

Return to parliament

But why the delay in getting down to business?

THE parliament resumed sitting yesterday after a brief recess and the current session is scheduled to be pro-rogued on February 28 next week. The return to parliament of the main opposition Awami League has rightly been hailed by all and sundry as the most positive news in domestic politics in quite some time, but it must be stated that the effects of this return have been ultimately disappointing.

We are of the opinion that too much valuable time has already been lost. Yes, the AL has returned parliament, but as far as we can discern, none of the crucial items on the nation's agenda have been advanced as a result.

Let us make no mistake about it. The nation is facing serious issues which need to be addressed directly, the most prominent of these being the question of election reform. Let us leave aside the issue of caretaker government reform for the time being, about which there is difference of opinion between the opposition and the government. When it comes to election reform, the government itself is on record as admitting the necessity. So why the delay in getting down to business on that score?

We urge the ruling party to take up the issue of election reform immediately and in right earnest, and the opposition to respond with an open mind. Let us have no more of unproductive time wasting and no more shameful trading of mutual recrimination and dragging up of the past on the floor of the House which have marred the sessions since the AL return.

We urge the Speaker himself to be proactive and seize this opportunity to guide the affairs of the parliament in a productive direction. The opportunity for reform is there, but it must be seized before the momentum dissipates. Let us not forget that a missed opportunity will have dire repercussions, further worsening the political climate of confrontation.

The performance of both sides since the return of the AL has been disappointing. The nation has been treated to the unedifying and deeply embarrassing spectacle of the two sides simply haranguing one another in decidedly unparliamentary fashion. Enough of this. It is not sufficient for the two sides to merely attend parliament together. It is time to roll up their sleeves and do the nation's bidding.

Vaccination campaign against measles

A good project for the administration

IT is heartening to see that the world's largest ever vaccination campaign covering 34 million children is being undertaken here in Bangladesh, with international funding and collaboration. The state of our medical services in the country, to say the least, is not only poor but frankly inadequate, particularly in the case of infants and children. In the case of children in particular positive benefits can be obtained through effective immunization programs. Measles is the leading cause of death and disability amongst children in Bangladesh. Launching of this campaign of immunization therefore is not only timely and most appropriate, but also much needed.

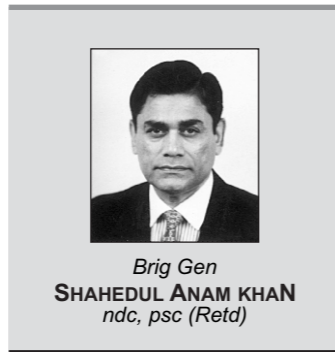
In implementation of the program, some 50,000 vaccinators and 750,000 volunteers will be engaged to cover 62 districts of the country. This is indeed a task of gigantic proportions that will test the management skills, particularly on the part of the administration and our health service assistants at ground levels. The concerned donor agency has already procured and distributed all the material ingredients and supplies required for the campaign. The relevant communication materials required for use of the media have also been made available.

We wish to see the success of this vital program aimed at protecting the health of millions of our children. All personnel involved should take pride in the fact that they are working for a program that is not only noble but also involve saving the lives of children who come from a comparatively poorer background. Given the sincerity and the right kind of attitude and drive, particularly on the part of the administration, the target set should be and is achievable. The implementation of the program may involve a comparatively larger area compared to any other project or programs under international collaboration, but the fact remains that it has also the natural advantage of being far less complicated and with few strings attached by the collaborating partner.

We in the media stand in readiness to play our part. With the opening of a number of new privately owned channels in the electronic media, the media campaign could be made even more effective and proactive. Care should however be taken on the part of the administration to orchestrate the campaign in a manner that is absolutely transparent.

Spurring democracy in Iran

The effect of interventions by the US in foreign countries has been counterproductive. A study conducted in the US by the Cato Institute in 1998 titled: "Does US Intervention Abroad Breed Terrorism?" quotes the Pentagon Defense Science Board asserting a strong correlation between increase in attacks on the US and its interventions abroad. The study very prophetically suggested that, "the US could reduce the chances of such devastating and potentially catastrophic terrorist attacks by adopting a policy of military restraint overseas." Alas, it didn't!



IT is a good exercise to propagate democracy around the world and even better if the major preoccupation of the lone superpower remains directed towards bringing it about in other countries. But the US's endeavour to promote democracy in Iran betrays the ill motives that provoke its policy towards the Gulf state.

Very recently the US administration had sought \$75 million to "spur democracy" in Iran. This is in addition, a sum nearly seven and half times, to what has already been

approved for a program, which is only a euphemism for activity directed towards destabilisation of the Islamic republic. How else does one characterise Ms. Rice's statement to a Congressional budget hearing that, "The United States will actively confront the aggressive policies of the Iranian regime, at the same time, we will work to support the aspirations of the Iranian people for freedom and democracy in their country," insisting that the US must support Iranians who are seeking freedoms under what she called a radical regime?

And this is not the first time that funding has been sought by the Bush administration for the purpose of deliberately destabilising a sovereign country. Readers may recall that the US Congress considered a similar bill in 2004 by senators Santorum and Cornyn in July 2004 entitled the "Iran Freedom and Support Act 2004." The purpose of the bill is interesting but not surprising, given the Bush administration penchant for establishing democracy around the world. The

two US senators had suggested that it should be the policy of the United States to support regime change for the Islamic Republic of Iran and to promote the transition to a democratic government to replace that regime.

The continuity in the US's Iran policy will be clear from the stated objective that Rice articulates in 2006 while seeking funds, and the objectives of the two senators in 2004, which among other things, sought to "deliver" the Iranian people from what the sponsors of the bill described as an "unelected" president.

The Congress had also passed a similar version of the bill in July 2003. These bills, by the very nature of their stated objectives, raise concern. Apart from the fact that the policy displays America's arrogant view of the world, and its passion for rectifying what it sees as aberrations in the political dispensation of other countries, particularly those of the Middle East, it would set a dangerous precedent if the perceived "undemocratic"

countries were sought to be chastised by others who considered themselves more democratic.

The Bush administration motivation, behind the emphasis that it is not the Iranians that it is at odds with but it is their attempt to help Iranians "win freedom from their government," pious as it may appear, is not entirely innocuous. Because, that is in sharp contrast to US views of democracy in other Middle East countries, particularly those that fall in the category of US allies. Only the other day, on a visit to Egypt as a part of the "democratization" of the Middle East tour, the US Secretary of State had said that it was not for the US to dictate the form of democracy that Egypt should adopt, while calling for support to "Iranians who are seeking freedoms under a radical regime?" One would like to ask, why is it that such a virtuous idea is being applied selectively?

As it is, there are two strands of opinion within the Bush administration on the issue of democratisation in the Middle East. One that supports free election, no matter which party or elements come to power, while the other, which is restrained by the prospect that democratisation does not merely mean elections, and that relevant democratic institutions need to be developed before such an exercise could be launched. Needless to say, the

second group is concerned at the prospect of Islamists taking over the region, democratically.

And the ostensible reason to democratise, a policy bandied about by the Americans as a cornerstone of US foreign policy, has been trotted out as an excuse for intervention in third countries. What in effect the US foreign policy had been designed to serve is very aptly summed up by William Blum, who says: "The engine of American foreign policy has been fueled not by a devotion to any kind of morality, but rather by the necessity to serve other imperatives, which can be summarized as follows: making the world safe for American corporations; enhancing the financial statements of defense contractors at home who have contributed generously to members of Congress; preventing the rise of any society that might serve as a successful example of an alternative to the capitalist model; extending political and economic hegemony over as wide an area as possible, as befits a 'great power.'"

One must, however, also note that the US record in democratisation is less than enviable. While the US has gone about helping to get rid of regimes, the process has seen large numbers of innocent deaths. And the success rate in so-called democratisation has been a paltry three percent or less. In fact

most of its interventions have been to prop up dictators and despots.

One hopes that "spurring democracy" on the part of the US is not a preamble to a physical intervention in Iran. Seymour Hersh's report in January 2005, of preparations underway for such an eventuality, was hardly refuted by the US administration. While that is a topic that requires addressing separately, suffice it to say that such a venture will have serious consequences, with prospects of wider conflagration, whose scope and intensity will be far greater than what has faced the US in Iraq.

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The author is Editor, Defence and Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

Reducing trade gap with Pakistan

National interest must be upheld first

What is considered necessary and sufficient "for reducing the existing trade gap" is conclusion of a bilateral PTA with provisions for duty-free and quota-free access of selected export items from Bangladesh. It would be prudent to evaluate pros and cons of the proposed FTA carefully before signing in the light of the experience of colonial exploitations our economy suffered from 1947 to 1971, prior to the advent of Bangladesh as an independent country. The government should uphold the national interests first and foremost.

GHULAM RAHMAN

THE Prime Minister on completion of her 3-day official visit to Pakistan has returned home. In parleys with her Pakistani counterpart Begum Khaleda Zia agreed to finalize a bilateral Free Trade Area (FTA) -- a proposal Pakistan tabled some time after BNP led 4-party alliance government came to power -- within the shortest possible time, by September, 2006, at the latest.

The conclusion of the proposed FTA is a necessary first step to re-integrate through discriminatory trade liberalisation the economics of two countries. Economic integration usually proceeds in a sequence -- preferential trading arrangement (PTA), free trade area (FTA), customs union (CU), common market (CM) and finally complete integration. Under a PTA, member countries impose lower or zero tariff on selected items of imports from each other than from non-member countries. Under an FTA the member countries free up trade among them but retain their own tariffs on outside world. A CU is an FTA with a uniform tariff on imports from non-members. A CM is a CU with complete mobility of labour and capital within the union. Finally, complete integration allows for harmonisation of domestic policies including the legal regime and foreign relations of the participating countries.

Fair and free multilateral trade promotes economic growth and welfare. Under a fair and free multilateral trade regime partici-

pating countries may improve the living conditions of their citizens by producing and exporting those goods and services in which they have comparative cost advantage and importing those which they produce less efficiently. The benefits of discriminatory trading arrangements (DTA), however, are not so obvious.

The discussion on the welfare and trade effects of DTA has been a major preoccupation of the trade theorists since the Second World War. Harvard economist Jacob Viner introduced the concepts of 'trade creation' and 'trade diversion' in 1950 to analyze them. Trade creation is the substitution of a lower cost source of supply from another member country for a higher cost domestic source in one or more DTA participating countries. Trade diversion is the substitution of a higher cost source of supply from a member country for a lower cost supply from non-member countries as a result of the elimination of tariff on imports from the members. In the case of the former, trade between partner countries expands in accordance with international comparative advantage and in the latter case, trade expands as a result of the preferential treatment given to imports from another member country as compared to those from the outside world. Viner argued that trade creation would increase the welfare of the member countries, while trade diversion would harm at least the member which had to pay a higher (tariff-exclusive) cost for the imported goods. He concluded

that an FTA or CU would be beneficial for a member country only if it gives rise to more trade creation than trade diversion.

The Daily Star in its February 14, 2006 issue reported that the purpose of the proposed bilateral FTA is "to create scope for easy access of Bangladeshi products to Pakistani market as a measure for reducing the existing trade gap". This is at best a half truth. FTA will also create equal opportunity for Pakistani products to enter into Bangladesh market tariff free. Imports from other countries as well as local industries would face uneven competition and might lose their market shares. If imports from Pakistan grow at a faster rate than the growth of Bangladesh exports to Pakistan, the existing trade gap will increase further.

Before 1971 the trade relations between the then East and West Pakistan were somewhat comparable to one likely to evolve under the proposed FTA. In the then Pakistan products of West Pakistan were sold in East Pakistan at exorbitant prices behind a high common tariff wall and foreign exchange earned by selling jute and jute products of East Pakistan was used for infrastructural and industrial development of West Pakistan. Former Prime Minister of Pakistan Benazir Bhutto in her autobiography "Daughter of the East" wrote "The majority province of East Pakistan was basically being treated as a colony by the minority West. From revenues of more than thirty one billion rupees from East Pakistan's exports, the minority in West Pakistan had built roads, schools,

universities and hospitals for themselves, but had developed little in the East." If not crafted carefully, under a bilateral FTA with Pakistan, a similar trade pattern may reemerge once again -- Pakistan selling its products in Bangladesh at high prices and Bangladesh settling its trade bill with Pakistan in foreign exchange earned from merchandise and manpower exports to the rest of the world.

In Bangladesh certain quarters in the interest of their political stratagem make big fuss about trade imbalances, particularly with India. In early stages of development it is normal for a country to have trade imbalance. What is important is the composition of its imports. If a country imports more machinery and raw materials for accelerating infrastructural development and to augment its industrial and agricultural outputs for domestic consumption and to expand its export base there is hardly any reason to be alarmed. But if the widening of the trade gap is due to import of luxury goods and consumer products the alarm bells should ring aloud.

Bilateral trade imbalances are of much less significance than global imbalance if importers of a country are allowed to import freely on a competitive basis from anywhere in the world. It is beneficial for us to import more from China, India, Thailand, Malaysia, Pakistan, etc because they are able to meet our requirements of machinery, raw materials and consumer goods at competitive prices. If we import less from these countries in order to narrow down the trade gaps our cost of production will increase, our exports will become less competitive in the global market and our domestic prices will also rise. With less imports our drive to accelerate economic development, to diversify the economy, to augment the level of employment, to boost

production and exports, to maintain adequate flow of consumer goods to meet the demands of a rising population to make their living more comfortable and to maintain price stability would face serious setbacks.

It is usual for a country to have trade deficits with some countries and trade surpluses with some others, particularly in the short and medium terms. The United States of America had 202 billion Dollars trade deficit with the People's Republic of China in 2005. We also have growing trade deficits with China, Thailand and Malaysia and host of other East and South East Asian countries. On the other hand we have trade surpluses with the US, Canada and the EU countries. However, persistent long term trade imbalances with neighbouring countries is a matter of grave concerns, which is indicative of structural deficiencies in our economy and may cause social and economic upheaval in the long run.

Of the South Asian countries the economy of India is poised to grow at a double digit and Pakistan's economy has also attained 7-8 percent growth rate. If Bangladesh economy with an enormous population of 140 million does grow at comparable rate stability in the region may face an insurmountable challenge. Regional integration through trade and other forms of economic cooperation is the time tested measure to avert such a possibility. The countries in the region could alleviate their abject poverty and improve the living conditions of the teeming millions through opening up their markets for each other's products, which would also help them in narrowing the trade gaps by putting the resources of each country to their best uses.

SAPTA agreement concluded under the auspices of SAARC in 1993 in Dhaka was a right step in

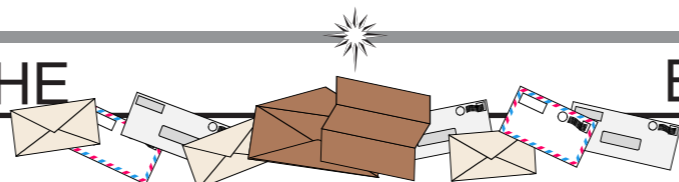
this direction, but for the lack of enthusiasm and sincerity of purpose of certain member countries it limped and failed to achieve its cherished objectives. SAFTA agreement, signed in Dhaka in 2005, is another laudable attempt to reinvigorate the regional efforts for economic development through trade expansion. The agreement was due to be effective from January 1, 2006, but for its non-ratification by Pakistan its implementation has now become somewhat uncertain.

Pakistan is eager to conclude a bilateral FTA, but it led a campaign openly against Bangladesh during WTO Ministerial Conference held in Hong Kong last December for not allowing its exports preferential access to wider world markets. Pakistan torpedoed it, when rest of the world was on board for granting our exports duty-free and quota-free entry into markets of developed and advanced developing countries, for which we painstakingly worked since the first WTO Ministerial Conference, held in Singapore in 1996. It is now pressing for conclusion of a bilateral FTA "as a measure for reducing the existing trade gap". What is considered necessary and sufficient "for reducing the existing trade gap" is conclusion of a bilateral PTA with provisions for duty-free and quota-free access of selected export items from Bangladesh.

It would be prudent to evaluate pros and cons of the proposed FTA carefully before signing in the light of the experience of colonial exploitations our economy suffered from 1947 to 1971, prior to the advent of Bangladesh as an independent country. The government should uphold the national interests first and foremost.

The author is former Commerce Secretary, Government of Bangladesh.

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.

Goodbye Cairns

He was a stalwart, he has curly hairs, and he was one of the best all-rounders in the history of cricket. When my eyes went to the picture of his farewell innings against the West Indies in the twenty 20 match on the pages of The Daily Star, I could not help but weep. The readers must have realised by now whom I am referring to. Chris Cairns was the best all-rounder of New Zealand. Cairns has so many records in the game; he holds the record of most number of sixes in test cricket (85) surpassing Sir Viv Richards'. He was such an all-rounder that it was very difficult to say in which department he was better in, batting or bowling? I met him and said hello to him in Dhaka when he came to play for the Rest of the World against the Asian XI. I will remember that day forever. Goodbye Cairns, we will miss you. **Muhammad Bin Abdullah Cox's Bazaar**

RU main gate

We, the students of Rajshahi University constantly run the risk of accidents every time we cross the main gate to attend our classes. Several accidents had occurred in the past in the same area. The authority is not concerned about it as they claim that it is the responsibility of Rajshahi City Corporation (RCC). But what will we do, when the responsibility of the construction of the bridge is oscillating between RU and RCC? Is there any possibility of a flyover bridge at RU main gate after all? **Masudul RU**

No Government Schools for 25 years!

The Daily Star of 13-Feb ran an alarming headline in the back page: "No govt school set up in Dhaka in 25 years". It is said that the situation is even worse in Chittagong where no government school has

been established since independence! Even, no land has been earmarked for this purpose! According to the concerned officials, sufficient non-government schools are in place. But can the government avoid the responsibility of monitoring/checking the quality of education, availability of requisite facilities and rationale of the fees charged by those schools? The most unfortunate twist to this saga is the education sector being politicised in the most unfortunate manner as the newspaper reports: "... the government had to stop adding to the government schools in the capital as well as across the country to tackle the problem arising due to pressure from the powerful political leaders who lobby for establishing new government schools and colleges in their own constituencies..."

Cutting the head off to cure the headache? **CNR Chittagong**

Dear Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen

It is very shocking and at the same time very unfortunate that a country seen by many (including me once) as tolerant and liberal as well as standing up for protecting the individual rights which include religion, has put itself in the centre of hate and outrage of the Muslims of the world. The publication of the blasphemous cartoons of our Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) by the Danish press is offensive, obnoxious, slanderous and thoughtless. Freedom of speech is being used as an excuse to insult our Prophet and therefore our religion.

This has proven to be a matter of a clash of civilisations, a clash of cultures and of communities, and it is the very Danish newspaper, Jyllands-Posten that has contributed to the fall of Denmark's image across the Islamic world.

The paper may have tried to depict a bunch of lunatics trying to deface and exploit the face of a religion, which in truth is benevolent, charitable, compassionate and humane and rejects as well as condemns extremism. But it has no right under freedom of speech to create a satirical image of the very symbol of that religion. Why should it mix politics with religion? In a country like Denmark it is unexpected and abnormal that such things are taking place

As the Prime Minister of your country, you have the moral responsibility to ensure that the Danish press do not indulge in such blasphemy again, because, by doing so once, it has ruined Denmark's image in the Islamic world. **Md. Umran Bin Kamran Chowdhury Gulshan-2, Dhaka**

Leaders' political visions and ideas

From 1971 to 2005 our leaders had

no ideology or vision to lead the country. It is a shame that we can't establish an ideological government. From the beginning of our Liberation our leaders always followed the rules and regulations of another country. Still now our development partners dictate our policy. Every government after Liberation has followed their prescriptions. Is this the country for which we have struggled nine months to liberate?

Still now we can't free the country of poverty and corruption. It is very unfortunate for those freedom fighters that had fought for our Liberation. I feel that the so-called good policies of the international financial institutions are the main causes of our economic instability in our country. Recently, one Bangla newspaper report, "Bad policy of World Bank and IMF: 4000 farmer's commit suicide in India" has opened my eyes. This is alarming for us. It could happen to us too. But our leaders are totally unconcerned.

The country is getting poorer and poorer because of weak policies adopted by our leaders. At this very moment the country needs ideologically motivated politicians, not ideas given by the West. We have enough resources like gas, oil, coal, water, manpower etc. If we want to be independent then we have to utilise these properly. **Riasat Hasan Khilgaon, Dhaka**

DS editorial

It is nice to read the editorial (dated 12th Feb. 2006) from a person who belongs to 'most of us who understand to use the freedom of speech with a degree of wisdom'. Freedom of speech is not to hurt others' feelings. Isn't it right?

I would love to share some portion of the article by Malcolm Fraser, Prime Minister of Australia from 1975 to 1983, with your readers. He wrote, "In 1997, there

was an exhibition of photographs by American artist Andrew Serano at the National Gallery of Victoria. Many regarded the exhibition as offensive to Christ. Churches and others objected. The Catholic Church sought a court injunction. The objections were strong. A youngster eventually damaged Piss Christ with a hammer. Violence was involved. The exhibition was closed. We have right to free speech and expression but that law in some instances circumscribes right. The worst excesses are covered by defamation laws or laws relating to racial or religious vilification. These set the bar very high and most of us understand that if we wish to live in a civil society where there is broadly harmonious relationship between different groups, races and religion, we must exercise that right with common sense and hope-fully, with a degree of wisdom." **Dilruba Shahana Melbourne**