

"Recast the Media" — a Challenge Posed by Khaleda Zia

White Paper or Agenda for the Future

In a developing country, a new administration feels the obligation to tell the people as to what had gone wrong during the previous government, in fields ranging from economic development to education, from social welfare to foreign relations. By doing so, the new administration puts its own responsibilities in the right perspective. However, some would say that this exercise also serves to caution people against harbouring any illusion about what the new administration can do during its tenure in office. Cynics would go further and claim that this is also meant to prepare people in advance against any future disappointment.

However, in Bangladesh, this exercise of informing people of the misdeeds of the Ershad regime, in which Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has been playing a key role, has an additional significance. What we have seen in our country is not just a change of administrations, but a qualitative transformation, from authoritarianism to democracy. In this context, the Prime Minister rightly feels an obligation, political and moral, to alert our people about the danger of authoritarianism and to ask them to remain on guard against its revival, in any shape or form.

So, on this subject, we go along with Begum Khaleda Zia a long way. However, we believe that at some point, the Prime Minister must strike a balance between assessing the failures — let's say, misdeeds — of the ousted regime and looking forward to the future with a new zeal. We humbly submit to the Prime Minister: That point has been reached.

In other words, we have reached the stage when, instead of harping on the past, the country, especially the administration, should see what lies ahead and how we should go about in tackling the manifold problems facing the nation. This is a gigantic task. It calls for the fullest attention and the maximum mobilisation of energies of all our ministries, autonomous bodies and statutory organisations.

In her address to senior officials of the administration on Thursday, the Prime Minister has sought to offer her vision for the future. However, in what is otherwise a forward-looking speech, Begum Khaleda Zia has asked all the ministries to publish white papers "so that people could understand the exact condition of the national economy when the new government took over." It is hard to say how much time and energies of various ministries this task will involve, which, we believe, should be fully utilised in future planning. Again, if the Prime Minister is primarily concerned about the situation in the economy at the time of the change of regime, she has the report of the Task Force, carried out by the interim caretaker administration, under the able guidance of Prof. Rehman Sobhan. It is just possible that the Prime Minister has not been briefed on the report of the Task Force. When she knows more about it, she may well change her mind on the question of the white paper and, instead, instruct her administration to work on the agenda for the future.

Drugs and the Third World

Khun Sa is a happy man these days. Territory controlled by this warlord in Shan state of Burma is expected to yield a bumper harvest of opium this year. The opium will then be taken to secret laboratories spread across the borders of Burma, Thailand and Laos, to be processed into heroin. From there, the deadly stuff will hit the streets, mainly in the First World but also in the Third, gratifying addicts and deepening social degeneration all over the world.

Heroin, along with its less potent cousins cocaine and marijuana, today carry a financial clout comparable to that of oil in the 1970s. It is not for nothing have people like Khun Sa acquired the power they have. He commands a fully-fledged army to augment as well as protect his financial power provided by the heroin trade. Burmese authorities have spared no effort to destroy his illegal kingdom surrounded by unfriendly mountains. But Khun Sa continues to thrive.

Khun Sa, however, is not a lone ranger. His equivalents can be found along the Hindu Kush in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and in the jungles of South America. Because of the illegal status of narcotics, shadowy power-structures parallel to state authority have developed in producer areas. Over the years, it has become progressively more difficult to combat the trade at the source. The "bud" has become a sturdy stem, refusing to be nipped.

The United States and Western Europe, by far the world's most lucrative drug markets, have periodically put pressure on source countries to stop the supply of narcotics. Last year the US even sent an aircraft carrier steaming into Colombian territorial waters, ostensibly to intercept drug-ferrying planes and boats.

This policy ignores the limited resources available to small Third World states to combat drug cartels with world-wide networks. Not enough consideration has been to the position of the peasants who grow coca or poppies either. Colombian coffee producers, for instance, have to struggle in a world market where the price of, and demand for, the product fluctuate alarmingly; coca planters on the other hand, have a guaranteed market and an upwardly-mobile price. Turning their land over to non-narcotic products without market guarantees could spell loss of livelihood. No government should be expected to pursue such a policy.

Before blasting the Khun Sas of this wretched world, one should critically consider the demand side of the problem. It is principally because narcotics fetch such a high price on the streets of New York or London, that drug lords have become such powerful figures. The production of drugs in the Third World is merely responding to demand in the First. Is it not the duty of the Western governments to put their own house in order first? While the aircraft carrier was manoeuvring off Colombia, we did not see any massive military operation in Miami to arrest smugglers and pushers. It is a clear case of putting the cart before the horse, and it will get nowhere. So long as Western countries remain incapable of reducing demand at home, Khun Sa will continue to be a happy man.

PRIME Minister Begum Khaleda Zia has thrown a challenge at her own Ministry of Information. "Mass media will be recast," she told a meeting of officials last week.

The Prime Minister's wide-ranging address offered a vision for the future of the press and the TV/Radio, a future that, we hope, will be built on solid foundation and help us in meeting the challenges in the twenty-first century.

Begum Zia has given the Ministry a broad outline of the changes she would like to see in this field. It is now for her officials to put her ideas within a framework and start translating them into reality. Herein lies the challenge for the Ministry which, significantly enough, has been placed under the care of the Prime Minister herself.

Of course, the work of "recasting" the mass media does not lie with the Ministry alone. The print media which covers a large number of dailies and a larger number of periodicals are in the private sector. The independence of the print media will be scrupulously safeguarded, so we are told, and it should be the press itself which must set its own house in order. In the process, it must strengthen the Press Council, develop its own self-regulatory code of conduct, introduce modern management techniques, promote better work environment and, above all, place the relationship between the management and journalists on a new basis of partnership.

In this exercise, the role of the Ministry of Information should be that of a watchdog, except when it comes to assisting the press, especially the community newspapers. In strengthening its financial base. This remains the subject of a separate article in this series.

However, in a developing country like Bangladesh, the Ministry of Information or, better still, an autonomous advisory body set up by the authorities, must have a meaningful relationship with the privately-owned press to promote the dissemination of development-oriented information, in line with the best journalistic standards.

For the Ministry of Information, the real challenge lies with the work of "recasting" of the electronic media, particularly of the Bangladesh Television (BTV).

Problems and their possible remedies facing BTV may be examined at three different but inter-related levels: Immediate, medium-term and long-term. There should be no ad hoc decisions.

This means that while BTV should immediately start recasting its programmes, in format and in contents, in style and in presentation, the formulation of a new Broadcasting Code of Conduct which would incorporate intellectual freedom, within limits of reason and logic, for all broadcasters and performers should obviously form part of the medium-term plan.

Whether or not Bangladesh should have a privately-owned second TV station, as distinct from a second channel for BTV and how and when we should turn BTV into a free, autonomous and self-governing institution are

issues for a long-term study which, we hope, will be a major topic for public discussion and a full parliamentary debate.

The way the authorities handle the immediate, short-term issues, namely in recasting the TV's programmes and format, will largely decide how they should move into the medium and long-term phases, with what kind of confidence and credibility and, indeed, with what degree of public goodwill. In short, what the millions of viewers see on their TV screen now, especially in the news coverage, and what they may see in days and weeks to come will be most crucial in moulding the public thinking on the government's approach to the electronic media.

Here, there is some cause of concern, some ground for disappointment.

Most viewers would say that news presentation still largely follows the same format and style as we had been used to (which had

Agricultural University in Mymensingh to talk to a group of students on how they viewed the polls?

Indeed, the trouble with the election coverage of the BTV was that it almost wholly centred on the activities of Begum Khaleda Zia, Sheikh Hasina and a few other leaders and almost totally ignored the common people, even the candidates, the real heroes of the country's freest election in a decade. The coverage also failed to educate the people on the meaning and significance of this magnificent exercise in democracy. Not surprisingly, just to give a couple of examples, it could not plan educational programmes focusing on the differences between an authoritarian regime and a democratic setup or between the presidential system and a parliamentary rule.

Herein lies a dismal failure of the interim caretaker government of Justice Shahabuddin. New, BTV seems all set to bring in the same

administration, especially of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia?

Sooner or later, we should have answers to these — and other — questions.

However, assuming that BTV discards its established approach and cuts out certain types of activities from its news coverage, activities which are essentially internal functions of the administration, what kind of exposure should the television give to the Prime Minister?

This has to be carefully planned. In doing so, the media — or the TV — should avoid any attempt to change or alter the prevailing image of Begum Khaleda Zia.

As we all know, Begum Zia's image is one of a determined lady who has played the key role in toppling a discredited regime through her sheer unflinching dedication to democracy. At committee meetings, she is said to be assertive but soft-spoken. Although she can be withdrawn or a little aloof, it is said that she remains in control of the situation she is in. It is a good image that goes well with her personality.

There should be no question of changing the image or of superimposing a new one on the Prime Minister's present personality.

This being the case, this writer would like to see the Prime Minister in a certain type of programmes which bring out the best in her personality, rather than in situations which put her at a disadvantage.

This writer would like to see Begum Khaleda Zia in somewhat informal settings, say, in small weekly press conferences with a group of three or four senior journalists, at group meetings with writers and intellectuals, listening rather than talking, or with school children.

At the risk of being misunderstood, this writer would not like to see her too much on TV. On the other hand, he would like to hear more about her activities, through the print media and the TV news, and be sure that she is in charge.

Here, there is much to learn from the working style of one of the greatest leaders of Asia, President Suharto of Indonesia. When he took over the presidency of his country in 1969 from a flamboyant media-conscious Sukarno, the press called him the reluctant president, which was the title of a book on the new leader. He was withdrawn, aloof and indifferent to undue media exposure. Now, more than two decades later, Suharto remains the same withdrawn but determined personality, and, during this period, he has turned his country into one of the most powerful nations of Asia. Begum Zia needs no example to follow. She must remain herself. TV or no TV, just as President Suharto has remained himself for over two decades.

This is the first article of The Daily Star series on the media in Bangladesh. Other staff members of the paper who will write in the series include Rezauddin Ahmed and Amanullah Kabir who are President and General Secretary respectively of Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists, and Mahfuz Anam. The paper also welcomes contributions on the subject from its readers.

AT HOME AND ABROAD

S. M. Ali

bored us beyond all limits of patience) during the regime of Hussain Mohammad Ershad.

The elimination of all activities of the ousted president as well as of Roushan Ershad from the TV news immediately created a time-gap which was partly filled by the activities of the Acting President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed and, in a matter of days, by the coverage of the election campaigns of major political parties. Some days, BTV was obliged to use far too many foreign reports to fill the time — the Gulf conflict eventually came as a saviour — which only showed how ill-equipped BTV is in reporting what goes on in the country, at the level of our common people, outside the activities of the administration in the capital.

Judging by the fact that BTV never had much experience in providing a "balanced" political coverage, it did well in reporting the election campaigns of the major parties, mainly the speeches of the leaders and the mass rallies, but it was all extremely superficial and unimaginative. Or did we miss a panel discussion among a group of independent experts on the significance of the polls and prospects of various parties, a couple of hard-hitting interviews with secretary generals of the major parties (assuming the top leaders declined BTV's invitation) or a debate on the election manifestoes? Is it possible that we had mistakenly switched off the set when BTV went to an outlying town to report on its preparation for the election or when it visited, say, the

superficial, unimaginative and stereotyped approach to its coverage of the activities of the new government, an approach that may well remind many viewers of the days of Ershad, although at the moment, one major difference is the inclusion of some coverage of Sheikh Hasina, other political leaders and their parties.

Judging by early indications, the approach is largely personality-oriented and in maintaining this approach, the camera focuses on activities which should not be meant for public consumption, certainly not for television presentation, such as cabinet meetings and conferences with high officials. When asked why these activities which never figure in the TV news in any other Asian country, are so religiously covered by BTV, an aide to Ershad had once told the writer that it was all part of the image-building exercise for the ousted president. After a while, BTV bosses could no longer see the line between a legitimate television coverage of Ershad and one that obliged viewers to switch off the set.

It is premature to say that BTV has bungled its coverage of the activities of the new government, especially of the Prime Minister. In the process of settling down, a new administration should certainly expect some extra coverage in the media as a whole of its day-to-day activities.

The question is, has BTV worked out its strategy? Has it got a sense of direction as to how it should cover the activities of the

Things Fall Apart In Somalia — Now Who Rules?

Leo Odera Omolo writes from Nairobi

THE once-proud Republic of Somalia in the Horn of Africa is facing dismemberment by clans warring groups which ousted Mohammed Siad Barre as president at the end of January.

Refugees are still trekking in their thousands across the frontier into Kenya in search of peace. About 50,000 are now living in several parts of Kenya.

Many weeks after Barre abandoned his hideout bunker in the capital, Mogadishu, and escaped in a convoy to the southern port of Kismayu no one knows which of the three clan-based armed movements is actually ruling the country.

The United Somalia Front (USF) controls Mogadishu and its environs and has formed an interim government under former hotelier Ali Mahdi Mohammed. It is said not to be getting on well with the other two main armed groups, the Somali National Movement (SNM) and the Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM).

Attempts to form a government of national unity have failed and intermittent fighting between the three groups is reported.

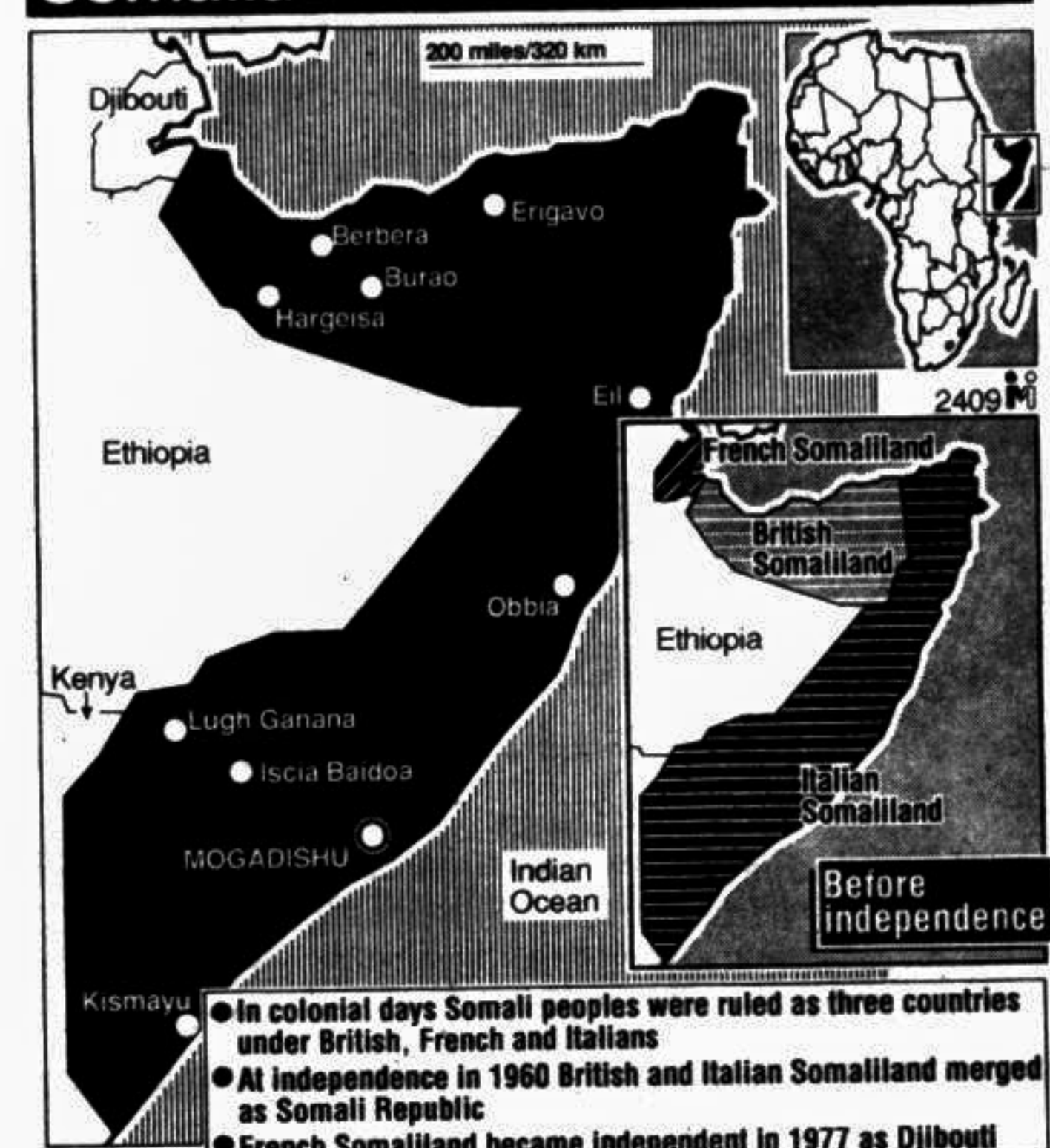
Meantime, Barre, whose whereabouts are unknown, is said to be mustering his forces for a bid to regain power. Loyal troops across the country are believed to number 30,000.

With attention diverted to the Gulf, the outside world is paying little attention to the suffering of the Somali people. Refugees tell of atrocities committed by all three armed movements and Barre's disjointed forces.

A meeting of foreign ministers of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) held in Addis Ababa at the end of February virtually ignored the problem, although Somalia has always been a staunch OAU supporter.

Ministers simply dismissed the situation as "very confusing."

Somalia



They could not make out who was running the country and the interim government did not send a delegation.

The ministers stuck to the OAU charter which forbids interference in the internal affairs of member states, although a couple of months earlier they had readily sanctioned the intervention in Liberia of the forces of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Moderate estimates give the number of displaced people in

Somalia in need of food and shelter to be about two million. The United Nations has appealed for emergency aid, saying that Somalia's need should not be forgotten because of what is happening in the Gulf.

Trouble started in Somalia three years ago. Barre, who had ruled the country with an iron fist for 21 years, was accused of having surrounded himself with close relatives and advisers from his own Morehain clan to the annoyance of other major clans.

Members of the Hawiye clan formed an armed clandestine movement in Central Somalia and around Mogadishu. At the same time the Hawiye-based United Somalia Congress launched armed attacks on government installations in and around the capital.

The SNM, consisting of members of the Ogaden clan, launched similar attacks in the north while the SPM, comprising members of the Isaaq clan, attacked from the south and west.

The three drove Barre's forces out from all sides and cornered him in the capital. A fierce battle raged for months and caused the deaths of thousands of soldiers and civilians.

Another East African refugee problem — that of the people who fled, some long ago, from Rwanda — has moved towards a solution as a result of a regional summit meeting held in Dar es Salaam.

It was agreed that the Rwandan government must now take back those of its nationals who want to return and pardon the rebels who invaded Rwanda last year.

Those who do not want to go can stay wherever they are and should be given citizenship by the host countries. Rwanda had all along refused to take them back on the grounds that the country was overpopulated.

The invasion took place across the border from Uganda last October. It was quickly defeated, but not before the capital, Kigali, had almost fallen to the rebels.

President Yoweri Museveni

of Uganda, who is currently chairman of the OAU, attended the Dar summit together with Presidents Ali Mwinyi of Tanzania, Pierre Buyoya of Burundi, and Juvenal Habyarimana of Rwanda, and Zairean Prime Minister Lunda Bululu. Kenya stayed away because it is quarrelling with Uganda over allegations that it has helped train anti-Kenya insurgents with Libyan assistance.

Fear persists that the root cause of the Rwandan refugee problem lingers because of the animosity between the ruling majority Hutu and the former feudal rulers and minority Tutsi.

Rwanda has agreed to offer a general amnesty to the rebels, but at the Dar summit it refused to agree to sign a

ceasefire with the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). Rwanda insists that Uganda must also sign the ceasefire and Zaire was asked to try to achieve agreement between Rwanda and the rebels.

Before the Dar summit Museveni and Habyarimana met in Zanzibar with OAU Secretary-General Salim Ahmed Salim and a representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Museveni promised to persuade the Rwandese rebels not to do any more fighting.

Hundreds of thousands of Rwandese fled or were killed in 1959 following a tribal conflict and another in 1988 exacerbated the problem. Whether these refugees will now take up Rwanda's offer to receive them back remains to be seen since they still fear persecution once they return home.

LEO ODERA OMOLO is a Kenyan journalist who is also a farmer and author of children's books. He operates mostly in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania but has travelled extensively throughout Africa.

OPINION In Defence of Sheikh Hasina

In his otherwise excellent analysis of the post-election scene in Bangladesh, Indian columnist, Nikhil Chakravarty has been less than fair to Sheikh Hasina Wajed, the President of Awami League (AL) in his article published on Saturday, in The Daily Star. During the election campaign, her style of presenting her party's case to the nation suffered from many flaws — a touch of arrogance and complacency being the two obvious ones — and, when poll results were out, she adopted a negative attitude towards the formation of the government of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) which has been widely criticised by many in this country.

However, it is grossly unfair for Mr Chakravarty to say, "The party President Sheikh Hasina, 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 her being her father's daughter and nothing more, never bothered to work collectively." Then, the journalist suggests that her statement of the poll results was an "exclusive product of her own unbalanced state of mind without the least consultations with senior colleagues in the party."

It is hard to say that Hasina issued the controversial statement entirely on her own.

without the agreement of, say, president member Abdus Samad Azad or the Secretary General, Sajeda Chowdhury. The statement conformed to Hasina's political strategy of creating a situation in which the BNP unequivocally accepts the parliamentary system. The strategy might be all wrong, but it is absurd to describe her statement as a "product of an unbalanced state of mind."

These criticisms obscure the fact that when Sheikh Hasina returned to Dhaka, persuaded by a number of AL leaders like Dr Kamal Hossain and Zohra Tajuddin, the morale inside the organisation was all-time low. Indeed, she used her status as the daughter of Bangabandhu to bring about a change in the situation. But she also worked hard and travelled extensively, which few other AL leaders have done. At this stage, she should certainly promote the concept of collective leadership and accept different viewpoints. The question is, is there an alternative leader in sight? Since the answer to the question still remains in the negative, the AL has no choice but to let Hasina carry on. Let us offer her constructive criticisms. Let her listen, instead of talking too much. But let us not knock her down in the way Mr Chakravarty has done in his commentary.

A Neutral Observer Dhaka

To the Editor...

BKSP and transport

Sir, It is good to know that Bangladesh can now afford to hold international sports events at the new BKSP indoor sports gymnasium at Savar.

My school-boy son had been pressing me to take him there to watch the international table tennis stars playing in the Pepsi tournament. As an ex-sportsman, I would also like to visit the site to watch national and international matches now and then.

But the problem appears to be lack of proper public transport service: regular,

fast, and cheap. Regular might be uneconomic, but adhoc shuttle services could be arranged for the public/spectators during international meets.

One could go there from Dhaka city using the existing public bus services; but the problem is returning late in the evening after the top matches. It is not clear how the 3000 seats are planned to be filled up with the spectators waiting in Dhaka!

It is therefore suggested that the interested and relevant agencies concerned could get together and arrange a pool of shuttle

transport service for the public during important occasions. A Sports Fan Dhaka.

Book fair

Sir, A book fair organised by the Islamic Foundation is on from the 19th of February and will conclude on the 13th of April.

According to a recent news item, the crowd at the book fair is not very large. This according to some, is due to the heat of summer. The other reason for low sale of books could be the lack of knowledge

about the book fair. However, the Holy Books are selling quite high.

We do hope, that the heat is the cause and nothing else, for we would not want anyone to lose interest in reading and therefore in books. For if as a nation we do lose interest in reading, our standard will go down. It is the cultivation of our intellectual ability that we are able to stand up as a nation, proudly in front of others. So let us remember this.

Reading is important and will continue to be so. Rehana Yasmin Bashabo, Dhaka.