

## Tasks Ahead

As the last of the international observers who have been here to monitor the country's parliamentary polls leaves for home, we, as a nation, have reasons to feel a certain pride about our performance. Without any exception, our foreign guests have commented on the way our voters and candidates conducted themselves in creating an atmosphere in which the election could be free and fair. It has been said by some observers that the elaborate system that had been put in place by the Election Commission may well serve as a model for other developing countries.

In the first place, congratulations to the caretaker administration of the Acting President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed and, indeed, to the Election Commission headed by Justice Abdur Rouf are very much in order. They have earned our gratitude by proving once for all that given the political will, a strong determination and a careful attention to details, the administration in a country like Bangladesh can achieve what may seem impossible at times. In other words, what happened was no accident. On the contrary, it was a carefully planned operation. This being the case, many people would ask if we could develop the same approach, the same will and determination, in tackling and eventually solving other national problems, such as corruption, administrative inefficiency and unemployment in urban and rural centres.

If the approach is based on a spirit of give and take and, what's more, on an appreciation of national interest, then one would say that it has just passed another test.

Here, we are referring to the meeting that took place on Saturday between the Acting President, Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed and a delegation of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), led by its Chairperson, Begum Khaleda Zia. In a cordial atmosphere, the meeting resolved a number of outstanding issues and helped in removing some misunderstanding which had been unwittingly created by the Acting President during his televised address on Friday. It is possible that part of the misunderstanding stemmed from differences in the perspectives. It is often difficult for a politician to see the point of view of a jurist and vice versa, although both may share a whole set of common concerns and objectives.

While we are indeed pleased that the Saturday meeting has cleared the path for the next move, namely, the appointment of the BNP Cabinet, one cannot rule out other difficulties, hopefully all minor, which may crop up in coming months, before power has been fully transferred to the new administration.

In this respect, a major issue facing the country still concerns the form of government. On the face of it, BNP which is committed to the continuance of the present presidential system may like to treat it as a non-issue. However, there are experts within BNP, not to mention the independent ones, who may see the need for a careful review of the issues involved. Neither BNP nor AL should see it in narrow political terms. No system of government is *per se* more democratic than another. It all depends on how it works. It is also true that those who had seen the working of the presidential system under the ousted Ershad regime from inside are well aware that the accountability of all members of parliament to one single person, namely, Mr Ershad, had turned the Jatiya Sangsad into a mockery.

This newspaper believes that there are many new elected members in BNP and AL who would be willing to discuss the matter and place their agreed position, if there is one, before their leaders. If the major parties can reach a national consensus on this issue, thus avoiding a parliamentary battle over a possible amendment of the constitution, they can try out a similar approach to the setting up of several house committees which play a major role in the life of a parliament. Such a national consensus will produce just the right climate for a new drive in the field of economic development, without which the last month's election carries little meaning.

## The Killing in Colombo

We mourn the killing on Saturday of Ranjan Wijeratne, the Sri Lankan Cabinet Minister who had been responsible for military operations against Tamil separatists as well as the Marxist rebels. As if there was not enough on his plate, he was also conducting an investigation into the illegal activities of the local casino owners.

While press reports from Colombo do not say who might be behind the killing, the professional manner of the attack — the use of a powerful car bomb — would suggest that either Tamil extremists or Marxist rebels were responsible for this dastardly act.

The killing removes from the scene an extremely able government official who appeared to have the capacity of at least taking his country's battle against insurgency a step forward, if not completely ending it. It will be hard for the Sri Lankan authorities to find the replacement. It will be also hard to keep up the morale among the people who want to live in peace. Sri Lanka has suffered enough. We can only pray and hope that the agony comes to an end before another victim falls by the wayside, in a senseless shooting.

INDONESIA is casting into a new era of openness, but critics charge that the government is only paying lip service to the concept known as "keterbukaan" in order to appear progressive.

Newspaper closures, increased censorship of foreign news and crackdowns on art have put the government campaign, which began in earnest two years ago, into question.

Since violence and bloodshed shook the newly-independent country of Indonesia 25 years ago, military and civilian administrators have argued to keep certain restrictions on free speech and political activity.

Leading dissidents in Jakarta, only a handful of whom can speak openly on the matter, say democratic freedoms have been emasculated by a system that prohibits political activity at the village level where most Indonesians reside.

"Socially, little has been changed since the late 1930s when every native of the archipelago was portrayed as happy under declaredly benign colonial patronage," claims a leading political dissident.

Possibly the most sensitive question in Indonesia today concerns the issue of corruption in President Suharto's family and his plans to continue on as a "President for Life" or step aside and allow free elections in 1992 and 1993.

When a New York Times article published late last year

poked fun at the family holdings of one of Suharto's daughters, the roving correspondent who wrote the story was banned from Indonesia. The *International Herald Tribune* which ran the story was dropped by its distributor and has been unable to find a new one.

Likewise, a play by Nano Riantarno, which took the same tact with few specific references, was banned last November.

"We have sent a letter to Parliament about nepotism," said Slamet Bratanata, a lead-

Philip Gorton writes from Jakarta

Indonesian military to meddle in civilian politics. It is known as "Dwifungsi," or the dual function law.

Indonesia is a vast archipelago with thousands of islands and a strong central authority that holds them together. Too much pluralism can cause divisiveness and, worse, minority uprisings, argue conservatives who favour limits on "Keterbukaan," or openness.

But an emerging voice in

shoulders of President Suharto.

"Mr. Suharto is telling them that they should be willing to relinquish positions and take a back seat when society has reached that stage of capability," said Slamet Bratanata, a former Minister of Energy and Mines. "The point is, who is going to give the signal? He makes it appear that the military is holding the people back."

"Mr. Suharto believes in the

Analysts said the incident was an example of how decisions are still made in Indonesia, from the "top down."

Paternalism may have run its course in Indonesia, but with voices of dissent stifled for over two decades, the country is stepping with hesitation towards democratic change.

Though new voices of dissent have surfaced in the past year, President Suharto, one of Asia's most resilient strongmen, has shown few signs that he is prepared to tolerate any

Much of the control stems from limits on free speech and press freedom, according to political analysts.

Despite the recent crackdown and promises by the Minister of Information to instill "the correct mental attitude and moral foundation" in the minds of journalists, the push for "keterbukaan" has not entirely ended.

Indeed, more criticism of the government has come to be tolerated as long as it does not appear to come from the extreme right or the extreme left, according to Mr. Bratanata. "As for the soldier concerned with keeping you in line, he only knows left and right," he said. "These are his marching orders."

President Suharto is feared for his willingness to crack down on subversion through military might and subtle repression. Human rights organisations have accused the Indonesian military of gross rights violations against dissidents in East Timor and Irian Jaya.

"The military treats us as an opposition and sometimes as an enemy," said S. Indro Tjahjono, coordinator for Skephi, a radical environmentalist group that claims the country's resources are being exploited for the benefit of President Suharto and his close associates. "They tap our phones, open our letters, arrest us and interrogate us," he said in an interview, estimating he has been hauled in late at night at least ten times.

—Depthnews Asia.

## The limited freedom of expression is quickly outpaced by economic progress and material gain

ing social critic and the leader of the dissident "Group of 50," "He (Suharto) is not the only one. It is a kind of a disease."

Artistic suggestions that there is social injustice in the region's most populated country have also been struck down. A play about a group of transvestites scrounging out a living in a city of gaudy wealth was banned in December. The censors merely said it was too vulgar.

H.J.B. Princea, director of the Institute for the Defense of Human Rights, told *Depthnews* that basic rights like free speech written into the Constitution have been "annulled by common laws."

In 1982 a clause was included that legally permits the

the Indonesian military is said to favour a reduced role for the army in civilian affairs. Elements within this faction are also said by Western diplomats here to oppose President Suharto's plans to run in the next election.

Still, the limited freedom of expression in Indonesia is quickly being outpaced by economic progress and material gain.

"They are afraid to give us any sensitive stories," said a newspaper editor in Jakarta, referring to local reporters. "Military rule is supreme."

One of Indonesia's leading social critics said the stagnation of progress towards more openness falls directly on the

notion that the state is I land that those against me are against the state's identity," added Mr. Bratanata in an interview with *Depthnews*.

Last year, the Coordinating Minister for political and Security Affairs met with government officials to discuss press freedom. They agreed to stop blacking out of foreign publications, stop calling journalists off stories, and stop closing publications for journalistic offences.

But when the Minister of Information returned from a trip abroad he was surprised after a meeting with President Suharto to announce that the threat to closure would remain.

real opposition to his 25-year rule.

In recent years President Suharto has achieved economic success enough to argue, like his neighbour Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore, that Western-style pluralism is not a requirement of national progress. To affirm this, the military has been able to institutionalise its control over civilian affairs.

Though Indonesia, an island nation of 190 million set in the South Pacific, keeps a tight lid on dissent, it is far removed from the totalitarian intolerance of China or other Islamic states of the Middle East.

Yet, President Suharto's reign remains supreme and without serious challenge.

THE latest round of the Angolan peace talks broke up in Lisbon amid much mutual re-ermination and evident regret. The meeting had convened two days early with hopes of at least an agreement on the modalities of a ceasefire and the introduction of a multi-party democracy. In the end nothing was signed.

After the break-up, all the players—the Angolan MPLA government, Jonas Savimbi's UNITA movement and a coalition of Portugal, the United States and the Soviet Union—put forward their versions of what had happened.

The Angolan chief representative, former prime minister Lopo de Nascimento, said that unlike his government, UNITA was not serious about the talks. Despite lack of agreement, his ruling MPLA-Workers' Party would go ahead in April with the plan agreed at its December 1990 Congress to introduce a multi-party system in place of the present one-party regime.

UNITA and the convenors of the talks each blamed the MPLA government in Luanda for the breakdown. They said UNITA had been willing to sign a document drawn up by Portugal, the US and the Soviet Union on the introduction of a multiplicity of parties, arrangements for elections and the details of a ceasefire.

But the government delegation led by de Nascimento had demanded that agreement on a date for the introduction of a multi-party system—April 15—be accompanied by a firm accord making that also the ceasefire date. The three states backing the agreement said that this introduced a new element into the talks and prevented a settlement.

Before the meeting, both the Luanda delegation and UNITA had indicated general acceptance of the five-point plan.

In late January, the Angolan government had said it agreed with the plan, which set out to achieve multi-party democracy, an internationally agreed ceasefire, free and fair elections, a ceasefire accord pre-

ceded by an accord on the date for elections and an end to all foreign military help to the two sides.

Then, in the run-up to the talks, both the MPLA and UNITA seemed to add new clauses. Luanda, which above all else wants an end to the fighting, decided it must have a definite ceasefire date.

UNITA on the other hand, which wants recognition as a legitimate political movement and a date for elections within a year of April 15, decided that a ceasefire could wait. The leader of the UNITA delegation, Jeremias Chitunda, Vice-

President to Savimbi, said on arrival in Lisbon on February 4 that a ceasefire might have to wait until all Cuban troops were withdrawn from Angola. This date had already been set by the quadripartite agreement which led to neighbouring Namibia's independence. All Cubans are expected to leave by June. No ceasefire until June would mean continuation of the war.

Sudden UNITA concern about the Cubans is strange as the departure date for the withdrawal has been known for over a year and there is no sign that the Cubans are drag-

ging their feet.

The UNITA statement can only be seen as a tactic to put greater pressure on the MPLA to agree to dates for the introduction of a constitutionally guaranteed multi-party system and for national elections.

What seems to have emerged once more from yet another fruitless round of talks is that the gulf between UNITA and the MPLA in terms of trust and ability to cooperate is as great as ever.

The government does not want an election date or the constitutional changes set in stone before it has an interna-

tionally agreed ceasefire, though it is willing to sign agreements on all three simultaneously.

It has the most to lose. It wants the war stopped; it will not give UNITA what it wants in terms of legalisation before it gets an end to the fighting.

UNITA, on the other hand, wants public recognition of its role in Angola's political future and an enforceable, internationally backed agreement on elections before it gives up its chief weapon, continuation of the war.

In the middle are the three countries trying to arrange a deal—Portugal, the US and the Soviet Union. All want a ceasefire and the start of a peaceful political process, although there are divisions over what final outcome they want.

The US wants to give UNITA as much of a chance to oust the MPLA as possible. At one stage it was being said by sources close to the CIA in Washington that the US wanted to see the MPLA defeated before the Cubans withdrew—thus humiliating them in the way that the Americans were humiliated in Saigon.

This position would dovetail with the UNITA position that a ceasefire should await a Cuban withdrawal. Even if the MPLA is not militarily defeated, a Cuban withdrawal before the end of the war would be some-

thing of a propaganda victory for the Americans and UNITA. They could say Cuba's mission had failed.

Moscow wants an end to the war, an end to its costly military commitment to the MPLA and a settlement that gives the MPLA some influence and access to government. They do not want to be seen in Africa as pulling the rug out from under the MPLA's feet. Nevertheless, they are pushing Luanda as hard as possible for a peace agreement and ceasefire.

Portugal just seems to want an end to the war and a chance to enter into a more regular political and, most importantly economic relationship with its former colony. It has much to gain from getting in on the ground floor of any post-war economic reconstruction.

Angola is one of the richest countries in Africa in terms of mineral resources and agricultural potential. Portugal has long experience of development and exploitation in Angola and wants the chance to help Angola towards a peace that will be mutually beneficial.

Whatever the individual aims of the three mediators, they are unlikely to have much success until the two warring movements can lower their psychological guards long enough to sign the necessary accords. So far, experience has shown this is unlikely in the foreseeable future unless heavy pressure can be put on them.

It is hard to see what forms of pressure would work. A halt to arms supplies would take a time to work, given the huge arsenals on both sides, and in any event the war would continue for months if not years at a lower technological level.

The next meeting has been set for March 4. Few expect a sudden change of heart by either the MPLA or UNITA, so pessimism is the order of the day.

—GEMINI NEWS  
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# Despite Peace Breakdown Angola will Go Multi-party

by Keith Somerville

Once again high hopes of peace in Angola have been dashed. Following superpower agreement on bringing the warring parties together talks were convened in Lisbon with Portugal, the Soviet Union and the United States taking part. When the talks broke down a few days later each side had a different version of the reasons. A major snag was an unexpected Angolan demand that a ceasefire be proclaimed on the same day as the introduction of a multi-party system.

## Angola



## 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.

### Death and world record

Sir, Death is inevitable, but still we dread it, no one wants to die. The more older we become the more scared we are of this eventuality.

However tough it is, we prefer to go along and carry the burden of life on our shoulders.

The taste of life on earth is indeed enjoyable, otherwise why would we want to continue with it even often in the face of adversity?

Those who dare to put and end to their lives are considered to be cowards, who have failed to face the problems of life.

Therefore, a person who manages to make a century on the earth, or sometimes even more becomes listed in the Guinness book of records. Praiseworthy isn't it!

Such was Carrie White, who made it as the oldest living person on earth. Death however, did not spare her also, but she will be remembered as the person who could evade death for such a long time. We mortals on earth respect and will remember her.

Any suggestion on ways to prolong longevity also deserves praise: Who doesn't want a long life!  
Zafar Imam  
Gulshan, Dhaka.

### A giant leap for Bangladeshi women

Sir, The gap between developed and developing countries appear to be shrinking faster than estimated to be. In this regard, Bangladesh may be referred to as one of the new cases, not too late though, as one more instance has been set forth by the promotion of a Bangladeshi woman to the position of Resident Representative of UNDP, which should be agreed upon by a

critic as a success of the movement for liberation of Muslim women, as an achievement for the Third world, as a milestone of Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and as a giant leap for Bangalee women to date.

Until this year, Bangladeshi woman as a high ranking executive in an organ of UNO had been unheard of, and this occupation must have lifted the

last veil of conservative attitude of this Muslim majority country toward women's roles in traditionally men dominated society in contrast to western ones where women have long been performing all types of jobs — Skin Diving to space walk.

Ascension to such a coveted position with creditable qualifications — Business degree from USA coupled with work experiences from Indonesia and Australia — entails solemn duties ahead to develop with budgeted means (to cover probable programmes from contraceptives to insecticides and roads to skyscrapers) and should deliver expected hopes to stand out as a beacon to the unfortunates especially in the dark periods yet to come.

M Rahman, Zila School Road, Mymensingh, 2200.

### Food habit

Sir, Of late there have emerged so many snack-bars or fast-food shops along the thoroughfares of Dhaka. A befitting sign for a growing metropolis. But most of them sell patties, burger, or 'singara' and 'samosa' as items of demand. But, despite popularity these fried stuff are not always beneficial to health.

Only some of these roadside food shops sell sandwiches, obviously better than those other stuff on health count, but that also at a prohibitive price. It appears, not the lesser availability or little motivation, but the price is the factor that has kept the item from gaining a popularity. For instance, today's commonplace burger was not a popular habit a couple of decades ago. It was introduced at an accessible price.

Even we see vans selling lunch packs of 'Biryani', which is a rich food item, good for occasions, not for a regular habit. Why not with points of better food value, digestiveness etc. sandwiches are also made available at a deservingly moderate price, to the benefit of the working public?

In many other countries of the world sandwiches are comparatively cheaper items of fast food. Virtually it entails lesser cost than many other fried and greasy food items. Why not then it can be sold at a lesser price. I don't understand.

Even we can have a variety of the item. Of course not that high-priced club sandwiches! But the cheaper ones — vegetable, egg, cheese, chicken, mutton, even beef varieties. And the suppliers can well make a countable profit at that.

Naim Bashir Gandaria, Dhaka.