

Combating terrorism and drug trafficking

Saarc home ministers pledge to embark on action

THE pledge taken by the home ministers of Saarc member countries to work closely in various areas is commendable indeed. The message that emanates from within is that this time the forum means business. The strong resolve to tackle some serious law and order issues exist commonly in almost all the member countries is amply reflected in the adoption of eight decisions, which include, among others, fighting terrorism and drug trafficking. We feel that the decision of the forum to work closely with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is a practical one in the fight against the twin evils. Our concern is bolstered by the fact that Bangladesh is very much at the receiving end of the machination of these two evils and needs a powerful collective body like Saarc to fight them.

We noticed that the idea of forming "Saarc-pol", to function as a regional law enforcement agency, had generated plenty of interest among the people in this country. But it appears that no decision could be taken in this regard this time for the lack of details and it has been referred to the member states for further review. The other pertinent issues that have been raised in the conference were money laundering, terrorist financing and relevant laws to tackle these menaces. We feel no forum would be better than Saarc to address these issues with due seriousness regionally and work together with the common objective of uprooting the networks.

There is no denying that the accord reached for cooperation among the Saarc countries will not only help the people in many different ways, it will at the same time make the organisation more meaningful and vibrant. The Bangladesh home minister has rightly said that it was a good beginning and that the endeavour was laudable for the fact that all the home ministers of the member countries vowed to combat the scourge of terrorism in their respective countries to ensure overall economic prosperity of South Asia.

Shanir Akhra spectre again!

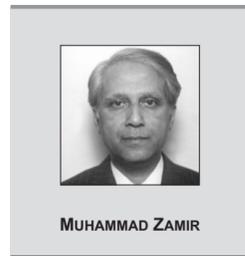
Govt needs to intervene

SOMETIME ago, the mayor of Dhaka and the agitators' representatives at Shanir Akhra sued for peace on an understanding that the latter's demand for water and electricity will be met within a week's time. The deadline has been overshoot, as it was bound to be, because the problems are deep-rooted, and not quite solvable in such a short time. That's where our problem lies; in order to assuage angry protests we will make adhoc promises that we won't be able to keep within a deadline. But the people are impatient with the unprecedented power outages and snapping of water supplies. That's why we hear of agitation resuming at Shanir Akhra.

It was our impression, however, after the agitation was brought to an end, particularly when we saw that the army was reaching water to the worst affected people, that the problem had been resolved. But we are disappointed to find that the trouble might reemerge. Tension is brewing at Shanir Akhra between two forces, namely the general members of the public who want better services and the supporters of the local BNP lawmaker over organising a counter-programme by the latter against the agitating people. The families of people who had participated in protest marches have also said that they still receive threats from, what they called BNP men, with dire consequences and are afraid of returning to their abodes.

We are concerned at this disturbing development and would urge the administration to rein in the trouble-mongers thereby preventing any recurrence of the earlier episode in any form or shape. The government cannot let its credibility go down on account of some unsavoury conduct on the part of an individual lawmaker.

A controversial voters' list



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

ANYONE who has had the pleasure and the pain of being a bureaucrat in Bangladesh will also know that government statistics in this country need to be treated with care. Normally, in areas of politics they are suspect unless proven otherwise. Fudging figures to justify ends have not been uncommon in our political history.

Our Election Commission has now undertaken such a practice. The net result has been controversy, disbelief and loss in credibility.

It need not have been done, but then, wisdom and sanity have drowned in the Burganga. This is at least true for this government institution. Such a course of action might have also been followed because of the absence of requisite political will.

I really cannot understand how those responsible for preparing this serious task should have treated the matter so lightly and superficially. The whole process smacks of irresponsibility. I have not been able to find any suitable explanation for this.

Citizens in general, and civil society in particular, have watched with great anxiety and dismay the steady deterioration in the political arena. Polarisation in politics is being further intensified instead of the spirit of compromise. We have seen exchange of letters and press conferences. We have seen the Opposition

adapt itself to changing circumstances. We have also seen inflexibility amongst those who are policy makers within the government.

It is against this scenario, that the Election Commission has again created further debate. It is clear that the hierarchy within that institution strongly believes that no one can question or dispute their policies. They have been following a path that has already been challenged in the superior courts in the land. The Appellate Division of the High Court after deferring hearing seven times, has scheduled the next hearing on the preparation of the voters list on 14 May. Nevertheless, this latest action on the part of the Election Commission indicates their total disregard for the directives of any judicial authority.

Normal legal norms, which would otherwise apply for other institutions, are not being taken notice of. In a manner of speaking, the courts as well as everyone else is being reminded that they do not count. The Commission, by completing the enumeration of a fresh voters list, appears to have overlooked the January 4 directives of the High Court. The Election Commission Secretariat has claimed that it has not ignored the court's directive. I, like many others, have however failed to comprehend their logic.

The media -- both print as well as

electronic -- have tried to understand the draft voters list which was published by the Election Commission, a few days ago on the 3rd of May. I am constrained to observe that the whole process has been inconsistent.

This draft voter list has enlisted a total of 91.3 million voters, almost 65 per cent of the total current population of Bangladesh. The new list has also shown an increase of nearly 22 per cent over the existing voters list prepared in 2000. The ratio of voters to population in this fresh list is considerably higher than any other list put together since 1972. In fact, according to details available from earlier Election Commission documents, this ratio has generally hovered between 50.48 per cent and 51.52 per cent, except in the case of 1990 when it has about 60.29 per cent.

The comments coming out of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, particularly from those associated with carrying out the demographic census have only reinforced views that there have been gross irregularities in the preparation of this voters list.

Several newspapers have published detailed demographic statistics to underline the inconsistencies that already exist within this list. After permutations and combinations, it has been suggested that according to the census report the number of voters in this list should not have

been more than 80.2 million (with zero deaths and no left-outs).

The situation has been further aggravated by reports that substantial numbers of people in both urban and rural areas have been left out of this voters' list. The names of Awami League Members of Parliament -- Mr Asaduzzaman Noor from Nilphamari and Mr Ekabbar Hossain from Mirzapur -- have not been included in this list. Journalists from several parts of the country have reported that many district election officers have failed to complete the draft lists for want of funds and personnel constraint. In some cases they did not have resources for copying the requisite forms. They have remarked that they need more time.

So, on the one hand, we have millions of ghosts roaming the corridors of the Election Commission. On the other hand, we have millions of ghosts roaming the corridors of the Election Commission. On the other hand, we have substantial numbers being denied the chance to exercise their rights as citizens.

We have to understand that if any election is to be considered as fair, then it requires a comprehensive voters list. If this is absent, it will not reflect the will of the people.

Next come the other stipulations of the Election Commission. They have decreed that the deadline for filing

objections and requesting corrections is 21 May and that such objections will have to be disposed of by 6 June. The final date for incorporation and deletion has been set for 24 June. Who are we trying to fool? Such tight time schedules will only add to the existing confusion.

According to rules, the list of voters has to be available in the offices of the Registration Officers and also in public places like the Union Parishad, Municipalities and City Corporations, Offices of Ward Commissioners and also in the educational institutions, which are likely to be designated as polling centres. This has however not happened in many administrative districts. So, how are the citizens going to ascertain the veracity of the list for their respective area? If they cannot do so, how will they seek rectification, and that too, within such a short time?

All the parties in the Opposition, quite understandably, have rejected this draft list of voters. This is now being seen as another step in the elaborate arrangements being put in place by the current Administration towards 'election engineering'.

We have seen how the caretaker process has been brought into dispute through arbitrary decisions and active intervention within the judicial process. We have watched how the Election Commission has

gradually lost its neutrality and independence. We have observed politicisation besmirching the dynamics of governance.

These are unfortunate measures and not conducive towards constructive engagement.

The Administration has to understand that double-speak will not calm troubled waters. The government today is vulnerably despite the spin put across through articles in the foreign press. What has happened in the recent past in Kansat and nearer to Dhaka in Shanir Akhra has underlined the deep frustration that exists within the general population over the absence of water, gas, electricity, diesel and fertilizer. Demonstrations have evolved their own spontaneity. People are now beginning to risk their lives for basic utilities that under normal circumstances are taken for granted.

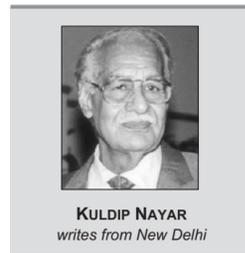
This is breeding instability and will definitely discourage investment. We are sitting on top of a volcano and those in power, in their air-conditioned offices and four-wheel vehicles, appear to be totally unconcerned. In their greed for power, they consider the present to be the best of times. Proverbially, they may be wrong. I am reminded of Charles Dickens in this regard. It could also be the worst of times later on.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador who can be reached at mzamir@dhaka.net

POST BREAKFAST

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Can democracy return to Pakistan?



KULDIP NAYYAR
writes from New Delhi

WHEN General Ershad was ruling Bangladesh, both Khalida Zia and Sheikh Hasina were agitating for restoration of democracy. But, at the same time, they were fighting against each other. It struck them to defer their confrontation till they had ousted Ershad. They and their parties, Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Awami League, respectively, joined hands and brought the people's rule back. It is another matter that they lost no time in resuming their fight.

I was reminded of the joint struggle in Bangladesh when I read about the meeting between Begum Benazir Bhutto and Mian Nawaz Sharif in London. Both stopped fighting some time ago because they had nothing to fight over. Both were in the wilderness. Benazir has said that a "meeting with Mr Sharif is aimed to discuss joint drive for the revival of the constitution and democracy and for ending the military dictatorship." I hope that the common front will not fall apart once democracy is restored in Pakistan. Both of them must assure the people of Pakistan that the two

have buried the hatchet.

However, the mere meeting is not going to erase old animosities. The stakes are too high. One of them will be the prime minister if and when democracy returns to Pakistan. It is easy to forego even the highest office when the contestants are nowhere near attaining it. The attitude can change when prime ministerhip is almost there. However, Sharif told me at Jeddah two years ago that he would ring up Benazir to offer her the office. He said he could afford to "wait" and would ask her to be the prime minister first. He was true to his words.

A few months later, I interviewed Benazir at Dubai where she lived. After checking with her, I found that Sharif had telephoned her to convey that he would like her to be the prime minister. Subsequently, they met at Jeddah to firm up the understanding. Benazir was on her way to Mecca for Ura. The meeting in London was a sequel to the several meetings the leaders of her Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Sharif's Muslim League had held in and outside Pakistan. They tried to iron out their

BETWEEN THE LINES

The main problem that Benazir and Sharif face is how to oust the military dictatorship. Both the leaders do not enjoy the best of reputation to evoke popular response. What helps the situation is the announcement by the Pakistan Election Commission that the next election would be held under a caretaker setup. Otherwise, a popular protest like the one in Nepal is difficult to imagine. The post-independent Pakistan does not know of a single countrywide struggle.

differences. Whether they did it to the last crease is difficult to say. But the manner in which the cadres of the two parties have begun cooperating on the ground shows that they are together at present. The rapprochement between Benazir and Sharif is an important development because it brings together the two main political parties in Pakistan. Each has a large following and both are ideologically closer to each other than before. But their approach to the military rule is somewhat different.

I found Sharif "absolutely uncompromising" on the role of the armed forces. He told me that the military could have no role in the governance in his scheme of things. It would be completely under the elected rulers as was the practice in a democracy. He gave the example of India. I have not discussed the subject with Benazir. But I learn from her party leaders that she may accept the Turkish model, an apex council with the three services chiefs as its members.

The most important thing which has emerged from the London meet-

ing is the "Charter of Democracy" that the two leaders have endorsed. It talks about the independence of the Election Commission, the judiciary and such other institutions. There is yet another point in the Charter that the political parties in India might like to study. A government in power would be allowed to complete its full tenure. Although it goes against the grain of parliamentary system, the fixed tenure can bring about political stability which the country needs. India's democratic structure has been trivialised because of the ambition of even a tiny party to have a share in power. The ruling party has to accommodate it to sustain a majority in parliament. The challenge before us is how to allow a coalition to settle down and govern for the full tenure because there is no likelihood for a single party to rule the country for many years to come.

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the Pakistan Election Commission that the next election would be held under a caretaker setup. Otherwise, a popular protest like the one in Nepal is difficult to imagine. The post-independent Pakistan does not know of a single countrywide struggle. Although the joint statement does not say anything about prime minister-ship, it is understood that Benazir would occupy the top position if and when the time comes.

Both the PPP and the Muslim League may have to fight against the Muttihida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), a combination of religious parties. It may be against President Pervez Musharraf but its track record is that it backs him up because it feels more comfortable with the armed forces than with political parties. MMA wants to take Pakistan towards fundamentalism, not democracy. Strange, Benazir should say that she would extend "all possible cooperation to it." This only confirms the issue.

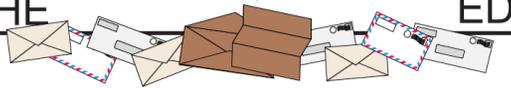
However, the "Charter of Democracy" does not go far enough. Democracy without economic opportunities holds good only

till the polling day. The disillusionment begins soon after. Freedom is necessary but so is the bread. Both Benazir and Sharif coming from the elite strata of the society as they do, have to spell out what the common man can expect if and when one of them comes to power. His sufferings are untold and he will not remain content if political freedom is without economic freedom. To quote Jawaharlal Nehru who founded the Indian institutions, "Democracy is means to an end, not the end in itself. We talk of good of society. Is this something apart from and transcending the individuals composing it?"

Then there is the question of provincial autonomy. One of the reasons why the army could take over Pakistan easily was the centralised governance. Islamabad has too much power. It has to share it with the states. The agitation in Sindh many years ago and the current uprising in Baluchistan should make Benazir and Sharif wiser. They cannot take the states for granted. India is stable because the states enjoy substantial autonomy. A popular government at Islamabad has no other option.

Kuldip Nayyar is an eminent Indian 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.

NBR's directive needed on PSP interest

We had purchased Protirakhya Sanchaya Patra (PSP) i.e. Defence Savings Certificates in the Fiscal Year 1996-97 with a maturation period of eight years. The terms and conditions stipulated, among others, the rates of profit that would be paid to the purchasers when it is encashed, say after one year or two or three years and so on, and at maturation at the end of the eighth year. The rate of profit was attractive and people, especially the fixed income group, who generally avoid taking risks in investment projects unless some sort of government involvement is ensured resorted to purchase PSPs.

In addition to its being a good investment opportunity, the government through various national newspapers also focused that the Defence Savings Certificates are secure, dependable and above all completely exempt from Income Tax (see, for example, The Daily Star, 23 June, 1997). However, when deduction of Income Tax at source started from the purchasers of savings instruments including PSPs after 11 June 1999, many banks and financial institutions started deducting profits from

PSPs even from those who purchased PSPs before 11 June 1999.

This was quite embarrassing to

the government. At that juncture of time, the National Board of Revenue (NBR) came forward to rescue the purchasers of savings instruments by issuing circulars, and even by advertising in national dailies warning all concerned not to deduct the newly levied tax of 10 per cent at source from the buyers of savings instruments including PSPs purchased on or before 10 June, 1999.

Thus towards the end of December, 1999, the NBR in its advertisement in The Daily Star informed all concerned that the newly added Rule 52D to Income Tax Ordinance, 1984 regarding deduction of Income-tax at source "shall not be applicable for savings instruments purchased on or before 10 June, 1999". And that, "all banks and institutions concerned are requested to be alert in this regard to avert unnecessary harassment of customers". Here it may be mentioned that the savings instruments till then remained outside the purview of income tax other than deduction at source.

The timely and appropriate step taken by the NBR was just and right, and much appreciated by all concerned as it stood to protect citizens from undue encroachments by certain institutions on whose whims people were deprived from their due share. It was also in concordance with the natural law of justice, as government's covenant with its citizens cannot be altered adversely affecting the other party. Not to carry

out governments obligations would have undermined its honour and prestige as well.

A similar situation has once more arisen. The PSPs that were purchased in the FY 1996-97 have matured, and we have received the promised profit. But then, the government tax officials are now demanding a substantial portion of the profit as income tax when such income was declared tax-exempt in our Income Tax Return of 2005-06. This tantamount to harassment, and a breach of promise that the government had previously made public through mass media. Even if government makes new rules and regulations, these cannot be done with retrospective effect adversely affecting thousands of innocent people who then purchased PSPs in good faith.

I, therefore, request the NBR to uphold its moral duty to comply with the commitments that the government had made earlier to the customers of savings instruments including PSPs. Necessary clear and unambiguous instructions may please be issued without delay to the officials of the tax department regarding income tax free interest on PSPs purchased on or before 10 June 1999. The instructions so issued may please also be published in the national dailies so that the investors also come to know about it.

Khaled Wahid Awwal
Dhaka University

Crop based ethanol and bio diesel

In the context of the global rise in oil price and its consequences on our economy, I wonder whether government is considering agro-based solutions like ethanol mixes or bio diesel. Even the current US administration, perceived to be leaning towards the oil lobby, has given corn based ethanol a serious thought in the recent times. According to a report from Worldwatch Institute, Brazil, world's largest producer of ethanol (slightly ahead of US), has saved \$50 billion in imported oil costs in the last three and a half decades. Brazil, unlike the US, produces ethanol from sugarcane and has taken several steps ranging from subsidising sugarcane farming during global drops in oil price to promoting flex-fuel vehicles (running on both gasoline and e85, a mixture of 85% ethanol and 15% gasoline).

The above data points out that ethanol will not only be helpful in reducing our oil dependence, it can also boost our agriculture by providing opportunities for crop diversification as well as a larger market for our existing crops. Neighbouring India, has ranked fourth in the list of world's top ethanol producers, using not only sugarcane but also cassava as a source of ethanol. France ferments wheat to make ethanol.

Additional plus points about ethanol lies in its ability to use existing distribution infrastructure.

Moreover, at least gasoline engines can be converted into dual fuel (gasoline and gasohol mix) engines without much trouble. Ten to thirty percent ethanol mixed with petrol can be used without any conversion at all. For diesel engines, a common phenomenon in our trucks, we can think about other forms of sustainable agro-based fuels, e.g., bio-diesel from soybean, which can be used with almost no modification in diesel engines. These might as well open up some opportunities for our Dholaikhal techs!

The usual downsides of using ethanol fuel in the west, for example, need for an extra cold start system, or slight reduction in mileage, are non-existent or of not much trouble in our country. Also, the labour intensive nature of our farming will keep the cost low and the production less energy intensive compared to the west.

I see no harm, at least in exploring these opportunities, if not done already by some of our innovative souls.

Mohammad Irfan
Denver, Colorado, USA

What is the fault of the common people?

We are feeling deeply troubled by the recent events in our country. What happened on May 5, 2006 at Demra on Dhaka-Chittagong highway is an example of it. The country is suffering

from water, power and gas scarcity; we sympathise with those who are most affected by it and demand that the government solve the problem immediately. But at the same time we could not accept the behaviour of the demonstrating people. The agitators have no right to put the common people in a precarious situation, thousands of passengers became stranded, they got very frightened by the war like atmosphere and were at their wit's end. Their miseries knew no bounds. The agitators damaged many vehicles, damaged a patrol and CNG filling station and looted goods and cash money, set fire to a shop. These sorts of actions are not acceptable. What right do they have to destroy private and public property?

Water, gas and electricity scarcity is not a new problem. From time to time under different governments people suffered from it but they did not become violent. The protestors showed empty buckets and lanterns; sometimes they seized the WASA and PDB office. But they never resorted to this sort of violent and destructive actions.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Improving Chittagong port

I am a merchant navy officer served at sea for long 22 years, out of which more than 12 years as Captain in various ocean going ships (including container ships). At

present, I am working at Chittagong with a Container Feeder Vessels operating company of Singapore. Apart from long time acquaintance with Chittagong port (since 1979) I had opportunity to visit numerous advanced and underdeveloped ports in almost all continents.

Normally, development of any port is heavy investment oriented affair. But, present congested situation of Chittagong port can be improved by taking certain measures and co-ordinated actions, which may not be too much expensive and time-consuming.

Captain Mohammad Kamruzzaman
General Manager
Prominent Container Lines,
Chittagong

Regarding power crisis

Power shortage has become acute in recent time and we have seen two unfortunate incidents at Kansat and Sonir Akhra. But it seems that nobody has any solution to this power problem. I have a humble suggestion regarding this. I have heard that many countries like Singapore, UAE, and Pakistan are applying daylight saving method; in the system people advance their clocks by one hour so that they can use that extra daylight hour to their advantage and save valuable electricity. If we can implement this system in Bangladesh I am sure we can save a good amount of electric-

Double standard in politics

Few years back Awami League had closely worked on a common platform along with Jamaat for anti-government movement. In fact it is AL who have virtually rehabilitated them in the organisational politics. Now when a vital issue of national interest has arisen and needs a dialogue between the two major parties, AL and the 14 parties have come up with an excuse. They have already closely worked with the anti-liberation forces and morally cannot say what they are saying now. Does not it boil down to the fact that their only intention is actually to break the 4-party alliances? In a political culture one can always take a stance to break the unity of the opponents but not with the pretext of a lame excuse. I hope the 14-party alliances will come out of their lame excuse and help the process of dialogue to be on.

N. Z. Khan
Dhanmondi, Dhaka