

## Pro-democracy demonstrations in Nepal Democratic reform long overdue

TODAY will be the 13th day of a nation-wide general strike in Nepal that was initially called for four days. In response to the heavy-handed tactics of the Nepalese security forces, the demonstrations seem to have expanded and gained more popular support, and by all accounts have metamorphosed into a mass pro-democracy movement calling for the end of the king's rule and the establishment of a republic.

Demonstrators have been beaten with batons, shot, tear-gassed and arrested by security forces these past two weeks, and it is interesting but not surprising that it was the initial repression that has led to the expansion of the movement.

In a sense, the events of the past two weeks are a microcosm of what ails Nepal. The lack of democratic space, muzzling of press and the increasing autocracy since the king suspended democracy are regrettable.

The king has used the Maoists as an excuse, but the fact is that the pro-democracy movement is not the same as the Maoist insurgency, and it is disingenuous to try to paint both with the same brush or to suggest, as the king has repeatedly done so, that to counter the Maoist forces, he had no choice but to crack down on the pro-democracy elements and curtail democratic freedoms.

We watch the events unfold in Nepal with apprehension. Nepal is a good friend to Bangladesh, we are both members of Saarc and have a mutually respectful and beneficial relationship. More than anything else, we wish for the Nepali people to safely emerge from the twin problems of Maoist insurgency and autocratic rule.

The time is long past for the king to loosen the reins of government and to reintroduce democratic reforms, as is the demand of the people. Basic democratic rights are what Nepalese are demanding and what they deserve. It is the lack of basic democratic rights that has helped to fuel the Maoist insurgency and is now fueling the current pro-democracy wave.

It would be in the best interest of all concerned for the king to take serious steps to democratisation and reintroduction of fundamental freedoms.

## Journalist bashing in a pattern

*For how long will journalists get beaten by police?*

THE police assault on journalists at Chittagong stadium, which left 20 of them injured, is the latest example of their long arm getting a bit too long for anyone's comfort. The audacity and cruelty that were evident in the excesses perpetrated on journalists covering the second Test match between Australia and Bangladesh have left us dumbfounded and outraged. We condemn it. The sight of a senior police official manhandling a veteran photo journalist in his sixties without an iota of compunction was abhorrent. Disgraceful!

Law enforcers have apparently developed the dangerous habit of settling any dispute, however minor and insignificant, through arrogant application of force. We have seen them pouncing on women during the opposition's programmes and everybody knows what happened in Kansat. In most cases the option of an amicable solution is thrown overboard in savage fury.

In this case they nearly marred the Test match itself. And even though it got started, our image has been sullied by the otherwise entirely avoidable fracas.

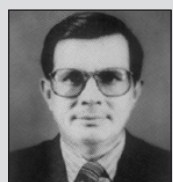
Those policemen failed to demonstrate any understanding of the journalists' job. The latter have to keep pace with events and, as such, cannot afford to lose time. The job is demanding and it is always expected that those in charge of security will cooperate with the newsmen. But what we observed in Chittagong was the complete abandoning of the age-old practice of controlling a situation with courtesy and tactful persuasion; mind you, journalists were not armed, the police were, calling for sobriety on the part of the latter.

The government must immediately find out the culprits responsible for the incident and bring them to justice. Police cannot beat up journalists and the government get away with the talk of press freedom.

# The Kansat carnage

## BENEATH THE SURFACE

The carnage at Kansat raises a few pertinent points. First, why should people be killed or tortured when they rise against government failures? Second, are we living under a democratic government that is accountable to the public? And third, what options do we have in stopping such carnage?



ABDUL BAYES

WHILE the BNP-Jamat alliance government had been spending taxpayers' money hugely to appoint American lobbyists to arrest its burgeoning "bad image" in the world, inside Bangladesh, police continued to fire at the people of Kansat. Till the time of writing this piece, as newspaper reports show, twenty people have already been killed. The scene seems to be a reminiscence of the atrocities unleashed by the Pakistani Army in 1971. It is as if an occupation police force is fielded to subdue the demands of an alien population.

The arithmetic of atrocities, running galore in news paper reports and captured by the following statistics, could possibly bear out the point I wish to make. First, two people were killed on January 4, followed by a killing of seven on the 23rd of the same month. Then four were killed on April 6 and one injured that day succumbed to death on April 12. And finally, six people were killed on 13 April.

Even the killing itself seems to be a just tip of the iceberg. When the totality of police excesses are

taken into consideration in the areas of Kansat, it could be more than what happened during the time of Pakistan army atrocities. Allow me to quote a report: "Thousands of villagers, regardless of their age and sex, have been living in the open air by the side of the rivers and water bodies, in sugar cane fields, mango orchards and open fields after Wednesday's police firing, raids and looting at their houses. Locals alleged that some BNP activists wore police uniform as disguise and joined the law enforcers in Wednesday's attack, while some others guided the police in raiding the houses and arresting villagers. The BNP men were in police uniform with helmets on and participated in the raid while some others guided police force in raiding and looting houses." (The Daily Star, April 14, 2006).

Thus, in agitating against uninterrupted power supply that foiled farming, a total of twenty people had to sacrifice lives through police firing. Noticeably, this time the number of people killed by police firing, and in connection with power only, beats BNP's own record of 1991-96 period when 17 farmers were killed through police firing on the heels of protests against shortage of fertilizers to apply on lands

during the growth period of the crops. In both the cases, farmers were fired for their voices against government failures! A government that spends millions of dollars to whiten its dark image outside, seemingly, threw its people in darkness through loadshedding and paucity of power in the recent times.

As we could learn, the protests of the people were peaceful all the way. And people do have the right to rise against uninterrupted power supply that costs their crops against shortage of fertilizers that adversely affect their fields. In the beginning, as reported by newspapers, people just demonstrated peacefully. When police brutally prevented them from being in the procession, they started throwing brickbats and carrying sticks. Later, as police exceeded the limits, they cut down trees to block roads and, in some cases, even dug up road sections. All the steps initially taken by the people of Kansat fall within the domain of a democratic device. In no circumstances, however, did they carry firearms, explosives or cocktails to justify the carnage. One should not forget, however, that even if found with firearms, police have no right to kill anyone; at best, they can

arrest the carriers. Interestingly, to date police also did not make a claim of carrying firearms by the agitating people.

The carnage at Kansat raises a few pertinent points. First, why should people be killed or tortured when they rise against government failures? Second, are we living under a democratic government that is accountable to the public? And third, what options do we have in stopping such carnage? The answer to the first lies in the peculiar attitude of the present regime. It is that any agitation against government is anchored against the "sovereignty" of the country where government and state are seen to be synonymous. Based on this perceptions, for the last four years, the government had been unleashing a reign of terror in containing people's outbursts. We have witnessed how police forces were used to torture women processionists in Dhaka streets; how militants rose to an astounding height before the eyes of the present government that took no notice of opposition parties' claims. We witnessed how famous opposition leaders were killed under grenade and other attacks but the criminals roam the streets. We also noticed how a former president

(and BNP stalwart) of the country was mercilessly treated because of his voice against the present government. There are thousands of such events but all seem to lead to the same conclusion: the government has grown grievously autocratic and is disdainful of democratic norms. It is, therefore, not surprising that a voice against interrupted access to power would amount to raising a voice against the "flood of development" that the government so "graciously" gifted us with during the last four years or so. Processions could be termed as "anti-state" because voice against a "patriotic" government amounts to "anti-state." And here lies the logic of police firing, otherwise not.

The answer to the second question closely follows from the first. Obviously, we cannot claim to be under a democratic government, even if we pretend to do so. The parliament is almost paralyzed due to shortage of quorum comprising prolonged absence of the main opposition party from the parliament and due to the absence of effective local government institutions in the country. The last four years or so saw no sign of abatement of this ailment.

Yes, of course, we are under an elected government -- notwithstanding the modalities or the alleged "election engineering." But an elected government does not necessarily mean a democratic government. The price spiral of recent times -- especially with respect to some of the essential items like sugar -- and the huge

costs on common men should have demanded some actions against business syndicates and unscrupulous businessmen, most of whom belong to the government party. On the contrary, exorbitant prices are exposed as enviable sign of "opulence" of the people by the policy makers!

And finally, by not taking the Kansat issue seriously and punishing the culprits engaged in the carnage, the present government seemingly portrayed a poor performance in managing governance of the society. The government has placed police against people's fundamental rights and thus helped create the carnage at Kansat.

The way out is organizing people's movements against the government and the goons who created the carnage. The opposition political parties should gear up their anti-government and pro-people activities. The civil society should come up with strong prescriptions against such atrocities. Unfortunately, so far they did not. The drive against "dishonest" and "uneducated" MPs is far away. At the moment, the bullet is piecing through the breasts of the people of Kansat and civil society needs to demonstrate its hatred against the carnage. Either on the streets or by speeches. Development is nothing but freedom. On that score of freedom alone, we are far behind.

Abdul Bayes is Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

# Enough is enough

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

THIS is one "democratic country" where the worst sufferer happens to be its people. People continue to be deceived by the political leadership year after year with varying degrees. The other day, the venerable Leader of the Opposition said that had Awami League been in power it would make Bangladesh one of the leading successful countries of the world in just about ten years.

I thought: she must be joking but then I saw that some grey haired senior politicians of the country sitting around the table were listening to her with rapt attention! If the ruling coalition is high-handed and repressive, the opposition happens to be sly, foxy and one that routinely indulges in meaningless demagoguery. I feel that things have now reached beyond all comprehension and tolerance.

It is high time for everyone in the society to work together in driving out all elements of partisan politics from all educational institutions. Let us chase the ghosts of Ayub-Momen regime out once and for all.

Every time trouble brews in the campus a so-called high-powered committee is constituted to enquire into the incident and that is the end of it all. The report of the committee is never made public and everything is thereafter forgotten. The role of the university's administration is also shrouded in mystery. Some time back, following an ugly incident I was extremely annoyed with the Vice Chancellor's remarks when he said that he would resign only when his conscience tells him that he has

No real political wisdom is required to streamline, straighten and remove such decadent social menace; all that is required is common sense and the existence of a minimum level of concern for the welfare of the people driven by a degree of commitment on the part of our administration. In the meantime I say: enough is enough.

failed in discharge of his duties.

I believe the incident was sparked off due to a number of our police forces entering the university women's hostel some time around midnight and roughing up a number of inmates inside the hostel. If such an incident did not move the VC's conscience, what will?

Frankly, I find the attitude to be almost parallel to that of our venerable shipping minister vis a vis the deaths of hundreds of innocent lives when a launch capsized resulting into innumerable loss of poor and innocent lives. It is indeed sad that the highest seat of our education today represents chaos and a playground for political vandalism.

Also disturbing is the way the death anniversary of Ziaur Rahman was celebrated some time back. Prime Minister herself went round the various places in the city distributing food and items of clothing to the distressed and the poorer section of the population. This was clearly a move designed to boost support of the city dwellers for the forthcoming elections in favor of the ruling coalition.

Personally, I hold Ziaur Rahman in high esteem and do hate to see his name being used and abused in this way. Besides I am almost certain that had he been alive today he would not have endorsed squandering of state funds for such unproductive purposes.

It may also be relevant to mention here that the venerable Leader of the Opposition during her tenure of office also indulged in similar degrading exercises of using and abusing the name of her father, the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. I felt disgusted to see that innocent city dwellers roughing it out in the sweltering heat of the day due all kinds of traffic jams caused by security measures for the PM through closure of traffic all round.

The other day, through the window of my living room located on the seventh floor of an apartment complex I was watching a telephone linesman apparently fixing some connection. He was engaged in disentangling a bundle of wires, which looked almost like a bird's nest. Suddenly, something told me that I should also check my telephone connection lest it is disconnected in the process.

Sure enough, I raced my wheelchair to my bedroom and found that my telephone was dead. I returned to the window and drew the attention of the linesman and told him that he had disconnected my telephone and that it should be restored forthwith. I also told him that should this not be fixed in the coming ten minutes or so, I would make sure that he loses his job. God's miracle, it worked and my telephone was restored.

Amidst many hazards and nightmares of living in this country, one is acquiring and maintaining a land telephone connection. Some years back, the chairman of the Telephone Board who happened to be well known to me told me that there are only two key personnel in the T and T, namely the chairman and the linesman.

Incidentally, I have no real connections with people of consequence in the department, and hence my telephone remains inoperative for the past four weeks or so. It must be a very simple problem since I can call out but I cannot receive any, since the bell of my handset does not ring. The linesman has promised to come and fix it at least a dozen times but never appeared. Looks like the linesman is indeed powerful and chooses to visit people with complaints as he so chooses.

The gruesome killings by Rab in the so-called cross fire are continually on the rise. It is now absolutely clear that many of these killings are carried out in rather very questionable and doubtful circumstances, as evidenced by a number of statements made by none other than the State Minister for Home Affairs. The ruling coalition often comes up with the argument that the people are happy with Rab's performance and that it has in effect caused a reduction in high profile criminal acts. The

Rab has finally received a further boost for its successes in nabbing and hauling up of JMB terror leaders.

We must remember that extraordinary law enforcing agencies like these have the danger of creating a legacy like that of the Gestapo during Hitler's Third Reich. Of late, as reported in the media, the mighty Rab has also been nominated for this year's Independence Day Award. What a spark of genius on the part of our administration!

While fancy lights keep burning bright in various shopping complexes, people continue to suffer on account of continuous power load shedding day and night, I wish to ask the City Corporation chiefs as to whose benefit these lights continue to burn bright? Why are the shopping complexes allowed to wear a festive look with fancy lightings all around right through the middle of the night at a time when regular blackouts and power load shedding is taking place all over the city? The only purpose it is serving is making a mockery of people's miseries. I also fail to understand as to why shopping complexes have to be open as late as 9 or 10 pm? Nowhere in the civilized world, are shopping complexes other than food and kitchen markets open this late.

Sitting at home and watching the television is also no fun. Of particular annoyance, is the bombardment of commercial advertisements of consumer goods and other products, which are often irrelevant, indecent, and on occasion outright offensive. The jingles and the visual effects followed by dancing and other forms of bodily gestures by both men and women are, to say the

least, reflective of poor tastes and contrary to the spirit of our culture and heritage.

One may attribute all these to going trends and breaking of cultural barriers but to me it looks as though a downright degradation in our ethical and moral values. Just consider a glaring example, an advertisement of a particular brand of toothpaste, wherein a man nearly paralyzed and unable to stand up all too suddenly stands up on being urged and then quick change in the scene, a particular brand of toothpaste is displayed covering the entire screen.

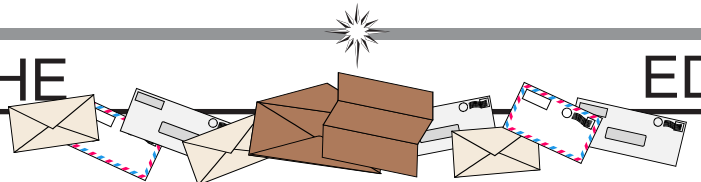
I am an arthritic patient and confined to a wheelchair. Sure enough, I am now considering buying that particular brand of toothpaste. Please pray for me! On the other hand the amount of time and the number of insertions between programs works as real deterrent to watching television.

A case in example is the news on Channell, one time my most favourite news program, I no longer see it. Relentless drumming of ads has literally driven me crazy. I now watch BBC instead and other Indian channels whose newscasts are far superior to any of our channels.

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Shamsher Chowdhury is a freelance journalist.

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.

## Ethanol as alternative source of energy

According to a report published in The New York Times on 10 April 2006, Brazil has made a major breakthrough in meeting the domestic demand for energy by producing ethanol from sugarcane. Side by side with the use of gasoline, the motorists have the option to use ethanol to run their automobiles just as we are doing now with Compressed Natural Gas (CNG). According to the report, by producing sugarcane-based ethanol to supplement their energy needs drawn from petroleum production, Brazil is heading towards self-sufficiency in energy.

Bangladesh is a traditional producer of sugarcane and therefore it may consider following the Brazilian footsteps and borrow their technology on ethanol production from sugarcane. Jute has declined in the international mar-

ket. Therefore, higher sugarcane production for energy needs could have been an attraction and a viable option both for the farmers and the government, which is hard pressed to meet the foreign exchange demand to import oil. Moreover, ethanol will benefit greatly the average motorists in Bangladesh for whom the use of petrol or octane is becoming nearly impossible because of the high price and who are increasingly switching over to CNG. Ethanol production will reduce the pressure on our natural gas as a source of energy.

**Syed Noor Hossain**  
Uttara, Dhaka

## BBC programme

On the other day, I and I believe there were several other Bangladeshis who were proud to watch a discussion on BBC World titled "Bangladesh - Can Democracy deliver?" Excuse me, if any of

the words has been missed. The political stalwarts of both the parties were approached and they answered very smartly to the presenter.

All was going on well. But when a minister was asked why his government has ties with Jamaat-e-Islami, he answered that they need it to win power (!). Then how can he claim that the practice of democracy exists in our country?

A big question from many like me, who were born a little before independence or just after it, is there any practice of democracy? Are there no idols in front of us as leaders?

**Maruf Hassan**  
Dhaka

## Cricket at Fatullah

The Sydney Morning Herald reported the sports news on the first page under the banner "Bangla Bunglers Australia Crumble". It is an interesting matter to note that the Tigers showed their awesome

prossess at Fatullah. The correct Arabic version is Fathullah though, which bears the meaning "Victory of Allah".

**Salahuddin Ahmed**  
Sydney, Australia

## Human Rights Commission

Human beings have some basic needs and the fulfillment of these are a matter of their right. Now the question is who will do that? In a third world country human rights are quite obstructed, due to economic crisis and political unrest. In our country, one noteworthy point is that the government makes the commitment to protect the human rights and the administration has the liability of its implementation. But, if they resort to abuse of power and deny us our rights, then where will we complain? I think there is no alternative to an active Human Rights Commission. At present, Rab is killing criminals in crossfire.

Is it not a violation of human rights? According to law, a juvenile criminal and an aged one can never remain in prison together.

Such issues never receive any attention in our context as we don't have enough sensitivity to the rights of people. However, that is not a hallmark of a civilized society.

**Roney**  
Ibrahimipur, Dhaka Cant

## Massive change in climate

During the last few years, a massive change in global climate has become the issue of concern to the climate specialists. According to them, the change is more rapid than their earlier prediction. As a result of global warming, the melting of ice sheets is on the rise in Greenland and the Antarctica. The sea level is increasing currently, which is an alarming piece of news for Bangladesh, like many others low-lying countries. In such a condition, the

specialists are concerned to created worldwide consciousness on the upcoming disaster. But here the question is, what steps are being taken in Bangladesh? During the previous years, a short period of winter and a long duration of summer and various natural catastrophes alerted us about the unpredictable future.

But a massive change in climate and the rapid deforestation in Bangladesh show the lack of concern about the problem. An enormous tree plantation programme must be undertaken to counter the menace. The countries that might face the wrath of nature have to prepare themselves to take the sting out of it.

## Expatriate Gene scientist

Recently Shapthahik 2000 published an interview of Mr. Abed Choudhury, an expatriate Gene Scientist living in

Australia. He seems to have a solution of blending Mr. Shaikh Siraj's concern of HYV rice to feed the nation and Mr. Farhad Mazhar's biodiversity based 'Noya Krishi' of Bangladesh.

We want to see some sort of collaboration among these three eminent experts and we want to see a discussion between them on the "Hridoye Maati of Maanush" on Channel-I and also a round table discussion with other relevant people in any big auditorium. Mr Siraj reported on the work of a Chinese rice scientist in the past. Now we want to see him reporting on the work of this great scientist of ours. This should be well advertised before telecasting, lest we miss it, as we can't always watch all the programmes.

**Jawad R Zahid**  
IBA, DU

## Writings on the wall

We had built a new wall in front of our house recently and painted it the colour of cement. One political party

came and wrote their grievances in big red letters. Another party had the audacity to white wash the entire wall, leaving a foot at the top in order to write something.

The government is enacting all kinds of laws. Why can't it enact a law that prohibits writing and putting up posters on private and public walls?

They are spending so much money to "beautify" the cities, but some political miscreants are spoiling the whole show by putting up their ugly posters and slogans everywhere. Some private organisations also do this to advertise their products.

I would request the government and the authorities concerned to put a stop to this ugly practice by taking some drastic measures urgently. The miscreants who do this should be severely punished.

**Nahas Ahmed Chowdhur**  
Amberkhana, Sylheti