

Restricting Official Meetings

At long last the government has responded to the need to regularise meetings, seminars and gatherings that ministers and high officials need to attend. We welcome the move of putting some sort of restrictions on dates and time when no meetings and seminars can be held. It is well known that cabinet members, senior bureaucrats, departmental heads and, of course, those who work closely with them are almost never found in their desks because they are required to attend one meeting or another. We are in no way denigrating the importance of or the need for holding meetings, seminars or workshops. What we are asking for is to make them more business like and less wasteful. What happens now is that a large number of government officials, instead of carrying out their day to day activities are obliged to attend an endless series of meetings without always producing the results necessary to push forward the work of the government. Not only do we need to restrict the number of meetings but also to make them limited in duration and more productive through better preparation.

While we are on the subject of saving valuable time of our ministers and high officials we would like to suggest that many more useful steps can be taken in this regard which will effectively cut the loss of time of our decision makers. To start with we feel that the presence of a large number of cabinet ministers — in some cases the whole cabinet itself — in every function which the Prime Minister attends, is unnecessary and wasteful. Only the minister concerned with the substance of the meeting should accompany the PM. Questions can also be asked as to whether the ministers need to attend all functions that they do. One cannot escape the feeling that occasionally there appears to be a competition among our leaders as to who gets invited to inaugurate how many functions, with the resultant bonus of coming under media focus on each occasion. Then there is the more absurd situation of ministers presiding over functions that have nothing to do with their substantive work. Sometimes it appears that there is a bit too much of protocol connected with the visits abroad of our Prime Minister. First among equals is what the PM is in the cabinet of a parliamentary government.

The British PM is not known to keep his cabinet colleagues waiting in long lines at the airport when he leaves or returns from visits abroad. Well much of the blame lies on the shoulder of the organisers who insist on the presence of one or several dignitaries to grace their functions. A few seconds of TV news footage cannot be said to be totally beyond their calculations in deciding who to invite. But as we cultivate democratic traditions, we must realise that ministers or government officials should not be the only ones to qualify for these honours. Men and women of letters, prominent social workers, artists, singers, scientists and the like can equally qualify to grace important occasions.

Let the move by the government trigger a whole range of new thinking on our part in this regard.

A True Hero

A college teacher was on Sunday evening beaten up brutally at the University mosque premises. Details as published in the different newspapers the following morning differed. But there is no question about the identity of the victim — Qazi Nurul, 35, a lecturer at the Munirunnessa Girls' College of Mymensingh. And by all accounts the culprits were students and came from a particular residential hall for university students.

Some newspaper reports said that a small group was indulging in 'anti-social' activity in the mosque with two girls. Others said an innocent girl passer-by was on the point of being molested sexually on the same spot by that group. The teacher protested and tried to save the girl. The youngmen, supposedly students, fell on him, gave him a good beating and then dragged the good man to Surja Sen Hall. There he was shot with a pistol stuck into his head and is in hospital in a serious condition.

This is shocking. Nevertheless, it is perfectly in line with the rape of two garment workers near the university library by students last year and the year before that the forcible carrying away of a girl by a gang of students and brutal stabbing of a passer-by who tried to resist them. These precedents do not in any way detract from the despicability of the attack on the college teacher. That the present crime took place inside a mosque premise perhaps adds to mindlessness of the culprits.

Who doesn't know about the many dangers of the university area? But life never stopped throbbing for a moment in the zone, come what may. This has been possible because of overwhelming superiority in the area of the forces of sanity. Thousands of students and teachers and their sons and daughters people the area who together very heroically had contributed to forging the zone into an island of culture and liberty, the only spot in the nation that has been strictly 'out of bound' — as the World War II expression went — for all autocratic regimes and self-appointed dictatorial saviours. This has been the springboard of all democratic and cultural movements ever since the first 'No' to M A Jinnah way back in 1948. All this panoply of achievements stand not only to be blackened but indeed ridiculed by incidents such as occurred on Sunday evening and the like of which keep on bobbing up every now and then throughout the year.

How to stop such sporadic cases of crime in such an area. Appealing to police for more intensive surveillance of the area is meaningless as the whole zone for many days now is literally swarmed with policemen. The Sunday incident must have taken place within a hundred yards of the presence of a police posse.

One sure way to fight such crime is to emulate the example set by Qazi Nurul Islam. According to some reports he effectively prevented the molestation of the victim girl, and the culprits warned him of a reprisal. That was on Saturday. Mr. Islam returned to the mosque next evening to say his prayers and take the punishment from the hoodlums. By whichever account, the teacher showed rare courage and strength of character in standing up to violent crime. If more and more people start facing up to crime in the footsteps of Mr. Islam, some tangible results would be there before long.

Our hats off to Qazi Nurul Islam. May he recover soon and return to his college a true hero.

Bush Re-election No Longer a Sure Bet

Kevin J. Kelley writes from Burlington

A stagnant economy is now the chief concern of US voters, and that is bad news for George Bush, whose foreign policy gains made his re-election seem a sure bet as recently as last summer. Challenges to Bush from within his own party could embolden his Democratic rivals and boost their chances of an upset presidential victory next November.

THE script for the 1992 presidential election in the United States has been radically revised. As recently as late summer, George Bush seemed a sure bet to win a second term in the White House.

The Republican President was enjoying high approval ratings in all opinion surveys, due mainly to a series of foreign policy successes. US victories in both the Gulf War and the Cold War, the military overturn of Panama's dictator, General Noriega, and the convening of Middle East peace talks, had combined to wrap Bush in an aura of political invincibility.

As well, the other major party seemed to be conceding the race. Until recently, the Democrats' sole announced presidential candidate was a little-known former senator. Voters indifferent to Bush had no credible alternative to consider.

Today, all these factors remain. Although Saddam Hussein's continued presence in Baghdad is embarrassing to Bush, he still regarded as a masterful practitioner of foreign policy. And while the Democratic field now includes six declared candidates, none has acquired presidential stature.

But, to Bush's great detriment, the focus of US politics has shifted. The country's attention is no longer riveted on events overseas but is now fixed primarily on domestic issues, where Bush exhibits major weakness.

Contrary to his administration's constant assurances, the recession has not ended. And widespread insecurity over jobs has angered a public al-

ready upset about corruption and perceived incompetence among top elected officials.

Even when he was setting popularity records, Bush was generally thought to be inattentive to domestic matters. For nearly three years, he failed to formulate convincing proposals to alleviate social ills including homelessness, a troubled education system, and runaway health care costs. Along with the economy, these problems now dominate the political agenda.

These new circumstances have emboldened two challengers to come forward within Bush's own party. Their willingness to risk the wrath of the Republican establishment is a sign that Bush should no longer be considered unbeatable.

David Duke, leader of a fringe movement of white supremacists, does not rank as a serious threat to Bush. Duke has won election only in a small legislative district in Louisiana, and despite saturation media coverage, has faked badly in two bids for higher posts. Duke will almost certainly act only as an irritant in whatever Republican primary races he enters in 1992.

Patrick Buchanan, on the other hand, could inflict heavy damage on Bush. A nationally syndicated newspaper columnist and television commentator, Buchanan is probably the best-known hard-line conser-

vative in the country.

While Buchanan's themes of nationalism and isolationism are similar to Duke's, he is not saddled with Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi associations, and could therefore capture a sizable Republican protest vote.



The focus has shifted

The key test of Buchanan's viability will come soon. If he takes more than one-third of the vote in the mid-February New Hampshire primary, he will overnight become a major

obstacle to Bush's re-election, perhaps even prompting the President to withdraw from the race.

It would likewise inflame the six Democratic contenders with great confidence. Already, they are being looked at, not as curiosities doomed to defeat, but as politicians who just possibly could achieve a stunning upset.

In that light, Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton appears to be the early frontrunner. Although he is still barely known outside political circles, he has own respect for his accomplishments in office and for his policy proposals.

Clinton is also well-positioned geographically, since he has repeatedly won election in a state typical of the South — a region once dominated by the Democrats but forfeited to Republicans in the last three presidential races.

Low Senator Tom Harkin, an unabashed, old-style liberal, has also been well received among Democrats, especially political activists.

Jerry Brown, the former California governor, now runs against a political system which, he charges, is manipulated by wealthy interests. The national mood is such that this message might find a large, receptive audience.

When no one else was running, Paul Tsongas earned plaudits for his suggestion that Democrats act more favourably

toward business while retaining their compassion for the poor.

But the former senator from Massachusetts is a lacklustre campaigner who could be an early casualty in primary voting.

With Jesse Jackson on the sidelines, African-Americans have no obvious champion to support. Virginia Governor Douglas Wilder, the only black in the Democratic race, is trying to claim Jackson's mantle. Wilder lacks Jackson's magnetism, however, and has a comparatively conservative record. But he could still do well in the Southern primaries if he survives until March and excites the large number of blacks in those states.

Bob Kerry, a Nebraska senator, is the most enigmatic figure in the Democratic field. Rivaling Clinton in looks, youth and intelligence, he has the added status of being a Vietnam veteran who lost part of one leg in combat.

Kerry's campaign has had a slow and troubled start, however. Unless it quickly gathers momentum, his debut on the national stage will be brief.

Already, one figure widely touted as a formidable contender, New York Governor Mario Cuomo, has ended weeks of speculation by announcing shortly before Christmas that he will not be a candidate.

Though Bush's chances seem much shakier now than a

few months ago, he must still be considered a favourite for re-election at the outset of the election year. Both history and demographics are squarely on his side.

Elected White House incumbents rarely fail to win a second term. It usually requires a major scandal, an economic collapse or a protracted and problematic war for a sitting president to be defeated. At this stage, none of those prospects loom, although continued recession could doom Bush's hopes.

But even if the economy is no better shape by election day in November, the Democratic nominee will probably still be rated the underdog. Barring a radical shift in sentiment, Bush can count on 20 of the 50 states in his column.

The Democrat, by contrast, can be confident of winning only about half a dozen. At the presidential level, the US is now a dependably conservative country. Republicans have won five of the last six White House races.

Bush's foreign policy expertise and image as a sure-handed commander-in-chief are also important assets. None of the Democratic candidates can compete with him in this realm, which usually matters a great deal to voters.

Finally, the sheer ruthlessness of the Republican campaign team will be a decisive factor in a close contest. Bush's advisers showed in 1988 that they will not hesitate to employ whatever tactics are needed to win. — GEMINI NEWS

About the Author: KEVIN J. KELLEY, a journalist based in Burlington, Vermont, is editor of Towards Freedom magazine.

WATER shortages may be the major regional constraint on rice production in Asia.

In several of the better irrigated parts of Asia, from Pakistan to the Philippines, the Green Revolution has been losing momentum as farmers can no longer rely on adequate flows of irrigation water for their multiple crops of rice each year — a deficit due in part to deforestation of watershed catchments, according to a new United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) report on the links between population and environment.

The report, which given special attention to Asia, contends that an 'environmental-population debacle' has been building up for years that now has the potential of creating 'a major crisis during the 1990s'. The study cites the 'heavy costs' of the Green Revolution — a mix of new seed varieties, irrigation and chemicals that allowed grain production to outstrip population increase during 1950-84.

Take India and Pakistan as examples. In India, 200,000 square kilometres — 36 per cent of irrigated lands — are so salinised that they have lost much of their productivity, while Pakistan has lost 32,000 square kilometres — 20 per cent — to salinisation. Yet these two countries have often been ranked among the prime exporters of Green Revolution agriculture.

Lack of Irrigation Water Derailing Asia's Green Revolution

It is not shortages of land, fertilisers or know-how which hamper rice production across the region. It is rather the lack of irrigation water, says a UNFPA report from Washington D.C.

Worldwide, the study notes, 44 people are added to the world's population every 15 seconds, while at the same time one hectare of the planet's arable soil is lost to land degradation. The study's authors argue that the growth of population, resource consumption and environmentally inappropriate technology can trigger dangerous ecological dislocations.

Increasing number of Philippine farmers, for example, are unable to find land in the agricultural lowlands. They have poured into the wooded uplands, causing deforestation and land erosion. In a warning that applies to other countries, the report states:

'As long as the lowlands were less than fully occupied, it made little difference to the uplands whether there was 50 per cent or 10 per cent space left. It was only when hardly any space at all was left that the situation deteriorated radically.'

The report — Population, Resources, and the Environment: The Critical Challenges — reviews the stress put on Java's highly cultivated and finite agricultural lands by a population surge

from 51 million in 1950 to 112 million today. Roughly 44,000 square kilometres of upland farming areas now are asked to carry 700 to 900 people per square kilometre.

'One-third of these upland areas are seriously eroding,' the report finds, 'and more than 10,000 square kilometres of grainlands have been degraded to the point they no longer support even subsistence farming. This threatens the livelihood of 12 million people, many of whom live in absolute poverty and have no means to engage in soil conservation practices.'

Nepal is another critical case in point. Upland farms, which averaged three or four hectares 30 years ago, now average one hectare per holding. As a result, poor farmers, in search of land to till, chop down trees on slopes that traditionally served as a vital wa-

tershed. Without the forest cover, rains, run off the slopes, carrying off topsoil and creating flash flooding downstream.

The team of authors incorporated seven country case studies into the report, including Pakistan, India and the Philippines, to examine the complex concept of national population carrying capacities.

Population carrying capacity is loosely defined as the number of people a nation can hold without irreversibly reducing its capacity to sustain its future population. In all three Asian cases, the delicate balance between people and resources was found to be in grave danger of disequilibrium.

The study is, in part, a response to those who would play down population issues at the crucial Earth Summit (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development), scheduled to be

held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, next June. Some ecologists and Government officials would like to bypass population issues, which are often considered controversial, lest they

divide support for environmental action.

'It is unrealistic to discuss sustainable development and a common future without reference to the environment and the world's resource base,' pointedly notes Dr Naftali Sadik, UNFPA's Executive Director, in the study's foreword. 'The debate is also meaningless if population is ushered to the sidelines.'

— Depthnews Asia

OPINION

'Do Not Politicise Everything'

Besides celebrating our most sacred and prestigious victory day, we have completed one year of democratic victory. The irony is that to remove a foreign occupied force we had to fight only for nine months but to remove autocracy, it took 12 times longer. Of course, the tremendous unity among our people caused the events. I congratulate the ruling party, the opposition and all other political parties and above all the democracy loving people on the completion of one year. My main idea behind writing this is to take note of works that have been done during this term. Although I support a particular party, I must try to maintain neutrality throughout this whole writing.

Constructive criticism is always welcome, the new government has already done a lot of works. The biggest job was done by switching over to the present form of government. Mention should be made of the steps to reactivate the shattered economy, the excellent way in which it handled the gigantic task during the recent cyclone steps improve ties with foreign countries (especially with India, US, other democratic countries and with the Muslim nations), measures to curb terrorism on the campus, and many more successful and good steps that deserve appreciation. But I think the Government has failed in a lot of other cases. Above all, two ordinances — Presidential Election Amendment Act '91, and the Upazila Dissolution '91. Both of these have some signs of autocracy. Dissolution of upazila system is a good step but without the consent of the Parliament. Therefore, it doesn't sound a healthy idea. Then, there is claim of the Prime Minister to have done more in nine months than has been done in the last nine years by autocratic government, and another press address of the Prime Minister when she returned from a bilateral visit and soon announced that there was no any famine like situation in the country. Again, no step has yet been announced to curb corruption from society once and for all. To make the administration dynamic and corruption free, adequate and stringent measures must be made public to reflect the sincerity of our Government.

The Jamaat backed Shibir continues to manhandle, and it has established its terror in

Chittagong University. However, the Government seems least able to deal with this situation. Ministers are only busy in attending functions (off course with exceptions) and spelling out criticism of the opposition.

There is no time frame to take back the stranded Pakistanis to their country. Those who are now Bangladesh and doing everything in this country have their houses and factories abandoned and only rushing and passing miserable days. To restore the right of these people was an election manifesto of our Prime Minister which seems to have been forgotten. Extra privileges to BNP activists are going to eat up the credits (whatever so far) earned by our democratic government.

The opposition, on the other hand, has completely failed to help bring peace in the country. Its student wing continues to strengthen a reign of terror. It has supported the agitating workers only to fish in troubled water.

We all must have maximum restraint and let the government have time to work. Criticize only those which are really in excess. The opposition must not make people to pay for its faults. We are tired of fighting. The people of Bangladesh can no more be made tools of political parties.

On the completion of one year of democracy, I appeal to the Government, to honour the Nov. 19 joint declaration by granting full autonomy to our electronic media, full freedom to the press; establish democracy by institutionalizing it, stop repressive measures. Home Ministry should be more responsible in issuing press notes, root out terrorism, eradicate corruption. Do not try to politicise everything. We want the present government to complete its term with more popularity and we are with it with our heart and soul. Do what you say. We expect a lot and a lot from you. Inshallah, you will get all support from us. Be democratic.

I pray to the Almighty today to provide Jannatul Firdaus to all of them who made supreme sacrifices and fulfill the good desires of those FFs who are today although alive but their dreams are yet to come true. We want to see through their eyes and we want to know everything about our selves.

Iqbal Ali Khan
Shantinagar, Dhaka

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.

Bus stop

Sir, I am sure you have never seen a bus stopping on the spot demarcated for it just beside the sidewalk with, of course, permanent passenger shed. But you always see them parking in the middle of the road, and also obliquely, and in the process jeopardising the whole traffic.

Who is/are responsible for this? Is there no 'authority' to check the irregularities? Why the innocent public should suffer and suffer?

A passenger
Dhaka.

Cost of education

Sir, About 50 per cent of poor parents of Bangladesh have been bearing the cost of education of their children by selling their only plot of land or other valuables. But at present they are virtually unable to afford education for their children due to the following reasons, and as a result the percentage of educated persons in Bangladesh has been decreasing. The reasons are: 1) High rate of school and college fees; 2) High cost of pen, pencil, paper; 3) High charge of hostel/boarding; 4) High

transport fares; 5) Time killing due to session jani which frustrates the poor guardians very much, and finally 6) Costly books and other materials.

For the sake of achieving an increased percentage of educated persons the government is required to ensure educational environment in the schools, colleges and universities as well as take steps, that the price hike of everything is checked.

MA Mobin Mojumdar,
Surveyor of Bangladesh, Dhaka.

Meaning and context

Sir, May I say how shocked I was to see the misuse of English terms and Greek mythology in the article entitled 'A visit to the DU Library' by Ms Esha Shana Chowdhury in the feature 'Dhaka Day by Day' published on 5 January 1992 in a paper as esteemed as yours.

The use of the term 'tour-de-force' in the first line 'A tour-de-force through the DU Library creates an ordeal' shows she has obviously no idea of the meaning of the phrase 'tour-de-force'. Although the phrase itself is French, it is widely used in

English, meaning 'Feat of strength or skill' and not 'tour' or 'journey' or 'brief visit' as your reporter obviously had in mind.

The reporter's knowledge of Greek mythology appears to be just as rusty. Prometheus did not steal 'the fire of knowledge' from Zeus as stated by her. He stole 'fire' and brought it to earth again when Zeus hid it away from man. The original story goes like this: Zeus would not give fire to the ashtres for man's use, i.e. he prevented the hardwood fire-sticks from being effective when rubbed against the soft ones. Prometheus therefore, stole from the gods enough fire to make the pith of a stalk of giant fennel smoulder, and from this men got fire once more. This is 'fire' in the literal sense and has nothing to do with the fire of knowledge which Ulysses craved. Ms. Chowdhury's use of the myth therefore out of context.

Zoya Ali Khan

OP-1 visa

Sir, I was the holder of OP-1 Immigration Visa under OP-1 programme. On the last 18th November, while I was going to Zia International Airport to go to America, suddenly my passport (No.G-388780) with my hand bag were lost and as a result I could not go to America.

This unfortunate event was told by me to the authority of American Embassy requesting to extend the time of my OP-1 Immigration Visa but the au-

thority concerned expressed their inability vide a letter after 21 days. By the request of the US Embassy authority, I again met the Visa Officer, who refused my request uttering only that old word sorry.

On receipt of letters and paper relating to OP-1 Immigration visa, a huge amount, around Tk. 10 lac, has been staked including my only homestead which I, on 24th December, intimidated to the Ambassador and the Consular of US Embassy at Dhaka but they did not give any importance to my representation. Now, am I to sustain that huge stake as a total loss for exactly no fault of mine?

It is known that the OP-1 Programme was held in USA in 1989 and after selection of the candidates, the letters along with related papers were supplied to me, but there was no provision or law mentioned in those so called papers that if any candidate was once offered Visa and he, on any reason, failed to go to America by specified time, he would not again be offered Visa and/or any extension be allowed.

Under the above facts and circumstances, I draw the kind attention of national and international humanitarian agencies as well as the US Embassy in Dhaka and urge for a solution.

Ali Hossain
North Musdair, Narayanganj.