LATE S. M. AL

DHAKA WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 6, 2006

Enough is enough

Save the national flag carrier

E note that the state minister in charge of civil aviation has assured the staff of Bangladesh Biman of solving the financial problems of the national flag carrier, but it comes as little comfort. We ask why is it that the government or the ministers wake up to problems only when threatened with a strike or are moved to action only after something terrible occurs in a ministry? That Biman has been plagued by assortment of problems is nothing new, yet nobody chose to take any corrective measures in good time to avert them.

What we see of Biman is its outer shell; its core having being eaten away, it is now left only with the dregs. Bangladesh Biman has been in a state of total disarray for a long time, and those responsible to keep the flag flying, are to blame for their gross failure to ensure that the corporation runs efficiently to make it into a profitable one. When Dhaka is becoming a new hub of international air travel, and when all around us most other foreign airlines have increased their passenger intake from Dhaka, some only after a few years of commencing operations, Biman had to close down some of its existing routes and was forced to suffer losses in revenue to foreign airlines because of mismanagement with lack of planning to top it off.

One must delve deeply into why has Biman come to such a miserable state. We believe that financial crunch is not the only problem that faces the airline? Much of the cause for its despicable state has to be attributed to poor management, wasteful exploitation of its meagre resources, offering of undue services to please higher ups in total disregard for the interest of the organisation. These demonstrate the utter unconcern for the organisation that amounts to criminal neglect; such actions have gone against our national interest.

Merely infusing cash will not solve Biman's problems. It needs complete revamping, starting with long-term plan to enhance the fleet, improve its service, and regain its goodwill primarily by keeping regularity of the flight schedules. But nothing will come of any plans unless it is spared political interference. Very little will come of it also if Biman does not undertake cost cutting measures and manpower rationalisation, since it perhaps has the highest aircraft to manpower ratio in the world, and purge rampant corruption that involves most in the chain.

No short-term measure will do. What has been contemplated is a palliative that may temporary resuscitate, but not permanently cure, what is a very sick organisation

Investigation into attack on **British HC**

Sign of progress after two years?

OUR persons have been arrested for their suspected involvement in a grenade attack that was made two years ago in Sylhet on British High Commissioner Anwar Choudhury. As much as we are appreciative of the arrest it has also raised a few pertinent questions about the protracted nature of investigation.

Earlier 20 people were picked up following the incident and subsequently released for lack of evidence linking their involvement in the incident.

It is said that the lately arrested individuals might have had links with the Harkatul Jihad al Islami (HUJI), a militant Islamist organisation, banned quite sometime ago. In recent times the media had reported that this very HUJI had appeared under a different name and even held public meetings and gave interviews to the press. We fail to understand as to how a banned militant organisation like HUJI continues to carry on with its activities unhindered

The media has also reported that two of the militants now under custody and being investigated had been arrested on 14 December, 2005 following the countrywide bomb attack on August 17 but were subsequently released. The current investigation has also revealed that one of the two arrested is a former student of the Quwomi Maddrassah while the other was a student of yet another Madrassah of Sunamganj in Sylhet.

It is our impression that the investigations into the acts of militants are conducted in a slow, half-hearted and complicated manner. The sequence of events into the investigation of the grenade attack on the British High Commissioner and into the murder of SMS Kibria create such an impression.

There is no denying the fact that some misgiving persists in the public mind about the government's commitment in dealing with the entire gamut of Islamist militancy in the country despite some visible measure of success. Religious extremism, if allowed to continue unabated and unchecked or even dealt with on a piecemeal basis is bound to make security of the country vulnerable, both internally and externally.

Justice Hasan could choose to say 'No' . . .



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

AHMOOD Hasan Mansur could easily have declined the offer of a position as election commissioner. He says he was not aware of the position coming to him before it actually came to him. That certainly sounds incredible. Even so, we will let that be. We will assume that the new election commissioner truly did not know that he was about to join the gentlemen who today happen to be holding significant positions at the Election Commission.

But it would surely have made a lot of sense if Mansur had opted not to accept his new job. He says he means to serve the country in his new capacity. All good men and women in this country are motivated, like him, by a desire to be of service to the nation. But what has been happening, especially where the Election Commission is concerned, is that those who have been appointed to its exalted offices are regarded as being individuals who have chosen to serve the political coalition in office rather than the entire country.

Mahmood Hasan Mansur would have done us all proud if he had observed the objective realities in the country before taking up the offer to be part of the Election Commission. He would have been the recipient of our collective gratitude if he had declined to join the EC. The sad reality is that he has not, which is a pity. At a time when conscientious men and women all

GROUND REALITIES

And, like every other man, K.M. Hasan will obviously, or should, leave his politics at the door as he assumes charge of the caretaker government. We will not pre-judge his intentions, not at all. But, for him, a far better proposition will be to let everyone know that he will not accept, owing to the debate over his past, the position of chief advisor in October. What if Justice K.M. Hasan did decide to walk away from his rendezvous with history?

over Bangladesh want the entire set-up at the Election Commission to be replaced by people with greater acceptability, and hence credibility, it is hard to accept the fact that good men like Mansur are keen to show themselves as being part of the system. The system, by the way, lies prostrate, for it has been hugely damaged in the past year or so.

As you move around the towns and villages of this country, you will hear a good deal of commonsense talk about the need for some resignations in important political, as well as administrative, spots. That, of course, is a message which has not been heard, indeed is not being heard, in the corridors of power. Altaf Hossain Chowdhury should have resigned from the government a long time ago. That he continues to be a minister without portfolio quite undermines the nascent democracy we appear to be struggling through.

And now we hear that he is into business of a sort that even the Securities and Exchange Commission has questions about. Minister of State for Home, Lutfozzaman Babar, for all the enthusiasm he keeps demonstrating before curious media people wanting to know about law and order has not made us happy with his performance. He could have taken the very dignified path of giving up his post. He has not, like so many others in the four-party

Law Minister Moudud Ahmed, the very epitome of politeness despite all those public worries about the shifting sands of his politics, could nevertheless have left his mark on history through carrying out the important iob of separating the judiciary from the executive branch of government. He chose not to do any such thing. But consider this: if he had decided to quit office by taking responsibility for this procrastination over the judiciary issue, he could have occupied a high moral ground and we would have identified with his

You can go on and on with tales of how some resignations could have left us all feeling better about ourselves as a nation. You could argue the merits of resignation till the sun sank into the sea at the end of the day. The tragedy for all of us, though, is that there are simply no men or women courageous enough to walk away from jobs for ethical reasons.

When Commerce Minister Hafizuddin Ahmed acknowledges his inability to rein in those who raise prices in the market, because of that faceless syndicate, we expect him to take the next step as well, which is to inform the country that he has had it up to his neck. therefore, he is leaving. Finance Minister Saifur Rahman, despite his relentless pontification about the need to weed out corruption, eventually presided over a program for transformation of black money

into white. That was disappointing. The minister himself should have felt disappointed as well and taken the honourable way out. Ask yourself a simple question: What would Taiuddin Ahmed have done in such circumstances? Ah. but Taiuddin Ahmed would never be part of a government that would leave the state at the mercy of robber barons, would he?

That makes you think. The

country we inhabit today is simply not the country we saw emerge into freedom on a December afternoon in 1971. Mistakes have been made aplenty, and nearly everywhere. There would hardly be any point in apportioning blame to particular individuals or governments, though the degree of responsibility for all the blunders committed might vary from one era to another. But where the present government occupies a distinctive position, in a demonstration of arrogance, is in its absolute unwillingness to respond to public sentiment. When Prime Minister Khaleda Zia tells the country, with all that show of hauteur, that it matters little whether or not the opposition takes part in the forthcoming elections she is making it hard for people to believe that democracy will actually dig deeper roots in Bangladesh. The ruling coalition can surely have an opposition-free election and can certainly romp home with a "massive mandate." And then what?

Anyone who recalls February 1996 cannot but recoil, with a sense of horror, at the way conditions have lately been shaping up in Bangladesh. Besides, there are all the lessons of history the ruling circles can learn. General Ershad went for a flawed election in 1988 and then was out in two years' time. Pakistan's Zulfikar Ali Bhutto won a huge majority over his opponents in March 1977. The opposition then marched on the streets in protest and put his government in truly hot

The arrogance that comes with an exercise of power can only cause terrible upheavals in society. When ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party leaders predict another two-thirds majority for themselves at the next election they are deliberately, or naively, papering over the realities which stare them in the face. Selfconfidence is a rarity in societies such as ours. But when such selfconfidence, because it is misplaced, points clearly to selfdestruction, and indeed to attempts to drive a hole through our national self-esteem, we are left with little choice other than to wait at the

bend of the river for salvation. And there are men around who can vet salvage our self-esteem. Think of Justice K.M. Hasan. Forget the fact that he has been linked to the BNP. Forget, too, the idea that he has served as ambassador in a BNP administration. And, if you can, try not to remember his embarrassment over the

Bangabandhu murder trial case. All that is important now is that there is the very real possibility of his taking charge as chief of the next caretaker administration. The controversy swirling around him simply muddies the waters, and all the time. But matters do not have to be that way. Justice Hasan can make sure that the country can make its way out of the woods through the simple, bold act of withdrawal from contention.

There come in history all those moments when individuals are unequivocal manner, the courage to abdicate from responsibility or expected responsibility -- all in the larger interest of the society they are part of. Justice Hasan can afford to take that courageous plunge and so make it possible for all of us to move on to the business of ensuring a free, fair and therefore credible election.

The issue is not one of Justice Hasan's playing a partisan role in the run-up to the elections. He is considered by his friends to be a man of integrity; and the mere fact of his once being aligned with the BNP is little cause for us to think he will ensure that his friends in the party will triumph at the polling stations. Every man is entitled to his political opinion.

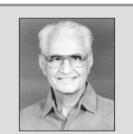
And, like every other man, K.M. Hasan will obviously, or should, leave his politics at the door as he assumes charge of the caretaker government. We will not pre-judge his intentions, not at all. But, for him, a far better proposition will be to let everyone know that he will not accept, owing to the debate over his past, the position of chief advisor in October.

Back in March 1968, President Lyndon Johnson stunned, and then charmed, America through his announcement that he would not seek, and would not accept, the nomination of the Democratic Party for a second term in the White House. In times and places nearer ours, the instance of Sonia Gandhi ought to suffice. She abjured the office of prime minister of India. Respect for her act of magnanimity soared.

What if Justice K.M. Hasan did decide to walk away from his rendezvous with history? And what if, to our amazement, other miracles begin to occur, purporting to inform us that Chief Election Commissioner M.A. Aziz and his colleagues had chosen to follow in the footsteps of the former chief iustice of the Supreme Court?

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Executive Editor, Dhaka

What's sure about the opposition?



M B NAQVI

HESE are the days of no confidence motion and popular agitation. Various opposition parties are said to be uniting. Should the regime fear? Rulers are a known category: They mean to stay in power; indeed, cannot afford to leave it. They can only be forced out by a superior force. But this is absent. Which superior force it can be is known; a united and aroused people's will

that has, so far, been unavailable. Which political party is likely to mobilize enough popular will to force the army out of politics? They are all uncertain quantities. There is talk about one-point unity. An Alliance for Restoration of Democracy has been uniting the opposition parties for several vears. MMA has also been doing it.

Which are the main opposition parties? Is it the PPP? Can we accept MMA's claim to be an opposition party? Is PML(N) really willing to cooperate with PPP, without reservations? Answers vary. Where stands ARD today? Is

MMA with it or against it? One-point unity has a long history. It began in East Bengal with the Jukto Front in 1954. It succeeded in toppling Muslim League in East Bengal. The power structure in the west wing remained with the Americans, and with a defence policy that pleases the army? Some entertain a persistent doubt that PPP may yet cut a separate deal, if only Musharraf does.

Leaving aside East Pakistan, the Combined Opposition Parties in 1964 memorably opposed the selfpromoted field marshal. Its failure was predictable. The parties then united to struggle against Ayub Khan in 1968-69. In a way, they succeeded: the Ayub regime was toppled. But the people were saddled with another military dictator.

unaltered -- and in power -- and it

soon retaliated. But that is another

The next dictator, Yahya, played an ambitious game. He implemented, in slow motion, what Ayub had agreed to in the 1969 Round Table Conference. Yahya restored one-man one-vote, doing away with the parity of East and West Pakistan, and held a free poll -- but just. Yahya held free polls under the misconception that he would get the results he wanted. Which of course did not happen. He rejected the results and what followed was a disaster for Pakistan and a new

beginning for East Bengalis. There are further instances of one-point unity. Under the Pakistan National Alliance banner the opposition parties brought the Bhutto regime down in 1977. Again the army gathered the fruits of a popular struggle, and another military dictator, Ziaul Haq, took over -- and hanged Bhutto for good measure.

The opposition had vet another go at unity: the Movement for Restoration of Democracy in 1983. MRD struggled but was brutally suppressed -- and not all opposition parties had joined in. The movement was largely a PPP protest and was confined to Sindh. Punjab's failure to take part in the struggle underlined a major ethnic fault-line. Consequences of this

The opposition's answer was ARD. But it is still a work in progress. Will not the parties

fall out among themselves once the system is defeated? Will not MMA insist on its

program of Shariah being made the constitution, and the law, in place of the present

statutes? Will PPP not insist on making its right-wing democracy more closely aligned

fiasco are still being felt. The army, conscious of becoming unpopular after eleven years of Zia, adopted a new strategy: it experimented with an intelligentlycontrolled democracy with real power staying with the army. The army retained most of the institutions of a democracy, but put unseen limitations on civilian power. This military rule in mufti ran from 1988 to 1999. Now the Musharraf regime is another hybrid, Martial Law combined with a controlled democracy, but with a semi-free press.

The opposition's answer was ARD. But it is still a work in progress. It is uncertain whether the PPP, the PML(N), and MMA are fully united, or only partially. With a heavy heart one ignores smaller parties, that are the salt of the earth, in ARD. Nawaz Sharif and Benazir have certainly signed a Charter of Democracy, theoretically a major step. The people want to be sure that the two will struggle closely together inside ARD and remove the uncertainty regarding MMA's status vis-a-vis ARD. MMA's internal disunity is causing uncertainties.

Will not the parties fall out among themselves once the system is defeated? Will not MMA insist on its program of Shariah being made the constitution, and the law, in place of the present statutes, indeed subordinating everything to the Shariah? Will PPP not insist on making its rightwing democracy more closely aligned with the Americans, and with a defence policy that pleases the army? Some entertain a persistent doubt that PPP may vet cut a separate deal, if only Musharraf

Each party has to define its America policy now. Which party will change these relations, and give up subservience to the US by striking out on a course of nonalignment, and do without the dole?

Then there are social policies. Will not the opposition continue the present economic policies? Or can there be a paradigm shift in favour of the common man rather than the globalization that is only enriching the rich and making the poor poorer. This is increasing unemployment and making it worse by failing to control inflation. This is not to argue that there

should be no united struggle against the military's overlordship of Pakistan. The point is whether the struggle is being conducted with eyes open about the natural differences over the policies to follow. What is paramount is that there should be an interim common minimum programme for a transitional period of, say, a year after the ancien regime ends. Let it be an open, honest democracy for that vear. All parties should propagate their programs and ideologies for a second election that would reconstruct Pakistan, Let each party spell out what it wants Pakistan to become through a reasonably well worked out program showing how it would implement its aims.

It means that positions have to be taken on the rights of the minority provinces clamouring for autonomy and control over their resources. That second Assembly would, in essence, be a Constituent Assembly to extensively amend the constitution, or write a new one, and begin reconstructing according to a popularly accepted programme.

In the meantime the Charter of Democracy needs to be signed by all parties and it should specify major social, political and economic reforms. The Charter is vague on social and economic issues. Let these issues be discussed by all parties and added on later, or they may agree to differ. The starting point should certainly be to take the Army out of politics. National security has to be redefined after a new India policy is

Major issues of foreign policy need to be formulated by people's majority, not by Praetorian guards. Pakistan's present foreign policy is

what America dictates, or allows. Who wants a change is the question. An alternative cannot be confrontationist. It has to be a policy of neutrality in world confrontations. Pakistan must reject all hegemonies. But let Pakistan be an honourable and independent second class power, with no leadership role anywhere -- certainly not in Afghanistan.

Crafting a new India policy will be controversial. PML(N) and an MMA party, JUI, happen to agree on befriending India. But there will be opposition from the Army, and the politicians supporting it. They regard India as a radical threat to Pakistan. What they want is to talking peace but also keeping the powder dry, with cold war and arms race intact.

Nuclear weapons are the next divisive question. Should Pakistan move toward nuclear disarmament, or continue the arms race, is the question. Fact is that the Bomb has no relevance to the military security of Pakistan. It has, indeed, made Pakistan less secure, and more vulnerable, as was shown in 2002, when India dared Pakistan to use its nuke(s) first and see what follows. The Pakistani Bomb did not prevent war in 2002. What did was Musharraf's acceptance of India's main demand. The issue requires to be sorted out.

Land reforms and the changing of agrarian policies to favour the poorer peasants, and to discourage corporate farming, ought to be the starting point in fighting poverty in rural areas. This reverses the regime's thinking. Who advocates it?

MB Naqvi is a leading columist in Pakistan

Game of balance of power



ANY political strategists believe that the recent war between Israel and Lebanon is not merely a conflict between the two states but is a war to maintain, or test, the balance of power between the US and Israel and Iran and Russia, in the Middle East. Iran is emerging as a strong regional power, and its potential capacity for making nuclear weapons has unnerved the US and the West, Russia and China are closely watching the scenario and are not averse to seeing the change in the money for acquiring weapons, rather than spending funds for poverty-reduction.

What is balance of power? Power can be tangible or intangible. Tangible power is a resource that is readily countable, such as infrastructure, and intangible power is untouchable, such as leadership, will-power, wisdom, and morale.

balance of power in the region.

The word "balance" evokes the image of a pair of scales with weights on either pan in such amounts that the scale is poised in equilibrium. Balance of power means a situation in which two states, or two groups of states, or

all states of the world grouped around two centers, are seen to display roughly the same amount of

If the flow of arms was stopped many civil wars, or tribal or ethnic conflicts, could not

have continued. There is double standard in the conduct of big powers. On the one hand

they advocate peace and democracy, on the other hand they continue to provide small

arms to warring nations. The warring nations in the Third World have been diverting

Balance of power is the distribution of power in states, and power is measured in relation to that of the opponent. One is expected to make an assessment of one's own power, as well as that of a potential opponent. Furthermore, in assessing power one has to take into account actual, and potential. power. Standing military forces are the most obvious example of actual power. Potential power is one that will be available at a future date

By one estimate, the five-power structure seems to be the ideal number of states keeping a balance of power. Five states will bring a stable balance of power because one state will be able to play the role of a balancer by joining with other states. The 19thcentury provides an illustration of maintenance of balance of power among five European countries, namely Britain, France, Prussia (Germany), Austria, and Russia. At first Britain and France were kept apart by colonial rivalry, Britain and Russia by mutual suspicion over Central Asia, Russia and France by

monarchy-republican animosities. Napoleon wanted to change the balance of power among the five states in Europe but he was defeated

By 1907, France, Britain, and Russia held the balance of power against Germany and Austria. The First World War in 1914 began to change this balance of power, but not because of any ideological fight against each other. It was simply to upset the prevailing balance of power in Europe

It was only during the Cold War that enforced peace prevailed, because two super-powers held the balance of power. Some say balance of terror because each power knew that it could be annihilated if it attacked the opponent. This is known as deterrent system.

The balance of power was based on sheer terror during the Cold War, and this doctrine is known as Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). In many ways MAD doctrine is applicable to India and Pakistan, and if Pakistan had nuclear weapons in 1971 many

military analysts believe that the 1971 war would not have occurred.

Neither the US, nor Soviet Union, used nuclear weapons in the knowledge that a nuclear attack by one side would immediately invite a retaliatory nuclear attack from the other, because of the fact that both had second strike capability. Furthermore, the two superpowers had implicit agreement about their "no-go-areas" -- for example for Moscow it was Latin America, and for Washington it was Eastern Europe

Military spending

It cannot be denied that the development of nuclear weapons brought enormous risks for humanity while absorbing money that could have supported worthier lifeenhancing purposes. The destruction in Hiroshima, in 1945, by one small and primitive bomb, was staggering.

Nuclear weapons came to be seen as a badge of honour, a kind of power projection. States build nuclear weapons, or acquire con-

ventional weapons, to keep the balance of power in the region, or in the world. The US alone is expected to spend around \$400 billion in a year for defence.

Between 1970 and the end of the Cold War in 1989, weapons worth \$168 billion were transferred to the Middle East, \$65 billion worth went to Africa, \$61 billion to the Far East. \$50 billion to South Asia (mainly India and Pakistan), and \$44 billion to Latin America. The Soviet Union and the US accounted for 69% per cent of the \$388 billion total.

During 1993-95 more than \$70 billion worth of weapons were exported, including about \$32 billion to the Middle East. This figure needs to be put in perspective against other world needs, for example only \$6 billion are reportedly required to educate every child in the world. In April 2004, the World Bank president stated that while \$900 billion were spent for military use, only US\$60 billion were used for aid. None of G-8 rich countries have met the UN targeted 0.7% of their Gross National Income for development

Who supplies arms to warring nations?

The five permanent members of the Security Council (Britain, China, France, Russia and the US) provide 86% per cent of the arms exported to developing countries. They know that at least 30 major civil wars are in progress and the arms exported would be

used in these conflicts. If the flow of arms was stopped many civil wars, or tribal or ethnic conflicts, could not have continued. There is double standard in the conduct of big powers. On the one hand they advocate peace and democracy, on the other hand they continue to provide small arms to warring nations. The warring nations in the Third World have been diverting money for acquiring weapons, rather than spending funds for povertyreduction.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh