

Where are we heading?

High time the downslide is arrested

WE are deeply concerned over the fast deteriorating violent political situation in the country. The clashes between the police and the opposition activists on Sunday, which quickly degenerated into bloody pitched battles, resulted in the deaths of an Awami League activist and a police sub-inspector under most unfortunate circumstances. Two precious lives have been lost for absolutely no reason whatsoever. The AL activist died after being reportedly hit by a teargas shell near Titumeer College, while the sub-inspector fell victim to the torrent of brickbats by demonstrators at Murgapara in Naryanganj.

The police have been committing excesses in the process of their heavy handed handling of the opposition programmes. They are going for preemptive strikes that greatly add to the mounting tension in the street. At the same time, the demonstrators are attacking the police out of desperation. That sets the stage for a showdown taking a toll of human lives and property. Sanity seems to be a lost thing amidst violence.

The need for avoiding this kind of skirmishes can hardly be overemphasised. We wonder if the opposition had designated places to hold their demonstrations, then police could also announce beforehand the places that would be cordoned off. Then both sides would know their limits. It would enable the opposition to fulfill their agitation programmes, avoiding a direct confrontation with the police. As things stand now, any desperate attack invites a ruthless counterattack, want it or not.

Given the law enforcers' punishing mood and the agitators' violent disposition, clashes on the streets become unavoidable. The police-people relations have become highly antagonistic, which is very much undesirable.

Our appeal to the government is: please arrest the downslide. And the only way open to you is a comprehensive dialogue with the opposition. BNP Secretary General Mr. Mannan Bhuiyan has reiterated the government's invitation to the opposition for talks. And we believe that it is the only way to defuse tension and curb violence. Mr. Bhuiyan has also hinted at reconstituting the government delegation for the hitherto aborted dialogue with the opposition. The government's readiness to sit with the opposition must be reflected in its handling of the overall political situation and the opposition should rethink on the dialogue issue, both in the interest of the nation at large.

Heritage sites under threat

Protect them from vandalism

WE are concerned at the reports of regular pillaging of invaluable artifacts such as ornamental terracotta pieces and antiques from various heritage sites in the country. A strong nexus of thieves and smugglers are reported to be active in and around the ruins, pillaging whatever is left there to sell in the black market. The very fact speaks a lot about how unprotected these sites are and how unfeeling we are as a nation in protecting our culture and tradition.

Some of these places have been declared by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites, attaching immense importance to their glorious history that date back into antiquity, and their place in the world culture at large. The structures and artifacts in the weather-beaten relics and ruins carry the imprints of the craftsmanship of our artisans and the aesthetic taste of our ancestors. Therefore, in no way must we let them fall into the hands of thugs.

We feel there are two things that the authorities concerned may give full efforts to accomplish in order to put an end to such pillaging. One, they should go on a drive in the city markets to recover the stolen antiques; second, they must enforce the Antiquities Act 1968 in full force to discourage future thieves from daring to steal from our heritage sites. It needs no emphasising that we must preserve our past for the future generations so that the link remains unbroken.

Hasina's trip: Unremitting brickbats



S H IMAM

FROM MY WINDOW

All this is a measure of importance shown to Bangladesh by contemporary India. India's galloping economic growth and high profile scientific and technological rankings find resonance in her political thinking which is now breaking loose from its exclusionary mental framework of yesteryear.

It is as though she had gone on a "political pilgrimage" to India prior to the general election in Bangladesh before throwing her hat in the electoral ring, as if India has been a consistent determinant of poll results in Bangladesh since 1991 through 1996 to 2001, so worthy of seeking blessings from. One would have thought, in the right frame of mind, that she went to Ajmer instead for the blessings. The fair guess is her sense of piety must have over-riden any mundane calculations.

Why Sheikh Hasina who went on a private visit to India to receive a Mother Teresa Award and offer her pilgrimage to Ajmer Sharif should be meeting with the doyens of Indian politics -- that seems to be the grudging question. The whole array of political heavyweights

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee, Congress President Sonia Gandhi, former prime ministers Vajpayee and Gujral, BJP leader Lal Krishna Advani and CPM leader Sitaram Kasari squeezed time out of their pressing preoccupations to talk to her. She also met with veteran West Bengal leader Jyoti Basu. Why not Buddhadev Bhattacharya, one wonders. Anyway, such courtesy calls are only reserved for a head of state or government, we are reminded.

Her detractors have made a special mention of her flying to Ajmer by Indian Air Force plane and being treated to a lunch by the Indian defence minister, something that only a foreign state leader, chief of army and defence minister can expect. What an amusing

analogy, that! On the one hand, her critics grant that as a former prime minister and opposition leader it was but expected she would be meeting such Indian dignitaries, but on the other, they have read much into weeks of preparations making the meetings possible.

All this is a measure of importance shown to Bangladesh by contemporary India. India's galloping economic growth and high profile scientific and technological rankings find resonance in her political thinking which is now breaking loose from its exclusionary mental framework of yesteryear. Morarji Desai's beneficial bilateralism is being surpassed now by a new theme of mutually inclusive benign multilateralism in the neighbourhood, the expression is coined drawing upon the attempted piping of gas and oil

through countries of west Asia and south and southeast Asia without an iota of past animosity.

India's relationship with neighbouring countries such as Pakistan, both at the government-to-government and people-to-people level, has been in the melting pot for the better, there is no question about it, although sea change would be an overstatement. India's policy towards Nepal is a hands-off one insofar as allowing Nepalese politics to take its own course goes.

For obvious historical reasons, Awami League is a party having closer rapport with India than BNP. Let's not forget also that it was during the Awami League rule in 1996-2001 that the Ganges Water Treaty was consummated with India and the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) accord was signed with the PCJSS. The Ganges water agreement remains a potential basis for sharing the waters of other common rivers between India and Bangladesh. What basically clinched the CHT accord was India's emphatic advisory note to the refugee leaders in India that they must seek peace with Bangladesh government.

It may not be out of place to recall that India's complaints about insurgents in its northeastern region being given sanctuary in Bangladesh became less strident during Awami League rule but didn't altogether disappear. Should Awami League win the next general election, one could expect dividends in the form of ice-breaking on some intractable bilateral problems.

With her democratic maturity and regional insights, India is favourably disposed towards dealing with political vicissitudes in the neighbourhood with an even temper and reasonable amount of sagacity and farsightedness. I can remember the gist of editorials on the electoral victory of Begum Khaleda Zia in 1991 that I read in my line of duty as minister (press) in the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi, which read something like this: The merit of dealing with Khaleda Zia and reaching an accord with Bangladesh on any bilateral problem is wider acceptability of what is signed up to.

The writer is Associate Editor of The Daily Star.

Sixteen years of political brinkmanship

Both AL and BNP would like to remain in power perpetually. Hence the doggedness of purpose of the party in office to cling to power by any means, fair or foul. And also the natural proclivity, arising out of deep-seated autocratic mind-set on the part of the party leadership when in power, to try to wear down the party in opposition through constant harassment and persecution of its leaders and workers, with the ultimate objective of emerging as the sole dominant political force in the country.

BRIGADIER GENERAL
SHAMSUDDIN AHMED (RETD)

WHAT we have been witnessing these days on the streets and inside our imposing parliament house is an all too familiar spectacle. On the streets the opposition is as noisy as ever, while inside the parliament the lawmakers of the ruling alliance are as vituperative and calumnious about the opposition leaders, and vice versa, as can be expected in a market brawl.

The opposition is frequently organising general strikes, processions, meetings, rallies, human chains, Dhaka siege, sit-in demonstrations in front of the secretariat, the PMO, the parliament building, the election commission office, etc in their effort to protest the umpteen wrong doings, follies and failures of this government and to press home their demands for reforms aimed at making the election commission and the non-party caretaker government system in place truly independent, powerful, and free from political influence.

The government instead of engaging itself in dialogue with the opposition over their legitimate demands prefers to use force and all sorts of subterfuge to foil the opposition political programs.

The police, ever ready at the ruling party's beck and call, together with the ruling party armed cadres, invariably swoops down upon the unarmed agitating political leaders and workers with no holds barred and brutalises them using rifles and sticks. We often see prominent political leaders, both male and female, being roughed up by the police and left

bleeding.

This sort of gory scene is doubtless sickening to watch and is all grist to the mill for public indignation against the government. We have seen such scenes during the autocratic regime of Gen Ershad, the fallen dictator. And we have been seeing these distressing scenes during the last sixteen years of our experiment with parliamentary democracy. This is sad indeed. The brutality and the fascist style of governance of the Ershad era at times seems to pale into insignificance when compared to the brutality and terror let loose on the opposition by our democratically elected governments.

The two venerable ladies in our politics, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wajed, have failed to measure up to the expectations of the people. People expected democracy and democratic behaviour from them. People did not expect democracy and democratic conduct from Gen Ershad who usurped power by holding the nation hostage at gun-point. To be fair, Khaleda Zia has scored more negative points than Sheikh Hasina, the former having been in power twice and the latter having just one stint. This by no means should be misunderstood to mean that one is better than the other.

One might ask in hindsight what was the merit of staging the much touted Dhaka Siege by the 14 party opposition led by Awami League (AL) on June 11, 2006. One might as well ask, in all humility, what was the necessity of the High Court order issued late in the afternoon on a holiday banning the Dhaka siege only hours before it was due to kick off. One might also ask Prime Minister Khaleda Zia

what she has gained in terms of political mileage by ordering the police of the republic and her party thugs to mercilessly beat up the opposition leaders peacefully leading the siege program and the media men performing their professional duties.

The June 11 Dhaka siege program was nothing new for us. We saw it being staged by the opposition in 1990 against the authoritarian regime of Gen Ershad. We have seen such siege program staged by the opposition during the rule of the last two democratically elected governments. Many of us may not see eye to eye with the June 11 Dhaka Siege program of the opposition. But viewed in the wider context of the situation obtaining in the country now, it does seem to have some relevance. Prices of essentials are spiraling. Corruption is rampant and all too pervasive especially among the political elites. Politicisation of the police and the bureaucracy has rendered the civil administration totally ineffective.

The worst sufferers and victims of the circumstances are the teeming millions of the people who want to live in peace and want to see the rule of law and not the aberrations fashioning their life. Economy is in shambles as evident from rising inflation and heavy borrowings by the government from banks. Law and order is at its nadir. People have never felt so frustrated and so insecure for their life and property and honour before as they do now.

Political persecution has probably reached its climax. The case of Baishakhi TV director and industrialist, Bulu, being allegedly framed in a host of cases and tortured in

police custody just because he filed a criminal case against a BNP political heavyweight and minister is a glaring example of how vindictive the government can be against anyone daring to protest the wrong doings of any ruling party stalwarts known to be "tainted" or otherwise.

Then look at the RMG sector. There is total chaos and lack of even a modicum of man management and service discipline in the DEPZ as is evident from the sacking of the executive chairman of the BEPZA. Factories have been burnt and vandalised by workers while the law enforcers and officials apparently remained silent spectators. This is what happens when corruption, inefficiency and toadyism are looked for as the criteria for appointment, posting and promotion in the administration. There is hardly a sector where the government can claim to have fared better.

Understandably, the opposition, which has been slandered and denied its due political space by the government from day one of its coming to power, would seize the opportunity to cash in on the utter mess the government has created by its follies and failures and by its corruption and incompetence. The Dhaka siege program is a novel innovation of our politicians to focus on the failures of the government and to turn the opposition political movement into a mass movement by involving cross sections of the people in large numbers.

The High Court order banning the Dhaka siege has been termed "unprecedented" by many eminent lawyers of the country considering the haste with which it has been issued and the circumstances surrounding it. The fact that the writ petition was moved by a ruling party lawyer and the High Court bench moved fast at a galloping speed to pronounce its judgment in favour of the petitioner late in the afternoon on a holiday hours before the siege program was to start is apt to raise question in the minds of many people as to

whether it was done in good faith.

The opposition went ahead with the siege program despite the court order as they did not receive a copy of the court order which to my mind has impaired the image of the judiciary. The High Court bench could have spared itself the embarrassment suffered by being more judicious in such cases.

The government action triggering mass arrests of people in the run up to Dhaka siege, followed by massive deployment of the police force in riot gear in tandem with the ruling party armed cadres on June 11 and physically assaulting the unarmed opposition leaders and supporters, was not only undemocratic but also barbaric to say the least. It is a shame to see on the TV screens and on the front pages of the national dailies the pictures of General KM Shafiqullah, a hero of our Liberation War, the first army chief of Bangladesh and a former Member of Parliament bleeding profusely from nose and head injuries and being led to safety by his party workers.

It reminds us of what Gen Ershad did to foil such programs in 1990. Gen Ershad also used the police and his party armed cadres and committed excesses on unarmed people, but to no avail. The more the opposition was brutalised, the more steeled was the determination of the opposition and the people to get rid of the dictator and his regime.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia would do well to have a good look in the mirror and try to remember those days when her party men were being brutalised on the streets and she herself had to be on the run to save her life. Ultimately, democracy won and the people, brutalised and left bleeding on the streets, became victorious. Gen Ershad now is in the dust-bin of history.

Meanwhile, the opposition leader has no other option except to lick her wounds and wait for her turn to wreak vengeance on Khaleda Zia and her party as and when she would step into the shoes of the Prime Minister and try

to replicate the dictatorial rule of Gen Ershad as successfully as her immediate predecessor. This is the sum total of the politics of this country during the last sixteen years of our experiment with parliamentary democracy.

Essentially, it boils down to political brinkmanship between the two main political parties of the country, AL and BNP. Both the parties speak vociferously of establishing democracy in the country but neither practice democracy. Both speak loudly of people's welfare and well-being, but in practice they are busy building personal fortunes and amassing vast wealth for their leaders and their henchmen.

Both AL and BNP would like to remain in power perpetually. Hence the doggedness of purpose of the party in office to cling to power by any means, fair or foul. And also the natural proclivity, arising out of deep-seated autocratic mind-set on the part of the party leadership when in power, to try to wear down the party in opposition through constant harassment and persecution of its leaders and workers, with the ultimate objective of emerging as the sole dominant political force in the country.

This hunger for power of the two main political parties, totally attuned to autocratic inclination, is the main reason for the myriad problems plaguing the nation. But the quest for democracy goes on because the teeming millions of our people hunger for democracy. They long for their political rights and economic emancipation to be guaranteed. They want to live in peace and live free from the clutches of both the clerics who kill innocent people in order to establish the so-called "rule of the Quran" in the country and the pseudo-secular and tainted politicians who have amassed vast wealth and developed muscles by misusing their office and authority and by criminal acts.

The writer was a freedom fighter and former military secretary to the President of Bangladesh.

Suicides still up despite brightening economy

CLOSEUP JAPAN

It might also sound puzzling to many in developing countries what exactly prompts people to take their own lives. In regions where mere survival is what is at stake -- hunger, poverty, deprivation and exploitation might look like a trap, inclining people to end their own sufferings of survival. Yet, we do not hear much about suicides in those countries.

MONZURUL HUQ

A very important question that as human beings we are yet to find a definite answer to is the riddle of our existence. For many it's a question better not to be asked and left in the hand of divinity to guide us to the proper way that many might call a life worthy of living.

Hence, in most of the religious teachings, taking one's own life is defined as something sinful, an act that dares to touch the domain most sacred and divine. As followers of one or another religion, most of the

people around the world tend to be satisfied with the interpretation and are content with the life they had been given, no matter whatever sorrow and hardship it might bring to them.

As a result, though taking one's own life is not a total absurdity in any given society, the rate of people committing suicide has never been alarming in many countries around the world. This is true even today, though in some countries the rate of suicide is continuously showing an upward trend. Japan is one of those countries falling into the later group, where 32,552 people killed them-

selves in 2005.

It might also sound puzzling to many in developing countries what exactly prompts people to take their own lives. In regions where mere survival is what is at stake -- hunger, poverty, deprivation and exploitation might look like a trap, inclining people to end their own sufferings of survival. Yet, we do not hear much about suicides in those countries. On the contrary, the problem is much more predominant in places where more or less a decent living has long been ensured to most of the people. Japan again is among that group of countries along with

most of the Scandinavia where the matter looks much more puzzling.

The National Police Agency of Japan issued the 2005 suicide figure in early June that shows an increase by 227 from a year ago. The agency started compiling such statistics in 1978 and for the eighth consecutive year now the figure exceeds the 30,000-level. The 1995 figure, showing the total number of suicide in the country at 32,552, otherwise implies that on an average one person is killing himself (or herself) in the country every 16 minutes. This is no doubt an alarming trend that prompted the government to find ways to prevent people from taking their own lives.

The police agency report also gives reasons for the suicides based on wills, notes, or information provided by the family members and friends. Nearly half of the suicides last year were due to health problems, followed by debt and other financial difficulties. Almost 8,000 people committed suicide in Japan last year due to financial problems.

The increasing rate of money-

related suicide in Japan is a relatively new phenomenon. According to the police agency, until 1995 the figure of money-related suicides ranged between 1,000 and 3,000.

As Japan's gross domestic product started to shrink due to continued economic slump, the figure doubled towards the end of 1990s and remained above 6,000 marks for eight consecutive years.

Among those who are driven to resort to the extremity are mainly those who lost jobs or are forced to declare bankruptcy. Though both, the jobless rate and figures for bankruptcy are showing signs of improvement in recent years, the mood is yet to get its due reflection in the suicide rate. The yearly suicide rate figure in this category has broken the level of 7,000 four year ago and is remaining more or less static since then.

The third largest group of people taking their own lives consists of those having family problems. The figure for 2005 in this group was 3,019. Broken hearts too had their due share in suicide as more than

800 people took their lives last year over problematic relationship with the opposite sex.

Males accounted for more than 70 percent of the suicides in 2005, showing again that the country's economic difficulties are continuing to claim victims. The government of Japan is well aware that although there are a variety of factors behind the relatively high suicide rate, a coordinated effort on the part of the government is essential to tackle the problem. The government in fact had been working since the last few years and eventually submitted a bill to the Diet that called for closer cooperation among central and local governments, companies and non-governmental organizations, to work together in preventing the trend.

The Diet recently had passed the bill that also calls for research into the causes of suicide, efforts to ensure mental stability among workers and support for those who have attempted suicide. Under the new law, company owners are now required to take measures to main-

tain the mental health of their employees. The law also paved the way for the formation of a governmental anti-suicide task force that would report to the Diet every year on the enforcement of measures in preventing suicide.

But governmental measures alone would not be sufficient in discouraging people from taking their own lives unless the country's economic health is fixed. The mere fact that more than 8,000 people took their own lives in 2005 due to financial difficulties like debt and declared bankruptcy leaves ample of opportunities for looking at the issue from a broader perspective. The problem has no magic cure and only a successful national campaign based on an effective strategy will probably be able to cut the unusually high rate of suicide to a certain extent.

The high suicide rate in Japan is also related to the country's social and cultural norms. Unlike in Christianity and Islam, suicide in Confucius-influenced Buddhist and Shinto tradition of Japan has never

been considered a sinful act. On the contrary, suicide in the form of Seppuku for long had been glorified in Japan as an act of extreme courage and worthy masculine behaviour. As a result, the social and religious taboo that act as a preventive measure against suicide in many other societies has always been absent in Japan.

Moreover, the sense of belonging to a collective entity might also have something to do with the suicide, particularly at a time of relatively high jobless rate when those finding themselves fired can easily feel falling out of the community network and losing the identity so much associated with the collective sense of belonging.

The Japanese society had always been an extremely cruel place for the misfits and it takes time to change that mentality rooted in age-old values. So, the new law is unlikely to change the situation drastically unless these issues are also taken into account in the process of implementing effective preventive measures.