

Truce in the Gulf

The international community, especially the West, have reasons to be as tough as possible with Iraq whose aggression against Kuwait brought untold suffering and financial hardship not only to the tiny Gulf state but also to a large number of countries in Asia and Africa, including Bangladesh. The war is now over, much more quickly than many people had expected, and the regime of President Saddam Hussein, down but not out, remains too busy in putting down the internal rebellion. In fact, it has had no time even to offer the mildest apology to the Muslim world, for that matter, to a country like Bangladesh, for the harm, the damage, the incalculable financial loss caused by its senseless war against Kuwait. In short, Iraq has done nothing so far to earn even the minimum sympathy of the outside world. Whatever compassion we have, it goes out for innocent civilians, especially children and old people, now trying to survive the ordeal in Iraq.

Taking full advantage of the situation, the West has submitted a draft resolution for consideration of the UN Security Council, which, if accepted by the Council and then by Baghdad, will pave the way for a formal ceasefire in the Gulf war. The US sponsored draft is unquestionably tough, perhaps too tough for the Third World members of the Council, the Soviet Union and China to accept in its present form. Both Beijing and Moscow have offered modifications, with Beijing threatening to abstain during the voting on the motion that may take place next week.

The wide-ranging draft resolution relates to such issues as the border between Iraq and Kuwait, the destruction of Iraqi plants for chemical weapons and missiles, the Iraqi compensation for victims of its aggression and an embargo on the sale of conventional weapons to Baghdad.

Reactions to the draft resolution vary from lukewarm acceptance to resistance. Again, different proposed provisions evoke varied responses. Under no circumstances, can Baghdad be allowed to run away from the question of compensation to victims of its aggression, no matter how long it takes for Iraq to meet this obligation. The dispute over the country's border with Kuwait must be settled through negotiation. The draft resolution mentions nothing about negotiation and, instead, gives the role of demarcating the frontier to the United Nations.

The crucial issues in the draft resolution relate to the destruction of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the arms embargo. Even critics of Baghdad may argue that implementation of these provisions will only create a power vacuum which a country like Iran will try to fill, a vacuum that will be very much to the advantage of Israel. Here, the draft resolution offers one redeeming provision. As the resolution puts it, "The above actions represent steps towards the goal of establishing in the Middle East a zone free from weapons of mass destructions and ballistic missile system." Many Arab nations will insist the two processes—the destruction of Iraq's military might and the establishment of the zone of peace in the region—should proceed simultaneously. The real challenge facing Iraq is, can this devastated country expect a fair deal from the international community if Saddam Hussein continues to call the shots? His very presence on the scene presents a hindrance and provokes the West into taking a much tougher line than it should. Someone in Baghdad should explain this to the Iraqi leader.

Unmeaning Bulks and Volumes

There is alarming news from Dinajpur. If things do not start moving in the right direction, and soon, 25,000 tons of rice will rot in the local CSD godowns and be thrown out. This stock was harvested in 1989 and procured by government soon after. As the varieties in this stock is not suited for long storage, the whole lot stands the risk of degenerating in about a month. The only way to save it from going total waste is to send them to various demand points in a matter of days — and so distribute as to enable early consumption.

But that only way is apparently clogged. And there is no sign that the way would be cleared before disaster overtakes the stock. To move and distribute the stock the government needs the right arrangement of railway wagons. The wagons are government property and their management is also a hundred per cent government matter. But in spite of repeated reminders, some of them at a rather high level, the Railway has not so far obliged.

This incredibly absurd story was published by this journal on Wednesday. One of the headlines to the story attributes the problem to a shortage of railway wagons. But inside there is an allegation of the most serious nature. While no wagons are forthcoming to relieve the Dinajpur CSD and save the rice from rotting — we quote — "a good number of railway goods-wagons are being sent regularly to Thakurgaon, Pirganj, Shibganj, Selabganj, Ruhea and Panchagarh by the traffic inspector to serve the personal interests of some businessmen." This no shortage talk but stinks of filthy corruption and should be taken up for investigation and action without a moment's delay.

One problem with big numbers and amounts is that they mean next to nothing. What is after all 25,000 tons in a country which produces ten million tons cereals every year! No one cares. Well, the price of the endangered stock is Tk 27 crore. To say this bulk of rice could feed — to one's full filling capacity — all 120 million Bangladeshis for one full day would be better still easy comprehension of the looming loss.

The second problem with big amounts and volumes is that after some time it dulls one's power to take in. We are so regularly fed on astronomical figures of paddy being lost in the fields to pests and birds and in the godowns to rodents and rotting — and between godowns in transit to human pests that at some point we cease to grasp and to care.

If we mean all this to stop and change — we must insist on the authorities — why 25,000 tons, not even a thousandth part of that shall be allowed to rot. And, please sirs, you will see to that, whatever your name Food or Railway, Movement or Storage

Bangladesh should Look Forward Instead of Harping on the Past

by Nikhil Chakravarty
Special to The Daily Star

NEW DELHI: After an election which is the freest and fairest of some 11 polls I have covered in my reporting career, the electorate in Bangladesh has provided no outright majority to any single party. However, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has won enough seats to form the first popularly elected government in nine years.

Before the poll, political observers had forecast that Awami League might get majority in the House though it could be only a small majority, while the BNP was expected to come up as a close second. When the ballot box was opened, the results did create a surprise with the BNP getting 140 seats out of 298 where elections were held, with the poll having been countermanded in two constituencies, for the house of 300. The Awami League on the other hand could bag only 85 seats, with Ershad's Jatiya Party getting as many as 35 seats and the Jamaat-e-Islami winning 18 seats. Just as few had expected the BNP to emerge as the first party within the reach of the majority, hardly anybody could anticipate Ershad's party getting nearly double the seats secured by the Jamaat.

What is significant is that both the BNP and the Awami League got almost the same number of votes — the BNP 31.44 per cent and the Awami League 31.13 per cent of the total votes polled. At the other end, the Jamaat with only 18 seats got 11.73 per cent of votes, that is, just a little more than the Jatiya Party which with 11.69 per cent could capture as many as 35 seats — nearly double that of the Jamaat.

The picture that emerges is that the Awami League's popularity has declined vis-a-vis the BNP which has gained to be on a par with the Awami League; and the Jamaat support base has not widened at all while Ershad's new entrant party has got the same number of votes as the Jamaat-e-Islami though it has bagged almost double the seats the Jamaat has won.

What could possibly be the reasons behind these new developments, particularly the setback for the Awami League and the accretion of popularity of the BNP? Obviously, these would require in-depth probe particularly by the Bangladesh political leaders themselves. However, certain tentative observations can be put forward at this stage.

For long it was held by many, including both friends and adversaries of the Awami League, that it alone had a network of party organisations all over the country in contrast to the BNP's supposedly weak organisations base. Perhaps this made the Awami League captive of its own illusion, and complacency must have set in the management of vote mobilisation. In contrast, the BNP candidates were conscious of the weak organisation of their party. Each of them thus put in extra efforts to manage a constituency-level machinery for the electioneering campaign. It was almost the case of the traditional hare and tortoise.

More serious has been the sorry state of the party leadership of the Awami League. Even a brief visit to Dhaka convinced one of the disarray in the higher echelons of the party. The party President, Sheikh Hasina Wajed, afflicted by an inflated ego, has from the very beginning of her return to Bangladesh and getting the leadership of the party on a platter, by virtue of being her father's daughter and nothing more, never bothered to work collectively. As one learnt on the eve of the poll and after at Dhaka, her poll-eve broadcast over the radio and her first statement after the announcement of poll results were both the exclusive products of her own unbalanced state of mind without the least consultations with senior colleagues in the party. In the

under the thumb of a Big Brother neighbour, and would certainly not like to be seen as such. This was a trait which was strong in Sheikh Mujibur Rahman himself as one would expect from any leader of a country just achieving liberation for its national identity and sovereignty.

It is in this background that the Awami League leadership with its long association with democratic forces in India — originating in the days of the liberation struggle — has been made the target to attack by its political rivals at home. This was compounded under Sheikh Hasina Wajed who had long taken shelter in India when Sheikh Mujib and other members of his family were assassinated in 1975. It is a complex story how Sheikh Mujibur with his

"There is no anti-India feeling as such in Bangladesh. But Bangladesh with its natural sensitivity would not like to be under the thumb of a Big Brother neighbour. This was a trait which was strong in Sheikh Mujibur Rahman"

entire process of nomination of party candidates as also negotiations with alliance partners, she turned out to be more of a liability than an asset for the Awami League.

There was fault in the line of the Awami League propaganda, particularly the one set by the party President's pronouncements. For one thing, harping back on who brought liberation to Bangladesh makes little impact today to the new generation of voters who are unfamiliar with the history of those heroic days. Secondly, the BNP leadership on this score has an equally impressive record since President Ziaur Rahman and his army colleagues had distinguished themselves in actual combat for the country's liberation.

It was obvious that the Awami League campaign harped too much on the past — which has its mixed complexion — while the public temper at the moment is focussed on Ershad's misdeeds.

Has the Awami League lost because it is pro-India? This is an issue which needs to be examined with care and understanding. Let it be clearly understood that there is no anti-India feeling as such in Bangladesh. What is natural and should be understood is that Bangladesh with its national sensitivity would not like to be

tremendous popular base lost the confidence of some of his close associates that led to his tragic end. What is important to note is that those who had been alienated from Mujib looked upon Hasina's association with India as proof of her dependence on New Delhi. It is this line of propaganda that has been exploited to the full by the adversaries of the Awami League, while there was little campaign from the side of the Awami League leadership to boldly rebut it.

It is, therefore, to be clearly understood that those who were attacking the Awami League leadership for having been truckling to India, are not necessarily anti-India. On their own, most of them would like to have close and friendly relations with India taking into account their national sensitivity. The BNP leadership has no doubt attacked the Awami League on this score in the recent election campaign, but those who constitute the leadership of that party, including many who had participated in the liberation struggle, can by no means be branded as India-haters.

Does the rise of the BNP signify the upswing of Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh? On the face of it, one notes that the Jamaat-e-Islami tilted for the BNP wherever it could not hold on its own, though nowhere was there any sharing of platform. Islamic fundamentalism received

considerable encouragement under Ershad as he used it for the political purpose of countering the democratic forces apart from trying to worm his way up in the countries of Islamic orthodoxy, particularly Saudi Arabia.

How far Ershad went to whip up communal fanaticism to ward off the challenge of the democratic forces was seen last year, when on October 30-November 2, he engineered anti-Hindu communal violence to derail and sabotage the mounting mass movement against his dictatorial regime. The convenient pretext was the communal violence that had erupted in India in the wake of the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation, which naturally agitated the Bangladesh Muslims. Ershad calculated that the Jamaat-e-Islami, which had joined the democratic upsurge demanding his resignation, could easily be blamed for the communal violence. Significantly, the Jamaat leaders were one of the first to denounce communal violence. Their statement clearly stated that the minority Hindu community in Bangladesh must not be blamed for the misdeeds of Hindu fanatics against Muslims in India and exposed the communal riots as Ershad's handwork. I had it on good authority that in Chittagong, the Jamaat came out to save Hindu temples from goondas whipping up communal violence. Incidentally, a number of leaders in Dhaka, including those of the Jamaat, told me that they were nonplussed and hurt when they found that Ershad had been complimented in India, particularly by people in authority in West Bengal, for having put down the communal riots. Understandably, they blamed the Indian media for this wrong impression.

It is obvious that communal fanaticism is exploited in Bangladesh as in India, for political purposes. Looking back on our record, particularly of the last two years there is no reason to believe that communalism has of late made greater headway in Bangladesh than in India. Communalism poses the same challenge for the democratic forces in Bangladesh as in India. And also let it be noted that the outburst of communal propaganda and violence in India has its inevitable repercussions in Bangladesh trying to undermine the democratic upsurge there. Undoubtedly, a matter of common concern for democratic forces in both the neighbouring countries.

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East Europe Produces a Very Different Socialism

Bob Dent writes from Budapest

A question being widely asked in post-Cold War Europe is: has socialism really disappeared? The state of politics in Hungary is of particular interest since for some years it was much freer than other East European countries. All six parliamentary parties agree that a different kind of socialism is emerging with social democratic values.

WHILE Eastern European socialism has suffered a knock-out blow in Hungary, some people still cling to their socialist identity. They are helped by the memory that in recent years life in Hungary was always much freer than in the neighbouring countries.

Gyula Thurmer is general secretary of the Workers Party, the successor to the conservative, traditionalist wing of the former ruling Hungarian Socialist Workers Party.

He remains optimistic: "People wanted real changes, but I don't think they are dissatisfied with a collective society. People are tired of a special type of bureaucratic collective society, but most of them are not against collectivism as such, or socialism."

He is not alone. With 54,000 members, the Workers Party is the largest in Hungary. Its electoral performance, however, has been very poor.

The party has no parliamentary representation and at the local elections, although a string of former communist mayors of small villages retained their positions, ironically most stood as independents.

More of a political force is the Hungarian Socialist Party, formed by the reform wing of the old ruling party in late 1989. It provided the members of Hungary's last communist — albeit reform-minded — government before multi-party elections last year.

It has ten per cent of the members of parliament, including several former ministers who remain individually popular, and can command at-

ention and often respect. Its socialism is far removed from what was understood by the term in Hungary over the past four decades.

Laszlo Kovacs, former deputy foreign minister and today a prominent Socialist party MP, says: "For us it means social-democratic values, such as liberty, freedom, social justice, equality of opportunity, solidarity with the poor, solidarity with the handicapped."

These values, in varying degrees, are stressed by all the six parliamentary parties in Hungary today, sometimes with a liberal, sometimes with a nationalist tinge.

The Socialist Party has not been able to claim them for itself, and at the same time it is forever being associated with the "old regime," however reformist its final years.

Kovacs says his party's socialism envisages democracy as something more than simply a multi-party parliamentary sys-

tem. He cites public participation in trade unions, local government, workplaces and schools as examples, but acknowledges the difficulties, given that Hungary has no tradition of a civic society.

Surprisingly, this lack of public involvement — of a wider democracy — is also acknowledged by Gyula Kodolanyi, a founder member of the ruling Hungarian Democratic Forum, State Secretary and political adviser to the Prime Minister. He is one of the most influential of Hungary's behind-the-scenes politicians.

He says: "What you have in Hungary is a political elite which was there for 15 years in opposition, preparing more or less consciously for a takeover. They did not know when it would come, but they were fairly sure it would come some time."

He admits the world elite has a bad ring, but argues that without such a social layer the revolutions in east-central Europe would not have taken place.



MIKLOS HARASZTI
"People don't vote by class"

"I'm not talking about a social class," he adds. "I'm talking about that minority which was able to develop a political consciousness under the conditions of communism."

He acknowledges Hungary's move to a market economy is producing social divisions, but argues that they are not class-based. Rather, they are divisions of age. Pensioners, on the one hand, and young, unskilled workers on the other, are being left behind. They are not the classical divisions which could lead to a revival of socialist thinking.

Miklos Haraszti, a leading MP of the Free Democrats, Hungary's main opposition party, has slightly different view, though his conclusion is the same:

"In post-communist democracies, the typical division is between conservatives and liberals. People vote according to political philosophy and not so-called class positions, nor do I think it necessary, as

many do, that after a while they will change into a class representative."

For him the anti-statist swing has been too strong for Hungary ever to return to a form of socialism. Yet his party, like all the others, recognises that with unemployment an unprecedented 100,000 and inflation running at 30 per cent, something must be done, to protect Hungary's new poor.

This tension between the flight from socialism and the desire to ease social disadvantage produces curious results. Haraszti's own party is an odd mixture of free marketers and social democrats.

The Social Democrats are currently in the ascendancy. Party this is because in opposing the center-right government the party is adopting a center-left position. Party it is because many leading Free Democrats, like Haraszti himself, are, ironically, former dissident Marxists, though today all reject any affiliation with their former beliefs.

Gyula Thurmer, general secretary of the "unreformed" Workers Party, remains unimpressed by the new parties. He regards them all as representatives of the new bourgeois order and is happy to stick to his beliefs. He says: "I'm convinced the idea of socialism is not lost Hungary."

For the time being, however, it seems that history, as the Marxists would say, is not on his side. — GEMINI NEWS.

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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.

To curb corruption

Sir, Allow me firstly to congratulate you on bringing out a fine newspaper seemingly committed to objective reporting and sophisticated articulation. For too long readers in Dhaka and elsewhere had to put up with pathetic construction of the English language and mind-boggling editing in the English dailies. Finally we have a choice. Keep up the good work! Secondly, I think you have correctly set your priorities, as noted in your editorial on corruption, published on March 25. It is imperative that we support the Prime Minister in her effort to address the problems of nation-building

and, as a conscientious citizen, I too pledge my support to fight the pervasive character of corruption in Bangladesh.

I am convinced that if Begum Zia and her government were to punish elements of the past administration (engineers, businessmen, politicians and ministers) who engaged in corruption, she should be able to woo more voters into the political process and return with a comfortable margin to establish positive changes to establish credibility. Begum Zia must act now.

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For a filth-free city

Sir, The population of Dhaka has greatly increased to the horror of its dwellers. New-comers have settled in the old as well as the new part of the city multiplying the miseries of the city dwellers.

Most of the thoroughfares remain without repair for quite a long time while a good number of them are regularly used as dumping grounds of garbage causing enormous health hazards for the tax payers.

Even in the residential areas, unscrupulous people are seen blocking the streets with heaps of dirt and filth rendering them unworthy of use by the pedestrians as well as vehicular traffic. The bad odour coming out of the heaped garbage pollutes the environment and people fall easy victim to various airborne diseases. Since independence, very little has been progressed to remove this standing

nuisance in many an area.

It can be stated that germs of diseases bred in the filth and garbage are scattered by gusts of wind and cause infection. The irony is that sweepers on the pay roll of the Municipal Corporation seem to neglect duties much. It is equally regrettable that the ward inspectors appointed by the said Corporation hardly pay proper attention to the problem. As such, the situation aggravates.

Most of the city drains remain blocked with mud and filth. This hampers easy disposal of waste water. The Municipal authority should launch a cleanliness drive every week in order that the city is kept tidy and clean.

Md. Atiqul Karim
Zigatala, Dhaka.

Polls and democracy

Sir, The franchise Bangladeshis exercised lately under a caretaker

government (upon resignation of "autocratic regime") has constituted 5th Parliament in order to form 12th government in the country's 20-year history.

Of the five elections, this one recorded highest voter turnout (over 70%) and the most number of candidates (over 2700) to represent 300 constituencies to 330-member National Assembly (30 seats are reserved for women members). For authentication, polling was inspected by a number of foreign observers including Commonwealth Observers Group, British Parliamentary Delegations, Japanese Diet Observers Group, SAARC non-Government Observers Group, and NGOs.

Foreign observers expressed their positive impressions over the polling procedure stating "this was an exemplary election, a free and fair exercise of franchise by people of

Bangladesh," "a notably calm and peaceful atmosphere, orderly and meticulous procedure voting," "the achievement was a triumph for people of Bangladesh" etc. Yet, a number of disappointed candidates reacted with allegations of misdeeds in the polls. Besides, the fact that persons "facing trial for crimes" became candidates for membership to state legislature may be mind-boggling for a citizen.

An elector may wonder why foreign or even UN observers are necessary for a sovereign state. Nevertheless, mere polling for a democratic system may not justify a democrat's rights, should the meaning and practice of democracy as a way-of-life lack significance and sanctity in a country with over 75% functionally illiterate people.

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