

AL's incredible suggestion

Jalil should have suggested Jatiya Sangsad in the first place

WE are totally at a loss as to why the much-awaited dialogue between the Secretary General of the BNP and his AL counterpart did not take place yesterday, as was expected. The comments of the AL General Secretary that have appeared over the TV, BBC radio and in the newspapers are perplexing and intriguing, and expose a total lack of political sense on his part. He should have proposed parliament to be the venue of his choice without making the blunder that damaged the party's credibility.

We are flabbergasted at the confusion, that has been confounded by the suggestion of the AL General Secretary, that the dialogue may be started at the residence of the US Ambassador in Bangladesh because that, according to the party leaders, is a neutral venue -- an even more perplexing argument, the rationale of which is beyond the common man's comprehension. We are sorry to note that the AL does not consider any other place in Bangladesh fit enough to hold a dialogue, other than a foreign territory, which technically the residence of the US Ambassador is. Not unexpectedly, the BNP has declined the US Ambassador's invitation.

What is beyond our comprehension too is the fact that the idea of the US Ambassador's residence as the venue to start the talks has been endorsed by the AL presidium. And that compels us to ask whether there was no one present at the presidium meeting with enough acumen to foresee the unmitigated blunder that the AL was committing, going for that option.

The stark reality that the US is the lone superpower is not lost on us, and we do appreciate its support for the democratic process in Bangladesh over the years. We also acknowledge the current US Ambassador's efforts to reduce the political hiatus between the two major political parties.

But notwithstanding the above, we feel forced to reject the suggestion that a dialogue to remove the political impasse be started at the residence of a foreign ambassador. However well meaning the effort might have been, the suggestion was injudicious and the timing disastrous.

We strongly criticise the AL for postponing the dialogue and creating fresh complicity. We are relieved that Jatiya Sangsad has now emerged as the consensus meeting place. So we see no hindrance for starting the dialogue immediately.

Unbridled police arrogance

Somebody must take responsibility and resign or be removed

THE incident in which police beat up a few leading shooters of the country at the Gulshan shooting complex falls in pattern with the highhandedness and brutality that the law enforcers have been showing these days. Nothing could justify an attack as barbaric as the one that we have witnessed at the shooting complex.

The shooters came under attack on the heels of an altercation between a security guard of the complex and the driver of a DIG of police following the latter's attempt to park his car at a place where parking is not allowed. The tiff centering on the incident soon degenerated into a one-sided drubbing of the helpless shooters by the policemen.

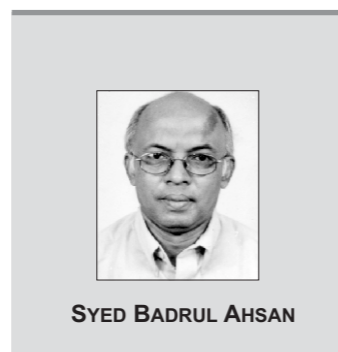
The injured include Asif Hossain Khan, the boy who won a gold medal for the country at the 2002 Commonwealth Games. His participation in the next Asian Games has become uncertain as doctors have said that it would take at least six weeks for him to recover fully. That is certainly not how gold medalists are treated in any civilised society.

The police violated the law twice. First, the insistence on parking a vehicle at a place not designated for this purpose was not expected of the law enforcers. Secondly, they pounced on the men who had tried to resist the violation of a rule. Obviously, the rules cannot be different for the police -- a truth the law enforcers failed to accept. And what is most shocking is that they swooped on the shooters and employees at the complex without even considering whether all these people were involved in the altercation between the driver and the security guard.

Then they cooked up a story to defend themselves, or to frame charges against the victims, which amounted to brazen lies. This is a favourite ploy of the law enforcers to cover up their misdeeds.

The police atrocities at the shooting complex must not go unpunished. Somebody at the top has to take the responsibility of the totally uncalled for attack on the shooters. The law enforcers have to realise that they are not above the law.

Talukdar and the politics of decency



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

IT takes a brave heart in an individual entrusted with public responsibility to concede that he is in no position to defeat the enemies arrayed around him. And that was precisely what Anwarul Kabir Talukdar did a few days ago when he informed us that he was calling it a day.

He was quitting because he could not fulfill public expectations about electricity. That was a gentlemanly thing to do, even though there are not many in the country who would like to hold Talukdar responsible for the mess that the power sector has been in.

Even so, the minister of state chose to resign; and by doing so he revived our faith in principled men and morally driven politics. It really does not matter that the government, which in its twilight hours has been doing all sorts of queer things, has been trying to malign Talukdar through dishing out disinformation about his having been sacked.

If anything, the vindictive behaviour of the powers that be towards one of its own, or one who had been its own, speaks of the sordid levels to which government by the four-party rightwing alliance has sunk in Bangladesh.

The absence of shame we notice in the government is once more a sign of how endangered a species good men and women have become in this country, for when these men and women take it upon

GROUND REALITIES

In these times, when hordes of ministers and ministers of state go on doing all the wrong things; or keep going through the pressure brought to bear on them; or lack the will to cast aside the power that gives them so much protocol, and so many perks, and nothing more, Anwarul Kabir Talukdar's departure from political office causes a cathartic change in us all. We do not lionise him. We do not shower greatness on him. But we do know that in him, and in people like him, there are the sparks that often make heroes of individuals. Talukdar's bravery deserves a salute and a thank you. We give these to him in good measure.

themselves to reveal the implied, or state the obvious, they run into deep trouble with those they choose to expose.

In a sense, the former minister of state for power did not subject anyone to humiliation or exposure. And yet he said a thousand and one things, in a manner of speaking, about his government when he decided, in his wisdom, to leave office. The focal point of Talukdar's decision to leave was the sheer courage he demonstrated in opting for life without the perks of office.

That is not something you can say about many, or anyone else, in this government. There are all the ironies involved here, in case you have failed to spot them. How about the fact that nothing that has been going wrong in the power sector could, in any way, be attributed to Talukdar's inability to do his job well? Consider the reality that he was there for a mere four months, and trying to put right a system that has carefully and meticulously been subjected to all manner of corruption.

Talukdar started out well, and would indeed have done well, had the coterie, which has kept the country in its sinister grip, not come in his way. To understand how the coterie has worked in the power sector all these five years, you only have to recall the fate of Iqbal Hasan

Mahmood. Of course, there were all the flaws and shortcomings that Mahmood can be accused of, and legitimately too. But when you remember the hurdles he ran into at the Prime Minister's Office, where powerful bureaucrats pulled the rug from under him and decided that he could be a minister of state without having to exercise his constitutional authority, Talukdar's predecessor was doomed.

Talukdar's arrival on the scene, therefore, was, for many, a good omen. Here was a gentleman, a sophisticate, whose background in the army, and outside it, would get things done. He made a good and necessary start by going after the bad elements in his department, and beyond it. He demonstrated his unwillingness to be a cipher when he put his foot down over the unbridled, and less than responsible, behaviour of those who manned the PMO. Naturally he was disliked, and then abhorred. Soon he was being hated. In Bangladesh, good people are, as a matter of routine, hated. Some of them are assaulted. Some others are killed.

Anwarul Kabir Talukdar, to our relief, is still around to convince us that there can be people in bad political dispensations who are willing and ready to be good and well meaning. You cannot but be surprised at the alacrity with which

he took upon himself the responsibility for the chaos in the power sector. It was conscience that was bothering him.

And that, you will surely agree, was morality at work. How many Bengali ministers have, as far as you can recall, resigned of their own volition? In a country where politics and morality have increasingly become strangers to each other Talukdar was telling us, in his quiet, unselfish way, that all was not lost yet.

When you reflect on his courage of conviction, you cannot but experience the mind in you dwelling on all the forces of darkness that continue to exercise their devilish sway in the society you are part of. In an institutionalised democracy Talukdar would have prevailed in his campaign against a corrupt bureaucratic-political-business establishment. He lost.

There are those of us who are, today, willing to convince ourselves that the retired major general may have lost a battle. As Charles de Gaulle would so enthusiastically agree, Talukdar has not lost the war, for we are all engaged in that war against the medieval forces which seek to push, and then twist, the knife into our modern sensibilities.

In essence, we feel better as a people because of Talukdar's conscious decision to resign. The

courage he has demonstrated is what puts all those others who have hung on to their jobs in the government to deep shame. Because it is those people, with incompetence and corruption writ large across their careers, who should have walked away from power. They have not, which again says a whole lot about the principles, or the lack of them, they have based their performance, or the lack of it, on in these terrible five years.

It is a political society of scapegoats we have created for ourselves. The ones responsible for the irresponsibility they have brought into their work have always sought to point the finger at those who have considered power a sacred public trust. And then there have been the helpless ministers who have known how badly they have failed, and yet have miserably stayed on. The record of bad administration that has been created in the years since the last general elections should have been enough, in an ideal democracy, for this government to submit its resignation wholesale to the president of the republic.

In the present instance, in the case of Anwarul Kabir Talukdar, it ought to have been for the minister for power (who is none other than the prime minister) to take responsibility, publicly for all the darkness that has befallen the country. She should have relinquished charge of the ministry. She did not do that, which is why Talukdar's boldness comes as a breath of fresh air.

In a country famished for want of purposeful national leadership, Talukdar has pointed out to us that it is still possible for the people of Bangladesh to expect a slim silver lining through the monsoon clouds. It may be that he will be forgotten in course of time. It may well be that we will soon not remember the selflessness in Talukdar.

But for now we are thrilled, not because he has left office but

because he has upheld the cardinal rule of governmental politics: he has acknowledged his limitations in the exercise of power, and he has, therefore, walked away from the feebleness that constitutional office can sometimes transmute itself into.

In politics nothing can be more demeaning for an individual's self-esteem than the hollowness which sometimes comes with holding office. Men and women with dignity know when to leave, or how long to stay. It is the shameless and the sycophantic who hang on till the last ray of the setting sun has become entwined with the first grey thread of dusk.

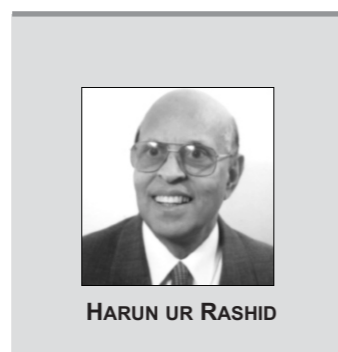
More than three decades ago, the respected Tajuddin Ahmed walked away from power, and breathed not a word of complaint about having to do so. AM Zahiruddin Khan, in his time, knew that holding on to office beyond the remit of morality was dangerous, and unbecoming for men such as he. He found his way out of government.

In these times, when hordes of ministers and ministers of state go on doing all the wrong things; or keep going through the pressure brought to bear on them; or lack the will to cast aside the power that gives them so much protocol, and so many perks, and nothing more, Anwarul Kabir Talukdar's departure from political office causes a cathartic change in us all.

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Syed Badrul Ahsan is Executive Editor, Dhaka Courier.

UN needs reforms to be relevant in the 21st century



HARUN UR RASHID

THE UN is 61 years old. It has 192 member-states. Although criticisms have been leveled against the UN, it has been credited with some achievements, too.

It survived the Cold War. The vast network of specialized agencies has helped to improve the quality of life of people across the world. The activities of WHO, Unesco, UNDP, Unicef, and ILO have touched the rich and the poor. There has been tremendous awareness and improvement of human rights.

One of most important visible functions is the UN peacekeeping missions, in about 17 war-torn areas, to maintain international peace and security at a cost of approximately \$2 billion.

Although peacekeeping has not been specifically mentioned in the Charter, it falls in between VI (peaceful settlement of disputes) and Chapter VII (action with respect to threats to peace).

BOTTOM LINE

It is acknowledged that without the UN the past 61 years would have seen a far bloodier world. The question is: does poverty lead to conflict, or does conflict perpetuate poverty? The answer is open to conflicting interpretations. The restructured UN should address how to eliminate poverty of people in developing countries. At the same time, developing countries must be democratic, and govern with accountability and transparency, together with a free press. The UN is a unique institution, and if there were no UN, we would have to have invented it in the days of globalization and inter-connectedness of states.

Mixed record

The UN has achieved a great deal in economic and humanitarian areas, but its scorecard in political issues is disappointing. The UN was set up to save the world from armed conflicts, but a number of armed conflicts have been raging in the world with the big powers selling arms to the warring nations.

The nations which took the initiative in the setting up of the UN to prevent war, "the sorrow of humankind," have been silent spectators to war. For example, the recent Lebanese-Israeli conflict was allowed to continue for 34 days before a ceasefire resolution was adopted.

This is because the five permanent members, that have veto-wielding powers, have continued to undermine the functions of the Security Council to pursue their own interests. They veto any resolution when their allies are affected

adversely, even when they know that their veto will result in injustice and oppression.

Major reforms

Without major reforms the UN will not be able to perform effectively. What the UN needs is democratization of the institution. It must be an organization which reflects the political and economic reality of the 21st century, and not of the mid-20th century.

The discussion on reforms has unfortunately been dominated by the reorganization of the Security Council. This is because each nation wants its power projection through gaining a permanent seat in the Security Council.

Other important areas of reforms, or restructuring, are not talked about or heard of. Although restructuring of the Security Council is imperative, other areas do need attention at the same time.

The areas that need improvement are described below:

First, the structure of the UN Secretariat needs overhaul. It is desirable that the four divisions, namely: (a) peace and security, (b) economic and social, (c) humanitarian, and (d) administration and management, be headed by four deputy secretaries general.

Each would be responsible for a particular functional area. Accountability, and transparency of decisions of the Secretariat, must be the hallmark of reforms.

Second, the powers of the Secretary General under the existing Article 99 are very limited. It needs amendment to reflect the current responsibilities of the head of the UN. Article 99 enables the Secretary General to report only to the Security Council, suo moto, or on his own, he cannot take any action when any war takes place.

Third, the powers and functions

of the General Assembly are minimal compared to those of the Security Council. Article 12 states that the General Assembly shall not make any recommendation with regard to that dispute, or situation, unless the Security Council requests it. Article 12 needs amendment to provide greater powers to the Assembly when the Security Council fails to take action in armed conflicts, or in removing threats to international peace and security.

Fourth, Article 51 (self-defence) is being interpreted wrongly by many powerful nations. For example, the Iraqi war was launched on the basis of self-defence by inventing a doctrine of pre-emptive or preventive war, thereby ignoring the legitimacy of use of military force. The language of the article should be clear so as to avoid any doubt, or confusion, or misinterpretation of its exact meaning and purpose.

Since threat to peace emanates not only from states but also from non-state actors (al-Qaeda or other extremists), this article, or another article, should incorporate an agreed definition of terrorism and normative constraints, including collective action, to activities of non-state actors.

Fifth, why doesn't a state from Arabia, Latin America, or Africa become a permanent member of the Security Council? Why didn't Germany (the largest economy in Europe) or (the second largest economy in the world) Japan become permanent members of the Council?

The answer lies in the political environment of 1945 when the UN was set up, largely by the victors of the Second World War (US, Britain, and Soviet Union).

The call for reforming the Security Council is justified by the need for greater credibility, representation, effectiveness and enhanced capacity to act in defence of maintenance of international peace and security. Those who contribute the most should have a commensurate say in decision making.

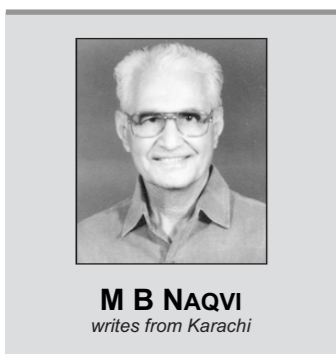
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President Musharraf goes to Washington



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

IT is untrue that President Pervez Musharraf was engaged in personal diplomacy, and that the important part of his US journey was mainly to promote his own book. He did promote his book, but the visit was an important development in its own context and content.

It concerned Pakistan's situation, domestically and vis-a-vis the region, soon after Musharraf's meeting with Indian Premier Dr Manmohan Singh in Havana. The Musharraf-Bush meeting over bilateral matters took place on September 23, while there was a second, trilateral, Bush-Musharraf-Karzai meeting on September 27. It concerned the war in Afghanistan, role of Taliban and the row between Kabul and Islamabad. What the Afghan authorities say is what the US, Nato and their army believe.

PLAIN WORDS

Musharraf-controlled Islamabad cannot do much to discourage the growth of the Taliban. The Taliban's domestic politics are winning them supporters. They are becoming a state within the state in at least some areas of NWFP and Balochistan. Not that their cells do not exist in Punjab and Karachi. They cannot be fought effectively by the army and PML(Q); that requires vigorous open democracy with many parties advocating different solutions to Pakistan's social and economic problems. That hopefully can dam the current of Islamic militancy; if only a chance could be given to such politics.

It is hard to specify what these meetings achieved, though they were extraordinarily significant for the immediate future. Pakistan policies are changing after the Indo-American strategic alliance and its offshoots: the Framework of Military Cooperation and the US decision to supply India with nuclear reactors. Pakistan felt jilted and lurched towards China.

True, Pakistan has always welcomed the Sino-Pakistan cooperation, irritating America. All new Sino-Pakistan ventures continue an old trend, but changes in the international context bestow a new meaning on them. Given China's rise as a near superpower, Sino-Pakistan friendship may have become an alternative route to strengthen Pakistan security.

The less charitable will say that Pakistan is playing the China card vis-a-vis both the US and India.

Not only did Islamabad ask China to build the Gwadar deep seaport, so near the Straits of Hormuz, its cooperation in defence and power generation stands out. Musharraf wants to make Pakistan an energy corridor for China by building energy pipelines to China, a railway to reinforce the Karakorum Highway, fibre-optic cable links, etc. The latest call from him is for the IPI gas pipeline to be extended to China. China is sure to provide as many reactors as Pakistan asks for. No matter that the Chinese are doing so for balance of power reasons, the Pakistani elite are hell-bent on running an arms race with India. If demand exists suppliers

will be found.

The American reaction to Sino-Pakistan cooperation will depend on its own strategic purposes. So far the Bush administration has been committed to neo-con thinking. America's purpose, on this basis, is imperialistic. Bush says he is promoting democracy and capitalism. The actions so far, and capitalism's compulsions, have a linkage with oil and gas, the key resources, and the control over which is the aim of strategy. An eventual clash of objectives between the US and China is already there, though at an early stage, but is restrained by America's own need for cheaper imports from China.

The specific American grouse against Pakistan concerns

Afghanistan. Doubtless, the Taliban use Pakistan territory as a staging post for their war on foreigners in Afghanistan. Powerful and resourceful people provide them shelter, and help them keep supplied. Karzai, Nato, and American commanders are not entirely wrong, as Musharraf admits. The American dislike of the Taliban, despite their culpability in acquiescing to using them, is genuine. But it is largely the fear of what will happen if the Taliban, and their mentors, inherit Pakistan with its army and atomic arsenal. It is too horrible to contemplate because they will be a great threat to Israeli and American interests.

Musharraf-controlled Islamabad cannot do much to discourage the growth of the Taliban. The Taliban's domestic politics are winning them supporters. They are becoming a state within the state in at least some areas of NWFP and Balochistan. Not that their cells do not exist in Punjab and Karachi. They cannot be fought effectively by the army and PML(Q); that requires vigorous open democracy with many parties advocating different solutions to Pakistan's social and economic problems. That hopefully can dam the current of Islamic militancy; if only a chance could be given to such politics.

That is unlikely to happen. The bilateral summit with Bush yielded most gratifying results for Musharraf, but not for Pakistan. Bush showered praises on his leadership qualities. Given American influence over the Pakistan elite, this is a signal to give Musharraf another five years in power. The army and the elite will do their magic, and get his supporters elected to the National and Provincial Assemblies which will formalize Musharraf's election early in 2008. Thus, Pakistanis are being gifted Musharraf till at least 2012, with or without uniform.

The second summit was all about the blazing row between Islamabad and Kabul over the Taliban's resistance to Afghan and Nato troops. To repeat, there is little that Pakistan will do to restrain the Taliban, even domestically. Behind Kabul and Nato stands the US; what they say echoes what the Americans say. What Musharraf said about Kabul's inability to solve Afghan problems itself is true, though Karzai was right in asking Pakistan to share the responsibility. Well, none of the facts of the case suggest that none of the three parties is able to achieve the solutions to problems facing all three.

The Kabul-Islamabad row is

rooted in history. Afghanistan's was the only vote against Pakistan's membership of the UN. What made the Afghans angry was that, for Pakistan, the Durand Line is its national boundary, whereas Kabul keeps referring to the troubled history of British-Afghan relations throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The Afghans fought three wars, and in the second war they defeated the British Indian Army -- the superpower of the time. Afghan nationalism has claims on Pakistan's two western provinces by one reading of history, just as Iran claims a different part of Pakistan (Balochistan) by another reading of history.

Pakistani rulers had adopted a lofty and arrogant attitude as the strongest Muslim state of 20th century. They unashamedly believed that they were the natural leaders of the Islamic world, and that Kabul had better come under their protection; they adopted British stances, that were plainly imperialistic, towards Afghanistan.

They adopted all British stances and methodology in border areas; they also made British assumptions and purposes their own, indeed, evolved an Islamic imperialism of their own.

In the 1950s Karachi began thinking of a confederation of Iran,

Afghanistan, and Pakistan as the successors of the Moghuls and the British. That alienated both, the Iranians and the Afghans. The Iranians had their own dreams, as the most ancient civilization, and thought they knew how to handle upstarts.

This dream was of leading the Ummah to, somehow, become as important as India. Rivaling India has been the true motivation of successive Pakistani regimes. This is how Pakistani rulers have wanted strategic depth, whether or not there is any common objective or historical basis.

The Afghans were forever emphasizing their Aryan race and origins as the foundation of their nationalism, despite their state being a partner of the British in their rivalry with Russian imperialists. The Iranians and the Afghans look down upon Pakistanis as being little better than Johnny-come-latelies who remain at bottom uncivilized and unclean. So much for the dream!

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