

Election reform

Let the dialogue begin

THE placing of a comprehensive reform agenda in parliament by the AL is good news for the entire country, and we are heartened that the centrality of parliament as a forum for the discussion and debate of issues of national importance is being reaffirmed.

The return of the main opposition to the chamber and the engagement by them with established parliamentary procedure is a vindication of the role that parliament should play in our national affairs.

By the same token, we commend the government response both to the AL return and to its placing of proposals. The response has been restrained and reasonable and leaves us with great hope that the sincerity to engage with the issue and come up with a workable solution exists on both sides.

This has been a good first step, but the question now is how to proceed. It has been The Daily Star's long-standing position that reform of the election commission and election laws are critical for credible elections. This has also been the position of much of the media and civil society, and the government has even agreed in principle to the need for electoral reform, and so it is fair to say that there is a quasi consensus on this issue. Thus the impasse on this issue should not be hard to resolve if both sides are sincere.

Perhaps one modality for proceeding would be for some of the more seasoned MPs from both sides of the aisle to get together to form an informal group to meet behind closed doors with an aim to moving the process forward. Such a gathering of those who sincerely wish to find a mutually acceptable solution, without the posturing and procedural wrangling which might mar the process in public, could be invaluable.

Let us not forget that the credibility of the coming election is at stake. The actions of the election commission thus far have only made things worse, but fortunately the situation is still salvageable if the opposition and government show good sense and negotiate in good faith. Neither side should lose sight of the fact that if there is no resolution of their differences, the nation will be plunged into crisis.

Delay in tendering

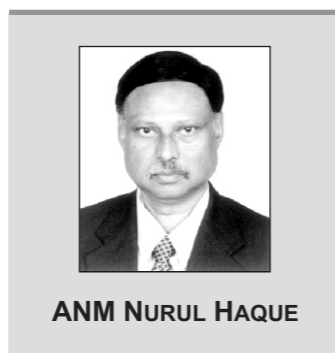
Power crisis deepens further

THE power sector has once again come under World Bank's scrutiny for the unusual delay in floating tenders for different projects. In fact, the WB has held this as being responsible to a great extent for the on-going power crisis, which has hit some vital components of the economy.

The state minister for power has admitted that there has been undue delay in tendering. We are told that the government will involve IFC, the private-sector finance arm of the WB, in the tender process with a view to making it transparent. The government is now doing what it deems best to accelerate the pace of tendering, but valuable time has already been lost. The power sector is plagued by myriad problems ranging from lack of the needed generation capacity to shortage of fuel. Obviously, resource constraints stand in the way of solving the problems. But lack of transparency in the tender process is a problem that brings us to the issue of corruption and politicisation that has nothing to do with shortage of funds. Newspaper reports indicate that tendering in all public sector projects and enterprises has been politicised to the extent where fair play has no place. Similarly, corruption is a highly debilitating factor when it comes to transparency and accountability.

The government has failed to handle the power crisis efficiently. Both the agriculture and industries sector are performing well below expectations due to shortage of power. This is bad news for the economy as a whole. But people expect to set things right in areas messed up by corrupt officials working in collusion with the elements having political clout. The government, indeed, owes an explanation to the nation as to why administrative measures like floating tenders could not be taken in time. After all, it is not desirable that our development partners will have to tell us to take corrective steps all the time in all important areas. Transparency in tendering in the power sector is something that we should have been able to ensure on our own. It's a lapse that speaks volumes for the disorder that now characterises the administration of public sector projects.

ACC and MCC



ANM NURUL HAQUE

THE government formed the much-vaunted ACC on November 21, 2004, and claimed that it was a landmark step of the government in order to fulfill its election pledge of combating corruption. The people at large welcomed the formation of the independent ACC and expected it to play a major role to control the unabated corruption in all sectors. But the commission and the government have been at odds since the commission came into being.

The ACC started functioning from November 22, 2004. The chairman sought all-out cooperation from the government, opposition political parties, and the people for effective functioning of the commission, and said the commission would succeed in getting rid of corruption if it got everyone's cooperation.

In a major move on January 1,

2005, the ACC asked 13 Secretaries of the government to explain to the commission within four days about 1,028 missing cars belonging to their ministries, which must have been deposited to the Central Transport Pool on completion of projects for which these vehicles were purchased. The prices of these missing vehicles were estimated to be Taka 200 crore. That was the beginning

submission of charge sheet would not be effective unless the president approves the rules.

The ACC has at long last submitted three charge sheets with Netrokona district court against nine people, including seven government employees, for misappropriation of government funds of about Tk 98.78 million.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh has been excluded from the list of

program launched nearly two years ago to provide additional US aid to countries that demonstrate progress in three main areas: governing justly, investing in people, and encouraging economic freedom.

The international development partners of the country on November 17, 2005 came down heavily on the government for its failure in curbing massive corrup-

omment works from the poor.

Ranking of Bangladesh as the most corruption afflicted country in the world by Transparency International for the fifth successive year is no doubt a matter of deep embarrassment for the nation as a whole. There may be dispute over the ranking of Bangladesh as the most corrupt country in the world, but there prevails no scope for denying the

operate independently and neutrally with sufficient powers to investigate any sort of corruption by any people without interference of any kind.

The people of this country have very bitter experiences with the now-defunct Bureau of Anti-Corruption, whose only job was to harass the opponents of the party in power. The people at large are anxious to see a really independent ACC, as they know to what extent corruption has penetrated every section of society.

Too much time has already been lost to make the ACC active. The differences of opinion of the chairman with two members has not yet been sunk as the government is yet to approve the rules required to make the commission operational, though the ACC has spent Tk 40 million (to the Asian Development Bank as the consultation fee under the "Supporting Good Governance Initiative" agreement) from the public exchequer to make it truly active.

But the crude reality is that unabated corruption has prevented Bangladesh from qualifying for MCC funding.

It has been learnt that the ACC is going to submit charge sheets on 45 major cases within a short time to cast away widespread doubt and frustration in the public mind. Let us wait and see.

BY THE NUMBERS

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of the crisis.

The finance minister gave a seven-day deadline on January 30, to the chairman and two members of the ACC to sink their differences of opinion about the operation of the commission. The ACC chairman, however, said that he would resign if he fails to make the commission functional. He said the ACC is going to submit charge sheets on 45 cases within the next week, while one commissioner and other officials said that the

countries selected for US assistance to be provided through the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) for 2006. The MCC at its board meeting held on November 8, 2005, selected 23 countries for the assistance to be provided under the millennium challenge account. The board has excluded Bangladesh from the list citing corruption as the reason.

The MCC administers the millennium challenge account, a

tion, for which the country is known in the world.

"The ACC will have to set an example by handling a big case within two or three weeks," said Praful C Patel, the World Bank Vice President, who is being regarded as the spokesperson of the foreign participants at the forum. He said that cost of doing business in Bangladesh had gone up due to corruption and law and order situation. These are also holding back the benefits of devel-

widespread corruption in the country.

This unabated corruption has negative impact on the country's economy, society, and the people as a whole. The common people of the country face innumerable problems in their day to day life events because of widespread corruption in the public service departments.

But the formation of the ACC can fulfill a long-standing public demand, only when it is allowed to

The symptom of a gathering crisis?

ABDUL HANNAN

THE Jatiya Sangsad by passing a censure motion on cartoons of Prophet Hajrat Muhammad (SM), published initially in a newspaper in Denmark and followed by other newspapers in Europe, demonstrated prudence and discretion. Now that the Danish prime minister and the Danish paper have recanted and apologized, what was needed was a strong and unequivocal statement of protest by the government conveying our deep distress and anguish and severe condemnation of the vile act considered not only blasphemous because the Islamic tradition prohibits pictorial portrayal of the holy prophet Muhammad (SM) but also because it denigrates and holds up to ridicule and hatred the religion of Islam. Earlier, the statements by the prime minister and the foreign minister were most appropriate and served exactly the desired purpose. Ayatullah Sistani, the Shi'ite leader in Iraq has criticized the Muslims for bringing bad name to the religion by postures of violence and intolerance. The relevance of holy Prophet Muhammad (SM), universally agreed as a quintessential embodiment of love, kindness, compassion and magnanimity, remains undiminished as ever in the lives of Muslims despite the hate and humiliation inflicted upon him by the cartoons.

Nevertheless, the publication of 12 cartoons, one depicting the holy prophet wearing a bomb shaped turban was indeed deeply offensive, extremely provocative and cynically disdainful of religious sensitivities of the Muslims, pleas of freedom of press and

freedom of expression within legal boundaries by European government leaders and newspapers, notwithstanding. But freedom of Press is never sacrosanct without duty and responsibility. Freedom of expression equates to neither an obligation to offend nor a duty to be insensitive to show hatred and disrespect to other religions and cultures. Besides, the spirit of the law is as much important as the letter of the law. What is important in this instance is to consider if it was the right thing to do. In Europe particularly in Germany and Austria there is a stern law against anti

September 30 last year. Australia later joined the fray.

There is no doubting that the cause of deep seated contempt for Muslims in Europe and elsewhere in recent times may be attributed to terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 and later terrorist bombings in Madrid, Bali, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, London and Turkey. Some unbalanced Western media reporting which depicted Muslims as 'an enemy within' also might have contributed to demonizing Muslims. The recent riots in France by disgruntled and disenfranchised North

and palpably unfair. The immigrant Muslim Diaspora on their part, as a defense against increasing hate campaign in the West, must make serious efforts to integrate and assimilate with the mainstream of host society without making their distinctive religious symbols and rituals unnecessarily much too apparent and conspicuous.

The reaction of the Arab and Muslim world to the cartoons was not knee jerk but predictable. The disgraceful cartoons lampooning the holy Prophet Muhammad (SM) sparked an incendiary of seething indignation and protest

the West, which was conciliatory and apologetic initially, has now become increasingly hostile and combative. The furor over the cartoons has now snowballed into precipitating a full blown international crisis. The UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has appealed for calm and the Arab League is taking the issue to the UN for a Resolution.

The crisis threatens the potential danger of so called 'clash of civilizations' between what is claimed as secular democracy of the West and traditional values of Muslim societies 'inherently intolerant and steeped in ignorance,

In the eye of the West every Muslim is a real or potential terrorist. A Muslim traveler or expatriate citizen is subjected to every conceivable indignity and damage. He or she, regardless of his or her age is brutally searched, finger printed and racially profiled. A Muslim expatriate citizen on suspicion is subjected to wire-tapping and eaves-dropping for 'security reasons'. A Muslim is held on suspicion without trial or access to due process of law and sent to languish or perish under torture and interrogation in US concentration camps and gulags in Guantanamo off the coast of Cuba, Abu Gharib in Iraq and Bagram air base in Afghanistan. A suspected Muslim terrorist is dispatched to Europe's detention centres by what has come to be known as the clandestine 'US rendition air flights'. Such discriminatory and repressive actions only spawn hatred and terrorists.

What is needed to defuse the crisis and usher in a brave new world of hope and decency, peace and prosperity for all is to stop racism and xenophobia and uphold what is right, just and honorable in the conduct of international relations, eschew mistrust and suspicion of Muslims and restore their right to a life of full dignity, end demonizing them, promote and foster genuine and egalitarian multiculturalism, abandon European and Pax-Americana imperialism project in the Middle East and allow true self-determination in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine.

Abdul Hannan is a former Press Counselor, Bangladesh UN Mission in New York.

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Semitic speech, writing and behavior, surely it is hypocritical to apply double standards when it comes to treating Muslims. There is no legal boundary or law to protect the Muslims from the ignominy from which the Jews are protected.

The publication of the cartoons, by all indications, was deliberate and pre-meditated, and was not a freak lapse of editorial judgment. It was neither an aberration but a recent trend of anti-Muslim bias in Europe. Editors across Europe from France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Norway, Netherlands, Austria and the Czech Republic rushed to repeat the cartoons as an act of defiance against what they described as 'radical Islam' in solidarity with the Danish paper which published the cartoons on

African youths blamed erroneously as Muslims and the killing of a Dutch film maker by a Muslim militant for portraying a picture of shabby treatment of women in Islam may have also contributed to feed the flame of anti-Muslim rage and Islamophobia in Europe. The Dutch in reaction to the killing, burnt Muslim schools and mosques. But the terrorists constitute a tiny aggrieved minority who have deep resentment at what they perceive to be injustice and oppression suffered by the Muslims in the Middle East in the hands of Israel and undemocratic surrogate and subservient states of the West in the region.

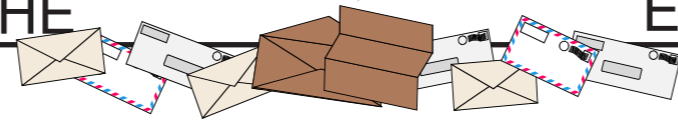
To stereotype the entire Muslim community in one broad brush as intolerant and violent is arbitrary

demonstrations. in the Middle East, Asia, Africa and Europe. What began as a spate of angry rhetoric and statements by scores of Muslim heads of state and government, diplomatic interventions by closure of missions and withdrawal of envoys and boycott of Danish and European products, soon gathered steam and escalated into violence by attack on the Danish embassies and burning of Danish and French flags in some Arab and other Muslim countries causing death to at least eight demonstrators in Afghanistan and Lebanon. If the utterances of President Bush, secretary of state Condoleezza Rice and some European leaders including the EU justice minister are any indication, the reaction of

bigotry and animosity towards the West'. Such prejudicial arguments about civilizations, assumptions underpinning sanctimonious superiority of European and American dominant culture, will only perpetuate widening the divide and chasm between the West and the Muslim world.

The uproar and the row over the cartoons is merely the symptom of a gathering crisis which is the culmination of a build up of escalating mutual distrust and suspicion, hatred and rancor between the West and Muslims, began since September 11 terrorist attack on New York and Washington. President Bush's war on terrorism, has no frontiers, no scruples, no law, no Habeas Corpus rights and civil liberties.

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



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

Tarek Fatah's article

At last we have someone concerned about this issue in a different way. From the Islamic perspective Tarek Fatah is right in his assessment about "the mode of reaction that should occur, and condemns the type of reaction, that has occurred due to power play or political colouring.

The daily humiliations and mocking that the prophet (pbuh) suffered was tethered, and contained, by stabilising patience, named sabran jameela. Yet the names with their understanding of Islam can still be inflamed by these derogatory remarks aimed at the prophet.

Worse still, these repudiators have fine-tuned their art of "getting under the average Muslim's skin"

Many of us understand that silence was perhaps the best reaction in these cases. But the world as you see has changed,

the polarisation process has already set in and groups having vested interests are going to spark the spill fuel.

These are jeopardizing lives and property, rights and benefits available to international immigration and emigrants, especially Muslim communities all over the world.

The Muslims should only make clear that the kufr may try and do their worst to obstruct and defame Islam, but they will never succeed to deter them from the path of proclamation and spreading the message of Islam. As during the period following the treaty of Hudaibya, the peace that ensued was a wholesome opportunity for the rapid spread of the message of Islam.

The issue raised here as a reaction to a cartoonist is indeed a detour from the proclamation and the spreading of the message, and heads towards conflict and

obstruction.
Mustapha Niwaz
On e-mail

Bangladesh-Pakistan relations

The prime minister went on a visit to Pakistan for two days beginning on 12 February. She is likely to sign a few business deals for mutual benefits. The visit and signing of a few deals are nothing unusual between two sovereign countries keeping individual national interests in right view. There are issues that come up during such visits. These are (1) Pakistan must seek 'apology' for the 1971 evils, (2) Pay back to Bangladesh Tk 4 billion (asset sharing) (3) Must take back nearly quarter of a million of the so-called Stranded Pakistanis (Biharis) without further delay. In fact, these are nothing-new but remain as hangover for over three

decades now. However, they are being repeated time and again after certain intervals, but nothing useful or constructive has been done so far. The governments of Bangladesh have not made any serious attempt to settle the matter.

About the due assets and properties of Bangladesh, I am not sure about the figure of Tk 4 billion. But how could this be a difficult matter to sort out provided it is just a matter of simple arithmetic. But I am afraid, this cannot be simple arithmetic on several accounts, I can see.

A columnist has emphasised that in order to have any constructive relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan in future 'majority' opinion must be taken into serious consideration. Well, this is very much a democratic view and a process one should be serious to ponder about. But we have to go back to

history to judge the situation correctly.

Prof M.T. Hussain
Ibrahimpur, Dhaka

Murder on the campus

As a student of Rajshahi University, it is a matter of great regret to me that a teacher has been brutally murdered on the campus. It has not only tarnished the congenial atmosphere of education but has also destroyed the image of the university, the premier seat of learning in North Bengal. We, the students, came to know that another teacher of the university has been arrested in connection with the murder.

The law enforcers must make sure that a fair investigation into the crime is carried out and also that the culprits do not escape lightly. The enormity of the crime is hard to describe.
Snal Goro

Rajshahi University

Blanket arrests

We have been playing fools in almost every sphere of our life. The long march organised by the 14-party alliance headed by the Awami League created a situation in which many people had to undergo an ordeal by innocence. Random arrests of the common people by the police prior to the long march created havoc in our social life. Thousands of the innocents are illegally put in the prisons in an unlawful manner and in a situation, as it appears, much akin to that of a pre war phenomenon. Over the last few days, the scenes at the jail gates are so horrendous and pathetic that only remind us of something as sinister as the anarchic act of the forces under a military junta. Thousands of men and women are gathering in front of the jail gate waiting for their relatives to be released from

the prison waiting for hours together. They are insulted and humiliated by the police. They are being mistreated, harassed and exploited-- media report, both electronic & the print. It was an unbearable scenario to watch on the TV thousands of men & women crying and accusing the police of the unprecedented tortures and sufferings being inflicted on them. Some complained that the police had been charging money from people for providing them with information regarding their relatives. The police at times lure people into a false hope of releasing their kith and kin. Thus the miseries of the commoners are multiplying. There are quite a lot outside the jail gate waiting for their only serving/earning man in the family now detained in prison following the blanket arrests by the police.

The High Court warned the government not to violate the

existing laws of the country. The highest judiciary has responded to the problem.

Unfortunately is the fact that the government is blatantly denying the charge telling that it hadn't ordered anything like that-- a ridiculous and absurd lie that is crystal clear even to a layman.

The innocent people are arrested on no ground or warrant and they're suffering so badly that reminds us of the medieval times. And that is a violation of all kinds of democratic norms.

It is time that the government took some measures to mend the damage done to these innocents and thought sensibly before dealing with any such incident in the future and ensure the rule of law so sadly compromised by the onslaught on common people.

Rafiqul Islam Rime
Agrabad, Chittagong