

Crisis in Lithuania

President Mikhail Gorbachev is caught in a "no win" situation in Lithuania which many, inside and outside the Soviet Union, would think is, at least partly, his own creation.

Looking back, one cannot say that the whole international community jumped at the prospect of secession of Lithuania -- and for that matter, of all three Baltic states -- from the Soviet Union.

The crisis last year was triggered off by the Lithuanian state government, Kremlin did not help matters by taking a tough line when it imposed a severe economic embargo against the "rebel" state.

The current crisis appears to stem from a change in the position of Mr Gorbachev. For all practical purposes, the Soviet leader has abandoned the facade of moderation and taken up arms, as it were, against Lithuania.

Soviet troops stormed key buildings in Lithuania, causing injuries to several people, while Mr Gorbachev warned the separatist republic to "bow" to Moscow's authority.

The reaction to the use of force by Moscow against the Baltic state has provoked understandable reaction from European powers and the United States. They have called upon Mr Gorbachev to desist from further use of force and return to the negotiating table to work out the constitutional future of Lithuania.

It is indeed this advice from the Vatican that probably provides one way out of the crisis. However, patience from Lithuania alone will not help. Kremlin too must make appropriate gesture to encourage the Baltic state to move towards some kind of accommodation with the Soviet leadership.

Films from Japan

We welcome the Japanese Film Festival now being held in the city. We do so, not only because it will provide our film lovers a chance to see the works of Japanese film giants, such as Kurosawa, Ozu Yasujiro and others, but also because it will give us a chance to know a Japan which is a bit different from a country known for its Toyotas, Sonys and the like.

It is the need for our people to broaden their understanding of peoples of the region -- both SAARC and beyond -- that underscores our suggestion that we should encourage the holding of similar film festivals with all our neighbouring countries and, going beyond, do the same with Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines.

While congratulating the Bangladesh Film Archive for organising the festival, may we request the organisation to look into the possibility of doing the same with the countries that we suggested. In this regard help could be sought from our embassies abroad and of the embassies of the concerned countries based in Bangladesh.

Quotations

My gut says he (Saddam Hussein) will get out from there (Kuwait) --George Bush

Every Muslim will be a missile to be thrown against the enemy... --Abdullah Fadil, Iraqi Religious Affairs Minister

There should not be any rancour in politics because once you feel that way, you are finished. --V.P.Singh, Former Indian Premier

Before the News every night, with the camera trained on the National Monument at Savar, Bangladesh Television plays a lovely, haunting song in memory of those who gave their lives for the Liberation of 1971.

In the life of a nation twenty years is no more than an eyeblink, said Bangladesh's most distinguished playwright. He had full faith, he said, in the young, especially in those born around or after 1971.

The remarkable thing is that some magic must be working somewhere because the upsurge which has just brought about the change was not at all centrally directed. People clamoured on to the rallies and demonstrations on their own, undeterred by lathis, teargas or bullets from the police, the Bangladesh Rifles or the Army.

The army barracks just outside Kabul is the last place one expects to see pacifism encouraged. Yet, right in the middle of the barracks stands a huge mural depicting an Afghan woman holding her injured daughter against a background of rocket explosions.

With the message of "We've had enough of war", it is another sign of a sophisticated campaign by the government to win the hearts and minds of the war-weary population.

But in the Pakistani border city of Peshawar this sophistication is lacking among the leaders of the mujahedin who have been discussing a plan to launch a full-scale attack on Kabul.

The plan envisages an attack by a mujahedin force of nearly 100,000 men. This would be preceded by a prolonged rocket barrage aimed at the capital's military bases. In practice, this means that rockets would indiscriminately rain down on the city's two million inhabitants.

The plan would also rely on a fifth column in the form of a military coup or a popular uprising against the regime in favour of the advancing mujahedin forces.

It is perhaps yet another sign of the deep divisions and resentments among the mujahedin leadership that some of them believe the plan has been drawn up by the Pakistan Army.

In reality, the plan is the brainchild of Golbuddin Hekmatyar, the hardline leader of the Hizbi Islami. Hekmatyar has made it clear that he is determined to go ahead with the plan, with or without the backing of other mujahedin leaders.

Luckily for the people of Kabul, the more moderate leaders of the mujahedin are opposed to the plan. They argue that it has to wait until the spring when the milder weather would allow the civilian population of Kabul to take refuge outside the city.

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.

System of Govt

Sir-- With electioneering gaining momentum, some have raised a very timely and pertinent question whether we would have Presidential or Parliamentary system of Government next in our country. If the Members of the Parliament decide the issue in Parliament, then before the ensuing election they should clear the policies on that matter so that we the voters are able to choose our representatives in Parliament who subsequently decide the issue for us.

This election should be regarded as referendum on the issue whether we want Parliamentary system or Presidential system of Govt.

ernment in our country to establish real democracy. Munira Khan Dhaka

Dignity of journalism

Sir--The present unfortunate trend of criticizing the personal lives, specially of women, since the fall of the autocratic govt. of H. M. Ershad, in the press speaks of very poor taste in journalism and brings to mind the question of whether we are fit enough yet to be granted press freedom. Many will bear me out when I say that the reporting on the activities of the women supposedly associated with H. M. Ershad, borders on porno literature. All women certainly cannot be condemned for the activity of a

An Indian View

Bangladesh: Peace or Truce?

by Chanchal Sarkar

STAR Guest Columnist

Let's get in, let them leave. What, then are the hard, knobby things like, the Economy, Education and possible Communal Turbulence?

With the unstoppable rise in the prices of essentials, the siphoning off the benefits and perquisites of foreign aid and the consequent stagnation of the economy is in very poor shape with its soft underbelly totally exposed to aid-giving powers like Japan, Britain and the United States. It was put about in foreign broadcasts during the upsurge that these powers had made strong diplomatic representations to General Ershad about restoring civil and democratic rights and about opening talks with the Opposition in pain of choking off aid.

With constant closures, with examination schedules blown skyhigh and the universities turned into mined battlefield, Education in Bangladesh is in shambles. Those who can afford it are anxious to send their children abroad. There are frequent enquiries about India but the preferred educational haven for the wealthy Bangladeshi is the West just as the desired

centre for medical attention is Bangkok, no longer India. But education or medical attention abroad can be only for a very few.

Bangladesh can be reasonably satisfied about its communal relationships. From Sheikh Mujeb's time Hindus and Muslims have lived with-out the riots that used to mar the country earlier. This communal tolerance is very noticeable in the educated and upper classes and is said to prevail also in the rural areas. Communalism for economic ends is, however, thrustful and the pressure is still on in the villages. Until now the famous Hindu temples and areas in Chittagong and Dhaka (like Kaibalyadham and Dhakeshwari) had never been violated. This time, it is alleged, it was a provocation choreographed by General Ershad's Government as a diversion with two of his ministers taking the organisational role. General Ershad then dramatically rushed in to offer relief and solace. After the incidents a good number of families, those who could afford the shift, have left Bangladesh and Hindus today sleep uneasily with their eyes and ears cocked towards Ayodhya.

Communalism could be said to be one face of a search for a national identity, some other signs being the contending of the slogans "Joy Bangla" and "Bangladesh Zindabad",

and the delving into Bengal history in a search for uniqueness. I had been told of a report on Bangladesh's culture by a Government Commission published last year and then, apparently, withdrawn. I was told that it spelt out and outlook have with religious emphasis and harped on differences from India with almost Pakistani dogmatism. With all that was going on around I couldn't read the report from cover to cover but I did right through it as thoroughly as I could. To my pleasant surprise I, at least, found no such theocratic message. Instead, there was much appreciation of the contribution of the Hindu and Buddhist strands to Bengal's life and culture including the mention of many distinguished non-Muslim scholars, writers, poets and cultural figures. Of course there was emphasis on the message and importance of Islam. Of course, too, there was criticism of exclusiveness, arrogance and feudal overlordship--meaning the Hindus in undivided Bengal. The recommendations, to me, seemed liberal. On enquiry I learnt that if the report had been withdrawn it was probably because people in the world of culture were not disposed to listen to official recommendations.

Bangladesh presents not as hefty a presence in India as India does in Bangladesh. But India seems far less inter-

ested and concerned than she should be. For her Bangladesh is "just another country". That is a great mistake. Active in their country's interest, official Indian knowledge about the going on in Bangladesh is acute and alert but diplomacy in a troubled neighbouring land with a very considerable reservoir of goodwill must come forward a few steps more. Sadly it is not just India and its Establishment, even West Bengal and its intelligentia seem a trifle bored by Bangladesh. One hopes there is a realisation in both those quarters that, with the trends visible in India today, there is no ground for rany preaching.

Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed has a hard row to hoe and the next three months and after in Bangladesh will not be easy. The elections may not settle things as there are too many inequalities, corruptive influences and ambitions on the boil. On Wednesday morning, way before sunrise, I made my way to Dhaka airport hoping the planes would fly. As dawn broke, every one in the departure hall crowded round the radio in the general shop, listening to the BBC. The News over, excited discussions broke out. I heard the shop owner, Amjad Hussain Montu, a nice young man in his thirties, say wistfully to all and to himself, "Is this peace? Will it last?" In their minds everyone in Bangladesh is asking those two selfsame questions.

A noted free lance Journalist and author of many books, Sarkar will be writing for The Daily Star as a guest columnist. He wrote the above piece which is published here by arrangement with the Hindustan Times after his visit to Dhaka during the historic week last month.

Kabul Talks Democracy, But the Mujahedin Fight On

by Kasra Naji

The government of President Najibullah is waging a campaign to broaden its support. The ruling party has renamed itself, included non-party members in the government and is talking about multi-party elections. The Mujahedin are indifferent to these changes and are talking about their next offensive.

In the first meeting of all the different factions of the mujahedin for more than a year, the moderates also opposed the plan because they could not agree on who would take over in the event of the

fall of the Kabul government. The episode bears all the hallmarks of an exile mentality, for the mujahedin leaders seem detached from the mood in Kabul. The plan ignores what the government in Kabul

has been doing: not without some success - to change its image and policies so as to broaden its support.

Says Farid Mazdak, the young and up-and-coming Vice-President of the ruling Watan (Homeland) Party: "I say categorically that we cannot govern Afghanistan alone. We need the co-operation of our brothers in Peshawar."

Taking its cue from the developments in Eastern Europe, the party changed its name from the People's Democratic Party and shunned its Marxist past in July. It changed its programme and laid new emphasis on Islam as the guiding light.

"The party struggles for the consolidation of the system of democracy based on a multi-party system," said the new programme of the party.

Soon afterwards non-party politicians were brought into the government, including the widely-respected Fazlehaq Khaleqyar who became Prime Minister.

The Press, though still government-controlled, has been showing more courage in setting the agenda for debate in the country.

Although many of the changes remain largely cosmetic, there is no mistaking the direction the party has chosen under the chairmanship of President Najibullah.

Few opportunities for emphasising the need for national reconciliation are missed.

The liberal opposition, with its close links to the former Afghan King, Zahir Shah, is tolerated and active in Kabul. The National Salvation Association, led by Professor Mohamed Asghar, is busy testing the limits of the new glasnost in Kabul.

Government officials encourage rumours of secret contacts with the mujahedin leaders with the aim of bringing them round to the government plan for transition to democratic elections.

Direct negotiations with the mujahedin leaders are the centre-piece of the government plan for a negotiated settlement. Predictably, the plan has been rejected out of hand by the mujahedin.

At the same time, the army, which is still heavily supplied by the Soviet Union and pampered by the government, has had some successes in driving back mujahedin forces from around the capital. The government has also been reaping propaganda from the mujahedin rocket attacks against the capital's residential areas.

The changes the government has been introducing are broadly in line with the prevalent international atmosphere of the post-Cold War era. While continuing to back the two

sides of the war, the two superpowers have been searching for a political solution to the problem, and are now reported to be close to an agreement to cut off arms supplies to both sides.

What has prevented an agreement so far is the differences over the precise role of Dr. Najibullah during a transitional period in the run-up to elections.

While the US negotiators have been demanding his resignation, the Soviets have been pointing to the Nicaraguan example whereby President Daniel Ortega presided over free and internationally supervised elections and then lost.

The Kabul government is also benefitting from the Gulf crisis. Kuwaiti financial backing for the mujahedin has now stopped. And according to mujahedin sources in Peshawar, financial aid from Saudi Arabia, which matched the US aid to the mujahedin dollar for dollar, has been reduced in the wake of the crisis.

Furthermore, according to one Western diplomat, the US will need Soviet support to maintain an international consensus against Iraq. As a result, the US is unlikely to take a hardline posture supporting the mujahedin in case it should alienate the Soviets from forming a united front over the Gulf crisis.

In Peshawar, the mujahedin leaders seem to be taking no notice of the developments in Kabul or at the international level. Says Professor Sebhghatollah Mojaddidi, President of the interim government of the mujahedin: "Our jihad is against the communist regime in Kabul and until it has been removed from power we will continue to fight." -- GEMINI NEWS

Kasra Naji is a producer with the BBC Persian Service who has just returned from visits to both Kabul and Peshawar.



WHAT OTHERS SAY

The Israeli Factor and Others

There is not good war, but sometimes a bad peace can be worse than war itself. A peace that left Saddam Hussein in charge in Kuwait would be truly bad. It would mean sacrificing a high principle; No country has the right to overrun and annex another. It would mean abandoning a great interest: secure access to the oil of the Gulf, on which the prosperity of the whole world has come increasingly to depend. And, because of those two things, it would mean accepting a peace that was no peace at all, merely the lull before a bigger explosion. --The Economist London

Iraq will not win the war, but then no one else might. A quick military victory over Baghdad is not guaranteed. Anti-Western terrorism could emanate from a defeated Iraq, repeating the history of terror that followed the Six-Day War. Peace must be given a chance up to the last moment. --Business Times Singapore

few and that is what the press has succeeded in doing. Please, let us rise above personal prejudices and try to bring back the dignity of a noble profession like journalism. Farida Zaman, Uttara Model Town

Or is there a separate code of conduct for superpowers? Would somebody please care to explain? Najma Haider, Kathalbagan, Dhaka

Are our soldiers not important enough?

Sir-- When the troops from Bangladesh were being sent to the Gulf, there was a big fuss kicked up by the political parties. We wonder why they are so silent on the issue now? And, as reported by the BBC Bangla Service a couple of days ago, our soldiers have not yet been inculcated against some of the dreaded diseases against which the soldiers of the western countries have been inculcated in case of chemical warfare. Why this discrimination? Or are our soldiers not important enough? Surely, in case of the horrid chemicals being used, everybody is bound to be affected? Few answers are certainly in order. Sufia Chowdhury, Eskaton Garden, Dhaka

Let us examine ourselves

Sir, Why do we not have any political cartoonists? When we are serious, why are we so serious? What has happened to our sense of humour? It stops working when we need it most! We lose our wits at critical moments. Our brand of seriousness has not led us anywhere worth mentioning. We have become unpleasant company. We are experts in passing on the buck even though the buck does not have much of a market value. Nobody wants to face this stance: "Tell me what you can do, not what others are doing." We are chary of pointing out the goodness in others; and fervently seek the negative side of a situation. We have high hopes at the after math of the elections. I feel the leadership of our country are aware of the super-human task ahead of them. However, before analysing the performance of others, let us examine our selves first. A. Mawaz, Dhaka