

An Independent Voice

It is with both a sense of challenge and a feeling of humility that The Daily Star today takes its place on the media scene in Bangladesh, with an overriding commitment that cuts across all other considerations: to serve the nation as a truly independent newspaper. By a propitious coincidence, the paper makes its debut at a historic time when, with the fall of an authoritarian regime, the country is well-set to begin a new journey towards establishing a democratic system of government, which has eluded this troubled nation so long but which we cannot do without.

For The Daily Star, it is a privilege to be part of this changing scene. But with this privilege comes an enormous responsibility which we share with the rest of the press in Bangladesh. In immediate terms, our responsibility is to serve as a watchdog in ensuring that the process leading to the holding of a free and fair parliamentary election next month and to the setting up of a truly representative sovereign assembly is not derailed either by thoughtless utterances or actions of political parties or by forces which, for reasons of their own, remain hostile to the concept of a democratic way of life.

This immediate responsibility will be later integrated into our larger and a more long-term role of strengthening public opinion on how the democratic system that, hopefully, will be in place by early March can be sustained and strengthened. Here, we should be able to impress upon our politicians that no matter how they guide the destiny of the nation, in the political sense, the ultimate test of the system will be in the way the elected government revitalises our economy so that it is able to meet the basic needs of our people. In short, unless the impoverished millions in rural Bangladesh get a fair deal, in terms of shelter, food, education and medical care, the democratic system for which so many have struggled so long and so many have died will gradually lose its credibility. We must never let that happen.

In this scenario, the uniqueness and have strength of The Daily Star lies in its non-partisan position or, to put it more positively, in the freedom it enjoys from affiliation with or influence from any political party, grouping or alliance. On the other hand, we will be anything but neutral in conflicts between good and evil, justice and injustice, right and wrong, regardless of positions assumed by political parties -- whether in power or in opposition. No politician will be able to take this paper for granted, but none will be given cause to doubt our fairness.

Finally, there are issues, such as the rule of law, human rights, press freedom and accountability of people in the administration or in the world of trade and industry, on which this paper will never compromise, whatever the costs.

Prayer for Peace

With virtually all efforts at resolving the Gulf crisis, diplomatically exhausted, millions of people all over the world will be today praying for peace. True, at this moment, a glimmer of hope is raised by the mission of the UN Secretary-General to Baghdad in what has been rightly described as the last grasp at peace. But so far the news from the Iraqi capital on the progress of the Secretary General's talks remains contradictory and vague.

No one believes that Perez de Cuellar will be able to work out a formula for a peaceful resolution of the crisis, just in course of a single mission. However, President Saddam Hussein may still offer some kind of a way-out to justify the postponement of the deadline for the threatened military action. Thus, Iraq may buy time, mainly to save its face. If the Iraqi President does make such a move, the United States which is spearheading the international campaign against President Hussein should not miss the chance of opening a new dialogue for peace. Better still, Washington should readily involve Paris in any new move that emerges from the mission of Perez de Cuellar to Baghdad.

The international community has already rightly condemned Iraq for its invasion of Kuwait. The move by President Saddam Hussein has split the Islamic world, caused untold suffering to millions of people within the Gulf region and outside and damaged the economies of several poor Third World countries, including Bangladesh, which we have discussed in details in articles published elsewhere in this paper. But this is not the time for recriminations. This is the time for averting a war. This is the time for a prayer for peace.

QUOTES

You both have your cases to make and your people to care for you have the power and the strength to destroy God's presence and image. His men, His women and His children.

Please listen to the will of God. God has created us to be loved and not to be destroyed by our hatred.

The condemnation of aggression and the restoration of right and legitimacy are musts that should not be tampered with or compromised on.

— Mother Teresa to George Bush and Saddam Hussein

— Nagrub Mahfouz on ME situation.

Leave alone nations, even individuals do not often get a second chance. This nation is, however, fortunate. The dreams that had faded, the hopes that we found more and more difficult to hold on to, have now reappeared on the horizon of the 'achievable'.

Democracy is the first of those dreams that, having eluded us for so many years, now appear again to be around the corner. The relentless struggle of our people against autocratic rule and the commitment of all political parties to holding a free and fair election has rekindled the faith in our hearts that at long last we are about to get a representative government that was a cherished goal of our Liberation War.

With the dream of representative government came the dream of social and economic wellbeing of our people. In December '71, we thought that as the flag of independent Bangladesh unfurled over this beautiful land, so would the era of meeting the basic needs of our people. All of us would work together, dredge our rivers, sow our fields, build our factories, clear our slums—joining hands in a show of patriotism that would make us the envy of the world. Instead we are the object of pity of the world. Years of undemocratic and unpatriotic rule has made destitutes of us all—economically, culturally and morally.

With our dreams of democracy and social justice came that of an accountable administration. Because of the intrinsic nature of autocratic rule, the administration became as much an instrument of corruption as it was a victim of arbitrariness. Rules and manuals were replaced by

whims and caprice. The merits of a project was judged not on how far it would serve the masses, but on how much of its funds could be syphoned off for the master. The servants of the representative government became the gatekeeper of the armed intruder.

An accountable administration necessarily gives birth to our dream of institution building. The gradual erosion of institutional autonomy, the decline of respect for professional ethics and the disappearance of a rudimentary respect for rules have led

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to the near collapse of our autonomous bodies, banking and other financial institutions and the local governments.

Now that the realisation of these dreams seems so near, the question that lurks in the back of everyone's mind is: are we going to make good this second chance? Do we have the necessary breadth of vision, the strength of character and the courage of conviction to give to our people a decent life of freedom, and basic rights? Or are we going to go back into the past,

open old wounds, raise unnecessary and irrelevant slogans, bring forth prejudices that are best left buried and squabble over what happened and when, and who declared what? All these while the nation agonises over the future of democracy, of economic growth and of a peaceful society.

The most popular lesson of history is that we do not learn from it. It may be popular but perhaps not altogether correct. Nations do learn from history—may be not quickly, nor thoroughly, but they do. And so must we. We must learn that a process is

more important than an event, that institutions are more important than individuals, and that a civic society, by definition, must adhere to some basic ethics and norms for it to work towards collective good. We must also learn that a society is as much a set of rules and regulations as it is a set of examples. More precisely a set of examples of its leaders—in the professions, in education, in industry and business and of course, in politics.

It is in this context of what we as a

people, and all of us as individuals, have learnt from history and what examples we are to set now, that we must approach the elections. For us now, more than ever before, the coming elections must go beyond waving of banners, shouting of slogans, raising of funds, lobbying for nominations, and after getting them, doing everything—and I mean everything—to win the elections. For us, above everything else, the election must be a commitment to serve the ideals of democracy and the people of our country.

When we tear down an opponent's poster to put up our own, or rub off another's wall writings to replace it with ours, we erode democracy. When we attack another's procession or prevent others from holding their meetings, we destroy democracy. The bottom line is that democracy is a total commitment. We either take it in its totality or we don't. It does not come in parts.

Through our struggle of today, the dreams of '71 are back. What should have been our people's emancipation, remained confined to political independence. We got our country but were unable to give it the shape we wanted. Now that the opportunity is back surely we can hope to work together for the re-emergence of those qualities of '71—patriotism, sacrifice, commitment, hardwork and discipline—that gave birth to our country.

The reborn dreams require the rebirth of those spirits.

The writer is the Executive Editor of The Daily Star.

Dreams Reborn

by Mahfuz Anam

The Election Scene

Major Parties Draw Battle Lines for the Contest

by Reazuddin Ahmed

As possible. But fielding of Jatiya Party candidates in 300 seats has caused concern in BNP circle. The triangular fight will divide the anti-Awami League votes reducing BNP chance to win majority. But the growing resistance by students against Jatiya Party has slowed down the party's move to stage a comeback to the election scene.

The filing of cases against Ershad and the mounting pressure on the interim government to send him to jail have discouraged many Jatiya Party nominees to seek elections. Awami League and BNP will make the constitutional issues the focal points in their main election agenda. Awami League will seek people's mandate to amend the constitution to go back to parliamentary form of government and to restore secularism and socialism as state principles. Awami League incorporated four state principles in the 1972 Constitution which included nationalism, democracy, secularism and socialism. Late President Ziaur Rahman

amended the constitution restoring multi-party democracy in place of one party rule, replaced secularism with faith in almighty Allah and altered socialism in to social justice. BNP is unlikely to change the stance against secularism and would like to retain the presidential system of government. Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina has already asked the people to choose between people's government and the 'Zia-Ershad style' (Presidential) government.

Awami League's basic stand on the constitution is to go back to 1972. The stand implies that religious parties like Jamaat will be banned and the constitutional amendment barring trial of the killers of late Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would go. Besides, the eighth amendment making Islam as the state religion will also be abolished. The basic difference on principle issues between Awami League and BNP has faded the possibility of a broad united front for fighting the elections. The move was initiated by Five-party Alliance and

Communist Party of Bangladesh. Both BNP and Awami League dismissed the proposal of a joint front.

The manifesto of both Awami League and BNP will focus on key economic issues like privatisation, liberal industrial policy to invite foreign investments and poverty alleviation. In the backdrop of changes in the East European socialist countries, Awami League, which professes socialism as state policy, is likely to catch up BNP in privatisation programmes. Awami League nationalised country's major industries after liberation. BNP government started denationalisation of industries. Both BNP and Awami League are expected to remain silent over the presence of Bangladesh troops in Saudi Arabia. The basic tilt towards the West will dominate the foreign policy of both the major parties.

The election scene will be clear after January 21, the last date for the withdrawal of candidates. Until that time the lobbying for adjustments among the like minded parties will continue to avoid duplicity of candidates. Meanwhile, the administration is expected to gear up steps to streamline the arrangements for holding free and fair elections: the law enforcing agencies need to be despatched well ahead of the election day to different parts of the country to prevent any untoward incidents during the hustings. Electioneering will start within a couple of days.

The writer is the Deputy Editor of The Daily Star.

The country's two major political parties the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) are set to face each other in the parliament elections of February 27. These two parties are at the centre stage of elections and all other small parties, having ideological tilts, are aligning with either BNP or AL.

With only 43 days left for the run up, major parties are locked in a strategic battle to put up potentially winning candidates in majority of the 300 seats of the parliament with a view to securing absolute majority to form government. But the Awami League's objective is much more than that; it is striving for two third's majority to amend the Constitution to revert to parliamentary form of government. Presidential system of government was introduced in the country in 1975 through fourth amendment of the constitution which is still in force.

With the fall of the autocratic regime of H. M. Ershad, the country is passing through a critical juncture. The nation has, therefore, started the count down to elections with a view to establishing a stable representative government. The interim government has taken up series of steps which include reorganisation of Election Commission and framing of laws restricting the polls expenses to Taka three lakhs for every candidate. Moreover, the candidates will have to disclose to source of the fund-

ing so that black money can not influence the polls. The services of the government officers connected with the election process have been placed at the disposal of the election commission which can fire any one of them for violation of the election rules.

These steps have raised expectations for a free and fair elections on February 27. But skepticism is growing due to presence of illegal arms and black money which influenced polls during Ershad's regime. The government has promulgated law to punish the holders of illegal arms and special drives have been initiated to recover them. Both the steps seem to have failed. Even at the initial stage of hustings in different parts of the country, free display of arms are being reported. Two persons were killed in Chittagong recently. The government needs to take stringent measures to recover arms and prevent the use of black money to influence the polls. The government seems to be slow in making preparations for holding the polls suc-

Peaceful Rambos Looking for Trouble

by Dennis Craig

The appointment of 12 RAO's in the West Bank and nine in the Gaza Strip — three of them women — was one response by UNWRA, the United Nations agency charged with the health, education and general welfare of the refugees.

Two weeks after the protest movement was launched in late 1987, the UN Security Council called for "ways and means of ensuring the safety and protection of the Palestinian civilians under Israeli occupation." Giorgio Giacomelli, UNWRA's Commissioner-General, considered the agency had a special obligation to minimise the bloodshed. Conspicuously placed observers would, he reasoned, serve as a restraint on both sides.

"Our relationship with the Israeli Army is now quite good and they often allow us to talk to them out of certain actions — particularly the beating of small children," said Saunders. "The Israeli border police are a different matter, however. It was they who recently shot up two of our vehicles and wounded an assistant RAO. Some of them seem to be out

of control." Although the Palestinians obviously appreciate them, waving and smiling when they enter the camps, RAO's are occasionally made the target of Palestinian stone-throwers.

"Paradoxically, it's usually when we have persuaded the military to back off and leave," said Saunders. "Some of the protesters feel frustrated and have to take it out on someone. We are the nearest."

RAO's are not allowed to take media correspondents or indeed anyone - not even the highest UN official - with them into the camps. They are forbidden to carry arms, gas-masks, cameras or any object other than their walkie-talkies.

"And no matter what the provocation, be it a slap, a punch or worse, we must never retaliate," said Saunders. Their motto could well be: "Who cools it, wins."

They are volunteers from many countries. There are Americans, British, French, Germans, Greeks, Italians and Spanish in the teams. They come from many backgrounds. Saunders, by training an epidemiologist, worked in Africa

for the Save the Children Fund for five years.

"I saw an advertisement for the job, went to Vienna for a long series of interviews, and was accepted. I liked the idea of work in which I could set my own guidelines and use my own initiative. Each situation, each confrontation, is different, so we have to find the solutions as we go along."

His own worst moment came when a mentally deranged Palestinian schoolboy loosed off 16 shots at him from an automatic weapon.

"I could feel the bullets whizzing past me on both sides. There didn't seem much point in even ducking. I couldn't believe it when the firing stopped and not one had hit me."

On average RAO's log about 2,000 kilometres a week, cruising the thoroughfares of the Occupied Territories in their vehicles showing the distinctive blue flag of the United Nations, keeping their eyes open for incidents, trying to forestall trouble.

WHAT OTHERS SAY

Key to peace

The UN Security Council has, of course, set a deadline for Iraq to vacate Kuwait but the Resolution 678 does not mean that the US and the multinational forces should start a war on January 16. Indications are that Washington will give peace one more chance until the proposed US-Soviet summit meeting in Moscow on February 11.

A quick diplomatic solution is what every sensible citizen of the world is seeking while knowing that Saddam is the only stumbling block in the way. When Saddam gets the impression that he is the one to dictate war or peace to the world, he would continue to play his cards as dangerously as he has been playing them since August 2, regardless of the US or other powers. This myth of a fact needs to be smashed, while finding a peaceful or military solution to the current crisis. But then this primitive military ideal will not be shattered if its outcome is applied exclusively.

— Saudi Gazette

Gibberish from Baghdad

No partial solution to the Gulf crisis: way Iraq can get away with its seizure of Kuwait; strict compliance with the resolutions passed by the Security Council since the eruption of the crisis is a must, the military option would be inevitable in case of Iraq's failure to quit Kuwait willingly. All these must have been trumpeted by world leaders since Saddam made his greatest tomfoolery.

Months later, it is downright ironic that Saddam is as obdurate and procrastinating as ever. Seemingly jubilant over his childish abortion of talks with the US, Iraqi warlord on December 18 told the Turkish TV that he saw no need for his foreign minister to go to Washington if President Bush was going to reiterate demands that Iraq withdraw from Kuwait. This remark induces a thousand exclamation marks.

— The Egyptian Gazette

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

A guarded welcome

Sir - Ever since we saw the advertisement about your paper, we have been wondering if The Daily Star will be really different from existing English-language dailies in Bangladesh. We have also asked ourselves if sponsors and editors of the forthcoming publication are conscious of the need for a different kind of paper and, what is more important, know how to go about

designing and producing such a paper. In order to be different from other newspapers, you have to know the nature of crisis facing the English-language press in Bangladesh. In our view, the crisis is two-fold. In the first place, most journalists, including some senior ones, have difficulty in the use of English. Much of the writing is full of errors. But many reports and articles we read daily are littered

with awkward phrases, long, complex sentences whose meanings are unclear and misplaced metaphors. It is no wonder that among Westerners we know here, the English-language press remains the subject of jokes. The other crisis facing the English-language press is purely journalistic. We read news reports which, poorly researched and badly sourced, cannot be distinguished from opinion pieces. During successive authoritarian regimes, investigative journalism gradually disappeared and most journalists specialised in writing in praise of leaders. Again, we find no redeeming features in government policies we decide to con-

demn or in personalities we want to run down.

We do hope that The Daily Star will be different from other dailies. Until we see your paper, we offer you our guarded welcome.

Tauhid Amzad Dhaka

Hope you'll be 'man' enough

Sir - I congratulate you and everybody associated with you and your newspaper on this momentous occasion of publication of your new English daily. We all look forward eagerly to some objective journalism which we hope to see in

your newspaper.

I, personally, have had bitter experiences with current English dailies, where they never like to print any letter which they do not like and, especially, letters which they think criticize their own role.

Here's hoping you will be a newspaper with a difference and be 'man' enough to rise above personal likes and dislikes, taking everything in your stride. Once again, congratulations and all the best.

Parveen Haque D.O.H.S Dhaka Cant.