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We fail to understand what's going on

Clarifications on the court judgement urgently needed

THE controversy raging over whether to have a new voter list or an update went to the High Court and people expected that there would be a prompt resolution of the problem considering its grave importance to the electoral process.

The matter was taken to the court for clarification, but it seems the smokescreen around the issue has become foggy as both parties to the case have claimed success from the observations made by the honourable judges and the controversy still rages telling upon the credibility of the voter list preparation.

We understand that it takes time for a certified copy of a judgment to be issued to relevant quarters. But what is involved here is such a pressing national issue that one would have expected a fast-track action on this. It was no ordinary matter for adjudication anyway and the court has made their opinions known.

The matter kept the entire nation in suspended animation as people waited for the court guidelines to be binding on the parties concerned as soon as these were issued. The CEC himself being a judge knows what is needed to be done under the circumstances.

Now the question is why should the nation remain confused over the matter? And why this trivialisation of a very important national issue? Why should it be subjected to ego play? The ultimate loser of course is the democratic process itself.

Obviously, preparation of an accurate voter list is the first step towards making the elections free and fair. It would not serve us if we stumbled at the very first step. A quick resolution of the voter list issue is now the top priority of the nation -- a point that cannot have any other interpretation. We would urge the judicial authorities to make the certified copy of the judgement available for necessary action at the EC's end which will also help put an end to the frustrating impasse in the constitutional body entrusted with the responsibility of holding a free and fair national election.

Tragic deaths at Makkah

Another hazard to pilgrims' safety

THE hotel building collapse at the holy city of Makkah took a toll of 76 lives of different nationalities, almost a microcosm of the Hajj convergence, under the crashing rubbles including a dozen of our compatriots. The deceased Bangladeshis were pilgrims who were staying in the hotel, utility workers and simply passers-by.

Our heart goes out in sympathy for the families of the dead, and those who have landed at the hospital with critical injuries with their kith and kin at home anxiously waiting for further information about them. We are profoundly touched by the deaths that occurred in the line of a sacrosanct religious duty but in this context, we bring up the tragic end of Abdul Muquit, marketing manager of a local pharmaceuticals firm, whose mother and wife too died in the accident. The family has only a seven-year-old son and a five-year-old daughter left in Dhaka.

Although clearing of the rubble, recovery of dead bodies and rescue operations left little to be desired by way of speed and competent handling, dissemination of information was, however, slow in coming initially when it was most anxiously awaited. Most of the Bangladeshi victims being non-ballottee Hajis news about them was not so easy to obtain. This calls for streamlining registration with the representatives from the Bangladesh mission. Now the burial issue has to be sorted out as early as possible with the Saudi authorities.

The disaster has brought into a sharp focus the problem of hotels and guest houses taking in more guests than they can accommodate having regard to the latter's safety and security requirements. This is a matter for Saudi law to take and enforce adequate precautions against building collapse under the weight of occupancy beyond the stipulated limits. All this gives rise to a compensation issue that too must be resolved before the curtain is drawn on the unfortunate episode.

A quiet 2006?

Can anyone hazard a guess on whether the caretaker government will be able to hack it? With an opposition unwilling to play ball, a nasty polarisation between nationalism and secularism, and the dramatic arrival of underground "Political Islam," the next 31st night will feel like taking a leap into the unknown. We have to get there first.

Farid Bakht

As you look at your shiny new 2006 diary (or Microsoft Outlook for the technically gifted), why not pencil in some key events to plan your year?

In January, the opposition MPs will scramble to save their seats to avoid inevitable by-elections in those same seats. The Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) bombers will scarp and try and reorganise. For strategic reasons, they would be smart to take a year out and defuse the Islamic issue till the time they are really ready. I doubt they will. The opposition will try and seize the initiative in February with some colourful, enormous rallies and another "march on Dhaka." February is normally dominated by the homage to the martyrs of Ekushey in 1952. This year, given everything is politically charged; expect to see a fearsome assault on the role of Jamaat in 1971. This will continue into March as we celebrate Independence Day on March 26. The BNP will struggle to keep Jamaat within the fold, while at the same time promoting its own nationalist credentials.

If they do, the main Jatiyo Party is on course to join forces with BNP in a powerful (some say unbeatable) alliance. This will be the critical event. If Jamaat can hang on in there in an enlarged alliance, then the nationalist-Islamist grouping becomes a formidable machine.

The fly in the ointment might be Bikalpa Dhara. All indications suggest it will be looking with special interest, with its bag of goodies, if there are any "casualties." Jamaat and Jatiyo Party will demand around 70 to 80 seats each, hoping to negotiate the combined total down to around 100. That will leave an awful number of disappointed potential candidates of the BNP, especially among the Old Guard. Will they look for another ship?

I would be interested to hear how Bikalpa Dhara explains this unethical horse-trading. How exactly does it fit into that yet unexplained phenomenon of "New Politics"? Are they going to "root out corruption" with the same set of second-division BNP MPs? After over two years, is this all they have to show? Why is that so many new parties come and promise the earth and in the end leave us with old wine in new bottles?

In any case, it will not work. Independent or Third Party candidates rarely do well. An alliance with the Awami League and its 13 partners would raise similar problems in allocating seats. All this, however, could create chaos and over-reaction, which is exactly what some people seem to want.

By the time Pahela Baishakh or Bengali New Year comes around in April, will we have witnessed another horrific "incident"? Try as RAB might, some will escape the net and the consequences will be tragic. The heat will be on literally as temperatures soar. Widespread water shortages and electricity blackouts will raise tempers. Protests might be more widespread given the political spin-offs for the opposition. The Energy Ministry will be frantically trying to get new expensive mobile power plants working in time.

Expect the Commerce and Finance Ministries to pull out all the stops and find some extra foreign exchange for massive imports of rice. The price of rice will have to plummet to restore their credibility in the rural constituencies. Having said that, there is every possibility of a looming foreign exchange crunch if things do not go smoothly. Watch out for lower remittance flows by then and keep an eye on the price of oil. Perhaps the Foreign Ministry could phone Washington and ask them to hold off invading Iran till 2007, until our elections are over. What are friends for?

By May, it should be obvious how/when/if meaningful elections will be held. The opposition will have formally announced its intention to boycott the polls (or miraculously stayed in the fray). Who knows what is going on down there? Either way, it will be wholly unprepared since it has done little or no mobilisation over the past two years.

The monsoon floods will disrupt everything. By then us urbanites will be too busy watching Brazil and Argentina in the World Cup finals, spread over June and July. All the authorities have to do is keep the power on while BTv refrain from interrupting live matches for the 8 pm propaganda. Surely they can wait for half time. Right to the death, licenses will be handed out and the Law Ministry will be overworked. Do you remember which licenses were signed up to the last day of the Awami League regime in 2001? Should we expect anything different now?

Monga will make a briefer appearance this year. Not that there will be any less hunger or more available jobs. The candidates will be too busy electioneering in their own constituencies. The \$64,000 question will be how and when the handover takes place by the end of September.

Can anyone hazard a guess on whether the caretaker government will be able to hack it? With an opposition unwilling to play ball, a nasty polarisation between nationalism and secularism, and the dramatic arrival of underground "Political Islam," the next 31st night will feel like taking a leap into the unknown. We have to get there first. You say, elections. I say, maybe. If.

It will be a peaceful year somewhere. It will not be here. Eid Mubarak.

Farid Bakht is a non-resident Bangladeshi.

Biman, the Hajjis and beyond

One may recall that at one time in not too distant a past a move was undertaken to privatize Biman and make it a public corporation with floating of 61 percent as public shares. Apparently the public response was good but God alone knows as to why that process was halted and in whose interest?

Shamsher Chowdhury

To say the least, matters relating to Biman and the Hajj flights has become nothing but scandalous. Messing up of Hajj flights has become a yearly feature of Biman's default culture in varying degrees. This year it seems to be at its worse. The whole business of Biman is so messy that it is difficult to identify as to who is at fault and who is doing what to whom.

I feel sorry at the plight of the Hajjis. Many of the Hajjis are elderly and are going abroad for the first time. Hajj is a matter of extreme emotion and once a lifetime commitment for any Muslim. Whoever plays with such emotions of the human mind is nothing but a criminal. Biman's Management must be put on the dock and tried in a people's court. It is absurd that so late in the day, it is stuck with such details of asking for landing slots from the Saudi Government. Surely this was a matter that should have been dealt with months ago, indeed a criminal negligence on the part of the Biman. I also fail to understand as to why Biman has to make commitments of carrying an ex number of hajjis when it does not have the required number of aircrafts in its current fleet. It also mind boggling as to why Biman has to undertake the responsibility of arranging flights of non-ballottee Hajjis or otherwise. No other country including our neighbor India indulges in such a system where Hajjis are transported to the holy land in this process. After all performing of the religious rite is only incumbent on those who can "afford".

The affairs of Biman over the last several months, has only added to our scenario of innumerable failures. Because of the Hajj Flights there has been an all round disrupt-

tion of its both domestic and international flights causing untold miseries to hundreds of regular travelers to and from Bangladesh. I do not understand as to why no disciplinary action is taken by the Administration against Biman and its officials despite its irregularities and glaring failures by the Organization, the list of which runs into miles. Some one told me that it is all about the travel facilities and the various other perks, its Board Members and their families enjoy including its senior officials. It is they who want Biman to go on since "they have a good thing going for themselves."

The other alleged vested interests relate to procurement of Aircrafts. It is big money and anybody and everybody wishes to dip its fingers into the pie. The worst of all is that, after all this, Biman continually engages itself in purchasing obsolete aircrafts endangering the lives of its passengers and requiring to look for replacement aircrafts every few years. The saga on the purchase and continued operation of the F28 aircrafts is a part of that story. Without a doubt if an independent honest audit of the Biman's operations is carried out it will stand out to be the leading corrupt corporation of the country besides being one that is hurting people more directly than the others.

Without a doubt Biman has become one of the most politicized corporations of the country. Corruption is rampant from the highest management to the level of an ordinary loader and the security staff. Only the other day one of its staff was arrested along with a gang of car thieves in the city. One wonders despite all these endemic ailments which are causing losses of crores of takas to our exchequer and that too taxpayers money how Biman continues to operate?

Biman has turned into an apology of a Commercial Airliner, which continues to tarnish our image both at home and abroad. Biman operates like a delinquent child. Routes are opened at random and then closed down at random. An insider told me that because of the perennial shortage of aircrafts Biman could never make profits out of its operations on the routes to London and the Middle East. Biman is nothing but a story of massive failures, corruption and total inefficiency. Biman's Frankenstein also seems to be its CBA, which often dictates the terms for its senior management.

One may recall that at one time in not too distant a past a move was undertaken to privatize Biman and make it a public corporation with floating of 61 percent as public shares. Apparently the public response was good but God alone knows as to why that process was halted and in whose interest? Under the circumstances there seems to be only one way out, close down its operations. If anything, the nation will be better off. Let the closure take place in phases through a carefully planned process spread over a period of two years. If the Adamjee Jute Mills the largest enterprise of its kind in Asia, could be closed down on account of stagnancy and incurring losses why not Biman? Besides it is also time for the Administration to ask itself as to how critical it is for the country to have its own flag Carrier? Surely we could put the resources to better uses of critical public interest and concerns.

I doubt if any other airline in the world operates under such a chaotic environment like that of the Biman.

Shamsher Chowdhury is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Indo-Pak peace process: Yet to clear the fog of mistrust



M ABDULL HAFIZ

THE meeting between the former Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan in the sidelines of 12th Saarc Summit in Islamabad initiated the Indo-Pakistan peace process now underway.

Vajpayee's unconditional peace offer at Srinagar on April 18, 2002 came after his failed attempt to teach Pakistan a lesson. The peace overtures and military threats are nothing new from either side in the subcontinent. More often than not they traded the rhetoric which was not necessarily followed by real peace or outbreak of hostilities.

Mr. Vajpayee alone held out an olive branch at least thrice, starting from his famous bus-ride to Lahore, much hyped Agra summit, to yet another offer for what he called "compositi-dialogue" nov. Pakistan's response was prompt and positive in grabbing the opportunity to restore the stalled dialogue between the two countries.

In the past, any attempt for

breakthrough in Indo-Pakistan relations proved illusory. But unlike in the past, the dialogue this time took off on an overly optimistic note, and its beginning was marked with celebratory mood bordering on euphoria on both sides. The snapped links were quickly restored. The new bus services were opened between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad with people from both parts of Kashmir surging forward to meet their long-lost near and dear across the LoC. The government officials also have

Indians seem to be wanting in reciprocity, particularly the developments during the last two months have their telling effects on the peace process. There is fear that the two rivals may again revert back to the confrontational relationship that prevailed before the Islamabad entente two years back. Even in the past, going back to square one had been a familiar feature of Indo-Pakistan relations.

The open disputation erupted between India and Pakistan at the UN General Assembly session,

hollowness of the claim that all Indo-Pakistan disputes can be resolved through bilateral efforts. The Kishanganga dam issue is sixty years old and Indp-Pakistan negotiations to resolve the issue have so far failed.

The history of half a century of bilateral ties amply exhibits that India and Pakistan could not resolve their differences because of a persistent syndrome of mistrust. In the sidelines of the Saarc Summit at Dhaka, Pakistan Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz drew atten-

tion to the phenomenon. Interestingly Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh did not disagree. He rather emphasized the need to build up trust.

It was the lack of that trust which did not allow the quake diplomacy to take off even when Islamabad finally decided to accept the Indian proposal on making the LoC irrelevant for speedy relief operation. As a result, the chasm between New Delhi and Islamabad remains as wide today as it was before the killer earthquake struck Azad Kashmir and India-held Kashmir on October 8 last year.

In the present atmosphere of distrust and suspicion, it is doubtful that the quake diplomacy is any more workable for resolving the Kashmir imbroglio, following the foot steps of another set of two inveterate enemies, Greece and Turkey, which Jettisoned their centuries-old rivalry after 1999 earthquakes in those countries.

That the relationship has dipped to a new low between India and Pakistan is indicated by the way India ignored Pakistan. India seems to have deliberately omitted Pakistan from the guest list to watch its military exercise being

deteriorated. Any forward movement in the relations calls for overcoming of the psychological "trust-deficit" and concrete measures when the negotiations on Siachen and Sir Creek resume this month. These must be done before the momentum of the process dies down.

However, the problems on the Indian side cannot also be ignored. It is not for nothing that India observes so much of caution even on settled issues of Siachen as Sir Creek, where everything has been done except its implementation. But the Indian side jitters with its bitter experience of earlier peace efforts.

Still fresh in its memory is how the Lahore declaration of Vajpayee was responded to with Kargil war or the hijack drama was paralleled with Pakistan's complicity to ensure release of terrorist leader Maolana Masud Azizur from Indian prison. India's accusing fingers still point to Pakistan for the blast in the Indian parliament.

Even now, the Indian Prime Minister points to certain "external linkages" in the recent Delhi bomb blast. Clearly, the Indian establishment without formally naming Pakistan was indicating that certain Pakistani elements were behind the Delhi blasts. The fog of such doubt will have to be cleared before the peace process can really move ahead and produce results.

Brig (retired) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

PERSPECTIVES Even now, the Indian Prime Minister points to certain "external linkages" in the recent Delhi bomb blast. Clearly, the Indian establishment without formally naming Pakistan was indicating that certain Pakistani elements were behind the Delhi blasts. The fog of such doubt will have to be cleared before the peace process can really move ahead and produce results.

been making optimistic prediction of an early settlement.

Mr. Manmohan Singh affirmed that "Musharraf is a man [he] could do business with." Overwhelmed with the warmth he was shown at Delhi during his brief swing through India to watch a cricket match, Musharraf called the peace process "irreversible."

The developments during the last two years of peace process do not however warrant such optimistic outbursts, notwithstanding a flurry of diplomatic activity, and a fusillade of unilateral proposals by Pakistan, ostensibly to hasten a "magic" solution in Kashmir. Taking refuge in subterfuge, the

failure of the talks on the Kishanganga dam have exposed the

conducted in Rasthastan near Pakistan border. The omission is significant when several other countries including China are invited.

In the meantime, the old refrain of "cross-border terrorism" surfaced when the Indian Prime Minister told his Pakistani counterpart in Dhaka recently that India would consider demilitarization and redeployment in Kashmir only after cross-border infiltration came to a complete halt.

The peace process has so far been a matter of much ado about nothing. Indo-Pakistan relations have not moved forward as they should have, neither have they

Becoming the world's dumpyard



PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

AS if Indians weren't poisoned enough by toxic wastes generated domestically, they are now being subjected to imported wastes. The worst example of such imports is the ship-breaking industry, which surpasses the brutality of the life of the poor in early industrial England described by Charles Dickens.

Ship-breaking involves, if you like, pitting desperately impoverished, anaemic, men armed with primitive tools, against the rotting carcasses of condemned ships, full of corroded steel, rust, and heavy equipment all ready to collapse. The

confrontation damages both sides.

By the time the workers have finished tearing up a ship, many will have broken their limbs, sustained burns and breathed vast quantities of asbestos dust, fumes of cancer-causing chemicals and gases like ammonia -- all to earn Rs 75 a day. Their employers will have made lakhs in profit.

Alang, on the Gujarat coast, is the centre of this nightmarish business. The trade can be measured in terms of turnover (Rs 3,000 crores), or more realistically, in terms of the damage caused to people's health and the environment, running into tens of thousands of crores. Alang has made India the world's biggest dumping ground for merchant ships.

Now, India could become the greatest graveyard for discarded warships too. That's what will happen if the decommissioned French aircraft-carrier Clemenceau is allowed to be scrapped at Alang.

The ship will yield steel worth \$10 million. It will also release hundreds of tonnes of asbestos, PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), contaminated oils, mercury, cad-

Alang's ship-breakers have made millions on the bloodied backs of workers who live in the filthiest imaginable conditions. They have no toilets, washrooms, or electricity. They live in shanties built with contaminated plastic and wood. They have no rights, not even identity cards. Alang represents the ultimate pathology of growth based on poisoning people and the environment with the West's toxic junk. It also betrays extraordinarily low national self-esteem.

mium, lead, and toxic sludge.

The Clemenceau is being towed to India -- in blatant violation of the 1989 Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal.

Export of ships containing hazardous material with a view to scrapping them contravenes the convention, which all prohibits toxic-waste movement from developed to developing countries. It's also forbidden by India's Supreme Court.

The French government is being brazen about the Clemenceau business: it even flew Indian reporters to Paris/Toulon to showcase its environmental "concern." Equally disgraceful is the collusion

between the French and Indian governments and the toxic waste lobby.

France has been trying to get rid of the Clemenceau ever since 1997. It tried to palm it off to Greece, Spain, and Turkey, but failed. Finally, it sold it to the Panama-registered SDIC for Euro 100,000. SDIC has entered into a partnership with two Indian firms for dismantling it.

At the heart of this toxic bargain are lies. SDIC claims it has decontaminated the ship of asbestos. (Asbestos is used extensively in ships as an insulating agent and fire-retardant. On inhalation, it causes lung silicosis and cancer.)

But the Clemenceau is not free of asbestos. Its original asbestos

inventory was estimated by France's defence ministry at 160 to 250 tonnes. SDIC removed only 115 tonnes. What remains can produce hundreds of thousands of cancers.

The remaining quantity may be greater than 45 tonnes. According to Technopure, employed by SDIC to carry out decontamination, the ship has 500 to 1,000 tonnes of asbestos.

This violates the stipulation by the Indian Supreme Court's hazardous-waste monitoring committee that the ship must be decontaminated of asbestos to the extent of 98 percent before it can beach.

The engine-less Clemenceau is being towed to India. It's not a ship, but a mere container with steel, asbestos, and other assorted poi-

sons. The French government speciously argues that the Basel Convention doesn't apply to "war material." But the convention covers all North-to-South waste exports.

The waste-trade lobby claims that the remaining asbestos can be "safely" removed from the Clemenceau and sent back to France. Nothing could be more false. The real hazard lies in removing the asbestos in Alang.

Its fine fibres will be inhaled in large quantities and produce cancers. The harm can't be undone by repatriating the asbestos. Asbestos is only one of the Clemenceau's hazards, including contaminated oils, PCBs, lead-acid batteries, and bilge water.

All this deception involves

collusion by India's Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF). According to the Supreme Court's Oct 14, 2003 order, no ship can enter India if it carries hazardous material. Before arriving at port, it must have "proper consent from the concerned authority" (Gujarat Maritime Board).

But the GMB says it's not aware of the Clemenceau's arrival. The trick is to let the ship get beached. Once beached, it won't be sent back.

This is what happened with Danish ship Ricky last April. It arrived illegally in India. Denmark's environment minister warned her Indian counterpart (A. Raja): "I believe our interests are joint -- and I call on you to cooperate in this case by denying the ship to be dismantled."

India was legally obliged under Basel Articles 1.1.b, 6 and 9 to treat the Ricky as hazardous waste. But Mr Raja violated this. He contended: "India has adequate capacity to ensure [its] environmentally sound disposal." India patently lacks such capacity. This bogus argument is used to promote toxic-waste imports.

The Clemenceau is a litmus test.

The MoEF is hell-bent on having it scrapped in Alang on the claim that "we have safety norms in place." But this is a blatant lie.

If the Clemenceau is dismantled at Alang, other countries will send their retired warships to India. The US has 170 such ships. India could become the world's greatest-ever military-cum-civil toxic dump.

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Alang represents the ultimate pathology of growth based on poisoning people and the environment with the West's toxic junk. It also betrays extraordinarily low national self-esteem.

Alang must be scrapped. The only question we should ask is, how to find the 40,000 workers dignified employment, while prosecuting waste-trade criminals, and rolling back the toxic tide.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.