spiralling cost of essentials, transport, the utility services and so on and a galloping inflation.

Even as the public sufferings increase, the callous establishment is busy making hay while the sun still shines. In a last minute pillage the government heavyweights are vying with each other to grab business, contracts, promotions, plots or plum postings for their loyal subordinates either in the administration or party hierarchy. In the

It's against this backdrop that the conscious citizenry, the civil society and responsible professional groups are convinced that the longer this government stays in power, the more haemorrhage would it cause to the nation which already bled enough in the past -- thanks to the exploitation it suffered for ages even in the hands of local predators. Therefore the only issue at hand in this critical hour is to salvage the nation from the clutches of predators. But understandably the people have no wherewithal as to how to go about it. The politicians also have so far failed them miserably.

No government with a vested interest has ever quitted unless hounded out through a mass upsurge. Few seems to know clearly how can that be brought

# Conflict, corruption, cricket



M. J. AKBAR

WHAT do we really celebrate when we usher out the old year and cheer in the new -- birth or death? I get the politically incorrect feeling that we are far happier about the death of the past than the promise of the new. The last twelve months have generally had little to recommend them. The wish that the next twelve months might be better is the usual triumph of optimism over reality.

Politics has its own calendar. Its seasons, controlled by human nature rather than nature, are whimsical and arbitrary. But December is too often dominated by that demon hovering over the Indian nation state, terrorism, as if those who hate what we have achieved cannot bear to let a moment of goodwill pass without tainting it with innocent blood. The attack on the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore was particularly heinous because a house of learning has been protected from ancient times by respect and honour. Only a savage violates values that are synonymous with civilisation. Scientists are one of the great success stories of modern India, pioneers who have led momentous revolutions that might be the envy of a Marx or a Mao, for the struggle against hunger is more important than the struggle against class. The

fact that killers were able to hit our premier campus in Bangalore indicates not only the depth of their reach, but also underlines how vulnerable we have become.

Terrorism is a dirty war fought at many levels in the bleak and arid ambience of a fog. Its perpetrators measure success by the level of fear they have created, for they know that fear feeds both rational and irrational responses. Since, so often, the enemy is a phantom, you can define him

and the correct spelling of Paul Volcker's name. At this point, I cannot but pause for an irony. There is an MP from Bengal called Adhir Chowdhury who is accused of murdering 12 people, and has seen the inside of a jail more than once in his rich and varied life. He continues to be an Honourable Member of Parliament because while there is clearly great anger at getting caught with your hand in the till, there is no clarity about what to do in the case of a man with a knife at someone's throat.

Volcker and Monica Bedi would pale in comparison to cricket. Cricket is the true religion of our times, with various sects protecting the omnipotence of their leaders with a fervour that was once reserved for the Almighty's affairs. The worshippers at the Temple of Sourav Consciousness

rather overdid it, actually. If I were the chief executive of the Saint Greg School of Thought, I would insist that Sourav Ganguly open the innings in Pakistan, and let him face the onslaught of the Shoaib Akhtar Brotherhood, rather than hide him at number six. One of the finest combinations of artisty, theatre and Mongol-style mayhem was the sight of Sachin Tendulkar and Sehwag taking apart Shoaib during the World Cup semi-finals in South

There were two ways in which MPs could have reacted to the expulsion of their errant brethren. They could all have decided to stop taking bribes. They chose the second option: one gathers that anti-surveillance electronic equipment has sold out in Delhi's black market. If there is a market for intelligence, there is a bigger market for counter-intelligence. Jamming devices are fetching a high premium. This will doubtless encourage the sting-masters of

degree to which the Pakistan establishment is involved in encouraging it. Over the last 12 months the view of the Manmohan Singh government has changed; it now believes that Islamabad has not lived up to its promise to curtail terrorism within India. But there will come a political chance to reverse regress, since Dr Manmohan Singh is likely to visit Pakistan before the middle of 2006. If that visit proves a failure, then conflict levels could touch flash-point again. Hawks in both Delhi and Islamabad, who have been condemned to a miserable diet ever since they drove South Asia to war fever but could not take it to war, are back in business with their hands on the menu.

New Year greetings and thoughts are flying at a furious pace through SMS: there is nothing like commerce to generate goodwill. One friend with a particularly devious mind suggested that life had got it all wrong; we should be born old and die young. He provided graphic reasons for his theory, many of them unprintable. But the point is worth considering. A new year is always born old, muddled by the hangover of so many yesterdays, and gets older. Youth means the birth of a new idea, or a new reality; and those are few and far between. We may have been young only once, in 1947, and that birth was a painful Caesarean, which resulted in twins separated at creation and condemned to compete, contest, combat, conspire but rarely to cooperate. Would it have been better if India and Pakistan were born old, and had become young by 2006?

It's a thought.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

## BYLINE

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according to your prejudices. A proposition is proved by assumed objective. Assumptions are not necessarily wrong, but anger so often over-rides right and wrong. The terrorist wins when he can sow fear and confusion. The politician and the policeman know that fear can become a key to more votes and more funding. There are layers of evil, deception and exploitation that sustain one another.

The three staples of news in 2005 were conflict, corruption and cricket. Worthy things also happened in 2005. The government introduced a rural employment scheme which the Opposition helmed pass with solemn assent: who in his right mind in Parliament is going to oppose a populist idea when it is the government's job to find the money for it, and

Africa. The runs were not really the issue. It was the brilliance of craft and absolute fearlessness of the batsmen that made those five-odd overs so memorable. That is the standard, in character, we expect from cricketers now and if Sourav is in the team then he must deliver at that level in Pakistan.

Cricket, conflict and corruption will provide the bridge stories between 2005 and 2006, and the paying public will probably get better performance levels in all three areas. The Pakistan tour by the Indian team will look after the mass-frenzy needs of January and February. Any sensible planner would make sure that George Bush's India visit takes place after the cricket is over: Bush and Manmohan Singh don't stand a chance against live coverage of Sachin vs Shoaib.

journalism to take their search-and-destroy missions to more complex and lucrative levels. Justice Pathak's enquiry report will resurrect Volcker in Delhi. The government is in a bit of a bind on this one actually. If it exonerates former foreign minister Natwar Singh it will be accused of bias; if it suggests guilt, there will be consequences for the Congress.

Conflict, and its handmaiden, terrorism, will, alas, remain the burden on the shoulders of an India ready to spring to the high table of the world's economy. It is important to recall that before China launched its economic miracle, it took a deliberate decision to resolve border conflicts by placing them in the storehouse and getting on with the rest of life. The key dilemma for Delhi will not be terrorism itself, but the

## OPINION

# Bangladesh as I see it

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

I wonder what is happening. As ill luck would have it, I am incapacitated by a debilitating condition and remain confined in a wheelchair caused by arthritic ailments, and hence have rather limited exposure and interaction with the outside world. But from whatever little I could gather from both the electronic and the print media, it looks as though things are moving from bad to worse.

While the honourable PM of late has begun to condemn the perpetrators of bombings as enemies of Islam, some senior members of her party are saying that there are a number of law-makers, including ministers, silently and openly encouraging religious terrorists. It is now evident that BNP is working on both sides of the fence and playing with people's trust. This is hypocrisy at

its worst.

On the other hand, the opposition is getting ready to tighten the noose around the neck of the ruling coalition. At its mammoth public meeting held in November at the Paltan Maidan, the opposition produced a 23-point program aimed at freeing our poor country and its poor people from all its woes if it comes to power; too ambitious and too good to be true.

It will take nothing short of a miracle to achieve all that. We have seen governments come and go, and the miseries of people, particularly those in the middle and the lower middle class, including the poorer section, continue to increase with passing of each of the government.

For long I have wondered as to why the opposition wishes to remove this government when there is less than a year left for the

The attitude of our political parties has always been to be in the seat of power, no matter what. To that extent there is little real difference between our politically elected governments and a dictator. The only difference is that these politicians have the natural advantage of acting under cover of democracy through so-called elections and through use and abuse of the Parliament.

present regime to complete its tenure? Until now I was at my wit's end.

I think I solved the mystery. Just consider this: if that happens the opposition can work out its own ways and means, change any statutory laws it so wishes and pave its way for winning the elections.

Frankly, to cut a long story short, its ultimate goal is to be in the seat of power just like BNP. Awami League and BNP are essentially two sides of the same coin. It is all very fine and even justified to say that this government is tacitly

supporting terror acts around the country, and all must seriously condemn the administration, but does any one believe that the coming of the opposition into power is going to put a halt to terrorism?

I doubt it. If anything, the incidences might increase instead of decreasing. To any intelligent mind, the reason for such an assumption should be easy to guess. The way things stand today it will be a gross mistake both politically and otherwise for the opposition to merely condemn the ruling coalition

and fold its hands without helping the government's efforts.

As I say this, please rest assured that I am no fan of the present regime. But I believe that at least on this particular issue the opposition should do all it can to make a joint strategy with the administration in dealing with this scourge. Believe me, this religious terrorism is here to stay and we shall have to live with it, but given a proper strategy we should be able to contain it, if not anything else. Terrorism has become and will continue to be a problem, not just for the ruling coalition, but

also the opposition, and the nation at large.

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Looking through the window of my flat on the seventh floor, day

after day, I am simply appalled by the horrendous sight of a jungle of concrete all around in the shape of multi-storied high-rise buildings of residential quarters represented by all kinds of clothing popping out from each of the "pigeon holes" and hanging on the iron grills of the verandahs, so narrow one can hardly move in and out.

Once in a while, a relation or a friend comes for a social visit, and as they take a tour of my newly constructed flat, they too come to my bedroom and cast their gaze at the lights burning in flats in the adjoining high-rise buildings, and congratulate me for being fortunate enough to be living in such a wonderful flat from where I am able to, at least "look around."

I am somewhat confused and do not know how to react. While all this was taking place, my mind was racing down to the workings of that

perennial enemy of the people, namely Rajuk. Rajuk officials have allowed both landowners and developers to plan, build, and construct these high-rise buildings in complete disregard of various statutory provisions of our national building code.

It is high time for politics to be permanently separated from religion. The other day I heard someone talking about introducing of Shariah law in the country's administrative machinery, a perfect recipe for disaster. Many of the lawmakers of the present regime should be declared as enemies of the people and the state. I am now fearful that the "godfather" of the world might be thinking of stepping in to compel change, something that I had predicted, as inevitable almost over one year ago.

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