

Insuring Against Avoidable Death

The task at hand is to see that the survivors of April 29 survive — all of them. That task we have already failed by a cruel measure of ineptitude. We couldn't reach very many of them till after the tenth day of the watery holocaust. It is not clear how many were lost during the time civilisation took to get to those islands. Hunger and diarrhoea, insanitation and exposure must have had already taken a secondary toll and one cannot be too sure that the process would stop as soon as tons of grains and heaps of clothes arrive on the desolate spots.

The government channels should by now have been established in a very exhaustive way. And relief from a multitude of sources are surely finding their way not only to wayside crowds but also to the deep interior. At this point the task is one of rehabilitation. We are not as yet well informed of how the government is going about this business. The promised 'master plan for rehabilitation' has yet to materialise. No one indeed expected from the government such a document on the second week of the disaster — a document into which years of exertions should have gone for it to be meaningful and effective. One only wanted the government — as also all other agencies and institutions — to go help the survivors in their efforts to build a shelter anew and get started in life once again. Many of the survivors are already on the job. And all of the rest will also have been made to get to work but for the sweet siren song of the arriving relief train. However, there already is a feeling that once the miracle-workers from the New World have got down to business, there will be little left for us to worry our heads off. That can prove a good deal illusory in spite of the good Samaritans doing a wonderful job of their good turn.

But this rehabilitation phase will be over in a matter of months and things would somehow get sorted out with or without help from the national or international governments. But the third and final phase of the job at hand may not even be effectively engaged, not to say completed, in a year or two. And this final phase is by far the most important one having an impact far into the future on the life and living of the tens of millions that will continue to people the coastal region.

This all important task is insuring the coastal people against being killed by the thousands in elemental strikes. Three hundred cyclone-shelters and a hundred and odd earthen mounds at some places called the Mujib-killa are credited to have saved the life of more than three lakh people in spite of being in a very bad state of decrepitude. It can only be a matter of course that the full original complement of 3000 such life-savers would be down there in the coming years. When the air heavy with talks of a thousand crore here and another thousand crore there — those still-and-platform things would not present a bill fatter than a hundred to two hundred crore Taka. But we must not as such think that with the shelters and mounds on the appropriate sites, we need not go looking for a hundred other ways of pre-empting cyclone and tidal bore death. Indeed the jolt to the national psyche could well have unplugged a fountainhead of ideas and innovations directed towards that goal. It is in that light we want to record our appreciation of the ideas put forward in a press conference on Sunday by Mr M. A. Mohaimen.

Mr Mohaimen, on the whole proposes three complementary things. A strong wooden pillar, 20-meter high, and having life buoys around it — in every homestead. A dighi-sized pond with very high banks all around to provide shelter to animals as also people and to keep the fresh sweet-water in it safe from the rushing sea — for every locality. A very big wide-bellied earthen jar for each family, to be placed firmly into the soil, for keeping grains and other necessities safe from the surging waters. The beauty of his suggestions lies in the fact that the rather inexpensive devices would be, unlike the cyclone shelters, within the last-minute reach of even the straggling children and the old ones.

Let Mr Mohaimen's initiative and enthusiasm — after all he is neither a professional builder nor an expert in coastal protection engineering — occasion a veritable flood of ideas on the theme. And let it shame our scientists and engineers into coming forward with the most effective and realisable of devices for saving the coastal people from very much avoidable death.

An Ominous Beginning

It is too early to say what the outcome of the Indian election will be. But it can be said definitely at this stage, that it has gotten off to a rather bad start. As reported in the press, on the very first day a total of 63 people lost their lives while participating in an exercise which is a part of their basic rights — to be able to vote freely.

Election violence has been a part of our life in South Asia. But it has seldom been on a scale and intensity that has been evident on the first day of the Indian election. The seed of this violence was being sown for a long time. It is for the first time that a party was taking part in an Indian election whose strategy was: inflict fear upon the minority community and pander to the rising religious fundamentalism of the majority. In fact the idea is that the more venom and hatred they can spread the more votes they are likely to get. This has divided the Indian population in communal lines as never before.

As has been estimated on the first day, the turnout has been around 52 per cent only, far lower than in the previous elections. After the violence of Monday it can easily be imagined that turnout in the two days that are left may be even lower. In such a case the result of the election may become the verdict of only those who will have muscle power to go to the polling centres (or even capture them) and not be reflective of views of those who, out of fear for their lives, will not dare to go out of their homes to vote. Such an eventuality must be prevented otherwise democracy will lose whatever meaning it still has for the masses — especially the minorities.

It is known that elaborate measures were taken to curb violence during the polling. But as it has been revealed the measures were not adequate. For the two days of polling that is still left, we hope that the Election Commission will spare no efforts to further strengthen the security measures so that poll violence can be kept to a minimum and voters feel confident enough to go out to exercise their democratic right.

If the importance of a parliament is measured by the number of citizens who laid down their lives to establish it, then ours should rank among the top, anywhere in the world. It was a parliament created through years of sacrifice and relentless struggle, whose first session concluded on 15 May last. So what do we have to show the people as the achievements of a parliament that took so much of giving, by so many, over such a long time (with apology to Churchill) in bringing it about.

In terms of form, a lot. In terms of substance,.... judgement will have to wait. We have of course learnt what is a point of order (an excuse to speak and say anything); what is a point of personal explanation (a chance to make personal attacks); how to put questions to as many ministers on as many subjects, so that one's name is all over the place whenever there is a Q & A session (an independent MP surpassed all in this art); and other rules of the game (and game it was for some).

The first session of the post-autocracy parliament covered a 41-day period, consisting of 22 working days, making for a total of 29 sittings. During this time 18 bills were legislated and three withdrawn.

During the same period we heard, sometimes eloquent, more often emotional, occasionally out of context and on some occasions ludicrous speeches, during the three general discussions that were held on the jail situation, the natural calamity and the Acting President's address.

The first session also saw three walkouts by the opposition (not counting the five or so by Jatiya Party), the two longer ones of which could easily have been avoided, saving more than eight valuable working hours of the Parliament. Considering everything, it was a GOOD START.

The performances by the Speaker and his Deputy were impressive. The Speaker — a lawyer of repute, a politician of stature and a parliamentarian of experience — Abdur Rahman Bishwas, had excellent rapport with members of both the Treasury and the Opposition benches. He commanded a

THE Gulf war and Japan's recent moves to shore up its military posture have revived insecurities and bitter memories in South-east Asia, but apparently not enough to provide a fillip to the search for a regional defence initiative in the region.

At the moment, it would appear only the Philippines is serious about an issue the Association of South-east Asian Nations (Asian) of Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Brunei and the Philippines can ill-afford to ignore.

Witness Philippine Defence Secretary Fidel Ramos' energetic forays to a succession of Asian capitals in search of that common defence denominator.

Ramos has reason to be worried. The Armed forces of the Philippines are reckoned to be among the weakest in ASEAN. With the eventual withdrawal of the United States from its bases there, Manila is keen that a regional security arrangements be in place before that happens.

Manila is hosting a regional security conference in June, where security experts from ASEAN as well as the United States, China, Japan, Australia,

PARLIAMENT'S FIRST SESSION

A Good Start

great deal of respect among the MPs as a result of his long association with mass movements. His personal acquaintance with most of the senior members of the House served him well in steering the deliberations through difficult situations.

Sheikh Razaque Ali was sharp, witty and at times harsh. But the members took his stern rulings well and complimented him for his toughness. Together they made a good team. It is sad that their election was not unanimous and should have come about through voting. It was a digression from tradition and has set a bad precedent. It gave a confrontational tone to the proceeding from the very outset.

Of the 18 bills that were passed, only about four or five were of much importance. The rest dealt with routine legislative matters. Among the important ones, the following may be mentioned. First, the Bank and Companies Bill. This Bill was meant to regularise the anomalous situation existing between nationalised and

private banks and companies. It provided for a minimum reserve of seven per cent for banks; restricted bank director's term to a maximum of two; and took other measures that are expected to discipline the financial sector of our economy.

The Premises Rent Control Bill is meant to systematise rights of both the landlord and the tenant. The Printing Press and Publication Bill attempts

wrong doers of the autocratic regime. It is expected to be totally done away with when the present need is over. That we will have to wait and see. Through the amendments it has incorporated all the changes brought about by the Acting President through earlier ordinances. These changes mostly dealt with freedom of the press. As it stands now only Section 3 of the Act, which empowers the govern-

ment to detain any person without showing any cause for a period of 120 days, invokes the fears of the original Act. This provision is in direct contravention to the fundamental rights to which this government is fully committed.

The irony is that it was BNP which was most vocal in denouncing the SPA and making a categorical election pledge about removing it. The AL lost some public support by hedging on the issue, giving rise to a suspicion in some minds that

The Third View by Mahfuz Anam

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they will retain the Act if they come to power. It is heartening that AL now has changed their position and has come out openly in favour of SPA's total abolition. But, now BNP appears to be hedging. It is hoped that the party will fulfil its election pledge and do away with this hated Act at the earliest opportunity.

It is a pity that much of the legislations passed by the new parliament have gone unnoticed both by the media and by the public. It was primarily due to the nation's attention getting diverted to the emergency caused by the natural disaster in the coastal areas. Not only the media and the public, the law makers themselves were preoccupied with other urgent issues relating to relief matters. Some of the bills could have used a bit more discussion and improvement before they were passed.

Our parliamentarians cannot escape the criticism that their overall standard of debates was low. It was the expectation of the people that a parliament whose genesis was so historic and whose creation entailed so much struggle and sacrifice, would produce a more serious and matured group of law makers. After all, these members have been chosen by the people in one of the most authentic election ever, with all the moral obligations and political strength that winning such an election brings with it. The fact that this parliament gathers within its fold the genuine representatives of the people, gives it a special status and the members, a special prestige. They must live up to that status and continue to deserve that prestige through their words, deeds, attachments to ethics, scrupulous adherence to parliamentary practices and personal behaviour in and outside the parliament.

Brief comments about the two leaders. Sheikh Hasina, who began with an abrasive demeanor, overcame much of

her impetuosity and ended the session with some degree of her prestige as the Leader of the Opposition restored.

Begum Zia, as the Leader of the House appeared a bit unsure at the outset, but learnt quickly on the job and gave some very convincing performances as the House's unquestioned leader. But later she removed herself from the scene — literally — leaving the House, in some instances, drifting.

This forces me to raise a very pertinent question. Do our leaders of the House and that of the Opposition have to retain all their positions, however unwieldy it becomes. Tradition has been that the leader of the party and the leaders of the parliamentary party are different people. For Awami League when Bangabandhu became the Prime Minister it was Maulana Tarkabagish first, and then Mr. Quamruzzaman who were the party leaders. Head of the government and the chief of the party have never been combined in the same person. It is only recently that this tradition has not been followed.

We have seen in the last parliamentary session, the Prime Minister was just too busy to pay due attention to the affairs of the House. As we have it now Begum Zia is the chief of BNP, Leader of the House and the Head of the Government. Sheikh Hasina is the chief of AL and Leader of the Opposition. Such concentration of power is unhealthy, impractical and not conducive for the development of democratic spirit and practice. I raise this issue in the firm belief that both the leaders, who have done so much to establish democracy and for ensuring freedom for the people, will consider this question seriously and will not hesitate to take necessary steps to strengthen the process of democratic institution building, at whose apex lies our Parliament.

[End of first instalment]

In the concluding part the author will deal with the issue of the form of government as debated in the parliament.



South-east Asia

Defence Pact a Non-starter?

Surya Gangadharan writes from Singapore

Differing strategic objectives have impeded attempts to create regional defence arrangements in the South-east Asian region.

Canada and South Korea are expected.

Philippine National Security adviser Rafael Iletto said recently South-east Asian nations should consider a regional security alliance, possibly including Indochina, if the United States withdraws from its bases in the Philippines.

No country is strong enough to stand by itself, it has to create regional organisations, said Iletto.

"Asean will be ready in a year to know what it wants," promised Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Raul Manglapus.

Consistent with the tendency among Asean countries to look to Western powers — including the United States, Britain and Australia — for security, Manila is clearly hoping that the United States will stay on as the 'benevolent underwriter' of security arrangements.

There is support from

Singapore on that. The island republic is allowing US aircraft and ships access to its military facilities under an agreement signed with the United States last year. On a visit to Manila last week, Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong reiterated Singapore's position that present security arrangements with the US presence in the Philippines have been beneficial for the region and should continue "for as long as possible."

Elsewhere in Asean, strategic perceptions differ. The Indonesians have shown different inclinations at various times. Indonesia has long opposed the presence of foreign bases in the region though it

did not react strongly to Singapore's decision to offer increased base facilities to the United States.

Indonesia has maintained that Asean should stick to being an economic and social grouping and not form a military pact.

"What we want to avoid is Asean becoming... a defence organisation. Asean should remain true to its essence and that is economic, cultural and even now political cooperation, but not a defence pact," Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas told reporters in Jakarta recently.

Last September, former Foreign Minister Mochtar Kusuma-atmadja urged that

Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia come together in a three-power defence arrangement. But he stipulated that the Five Powers Defence Alliance (FPDA), which groups Britain, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia and New Zealand, be phased out.

This appears to conflict with Jakarta's oft-stated position that defence cooperation should not develop into a pact.

Analysts are inclined to believe that the 'three-power arrangement' proposal was trial balloon, to gauge reactions in Asean.

Suspensions about Indonesia's remain strong in the region, said one analyst. "Sukarno's konfrontasi in the early 1960s has not disappeared from memory," he said.

Malaysia is committed to the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (Zopfan) concept for Asean, and the withdrawal of foreign bases.

But for all its anti-colonial international stance, Malaysia

has shown no signs of wanting to sever links with FPDA. It also provides facilities for the Australian Air Force at Butterworth air base.

Oddly enough, Malaysia sees no necessity for closer military links with its own Asean partners.

"There is no pressing need for a defence pact as enough cooperation and understanding exist among them (the Asean countries)," observed Defence Minister Tengku Ahmed Rithauddeen recently.

Thailand appears to be batting on a different wicket. Former Prime Minister Chatichai Choonavan's single-minded pursuit of national interest has seen Thailand move even farther from Asean's wobbly unity — towards Indochina.

There are some who see in Japan's decision to beef up its military posture an opportunity for Asean to get its security act together, using China as a counterbalance to Japan.

But the Tiananmen crackdown is unlikely to inspire much confidence in China. Analysts say the preference to look outside for greater security — in this case, the United States — would continue.

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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.

Defaulters

Sir, My attention has been drawn to the list of defaulters published in some local dailies in their issue of 18th May, given by Bangladesh Bank, Banking Department, Dhaka.

Default takes place when the amount owed is not reimbursed to the bank in time agreed upon. Then the lending bank starts negotiations with the defaulting party and tries to find some way by rescheduling payment terms. Whilst these negotiations are taking place and whilst the amount has not been fully paid even though the reschedule of debt payment has been agreed upon, the party who owes the amount is not a defaulter.

It is upto the lending bank to take action against the party in a court of law and put the party into compulsory liquidation to recover the loan in the event no subsequent agreement can be made to recover the loan.

This matter is strictly between the lending bank and the borrower and the Bangladesh Bank has exceeded its authority by divulging such parties' names

who have not repaid their loans calling them as defaulters. The information which was given is in strictest confidence relating to an account with the banker by the borrower.

The Bangladesh Bank has, it appears, placed itself in a position where both the lender and the borrower jointly or singly can seek redress in a court of law as such publicity has tarnished the banker's name as one who has not protected the loan and not taken timely action against the so called defaulter. It has tarnished the name of the borrower because he has not refused to pay the loan and was under negotiation to reschedule the payment. In the event the borrower wishes to dispose of his asset his offer will be treated as if he is a seller in distress and is unlikely to get a fair market price for his assets.

Mirza Mehdy Ispahani
Chairman, M.M. Ispahani Ltd.

Doctors

Sir, A very interesting item which appeared in one of the newspapers caught my attention recently. The article was

about doctors themselves being quite careless about the very advice they give out to their patients.

The most contrasting part is that, according to the report quoted in the specific article, medical practitioners have a record of twice as many deaths from road accidents than the general public and three times higher suicide rates. Cirrhosis cases and drug addiction thirty times higher than in the general population! Besides, while most of them keep on advising their patients about overweight, they themselves are not so bothered about it. That although they constantly remind their patients about the hazards of smoking, they often themselves are heavy smokers. This is of course talking of GPs in Britain.

Moreover, another report from America said that doctors almost never exercise as they do not think it is necessary in their case.

Therefore, experts in the West opine that doctors of ten years back were far more healthier than the doctors at present. They must change this 'unhealthy' attitude towards themselves, not only for the sake of making an example for their patients. For doctors can make the best example to their patients, since patients have so much confidence in them.

Raajib Haider
Coptibagh, Dhaka.

Floods

Sir, Immediately after the century's worst disaster in Chittagong and along the coastal belt resulting in a massive loss of life and property, we now hear of an equally terrible floods in Sylhet.

Now this is hardly the middle of summer, we dread to think what will happen with the onset of Monsoon! There is a very good chance of a same kind of flood in other districts of the country also. So the Sylhet floods should act as signals for us to be prepared, for any such calamity.

We should not only be ready for calamities in other places but in the capital as well. I am sure very few of us have forgotten the terrible floods of 1988, and it's aftermath. The entire city of Dhaka was turned into a vast pool. Even engine-run boats played through the streets.

So taking note from that, we should all be careful and start taking precautions before the disaster strikes again. For, prevention is always better than cure.

This is speaking about both our government as well as the general citizens of the country.

So let us be prepared this time, and let not nature make the best of the situation. If we all can wake up to a calamity, and work towards providing succour to the distressed after the strikes, I am sure we can take the same attitude beforehand also.

Syed Ahmed
Jinjira.

OPINION

Cyclone and the Rohingyas

The Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), Arakan, Burma strongly condemns the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) of Burma for its total negligence in launching emergency rescue and relief operation to save lives and property to the Rohingya Muslims immediately after the devastating cyclone that hit the north-western Arakan on Tuesday, April 29.

The members of RSO would like to express their deep shock, grief and sorrow at the colossal loss of lives and property.

In the devastated area of Arakan, the Rohingyas Muslims have been passing a life of hazards and uncertainty with no helping hands reaching them from both inside and outside. The cyclone and tidal surge had destroyed their agricultural farms, washed away shrimp projects and salt farms. It also destroyed the embankment along the bay of Bengal in the south and along the Naff River in the north of Maungdaw district. Most of their kutcha houses were ravaged and razed to the ground. Many people have died, the survivors are living under the open sky and counting their days to death.

They lost whatever food stuff they had in their possession. Acute shortage of food was prevailing in the affected areas and people were starving to death in the cyclone aftermath. Innumerable dead bodies and carcasses were lying all

along the coastal areas and corpses remained unburied. Epidemics posed a threat to the survivors as they were totally without any relief materials including medicines.

The helpless people falling to get drinking water drink polluted water. Diarrhoea already has broken out in the cyclone affected areas of medical measures.

The SLORC regime did not take any step for alleviating the sufferings of affected people. Even those who manage to rehabilitate themselves, are being prevented from doing so and are alleged to allow outside interference and influence into the area. Instead of being helped the Rohingyas Muslims are pushed to forced labour free of charges in hard labour camps and military operations.

The RSO hereby declared the cyclone affected areas in the north-western Arakan as calamity zone, and it urges the international community to come forward in aid of the humanity in distress. The RSO also appeals to the world media, journalists, humanitarian organisations, relief agencies to visit the devastated areas of north-western Arakan to assess the extent of the damages and thereby to help the distressed.

Dr. Mohammed Yunus
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Arakan, Burma.