

## Wildlife: Time to Act

Some highly disturbing statistics about wildlife in Bangladesh have recently come to light. The Red Data Book of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, has listed no less than 129 species of animals as being threatened with extinction; the book also claims that 14 species of mammals have been lost to Bangladesh during the past 25 years alone. But the disappearance of wildlife is indicative of something far more serious than the mere loss of a life-form or two. Existence of wildlife is inextricably linked to the survival of specific habitats such as forests, marshes etc. These habitats support a wide variety of plants, insects, reptiles, birds etc. which in turn play a crucial role in the maintenance of the ecological balance.

The Sunderbans, which account for about 74 per cent of reserve forest in this country and form a vital component of our ecosystem, is dying. The forest, which is the natural habitat of the Royal Bengal Tiger and provider of wide range of economic and environmental benefits, is one of the world's largest mangrove ecosystems. This ecosystem is now facing extinction as a result of wanton deforestation on the one hand, and increased intrusion of saline water due to a significant drop in the inflow of sweet water down the Ganges over the past decade or so on the other. At the same time, pollution caused by ships and motorised boats have done their worst to accelerate the process of forest depletion.

But the real tragedy lies somewhere else: It is our failure, or rather refusal to treat this issue of the environment with the seriousness and urgency it deserves. Wildlife conservation has always figured pretty poorly in our priorities. The excuse has always been that such issues as welfare of animals and birds are too much of a luxury for a poor country like Bangladesh. Consequently, no full-time staff or financial allocations have ever been made for wildlife management, and forest department officers are left to look after conservation as merely one of many responsibilities. At the same time poaching and killing of, and trading in rare and endangered animals and birds go on virtually unhindered, often with official connivance.

And time is running out fast. Unless we wake up to our folly and begin to regard preservation of our forests as a priority concern, an ecological disaster awaits us in the not-too-distant future. Providing financial and legal teeth to the forestry department is now a must to stop the killing of wildlife, while finding an alternative for those tens of thousands of people who make a living out of forestry, has become an urgent necessity. Either we act soon, or be ready to pay the price sooner than we think.

## For a Better Society, for a Better World

Low literacy is an impediment to population control. Mr Saifur Rahman couldn't have said anything truer. That our Finance Minister should take it upon himself to underscore the importance of improving our literacy is a most welcome and surprise departure. Of course, he did so only because an effective population control — which was not possible without spread of literacy on a massive scale — depended the success of his exertions as the man in charge of our economic well-being. The question of elevating literacy rate to a desired level was very integrally related to any projection of economic progress, — and as such came in very cogent to his address at a recent conference on "Impact of population programme performance at district level."

In fact Mr. Rahman that day made many another important if somewhat obvious observation on the interrelationship that existed between literacy and population control and economic performance. His exertions led to that inescapable message: control population if you want our posterity to live well.

While thanking him the whole way for all that he said, we would rather not shrink away laying bare a small point of disappointment with his speech — at least the part of that which was reported in The Daily Star on Friday. It could be construed that he had taken the literacy-population control connection a little too mechanically — thus robbing the argument of much of its true significance. While it was very true that the huge amounts of money that had been spent on family planning promotional activities have yielded very painfully low results and that the cause of FP could far more effectively be served through spread of education, as the minister has very well put it — it is rather naive to expect the result to come through a spreading education reaching the importance of FP and the knowledge of the materials and techniques involved to an ever widening clientele and audience. Audiovisual facilities, such as mainly the radio and the TV as also the film can do the job far more forcefully and effectively than the literacy or print medium ever could.

A high rate of literacy would unfailingly inhibit our population growth through contributing in the biggest way to social development — the development of the individual's personality and development of the society as a whole. Please do not tie up the necessity of literacy to a tool to prevent parents from producing more — and to little else. Realise a high rate for the all-round development of society and it will surely leave its unmistakable inhibitory stamp on population growth.

Let literacy be for culture's sake, for the sake of better understanding and cooperation between man and man, community and community, people and people — and for the sake of building better societies all over the world, for building a better world.

In order to accommodate the "Conversation" with the Prime Minister, materials which are normally used on this page are being held over for today.



**A**s Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia rose from her seat in her tastefully but not lavishly furnished office at the Secretariat and walked across the room to greet a group of senior staff members of The Daily Star, the mood of what turned out to be a 60 minute interview was already set. The smile and the relaxed manner of the BNP leader who had just completed the first hundred days in office suggested her readiness to join her visitors in a substantive discussion, without any limits being imposed on either the time or the nature of questions.

This first impression was confirmed as the interview got off the ground. In a matter of minutes, we knew that it was more a conversation than the kind of interview which yields some hard news. It was also the kind of unstructured conversation — we had only a few broad questions in mind and nothing else — which would give us an insight into the thinking of the Prime Minister, her mood and, finally, into her broad approach to problems facing the country.

The wide-ranging conversation predictably started with the Prime Minister's own evaluation of her government's performance during its first hundred days in office and moved on to cover such issues as the form of government, the violence among the student community, the socio-economic priorities of the government and the question of imposing discipline on financial institutions. With a little persuasion, she talked a bit about areas where the performance of the administration had fallen somewhat short of expectation. As the conversation drew to a close, she also answered a couple of questions, somewhat hesitantly, about what she does when she gets some leisure, which is rare.

The conversation with the Prime Minister was conducted by SM Ali who was assisted by his colleagues, Khalilur Rahman, Mustafa Kamal Majumdar, Amanullah Kabir, Reazuddin Ahmed and Mahfuz Anam.

We reproduce below extensive extracts from the conversation held with Begum Zia on Thursday.



We will try to overcome our failures

Daily Star: We congratulate you on the 100th day of your assumption of office as Prime Minister.

Prime Minister: I did not count the days. They have passed unnoticed.

DS: Would you please tell us how you look at the achievements of your government during the hundred days, the things about which you are happy. At the same time, we would like to know the areas where you think your government could not do much, where your performance fell short of your own expectations.

PM: You know that on the 39th day of our assumption of office, a devastating cyclone and tidal surge hit Bangladesh. The people would always remember this calamity. The cyclone was the biggest challenge to our government. You know we found the country in a state where we had to start from zero in every sector. Everything was destroyed. Indiscipline, anarchy and corruption were the order of the day. But since we took the responsibility it was our duty to take the country forward. The atmosphere was not congenial. Against this backdrop came the cyclone. Then, our prime target was to help the cyclone affected people and rehabilitate them by keeping all other priorities aside.

The cyclone hit on April 29. On the following day we started relief and rehabilitation activities. You know the weather continued to be rough and there was rainfall or storm almost everyday, and we had to work under a difficult situation. Now the weather has become normal. Our resources were limited. We did not have enough materials and transports to help the coastal people. Within such limitations we worked by taking the people with us. We utilised the services of the armed forces, BDR (Bangladesh Rifles), police and ansar. With the cooperation of all we completed relief operation satisfactorily. We reached relief materials to all places and to all men. For the first time people at home and abroad said that there was no corruption in distribution of relief materials. Relief goods were not sold in the markets. I consider this to be a great success of our government.

We faced the disaster with courage. Such a disaster was unprecedented. We not only faced the disaster, but so to say, the supply of relief materials was more than sufficient. Maybe there was a bit excess of relief distribution so much so that a section of people now do not want to go back to work. It has become difficult to get people for work in the coastal areas. Now rehabilitation activities are going on in full swing. Houses are being constructed.

Then there was the problem of smuggling. During the autocratic regime of Ershad, Bangladesh had turned into a haven for smugglers. Smuggling had become the principal cause for closure of local mills and factories. We had initiated special measures to curb smuggling. You have observed, I had some meetings in the districts. The initiative had proved very effective. Smuggling has been curbed to a great extent. It's a great success for Bangladesh. For the first time the value of Bangladesh currency has recorded a rise. I will call it a good sign for the economy.

You are also aware of the law and order problem. Newspapers are now writing freely. The autocratic government of Ershad had caused a maximum deterioration of the situation. The administration and government employees were in a bad shape. There are law and order problems, and some problems will continue to be there, but there had been a

# HUNDRED DAYS OF DEMOCRACY

## Conversation

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia talks to The Daily Star on the performance of her government during its first hundred days in office, on her party's decision to switch to the parliamentary system, about continuing violence among students and, finally, about her life and leisure activities.

tremendous improvement of the situation. It's however, not possible to solve everything. You saw there was indiscipline all around. We are an elected democratic government. Certain forces hatch conspiracies if nationalist and patriotic government comes to power. They try all means to unsettle the government, to damage its reputation. Attempts have been made to create indiscipline and anarchy. You saw how we tackled the jail revolt. We accomplished this in a reasonable manner.

Yes, to take up the second part of your question, maybe we also had failures during this period. It's a new government. There is indiscipline and anarchy all around. We cannot turn everything nicely overnight. We will try to overcome our failures. We believe, given the people's cooperation, we can overcome those.

Meanwhile, you know, we have started fulfilling some of our pledges. For instance, we have waived agricultural loans up to Taka 5000, and land tax up to 25 bighas, and increased the age-limit for entry to government jobs.

DS: You have mentioned about failures, can you specify particular areas? For instance, some people say we have not yet succeeded in solving the student problem. Maybe you have some thoughts on this subject.

PM: We expected that the students who had looked forward to the restoration of democracy would grow up properly and be established in life. We want our children to study properly, and the universities to function in a congenial atmosphere. They had their demands. In Bangladesh you will find demands all around, but those cannot be fulfilled overnight. We tried to fulfil those which were within our means.

But the indiscipline we are witnessing in universities now are being created at personal level. We are told some students go for occupying seats in the hall. It's not their task. They should devote more to studies and stay in halls. Now different groups are found to clash over petty matters. Again, it is against the principles of sound politics to shelter bad elements expelled from parties for harmful activities. This is certainly not good. All democratic political parties had called for expulsion of bad elements. After we expelled some, such elements were found being sheltered by another party. So they are getting encouragement to continue unlawful activities. It's not the responsibility of the government alone. It's the responsibility of all to maintain peace and discipline especially in educational institutions. All political parties should come forward with help so that children can devote themselves to studies.

I think there are conspiracies too. Our children will not be able to get proper education if the colleges and the universities

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are not run properly. Some students will suffer from frustration. Some others will indulge in criminal activities. In such a situation some people will send their children abroad for education. We believe if children stay abroad for a long time, they become influenced by foreign ideologies. Of course this is not good for our country. This may be a conspiracy to destroy our country. I would, therefore, appeal to teachers, politicians and guardians to come forward to end indiscipline on the campus. We want our children to grow up in our own environment and become ideal citizens. If necessary we will take harsh measures if all concerned lend cooperation.

DS: Would you initiate dialogue with students and the political parties for the purpose?

PM: We had exchange of views with students before. If need be, we may have dialogue in a broader way with people of all professions, guardians, and teachers. We may seek their advice for the solution of the problem.

DS: Dialogue with political parties?

PM: Yes, also with political parties... with all. DS: Would you tell us something about the Chittagong university situation?

PM: The university is still closed. We are thinking over it. We have to find a solution to the problem.

DS: A particular organisation is keeping the university under occupation for a long time, and classes are being held outside the university...

PM: You see different political parties are giving different viewpoints. All parties do not give the same explanation. There are divisions also among teachers. So we will take decision about our own steps after having discussion with all. Some people say a certain organisation has kept the university under its occupation and there could be a solution if we evicted them. Yes if this solves the problem, we can evict them. But the problem does not appear to be like that. Another party says the organisation occupying the university should not be evicted. These are no solutions. That's why we are having exchange of ideas to find a solution. There must be a solution.

DS: Going back to your hundred days in office, you did not mention about the budget that has been prepared during this period.

PM: Discussions on the budget are still on. That's why I have not mentioned it. But I would definitely say, we had to start things from scratch. The economy was destroyed. There was indiscipline and corruption. The wealth was so much misused that now we are under pressure. We are advised from different places to spend money in specific sectors, to limit expenses in others. You might know to what depth the autocratic regime had taken Bangladesh.

But despite these limitations we would say the new budget is a good one. We did not want to burden the people with tax. The most noticeable thing is that we have tried to solve

and overcome problems gradually. You have seen tax has been reduced in many areas. We have withdrawn surcharges and have taken measures to ensure that foreigners can invest in Bangladesh.

DS: It seems there has been a consensus between the two main political parties on the form of government. At least it appears so to outsiders like us. Do you think this consensus can be extended to other areas, say agriculture, industry, privatisation? Do you see any prospect that after the settlement of the form of government issue BNP and AL can sit together with the same spirit?

PM: We in BNP are ready to solve problems facing the country through dialogue. This we want to do in the interest of the country's development. Ours is an agricultural economy, and so the top priority should be given to agriculture. Of course we have to set up industries. We should do everything possible to help farmers to increase production. BNP has its own views in this regard. Even then if somebody wants to give us suggestions — and their suggestions might be better — we are ready to accept those.

DS: What has prompted you to suddenly change your opinion and opt for a parliamentary form of government?

PM: Look, we had never been rigid on this question. We had repeatedly spoken the same thing even before the holding of the elections. We did not tell anything clearly. But being asked we said this would be decided in the parliament. That meant the members of our parliament would meet, if they were in a consensus about the parliamentary form and if it was considered good for the country, I would have no objection. We have always said this, and acted accordingly.

DS: When do you think the constitution amendment bill will be passed?

PM: You will witness it very soon. This is open to you. But I should emphasise that there has been no change of decision in BNP. We have acted according to our promise.

DS: Before the election you said a decision will be taken in the parliament.

PM: Yes, and we have done what we had said. We are very much on our own stand.

DS: Bangladesh Awami League had worked in favour of parliamentary democracy.

PM: But the people did not give them the mandate.

DS: Then it can be said that you are respecting the consensus. You did not make any election pledge, even then you have decided to opt for this for the good of the country...

PM: Yes, for the good of the country. We have repeatedly said there is nothing wrong in the system. No system is bad. It depends on how we work and how we make a system to work. We have seen most development works in Bangladesh were accomplished between 1976 and March 1982. The economy of the country had prospered, problems were solved, and Bangladesh's image abroad had improved. The country was then under a presidential system. Of course, the system was there even before that time. Ziaur Rahman proved that work could be done under the system. It depends on the party and the man in power. Afterwards the autocratic regime of Ershad destroyed the system and put the country to limitless indiscipline. The economy and reputations of the country were shattered. We are now going back to the parliamentary system because the people want it. BNP had in the past proved that it could properly run the country under a presidential form. Now with

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the people's cooperation we will again prove that the country can be administered properly and development achieved under a parliamentary system. Those who had introduced the presidential form could not prove that it worked. It's not the system but the people who are to be blamed.

DS: Some people say Ziaur Rahman had restored multi-party democracy from a one-party system introduced through the Fourth Amendment to the constitution. Maybe, by restoring the parliamentary system, you are completing his unfinished work...

PM: Maybe he would have done it had he been alive. He could not accomplish this. Shaheed Zia had restored multi-party democracy by ending one-party rule. We are turning the multi-party democracy into a parliamentary democracy and taking it closer to the people.

DS: After these hundred days what outlook do we have for the future? On which areas you want to give more priority in the immediate future, say next one or two years?

PM: We have said our main target is to make the country self-reliant. With this aim in view we can increase agricultural output so that the people can have at least two square meals a day. We have our programmes, for instance to meet the basic necessities of food, clothing, education, medicine and shelter.

DS: Would you put equal emphasis on all these five necessities? You cannot ensure them in one year...

PM: We will definitely give top priority to food, and take measures so that agricultural output increases. You have seen prices of food items have not increased even though standing crops were damaged by the cyclone and floods. Price of rice is more or less steady. We have made proper utilisation of whatever assistance we received. We have sent pumps to the affected areas so that production is not hampered. Saline water will be pumped out to sow fresh crops. Measures have been taken enlisting the cooperation of all. We have told China, especially when the Chinese ambassador called on me, that there had been a tremendous loss of draft power in the cyclone and our farmers will face difficulties to till



fields. I sought help. They have agreed to give us power tillers. We believe many problems can be solved if agricultural output is increased. It will be a great thing if the people have enough to eat.

DS: You have spoken about water conservancy and canal digging...

PM: We will start canal digging in the next dry season. We will also start tree plantation to make good the losses caused by the cyclone. Afforestation is urgently needed also from an environmental point of view. So we would like students of schools, colleges and universities to plant trees. We will start this immediately. You know the parliament session is on, we will do other works too. We cannot just remain preoccupied only with the parliament.

DS: Do you think you can form a government in the month a July after the passage of the amendment bill and the holding of the proposed referendum?

PM: Yes we hope so... One thing I should mention is that we have made the highest allocation to the education sector. We are also about to restart the mass education drive.

DS: It was in the 18-point programme of Ziaur Rahman...

PM: It was a 19-point programme.

DS: Oh, yes.

PM: We want to educate rural children through movies and slides. We look forward to giving them some forms of entertainment. There is nothing in the villages. Everything is dark in the villages at night.

DS: You have gone abroad three during the one hundred days, for instance you have visited India...

PM: Please do not consider the trip to India a foreign visit. I had to be there because of an unexpected development there.

DS: You have visited three Middle Eastern countries and China. What plan to do you have for increased cooperation with friendly countries?

PM: Our visit to all the four countries were very successful. You have observed that all concerned are ready to help us to face different disasters. They are showing more



There must be a solution

interest because a democratic government has been installed after nine years. I would say that they have maximum confidence and faith in us because the government has come to power as a successor of the programmes initiated by Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman. That's why they are ready to lend all kinds of cooperation. Their confidence in an support for our government is reflected through the way they have accorded us reception, and talked to us. On June 25 the Japanese parliamentary delegation said they were ready to help us to construct embankments and lend other forms of assistance. Those things demonstrate that foreign countries have every confidence and faith in our government.

DS: You give top priority to agriculture which again depends on availability of water for irrigation. Now that a new government has come to power in India how do you think Bangladesh can get its due share of Ganges water?

PM: BNP had its stand on this issue. The government of Bangladesh is a democratic government. A new government has come to power in India. We will have negotiations. We want to solve problems through this.

DS: There is a problem ahead of us and newspapers are writing on it. It is about financial discipline in the banking sector. How can financial discipline in the sector be restored? You have inherited the problem which, however, is a big one. Newspapers are also writing on the steps taken. We do not know which way the government will now proceed. Lists of bank defaulters have been published, there are different speculations in the private sector. The World Bank is putting on pressure and making conditions. Under such circumstances what steps can be taken by the government to ensure that financial discipline is restored as early as possible? And that the private sector can enjoy a degree of confidence? Would you let us know your opinion about this?

PM: Yes, you know that we inherited the problem. The Ershad government had come to power illegally, and had allowed all sorts of indiscipline sacrificing canons and rules only to continue in power. That's why it's not possible to solve the problem in just one day. Our government has taken some steps. We will solve these problems gradually.

A democratic government is now in power and a democratic atmosphere is now prevailing in the country. We are also creating an atmosphere to attract foreign investment, so that foreigners set up mills and factories and help industrialise the country.

DS: The government has yet to start any formal dialogue with the opposition about the passage of the proposed amendment bill. Will there be any dialogue?

PM: You are extracting everything from me. No, there has not been any dialogue with me as yet. But yes, of course there will be dialogue.

DS: It is rumoured that some people may try to obstruct the passage of the proposed bill...

PM: Who will gain... who will lose out of this?