

PM's advice for journalists

Applicable more for some of her party colleagues

WHILE speaking with a delegation of the newly elected members of the Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ), the prime minister is reported to have called upon journalists to refrain from doing things that might harm national interest and the economy. We are at a loss to comprehend why the PM had to make those exhortations to the journalists who, to the best of our knowledge, have been upholding national interest in their line of duty, even by laying down their lives. And her allusion to harming country's economy confounds us even further since we have no record of a journalist ever doing so. Therefore, to satisfy our curious minds, we would request her to cite one example when and where our national interest or economy has been harmed by the work of a journalist.

We strongly feel, it would have been more befitting if the honourable prime minister had one or two pieces of advice for the lawmakers belonging to her party who have been having a field day of media bashing in the recent past. The attack on journalists by some ruling party members has become a topic of discussion at home and abroad, and that is something that harms our national interest, and dignity. We have appealed to the government through our editorials to take immediate measures against the lawmaker who was responsible for attacking a meeting of senior journalist leaders at Kushtia weeks back. But, unfortunately, it was not taken into cognizance by any government body or ruling party leader. This non-action did not go down well with the journalist community of the country, neither with the media watchers all over the world.

It is accepted by our people that the press in Bangladesh is truthful, vibrant and courageous. The biggest proof of it is the rising circulation of most of the quality newspapers. The mainstream journalists are always ready to take great risks on their lives to project the truth. They have exposed the crimes and criminality of many a high and mighty without any fear or favour, and by doing so have earned their wrath.

We say and have said a lot against all governments of the day, and we intend to steadfastly continue that practice, without apology to anybody. But never have we ever written anything, nor will we ever do, that will harm the country. The tragedy of our politics is that those who win elections think that they have a monopoly on patriotism, and whatever of it is left, is possessed by those who lose the elections. There is no patriotism left for us the poor journalists!

Fishermen's ordeal

Time we had interstate protocol

WE are relieved by the return home of 13 Bangladeshi fishermen from India which hosted them for nine months under extraordinary circumstances.

In September last their boat had capsized in the rough waters of Bay of Bengal. They were ultimately rescued by Indian coast guards who sent them into a trawler over to a nearby port in Orissa.

These fishermen have been brought back home after their long stay in India with the commendable efforts of an NGO in Bangladesh. We express our sincerest appreciation for the help and assistance of the Indian authorities and the extraordinary efforts of the human rights organisation that was instrumental in bringing them back home.

The entire issue was nothing but a humanitarian one. We are of the opinion that given a level of awareness between the relevant authorities of the governments this could be resolved without such lapse of time that caused unprecedented sufferings to these innocent and simple village folks.

We fail to understand as to why an NGO had to take the major initiative in making the arrangements for their return, what was essentially the responsibility of the relevant agency of the government i.e. our diplomatic mission in India?

There is often news of people driven by disasters gone missing in each other's territorial waters. The first information of their being alive at all filters through to a government in a belated manner and the bilateral procedure for rescue and return would take yet more time.

Against this backdrop, we strongly suggest that countries of the region should adopt a protocol for safe and expeditious return of their citizens straying into other's territory, accidentally or driven by a natural disaster.

EC contriving crisis?



ABDUL BAYES

THE on-going agitation movement of the Awami League-led 14 party alliance seems to be set for a right cause. At the initial stage, however, it was suspected as an act of opposition for opposition's sake. But as days rolled by and the roles of EC came increasingly under public scrutiny, the suspicion gradually subsided to put it up as a case for people's movement for people's cause. At least, apparently, the malicious motive of the Election Commission (EC) in holding a general election massively engineered, is going to be challenged by the on-going movements. Mistakenly, however, the movements so ushered are considered to be a move to unseat a government. But nothing could, possibly, further from the truth than this. If the ruling party truly believes in democracy and transparent election then, we suppose, they should also join the fray in tuning the EC for a better future for all of us.

The most serious complaint against EC has been that it is bent upon arranging a general election

For the sake of holding a free, fair and creditworthy general election in 2007, the CEC and his two Commissioners should immediately resign. In case they do not do it -- and possibly they will not as they are the 'means' to the 'end' of the ruling alliance -- the Supreme Judicial Council should be formed to investigate into the wastage of public money by the CEC and the two Commissioners and for placing the country into a serious constitutional crisis. And as we can witness, the public is poised to negate any election engineering and vote rigging in future. This is evident from the growing resistance by the public in the streets.

for 2007 that could be riddled with election engineering including vote rigging. Arguably, a first step towards that was the 'invention' of the idea of a new voter list. While the whole nation stood against such a move terming it as unconstitutional and unprecedented, the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) alone went ahead with the proposition. In consequence and meantime, a total of Tk.600 million was spent in producing one of the most scandalous voter lists in country's history. It became soon crystal clear that the 'special means' (new voter list) was targeted towards a 'specific end' (favouring a particular group in the election). The cat came out of the bag. Quite obviously, in spirit, the movement by the opposition was heralded against the present bizarre activities of the EC under the alleged 'partisan' CEC Justice MA Aziz and his two associates on board with a 'maligned' motive.

That the allegations brought against by the opposition are just has been forestalled by the recent verdict of the Supreme Court (SC).

BENEATH THE SURFACE

The verdict called for an updated version of the voter list implying that the voter list should contain the previous voters (unless dead or mad) plus those who graduated to 18. We all expected that the CEC and his two Commissioners would resign from EC immediately after hearing the verdict. Mainly for two reasons they should have done that. First, they lost the legal battle that indicated that they were pursuing an illegal act at huge cost from the treasury and second, they lost credibility in the eyes of the public. Anybody not in line with the laws of the country and not respected by the public should not any more hold any public position, not to speak of constitutional post as those in EC. On the other hand, if the above mentioned "end" is not hypothetical but actual one then, notwithstanding legal and moral standing, they could cling to power. Unfortunately morality and ethics do not seem to prevail in the premises of the EC and hence, to our utter dismay, the result is what it shouldn't have been to cause more troubles in the days to come. Take

one or two examples. For two weeks or so, despite a clear guideline from the SC supposedly conveyed by lawyers of EC immediately, the CEC sat on the files of updated voter list on the plea of not receiving the court order and thus stole away valuable time to trim the voter list. We fail to understand how so many days were required to pass on an order of the SC to the EC that is at best a 20 minutes drive from the SC. Whereas, the writ petition submitted against the Dhaka seize programme was, reportedly, settled in vacation and in a Justice's house and communicated to the parties through police at an unprecedented level of efficiency.

However, after receipt of the court order, the CEC and his 'comrades' in the EC started a new course of 'conspiracy' with all their ferocity. It is that (a) the updated version of the voter list would draw upon the 'rejected' new voter list and that (b) voters would have to register their names coming to the EC themselves rather than the EC staff moving door-to-door for collecting the names of the new

voters. Implementation of (a) would ensure, to a large extent, the inclusion of fake voters and thus provide an edge to the ruling alliance in the next general election. On the other hand, implementation of (b) would possibly compensate the losers (in this case ruling alliance) with the additional intakes from (a). Of course, faced with possible legal problems, EC backed out from (a) but decided to continue with (b). To that extent EC's decision not to go door to door is another question looming large on the legal horizon. After all the EC is established to see that none is left out as a genuine voter and in that case it should knock at every door. It is ironic to observe that a Justice of the SC Appellate Division has stepped into so many injustices and unlawful ventures over the last few years.

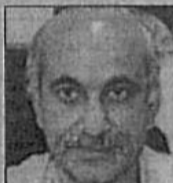
From the bizarre activities of the EC -- especially its mentors -- it appears that the CEC and the Commissioners are unnecessarily killing times so that an accurate updated voter list is shelved for distant future and the next general election is not held on time thus

creating a constitutional crisis. The EC is engaged in pushing the country to a grave situation that would only be added to the appallingly partisan role of the present EC.

For the sake of holding a free, fair and creditworthy general election in 2007, the CEC and his two Commissioners should immediately resign. In case they do not do it -- and possibly they will not as they are the 'means' to the 'end' of the ruling alliance -- the Supreme Judicial Council should be formed to investigate into the wastage of public money by the CEC and the two Commissioners and for placing the country into a serious constitutional crisis. And as we can witness, the public is poised to negate any election engineering and vote rigging in future. This is evident from the growing resistance by the public in the streets. Especially, the cat out of the CEC's bag has clearly demonstrated that people's rights are resting in wrong pockets. The spectre of Magura and February elections are still in memory as is the memory of the fall outs from those election engineering and vote rigging. Therefore, it is the people who need to extend their support to the fight against the devils destined to spoil a free and fair election. Sooner the government asks CEC and the Commissioners to quit; the better it is for the nation. Otherwise, as in the past, the aggrieved public will come out in the street to realise rights through mass revolution.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

How big is Togo?



M.J. AKBAR

HOW big is Togo? How small is Togo? How big is India? How small is the Indian? How petty is the mind that manages Indian sports? How minuscule is the pride that a nation should have in its sports team?

How complacent are we Indians -- or for that matter, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, Nepalese, the wretched non-performers of South Asia -- that we permit our sports czars to crush our national pride so that they may pick up the travel allowance perks of officialdom? How humiliating that young men of Kolkata pray for the success of Brazil (or possibly, after Crespo, Messi and a goal against Serbia and Montenegro that will remain imperishable in my memory, Argentina) in the World Cup because the Indian football team is a pathetic joke that would not find a place in the dustbin of MAD magazine.

It was not always so. In the 1950s, India was a pre-eminent side in Asia, in the hunt for medals at the Asian Games or even the Olympics. Chuni Goswami can tell you the story over a glass of something soothing at his club in Kolkata. But while other nations in Asia and

Poverty is a valid reason for failure. But India has run out of excuses. There is enough wealth to create world class teams in any sport. How small is Togo's economy? Its growth rate in 2005 was 1 percent and its GDP just under two billion dollars. Ivory Coast had the same non-growth rate, and a GDP of \$16.5 billion. Paraguay's economy grew at 2.7 percent and had a GDP of \$7.2 billion. Ghana was in single figures as well, with a GDP of \$9.4 billion and a growth rate of 4.3 percent. It's not the money, stupid. It's the will. Without the will there will never come the power. Indian football can get its act together, but the first step will have to be drastic: the actors who strut the stage must give way to professionals.

Africa (which did not exist on the sports map of the world) put sweat into their skills and passion into their dreams, we Indians slid into a swamp.

Who is responsible for this degeneration? The easy answer? Politicians. We all love to blame them. It is true that some politicians have presided over failure and collapse of sport with the aplomb of the indifferent. But that is only part of the answer. It was not a politician who ruined Indian hockey. There is no reason why politicians should not be as fond of a sport as doctors, lawyers. Politicians also have the acquired or natural talent for dealing with people, and sport is nothing if it is not public. The problem is that Indian sports is ruled by a range of non-professionals who could not run to save their lives, and who believe that sport should serve them rather than the other way around. Sport is the means to their presence in media space, a bridge on which their vanity can sprint to and fro.

This is a particularly Indian disease. The only disease more

fatal to sports is possibly the Pakistani version, where generals suddenly mature into experts on squash or volleyball the moment the pips come off the shoulder. The syndrome is similar, for both use power to extend their clutch over sport. Since no Pakistani civilian is in power, although some are in office, it is inevitable that the outreach quota should be filled by generals.

What is the difficult answer? That we, the people, who love sports and love our country, and thirst to see our national team win a match or two in the World Cup finals, let our self-appointed masters get away with this crime. Why do we permit our institutions to be purchased by non-professionals? Why is there no public demonstration of anger? Tony Blair may have been one of Britain's most successful Prime Ministers, but when he is eased, or hopefully pushed, out of 10 Downing Street, the one job he will never get is management of England's football fortunes.

All right: admitted that big or small is not necessarily a reflection of ability. China has always been

big. It has become strong, in the modern age, only now. The British ruled 300 million Indians with something like 50,000 civilians and soldiers most of the time. We Indians are welcome to congratulate ourselves on the statistic that one British civil servant was generally considered sufficient to rule half of Sudan, but that would reduce bathos to pathos. Babur had less than 10,000 men by the time he defeated the Rajput-Afghan confederacy at Kanhua to establish his empire. It is not numbers, but quality that matters, and quality can be fashioned out of a few just as easily as it can be fashioned out of the many.

Poverty is a valid reason for failure. But India has run out of excuses. There is enough wealth to create world class teams in any sport. How small is Togo's economy? Its growth rate in 2005 was 1 percent and its GDP just under two billion dollars. Ivory Coast had the same non-growth rate, and a GDP of \$16.5 billion. Paraguay's economy grew at 2.7 percent and had a GDP of \$7.2 billion. Ghana was in single figures as well, with a GDP of \$9.4 billion and a growth rate of 4.3

percent. Don't doubt these statistics. They are from the CIA's World Factbook. One squeak and you could end up in Guantanamo Bay.

Compare with booming bursting blurring blazing buoyant India. India is on the cover of the international voice of capitalism, the Economist, ready to levitate towards the stratosphere. India's GDP is \$720 billion, its purchasing power parity over three trillion dollars, its growth rate 7.6 percent and its population over one billion. The population of the other countries would lie unnoticed in an Indian district, and the Togoans could be fitted comfortably into a satellite town of Delhi.

How about a football match between Togo and India? All that India cannot do is find electricity for dazzling Delhi, water for any Indian or eleven young men in the national colours who can defeat Togo.

It's not the money, stupid. It's the will. Without the will there will never come the power.

Why has Indian cricket escaped the curse of the Indian crab? The Indian crab, as is well known, is not

only unable to scale any height, but is at its best when dragging down another crab on its way up. The answer is not nuclear science. Indian cricket has managed to privatise its economy, while other sports still live in a mixed economy. State patronage is minimal but comes at a heavy price. Indian cricket can sniff at the state, and possibly lend a bankrupt state government some cash provided the interest is good and the Reserve Bank of India can guarantee the loan. Cricket is fuelled by advertising, and has become a huge industry in its own right. Advertising needs icons and icons are bred by success. This chicken comes before the nest egg. The success does not have to be huge, as Sania Mirza has discovered, to the intense joy of her bank. Indian cricket entered a new economic zone when it brought home the World Cup from England nearly two decades ago. A starving generation found its heroes. Kapil Dev did not even need to speak English to become rich; Palmolive was certain that even those who did not know English liked to shave. A Test cricketer now counts his annual income in crores. Rahul Dravid's personal annual earnings would match the spending of all the big football teams of the Kolkata league put together.

Indian football can get its act together, but the first step will have to be drastic: the actors who strut the stage must give way to professionals. Amateur hour is over. The world has moved on, as has the World Cup. Nothing is out of reach, but you do need the will to reach it.

Will anything change? Let us pray.

M.J. Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

OPINION

Of rationale behind the govt primary school teachers' strike

MD. MASUM BILLAH

NO sooner had eighty thousand teachers of twenty thousand registered non-government primary schools left the street than the government primary school teachers replaced them. Thanks to the leaders of primary school teachers for selecting a very strategic time to press home their demands. If the present regime gets back to power they will forget the demands of about two lakh teachers. The opposition will behave in the same way if they come to power. So, the present is the proper time to squeeze anything from the political parties.

Living in the age of Universal Primary Education it goes with our expectation that non-government primary school teachers would press home their demands for nationalisation. When the root cause of our lagging behind has been identified as the lack of our education, we strongly support their demand and agitation. Receiving elementary education from the state is the fundamental

right of every child irrespective of colour, caste, creed and religion. Their agitation and hunger strike invited the attention of the government which came forward with some incentives which pacified the teachers though their main demand of nationalisation of their job was not realised. They received only ten percent of their salary while they now get fifty percent from the government.

If we analyse the rationale behind the strike of the government primary school teachers the following points surface. Our government primary school teachers enjoy all sorts of government benefits, as they are government employees. But our secondary education is run privately as 98% of secondary schools are community based. Non-government secondary school teachers are more qualified than primary school teachers. These teachers give twenty-five or more years service to the nation and when they go home go there empty handed. These teachers produce the accomplished children of the country ranging from

doctors, engineers to university teachers. Their contribution to the nation is immeasurable but they receive scant state benefit. They, at present, enjoy 90% benefit from the government only as their basic salary. They get from the government only 100 taka as house rent and 150 taka fixed medical allowance, which seems to be a farce. They also don't get their salary regularly. The government primary school teachers get their salary on time. It is a cruel reality that most of the teachers of non-government secondary school get only the government benefit. No money is given to them from the school. They depend on that government grant for their survival. The grim fact is that to get this 90% government benefit they had to take to the streets and agitate, though our respective government declares boldly the highest budget for education every year. The disparity in respect of salary and social status was removed in 1981 when the then government introduced a uniformed national scale for the government and non-government

secondary school teachers. But the tragedy was that only 50% government benefit of their basic salary was given to the teachers and the disparity remained as it was. Since then twenty-five years have elapsed but the teachers enjoy only 90% of their basic salary. This compelled teachers to take to the streets to realise their demands.

What rationale lies behind the strike of government primary school teachers? Only salary disparity between trained and non-trained teachers and introduction of School Based Assessment. Is this enough to resort to such kind of tough programme? Could it not be done through dialogue or discussion? Don't they have any responsibility towards the little children? In this poor country our government primary school teachers are not well off and are leading a miserable life like the non-government secondary school teachers and non-government college teachers as well. But then, not the others are on strike.

Schools are passing very important time, as it is the middle of the

academic year when children start learning something as the previous part was occupied by sports, exams, results and vacation. Questions arise when we look at the standard of primary education of the country. In most of the cases many primary school passed students cannot write even the alphabets correctly. Many students who get enrolled in class six show extremely poor performance. Do the government primary school teachers notice these? Don't they have any responsibility and duty towards these students?

School Based Assessment means the formative assessment of the learners. Definitely the elementary teachers must devote themselves to the development of the buds, which are going to be full-bloomed flowers. Teachers should know the ways and means to implement SBA. They cannot afford to avoid it. Because this system has been absent so far, they may face some difficulties at the initial stage. Subsequently they will be able to overcome the hurdles. But we cannot support their keep-

ing 37000 primary schools under lock and key just to protest SBA without considering its merits and demerits.

Yes, teachers can say that when corrupt politicians and black money makers enjoy very gorgeous and posh life, why can't we? Teachers are the conscience of the nation. They cannot do what the dishonest politicians can do. Had conscience prevailed with those politicians, the country would not have faced this appalling situation after thirty-five years of independence. Teachers must rise to the occasion. Definitely they deserve more facilities from the government, but they must not forget the professional duties and their position in the society.

They must also think of their brothers who serve in non-government secondary schools.

The government of our country nurture many white elephants. They satisfy these organisations at the cost of people's enhanced tax, which definitely becomes the cause of exacerbation of the common citizens of the country. Every

government has absolutely failed to satisfy the demands of the teachers of all levels. The matter of teacher development has been a neglected issue for a very long time. Sometimes we hear something from the government but the genuine change is hardly discernible. So, education of the citizens to develop them into potential human resource remains neglected. The irregularities and inefficiencies in the government machinery create scope for the teachers to come out of the classes and create chaos. Government must cast a reasonable, judicious and sympathetic eye towards the demand of teachers. And the quality of primary school teachers must be ensured at any cost. The government machinery of this sector (I mean the ministry of education) must give a serious thought to it. The teaching and way of teaching of the outside world has undergone a tremendous change with which our teachers must have acquaintance, and this responsibility lies with the Ministry of Education. How is it that the internal problem of the primary school teachers

could not be resolved by the ministry?

Our tertiary educational institutions have been plagued by nasty political chaos. Arms have replaced books; the research and study time of the teachers is now occupied by politics. Now teachers need not produce research articles in the journals, they need to follow some party politics. They are to prove that they belong to a particular party. Instead of subject-based research, they conduct research on party politics.

If primary education takes a political colour then the future will be bleak for the nation. The government primary school teachers' agitation is an ominous sign. The sooner the government can deal with it, the better without giving the matter any political colour. We request the agitating teachers to think of the miserable condition of the non-government secondary school teachers to review their course of action.

MD. MASUM BILLAH works for Post Primary Basic And Continuing Education (PACE) Programme, BRAC.