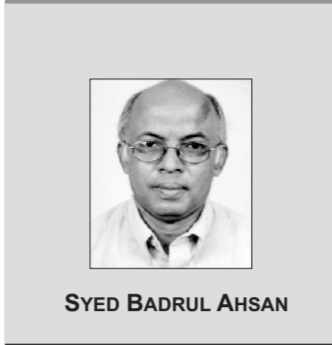


Nightrunners of Bengal



[With apologies to John Masters]

HERE has hardly ever been a time when bureaucrats have scurried off from a party. And rare has been the occasion when they have tried desperately to keep their faces concealed from the cameras. But that is precisely what many of the civil servants -- serving, retired and terminated -- did a few days ago in front of the darkened office of a former energy advisor, who is, today, a good camp follower of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

The problem for the people of this country is not that there are men and women who believe in what the BNP stands for. Political beliefs are a natural part of democracy. And so if there are still people who think they ought to be loyal to Begum Zia and her party, we have no problem with that. But we do have a huge problem on our hands when we are informed, as we have been informed already, about servants of the republic engaging in activities that do not quite seem to be above board.

Those bureaucrats who ran (and you can be sure they were doing it for the first time in decades, the last time being when they were in school or college) away into the night at the sight of all those inquisitive media men and their excruciatingly luminous cameras, were all doing it from a sense of guilt.

GROUND REALITIES

The focus ought now to be on these new nightrunners, on the agenda they have all been coming together for. With the Election Commission being run on the lines of a perfect farce, and election officials already in place and ready to engineer the forthcoming vote it makes sense to ask why so many civil officials, all beholden to the state for their well being, made that surreptitious trip to Uttara on Friday. There is more than an asking of questions that is called for. As long as these badly erring bureaucrats are not swatted down, questions about the fairness of the elections will only multiply before snowballing into a disaster.

Good men, we have known since the first day we went to school, have nothing to hide. These nightrunners of Bengal, we are afraid, had a lot to hide. It should now be for the law to deal with them as it deems fit. There are very transparent reasons why such action needs to be taken, given the fact that in these past five years of monumental corruption a class of bureaucrats has seen nothing wrong with plunging into politicking, even as it remained part of the administrative machinery; and given the fact, too, that some of the men who served the just-departed government with such mind-boggling loyalty have often demonstrated their authority through making their way to the National Press Club in the company of unsavoury elements. Those elements have heckled and intimidated newsmen, to our undying shame. If you thought they would fall silent with the departure of their political patrons, you made a mistake. They are yet around, coming together in the night before running away into it.

These nightrunners are but successors to the generations of fleeing men and women we have all too often spotted in the tortuous course of our history. If you recall, on the day General Hussein

Muhammad Ershad's regime fell in December 1990, most of the individuals who served him as ministers, and in other positions, did not look behind their shoulders but only ran ahead, breathing hard, into unknown territory. They were all, again, nightrunners seeking desperately a place to conceal themselves, and thereby save themselves from the wrath of the people.

At least two of Ershad's ministers had their homes nearly go up in smoke, the consequence of the arrival of an angry mob, while a minister of state, abandoning his garments business, left the country and would not return until he was sure that his misdeeds had been forgotten. You might now ask yourself why the departure of a government must soon turn into a macabre symbol of once powerful men and women running for their lives. Do not worry overmuch, for the pretty good reason that in a society where bad men often commandeer the state, it is but natural for their accomplices and cohorts to pay a price someday. They do pay the price, but they feel little shame in doing so.

Back in 1971, again in the dark, Moulana Mannan scampered away from the home where the lately abducted (and murdered) Alim Chowdhury had given him shelter.

It is always the morally weak, and the politically corrupt, who run for their lives. And so in the dark the Moulana ran, to live not just another day but for a number of years. As long as he lived, he felt little need to say how ashamed or how sorry he was about his dark deeds in the year of our collective travails. There were other collaborators who ran, some in little more than their underwear, only to be caught in the end.

Mouvi Farid Ahmed, an intelligent man who made the grave mistake of taking Pakistan's side against his own Bengalis tried to run, but was caught by the Mukti Bahini, never to be found again. Syed Sajjad Hussain loved imitating the English, but when it came to defending the "integrity and solidarity" of Pakistan, he did not flinch from seeing his academic colleagues and his students die at the hands of the Pakistan army and its local quislings. It was a bizarre case of English literature and murderous communal ideology coming together in the service of genocide. On 16 December, Hussain's "courage" failed him. He ran, was caught and treated by the freedom fighters in expected manner. Then he ran through the night again, this time to Saudi Arabia; and then ran back, once secular Bangladesh turned communal, to

this country, to be shunned by Bengalis who had not forgotten 1971.

History, in our case, has followed a single track, where running in the night has been the issue. The running has been intense. You will recall Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury, in his avatar as Ershadian prime minister, running from the Shaheed Minar. As you do, you just might go back in time and recreate, in the mind, the grainy images of a fast-running Justice SA Rahman. Bengali fury had left his reputation in tatters and he would not stop running until he reached Karachi.

The next day, the Agartala conspiracy case was dropped by Ayub Khan. Khondokar Moshtaque's young soldier-killers of Bangabandhu and the four national leaders set a particular record as runners in the night when they fled to Bangkok, and then to Tripoli, after the Khaled Musharraf coup in early November 1975. In the early Zia years, a sudden, gleaming spectacle of snakes near Baitul Mukarram mosque made Moshtaque run from a rally that he thought would turn him into the man of the hour.

He ran in the way Chowdhury Mueenuddin ran in December 1971. Do the men who have given Mueenuddin a place in the Muslim Council of Britain know of his notoriety? They most certainly do. Ask Iqbal Sacranie. The tale of nightrunners lengthens as we recall how Nurul Amin, Mahmud Ali, and Raja Tridiv Roy, good, feverish nightrunners all, abandoned their people and made Rawalpindi their home as their country began to go out of their sight and their reach.

In our times, we have had the undefying sight of Salahuddin Ahmed, lawmaker and BNP pointman at Shonir Akhra, running in sheer terror from those who once voted him into parliament. A former minister, we understand on good

authority, was run out of his local constituency a few days ago. That is a terrible thing to happen in this country, in any country. And equally terrible is the outrage some individuals commit as they try running good men out of their homes and their towns. Do not forget, ever, the hooligans who stormed the home of Ziaur Rahman Khan, in the night, in order to reclaim him as one of their own. Keep stored in memory the arson let loose by criminals at the homes of men who made us a very proper gift of the Liberal Democratic Party.

But let all that be. The focus ought now to be on these new nightrunners, on the agenda they have all been coming together for. With the Election Commission being run on the lines of a perfect farce, and election officials already in place and ready to engineer the forthcoming vote in favour of the "Bangladeshi nationalists," it makes sense to ask why so many civil officials, all beholden to the state for their well being, made that surreptitious trip to Uttara on Friday.

There is more than an asking of questions that is called for. And that more must come in the form of concrete, pitiless action against these forces of the dark. No one is fooled here. As long as these badly erring bureaucrats are not swatted down, questions about the fairness of the elections will only multiply before snowballing into a disaster.

It was in impenetrable darkness that Brutus and Cassius planned the murder of Julius Caesar. Darkness was again the backdrop against which they ran, fleeing from the fury of a rapidly advancing Mark Antony.

Need we say more?

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Executive Editor, Dhaka Courier.

New election commissioners

A shocking decision by the president

PRESIDENT Iajuddin Ahmed has shocked the nation by his choice of the two election commissioners that he appointed on Monday. The appointments will certainly not serve the purpose of reconstituting the Election Commission -- a major demand of the 14-party alliance, rather it will only deepen the raging controversy over the neutrality and reliability of the EC. A close perusal of the backgrounds of the newly appointed election commissioners will make the point amply clear.

Modabbir Hossain Chowdhury, one of the two new appointees, has been trying openly for nearly a year to contest the next election on a BNP nomination. It is absolutely incomprehensible how the president could appoint a man with such a background. Furthermore, newspaper reports indicate that his role in 1971 is highly questionable. That makes his appointment doubly controversial and casts a shadow of doubt on the president's decision.

Not only the person but the process of appointing him has also been controversial as we have already written in this column. The President appears to have been oblivious of the prevailing political situation, which is going from bad to worse, and has not attached due importance to the task of keeping the EC above any controversy. The President has clearly disappointed all those who have been eagerly looking up to him for a possible solution to the ongoing political crisis, but his decision has further complicated the issue. This will push the country toward greater uncertainty.

As for the other newly appointed election commissioner, Saiful Alam, he may have a less controversial profile, but he, too, does not appear to us as somebody who should be given such a responsibility. The nation is passing through a grave crisis and only men of vision and great integrity can see us through. The need is to find them out, casting aside party and individual interests.

Unfortunately, the appointment of the two new election commissioners suggests that recasting the EC in light of our political needs is still an elusive goal. The caretaker government cannot prove its neutral credentials as long as its Chief Adviser continues to make decisions that are unacceptable for obvious reasons.

Hanif's passing

We have lost a decent politician

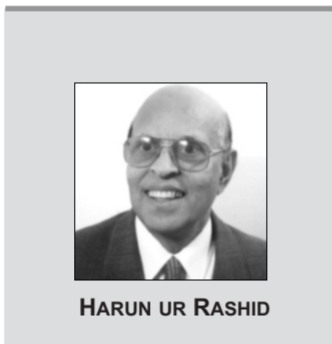
WE are deeply saddened by the premature death of Md Hanif, a veteran leader of Awami League and former Mayor of Dhaka. He was a close associate of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Earlier on Feb 8 this year he suffered a heart attack while addressing a rally. He was also injured in the infamous grenade attack on an Awami League rally that took place on August 21, 2004 that killed 22 people and injured the leader of the opposition.

Md Hanif was the first elected Mayor of DCC. He was also the first Whip of National Assembly after the independence of Bangladesh. Hanif belonged to that rare breed of politicians who had no blemishes throughout their entire career. He was like a breath of fresh air away from most of our politicians of today. Hanif was indeed a successful lawyer and a sound modern day political thinker, a proponent of the metropolitan system of government in line with the local government systems. Although it has not seen the light of the day, the senior and moderate politicians did welcome the idea. As a matter of fact it did have positive sides to it that would have added a new dimension to the administration of the Dhaka City, resulting into immense benefits for the city dwellers.

The death of Hanif is a serious blow to the entire nation at this initial juncture of its existence. He left us at a time when we needed him most. In this volatile environment caused by severe political differences and conflicts between political parties and politicians, Hanif's absence is felt all the more.

Hanif's death is indeed a national loss. We join the entire nation in mourning his death. Today the most befitting tribute to him would be for all politicians and political activists to sink their differences and unite for the greater interest of the country. Our deepest sympathies to the bereaved family.

India-China relations blow hot and cold



HARUN UR RASHID

FOR the last few years, both China and India have been careful to appear friendly and cordial. The day-long visit of Chinese President Hu Jintao to India on November 20, after almost ten years, demonstrates the efforts for sustaining and mapping out the direction of their relationship.

The issue of claiming each other's territory died down in recent years, partly because economic relations between both countries (about \$20 billion annually) have been accorded priority, submerging the core undercurrent border dispute.

In April 2005, India and China signed an agreement in resolving the dispute over their Himalayan border, resulting in China's recognition of the state of Sikkim as being part of India, in return for India's recognition of Tibet as being a part of China.

However, territorial claims on each other's territories continue to

BOTTOM LINE

The proximity of China, a large and militarily powerful nation, has been a great concern for India. It is more than 40 years since China and India last went to war, but the wounds have never healed. The territorial disputes that have soured relations for decades continue to remain. Without substantial progress in resolving territorial disputes, many analysts believe that it is hard to imagine an end to the mutual suspicion which characterises Sino-Indian relations.

surface off and on. A week before the visit China's ambassador to India, Sun Xi, told an Indian TV channel that the state in the northeast, Arunachal Pradesh, is a part of Chinese territory.

India's Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee rejected the Chinese claim, saying that Arunachal Pradesh was an integral part of India. Instead, India says Beijing is occupying 38,000 square kms in Kashmir. The territorial dispute dates its legacy to an armed conflict in 1962 in which China defeated India.

The recent verbal spat between the two major powers has sent tremors from Islamabad to Singapore.

Core underpinnings of bilateral relationship

The mistrust between the two countries is deeply ingrained. It is noted that India has always defined its security position in the light of China's military strength. India has been aware that China has length-

ened airstrips in Tibet for the Sukhoi fighters, and has been deploying ballistic missiles with a range of between 8,000 and 12,000 kilometres.

During the Vajpayee government a newspaper headline screamed: "China is threat No.1, says Fernandes (Hindustan Times, May 4, 1998)." Defence Minister Fernandes was in the Andamans where the prime minister reportedly phoned him in some anxiety. Fernandes tried to defend himself, saying that a TV interviewer had foisted the phrase on him.

The explanation was weak because Fernandes had accused China, in his Krishna Menon lecture, of supplying Pakistan with missiles and missile technology, and of siting nuclear weapons along the border with Tibet. He drew attention to the massive electronic surveillance establishment that the Chinese had established in Cocos island, a bare forty-eight kms from Indian Andaman Islands, which China had leased

from Myanmar (Burma) in 1994. Furthermore, India's Prime Minister Vajpayee had sent a letter, one day earlier, about the nuclear tests of May 11 and 12, 1998, to President Clinton, in which he justified the tests. The letter, in part, said: "We have an overt nuclear weapon state on our borders, a state which committed armed aggression against India in 1962."

Why does mutual suspicion exist?

Some of the reasons are described as follows:

First, in 2002, President Bush spoke about building a strategic relationship with India in a global context. The nuclear deal of providing nuclear technology and fuel by the US to India (the Senate overwhelmingly approved it on November 17) will, reportedly, allow India to increase its annual nuclear bomb-production from seven to forty. China obviously is uncomfortable with this prospect, because the nuclear cooperation is

nothing but an attempt to compete with China's military strength.

Although India claims that its strategic partnership with the US is not in the context of any other country (meaning China), or regional equations or even alliance systems, China is extremely wary of US intentions in providing nuclear fuel to India, which has not signed the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Second, India's nuclear and missile capabilities owe much to the dynamics of Sino-India rivalry. India perceives that the single objective of China's policy has been to contain a real Asian rival to China. One Indian analyst put it: "China talks about multi-polar world but wants a unipolar Asia, with itself in prime position."

Third, China's close relationship with Pakistan, and in particular their military cooperation, irritates India. India's security experts believe that no other Asian country has ever backed and armed another Asian country as China has backed and armed Pakistan for over more than 30 years, in such a consistent manner over such a long period of time. India views the Sino-Pakistan military cooperation as a serious and direct threat to its security interests.

Fourth, India has concerns about what it perceives as "encirclement" by China, with not only the Chinese military deployments in Tibet, to the north, but also Chinese activities and alliances with neighbouring Pakistan to the west, and Myanmar to the east. India perceives that

China ties down India to the south of the Himalayas, and thereby prevents its rise as a major challenger to China's primacy of the Asia-Pacific region.

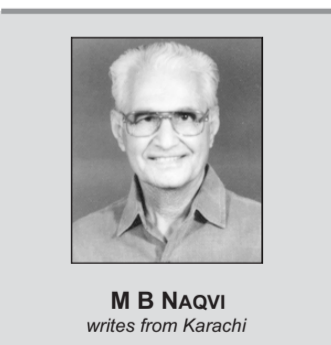
Fifth, the presence in India of Tibet's leader in exile, the Dalai Lama, is an ongoing source of friction in the India-China relationship. China stays angry about India's harbouring of the Dalai Lama and his Tibetan government-in-exile. The overseas tour of the Dalai Lama is seen by China as annoying, and that India provides him the opportunity to keep alive the Tibetan issue is against Chinese national interests.

The proximity of China, a large and militarily powerful nation, has been a great concern for India. It is more than 40 years since China and India last went to war, but the wounds have never healed. The territorial disputes that have soured relations for decades continue to remain. Without substantial progress in resolving territorial disputes, many analysts believe that it is hard to imagine an end to the mutual suspicion which characterises Sino-Indian relations.

The claim by Chinese ambassador in New Delhi to a large area of northeastern India has ignited the old dispute. It could be a signal to the US that the nuclear deal with India is against China's security interests.

Barister Harun Ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Beware of visitors bearing gifts



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

LAST week, British premier Tony Blair, US diplomacy's Man Friday, came to Islamabad bearing gifts. The visit's context was Afghanistan, where the situation may be moving toward defeat and destruction of the Afghanistan state.

Blair promises to double British aid. Doubtless there are hints that if Pakistan acted the way Nato wants, more Western aid will come its way. Nato desires Pakistan to prosecute the terror war "jointly" with Nato in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Nato troops' right of "hot pursuit" into at least Federally Administered Tribal Areas, if not in Balochistan and NWFP, was being discussed.

"Joint conduct" of a war implies that troops of all allies can move in the territory of other allies. Nato had a treaty. Are Pakistan and

PLAIN WORDS

Today, Pakistan's obviously junior partnership with the US -- that too under duress -- is making Pakistani rulers unpopular. Who is gaining? Why, the beneficiaries are the Taliban. They have appropriated patriotic sentiment as well as the Left's two characteristic concerns: anti-imperialism and removal of poverty. What sustains Maoist struggles in Nepal and India also helps the Islamic version of Maoists: Taliban. Islam, in Taliban propaganda, improves the life of the poverty-stricken in the here and the hereafter. Their popularity is, thus, on the rise.

Afghanistan, singly or jointly, going to be treaty allies with Nato? Or will the earlier formulation of Pakistan being a non-Nato ally of the US -- and Nato -- suffice?

The question arises, what more is desired of Pakistan under the term "joint conduct of the war?" This is what has been going on. The Blair-Bush duo, both being domestically isolated, need to salvage their terror war that looks increasingly unwinnable. On both sides of Atlantic calls are being made to cut and run. But the reasons for which the war was started still exist. What were those reasons? Stated reasons have ranged from Taliban being barbarian terrorists, Saddam's possession of WMDs, to promotion of democracy through regime changes.

Many think that none of these

abstract or altruistic reasons had anything to do with the war. Instead, they look for American and British economic and strategic aims -- with which most Europeans, Asians, Africans and Latin Americans do not sympathise. It has to be conceded that, for all the recent retreats, US and UK are open societies. The literature produced by their think tanks and media reports have thrown sufficient light on those aims.

For most, oil is the name of the game. America -- Britain hanging on America's coat-tails for sound economic reasons -- cannot maintain the living standards of its people, or viability of its economy, without dominating the world. That involves the detail of controlling the sources, and downstream trading of oil. The regimes in such places

must be US-friendly, or the reason for regime change will arise. US diplomacy has the advantage of giving substantial aid that costs it little, it has only to write cheques on itself, and dollar bills can be printed to any extent -- so long as its world domination lasts.

Which is why American strategists insist that America must remain Number One in military and economic power. Such wars regulate or punish regimes, mainly through regional influentials: Middle East through Israel, Far East by Japan and Australia, and the virgin areas of Central Asia by its own exertions. Which is why Afghanistan was chosen for the first regime change after it refused to be flexible enough to accommodate Unocal, as well as refusing to hand over Osama bin Laden. Iraq came

next; it had too much oil, and was too much of an eyecore for Israel.

But the hyper-power has not replaced God. Unipolarity of the world now looks like ending before too long. However, the aftermath of American military victory in Afghanistan and Iraq may have temporarily halted the pursuit of all US goals. But it is unlikely to force the US to give up its strategic aims. It will probably end up having so many bases in Iraq, and three probable successor states in the north, centre, and south, each friendly to the US. America seems to be handing over the job of keeping the pro-American Karzai government in power to Nato and Pakistan as a first step. So long as the Kabul government remains broadly pro-American, and keeps American bases safe, everything will be OK.

But it is wise for Pakistan to accept more Afghanistan-related responsibilities? Any further involvement in the already splintered country will be dangerous. Experience shows that the 1980s involvement gave a fillip to Islamic terrorism, heroin and gun culture, a lot of drug money in very few hands and, finally, to the Taliban, after older Afghan Islamic parties had been alienated. The Taliban have cost Pakistan dear in terms of Chinese annoyance, Iranian anger and Russian and Indian displea-

sure. No one seems to sympathise with Pakistan.

The Taliban are not what Islam demands; the two are separate propositions. What the Taliban -- a product of CIAISI effort for non-Pakistani aims -- did in Afghanistan was to establish the personal dictatorship of their leader, Mullah Omar, and called him the Caliph: the religious, military and political head of all Muslims everywhere. What they did is known: they stopped girls' education, threw out women from all government jobs, killed Shia minority on a large scale and in culture they not only demolished the centuries-old Buddha statues, but even punished a Pakistan football team for wearing shorts through the match. They harboured sectarian terrorists of Pakistan.

Today, Pakistan's obviously junior partnership with the US -- that too under duress -- is making Pakistani rulers unpopular. Who is gaining? Why, the beneficiaries are the Taliban. They have appropriated patriotic sentiment as well as the Left's two characteristic concerns: anti-imperialism and removal of poverty. What sustains Maoist struggles in Nepal and India also helps the Islamic version of Maoists: Taliban. Islam, in Taliban propaganda, improves the life of the poverty-stricken in the here and the hereafter. Their popularity is,

thus, on the rise.

The Taliban cannot be fought with tanks and helicopter gunships; that way for each dead Talib, three recruits to their ranks will replace him. That is the lesson from both, the Afghanistan and the Iraq wars. Military means are wholly inappropriate against ideology. The more the troops and equipment are thrown into an unwinnable ideological war, the more certain becomes the eventual defeat.

Stakes are certainly high. The British commander of the Nato forces in Afghanistan must have read about how the British-Indian army fared in Afghanistan in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and about the Russian superpower's defeat in that arid country in 1989. Whatever may happen to Afghanistan, foreign conquests do not last; the Afghan people's fierce independence is well documented, though that does not secure the future of the Afghan state. Factually, Afghanistan is already splintered into too many lawless statelets. Worldism is more likely to be the future.

Among the stakes is Pakistan's own future. It is seriously vulnerable to Talibanisation of its western provinces and, should that happen, one or more civil wars can be expected. The economy, too, is vulnerable: should there be a shrinkage of western aid and help

after current debt reschedulings end -- and Islamabad is required to pay for the huge military establishment and elite's consumption from its own resources, a meltdown will not be far off. And there may be much civil strife and worldism amidst endemic conflicts.

Another involvement in Afghanistan is far too risky, and not worth taking for some more millions of pounds and dollars. The way to fight Talibanisation is to fight ideas with ideas -- with words and civil action. Show the people that democracy yields better results; under it, the chances of economic progress, amidst the full range of human rights, are more attractive than the absolutist dictatorship of a Mullah Omar.

Messrs Bush and Blair ought to see with a clear eye that the two nation states of Iraq and Afghanistan have been destroyed, perhaps for good. It is now time to think of the troubles that will multiply in the Middle East and the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Redrawing maps of areas that have seen successive civilisations is too risky an affair. History is not a tamed beast to do tricks on the master's word of command.

MB Naqvi is a leading Pakistani columnist.