

HC directive on voter list

It would be prudent to pay heed

WE are constrained to comment once again on what we consider to be the Election Commission's action or inaction regarding the preparation of the electoral roll in view of what has transpired in the organisation since the High Court issued an order on a writ petition related to the preparation of fresh voter list by the EC.

It appears that the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) has thought it fit not to act on the HC guidelines. It is worth mentioning that so far we have had bureaucrats heading the EC mostly. But being a sitting judge one expects that the CEC's way of looking at things will reflect a judicial perspective. We believe that he understands the import and implications of observations and directives of his peers. But regrettably, it appears that he is neither seized of the immense significance of the issue nor the gravity of the situation arising out of his dithering on it.

As preparation of a 'fresh voter-list' went ahead ignoring HC directive, there are reports that two more election commissioners might be inducted and that the EC may appeal against the recent HC verdict. If all of this should happen a new dimension would be added to the matter.

Our concerns in this regard are that of any other citizen of Bangladesh. We want that there should be an authentic, comprehensive and real-time voter-list with the EC well before the polls are held. And that list must have the names of all eligible voters. This is the sine qua non for holding, not only free, fair and impartial elections, but also for commencement of an electoral process that enjoys full credibility of the people.

We suggest that the CEC address this pressing issue promptly and hold the EC meeting with his colleagues to get on with the job at hand. The next general election is round the corner, and the EC has many things to iron out before it can hold the election. Even more importantly, this is one institution that can ensure an acceptable democratic process in which the electorate can repose their confidence.

People dying in cold

Reach out to the vulnerable urgently

WE are deeply concerned at the news that 21 persons, including mostly babies, have died in the north due to the cold wave sweeping the country.

Dying from cold is tragic but it is more so when the victims are mostly children. When the country has made considerable progress in the garments sector with the market-place flooded by cheap old seasonal clothes there is no justification for lives being lost in this way. We feel that the death and miseries caused by a cold wave though of a much shorter duration, has an equally adverse impact, if not more, on lives of people like that of monga, yet another annual scourge in the region.

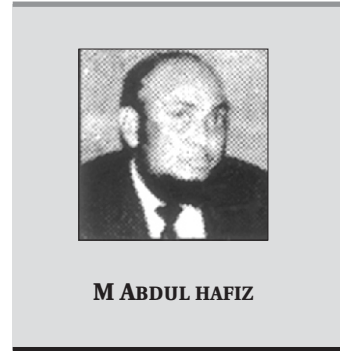
The situation is rather aggravated when critically sick new-born babies are denied adequate access to medicare and attention. We are talking of poor families who come with their babies to city-based hospitals where they are often denied treatment due to purported lack of accommodation and related facilities.

It is not understandable as to why families have to come to as far as Dhaka and other major district towns looking for urgent medical attention for their sick babies and children. Surely, the administration is capable of making required health services available at the respective thana levels that are reflexively responsive to cold spells on short notice. Simultaneously, there could be ready stock of warm clothes for distribution amongst affected families. This will certainly be an investment in the cause of humanity with high returns that is not only feasible but could very well be met out of our own resources.

The eclipse of an invisible empire

PERSPECTIVES

The Mar del Plata summit has confirmed the trend of declining influence of the US in Latin American affairs and an increasing assertiveness of the Latin Americans in pursuing their own agenda with more confidence. It is only a matter of time before the American economic empire in Latin America may ultimately be dismantled unless, of course, some miracle takes place to protect this hidden American borough.



M ABDUL HAFIZ

EVER since the world nervously watches the naked US aggression in the Middle East and elsewhere to fulfil the neo-cons' dream of building up a spanking new empire in its classical form, the US itself has been witnessing the gradual collapse of an "invisible empire" right in her backyard -- in Latin America.

That's the message from the recently-held fourth summit meeting at Mar del Plata, Argentina. The message was clear that the Latin American countries could no longer be taken for granted by the US -- notwithstanding her strong standing and

long-term interests in the continent. The waning US influence was writ large on the changing mood of the Latin Americans who amply demonstrated at the summit their growing desire for increased autonomy in their decision-making without US interference.

It may be recalled that the US prevented European interference in Latin America by means of the Monroe Doctrine and as a result she faced no rival there. Yet the US shunned the model of European colonialists in their empire building and opted for not taking possession of foreign territories. As and when the attention of an ever-growing United States fell on richly endowed Latin American countries, she instead sent her goods to those countries to capture their markets.

The American capitalists -- the banks, multinationals, and financial institutions -- duly patronised by their government heavily invested in railways, mines, and other undertakings and also lent money to the governments in Latin America. In this way American capitalists gained effective

control of the smaller countries in the South and ran the banks, railways, and mines there to their advantage. That is to say, the US annexed the wealth, or a great part of it, of these countries. Even in the larger countries they exerted great influence because of their investment and money control. In the process the Americans built-up a vast empire in the South which is in fact, an economic empire wherein the exploitation and domination were exercised without any obvious outward signs.

This modern type of empire without shouldering the "white man's burden" went on for the last 100 years in Latin America. As a matter of fact, the economic imperialism is the least troublesome form of domination for the dominating powers. The US was no exception and all she had to do was to bring the methods of exploitation to new perfection. The US-sponsored Free Trade Area for Americas (FTAA) had been one such project with the US grand vision of creating a single market for Americas from Alaska to Argentina.

The FTAA has been the most important US project in recent times with its goal set during the first Summit of the Americas in Miami in 1994. The deadline for the conclusion of negotiations for it was January 2005. After several rounds of negotiations in the last ten years there was however a deadlock.

The summit at Mar del Plata could not reach a consensus on when and how to resume the stalled negotiations. While the Mercosur countries have major problems with the US on the issue of agriculture and market opening, President Chavez of Venezuela came to the summit vowing to bury FTAA once and for all as part of his crusade against neo-liberalism. Although no one takes seriously the Bolivarian alternative, the Latin Americans are, by and large, sceptical about the recipe being offered by Mr. Bush.

The FTAA negotiations are however indicative of the diminishing influence of the US and growing autonomy of Latin American countries from the US economic stranglehold. At the beginning of the FTAA negotiations, the US put forward two conditions: First, all the sub-regional groups such as Mercosur and Andean Community should be dissolved, second, each country should negotiate in its individual capacity and not as part of any sub-regional group.

The Latin Americans said "No" to both these conditions and the US had to back down. This was perhaps the turning point when

the Latin Americans, for the first time, stood up to the US pressure -- asserting with confidence the determination to pursue their own agenda.

The new confidence, it is observed, comes mainly from their collective strength arising from regional integration. For example, Brazil gets more weight when speaking on behalf of Mercosur than as an individual country. Although the regional groups have their own problem of consolidation they are by now permanent phenomena as the leaders have realised the merits of collective strength. This realisation has already led to the launch of the "South American Community of Nations" in 2004.

The regional integration is not just about acquiring political clout, it has changed the region's economic orientation also. For example, Mercosur membership has made Brazil more important for Argentina in trade than the US.

In economic terms the US importance for Latin America has diminished also for other reasons. China is emerging as a major trade partner and investor in the region. The Chinese president announced in November, 2004 that his country's trade with Latin America would reach \$100 billion in the next three years from \$30 billion in 2004, and that China would invest \$100 billion in the coming decade.

In fact, China has replaced the US as the largest consumer of Chilean copper. Venezuela is

trying to reduce its dependence on the US market for its oil by diversifying it to new markets, including China. Another reason for the growing divergence in approach between the two Americas is ideological.

The political left is rising in Latin America and has already taken over the governments in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

The leftist candidates elsewhere for elections due next year are leading in opinion polls. The governments in Latin America worry more about their own fundamental problems of poverty and unemployment rather than about the US priorities of the Iraq war and terrorism. They are disenchanted with the Washington Consensus that has failed to address their core development problems. They have also realised that they should find solutions to their problem without depending too much on the US.

The Mar del Plata summit has confirmed the trend of declining influence of the US in Latin American affairs and an increasing assertiveness of the Latin Americans in pursuing their own agenda with more confidence. It is only a matter of time before the American economic empire in Latin America may ultimately be dismantled unless, of course, some miracle takes place to protect this hidden American borough.

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The politics of refutation and scapegoating

However, the question remains: is it necessary to hold a dialogue among political parties to eliminate Islamist militancy? There is no doubt that dialogue is a good technique for resolving conflicts, but holding dialogues to eliminate Islamist militancy seems odd. None of the opposition parties support the militants. Everyone demanded of the government to take punitive actions against the militants. There has already been an implicit consensus on this issue. Therefore, the need to have any dialogue between political parties for this does not arise.

A.J.M. SHAFUL ALAM BHUIYAN

NOTWITHSTANDING the fact that there have been no suicide bombings for the last few weeks, everyone from toddlers to seniors is scared. People are fearful of getting blown up by suicide bombers. This is the consequence of a politics -- the politics of refutation and scapegoating -- pursued by the BNP-led ruling coalition. Such a politics entails the arts of denying responsibility for mistakes, inactions, and wrongdoings, and finding someone to blame for. Let's explore this politics.

When Islamist militants began to bomb the shrines of Muslim saints, the ruling coalition turned a blind eye to this. Ministers and coalition leaders propagated that it was an act of the opposition in liaison with a neighbouring country to destabilize the government. But it was clear to all that Islamist militants bombed the shrines to scare people from visiting them because they present a real secular space where people from all religions go.

The media replaced the opposition party as the scapegoat when the mainstream newspapers including the Daily Star began

reporting the vigilantism of a group led by a man called "Bangla Bhai" (a pro-Taliban outlaw) trained in Afghanistan. Siddiqui Rahman, alias Bangla Bhai, a follower of the Taliban, tested a Taliban model of administration in Rajshahi's Bagmara village. He tortured and killed people for not following the Taliban lifestyle recommended by him. Local law enforcement agencies and a couple of junior ministers, who represent the area, condoned him. When media reports about his illegal activities became abundant, the ruling coalition refuted them. It said there was nobody called Bangla Bhai and he was a "creation of the media." The media created him to demonstrate the government's failure in maintaining law and order. The media was serving the interest of the opposition. However, eventually the government failed to cover it up. It had to recognize Bangla Bhai's presence and issue a warrant for his arrest. The police are yet to make any headway with this.

The government also faced difficulty in getting a scapegoat immediately when an Awami League rally was attacked with grenades killing a top leader like Ivy Rahman and many activists in August 2004. Although some elements of the ruling coalition tried

to blame the opposition by saying that the party did it itself to earn public sympathy, it was difficult to sell this to people. Therefore, the focus was shifted to pick a scapegoat from somewhere else. This time it was from a religious minority group. A young man -- Partha Shaha -- was detained and tortured by law enforcement officers for allegedly threatening Sheikh Hasina over e-mail. His stay and education in India was presented as a suspicious thing although it is not a crime for the Bangladeshis to study there. At the moment thousands of Bangladeshi students study in various Indian universities. The law enforcement agencies could not produce any credible evidence proving Partha's role in threatening Hasina.

The ruling coalition, mainly the BNP, became perplexed when Islamist militants began dispatching suicide bombers to pick judges and lawyers to paralyze the judiciary. The militants intend to establish Taliban style courts Bangladesh, unsettling the BNP. Some BNP MPs began to speak out against the militants and point the finger at a coalition partner -- Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh -- for harbouring militants.

The pro-militant players within the ruling coalition devised a three-

pronged strategy to handle the situation. First, they prepared the ground for BNP chairperson, the prime minister, to take punitive actions against the party members who voiced opposition to Islamist militants. Second, they made attempts to find out scapegoats to blame for suicide bombings. Third, they persuaded the prime minister to make a call for a national dialogue to deal with the rise of Islamist militancy in the country.

The first strategy seems to be a success. Abu Hena MP who spoke against militants was expelled from the BNP and a few others were censured. Disciplinary actions against party dissidents apparently silenced people inside the BNP from taking explicit positions against the militants.

The second strategy of finding suitable scapegoats was a flop. An attempt to find out suicide bombers from a religious minority group did not succeed. After the suicide bombing in Netrokona, the unfortunate Yadav Biswas who died in the bombing because of his excessive curiosity was initially identified as a suicide bomber. It was done to discover the hands of foreign conspirators in suicide bombings. But circumstantial evidences and eyewitnesses made it impossible to indict Yadav as a suicide bomber and the poor man was absolved of this curse.

The third strategy of having a national dialogue to eliminate Islamist militancy is now in play. This has given some dividend to the coalition government. I appreciate the brilliance of the people in the ruling coalition who floated the idea of the dialogue. It turns out to be a master stroke in many

respects.

Suicide bombings have exposed the government's lenience to Islamist militants and the involvement of coalition partners in harbouring militants. People are not willing to buy into the old strategies of vilifying the media, the opposition, or a particular religious minority group for suicide bombings. They have been terrified like hell. In such a context, the ruling coalition has needed something to salvage its image to people and the foreigners, including diplomats, living in the country. The proposal of a national dialogue gave the government a chance to hold some ground and simultaneously vilify the opposition.

The people who floated the idea of holding the dialogue were prescient to know that the main opposition would not join because of its animosity to the ruling coalition, creating some opportunities to castigate it. They were not wrong. As expected, the main opposition party declined to join the dialogue, giving the ruling coalition an opportunity to question their integrity in eliminating militancy. Sensible people stood up to the opposition for its unwillingness to cooperate with the government during a national crisis.

However, the question remains: is it necessary to hold a dialogue among political parties to eliminate Islamist militancy? Any assessment of this question requires an understanding of dialogue. Dialogue is a democratic way of solving conflicts which usually takes place between conflicting parties. For many decades western governments and UN organizations emphasized dia-

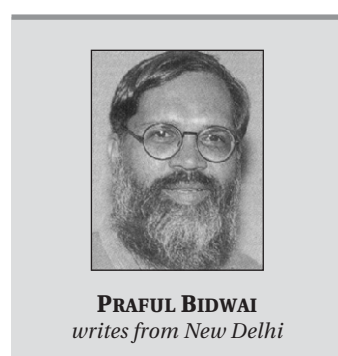
logue as a means of solving regional and international conflicts. From time to time, western diplomats in our country also called for dialogues between our political parties to solve political problems. There is no doubt that dialogue is a good technique for resolving conflicts, but holding dialogues to eliminate Islamist militancy seems odd. None of the opposition parties support the militants. Everyone demanded of the government to take punitive actions against the militants. There has already been an implicit consensus on this issue. Therefore, the need to have any dialogue between political parties for this does not arise.

So, why are we having a dialogue? If you have been following it you know the reason. You have seen how the PMO influenced Ershad's Jatiya Party against pointing the finger at a component of the ruling coalition for harbouring the militants. The "dialogue" seems to be an attempt to persuade the people and the foreign diplomats that the government is doing something to stop suicide bombings. I am not sure how successful this tactic will be at the end of the day. It seems clear that the patrons of Islamist militants are in the ruling coalition. The government needs to do housecleaning, rather than spending time and energy for dialogues. Only punitive action against the militants and their patrons can allay the fear of the common citizens.

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Congress confronts a challenge

No party can win enduring legitimacy from the masses by making India the B-team of a global superpower. What people respect is fierce independence in foreign policy. They expect India to contribute to making the world a better place, not join the latest bandwagon. This means discarding the "holding operation" approach. The Congress must not shy away from ideological-political battles if it's to reinvent itself as a left-of-centre party committed to popular welfare.



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

IT was the chance of a lifetime. On January 7, Ms Sonia Gandhi could have begun repairing the creaky 110 year-old Congress party machine by announcing elections to its Working Committee. That would have

broken the undemocratic practice of nominating members.

Such elections were repeatedly promised since the party's top decision-making body was reconstituted in 2004, and renamed Steering Committee. An elected CWC was to replace this before the January 21-23 plenary session in Hyderabad.

However, Ms Gandhi again resorted to nominations. She had nothing to lose and much to gain from holding party elections. She enjoys tremendous goodwill and credibility because of her renunciation of the Prime Ministership.

She would have enhanced her stature had she re-democratised the Congress, distanced herself

from sycophants, and shown she's not obsessively promoting the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty.

There are only three surprises in the list of 20 CWC members. Mr Rahul Gandhi doesn't figure in it. But he could soon be co-opted. The new CWC is dominated by "old veterans." Only two members or special invitees belong to Generation Next.

Third, Karnataka is over-represented, claiming 6 seats. The Congress runs an uneasy coalition there with the Janata Dal (Secular). The two clash over infrastructure development projects favoured by the pampered IT industry, the Bangalore metro, and the NRI-promoted Bangalore-Mysore freeway, lined with posh housing complexes,

which will divide villages.

The Congress's tie-up with JD(S) dissident Siddaramaiah in recent local elections has annoyed Mr H.D. Deve Gowda. He may precipitate mid-term elections. The Congress isn't well-placed to win these. Inducting six members from Karnataka into the CWC won't help matters.

More generally, the Congress faces a gloomy prospect in the coming elections -- in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Kerala, Assam, and Tripura.

In West Bengal, the Left Front seems set to win for the seventh time consecutively -- probably a new record. In Tamil Nadu, Ms Jayalalitha could well win thanks to the tsunami relief operation and social security measures like free meals for the poor.

In Kerala, the dice seem loaded in the Left Democratic Front's favour. It has swept all by-elections with unprecedented margins. Besides, Mr K. Karunakaran's faction has significantly cut into the Congress's base. In Tripura too, the Left has the upper hand.

It's only in Assam that the

Congress could put up a respectable fight thanks to divisions within the Asom Gana Parishad and its rift with the BJP.

This year's elections, then, won't give the Congress a boost. It can at best console itself that the BJP probably won't do well either, and that the United Progressive Alliance's stability won't be threatened, despite differences among the constituting and supporting parties.

Although the Samajwadi Party and the Congress are sparring over telephone tapping, the SP won't destabilise the Congress.

The Left isn't happy with the Congress's policy direction. But so long as it broadly follows the Common Minimum Programme, and the Left vetoes unpleasant measures (like BHEL equity sell-off and pension privatisation), it'll keep the alliance going.

The Left definitely doesn't want the BJP to return to power, whose prospect in any case seems distant.

The big challenge to the Congress will come in 2007, in Uttar Pradesh. The party has no base in

any sizeable group in UP. The real contest there is between the SP and the Bahujan Samaj Party.

The BSP, whose vote-share has more than doubled in 15 years, is now attracting groups outside its core constituency, including savarnas, and the most backward classes.

Ironically, the party grew on the strength of Dalit self-assertion against the domination of Tilak, Tarazu aur Talwar (respectively, Brahmins, Banias and Rajputs). The SP too is trying to entice savarna groups like the Kayasthas with job reservations.

Reforming Congress is a formidable task. To address this, it's not enough that the party carry on with its present holding operation. It must strike out and prove its relevance.

Only thus can it build a winning social coalition. The Congress's drift towards neo-liberal economics and a pro-United States foreign policy is the surest recipe for erosion of popular support.

Yet, many Congress and government leaders favour this. Dr Manmohan Singh and Mr P.

Chidambaram now regard 10 percent GDP growth as the key to "inclusive" development.

They should know better. It's not for want of high GDP growth, but for lack of equity and employment, that the NDA lost in 2004. More growth within skewed income distribution will further widen disparities. The market is a hopelessly bad redistribution agency. This is the state's task. It can only perform it if it's economically strong.

This inevitably means raising taxes to finance infrastructure growth, provide good-quality public services, and fund increased social spending and measures to correct geographical imbalances. These imbalances threaten to cleave India into what Amartya Sen recently called "a California" and "a sub-Saharan Africa."

To regain pre-eminence, the Congress must do far better than guarantee employment to each rural family for a maximum of 100 days a year -- which can at best add to its income by Rs 6,000, or a very modest 6 percent.

It must develop a comprehen-

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