

CEC issue

Mr. Aziz must go

CHIEF Election Commissioner MA Aziz, whose obstinacy and unwillingness to accept the popular demand for his resignation created a political stalemate of the most intractable kind, is showing the same disregard for public opinion when he can perhaps no longer hold on to his position. The developments in the last 48 hours clearly indicate that the CEC has never been responsive to the public sentiments.

Mr. Aziz is the man who could spare the nation of the trouble of going through political violence for an indefinite period of time by simply resigning. But even when his exit looked like a matter of time, the CEC failed to behave sensibly and gracefully. He has kept the whole nation in a state of uncertainty by not declaring his intentions and by behaving in the same undignified manner that he is now known for.

The persuasion that was needed to make him think that his services were no longer needed was enormous. Almost nothing was having any impact on the man who had assigned himself the task of holding the election, though he had lost his credibility long back. Even the president's request could not apparently make him take another look at the situation.

Mr. Aziz should have been aware of the fact that he, as a justice, has actually insulted his fraternity and lowered the image of the judiciary. The position of the CEC is an extremely important one that should be occupied by a man of unquestionable integrity, but Mr. Aziz has clearly failed to live up to the expectations of people. Whatever little sympathy we still had for him was finally destroyed by the man himself with his last-minute stubbornness and the brazen attempt not to quit. In the last 48 hours, the CEC proved that all the allegations brought against him were well founded.

The EC could not be safe in the hands of the man who had taken too many unilateral decisions that were interpreted as politically biased. Only his exit could create the conditions for a peaceful settlement of the ongoing political impasse.

Return of the mayhem

Two crushed by a fleeing jeep

A fleeing jeep belonging to the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) when it came under attack by armed cadres of BNP killed two persons. The incident took place at Patiya, when an LDP procession was proceeding to join a public rally. As many as 20 people were also injured. The two dead were a former BNP organising secretary of Patiya, and a former member of Jatiyotabadi Chatra Dal (JCD) who also recently joined LDP.

The armed goons also attacked a motorcade consisting of four microbuses carrying a team of journalists and tried to prevent them from reaching the venue of the main rally, which finally reached the venue through an alternative route.

It may also be relevant to mention here that following the October 28 blockade programme of the 14-party alliance, we also condemned the loss of lives caused by unwanted and unprecedented violence. We have since then heaved a sigh of relief to see a respite in the rising incidences of extreme violence. Unfortunately it now seems that the relative peace is short lived. We simply must put a halt to this growing spate and continuity of senseless violence resulting in deaths.

We are, at the same time, concerned about this continuous bashing and terrorizing of journalists. Journalists are mere instruments for disseminating information of all kinds for the benefit of the public at large. They do not represent any political party nor subscribe to the political thinking of any political party. They should therefore be allowed free and unhindered access to places of events of national significance and significant public interest.

Hurting journalist who are engaged in carrying out their professional obligations is tantamount to hurting the interest and the democratic rights of the public at large. In this connection, we are rather disturbed by the fact that one of our reporters was also injured in Bogra by BNP activists yesterday.

We appeal to all our political leaderships and all others concerned to use all their resources and collective wisdom to put an end to this scourge of violence leading to deaths of people. Let sanity, tolerance and moderation be our guiding spirit in all spheres of our lives.

Light at the end of the tunnel



Brig Gen SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

AFTER suffering the agonies of the political combat between what is now a polarized polity of the 14-party alliance and 4-party alliance over the last three weeks, we were heartened by the optimism conveyed by the comments of the advisors who were entrusted with the task of transmitting the "gentle persuasion" of the president to the CEC to leave. They have seen "light at the end of the tunnel."

That was perhaps the most encouraging words that we had heard in the three weeks of the caretaker government's rule. And the message to the CEC, that discretion is the better part of valour, was perhaps the most substantial action the president/chief advisor has taken in the otherwise torpid existence of the caretaker government so far.

We are not as yet aware of what developments have taken place following the meeting between the president's emissaries and the CEC that would resolve the main point of conflict, that is the present incumbent continuing as CEC, and which will help allay our apprehensions about the direction we are heading towards should this impasse continue. We have been asked to wait for 48

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

By the time we go to press, some positive developments will hopefully have taken place for the country to take relief from. But one is at a loss as to why it should have taken 48 hours for a man to decide what he must do, when every hour was crucial for the nation, and when everyone but he could see the writing on the wall. And why was it that the chief advisor did not realise the urgency of time and demand a quick reaction from him. In the 48 hours that have been spent to take a decision, a few more people have died, many more have been injured, and some more damage to the country's economy have been done. A man has to do what he has to do, and as a man Justice Aziz should know what he has to do.

hours. But we have been advised that the president/chief advisor will let the people know himself the plans to resolve the crisis.

By the time we go to press, some positive developments will hopefully have taken place for the country to take relief from. But one is at a loss as to why it should have taken 48 hours for a man to decide what he must do, when every hour was crucial for the nation, and when everyone but he could see the writing on the wall.

And why was it that the chief advisor did not realise the urgency of time and demand a quick reaction from him. In the 48 hours that have been spent to take a decision, a few more people have died, many more have been injured, and some more damage to the country's economy have been done. A man has to do what he has to do, and as a man Justice Aziz should know what he has to do.

The issue of the credibility of CEC has been recognized by the international community as well. And this is only what, I regret as a Bangladeshi to say, might propel

the government to action. It is a matter of regret because it is only the resolutions in a foreign parliament or comments of their representatives in our country that push our leaders to action, but never the plight of the people or their legitimate demands. We are happy that our friends are taking interest in us, as they must, but some have rather deliberately stepped beyond their mandated task by trying to play the mediator role, that cannot sit well with conscious citizens.

It is difficult to hide one's surprise at the very languid way the president/chief advisor have so far chosen to handle things. The critics are of the opinion that his assumption of the office of the chief advisor was more by designs than compulsions of the time. One is constrained to say also that having chosen to wear two hats or having had the second hat thrust on him, he has not been able to distinguish the role of the two offices. The president ought to act more decisively to demonstrate that he is not under any extraneous

pressure, which is what the general perception of him is at the moment.

Having chosen to retain about a dozen ministries, one is not convinced that Prof Iajuddin is even trying to show confidence in his council of advisors. The faux pas with the order to deploy the army, his mixing up the priorities of work in that the 4-advisor team had to wait quite a long time before it could report to him the outcome of their discussions with various parties, and now he is keeping the nation waiting in distress and pain. But we will be happy if he can find an equitable solution to the current crisis, and he will earn the nation's gratitude.

The people want to see Prof Iajuddin not only act but also play the part of the chief advisor. And to start with, he must function from where the chief advisors have functioned in the past, the chief advisor's secretariat, which is adequately staffed to conduct the executive functions of the state, and not the Bangabhaban that deals with the ceremonial part



that is the president's to perform. If that had been done, his accessibility to his advisors would certainly have been more, and the advisors need not have had to arrange "social meetings" as we have seen them do several times so far, to exchange notes. It is for Prof Iajuddin as the chief advisor not to allow the impression to be embedded in the public mind that his is really an extension of the erstwhile 4-party alliance rule.

We are also concerned at the rhetoric that is flowing from the two alliances. We cannot suffer any more death or destruction or uncertainties that are acting upon our psyche. Even though the president/chief advisor has to do the major groundwork for the elections, it's up to the two top leaders of the two alliances to help the president, particularly in ensuring that the party activists keep their calm.

We have unfortunately been suffering a crisis of leadership. No one could have said it better than the young man in the recently held "BBC: Bangladesh Discussion" when he demanded "safe leadership" for Bangladesh. Those words, spoken out of conviction, demonstrate the true feeling of the common person about our leadership and the esteem that they are held in. No leader is worth the salt if victory is achieved through unnecessary losses. It is unfortunate that we have leaders but not leadership. And that is what has brought us to this state after 15 years of democracy.

Unless our leaders rise to the occasion there is every reason to believe that we may have many a mile to travel to get to the end of the tunnel.

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

Britain and the burkha



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM
writes from Madrid

TWO separate incidents last month, involving Muslim women's clothes, have set off a fierce debate over veils in Britain, which is refusing to die down. There have been heated exchanges in the media, in which the prime minister down to local council members have felt compelled to participate.

The tensions are so high that even the government-appointed chairman of the Race Relations Committee has warned of race riots over veils in Britain. From all this, one could get the wrong impression that Britain has been invaded by hordes of Burkha-clad women.

But nothing could be further from the truth. Only about 3% of the total population (men, women, and children) of Britain are Muslims. Although many Muslim women cover their heads with scarves, only a very tiny minority of them wear full veils

LETTER FROM EUROPE

On the specific issue of the veil, the vast majority of Muslims find it quite natural for Muslim women to wear headscarves. But while respecting everybody's right to dress as he or she pleases, they are not very comfortable with women wearing full veils, particularly at workplaces. Actually, many Muslims would understand former foreign minister Jack Straw if he had made his critical comments in private to his Muslim constituents in Blackburn. The fact that he used this sensitive subject in newspaper comments as a political weapon to position himself as current deputy prime minister John Prescott's successor has irritated many.

covering their faces except the eyes. It is quite possible that on the streets of British towns one would find more men wearing Sikh turbans or Jewish hats, or more women wearing nun's wimples.

So why so much fuss over the dressing habits of a tiny minority of women? Why have the British Muslim women been singled out and targeted? The underlying issue is not so much the veil, but the place of the Muslims in Britain, who have become a suspect community after the London bombings.

Ever since the mid-fifties of the last century when Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh immigrants from the subcontinent of India -- who did not speak much English -- started coming to work in British factories. Britain has been

a remarkably tolerant society as far as cultural diversities are concerned.

The government did not insist on assimilation. Instead, it allowed the immigrants form their own communities, practice their own religions, and retain their separate cultural habits. The idea, as home minister Roy Jenkins said, was to build a multi-cultural society with one common denominator of being British. There was a general expectation that, in time, the children of these immigrants would lose their ties with their parents' home countries and become more British than Indian, Bangladeshi, or Pakistani.

Actually, despite many social and economic difficulties and racial discrimination over the years, this was precisely what

happened to a large degree. Many of the children of these immigrants spoke no other language but English, went to college, considered themselves British, and felt proud of it. Many moved up the social ladder and became doctors, accountants, and lawyers.

True, it also made them more conscious of their rights. While their parents were quite happy to have stable factory jobs, live in their ghettos and tolerate racial discrimination, the new generation was not ready to put up with all that. Of course, there were others, like members of any other immigrant community, who felt alienated because of discrimination in housing and in the job market. But they were not singled out for being Muslims.

To the vast majority of Muslim

youth, religion was a private matter. However, the bombings on 9/11, and the British government's whole-hearted support to Bush's so-called war on terror, changed all that. All of a sudden, religion became an important political issue. The British Muslim citizens felt that the West was waging a war on Islam, and after the re-election of Blair for a third term, extremist elements of this community resorted to terrorist activities.

Thus, everybody who had a Muslim name, looked like a Muslim, or dressed like a Muslim became a suspect automatically. This feeling merely heightened the Muslim community's "sense of besiegement." Young British Muslims, who until very recently had considered themselves as British first and then Muslims, started identifying themselves first as Muslims then British. More Muslim women started wearing the veil as an act of political symbolism and religious self-assertion. More men started going to the mosques. But most Muslims were not happy with the turn of events. Most community leaders were, and are, deeply worried about the increasing polarization of attitudes on both sides and desperately want to improve inter-faith relations. There is an ongoing debate in the Muslim community over how to deal with the situation.

On the specific issue of the veil, the vast majority of Muslims find it quite natural for Muslim women to wear headscarves. But while respecting everybody's right to dress as he or she pleases, they are not very comfortable with women wearing full veils, particularly at workplaces.

Actually, many Muslims would understand former minister Jack Straw if he had made his critical comments in private to his Muslim constituents in Blackburn. The fact that he used this sensitive subject in newspaper comments as a political weapon to position himself as current deputy prime minister John Prescott's successor has irritated many.

Prime Minister Blair's public utterances, supporting the suspension of a Muslim teacher for her refusal to remove her veil, have exacerbated the situation. Both Straw and Blair are intensely disliked by the British Muslims. In fact, many consider them responsible for the killing of hundreds of thousands of innocent Muslim civilians, and the current deteriorating relationship between the Muslim community and the rest of the British society, therefore devoid of any moral authority. That is why these politically-motivated public attacks on the veil are counter-productive.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.

Inter-cultural dialogue with the C-100

AS I SEE IT

With the advent of technology distances have disappeared, and because of communications information has been revolutionized. The minds of the people living in the former colonies have not kept to the pace of globalization. In fact, one can say that the perception of the contrast between what one views at home and compares with abroad is so much that it has created a mind-block of sorts. The people of the third world are afraid of, and reject, what they do not know of the first world, and it is so vice versa. One has to learn to accept, and live with, it.

debate have little knowledge about their own religion, and what they know is sometimes liable to misinterpretation. The knowledge of religions, at least a cursory understanding at the general level of all the major ones, is imperative. Education provides better understanding. We have to modify the content of education for developing a more comprehensive knowledge of the tenets associated with different religions.

One finds that the commonality of the beliefs in the main religions is far more than one is normally aware of. The perception the public has is on the basis of the cultural part of the religion, which is on display, rather than the content of the religion itself.

As Professor Dr Bettina Robotka of the Institute of Business Administration (IBA), Karachi, who helped me prepare arguments for the session on inter-cultural dialogue says: "It is the cultural climate of the religion which we notice and resent more easily, like the 'headscarf' of women in Islam, or the 'half-naked' women in the west." She adds that when we talk about different cultures and/or different civilizations, it is nothing new, it has always been there. With globalization reaching a stage where the world is becoming a village, people have become more aware of things that they would never have been aware of before. It is only natural that they are comfortable with what they

see at home, and since they cannot understand what they see in other places they want everything everywhere to be like at home.

There is a universal perception about Turkish success in bridging civilizations. While Turkey is very much a secular state, the Turks in Europe tend to feel that they are not secular. In Turkey itself, the revival of the Islamist parties, and their widespread popular support throughout the country, is a contradiction that is increasingly being debated in the European Union (EU) in resistance to Turkey's entry. Given the fact that Pope Benedict, who inadvertently made a remark recently that was offensive to Muslims everywhere, is visiting Turkey soon, the Turkish model will come up for detailed scrutiny.

Dr Robotka says that globalization is one of the reasons for our troubles. Globalization actually started when the Portuguese, Spanish, and British sea-farers discovered and conquered the world in the 15th and 16th centuries, creating a world market on unequal terms, the colonies entering this market in a dependent and disadvantageous position. This unequal status has lasted throughout the process,

viz (1) of formal colonization, (2) the elimination of the physical presence of the colonizers, and (3) even after the political independence of the colonies was achieved.

With the advent of technology distances have disappeared, and because of communications information has been revolutionized. The minds of the people living in the former colonies have not kept to the pace of globalization. In fact, one can say that the perception of the contrast between what one views at home and compares with abroad is so much that it has created a mind-block of sorts. The people of the third world are afraid of, and reject, what they do not know of the first world, and it is so vice versa. One has to learn to accept, and live with, it.

According to the West, democracy means progress, and the West dominates the international debate because it is more progressed. Dr Robotka says that we must define progress. Is progress all material? More productivity, more sophisticated weapons, and more consumerism? Is civilization all material? The West believes that progress is the Western way of social and economic life, and even of political

life! People forget that progress can only be exported partially, everybody has to find his (or her) way towards what he (or she) thinks is progress. Democracy in the West may differ in concept from that in developing countries, being dependent in each region on the genius of the people in that region. It cannot be imposed lock, stock, and barrel in the form that it exists in the West.

Being different is normal, it is everyone's right. There are different civilizations in the world. They not only differ in how they look, they differ in their mode of thinking, understanding and their social systems, and their histories are different! Since the world is the creation of one and the same God, there can be no impossible differences which cannot be bridged. God would have made all the people the same, but in his infinite wisdom He made them different. It is incumbent upon us to come to terms with this.

Dr Robotka holds that ancient Greece and Rome followed a philosophical heritage which emphasized the power of man to change and dominate the world. During the Dark Ages, a church dogma was sought to be imposed

on the world. Being contrary to the nature of man, the Reformation tried to rectify the Christian Church. When that was found impossible the Protestants broke away. A period of 100 years saw a devastating war destroying Central and Northern Europe, and bringing the Christian civilization almost to the verge of collapse.

The only way to prevent a disaster was to have a division between Church and State, thus was secularism formed. The replacement of religious values with secular ones (mostly materialistic) resulted in a second phase of secularism in the 19th century. Secularism, thus, came to mean irreligion. The Islamic world has a different philosophical heritage, but it has to co-exist and accommodate followers of other religions. A form of neutrality of the state towards other religions is necessary. Dialogue is an interaction when all the participants, who present their own points of view, are ready to listen to the other arguments as well. This possibility includes accepting a different solution for a problem than what we devise as our own.

Dialogue is an interaction when all the participants, who present their own points of view, are ready to listen to the other arguments as well. This possibility includes accepting a different solution for a problem than what we devise as our own.

Ikram Sehgal is an eminent Pakistani political analyst and columnist.



IKRAM SEHGAL
writes from Karachi

C-100 stands for the "Council of 100 Leaders," an initiative of the World Economic Forum (WEF) meant to promote and sustain inter-faith dialogue. The co-chairs of C-100 are Prince Turki al-Faisal of Saudi Arabia, presently Saudi ambassador in the US, and Lord Carey of Clifton, former Archbishop of Canterbury.

It will be a unique privilege for me to moderate the session "C-100: Taking Stock of Intercultural Dialogue" in the Ciragan Palace, Istanbul, on Friday, November 24. The panelists for the session, Khalid Abdullah-Janahi, chairman, executive committee, Shamil Bank of Switzerland and vice-chairman, Arab Business Council, Prof Mehmet Aydin, minister of state for religious