

Dhaka, Delhi forge better understanding

A new phase in friendship in the making

THE visit of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia to India, the first ever in her second tenure, that the PM has described as a trip to usher in a 'new phase in friendship' between the two neighbouring countries, looks to have definitely advanced mutual understanding and cooperation.

We are heartened to see that the two leaders, Khaleda and Indian PM Manmohan Singh, appear sincere in their desire to improve relations and lower tensions, as there is nothing for either country to gain from bad relations and much to gain from better ties.

The most encouraging sign so far is that there appears to have been a willingness on the part of both the leaders to go the extra mile in order to bring relations to a more amenable level.

This is crucial. On both sides of the border there are hard-liners who do not wish to see relations improve. Similarly, speaking frankly, both Bangladesh and India have legitimate issues with one another that the other country has often dismissed out of hand, and it is this refusal to engage with the other side's concerns that has done the most to strengthen the hand of the hard-liners and made rapprochement so difficult.

The talks between Khaleda and Manmohan are noteworthy for having crossed this hump. We have seen that most major issues have been placed on the table and confronted. The specifics may not have been thrashed out, but the mere fact that the sensitive issues have been raised face to face and been given a hearing is in itself a confidence building measure.

India has taken Bangladesh's concerns with the bilateral trade deficit seriously and inked a deal that is largely a renewal, albeit on a more non-adhoc basis, of an accord signed more than two decades ago. She also sees the need for lowering non-tariff barriers. The anti-smuggling deal augurs well, too. What's obviously cheery news is the consent to have Sealdah-Joydevpur railway link.

The talks have fostered a congenial atmosphere whereby issues can be addressed and dealt with in a cooperative manner in depth and detail. On this count alone the dialogue must be judged to have been extremely encouraging.

Clean candidates for next election

A campaign heralded

WE welcome the floating of a Citizens' Group with eminent civil society members with a view to developing a mid-term vision of progress for Bangladesh and launching a campaign for clean, honest and competent candidates in the next general election which are intertwined agenda. We are proud to be part of the initiative taking shape by virtue of the CPD, Prothom Alo and Daily Star dialogue on National Election, 2007, held in Dhaka Monday.

Over the years, we have seen how corruption, criminality and use of muscle power engulf electoral processes through the last three general elections since 1991 preventing the emergence of honest and efficient leaders at the forefront of national affairs. In order to address the concerns arising out of this realisation, that the civil society has formed a group with the leading pro-active citizens.

The entire nation looks forward to an election with clean candidates. This can no longer be a mere wish; it has to be a tangible reality by getting the fundamentals of an election process right. To ensure clean electoral contests the basic imperative is to obtain disclosure of wealth of the candidates. In fact, all their antecedents and records must be made known to the voters to enable them to meaningfully exercise their right of choice.

The High Court last year had issued an eight-point directive to the Election Commission requiring it to collect and make public all information regarding a candidate's wealth, his/her personal records etc. which the EC must now be prepared to comply with.

The group is to put pressure on major political parties to field good candidates in the first place. Moreover, it will try and raise the consciousness level of people so that they demand to know all about the candidates and no undesirable elements can sneak through the system.

Democracy is the best system of governance and nothing but good elections can ensure its true efficacy. And for good elections, we need honest candidates.

The costs of irresponsibility



M ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

IRRESPONSIBILITY, generally denoting untrustworthiness, undependability, unreliability, arbitrariness, whimsicality, capriciousness and carelessness, has become an important menace in every sphere of our national life, whether it is political, administrative, financial or otherwise. Irresponsibility has grasped the individuals, organisations and government. But we are yet to properly ascertain the costs and effects of this menace.

The people of independent Bangladesh dream of a democratic state that would protect the fundamental rights granted to them by the constitution which was enacted on November 4, 1972 and came into force on December 16 of the same year. People first saw infringement upon their fundamental rights and democracy with the adoption of Constitution (Second Amendment) Act, 1973 and the Constitution (Fourth Amendment) Act, 1975, the former providing for suspension of fundamental rights through insertion of emergency provisions and the latter replacing multi-party parliamentary democracy with one-party dictatorial presidential system of government.

The arbitrariness, whimsicality and capriciousness, which are important traits of irresponsibility, of the top leadership of the then ruling AL thus led to the demise of the parliamentary democracy within a period of less than three years from its introduction and stalled the growth of democracy in the newly independent country.

BARE FACTS

Irresponsibility is noticed even in our macro-level planning and in the inclusion of projects in the annual development programme. The finance and planning minister M. Saifur Rahman is on record to admit that populist or vote-oriented projects are getting priority over schemes that are really important for the economic development of the country.

Reintroduction of parliamentary democracy in 1991 after 15 plus years of dictatorial military and presidential rules through the Constitution (Twelfth Amendment) Act has not as yet demonstrated success in giving democracy a strong foundation due to the confrontational politics of the BNP and the AL that have been ruling the country in succession since 1991.

Personal animosity between Sheikh Hasina, the AL president and daughter of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of the nation, and Begum Khaleda Zia, the chairperson of the BNP and wife of Ziaur Rahman, a liberation war hero who read out the proclamation of independence over the radio, their accusing each other irresponsibly and their uncompromising attitude towards the burning national issues like reforming the caretaker system of government, the Election Commission and the electoral laws, coupled with their desire to establish a dynastic rule, have made the whole nation hostage and put the nascent democracy at stake.

Administrative irresponsibility has been widespread among the political masters and the civil servants. Since independence, the successive political governments have meticulously taken necessary steps to patronise "their men" in the administration. Patronisation has generally taken the following forms: (a) appointing the activists of the student-wing of the party in power as well as the relatives of the political masters to the cadre and non-cadre posts in the civil service; (b) making and unmaking rules for giving the

party supporters and relatives of the political masters promotion to the key posts in the Bangladesh secretariat, commonly known as the seat of the government; (c) giving the party loyalists prized postings at home and abroad; and (d) giving contractual appointment to such of the retired loyal officials who shall exist only to carry out the orders of the political masters.

As a result of such irresponsible behaviour of the political party/parties in power from time to time, the civil servants have come to be designated as inefficient, ineffective, corrupt and partisan. We thus find the prime minister recently regretting: "The documents once prepared at the tables of deputy secretaries and joint secretaries are now being done through appointment of consultants."

Sometimes, certain activities of many civil servants, particularly at the higher echelon of the administration, speak of their irresponsible behaviour. On February 4, one Dhaka daily carried a report under the headline: "Bureaucrats pay little heed to JS body advice" which said that secretaries of most of the ministries did not follow the Public Accounts Committee's decision to place in the committee's meeting on February 2 the audit objections that remained un-discussed by the committee between financial year 1971-72 and 1989-90.

A Dhaka weekly in its January 9, 2006 issue carried a special report which said that on the invitation of a professional tadbiraj, more than one hundred senior government officials,

including over a dozen secretaries to the government, attended a merry-making function arranged at Chandra, Gazipur on January 4. By attending such a function, the concerned officials not only violated the government servants' conduct rules, but also compromised their job pride. More such instances may be cited.

Those who have the authority to incur any expenditure or enter into any liability involving expenditure from public funds must exercise their prudence in doing so. For incurring or authorising expenditure from public funds, emphasis has to be given on the following principles:

— The authorised person will exercise the same vigilance in respect of expenditure from public moneys as a person of ordinary prudence will exercise in respect of expenditure of his own money.

— The expenditure should not be prima facie more than the occasion demands.

— No authority should exercise its powers of sanctioning expenditure to pass an order which will be directly or indirectly to its own advantage.

— The amount of allowances granted to meet expenditure of a particular type should be so regulated that the allowances are not on the whole a source of profit to the recipients.

But, we often come across media reports regarding misuse of authority for incurring or authorising expenditure from public funds.

The media has recently reported about the chief whip Khandaker Delwar Hossain's lavish entertainment bill. Commenting on the issue, The

Bangladesh Observer in its editorial on March 14 wrote: "The issue is distasteful to say the least. It hurts to comment on such a bizarre matter involving the Jatiya Sangsad's Chief Whip Khondker Delwar Hossain. But we are helpless. If someone in that position does not feel ashamed to take all the daily necessities for his residence, at least the nation should. We do not know how much the party that has nominated him to the position wants to trample the image of the Jatiya Sangsad (JS) and the country. As the Prothom Alo reports, two lists of victuals and daily necessities are sent to the JS VIP cafeteria each month enough for two families for a whole month. No answer to why provisions of almost the same amount on two lists are required is however available."

In its editorial on March 17, The Daily Star commented: "The drawing of entertainment allowance by the chief whip's office at the rate of Tk one lakh per month in provisions and cash from the Parliament Cafeteria has caught our attention. During the last eight months of the fiscal 2005/2006 the chief whip has drawn nearly Tk 8 lakh as compared with Tk one and half lakh on an average by other whips. The way the chief whip has defended himself against the exposure has betrayed an insensitivity on his part to the seriousness of the issue at hand. He says he has not committed any act of illegality, a claim which of course is expected to go through scrutiny under the financial rules in due course; but it is certainly a question of ethics, morality and, above all, propriety that has been given rise to. Little wonder, some of the former whips have described the matter of drawing rations for his residence by the chief whip as unheard of and unprecedented."

Irresponsibility is noticed even in our macro-level planning and in the inclusion of projects in the annual development programme. The finance and planning minister M. Saifur Rahman is on record to admit that populist or vote-oriented projects are getting priority over schemes that

are really important for the economic development of the country.

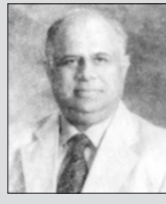
The nation is going through a severe crisis. The economic plight of the country has reached unprecedented levels with the persisting problems of fuel scarcity and price spiral of essentials coupled with problems of politics and militancy. And there is no end in sight to the plight of the common man. The governor of the Bangladesh Bank has reportedly said that he does not understand why there is a foreign currency crisis in the country. If he does not understand, the relevant question is: who knows?

Inattention to workplace safety has resulted in a number of tragedies in the country's garments industry. According to International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (ITGLWF), in the five years prior to 2000, there were 30 fires in the garments industry of Bangladesh which claimed over 250 lives. The ITGLWF apprehension of massive disasters in the country's garments factories came true with the recent devastating fire in the KTS Composite Textile Mill in Chittagong and collapse of a multi-storey building in Dhaka. Mentionable that last year, after the Spectrum Factory collapse at Savar, the ITGLWF in an investigative report warned that such tragedy could have happened in any one of 1,000 other factories and a similar accident would soon happen again unless something was done immediately. But the irresponsible garments factory owners paid little heed to that advice.

It appears from the above discussion that irresponsibility has been adversely affecting the nation's growth and development in its various spheres. But this menace has so far received little attention of the academics, the civil society members and the media. The earlier we all shun our irresponsible behaviour, the better it is for the nation.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary to the Government.

Five decades as a republic



IKRAM SEHGAL
writes from Karachi

PAKISTAN chose not to become a republic till March 23, 1956. Five decades on (and 35 years almost to the day the "First Republic" came asunder), we must take stock of where we are today, and where the "Second Republic" will be in the future. One may take lessons from the past, it is no use lamenting the many mistakes made, they are the stuff of history and fortunately, despite our best efforts, we are still in existence. Predictions range from dire pessimism to the optimistic "feel good" churned out by the establishment's propaganda machine, it would be in the scheme of things to hold that the truth is somewhere in-between, but would that be true? Most developing nations without access to windfall oil revenues (or some cash resource along that kind) face problems of varying magnitude and are coping with them. There have been some gains and some losses. Simplistically stated, the gains are mainly in the economic field, the losses mainly political. Defying the laws of nature, we are geo-politically stronger than ever before, due (with some individual credit to Pervez Musharraf's decision-making) to favourable circumstances than our own abilities and performance thereof.

Democracy is representative of the will of the majority, our major problems stem from experimenting

AS I SEE IT

Pragmatism must govern our policies, including the rush to "unfettered" democracy. As long as the masses can retain their self-respect and pride, they will be willing to compromise their freedoms. If one were to compare political emancipation to economic amelioration, the mass of the people would prefer food on the table for the family and their security than the freedoms one enjoys in a pure, unadulterated democracy. The minimum common requirement for Pakistanis is freedom from want while retaining our sovereignty and self-respect.

with various models of imperfect democracies. Is every adult vote cast freely in the manner democracy requires it to be meaningful? Does the majority really rule? Or are we hostage to a powerful minority? While doing away with the "first past the post" system and opting for a second round to get an absolute majority, we must also go for "proportional representation." All elected posts must be contested through direct elections e.g. elections to the Senate, post of President, PM, etc. It is the right of the masses to choose whom they want as their leaders, not a handful of electors who can be influenced, bought, manipulated, coerced, etc. The Senate elections are a standing reminder that in its present form democracy is a hypocrisy. The Senate must be credible in any Federal Republic like Pakistan, all posts being truly representative of the people.

Blessed with a pro-active superior judiciary presently, will this fluke of nature survive change of incumbency? To ensure the rule of law prevails, the Honourable judges are themselves setting about putting their house in order, setting in motion method and means to rid themselves of the corrupt and incompetent from among their midst. Problems at the grassroots level take place mainly

because of a lack of experience as well as acute shortage, why not induct civil servants and Armed Forces officers with spotless careers and with a reputation for maturity and good judgment to opt for the judiciary in the last quarter of their service or even during early period of retirement? Preference should be given to those who could not be promoted because of a lack of vacancies despite their good performance. As magistrates (their appointment level depending upon rank and length of service) they can serve in the area of their preference after retirement.

Education has to get a priority. The Musharraf regime is correctly concentrating on Higher Education but in churning out more PhDs we must not compromise on quality. Teaching jobs across the board must become lucrative careers on the corporate pattern, enhanced salaries, perks and privileges will attract better quality of teachers.

The law enforcement agencies (LEA) desperately need meaningful and practical reforms. Tapped in 2000 by Lt Gen (Retd) Moynuddin Haider, then Federal Interior Minister, to be part of "Police Reforms Commission," we endured a few frustrating meetings badly polarized due to a battle for turf between senior bureaucrats members and police representatives (all honourable,

competent officials), we made no progress whatsoever. With the help of Liaquat Merchant, Senior Advocate, Jamil Yousof (then Head of CPLC) we produced a comprehensive document addressing most issues. The Commission went over it sentence by sentence without any major dissent or comment. After a few more meetings, Jameel Yousof and myself were never called again, that document never saw the light of day. The inability of enforcing the rule of law is more acute in the rural areas where the most powerful local landowner/enforce their personal rule. Despite the government's best efforts, police stations remain "no go" areas for law-abiding citizens, particularly women. The conflicting demands of local politicians is their areas has corrupted the situation, further complicated by increasing acts of terrorism in the country.

We must implement land reforms which are already in the statute books or society will continue to remain governed by an elite handful who play a game of musical chairs in the government. The political parties are populated mostly by feudals and a growing number of industrialists, only the MQM and MMA are really truly representative of the people in that sense. India carried out land reforms fairly early in its existence, across a broad spectrum of society this is now reflected as relatively an

even dispensation of wealth, justice, etc. Given India's population, myriad number of races and religious, sects and other divisions thereof, the social situation would have been horrendous if land reforms had not been implemented.

While we have unenviable record in the matter of corruption, only a few steps behind Bangladesh, the Musharraf regime certainly deserves credit for bringing to task a good number of politicians and bureaucrats for past misdemeanors. While accountability has been selective, some accountability is better than none at all. We must do away with "plea bargaining." One cannot bargain with crooks, it subverts the concept of justice. To assuage public perception a greater modicum of public self-accountability in the Armed Forces is required. The lasting legacy of the Musharraf regime will be the accountability process, the regime's place in history will be assured when accountability is applied equally across the whole spectrum of society.

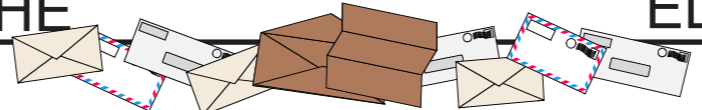
Foreign policy must follow a concerted direction based on a well thought-out "National Security Strategy." For over 50 years our foreign policy has been a passage to nowhere, a rudder-less ship adrift in a choppy ocean, with a few nations intent on enforcing their "doctrines" through the modern version of "gun-boat diplomacy." Pakistan has just had a stiff dose thrust down our collective throats of the two-centuries old-George Washington admonition to Americans in his farewell address as the first US President, to quote "never make inveterate friends or inveterate foes," unquote. Sometimes we are the cornerstone of US policy, sometimes we are treated worse than their enemies. Five decades as an "independent republic," are we really independent? Following a course suited to the best interests of the nation? Independent sovereignty as a nation is

possible because of our geographical location in the region. Unfortunately most of our policies are crafted by those whose inclinations are suspect, how many of our senior foreign service cadre have settled abroad? Foreign policy must be an amalgam of mass wish and pragmatism, unless of course the mass wish is suicidal by virtue of ignorance. Nothing is more important than the comfort and welfare of the masses, even if we have sometimes to bite the bullet, as Pervez Musharraf did, to his everlasting credit, after 9/11. After having lost more than 600 combat deaths and several thousand wounded in the "war against terrorism" we found the bullet we bit was no chocolate-cookie.

Pragmatism must govern our policies, including the rush to "unfettered" democracy. As long as the masses can retain their self-respect and pride, they will be willing to compromise their freedoms. If one were to compare political emancipation to economic amelioration, the mass of the people would prefer food on the table for the family and their security than the freedoms one enjoys in a pure, unadulterated democracy. The minimum common requirement for Pakistanis is freedom from want while retaining our sovereignty and self-respect.

Ikram Sehgal, a former Major of Pakistan Army, is a political analyst and columnist.

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.

Water sharing

In reply to a question, our State Minister for Water Resources said on 15-02-06 that if our water problems with India are not solved, then Bangladesh will go to International Court of Justice.

It may be recalled that as early as June 4, 1996, I suggested in my article under the caption "The Farakka: Problems and Solution" (See BO dated 4.6.96 and 6.6.96) that for securing our due share of water, we should file an appeal to the International Court of Justice or an International Tribunal as was done by Spain for resolving the Lake Lanoux dispute, which was eventually settled by the Lake Lanoux Arbitral Tribunal, while rejecting France's claim for absolute territorial sovereignty over its river. It held, "Territorial sovereignty plays the part of a presumption. It must bend before all international obligations. Whatever their origin."

Bangladesh should lodge a strong protest with India asking it to immediately stop its River Linking Project, construction of

Tipaimukh dam on the river Barak and other dams and barrages on 54 common rivers and conclude water treaties with us to share water of all the rivers on a just and equitable basis, as per existing international laws and practice in this regard.

Mohammad Mujibur Rahman
On e-mail

A vicious cycle?

While the controversy over the cartoons published in the widely circulated Danish daily Jyllands Posten (and subsequently other European newspapers) has spiralled out of control, I am left wondering what is my own reaction. The reaction of the vast majority of the Muslims is an apt reflection of the very dichotomy that faces Muslims today. It is undeniable from a Muslims' viewpoint that it is unacceptable to depict any images of any prophet. To be a Muslim implies recognition and acceptance of all prophets. Yet, Muslims by and large have, by silent consent, allowed depictions of Jesus, Moses, and

other prophets to go unchallenged. Nevertheless, Muslims and upholders of faiths from across different belief platforms are reacting to this event-why?

Reaction over the cartoons is two-fold (interestingly an important detail left out in most reports)- depiction of the prophet (pbuh) and offensive caricature that aims to insult. If it were only depiction of the prophet (such as Jesus in Passion of the Christ or Moses in Ten Commandments), the upheaval would probably have been different, undoubtedly more contained in nature. It behoves us not to recognise that the content reeks of satire and ridicule, hurting the very core of human dignity.

Freedom of expression has to come with an urgent sense of responsibility to have credibility, even when protesting against injustice. Even as the cartoonists themselves jeopardised their own legitimacy, so does emotional chaotic outburst, manifested in holding all Danish companies and citizens responsible for the thoughtless act

of a marginal group of people, take away from the integrity of protest. For so many, the immediate onslaught of reaction has resulted in confusion. On one hand, they can perceive the transgression of civility but they are alarmed by the reactionary outburst.

Expression is of paramount importance in a world where the communication gap seems ever widening between different belief structures. Let's take a minute and think of how Muslims and non-Muslims alike would react to a racist cartoon against an African American or Jewish American published in this century. The world would find it unacceptable. The Muslim world finds itself operating on the margins of being considered part of that world. Why that is so is a discussion beyond the scope of a cursory blurb. For now, it is a truth that one simply cannot ignore—this recent event has muted more support for freedom of expression, at the expense of transgressing the very essence of human dignity that freedom of expression is meant to

uphold, than what the 21st century would want to claim in retrospect.

Does that then mean that torching down Danish embassies, boycotting their products, and holding counter-protests calling for cartoons that ridicule other faiths are the optimum reaction?

So, it's a catch-22. For believers and non-believers (by that I mean theists and atheists and the entire spectrum that lies therein) alike, it is a situation that can only keep getting worse. Let us then continue with this "you did, I did, you did I did" chronic syndrome of apathy... and widdle our thumbs for the end of the civil world, boxed in the narrow confines of our socio-religious-ethnic identities.

Naureen Ali
Chambersburg, PA

Let there be more light

With the havoc caused by the acute power shortage in the country, students sitting for the SSC examinations are the worst victims. One

finds oneself in a position of extreme hopelessness since, apart from the talks/agitations from almost all corners of the society, the situation is not changing.

And one wonders if there is any way out of this mess. We wish that there be more candles and lights for us!

Rafiqul Islam Rime
Agrabad, Chittagong

Butterfly Wings

Somarante Dissanayake is a disciple of the great Sri Lankan filmmaker Lister James Parez. Soma's film Butterfly Wings is a beautiful story, a real story of poverty and deprivation. It is a narration of the day to day struggle of a family literally living from hand to mouth... It is the story of a poor child who has a dream... a dream of owning a bicycle (and in a way takes one back to the all time Italian classic film The Bicycle Thief). Is it possible for Sira to make his dream come true? He thinks he can make his dream come true and so

he makes several attempts to do so. Alas, he fails only to learn that destiny is all set for him with unmatched pain and the pathos all the way through.

The story is also about another physically impaired child, who is Sira's sister, and is happy, as she has accepted her limitation.

Towards the end of the film the distinction even in death between the rich and the poor is highlighted by the burial services. The film touches on the inadequacies of juvenile justice, where people do not even know how to talk to a child! For the poor, food and shelter take priority over children's education. These are very strong messages for the audience. During the lifetime of a poor family, child molestation, child labour and cheating are common matters and a poor woman's pride and honour are a priceless commodity and cannot be traded in the market place.

The story, script and direction are good... which only prove that Soma is a dedicated and serious filmmaker. The end of the film

brings to my mind an unanswered question. Poor people are neither isolated nor alone from others of their kind, then was this the only poor family in the area? Why was the film called Butterfly's Wing and not Sira's Dream or Bicycle Dream?

Farida S
On e-mail

Police clearance certificate

I am a Bangladeshi now living in the UK. I need a police clearance certificate to apply for immigration to Canada. But I cannot find any form in Internet.

I also need a police clearance certificate from the UK. All the information is available online. I do not need to go to the police station to get a certificate. I can apply by post.

I think the media should focus on such issues in the interest of expatriate Bangladeshis.

SMSI
London