

## CEC flops, should quit SC verdict leaves no other option

It is heartening to note that finally the smokescreen of confusion enveloping the issue (or non-issue!) of whether we should have a new voter list or an update on the 2001 electoral roll has been lifted. It gives a big sigh of relief. The Supreme Court has upheld the directive of the High Court that the Election Commission revise the last list of voters by deleting those who are deceased now and those who are mentally retarded and adding the new genre of eligible voters who are 18-year old.

We find it extremely unfortunate that as much as Tk. 60 crore spent so far in preparation of a completely new voter list that the CEC has all along been obdurately insistent on, is going waste now. Had the CEC taken cognizance of the earlier directive of the High Court Division this would not have happened. The loss to the exchequer on this account as well as money earlier spent on perfunctory preparation of voter identity cards focuses on the huge premium nation had to pay through imprudence of highly placed people.

We now strongly suggest that the EC prepare an authentic voter list on a double-quick basis in accord with the directive of the Supreme Court. There is still time for household-to-household collection of data, a task which, however, needs to be entrusted to carefully selected enumerators.

In the meantime, we also strongly feel that in order to uphold the dignity and legacy of this prime constitutional institution, it is time that the CEC and his team consider honourably quitting before some new controversies emerge. There is also a case of contempt of court against the CEC. To put it mildly, the CEC and his other associates in the EC have lost credibility with the people at large. Frankly, it is our belief that protection of public and national interests should get precedence over individuals whosoever they may be.

## Threat to the garment sector

Workers must renounce violence and owners re-examine management practices

THE RMG sector, the country's premier foreign exchange earner, has been hit by an unprecedented labour unrest which has already caused huge loss to it. On Tuesday alone, some 250 factories came under attack by the agitating workers pressing for fulfilment of their demands. It is a terrible misfortune befalling the booming industry (which we hope will be short-lived) and a very ominous development for the economy as a whole. We are worried but not panicked.

Now, the matter has to be handled efficiently and discreetly and we share the views expressed by eminent economist Professor Wahiduddin Mahmood on the issue. He has suggested management review to put an end to the crisis. Obviously, it has to be found out whether the agitation was triggered by smoldering discontent among the workers created by the failure to address their problems. Yes, the sector can retain its competitive edge even after paying 'just salaries' to the workers. The point here is that the rights of workers cannot be ignored.

Outsiders have been blamed for the crisis by certain quarters. Conspiracy theory has also been touted like it is done whenever a big shattering thing happens, but talking vaguely about such matters won't serve the cause of the industry. In fact, might be an outright disservice. The government must identify those who are 'subversive' elements, if any, and bring them to justice.

Whatever might be the immediate driving force behind the agitation, there is no denying that workers in the sector have some genuine grievances that have to be alleviated so as to create a healthy industrial environment in the factories. The owners have a fundamental role to play here. Mere finger pointing at invisible trouble mongers would only multiply the confusion in the public mind and delay the process of reform.

The pent-up disgruntlement of the workers might not have found such an expression had the owners allowed trade unionism within the ambit of labour laws. But it is evident that there is no mechanism to give a hearing to and redress the genuine grievances of the workers.

Any further chaos in the garment sector can be a fatal blow to the country's economy; so, the need of the hour is a quick resolution of the crisis. The owners need to have a fresh look at the management practices, while the workers must not forget that vandalism will only harm their interest.

## Ominous trends



Brig Gen  
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN  
ndc, psc (Retd)

ONE can hardly talk about the current situation in the country without either raising the hackles of those that are wallowing in a euphoric existence, or sounding too alarmist. But it will not be an exaggeration to suggest that the recent developments in the country convey a picture of despondency on the part of the public, and an apathetic attitude on the part of the government in addressing the causes of the state of the public mind that has shown a growing inclination towards resorting to means other than peaceful in seeking redress to their grievances.

Regrettably, there has been a growing tendency on the part of the police to resort to the extreme measure in their attempt to curb violence. The result is in front of us in the form of deaths in police firings in Kansat, beating in Demra, and in the unfortunate incident of the death of a student of Shahjalal University and in the many random acts of mob violence and violent police actions

that have occupied the space and time of the media recently, topping off, however, with the recent violence that resulted in damage and destruction of more than a hundred RMG factories in Savar and Dhaka with police playing not a very assertive role.

And nobody can vouch that there are not a few of those that are waiting to exploit the flux to serve their ulterior motives.

Several of the recent incidents have created a sense of consternation in the public mind. One wonders what provoked the police to fire on the students in Sylhet SUST? The police often fail to determine the level of appropriate force that is required to quell a particular situation, and have very little understanding of the precept that it is in the withholding of the precipitate action and not the other way round, that helps in quelling an aggressive situation. And if death and injury sustained by the students of SUST were a despicable event, no less was the act of vandalism by the students

who decided to vent their spleen by putting the VC's house on fire following the death of one of their fellow students in police firing the previous day.

Violence does nothing to further the cause that one is espousing but it is highly infectious, and that was proved once again when students of two private universities in Dhaka, aggrieved by the authorities' inaction, let out their anger physically.

Perhaps the most serious of the lot has been the very recent incident of destruction of several, and vandalism of dozens of garment factories in Savar and Dhaka city. What started off as worker unrest in one factory in Sreepur spilled over to more than a hundred RMG factories in Savar and surrounding areas.

What is most alarming is the aggressive attitude assumed, on the one hand, by those that are ventilating their grievances, and on the other by the law enforcing agencies entrusted to tackle those situations that arise out of public

demonstration of popular complaints. Very noticeable have been the picture of the protesters coming prepared armed with sticks and staves, something that has become a trend following the Kansat protestors, a very foreboding one indeed.

And such a situation appears to have spread all over the country, and the example of Kansat, a situation where violent agitation was resorted to as a means of redress of public grievances, is being sought to be replicated elsewhere. What is disconcerting is that the government for some inexplicable reason is unable to contain the spread of violence. In certain cases the over-reaction of the police and in some their late reaction, have caused the situation to get out of hand.

While one may find it convenient to lay the entire blame on the administration one fails to rationalise the actions of those that are expressing their grievances through public demonstration but turn their wrath on private and

public property, as we witnessed on the day that the Biddut Bhaban was laid seize to. One is also at a loss to understand why, in seeking the rightful remuneration for their labour, the workers had to put to torch two garment factories and ransack and destroy hundred others, without realising the immense damage that they are wreaking not only on the state but also on themselves. Or are those that are resorting to such acts have other motives?

While it is an undeniable right of individuals to protest injustice or seek justice, individually or collectively as aggrieved party, the propensity to agitate and protest in a violent manner appears to have become the norm of late. And when protestors become a mob and set upon private and public properties, two things happen. One, the cause for which the demonstration is being organised is severely diluted, and even more seriously, a chain reaction of violence is set in motion, where the core issue is lost track of, if not totally forgotten, and the matter takes the form of a law and order issue. That is a situation that allows the administration to justify the use of the coercive machinery under its command.

It seem that we are yet to identify the causal factors that propel people to the path of violence. Is it perhaps that they have reached a level of despondency and find violence as the only recourse to the solution of their problems? Or is it that they have lost confidence in the system and take up the law in

their own hands? While the former cannot be condoned the latter is a dangerous development.

Needless to say these will impact adversely on our internal security, adding to the vulnerability that such developments entail. If this situation is allowed to continue it will jeopardise our overall national security. It has now become the bounden duty of both the government and the opposition to come together to put a stop to this particular pattern of lawlessness that might eventually lead to anarchy, because that may jeopardise democracy in Bangladesh.

This is neither the time to seek political mileage of the situation at the expense of the nation, nor take pleasure in the predicament that the government finds itself in. These are trends that might leave a permanent imprint on our psyche which might not be easy to purge, and may even continue to be manifested in future, irrespective of the party in power. It is therefore essential to determine why such a situation has come about and take remedial measures immediately?

Our foremost duty should be to secure the safety and integrity of the country above everything else.

The author is Editor, Defence & Strategic Issues, The Daily Star.

## Budget should address challenges with vision

The expectation of the people is much more , specially commitment of the government on the functioning of Ombudsman, efficacy of the election commission , strengthening of anti-corruption commission, and above all functioning of parliamentary democratic system with free and fair election. The budget should address all pertinent issues keeping in view the genius of the people and feeling the pulse of voters who matter most.

DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

RESIDENT lajuddin Ahmed summoned the 22nd session of the eighth parliament on 7th June 2006. The Finance Minister is going to place the national budget for the fiscal year 2006-2007 on June 8, 2006. Mr. Saifur Rahman will place the budget for an unprecedented 12th time. People in general can, therefore, expect a visionary budget with experience and wisdom addressing the challenges of national progress and current problems.

This budget session will be a crucial one in consideration of its possible hot debate , frequent walk out by opposition and agitation and procession outside the parliament on different issues . Most important is that the budget to be tabled during this session would be implemented by three governments , the exiting one, the caretaker and the government to be formed after the election. In addition, this budget will provide funds for the general election, and for also completion of committed projects within the time of present government and for payment of outstanding dues for the big procurements made during the period of this government. Apart from this the budget must be one with strat-

egy to draw the attention of voters and therefore, should reflect political wisdom, provisions and support from the public as a whole!

The budget mirrors not only economic promises to the nation but also the political goals of the party in power. The budget must provide long-term perspectives and immediate remedies to resolve acute core problems that continue to hinder development initiatives and must also build up the image of the government among the citizens. This is the opportunity to reduce resentment among the general public and overcome criticism of avarice and rampant corruption.

The public in general wants to listen to the commitment of the government on the strategy and action to ensure good governance and the establishment of rule of law. Sound and comprehensive development planning, containing measures to overcome indiscipline and inefficiency in public service delivery system is also wanted.

In addition, people are interested to hear about the macro-economic measures to be adopted in the economic horizon with special indication to foreign investment and promotion of private sector. Specific programmes need to be spelled out for poverty alleviation and achieve-

ment of millenium development goals.

To be very precise and specific, the whole country is experiencing crippling power shortage, inadequate water supply, unplanned utilisation of gas wealth, fertilizer crisis affecting agriculture, dollar and acute liquidity crisis etc. The continuous price spiral and deteriorating law and order situation have alarmed the people who are demanding immediate solution to the problems.

The budget should at least give an indication about the vision of the government and its plan to address the following areas in particular :-

Public utility services: There is resentment that public utility services are being made dearer and costlier. The unprecedented crisis of power generation and distribution has now reached a critical stage while the public have become restless for electricity and water supply almost everywhere throughout the country. How government addresses the shortage of 1624 MW of electricity in the year 2006-2007 is a big question. The energy minister has said that it would be difficult to improve the situation before 2008. The present demand for 4200 MW during the evening peak hours is covered by 1000 MW load shedding. This has

in fact created acute shortage of water supply in addition to demand of electricity. The remedy does not obviously lie with the transfer of the MD of WASA or the branding of the Kansat protestors as ill-motivated people.

Infrastructure development: Of all the infrastructure and key points of installations, Chittagong port is top most one as prime life line of nation's economy. This is in serious trouble for the last two months on the question of appointment of private operators. The pressure from political front became a great concern for all import and export traders and the national economy as a whole. The involvement of Stevedoring Services of America at Chittagong port and their subsequent withdrawal from Bangladesh is very much in our living memory. The highest turn around time and stockpiling of more than 15000 units of loaded containers against the maximum capacity of 13000 units is alarming. Operational hazards and the cost of clearing goods coupled with inefficiency and corruption force a rise in the price of imported goods. Besides, Mongla port, in fact has become dysfunctional at present. Can we not try to make it viable by drawing the attention of the new democratic government of Nepal to use the port for import of bulk items? The question of allowing the seven sisters of the Indian north-east to use the Chittagong port should be examined in right perspectives.

Strengthening of local government: In principle, the government has agreed to strengthen the local governments by giving more resources and power to them. One

of the issues which is striking the minds of the people is the functioning of upazila system. Now the question is, why the Upazila system is not working when all infrastructure facilities exist? Around 32 officers are posted and designated as upazila officers of different departments. They have in fact no coordinator to streamline the system and ensure better performance of development projects at the upazila level. The need for upazila system is keenly felt to ensure development activities and also to maintain law and order at the upazila level. The common belief is that the upazila system is kept in abeyance since MPs feel that they will eventually have no control in their constituency if a chairman of the upazila takes over the charge.

In fact, there is no local government institution at present except Union Parishad. This cannot be a situation in a country demanding development from the grassroots level and establishment of democracy in right earnest.

Good governance and rule of law: The budget speech must come out with specific commitment about good governance and establishment of Rule of Law with clear financial allocation for the same. In the absence of good governance all initiatives must end in fiasco. There is nothing to be reemphasised on the need of good governance and rule of law to be established in Bangladesh as civilised nation with long heritage.

Market management and distribution system: Nationwide price spiral of almost all items has generated a resentment among the common people. The Ministry of

Commerce has stated that the control of the market and price monitoring system is not their function. The Rules of Business, schedule 1, surely indicates such an important subject be allocated to some Ministry or Division. Control of the trade organisations including the registrar of joint stock company, price stabilisation, market intelligence, TCB etc are obviously subjects of Commerce Ministry. All these indicate the commerce ministry to have control on the market and act against hoarding, cartel formation etc. This budget session we hope, shall make these issues clear to the nation and oblige the government to keep the prices within the purchasing power of the common people.

The expectation of the people from this session is much more , specially commitment of the government on the functioning of Ombudsman, efficacy of the election commission , strengthening of anti-corruption commission, and above all functioning of parliamentary democratic system with free and fair election.

The budget should address all pertinent issues keeping in view the genius of the people and feeling the pulse of voters who matter most.

Dhiraj Kumar Nath is a freelance contributor.

## OPINION

## Nuclear Iran: Apprehending Shia-Sunni tension in ME

Most of Sunni countries connect their Shiite population to Iran and the Sunni Arabs are naturally afraid that a nuclear-armed Shia Iran would pave the way for the Iranian domination of the Arab world. Two years ago, King Abdullah of Jordan, an overwhelmingly Sunni country, caused an uproar by warning against any linkup between Shiite Iran and largely Shiite Iraq as an "emerging Shia crescent," threatening the Sunnis.

MAHMOOD ELAHI writes from Ottawa

I am writing with reference to Op-Ed: "Should Iran go nuclear?" by Kazi Anwarul Masud (DS May 21). In his otherwise interesting article, the author might have missed the main consequences of Iran's quest for nuclear weapons.

Iran says it wants to develop nuclear power for peaceful purpose. Yet, in the same breath, Iranian President Ahmadinejad threatens to wipe out Israel from the face of earth. This doesn't sound much peaceful. Israel has had nuclear weapons for

decades, but it never threatened to wipe out Iran. Iranian President Ahmadinejad also utters dire threats against the United States.

Why is Iran threatening the United States and Israel if it wants to develop peaceful nuclear power? Mark Bowden, author of "Guests of the Ayatollah," thinks that Iranian Mullahs are using the present confrontation with America to rally support of the masses in the same way earlier Shiite revolutionaries like Ahmadinejad used seizing the American Embassy in 1979 to rally support for the Shiite revolution. At that time, the

Mullahs faced intense competition from secular parties and holding of 52 Americans as hostage, triggering a confrontation with the United States, helped them to consolidate their position, marginalising other political groups. As Mark Bowden writes: "Today, as the Iranian supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, presides over an increasingly restive, unhappy population ... President Ahmadinejad, has picked a new fight with the United States of America. ... In openly pursuing nuclear power and defying the world opinion, the old revolutionaries are shoring up their stature at home by appeal-

ing to nationalism and foreign attack. And why shouldn't they? It worked before."

The Iranian people may become the ultimate victims of the Iranian regime's nuclear ambition. A look at Iranian author Azar Nafisi's book "Reading Lolita in Tehran," will make the point clear. Ms. Nafisi was expelled from the University of Tehran for refusing to wear the veil and now teaches literature at the John Hopkins University in Baltimore. Her story of Iran is a struggle for survival in a country where radical Shiite leaders regularly "hang people in the streets;" it is a country where

boys as young as 15 year-old were sent to battle during Iran-Iraq war to walk straight into enemy fire and clean mines by blowing up themselves, it is a country where independent-minded women are viewed as enemies of the state. Reading Nafisi will make most readers realise that Iran's Shiite Mullahs desire nuclear weapons to provide them with additional power to intimidate their own critics at home.

Or as Prof. Salim Mansur, professor of political science at the University of Western Ontario and an expert on the Middle East, recently wrote in The Toronto Sun: "A majority of Iranians will despair for their own future, and that of their children and grandchildren, knowing too well that nuclear weapons will make their leaders feel invincible and extinguish any hope of regime change in Iran."

Moreover, it is unlikely that

Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other Sunni Arab countries will sit passively while Shia Iran acquire the bomb. They will likely follow suit, and develop their own nuclear capabilities. As John Chipman, director of London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, pointed out in the Financial Post: "The small Gulf Arab states would seek nuclear guarantees from the West, perhaps even closer affiliation to Nato. Saudi Arabia might reconsider its position and seek some kind of nuclear accord with Pakistan. Further afield, Egypt and Turkey might even think of going nuclear. ... A nuclear-armed Iran would cause a strategic earthquake leading to all sorts of diplomatic and security realignments."

This looming confrontation between a nuclear-armed Shiite Iran and non-nuclear Sunni Arab countries may be the greatest threat to peace in the Middle

East. Although the Shiites make about 15 per cent of the world's 1.5 billion Muslims, they are a majority in Iraq and more than 90 per cent of Iranians are Shiites. This also includes Bahrain, where Shias are a majority ruled by a Sunni minority. Saudi Arabia has also a large Shiite minority and its dominant Wahabi Islam has long considered the Shias to be heretics and there is a long history of conflict between the Sunnis and the Shiites. As Lebanon's leading Shia religious leader Sayyad Mohammed Hussain Fadlallah recently remarked: "There is a Sunni world in the Arab world and there is a history, bloody and complicated towards the Shia."

Most of Sunni countries connect their Shiite population to Iran and the Sunni Arabs are naturally afraid that a nuclear-armed Shia Iran would pave the way for the Iranian domination of the Arab world. Two years ago,

King Abdullah of Jordan, an overwhelmingly Sunni country, caused an uproar by warning against any linkup between Shiite Iran and largely Shiite Iraq as an "emerging Shia crescent," threatening the Sunnis. The Sunni fears have been compounded by the muscle-flexing of Shiite Mullahs of Iran, now determined to pursue a nuclear programme and consolidate their influence in the Shiite-dominated Iraq. The implication of a nuclear-armed Iran is clear: Most Sunni countries will try to counter Iranian nuclear threat by developing their own nuclear capabilities.

Tensions between nuclear-armed Iran and non-nuclear Sunni Arab countries may be next stage of conflict in the Middle East.