

Looking at One's Own Faults

Again those appalling photographs on the front pages of newspapers. For the umpteenth time they published cruel pictures of bodies laid out on the ground in the most grotesque manner in a gesture of some final indignity — and of lamenting relations of persons drowned in droves in some bus or launch disaster. This time the photographs tellingly caught the tragedy of the bus that plunged into the Titas on Friday afternoon by portraying the scenes at the Shahbazzpur ghat when after two days of unsparing toll the bulk was raised from water with twentyweight bodies in it.

The local bus, bound for Madhavpur from Brahmanbaria, fell into the river Titas with about 50 passengers on its seats. Luckily for as many as 25 others travelling mostly on the roof, they had got down at the ferry-ghat and escaped the sudden call of eternity, and unluckily for the 50 inside the damned contraption some helper, and not the driver, bungled at the steering wheel and the bus rather than boarding the ferry went down into the river.

Photographs such as lending poignancy to the issue of the national press on Sunday help the newspapers produce a striking page. They indeed do something more than that. While they certainly produce a sense of shock in many of the newspaper-reading public they also represent a kind of mindlessness which the editors and the government and, in the final analysis, our society in general share among themselves. We have all the rights in the world to ask the government to tell the nation about what was going to be done to the bodies and to the persons they gave shape to and what have they so far had done to prevent people from coming to such an end. But the demand would be as hollow as a Prime Minister's condolence for the very obvious reason that the Press itself do never follow up any of these cases of package unnatural deaths and keep their readers posted with what happens to the dead and to their families. The Press has also traditionally in mounting any campaign aimed at curbing such meaningless and highly preventable loss of life. They haven't been able so far to pressure the government into feeling any measure of responsibility and guilt in the nagging repetition of such harrowing scenario. Not have they tried to motivate society into giving up practices that invite such tragedies — and the society which includes the operators of the transport vehicles as well as the passengers, has much to mend in the way it takes travelling and in the fatalistic way they give everything up to chance. The Press only publishes photographs and some information in their barest outline. In the present case not one paper could say how did the bus get into the river — by falling short of the ferry or by overshooting it. And the nation's leading daily said the bus fell when trying to negotiate a diversion to the Shahbazzpur bridge — not a word on the ferry anywhere around is there.

That's the measure of our failure which doesn't in any way lessen the government's share of guilt in the matter. Such disasters at ferry crossings are followed up for a few days by the strict observance of the requirement that all passengers get down before the vehicle boards the vessel — and then full busloads of people drive up to the ferry till another accident kills another dozens of persons. Why is this pattern so unshakably persistent? For one thing, the ferry-vessels are so loaded with vehicles that practically no space is left for bus passengers to stand on it. And then, on reaching the other shore the buses shoot up like arrows waiting not for a minute for any woman or child or old straggler to run up. All these are supremely improvable — if the passengers are conscious and insistent and the bus handlers a little more responsible and the government — in the shape of those in charge of the ghats and ferries — more caring about discharging its duty.

Only last year at the very same point another bus slid into water drowning 46. The final toll of the present disaster can very likely run up past even that. And will the lessons remain unlearned even after that?

End of the Party

How would one react if the Catholic Church was banned in the Vatican? With disbelief, certainly. But with understanding? Never! So how are to react to the news that the Communist Party has been banned, meaning outlawed, in the Russian Federated Soviet Socialist Republic? If that was a piece news carried by Pravada on April 1, then one could have greeted it with a slight chuckle. But since banning of the party was the result of a presidential decree issued by Boris Yeltsin only the other day, we are at a total loss.

When the communist party was outlawed in the United States in the early '50s nobody batted an eyelid. Many people did not even know there was a communist party in the US to ban in the first place! But the Soviet Union? Where the party had come to symbolise the state itself? The irony of Yeltsin's decree is so acute as to defy analysis.

Was it not only the other day Yeltsin himself was the party's Moscow city chief and a candidate-member of the Politbureau? He certainly was. Did Mikhail Gorbachev not climb to the top of international power and fame on the back of his unstinting service to the party? He certainly did. Was not the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, that unlikely federation of 15 ethnically diverse and often historically hostile regions, itself the product of the October Revolution and designs of Joseph Stalin who turned a mass of revolutionary fervour into an organised, monolithic and bureaucratic political party? It certainly was. In other words, the USSR itself was fathered and brought up to adulthood by the Party.

And now, that grown up child has disdainfully disowned its once-mighty father! The father has been declared persona non grata in the very house he built! It's almost as if Yeltsin is organising a grand New Year's bash, but has told the head of the family to stay away because he is too old and decidedly out of fashion, and also because he would be an embarrassment and might even scare the other guests away.

Such is life. All this is happening while the Communist Party enjoys full legal status in all the democratic countries, including in the United States, that bastion of capitalism and "nest of conspirators." We may soon see Lenin's statue in New York, London, Paris, etc. while no trace of the founder of the Soviet state will remain at any corner of the cities which used to be adorned with his busts. This is the difference between democracy and other forms of government.

An acute stagnation has come to characterise the country's economy in the past few months, causing confidence among investors to slump to a record low. Apparently no other period since the liberation of Bangladesh 20 years ago has seen such a depression in economic activity.

If the above had been stated by an opposition politician or anybody else wishing to damage the credibility of the present government, then one could have taken the gloomy assessment with a large pinch of salt.

Unfortunately, the comments were made by some of the leading figures in the business community in the course of an open discussion held in the city Nov 5 last organised by the Federation of Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Given the fact that the grim picture was painted by some of the country's foremost entrepreneurs, the impression needs to be taken seriously. Even if one is inclined to think the business community is being a little alarmist, perhaps to get more concession out of the government, one cannot escape the fact that, whatever political leanings or motives a businessman may have, the last thing he needs is an unstable political environment. As a rule, he will oppose parties that propose intervention and regulation, because that will hamper the growth of the private sector. But the present regime came to power on the promise of making life easier for business, not difficult.

One does not have to have an MBA to recognise that a legitimate i.e. representative government is a Good Thing for the economy, but perhaps more important is that government's ability to ensure an atmosphere of stability and confidence both in the economic and political arenas.

The Economy and Power: It's the Government's Choice

by Sabir Mustafa

In the past, dictatorial regimes have succeeded in achieving a limited degree of economic success by managing to impose a great deal of social and political discipline from above. The resulting stability, coupled with a deregulation of business activities, allowed the economy to pick up steam.

But there was always a catch. The dictatorial and unrepresentative character of those regimes meant that they lacked legitimacy in the popular minds, which created con-

ditions for long-term political stability, thus threatening short-term economic gains.

Furthermore, as with all things authoritarian development of social and economic infrastructures, financed exclusively by foreign aid, was carried out according to whims of individuals rather than logic, leading to what could be politely described as lop-sided development.

But today we face a peculiar problem. We have an elected and therefore representative government. But that government is too often betraying a lack of leadership within itself. And when the government itself lacks leadership, the state loses direction and the economy cannot but suffer.

We have an export policy and an industrial policy in place which, on paper at least, are tailor-made for breathing new life into the economy. But business leaders are complaining of stagnation and lack of direction. Something, quite

obviously, is amiss.

Only a few months ago, the finance minister was lecturing everyone on the virtues of reforms prescribed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. But more recently, he has been talking about "difficulties" involved in implementing those reforms.

Last week, he talked about the need for "political decision", in order to get the economy moving.

The prevailing situation simply means that there is no long-term economic strategy in place as yet, or if it is, there is nobody in government who knows how to go about implementing that policy. But more seriously, the lack of direction seems to emanate from where it matters most in a parliamentary form of gov-

ernment — at the head of the cabinet.

In order to inspire confidence, a prime minister needs to demonstrate a profound understanding of the situation and a clear vision of what needs to be done and just as importantly, a clear recognition of the socio-political parameters within which those economic policies are to be implemented.

This is particularly impor-

tant for a country like Bangladesh, which has to look abroad for investments as well as aid to keep pushing economic growth rates upwards while building up essential socio-economic infrastructures.

But because of our recent experiences with dictatorial and unaccountable regimes, the new government also has to show that it is capable of carrying through its policies within the constraints imposed by a democratic polity where parliament will demand a much greater say than ever before.

Regrettably, what we have had so far from the prime minister and some leading ministers are sermons and lectures on sins committed by the previous regime, and how "certain quarters" are conspiring to undo her government and democracy itself.

However, while there may or may not be substance in the conspiracy theory, past misdeeds cannot be offered as an excuse for present lack of direction. The people have entrusted Khaleda Zia and her party with the honour, privilege and responsibility to govern, not to look back and complain but to look ahead and point the way forward.

Yet eight months into office, the "new" government itself seems confused about what its policies are.

For instance, will nationalised industries be privatised or not? The Industrial Policy says they will, but the PM recently said the "profitable ones" will not be, and the Minister of Textiles even more recently said none of the textile factories, nearly 50 per cent of which are loss-making, will be either! So, where are we?

The Bank of Credit and Commerce (BCC) crisis is still unresolved even after four months. But the government has not been forthcoming about what the real problem is i.e. what exactly is the internal state of BCC in Bangladesh?, nor how much damage the affair is causing the economy.

The bank loan defaulter issue is swinging like a pendulum, with the finance minister breathing fire one minute, and quietly writing off accumulated interest on those loans in the next.

This is not a question of waiting a little while and hope things will sort themselves out nicely. It is the industrial sector that will have to be rejuvenated if we are to tear that ob-

noxious LDC tag off our lapels. Considering our immediate economic environment — that is, south and south-east Asia — has become a high growth area, we have a lot of catching up to do.

In the present, highly-competitive environment, for us to stand still would be to move backwards, and watch our competitors disappear into the horizon (we have already lost sight of Thailand and Malaysia, with Indonesia and the Philippines picking up pace, and if Narasimha Rao's radical policies bear fruit, then soon we won't even have a place to hide).

Therefore, excuses such as "its still a new government" or "its early days still" are just not applicable anymore.

The government is still in an advantageous position: it enjoys widespread international sympathy as a result of being an elected government, and the public at large can be a very patient lot if it sees some sign of sincere determination from the government. The business community has made no secret of its willingness to cooperate as a popular and successful government is always good for business, and even the labour unions could be pacified if they were dealt with firmly but fairly and with sincerity.

But all these favourable conditions will disappear if the government fails to show it has a total grasp of the situation and prepared to deal with it accordingly. Failure to act soon will really push the government into the path of a crisis, but it will be a crisis of its own making, and there will be no more scapegoats.

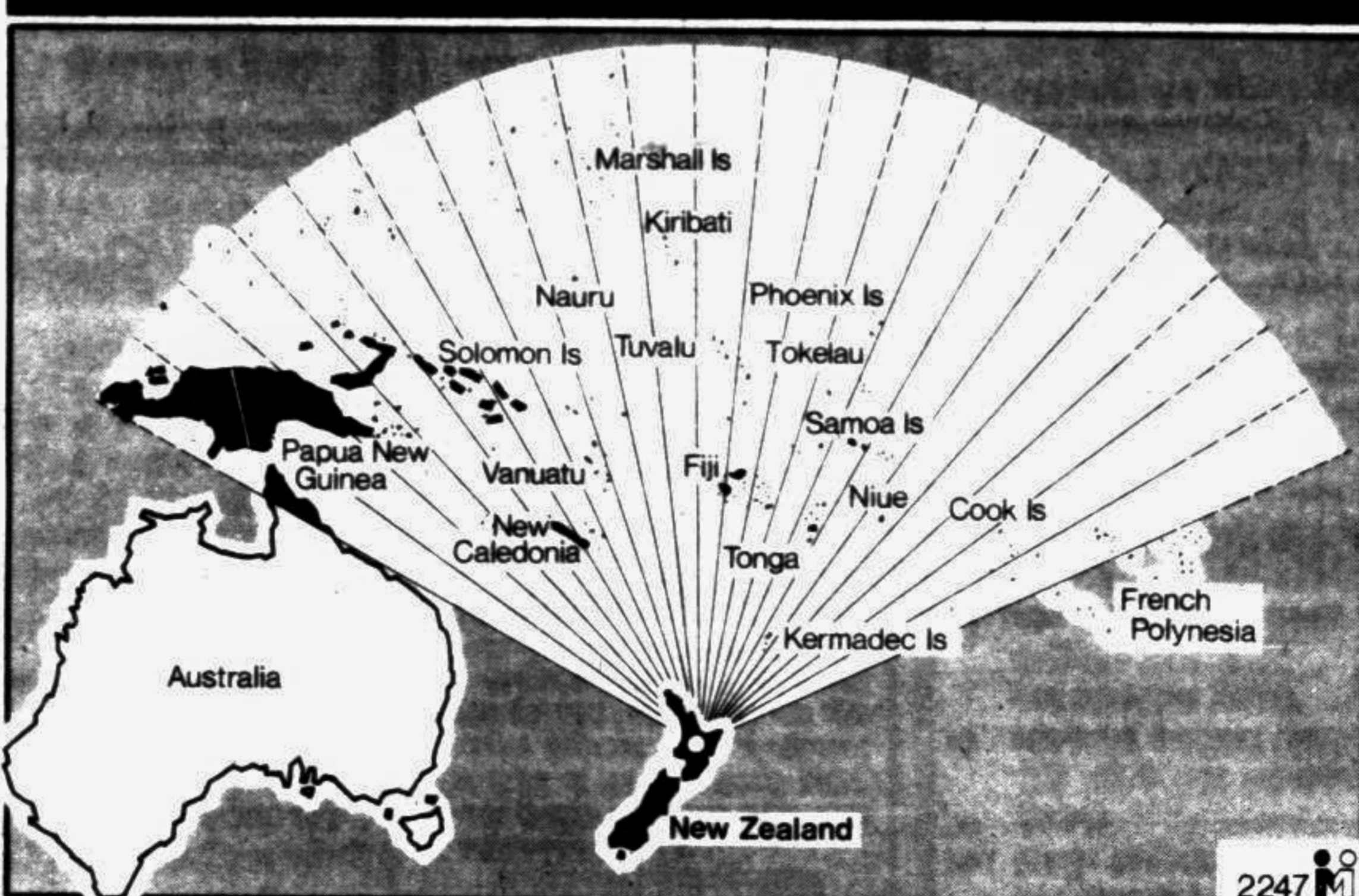
But it can avert such a crisis by giving top priority to the problems facing the economy, and by bringing some order and direction in decision-making. It is in everybody's interest that the economy assume some recognisable shape within the next 12 to 18 months.

US Nuclear Cuts May End New Zealand Freeze

David Robie writes from Auckland

Since former Prime Minister David Lange ushered in New Zealand's nuclear-free policy and barred a US warship from its ports six years ago, Washington has frozen government and military links with its former Pacific ally. The US announcement of a cutback in its nuclear arsenal may signal a thaw in relations between the two countries and lead to renewed American warship visits to New Zealand.

Anti-nuclear voice in the Pacific



(Australia, New Zealand and US) alliance, dropped high-level government contracts with New Zealand, severed military and intelligence cooperation and applied some trade sanctions.

In 1987 Lange's administration enshrined the policy with a law banning nuclear weapons and after he resigned as prime minister the following year he wrote a best-selling book, Nuclear-free — The Zealand Way.

Lange described how small-scale protest turned into a mass movement and then into government action as New

Zealand took the courageous step of refusing to get involved in the great power's nuclear arms race.

He said: "Small powers cannot wait until the big powers move. They will assess their security options. They will take slow and often painful steps to minimise their risks."

"The exclusion of nuclear weapons from New Zealand was a small step to take in the global context, but unless a lot of small steps are taken we will always be in thrall to nuclear weapons."

In a decision praised by many New Zealand peace cam-

paigners, Bush ordered the elimination of all US ground-launched, short-range nuclear weapons.

Specially significant for New Zealand was the US move to withdraw all nuclear weapons from its aircraft carriers, other surface ships and attack submarines — leaving just 34 strategic submarines cruising the oceans with powerful long-range nuclear missiles.

This means that 90 per cent of American surface warships could potentially soon be welcomed in New Zealand ports, although it is likely to

take about two years before this would become effective.

Prime Minister Jim Bolger greeted the US move as "an historic step of global significance" while Opposition Labour Party leader Mike Moore believes the US move has validated New Zealand's nuclear-free stance.

He called on the Bolger government to start a new campaign against French nuclear tests at Moruroa and Fangataua atolls in the South Pacific.

The National government inherited the nuclear-free policy when it was elected to office after turning about-face before last year's election, reluctantly accepting it as the will of the majority.

Although the policy was endorsed by more than 75 per cent of New Zealanders and continues to enjoy overwhelming support, Foreign Minister Don McKinnon and defence Minister Warren Cooper have been accused of trying to sabotage the stance.

New Zealand's 1987 Nuclear-Free Zone, Disarmament and Arms Control Act allows foreign warships into the country only if the prime minister is satisfied that the warships will not be carrying any nuclear explosive device.

The law also bans the entry of nuclear-powered ships, and makes it illegal for any New Zealand citizen to "aid, abet or procure any person to manufacture, acquire or possess or have control over any nuclear explosive device."

Constitutional experts believe this last provision could prevent any New Zealander

taking part in any joint exercises which include nuclear-armed ships. However, they say, it is unlikely that this would happen as the US has already removed obsolete nuclear weapons from about half its warships.

Nicky Hager, campaigner for the New Zealand Coalition Against Nuclear Warships, said: "Without any fanfare, the Americans withdrew nuclear weapons off most of their ships in the last two or three years."

Said peace researcher Owen Wilkes: "I am delighted with the new US policy. It represents a total capitulation to our nuclear-free policy."

"It shows the power of protest. Of course, we still have to recognise that the strategic nuclear weapons will remain untouched — and they are the ones with the capacity to blow up the whole world."

Nuclear-powered warships will also remain a problem, Wilkes believes, but this is an environmental and safety problem rather than a peace issue.

Dr Stephen Hoadley, an associate professor of political studies at Auckland University, said it was now up to the US to show that the neither-confirm-nor-deny policy was not longer relevant.

He said: "Alternatively, the ball is in New Zealand's court to alter the legislation."

Bolger is expected to face severe pressure from McKinnon, who is also deputy Prime Minister, and other ministers to relax the law and resume military ties with Washington.

While professor Hoadley argues that links with bigger powers are vital for New Zealand's tiny armed forces, Lange, Wilkes and others insist that the break-up of the Soviet Union renders the old style of alliance meaningless. — GEMINI NEWS

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The Editor

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Let's learn from history

Sir, We all felt a ray of hope after the fall of the Ershad regime. With Chief Justice Shahabuddin in the august chair of the presidency showing and enforcing his commitment to democracy we could all feel proud to belong to this nation. For the first time we have had a free and fair election. The people got a chance to elect their choice of representatives. They were given the opportunity, for the first time, to make their decision without a gun pointed to their head or a knife at their belly.

The election was held and the people gave their mandate.

Begum Khaleda Zia with her uncompromising struggle of the long years against an autocracy that had gone wild, symbolized people's hope for an honest and open government. They looked at her for guiding the nation out of moral, social, economic and political degradation to a healthier status. It was a heavy burden given to her considering the backdrop of the nation. The expectations were very high and the limitations too much.

We are a forgetful nation which wants its rewards regardless of the performance of its leadership. Begum Zia and her party have been in power for only over six months. We expect miracles, but, this is

not right. Of course, we did expect some changes in attitude that could give us a lasting impression of her party's commitment to the people who so overwhelmingly elected them. These include such minor things as changing /stopping the practice of 1) overdoing of the news coverage of the ministers on the TV everyday, 2) stopping the traffic to let ministers' car go by, 3) protocol of receiving and seeing off the Prime Minister everytime she is off on an official visit, 4) some kind of patronizing words being used about the government trying to give everything to the poor. We have seen it all before. This is like a repeat performance and it is boring.

We want action. We want commitment. We have elected them of our own free choice and will. We do not need to see and hear them on the TV telling us how hard they are working, trying to change our fate. We live with the reality and will know first if we are any better or worse. In five years we will be given

another chance to practice our franchise wherupon we will show our gratitude or distaste. Just a little note of caution to keep in mind what has happened in the past. Let us learn from our history, not discard it.

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Does honesty pay off?

Sir, The long queues in most bank branches throughout the banking hours show the keenness of the consumers to pay bills for utility services viz. electricity, WASA, gas, telephone, telex, municipal tax and the like. The tragedy in paying bills after standing in queue for hours together can better be realised than described. Allocation of a limited number of branches for collection of such bills has at times been very much distressing. Some of the consumers/subscribers may find it convenient to pay such bills to

banks close to their residence, but there are others who would find it convenient to pay bills to banks close to their place of duty. Curiously enough this aspect has been utterly ignored by the Departments while allocating branches for collection of such bills.

One must understand the pangs of the subscribers in paying their bills for utility services every month at the cost of much of their time and money. There are however many others, who are indifferent to making payment of utility bills every month and they accumulate the dues, and by doing so, it seems, they save much of the botheration, time and money, which the others have to shoulder in the process of paying bills every month!

The Electricity Department, for instance, in their endeavour to realise such accumulated dues, at times waive interest and fix a date for clearance of 50% of arrear dues within such fixed time, and allow 2/3 instalments for

payment of rest of the dues. My point is: what about those consumers/subscribers who paid their bills regularly every month? They do not get the benefit of waiver allowed by the Department! By their sincerity in paying bills regularly, at the cost of their much valued time and money, they kept their accounts up to date, they should not be deprived of the benefit of waiver granted, which they would have also enjoyed had they been 'wise enough' to keep their bills pending. This is perhaps a proper (sadly) instance to show that "honesty is not the best policy".

It is, accordingly, hoped that the Department while granting a waiver, should take steps so that the benefit of waiver also goes to the regular bill payers, by adjustment of such dues from their future bills, for the sake of equity, justice and fairplay.

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