

All roads led to the Turag

Spread the message of understanding and friendship

THE bank on the river Turag was yet again, like the last forty-one years, filled with almost two million devotees, a large number of whom were from overseas, to participate in the three-day annual congregation, the second largest after the Hajj known as the Biswa Ejtema.

We are happy to note the very good arrangements made to host the devotees for the three-day congregation, although the security arrangements were more pronounced than any time before. That was only to be expected, given the state of security in Bangladesh since the last Ejtema. The organisers must be commended for their successful handling of the event, which could be a logistical nightmare.

Besides the more than two million people who spent three days at the site, many more that number congregated from all parts of the country to the Ejtema to participate in the Akheri Munajat, on the final day of the Ejtema.

The congregation epitomises the bond of the Ummah that transcends national boundaries. And while we seek the blessings of the Almighty for the Ummah we must include in our prayers the vast multitude that are deprived, uncared for and neglected, cutting across social and religious divide. If anything, it is the deficit of understanding between religion and culture that is hampering attainment of peace globally.

We understand that several groups of the Tablig Jamaat will set out for various parts of the world conveying the message of Islam. It is our hope, and indeed that we feel should predominate the thoughts of those that make up these groups, that they would attempt to remove the wrong image of Islam which many, particularly in the West, have of the religion, a religion that emphasises entirely on the need for brotherhood, harmony and understanding.

There is the great need today for spreading the message of brotherhood, harmony and understanding at the national level and beyond to the greater world. Sinking of differences between races and religions is of utmost importance and we beseech the leaders at all levels to keep this ennobling thought uppermost in their strivings for a better world.

The tell-tale superabundance of OSDs

Bringing the administration to greater harm

IN recent times, there has been a large-scale promotion of government officials, not to any physically available vacancies but to mere designations, albeit with higher salary bill implications. These elevations have been mostly to the ranks of deputy secretary, joint secretary and, in some instances, to the post of secretary. Ironically, many of these promotions were effectuated without taking into consideration the existence of real vacancies. And, whether there were potential vacancies against such promotions is also perhaps open to question.

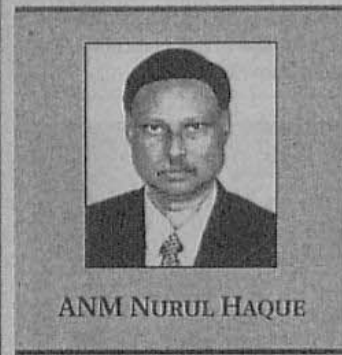
As a result, we have the whole lot of new officers on special duty (OSDs) inflating the number of the pre-existing ones which was big as it is. Just consider this: the senior assistant secretaries on promotion as deputy secretaries have alone raised the total number of OSDs, in that particular category, to 463. It is a well-known fact that OSDs in general are in a class that are put away from the mainstream operations of the administration and all too suddenly become a forgotten bunch. These officials, traditionally, have no specified duties and often stay in that state for months, which may even stretch into a year or so, unless someone would be extremely lucky to be posed out any sooner. They merely register their 'attendance' in respective ministries or departments representing thereby a reservoir of idle salaried manpower. Just consider this as well: 87 senior assistant secretaries who were recently transferred to the district-level administration, as additional deputy commissioners (ADCs), even after their promotion, will have to work in their present position for at least a year. This means that the DCs and the ADCs, for all practical purposes, will simultaneously hold the equivalent rank of deputy secretary.

Such massive promotions in haste, with a sizeable segment of trained and experienced officials being pushed to the margins, particularly at this fag end of the current administration, with the national elections near at hand, also raise questions about the motivation behind such an action.

Over the years with the gradual retirement of our erstwhile civil servants in the CSP and EPCS cadres, there is no denying the fact, that our civil service has been considerably weakened. We should, therefore, desist from any action that further weakens the bureaucracy.

Right to information in Bangladesh

The right to information is a cardinal phenomenon to good governance and the whole mechanism of governance in the country has been vitiated owing to lack of it. The Public Expenditure Review Commission (PERC) headed by M. Hafizuddin Khan detected hundreds of irregularities in public expenditure and waste of funds. The PERC also categorically reported that the parliamentary standing committees failed to ensure accountability and transparency in public expenditure and to remove corruption from the state organs. Absence of accountability and transparency coupled with ever increasing corruption in most of the government departments is no doubt the consequence of lack of right to information.



ANM NURUL HAQUE

INFORMATION is power, and the spirit of democracy and the right to information is considered as a fundamental human right everywhere in the world. But like many other fundamental human rights, such as right to food, shelter, clothes, medicare and education, the right to information is also faced with an identical fate of non-realization in Bangladesh. An effective access to information has the potential to empower people to engage themselves more meaningfully in the democratic process with a view to increase transparency and accountability in the mechanism of governance and also to reduce corruption.

The right to information became

a fundamental human right with passing of a law known as the "Freedom of Information Act" by the US Congress in 1966. At present more than 50 developed countries in the world have freedom of information laws. Britain was first promised in 1974 by the then Labour government for enacting a freedom of information law, but it took more than a quarter of a century to reach the statute book and a further four years to come fully into force in 2005.

Most of the central government departments in Britain are now well geared up, with a mass of easily accessible information already on their websites. Under the freedom of information act, anyone, of any nationality, living anywhere in the world, will be able to request for information held by more than one hundred thousand public authorities and other designated non-governmental organisations in Britain, and expect an answer within 20 working days, usually free of charge.

There are, of course, exemptions. Anything relating to national security, most personal data, court records, information subject to parliamentary or legal privilege, or information likely to prejudice the effective conduct of public affairs,

is subject to an "absolute" exemption which cannot be overridden. The Independent Information Commission set up by the act, has made it clear that aggrieved members of the public can seek enforcement of their "right to know" only through it.

The civil right groups are nevertheless worried at the right of ministerial veto included in the act, which could be used to block any information deemed too politically embarrassing or sensitive to any government. It may be mentioned here that in New Zealand, on whose freedom of information legislation Britain's act is closely modeled, the ministerial veto has not been used once in the last 17 years since the present system was brought into force. After January 1, 2005, it has become a criminal offence in Britain to destroy data for which a valid request has been made under the act. Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister has described the Freedom of Information Act as one of the last achievements of his government.

In Bangladesh, where democratic governments have been in power since 1991, there are some laws in force that are antithetic to

the right of access to information. The Official Secrets Act (1923), the Evidence Act (1872), Penal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure (1960), and the Rules of Business (1996), are such restricting laws that are being imposed by the governments to curtail people's rights of access to information. Article 19 of the Government Servants Conduct Rules, 1979 says: "A government servant shall not, unless generally or specially empowered by the government in this behalf, disclose directly or indirectly to government servants belonging to other Ministries, Divisions or Departments, or to non-official persons or to the Press, the contents of any official document or communicate any information which has come into his possession in the course of his official duties, or has been prepared or collected by him in the course of those duties, whether from official sources or otherwise."

Despite an abundance of advocacy and citizen groups in Bangladesh, the lack of right to access to information has consigned the country and its people to an abject obscurity about the government functionaries. The proposed Right to Information Act, drafted by the Bangladesh Law Commission in 2002, is now lying with the Ministry of Information for scrutiny. The main feature of the proposed act is that government functionaries are compelled to supply information to the people enjoying this statutory right. But the loophole remains that the act has been made applicable subject to certain provisions of the Official Secrets Act.

The most important lesson we can learn from India while passing

a right to information act. Indian parliament passed the Freedom of Information Act in 2002 which came into force in January 2003. But the civil society in India rejected the act terming it "paper tiger" for its weak provisions and not providing the scope of appeal by the aggrieved person who is denied access to information. The members of the civil society, under the banner of "National Campaign for People's Right to Information" is now struggling hard in demand of a strong act to be known as the "Right to Information Act" instead of the existing "Freedom of Information Act."

A dialogue titled "Role of Lawmakers in Ensuring Right to Information for All" was organized jointly by All-Party Parliamentary Group on Bangladesh Development Forum, WTO, and Manusher Janno (an NGO), in October. Both ruling and opposition lawmakers, legal experts and civil society leaders attending the dialogue agreed to ensure free flow of information by repealing the laws that hinder people's right to information. Saying corruption resulted from concealing information, they demanded that the annual reports of all the ministries should be made public.

On the other hand, the ministers and some of the ruling BNP lawmakers launched an abhorrent attack on the country's media in parliament on November 22, accusing it of tarnishing the government's image by publishing what they called "fake news" and also demanded for enactment of tough laws to punish journalists. The President, Prime Minister and Information Minister also expressed their intention to amend

the provisions of the Press Council Act regarding the power to warn, admonish, and censure to press.

The right to information is a cardinal phenomenon to good governance and the whole mechanism of governance in the country has been vitiated owing to lack of it. The Public Expenditure Review Commission (PERC) headed by M. Hafizuddin Khan detected hundreds of irregularities in public expenditure and waste of funds. The PERC also categorically reported that the parliamentary standing committees failed to ensure accountability and transparency in public expenditure and to remove corruption from the state organs. Absence of accountability and transparency coupled with ever increasing corruption in most of the government departments is no doubt the consequence of lack of right to information.

Access to information is a vital factor for achieving the goals of good governance, which promote transparency and public accountability in the working of government functionaries. Information is a public resource in the hand of the government and the government is to share it with the citizens to the best advantage of the society. We sincerely hope that our parliament will ponder over the issue of right to information and enact full-fledged laws to ensure people's right to information which will eventually lead to good governance and give the democracy a real spirit. The media and the conscious people of the country should also come forward to meet their moral obligation for people's right to information.

ANM Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.

Congress still groping for strategy

The Congress has failed to democratise itself. It's still praying for manna from heaven -- through the charisma of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. But it should know: dynasties are no substitute for radical policy reform or for strategy.



PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

JUST when the Congress seemed ready to re-enact the script originally written for Rajiv Gandhi's succession in 1983, Mr Rahul Gandhi decided not to accept a position in the party leadership. He rejected pressures from sycophants clamouring for his elevation to the Congress Working Committee, while glorifying him as the "symbol of youth" and "light of the future."

It's hard to say if his decision was driven by humility -- "I'm still learning" -- or a shrewd attempt to convert inexperience into virtue.

Regardless of the motive, the decision is welcome. Mr Gandhi's entry into the CWC would have fanned disgusting hero-worship

and toadyism and strengthened the self-delusion that the party is now ready to rule India on its own. The Congress spoke in two voices in Hyderabad. It pledged to continue status quoist economic policies and "aggressively confront" the Left.

On the other hand, Congressmen projected their party as *Left-leaning*. Information Minister Priya Ranjan Dasmuni described Congress as "India's greatest Left party." Another functionary praised Ms Gandhi as an "extreme Left leader." Kerala's Vayalar Ravi called her the leader of "all the poor countries of the world!"

The Congress, which attributed its 2004 victory to its allies, now reads the riot act to them. It reminded them of "collective responsibility" and warned them against "crossing the limits of constructive criticism," thus weakening the United Progressive Alliance's "credibility."

This dual-faced approach highlights the Congress's *fundamental confusion* about self-identity and reveals the yawning gap between its ambition to free itself of coalition constraints, and its limited base and popularity.

The promised "tryst with destiny" remains just a fond hope.

In Hyderabad, the party only had to look next door to comprehend its own hypocrisy. In Karnataka, its ruling alliance with the Janata Dal (Secular) was plunged into deep crisis primarily because the Congress allied with the JD(S) dissident S. Siddaramaiah. Matters got further muddled with Mr Deve Gowda's son Kumaraswamy defecting and joining hands with the BJP.

Irrespective of whether the Congress-JD(S) government survives the confidence vote, the blame for the Karnataka crisis lies mainly with the Congress. It is the party's venality and greed for power, coupled with lack of tactical sense, that destabilised the Dham Singh government without strengthening its own power chances.

Similarly, in Bihar, the Congress and allies snatched defeat from the jaws of victory by preventing Mr Nitish Kumar from forming a government last February. The latest Supreme Court judgment strongly indicts Governor Bata Singh for this. Had he not thwarted Mr Kumar, a fresh election wouldn't have been necessary, which the

Congress-RJD alliance lost.

Unless the Congress internalises lessons from such tragicomedies, its claim to be "destined" to return to power will sound laughable.

The Congress must also reconcile its president's appeal for austerity and selfless service, with its own lack of probity. This stands highlighted by the government's decision to let Mr Ottavio Quattrocchi take money out of his London accounts without being cleared in the Bofors investigation.

The Congress has developed considerable smugness on issues of policy -- just when a change of direction is called for. But its Hyderabad resolutions reflect complacency.

The two resolutions on economic issues fail to recognise the magnitude of widespread unemployment or agrarian distress. From Andhra Pradesh to Maharashtra to Punjab, farmers are finding agriculture unremunerative, and the burden of debt crushing.

In Punjab, they are leasing out land under "contract farming" or experimenting (unsuccessfully) with non-food crops -- thus suffering a loss of income.

Many Maharashtra villages have put themselves up for "sale." In some, farmers have decided to sell their kidneys. Hundreds have committed suicide. In Andhra, the spate of farm suicides (now exceeding 5,000) hasn't abated

after the Congress-TRS came to power.

In such a situation, it's not enough to demand that food subsidies to the poor not be cut. Nor is it enough to launch "Bharat Nirman" with its marginally increased allocations to irrigation and drinking water.

"Bharat Nirman" seeks to finance roads, power and telecommunications through so-called "private-public partnerships." This lets the state off the hook of its responsibility and imposes heavy tolls and user-charges upon public services.

On foreign policy and security, the Congress is mealy-mouthed or disingenuous. It says India's relations with the United States are based on reciprocity and transparency. This is nonsense. Indo-US relations are *profoundly* unequal.

Recent unequal agreements between the two, including the July nuclear deal, demand that India chart an *independent* trajectory. This has become imperative after US ambassador David Mulford's latest "vote against Iran, or else..." bullying.

The Congress piously hopes the impasse over Iran would be resolved through a "mutually acceptable solution." This is unlikely. So keen are the Western powers to drag Iran before the Security Council that they don't want a "mutually acceptable" solution.

India could again come under pressure to vote against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency. And it will succumb.

So long as the UPA persists with its pro-Western foreign policy, India will be condemned to fail the US on all critical issues of the day: whether Iran, Iraq and Palestine, or terrorism, human rights, and climate-change.

There's an unfortunate parallel between now and the Congress's 1983-85 leadership succession. Then, Rajiv Gandhi talked of taking India into the 21st century. Today, the Congress talks of making India an "economic superpower" through the (neo-liberal) "reform process."

Rajiv Gandhi's dream remained just that. Similarly, superpowerhood will mean nothing while hundreds of millions of Indians lack assured access to food, drinking water, healthcare and education.

Coupled to this policy disconnect is the Congress's *strategy disconnect*. The party lacks programmatic clarity. It has no discernible appeal for the poor. It has no clue about mobilising political support.

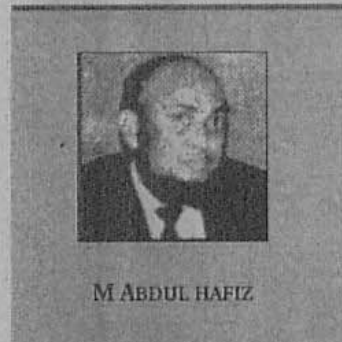
The Congress has failed to democratise itself. It's still praying for manna from heaven -- through the charisma of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. But it should know: dynasties are no substitute for radical policy reform or for strategy.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

The mystery behind the West's climb down on Iran

PERSPECTIVES

President Bush has already branded Iran as one of the "axis of evil." The neo-cons, who find Iran to be the only impediment to their gaining supremacy over the entire region from Morocco to Indonesia, compiled numerous allegations against the country. They include Iran's opposition to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, aiding Hamas and Islamic Jihad in occupied West Bank, a nexus with Lebanon's Hizbollah, and of course, interference in Iraq's internal politics.



M ABDUL HAFIZ

EVEN if the Americans were hounded out of Iran in the aftermath of its 1979 revolution, they seldom abandoned the hope of regaining influence in the country that was once one of the vital pillars of US security in the Gulf. They blew hot and cold to win back their old ally, but to no avail.

The continuing US interest in the country stems from the latter's abundant oil wealth and its strategic location -- having command

over the vast swathe of oil and gas fields and their supply routes. However, much of the US hopes were dashed with the coming of a hard-line president in Iran. That has again brought Mr. Bush on the warpath with regard to Iran.

President Bush has already branded Iran as one of the "axis of evil." The neo-cons, who find Iran to be the only impediment to their gaining supremacy over the entire region from Morocco to Indonesia, compiled numerous allegations against the country. They include Iran's opposition to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, aiding Hamas and Islamic Jihad in occupied West Bank, a nexus with Lebanon's Hizbollah, and of course, interference in Iraq's internal politics.

But the most potent excuse they have in their hand, is Iran's assertion of going ahead with its "peaceful" nuclear program. Iran has, in the meantime, angered the West as well as the international

community by calling the restriction on Iran's uranium enrichment program "nuclear apartheid." It also inadvertently made the provocative statement of "wiping Israel off the map" and called the sensitive Nazi Holocaust a "myth" -- thus providing excuse for hostility from various quarters.

The American had already been beating the war drum with regard to Iran which was brought to a crescendo in the run up to the crucial IAEA board of governors meeting on November 24 in Vienna. The Bush administration has pulled out all the stops in its efforts to cajole, bully, and scare the world into believing that Iran is on the very brink of acquiring nuclear weapons capability.

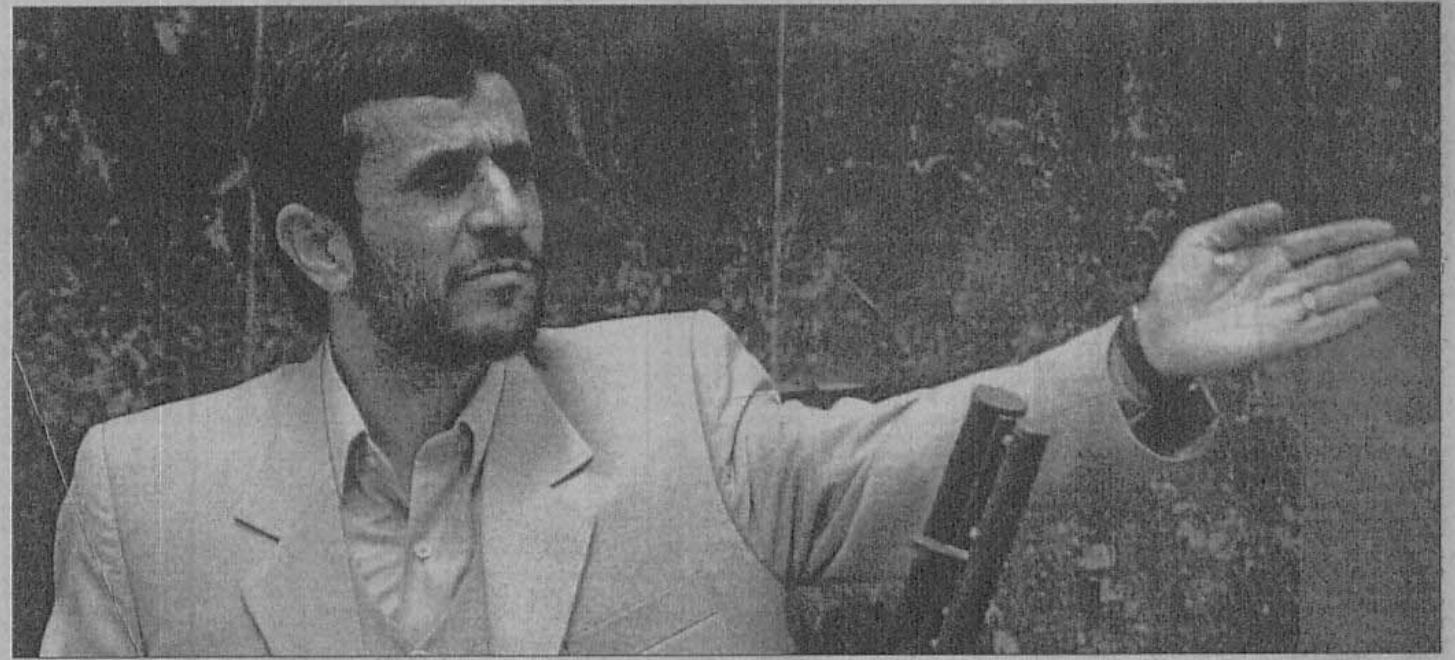
Last September the EU troika succeeded in convincing the IAEA board of governors to declare that Iran was in non-compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. But it stopped just short of

referring Tehran to the UNSC, the next logical step. Backed obviously by the US, the EU-3 restarted talks that had precipitately been terminated by the EU-3 itself four months ago. The fresh negotiation to be resumed without precondition from either side will start any time soon.

The November 24 IAEA meeting was designed to effect a consensus to put Iran in the dock of the UNSC for possible sanctions including an oil embargo. To make the resolution sufficiently propitious, a flurry of diplomatic campaigns were launched. However, a sudden turn around on the part of President Bush, who seems to have somewhat relented on the Iran issue, has taken many by surprise.

It will no doubt allow a reprieve to Iran which has been contentedly living under the threat of Damocles' Sword falling on it at any time. There has been a certain climb down also on the part of western capitals who however always favoured a negotiated settlement of the issue. But what has led to this refreshing change of mind is still a puzzle, although speculation abounds.

The discerning observers of the Gulf affair see it in a light that again highlights the geo-politics of the region splashed with the world's most sought after strategic com-



Much of the US hopes were dashed with the coming of a hard-line president in Iran.

modity. The countries, be they big or small, but dependent on oil imports, are increasingly reluctant to antagonise those endowed with oil.

EU-3 did realise that the UN sanctions including an embargo were the only effective way to punish a non-compliant Iran. But it also knew that the step would inevitably increase the oil price and damage the Western economy.

Therefore in punishing Iran, the West will be equally punished.

There could have been another secondary factor behind the climb-down. And that was the change in rotating membership of 35-strong IAEA board of governors and India's position on the issue. The pro-western countries that voted with the EU-3 and the US in September have since been replaced by Belarus, Cuba, and

Syria -- all of them anti-West.

Also India, which had voted for the EU-3 resolution in September, to raise the "yes" tally to 22, was expected to abstain on any fresh anti-Iran resolution -- thus reducing the pro-western total to a bare majority of 18 -- not a strong motion for sanction by UNSC.

There are reasons for India behaving differently this time. There is already an Iranian proposal

for \$22 billion worth supply of Iranian natural gas to India for the next quarter century. Between now and 2025 the import of hydrocarbon energy required by a fast industrialising India will substantially rise. Along with India, another fast industrialising country China also has joined the scramble for energy, thus reshaping the global geo-politics in favour of the oil-rich countries.

Big (right) Hafiz is former DG of BHS.