Dhaka, Sunday, June 9, 1991

Signals from Begum Zia

While it may be too soon to attempt an evaluation of political events of the past few days, one should still regard the meeting between Acting President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed and Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia who was accompanied by some of her senior cabinet colleagues on Friday as a welcome event. In normal circumstances, the meeting would have been viewed as a routine affair. However, seen against the background of tension that had been felt in political circles during past weeks, the meeting and, indeed, the publicity given to it served a most useful purpose. However, let us hasten to add that like one swallow does not make a summer, just one meeting between Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed and Begum Zia would not produce a breakthrough in the political stalemate in the country. What is needed now is continuing dialogue between the two who have such important roles to play in solving the problems facing the nation.

Significantly enough, the meeting between the Acting President and the Prime Minister took place within 24 hours of an address delivered by Begum Zia and some 48 hours after Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed had spoken to the nation through the electronic media. If the Acting President had used his TV/radio address to assert his neutrality, the Prime Minister used her speech to reaffirm her political strength. One was perhaps as necessary as the other. However, the two leaders cannot repeat such exercises too often, without creating new misunderstanding.

Apart from making a show of strength, the public address of Begum Khaleda Zia provided the nation with a few important signals. A timely one was addressed to the student community when she urged it to return to its studies, while posing a straightforward question, "What is the justification for inciting trouble in the campuses after the fall of autocracy in the country?" Let us hope that various student bodies will heed the advice of the Prime Minister and help in the restoration of peace and order in various universities in the country. However, having clearly denounced the violence which has been causing such havoc in our educational institutions, the Government must be ready to take measures to bring the situation under control, in case the Prime Minister's advice falls on deaf ears.

The Prime Minister's other signal, the one about the alleged conspiracy to destabilise her government, may evoke varied reactions, ranging from scepticism to concern. Assuming that Begum Zia's allegation is not without a basis, we can only reemphasise the need for some understanding among major political parties on issues and problems facing the nation. In this respect, it is important for the BNP Government to discard the siege mentality and to approach a possible negotiation with the opposition with confidence and strength. The patriotic fervour that had brought so many parties and groupings together in the struggle against the Ershad administration must indeed be revived. And here the initiative must come from the BNP government which, in the ultimate analysis, has the final responsibility to ensure political stability and economic progress in the country.

Three Cheers for Abahani

It is always gratifying to see a local team win a sporting event in which formidable foreign teams are also involved. The victory of Abahani Krira Chakra in the just-concluded Club Cup Football sponsored by Bangladesh Tobacco Corporation is naturally worth our congratulations. The fact that another local side, Dhaka Mohammedan Sporting Club, also reached the final ahead of the semi-legendary East Bengal, Mohammedans and Mohan Bagan clubs of Calcutta, provided added cause for satisfaction. The three Indian teams were once the cream of subcontinental football, and their very names still inspire awe and affection among followers of the game here in Bangladesh. But now, our own boys have quite convincingly laid claim to the same sort of greatness, at least in the regional context.

Abahani players must be doubly pleased with themselves because, for one thing, they had to overcome East Bengal who played possibly the best football of the three guest teams, in order to reach the final, and also because they outfought their traditional — some say bitter — rivals Dhaka Mohammedans in the final.

Since the club's genesis in 1972, Abahani has gradually established itself as a major contender for local as well as regional glory. Over the years, it has successfully built up a challenge to Mohammedans' once-undisputed supremacy. League titles and various cups have come its way despite all the upheavals and uncertainties that have often affected the club. The survival and thriving of Abahani owe a great deal to the professionalism of its management, its pool of talented players and the dedication of its numerous supporters.

This Club Cup tournament captured the public's imagination from the start, and Bangladesh Television deserves commendation for transmitting the matches live. The tournament, held to raise money for the cyclone victims of Bangladesh, also showed the part sport can play in a noble cause. We extend our warm thanks to the organisers and participators of the event, especially the three guest-teams from across the border.

But the biggest cheer should be reserved for Abahani, especially as many a laymen had presumed that the trophy would be won by one of the three West Bengal sides. So, let's hear it for the boys: Three cheers for Abahani, hip, hip, hooray!

DIVISIVENESS CAUSES TENSION

Political Parties Should Reach Modus Operandi on Major Issues

IVISIVENESS and drift are the two worst enemies of an emerging democracy. When they get out of hand, it is the entire system which is at peril.

This was one of the perceptive views which came into focus during a conference of a number of countries, which, after years of authoritarianism, had won back their democratic rights. Appropriately enough, the meeting was held in Mantla, under the auspices of the Government of Corazon Aquino, in 1988.

lf, by then, Bangladesh had already thrown the Ershad government out of office, it would have been at the Mantla conference of "emerging democracies", as it was called, and probably learnt a great deal from its deliberations.

However, when it comes to knowing how much damage divisiveness - drift is not a problem here yet - can do to the political life of a nation. Bangladesh may hardly need any advice from outside. The country's experience in this field is unlikely to be matched by that in most other developing nations in Asia.

We have reached the stage when we glibly attribute divisiveness to our national character. when the real causes for this phenomenon lie with some deep-rooted habits and norms of our middle class life, especially in socio-political and cultural fields. In other words, many of the problems, contributing to growing divisiveness in our society, are inherent in our nascent political culture, some linked to the way we run our political parties and organise their structures, including elections (which seldom or never take place), internal debates and

differences. Many of these problems, in different forms. are part of our pre-liberation history, with remote echoes from the pre-1947 period. Our difficulty, often bordering on total inability, in running political parties on democratic lines, in accepting internal dissent as part of the political process and in recognising the validity of the views held by opposite sides, is nothing new. However, in the pre-liberation period, the presence of such formidable personalities as Hussain Shahid Suhrawardy, Moulana Bhashani and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as heads of political parties and the unqualified identification of our shared goal diverted our attention from issues and problems relevant to the yet unborn political culture of an independent nation.

The political life in the pre-liberation period had other characteristics. While such organisations as Awami League (AL) and National Awami Party (NAP) were led by strong-willed personalities with somewhat authoritarian ways, there were also competent general secretaries, like

Tajuddin Ahmed and Mashiur Rahman, who exercised considerable influence on their respective organisations and, on occasions, showed that they had minds of their own. Above all. these two organisations operated from different reasonably well-defined ideological positions on national and international issues, which influenced their political agendas. Their programmes had their ambiguities, but the average political analyst at least knew what these two organisations — and, in fact, others, like parties in the left - stood for.

So, there was quite a good deal of cohesion inside each major party. One seldom heard of defections and never of a political party splitting into factions. Divisiveness was indeed kept under check.

Now, let us look at the current scene and see where exactly the major changes have taken

tracted to the party that was either in power or had the best chance of taking office in the near future. From this generalisation, one must exclude a party of the extreme right, like Jamaat, the Communist Party of Bangladesh and smaller left organisations, the only ones who can talk in terms or programmes and even ideologies.

When it comes to internal divisiveness within major political parties, a recent change in the phenomenon should not be overlooked. Now that BNP is in power and the leadership of Begum Khaleda Zia has gained tremendous strength, defections from the party can be ruled out. Divisiveness among members of the BNP parliamentary party, say, on the issue of the form of government, may be manifested more in rumblings than in an open outcry. Again, by sounding a warning on Thursday about an alleged conspiracy, to destabilise her government.

each major political party. But what is happening now is worse. Divisiveness, already a phenomenon touching our lives at many points, is being accelerated at the national level. It is almost getting out of control.

At one stage, a section of the media, certainly this paper, had called for a national consensus, involving the two major and other parties, to tackle the formidable problems facing the country. The call was repeated soon after the devastating cyclone hit the coastal belt and the need for setting up some kind of national advisory body became an urgent one.

At this moment, the hope of a national consensus seems a far cry. The alternative now is for the two major parties and the office of the Acting President which is now a factor in the growing divisiveness in the country, to reach a Modus Operandi in a spirit of co-existence and work out a set of guidelines for tackling the constitutional and political problems facing the country. Such a Modus Operandi would imply that while the two parties - the ruling BNP and the opposition AL - would pursue their own political goals, they would refrain from creating any new crisis of confidence in the country or from destabilising the process of democratic transition. In such a situation, the best that the Acting President, Justice Shahabuddin can do, a role that he has avoided so far, is to persuade the two parties to meet and talk about some joint efforts to resolve the problems facing the nation, from the constitutional deadlock to the unrest among students.

While one is inclined to say that such talks. hopefully at the highest level of the two parties. should be private to allow for frank exchanges. we wonder if a public knowledge of such meetings, arranged by the Acting President himself, would not produce some salutary effect on the national situation, even if it raises expectations which are not immediately fulfilled.

Such meetings could also serve as signals to students in the universities that they should bring an end to violence and return to their

If the two political parties — being the ruling party. BNP has a bigger responsibility in this regard - cannot deal with the growing divisiveness, now almost bordering on confrontation, between themselves as well as at the national level through bold and courageous moves, one cannot even speculate about what may happed next. One thing is certain: There will be a crisis that neither party can tackle on its own, a crisis that this country can do without.

AT HOME AND ABROAD

S. M. Ali

place, contributing to the growing divisiveness in our political life.

In the first place, it is the lack of genuine political cohesion inside the two major parties the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Awami League (AL) - which provides the single biggest factor behind internal divisiveness within each organisation. There is no doubt that this lack of cohesion stems from the absence of well-defined programmes and the reluctance of the two parties to take ideological positions, beyond almost identical populist viewpoints. Again, if BNP realise heavily on the appeal that the memory of the late Ziaur Rahman, exercised through his wife Begum Khaleda Zia, holds for the masses. AL remains very much the party of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, with his daughter, tem. Hasina serving almost as a proxy leader.

During the past two decades, the motive that prompted many a politician or even a mid-level worker to join one party instead of another, defect to the opposite side or set up a splinter group was, almost always, more personal than political, with some kind of a personality clash with the leader often serving as the decisive factor. To complete the scenario, one must also recognise that most politicians have felt at-

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has put everyone in her party on a loyalty test, a move that also boosts the aggressive spirit within the organisation. Oddly enough, as one political analyst puts it, the move is reminiscent more of the political style of late Sheikh Mujib than of the late Ziaur

Since the present uneasy political situation, especially between the Acting President and the Prime Minister, yields some dividends for the opposition, the AL should be able to stay together, without internal dissention posing too much of a threat to the leadership. Even a dissident like Dr Kamal Hossain may see the need for closing the ranks behind Sheikh Hasina to push for the adoption of the parliamentary sys-

At the moment, the role of the Jatiya Party has been largely marginalised. Unless there is a dramatic change in the overall scenario, it remains a minor actor on the scene, although, from time to time, its acting chairman Moudud Ahmed will pontificate about "national approach" to tackle national problems.

In the changed situation, we may, therefore, see less and less of internal divisiveness within

After 22 Years They're Actually Sitting Round a Table

Etan Vlessing writes from Belfast

Dogged Peter Brooke, British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, has had more success

than almost any of his predecessors in getting the political parties in strife-torn Ulster to sit

round a table. It has taken two decades. No one can be surprised that there have already

F it has taken 22 years to get Northern Ireland's political leaders to talk, there seems little point in rushing things when they finally seem near to getting round a table.

Whatever the outcome of current wrangling between stubborn political parties in the north and the Irish government, the negotiations on the future of Northern Ireland are moving almost imperceptibly towards round-table talks.

Since 1969 the bomb and the bullet have become the hallmark of Northern Ireland to the outside world. The majority Protestant community are adamant that the province will remain within the United Kingdom, while the minority Roman Catholic community would prefer to join up with the Irish Republic to the south.

Since "the Troubles," as the bloody Northern Ireland conflict is often termed, gathered pace in the Seventies, the British government, maintaining forces and direct rule in the province, has sought a way in which the majority Protestants and the minority Catholics might share power and resolve their major differences.

But Northern Ireland politics are not for the fainthearted. In tense and divided Belfast, where one-third of the province lives, the depth of cynicism and apathy among some, and religious bigotry among others, means the fact that the Ulster talks are continuing at all is progress enough for many.

Most people cannot do much more than shake their heads and trust their hearts when commenting on current efforts at agreement.

Their silence betrays a weary boredom over the current talks, which is found as well on the British mainland. A leading administrator in Northern Ireland's Art Council, the province's arts funding

been hiccups. If a negotiation gets started it is going to be an extremely long haul. body, says: It's all posturing.

Atlantic Ocean

I can't see any agreement coming from the politicians now." Another long time resident of Belfast and a leading businessman, says most people in Northern Ireland want to bridge differences between communities and live in peace.

"They've been talking for years.

But he could not imagine what the province's politicians might say or do as they sit for the first time around a table. "The tragedy is I don't know what the politicians are thinking at all."

Most people in Belfast have learned to turn their gaze away from "The Troubles" and get on with their lives. Many will claim Belfast is a good place to live in, given the current rise

Northern Ireland

A Minister responsible for Northern Ireland sits in the British Cabinet

seats in UK parliament:

(Protestant centre-right. Aim: complete union with

(Protestant extreme-right.

Democratic Unionists

Westminster, but with local law-making and administrative powers) Social Democratic and

Labour Party (Catholic centre-left.

Alm: a united ireland) Sinn Fein

(has not taken seat. Aim: a united ireland.

Political wing of IRA)

Ulster Popular Unionist Party

Police 12,793
British Army 10,523
Ulster Defence Regiment 6,095

Aim: union with

7 Northern Ireland

9 Ulster Unionists

in retail activity and development within the town centre.

The rejuvenation of Belfast's port area on the Lagan river. following the demise of the city's traditional shipbuilding sector, aims to create jobs and foster civic pride in what is considered a neutral zone between divided East and West Belfast

At the same time, the depth of hatred felt by both communities is tangible when you witness British soldiers emerge from their high-security barracks, all surrounded by high stockade fences and turrets to protect against bomb attacks, in order to patrol Belfast.

To get round, British soldiers in bullet-proof vests ride

in armadillo-like jeeps, their rifles ever raised and aimed in readiness against possible

The challenge for the Northern Ireland government will be to attract enough jobs and outside investment to West and North Belfast in particular, where unemployment among local youth reaches 80 per cent in some areas.

With out these jobs, any agreement the province's politicians eventually hammer out will never work because the city's embattled neighbourhoods will not let it work.

Belfast's divided communities must be part of any eventual agreement, politicians on all sides are agreed. Otherwise all efforts are certain to fail

Total deaths since 1961

Jister Defence Regiment

Paramilitary Organisations

Irish Republican Army (IRA-aim: united socialist Ireland) Irish National Liberation Army

Ulster Defence Force (aim:

to counter IRA)

Irish Sea

Royal Ulster Constabulary 284 British Army 430

But should this optimism prove unfounded and the impending talks fail, the fear is that this last, best hope for a secure and lasting settlement will be followed by Protestant paramilitaries on the one hand, and the Irish Republic Army (IRA) on the other, launching yet another wave of violence and bloodshed in Northern Ireland. Over recent weeks. Peter

and leaders all round will lose

insist that, at long last, the

ment. The current posturing

on both sides, they urge, may

simply be the prelude to more

constructive talks when the

politicians finally sit down

agreement arrived at early on,

most people expect a series of

smaller agreements to be

forced over time, each helping

to build on the trust that must

eventually underpin any

power-sharing agreement.

Far from a comprehensive

across from each other.

time may be right for agree-

Of course, the rare believers

credibility.

Brooke, the British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. has tried with some success to corral the province's main politicians, including Rev Ian Paisley of the Unionist Party on the Protestant side, and John Hume of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) of the Catholic community, into setting a time and location for power-sharing talks with the Irish-government. When the talks threatened

yet again to founder, Unionist politicians agreed Stormont Castle in East Belfast as the

venue for most of the meetings in the second round of talks.

The fortress-like Parliament building is situated on a hill overlooking the Shankhill Road and Divis Flats neighbourhoods below, where the damage-strewn surroundings and sectarian hatred is more reminiscent of embattled Beirut than the north-western corner of Europe.

Peter Brooke apparently convinced Paisley, James Molyneaux and the other Unionist politicians to stand down from initial opposition to allowing Charles Haughey, the Irish Prime Minister, to set foot in Belfast and mount the steps to Stormont for round two of the talks.

The sight of Paisley and other Protestant leaders later journeying south into Ireland for the third round of talks in Dublin will be a further propaganda coup for the Irish government.

In the long term, hopes for peace between Northern Ireland's waiting communities may well depend on economic recovery more than anything else. In the absence of a Nelson Mandela or a Mikhail Gorbachev; politicians who can lead weary factions by the ear towards possible agreement, most people in Northern Ireland are doing their best to turn their back on "The Troubles" and lead as normal a life as possible.

In the meantime, the sight of smiling politicians emerging from Stormont Castle to continue their negotiations before waiting reporters, and almost daily outbreaks of violence in Belfast and surrounding provinces, does much to colour life in a embattled land biding its time before possible - GEMINI NEWS

ETAN VLESSING is a British journalist working for Financial Weekly in London.

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.

Gas reserve

Sir, I refer to Mr Abu M Faiz's gripe (May 23) on our habit of rushing out with the begging bowl towards the donor countries for perpetual assistance for 'calamities' which seemingly never forsake

In this connection may I draw attention to another of our complexes: to have the cake and eat it too. For example, we are chary of exporting a part of our rich reserve of natural gas, which is supposed to last for more than 70 years (maybe more, if Scimitar's advertisement is taken into cognizance). LPG /LNG (and other derivatives) have a good world

market. We should reexamine whether it would be feasible to sell, say, 10 years' reserve, and use the foreign exchange for strengthening the development structure; especially after the recent devastating cyclone and tidal wave. We could have had the natu-

ral gas network in the northern region had we agreed to sell some of the gas to a neighbouring country in the '70s. We are unable to attract foreign investment for our coal reserves to be commercialized (if feasible). We cannot attract enough foreign investment in the country, the way, say, Malaysia is doing; although we have a vast and cheap labour

We have to improve our image abroad. We expect some dynamic (and fast) action from our new leaders.

A. Mawaz Dhaka.

Irish Republic

Golden Lion

Sir, Lion International President's Gold Medal has been awarded to a Bangladeshi in Dhaka recently. One of the most famous philanthropic organizations, Lion International has been very popular for its helps to the wretch like "a friend in need."

Lions' humanitarian services to the victims of nature's mistreatment have earned appreciation and confidence of both the public and private sectors. In a poor country like Bangladesh where dozens of foreign donors are discharging their aids to the unfortunate and to the nation's developmental efforts as well, the society of Lions has justified its worth of a Helping-Hand.

lightened "Lionism" many times over as the Nightingale or as the Hazi Mohamed Moshin. So much so, Lion International, unlike the king-ofthe beasts, stands out now as a symbol of service and sacrifice to the suffering humanity that has been promoted gorgeously by the Bangladeshi Lions.

Zla School Road Mymensingh 2200.

M. Rahman

On the campus

Sir, The present situation on the campus is very frustrating. The campuses have now become battle fields. Friendly relationship among the students is now a matter of the past. A student feels no hesitation to assault his fellow student on mere reasons. But this anarchy cannot be allowed to continue further.

In my opinion, the government may in consultation with

Also, exemplary, dogmatic different political parties find generosity of the Lions en- out an effective way to restore legs and hands, and then went discipline and congenial academic atmosphere on the campus. Let our students also set an example in this respect as they did in restoring democratic order in the country.

> Assistant Professor, Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Dhaka-1207.

M. Zahidul Haque

Extent of brutality!

Sir, All over the world, women are considered to be symbols of softness, sobriety, sweetness, and what not.

But I was shocked to read a

news item recently that a very, very brutal incident was enacted by a woman! Apparently, there was a

quarrel between two families in a village in the district of Barisal. A woman belonging to the other group, got hold of the son, aged four years.

anytime! She first gagged him by

Amena Ahmed putting fried rice inside his Azimpur, Dhaka.

mouth, and then bound his on to chop off his hands and feet one by one.

The report says that even

those officers who took part in the investigation of the dead body of the child, couldn't check tears at this act of inhumanity! It is further reported that

the parents of the said child are very poor and, therefore, for them to go to any court for redeeming the crime done, or punishment to the criminal, is out of the question. This incident speaks

well as the state of barbarity we have reached. Another important question is that what sort of woman was this when woman is a symbol of motherhood ? Can we still claim that we

volumes about our courage, as

are civilized? We can put any of the barbarians in shame