The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA THURSDAY MARCH 30, 2006

Return to the dialogue path

Confrontation will be counterproductive

IN a preemptive move, the government has imposed 24-hour ban on gathering in the immediate vicinity of the Secretariat, the hub of civil administration, in reaction to the 14-party alliance's two-hour sit-in programme. The opposition programme was announced to press home its demand for electoral and caretaker government reforms.

Many tended to view the recent exchange of letters as a sign of thawing of ice between the two camps, which, we would still like to believe has the potential of going forward if the leaders of the major political forces can play their cards well with wisdom and flexibility rather than emotion. It is being widely felt that the initiative for dialogue should be given a fair chance as per the norms of a democratic polity. Besides, the reforms issue will have to be resolved before an election can take place fairly and squarely. We cannot but voice our surprise at the deterioration within such a short time of the outlook for a constructive engagement between the two sides, which emanated from the recent exchange of communication.

The government's hardline stance every time a big programme is announced by the opposition alliance only adds up to its record of denial of space to dissent which is a part and parcel of a functioning democracy. In Bangladesh's political history there are examples of organising sit-in programmes by various parties in the opposition including BNP. Moreover, the 14-part alliance had made known that they would stage the sit-in wherever they are intercepted. If that be the case, why must a ban be imposed?

The opposition being resolute on staging the programme with the attitude of 'come what may', and the government insistent on a tough line, the propensity to confrontation has increased and this must be handled with great caution to prevent clashes taking place. We urge restraint from all concerned.

CEC, MP face contempt charge

Prestige of the Court must be upheld

THE conduct of the chief election commissioner since his assumption of the post has been, to say the least, contentious and controversial. Perhaps one of the most unsettling aspects of his tenure so far has been the lack of respect and deference he has shown to the rulings of the Supreme Court. Coming, as it does, from one who is still a sitting judge of the Supreme Court, we have always found the stance of the CEC confounding.

Now that the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court apparently has had enough of this continued hostility and issued a suo moto contempt rule against the CEC as well as a BNP lawmaker, the issue of the deference the CEC owes to the nation's highest court can finally be dealt with once and for all.

The suo moto rule is in fact merely the latest turn in an increasingly bizarre struggle between the CEC and the Court, during the course of which the CEC has seen fit to flout and countermand the Court's orders.

The issue began with the High Court verdict on the preparation of the voters' list. The CEC paid no heed whatsoever to it. He filed a petition for leave to appeal, which is his right, but continued with the preparation of the voters' list in the meantime without waiting to see how the Appellate Division dealt with his appeal, which was certainly a telling action.

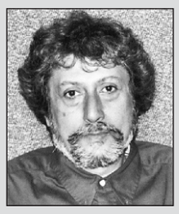
It is in this leave to appeal application that the CEC's counsel had asked for a full bench to hear the application and also appended a letter from the BNP MP which seemed to suggest no confidence in the four-person bench before which his appeal was to be heard.

The CEC and the MP will have the chance to respond and we hope that the matter can be resolved with minimum of fuss.

But the important thing is that the CEC understand that he is subject to the Court, and that the principle of the supremacy of the laws and the courts is upheld. It is important that we establish and reiterate that we are a nation of laws and that even government or statutory functionaries must comply with the rulings and verdicts of the Court.

Hell-bent on going to heaven!

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY



SHAHNOOR WAHID

Interesting to know that the fearless Shaikh has boldly declared that he does not need to take bail from this earthly court. Hmmm, janab Shaikh, how come you finally surrendered to the very much earthly law enforcers of the country? How come you used earthly chemicals, detonators and mobile phones and tons of earthly money to keep your operation going? So, sire, when you have to kill innocent people you need everything earthly that is available. But when it comes to saving your own skin you talk of divine support.

OVER the years the social, economic and political progression has successfully resulted in dividing our society into two unequal halves. On one side are those few, mercifully endowed with the now-rare attribute called sense, and on the other, the brute majority of men and women remaining insensible to any and everything.

Hence, the name of this column. If one will give a careful look around, one will find that the veneer of civility is peeling off at a rapid pace from society, thereby exposing the moth-eaten blemishes here and there. And insensibility is no more considered a mental aberration that needs to be treated on an urgent basis.

Of late, the collective media have been assiduously bringing bizarre "breaking stories" to our dining tables every morning, to spoil our breakfast, and keep our senses under clouds of confusion for the rest of the day. Last two months it was on the "arrest them, arrest them not" drama concerning the terrible terrorists of the country.

One must appreciate the brave young reporters spending hours in front of the houses for a glimpse of the VIP terrorists holing up inside. They have been providing running commentary of every move the men and women made inside, and also of the chaotic running about by the Rab members outside (It seemed everyone in black gave orders to one another but no one carried them out).

Thanks to the TV channels, besides the graphics of Shaikh Abdur Rahman surrendering live, we have had the rare privilege of looking at the anointed commode used by the Shaikh in his Sylhet house toilet. Think of it! Even CNN or BBC or even Al-Jazeera could not show us Bin Laden's toilet no matter how desperately they tried with the help of all the satellites hovering over the area. Imagine blowing up the holy toilet house with a rocket while the world's number one terrorist was relieving himself of earthly waste! So, Bangladeshi media is one up on that count, I must say.

Wait, wait, we have more that should go into the dossier on the "War on Terror" as "first time ever." This is for the time in Bangladesh history that fire brigade water has been hosed down in full fury inside the houses, both in Sylhet and Comilla, to flush out terrorists! We haven't heard of using this watery tactic against terrorists in recent history. I only know of an incident during the Second World War and it was about three or four French resistance fighters who had taken shelter in the basement of a big house in suburban Paris after successfully killing a German general.

When grenade charges could not bring them out, the Germans beamed down water from a fire brigade vehicle and at one stage when the basement got filled with water the guerrillas had no option left but to come out and surrender. Coming back to Bangladesh, I wonder how could the fire brigade vehicles enter those narrow roads in Comilla and Sylhet? (Anyway, the US military may consider using the water strategy to "dampen" the fortitude of terrorists world over. They, however, will require an entire sea if they want to flush out all the anti-Bush administration terrorists who lie low all over the continents.)

There is more "first time ever" stuff that must also go to our credit. That our militants love their wives and children a great deal more than the non-militants do became evident when Shaikh Abdur Rahman surrendered along with his entire family. Though he has been taking the sons of poor people away from them and sending them to heaven, he preferred to have his own wife and children with him even while in hiding. Apparently, he wanted to enjoy the goodies of both the worlds! And then we saw the entire family of Mollah Omar heading for heaven. Lo and behold! He wanted his wife to be around in heaven instead of the "promised" 70 houris! It is difficult for us to conclude convincingly at this point whether most mortals would like to follow him, that is, want their wives snooping on them even in heaven! Good heavens! No! Undoubtedly, Mollah Omar of Bangladesh would be the first terrorist to arrive at the gates of heaven with his entire family and not demand houris up front, pronto.

Now, let us turn our eyes to yet another issue that is also connected with the newly found religiosity in a section of people in Bangladesh who are hell-bent on going to heaven. Our attention has been drawn to the recent news disseminated by the US Embassy in Dhaka and it is about the Peace Corps members being withdrawn from various corners of the country and sent back home. The decision came in the wake of the arrest of Bangla Bhai and Shaikh Abdur Raman. There is a fear that hundreds of JMB men are roaming around the country and converting Muslims to Islam. They are going about telling people about the importance of growing a beard, wearing a cap and wearing the special dress that is worn in heaven by everyone. I don't know whether the Peace Corps guys have been approached by the Bangla Bhai men and told to repent by wailing loudly in the market place for having been infidels for so long and from here on follow their tariqa, that is, do as they do. I don't know whether the infidel Americans ran away when they were given a bag full of small stones -- for cleansing purpose! Perhaps that did it. That scared them infidels away. Can't really blame the poor guys. After all they came here to establish peace and not to go back home in pieces!

Have you ever wondered how the JMB guys managed to have the entire lot of bomb making chemicals, thousands of detonators and other stuff smuggled into the country from India through the border areas, as confessed by the kingpins themselves? When Jadus and Madhus and Rahims and Karims get caught every time they try to smuggle in a small quantity of this or that to supplement the family income, the trained cadres got past tons of materials without getting caught once! I am sure all the border security forces on our side of the border are one-eyed. Because they can only see one side at a time! Yes, that must be the reason! Then think of the help the JMB men got from everyone while moving the precious cargo to Dhaka, Tangail, Mymensing and other areas. Amazing, indeed!

Interesting to know that the fearless Shaikh has boldly declared that he does not need to take bail from this earthly court. Hmmm, janab Shaikh, how come you finally surrendered to the very much earthly law enforcers of the country? How come you used earthly chemicals, detonators and mobile phones and tons of earthly money to keep your operation going? So, sire, when you have to kill innocent people you need everything earthly that is available. But when it comes to saving your own skin you talk of divine support. And finally he has confessed that he has received funds from foreign-based organizations that allegedly have links with Al-Qaeda. And all these "holy" activities have been going on in the country through various commercial banks and agencies right under the nose of the administration!

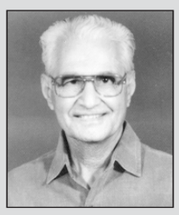
Frankly speaking, we haven't seen the back of the Frankenstein's monster yet. A large segment of people in this country are still behaving oddly from an overdose of adulterated religion fed by the quacks. When religious history and religious philosophy are dished out by half or illiterate people, who have no intellectual ability to differentiate between the esoteric, metaphors and historical truths, we cannot expect anything better than what has already materialised before us.

The malaise has already gone deeper than what we may assume. But the charade must end here. Therefore, it is time for the literate and sane civil society to step in and redesign religious education in conformity with the need of the time and take full control of the running of the religious institutions like madrashas and mosques. These must not be monopolized by a section of people who, to a large extent, are intellectually impaired and yet have this "holier than thou" disposition.

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

Say yes to Manmohan Singh

PLAIN WORDS



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

These are short-term ideals. We need to implement them here and now. Kashmir being a matter for history, what prevents Pakistan to accept the step-by-step improvement of relations? So long as Pakistani state keeps the interest of the common people supreme, the policy toward India becomes obvious: there has to be the maximum possible people-to-people contacts; maximum possible trade, maximum possible economic cooperation, compelling, insofar as Pakistan can, India to keep the interest of the Indian people supreme.

PAKISTAN government has cautiously welcome the purported offer by the Indian PM Manmohan Singh of a treaty of peace, security and friendship while inaugurating another bus service between India and Pakistan, though it has reiterated its ancient Kashmir-first stance: unless the old dispute over Kashmir is resolved, further advances in other fields are not realistic. Basically, there is no change: India offers step by step improvement in bilateral ties; Pakistan subordinates everything to Kashmir.

It is time to rethink almost everything. Why? because the two countries have lost nearly six decades thus quarreling over Kashmir. Meanwhile new issues have actually eclipsed Kashmir in importance. Pakistan's continued insistence on Kashmir to be solved first, means nothing will change. India offers only Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) and a talkathon on Kashmir. Even the CBMs in place may wither on the vine. Some more CBMs are all to be hoped for. Do we want another 60 years to be wasted in the same fashion as hitherto.

Which new issues have arisen? It is the qualitative change in bilateral balance of power. There is the cumulative effect of still accelerating arms race. The Bomb has come. It is pointless to blame who began it. Fact is both are nuclear powers; both are still making more atomic weapons. While else would they go on testing missiles if not to adapt them to newer shaped weapons? Implications of this need being understood. War now is out of the question -- unless either party takes leave of its senses. The lessons of 2002 have to be learnt: India, in the end, did not invade Pakistan, although it wanted to. Pakistan has no earthly reason, Kashmir or anything else, for which it should start a war. At stake is the survival of the country. Surving a nuclear war with India is not possible. Nothing is worth a nuclear war. Maintaining peace is now mandatory.

That alters the perspective. Pakistan cannot now wrest Kashmir or force solutions of its choice. Military approach is simply not feasible. A new approach is unavoidable. Fighting India legalistically in the UN is now wholly fruitless. Foreign powers' mediation is again totally out; foreigners now want Pakistanis to stop being a nuisance. Similarly Pakistan's refusal to accord India with MFN status or observing trade or cultural contacts serves only to isolate and hurt Pakistan. Friendship with America will not now yield support over Kashmir. Strength of Indian Army plus its nukes have posed new problems. Does the present deadlock with India serve any Pakistani purpose? The answer is none at all. Other peaceful means of persuading India to be more forthcoming have to be found: it means offering it something that will be of real utility to India for which reason it will like to accommodate Pakistan to whatever extent may be useful to it.

What of Kashmir then? Do Pakistanis forget it? True, taking Kashmir by force is now impossible. What remains possible and desirable is to create conditions in which Kashmiris can get the substance of Azadi by creating conditions in which India would cede it. What legal shape it will take can be left to the good sense of the Indians and Kashmiris. Pakistanis, as freedom lovers and friendly outsiders, should only encourage and when asked advise.

India has been dropping hints it is ready to make a deal with Pakistan on Kashmir provided Pakistan accepts the Line of Control. Other goodies like agreements on Siachin, Baglihar, may be Sir Creek -- are also hinted at. Accepting the Line of Control as legitimate international border is hard for the Pakistan state as now constituted. While it can refuse to accept it as a de jure solution, it should accept LoC as the de facto border, as indeed in hard fact. There are good reasons to believe that the arrangement agreed at Simla was intended to do just that on both sides. India can happily live with it so long as Pakistanis do not keep on stirring trouble through terrorism. Strenuous anti-India propaganda being counter-productive needs to be desisted from.

But there is no call to accord de jure recognition to LoC. Question recurs: what of Kashmiris? But it is a matter for Kashmiris and the Indians to sort it out in the fullness of time. Meanwhile Pakistan and India can agree upon a modus vivendi now being suggested by America. That is probably the only workable recourse today. For the rest, Pakistan can continue saying that they only recognize LoC as a de facto border; it is not a de jure one. It can remain a dispute.

That is, leave Kashmir to history. What will be the ultimate outcome? Let Kashmiris, Indians and history decide. But realism has many faces. Where do Pakistanis want to go? There are questions about who the Pakistanis are, which Pakistanis matter and which do not. This last category has to be destroyed, while the category of those who actually matter today need to be downgraded. Let them keep their human rights intact; no more than of any other Pakistani. Country law should be the will of the people, freely formulated through their elected representatives. Let it represent the moral consensus of the society. Government institutions and fighting forces should be subordinate to the state through the government. The government should also be subordinate to law and should work under law without transgressing the limits set by law.

That leads to judging what the state policies to be. For whose benefit is Pakistan to be run? Well, Pakistan must be run for the maximum benefit of the maximum number of Pakistanis. The current supremacy of the Army is a disgrace for Pakistanis. That has to end once and for all. The relationship with neighbours can then be peaceful and productive and should aim at enrichment of all people in the region, to begin with; the region should contribute to the general prosperity of the world.

Meantime these ideas may look far-fetched and long-term ideals. No, they are not long-term ideals. These are short-term ideals. We need to implement them here and now. Kashmir being a matter for history, what prevents Pakistan to accept the step-by-step improvement of relations? So long as Pakistani state keeps the interest of the common people supreme, the policy toward India becomes obvious: there has to be the maximum possible people-to-people contacts; maximum possible trade, maximum possible economic cooperation, compelling, insofar as Pakistan can, India to keep the interest of the Indian people supreme.

One is not sure that the ruling elites in either Pakistan or India are actually interested in material betterment of common Indians, and common Pakistanis. Both are elitists and all they are interested in is in the prosperity of the elites. This is the way to keep peace within either state and also among them. Let's accept the people as the supreme masters for whose benefit states must be run by governments that are established by law and freely elected by the people.

MB Naqvi is a leading columist in Pakistan.

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.

Trial of Islamic militants

I send my appreciation to the government of Bangladesh for rounding up the top leaders of the Islamic extremist group Jama'atul Mujahideen, Bangladesh (JMB) through efficient and almost safe operations. The only casualties so far are 'Mullah Omar' and, much painfully, his family which were perhaps self-inflicted. This is further praiseworthy; so far no 'crossfire' type extra judicial killing in custody of Rab or police has taken place. I express total satisfaction as government agencies could guarantee the safety of life and legal rights of the individuals in custody of state.

There are parallels between the crimes committed by JMB and the genocide committed by Jamaat-e-Islami during liberation war of Bangladesh. The literatures, materials, telephone numbers, bank documents etc. retrieved from various dens of these 'Jihadi' extremists clearly indicate that their ideological Guru is the late founding father of Jamaat-e-Islami, Maulana Moududi. They are very well organised and an integral part of local and international Islamic militancy networks.

Jamaat-e-Islami is a partner in the present coalition government of Bangladesh. The Rajshahi chapter of the BNP, the lead coalition partner of the present government, has directly patronized Siddiqul Islam alias 'Bangla Bhai', to create a brutal private army, who carried out mayhem and public execution-style killing of leftist, secular political workers and even innocent villagers.

Now, it is evident that both political operatives in the present government along with law enforcing agencies have various degrees of involvement in this violent campaign of JMB. Therefore expecting fair trial from the existing system entwined with the government is an absurdity. Also due to JMB's link with international Islamic extremist groups, it is imperative to try them under the supervision of the UN or the EU, only which can ensure total fairness and transparency of this trial. The credibility of this trial will play a pivotal role in stopping Bangladesh from plunging into the darkness of a Taliban era.

Abu Raad Abdul Aziz
Toronto, Canada

Tribute to a Nobel laureate

Even two years after, I still think of Nobel Prize winner Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Bill Clinton AND am perplexed as to why has our America changed?

My spouse Lori & I drove from Long Island to Manhattan under a torrent of rain and amidst heavy traffic. The programme started on time at 8:00pm at New York City Town Hall on 43 street and 6th Avenue (Theater District). All the participants, including Salman Rushdie, William Kennedy (New York Times), Rose Styron (New Yorker Magazine), Jon Lee Anderson, Edith Grossman, Paul Auster, Francisco Goldman, Jaime Abello came to the dais and made their speech paying tribute to the guest of honour. The Nobel Prize winner, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, did not come to the United States. He sent a written apology and it was read to us. He wrote due to a superpower and its leader our world is sad. So am I. So sad that my mind did not want to fly to the US.

The programme started with a welcome speech by our former President Bill Clinton. Mr. Clinton is a close friend of Gabo (the nickname of Gabriel Marquez). We were told that Bill Clinton could still read the entire novel "Hundred Years of Solitude" (by Gabo) from his memory.

Salman Rushdie added a bit of humour to his speech. For example, the world became so dirty due to bushes all over the world. (of course he meant President Bush). Finally, I am providing two comments from Mr. George Bush and you be the judge of them:

"God created humans and no government can kill them" (Abortion Issues) November 6, 2003.

"God gave us the power to put a human to death" (Death Sentence act of Texas signed by Bush)

Ehsan Imdad
Banani, Dhaka

Sodium cyclamate

I share the concern of Dr. Hyder (March 9) and strongly suggest that mobile courts be more serious about preventing the sell of the dangerous chemical Sodium cyclamate as a sweetening agent. This is an irony that sodium cyclamate is being sold as refined sugar openly in a civilised country. News media reported time and again that this is a cancer-causing agent, which has been banned in other countries of the world. The government should punish those who sell this dangerous item. Millions of people are taking this poison including the children of the sellers.

If we cannot expect anything from this highly corrupt government, we should build awareness among people regarding this health hazard.

Dr. Mahboob Hossain
Associate Professor
The University of Asia Pacific, Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Women pickets

This is in reference to the letter of 'A Frightened Citizen' published in The Daily Star today (22.03.06). Expressing my unequivocally equal respect to women as wives, mothers and sisters of men and condemning any brutality against any gender; may I please urge the 'striking-women' to keep the virtues that bring women respect, honour and favour!

You may feel this letter to be from a male chauvinist. It's no chauvinism when I cry for upholding peacefulness, tenderness, gentility etc. that womanhood consists of. I feel outraged inside when I see the police beating women during strikes as much as I feel when I see some young women intentionally engaging themselves in fighting, beating, kicking the security forces and stoning motor bike riders or ordinary passengers perhaps in a deliberate attempt to come to limelight, and get a glance from the party hierarchy.

It's discriminatory and probably hypocritical to overlook the flexing of muscle by some women during strikes and then to oppose brutality when it becomes inevitable like tit for tat. As Abraham Lincoln said, "Hypocrite: Who killed both of his parents and pleaded mercy because he was an orphan."

Ahmed Mohiuddin
On e-mail

Crossfire victims

Suman Majumder, Abul Kalam Azad Suman, Masum, Iman Ali & many more, the list is increasing day by day. They are the victims of shame. They are some innocent people who proved the "crossfire" method wrong by sacrificing their lives. As a concerned citizen of this country I can't just accept it. The "crossfire" method is barbaric. It can't continue in a democratic country like ours. But the perennial question is, is Bangladesh a democratic country? I think ours is an autocracy in the guise of democracy.

The crossfire doesn't reduce terrorist activities. The country-wide network of militants spread during the crossfire age. The crossfire only created some opportunity for the law enforcers to earn money. We can't create any living being, so we haven't any right to kill anybody, especially without proper trial. When many countries of the world banned the death sentence, we adopted the shortcut method of uprooting terrorism, named crossfire.

We should be aware that no innocent is punished but this is not possible in crossfire. So stop crossfire and save the innocent people. Only one blunder of the law enforcers can ruin a family.

We can't just present ourselves as a savage country to the world at large. So stop it, right now.

Solaiman Palash
East Jurain, Dhaka