

Consensus Alone Can Resolve Divisive Issues

Relief for Rohingyas

A section of the international community, especially the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), have started rushing relief to Rohingya refugees, a move that immediately raises what had been so far regarded as a bilateral border problem between Myanmar and Bangladesh to the international level. This brings about a qualitative change in the situation.

In making an initial grant of \$100,000 and, what's more, in despatching a high-level mission to study the situation on the spot, the UNHCR has, in effect, responded to an appeal for assistance made by none other than Bangladesh Foreign Minister ASM Mustafizur Rahman who has been quoted by the chief of the UN body as saying that his country was facing a "grave situation".

At this moment, the grave situation primarily relates to the hardship faced by the refugees and the increasing inability of the authorities in Bangladesh to provide them with shelter, food and clothings. In this context, we also have, for the first time, the number of Rohingyas, estimated at 100,000 in a press report from Paris, who have already poured into Bangladesh, while another report puts the number of refugees arriving every day at the average of 1,500. Meanwhile, there are reports of starvation as well as of cases of diarrhoea and malnutrition, a situation that might get worse with the start of the rainy season. Indeed, the situation is getting out of control.

What are the political implications of the worsening situation? In the first place, the government has been proved wrong in its optimism — or calculation, as one may put it — that the problem can be resolved at the bilateral level in a spirit of good neighbourliness. Here, fault clearly lies with Myanmar. However, our officials should take some blame for their inability to monitor the situation effectively and, indeed, for their failure to understand the thinking of the military junta in Yangon. The repeated postponement of the visit of Myanmar's Foreign Minister Ohn Gyaow to Bangladesh provided Dhaka with a clear enough signal of the increasing non-cooperation of Yangon, which is further compounded by foreign press reports of continued mobilisation of Myanmar troops along the border and increased persecution of Rohingyas, thus forcing them to run for safety into Bangladesh.

Myanmar has created an untenable situation which we should face without taking up a defensive posture. The international opinion is very much with Bangladesh. There is, therefore, no need for Dhaka even to speculate about an armed conflict to resolve the issue. However, while maintaining our commitment to peace, we must not be pushed around or taken for granted. On the other hand, it is quite probable that Myanmar is deliberately provoking a confrontation with Bangladesh in order to divert the attention of its people from its internal crisis. Taking this possibility into account, we must handle the situation with care, caution and dignity, and maintain our rapport with the international community.

A Salute to Osmany

The nation remembers Muhammad Ataul Ghani Osmany, the supreme commander of our Liberation War, on the eighth anniversary of his death. His exploits in our war of independence marked by steadfastness and unflappability in times of great challenges of disorganisation and frustration, proved instrumental in keeping the Bangladesh military efforts not only shipshape but also worthy of forcing a win in an unequal war — which it did. It must be remembered that he presided over the military affairs of the Liberation War, when things were well nigh anarchic in that sector, and led it to ultimate victory.

His military achievements were more than matched by his unflinching efforts to realise a democratic and prosperous Bangladesh. He proved the last recourse, being above controversy, in resolving state and political crises that proved beyond dissipation until he inter-vened. Osmany was, and is, an institutionalised personality to remember and follow.

The nation's grateful remembrance of this hero who was universally known as Mr Upright, however, underlines the tragedy that the occasions to remember the people from whom he took his orders — mainly Tajuddin Ahmed, the Prime Minister of the provisional government at Mujibnagar, among other towering leaders, — pass rather unnoticed by the nation, primarily in the absence of any commemoration by the state they created. Our respects and gratitude to General Osmany's yeoman service in the Liberation War would have been more genuine had all the leaders of the Liberation War, including the supreme leader of the political struggle that gave birth to it, — were remembered fittingly and formally by the state.

A patriot by heart, he was also a democratic inspiration, by and large. We salute the memory of General Osmany's indomitable spirit in war and uncompromising political posture in time of peace.

Whether one sees it as fragmentation or as a new polarisation, a number of trends, now set in motion, are likely to produce significant changes on the political scene of the country during the coming long hot summer. The overall scenario at the end of 1992 would probably look quite different from what we had seen at the beginning of the year.

At this moment, two major developments are easily identified.

The first one relates to the move aimed at settling up some kind of a working relationship among the left-oriented parties and groupings, inside and outside the parliament.

The second one which has evoked more immediate interest of the media than the first one is the possible establishment of a Forum of a group of like-minded politicians and intellectuals, which may eventually emerge as a special interest lobby that speaks out on national problems, trying to influence both public opinion and policies of the government.

Alongside these two major developments, a few other issues will be gaining increased importance.

In one way or another, the fate of Golam Azam, the so-called Emir of the Jamaat, will have to be decided, with the fundamentalist party all set to make some political capital no matter how the issue is settled. True, the government may prefer to sit on it as long as possible, with the country putting up with the untenable situation in which one of its major political parties is being led by a foreigner.

For the BNP administration, it looks very much like a "no win" situation. Then, a decision may be taken, perhaps at the next Sangsad session, on the Indemnity (Repeal) Bill, another divisive issue which, in the existing political climate, hardly offers prospects for a widely-acceptable solution.

To the opposition Awami League (AL) and, indeed, to the Jatiya Party (JP) which will be fighting for a comeback to the mainstream politics during this year, all this adds to the

predicament of the government of Begum Khaleda Zia. On its own part, the BNP administration will probably play down its difficulties and do nothing that might be interpreted as a concession to the opposition.

With their short-sighted partisan policies, neither BNP nor AL may realise that what is seen as a predicament for the administration is, in effect, a predicament for the country as a whole.

Then, when we add to it such chronic problems as campus violence, work stoppages, demands for pay rises in industrial concerns and a deterioration in law and order, we have the scenario of a national crisis. But it is a crisis that the administration should not play

down and the opposition should not about.

At this stage, it is hard to anticipate where and how this crisis will hit the nation most. But one can make some guesses.

In the first place, it will be the economy which will pay the heaviest penalty. As we have just seen during the transport strike, nothing seems easier in this country than to call a nation-wide work stoppage in an essential sector of the economy at the cost of crores every day and then win new concessions from the administration, which again cost additional crores of taka from the country's dwindling, precariously-balanced resources.

In such a situation, it is not only difficult for the government, no matter which party leads it, to win the credibility of the private sector within the country but also virtually impossible to make a strong case for foreign investment.

The impact of such a national crisis on other areas of development, especially education, may also be just as serious as it is in the

industrial sector or in the field of joint ventures with foreign entrepreneurs.

How does one bring about a change in the situation and help in averting the national crisis of the kind we see in the horizon?

The answer lies, at least partly, in the entry of new players into the political scene in the country, in the infusion of new ideas and in, so to speak, a new polarisation of forces within the parliament as well as in the wider national arena.

This is why this writer, for one, welcomes the possibility of the setting of a Forum of like-minded politicians and intellectuals, committed to the principle of national consensus on fundamental problems of our time. This is also

why we look upon the prospects for a working alliance among left-oriented parties with interest.

To start with, what should the proposed Forum do to take up a useful role?

The strength of the Forum would lie in its credibility as much as in its ability to convince all concerned that it has no interest in emerging as an organisation aspiring for power. However, it should be conversant with the mechanics of power in order to influence public opinion and government policies.

It is important for the Forum to be broad-based enough to include in it not only persons who are or were associated with the Awami League but also others who were or still are close to BNP. After all, the Forum should be in a position to maintain a continuous dialogue with both the ruling party and the opposition.

This means that the Forum should not give the impression of being an intellectual extension of Awami League nor a platform of those

who have fallen out with the present leadership of the opposition party. This is one main reason why it should be an broad-based as possible and be accepted for its non-partisan national character.

At this stage, it is hard for outsiders to discuss the possible *modus operandi* of the Forum. However, next to its credibility, its strength should be in its knowledge and expertise about problems facing the country and of their possible solutions. In order to gain this knowledge and expertise, it should work closely with non-governmental organisations, and, in time, set up its own think-tank.

Yet, let there be no mistake about it, the Forum must indeed have a strong political dimension. It should be able to take up positions on complex issues, such as campus violence or foreign relations, from a national point of view.

Judging by the names of leading figures of the proposed Forum, published in the media, it seems the representation of the platform in the parliament may well be minimal or perhaps non-existent.

Here, a working relationship between the Forum and the proposed alliance of left-oriented parties within the Sangsad should serve as an essential element in the new polarisation in our politics.

If such a working relationship gains momentum, political parties within the Sangsad, the ruling party as well as the opposition groupings, may feel obliged to take up more social issues than they do today, not in rhetorics but in terms of hard facts, realities and a genuine national commitment.

If we are able to create this new climate with the media playing its due role, it may eventually become less and less difficult to arrive at national consensus on current divisive political issues and, in the process, make the best of our democratic system. The alternative is nothing short of a national disaster. The choice is ours.

AT HOME AND ABROAD

S. M. ALI

German Mayor wants Greater Afro-Asian Links

by John Burke writes from Stuttgart

In big German cities one inhabitant in ten is an immigrant, so there might seem to be nothing different about the provincial capital of Baden-Wuerttemberg. Arabic and Turkish newspapers are sold at Stuttgart's central station which is topped by a Mercedes emblem, symbolising the industry which lured so many guest-workers from the Balkans and elsewhere.

In the tourist office I met an Egyptian manager, while my chambermaid in the Hotel came from Peru. In the city-centre demonstrators hand out leaflets, warning against Rassenhass — hatred of foreigners. The past year has seen a wave of attacks on foreigners all over Germany, leading to the death of a student from Ghana and a Mozambican refugee.

Stuttgart, however, has so far escaped any such incidents, and there is a good reason according to deputy mayor, Gabriele Muller-Trimbusch, whose liberal FDP party wants Germany to keep its frontiers open. Said Muller-Trimbusch: "We

debated calmly without hysteria or politicking. He added: "we have taken an all-party decision to accept refugees so long as the legal situation requires it, although it is a heavy financial burden; and the time may come when cities like ours can no longer cope. However, we have long term plan for accommodating seekers of asylum cheaply.

He said that people protested if they were put anywhere near schools or housed in gymnasia. There was also a risk of incidents if as many as 30 were put in an apartment block. So the city was planning to build prefabricated villages, each with at least 250 people in them so as to fulfil the monthly quota of 200.

Meanwhile, Rommel is continuing his twinning of Stuttgart with cities abroad. Lodz in Poland is to be followed by Shave Zion in Israel. Other cities include Strasbourg, Bombay, Menzel-Bourguiba in Tunisia, Brno in Czechoslovakia, and two British towns — Cardiff and St Helens.

With over 800 attacks on immigrants in 1991, Germany is gripped by fears of neo-Nazism. For the ruling Christian Democratic Union party the solution would be to limit asylum, but in the same CDU is the mayor of Stuttgart who views the Third World refugee problem differently. Gemini News Service reports on the attitude of Manfred Rommel on the issue of immigration.

have very good relations with immigrants. Stuttgart pioneered race relations in West Germany 20 years ago. At a reception for ethnic leaders and social workers to mark a multicultural week of events Stuttgart's lord mayor, Manfred Rommel gave a glimpse of his views on Third World immigration.

His progressive views came as a surprise, not just because his own CDU party is against immigration, but because his father was Hitler's most famous general. Field-Marshal Erwin Rommel was forced to commit suicide after failing to overthrow Hitler — events that Manfred, then aged 15 — remembers.

Now aged 64, he went to Cairo in 1979 — which his father had tried to capture — to make it one of Stuttgart's 12 twin-towns. Manfred Rommel, a former lawyer, believes that Germans mistrust the word 'multicultural' and his main efforts for good international relations are in Stuttgart itself. The lord mayor said that the word 'foreigner' should not apply to immigrants' children born in Germany, and he noted that Britain and the United States gave nationality automatically to those born on their soil.

Rommel said: "In Stuttgart 30 per cent of children are of non-German parentage and the figure is higher in some other cities. We may well think this addition to the labour-force by the year 2020 when one person in five will be a pensioner. The proportion of people of non-German origin is bound to increase."

He said: "We have got over our fear of foreign cooking, so it is high time that our brains became as clever as our stomachs. We Germans are good at details, but we still have much to learn in such big things as war and peace as well as environmental problems or social justice."

Rommel would prefer the question of immigration to be handled by the European Community, although he pointed out: "I am not in favour of what is called Fortress Europe with a cordon round its borders." Nor could he totally agree with those who said that the way to halt immigration into western Europe was by tackling economic problems in the developing

countries themselves. Pointing out that this was only a partial solution, Rommel noted: "In some Arab countries more than half of the population is under 20 years of age. And there are not going to be enough jobs in the Middle East for those talented youngsters, so they will seek opportunities elsewhere. Europe may not like immigration, but totally isolating this continent simply would not work."

Rommel said by 1989 in (West) Germany there were already one million refugees and evacuees, while in the past year almost 200,000 people have sought asylum. He admits that the situation is an enormous national problem and that, as pressure mounts to change constitutional rights here, the issue will have to be

Gulf: The Post-war Balance Sheet

US President George Bush's decision to go to war against Iraq last year may have changed the world in many ways, but perhaps not in the ways intended or desired by Washington. Jim Lobe of IPS reports.

WASHINGTON — One year after US and coalition warplanes lit up the night sky over Baghdad in the opening attack in Operation Desert Storm, the balance sheet on the Gulf War for the United States is anything but clear.

While polls show that about two-thirds of public opinion here still consider the war a "great (US) victory", it also seems strangely irrelevant to the present political climate. Despite President George Bush's efforts to refocus attention on Washington's most successful military campaign since World War II, the electorate appears far more preoccupied with the uncertain fate of the US economy with which Bush's own re-election chances next November are now tightly bound.

In fact, the media devoted considerably more attention to Bush's recent trip to Japan, where he entreated his hosts for help with economy, than with the celebration of the first anniversary of last year's war against Iraq.

Yet there is little doubt that

Bush's decision to go to war one year ago, as well as the later collapse of the Soviet Union, have transformed the world in many ways — but perhaps not in the ways intended by Bush when, two hours in the war, he proclaimed a "new world order" that might be born after its conclusion.

Never very clear about what he meant by that phrase, Bush sometimes suggested a much-strengthened role for the United Nations, guided by international law. At other times, he evoked a "Pax Americas". As he exulted at a military base in the middle of the war, "what we say goes."

While the United Nations appears to have emerged from the conflict with increased power, especially an enhanced ability to intervene in the in-

ternal affairs of member states, there is so far little evidence that international law is the new wave. That was brought home here last week when visiting Portuguese President Mario Soares politely suggested that Bush was guilty of a "double standard" in his commitment to liberate Kuwait, compared with his lack of concern about East Timor, which has been invaded, annexed, and repressed by Indonesia since 1975.

As for Pax Americas, it seems to have resided only in the imaginings of neo-conservative sectors obsessed with visions of a Washington-dominated "unipolar world".

It certainly failed to take account of the weaknesses in an economy unable to sustain the imperial burdens it shouldered during the Cold War, a point which was manifest when Washington insisted that its European, Japanese, and Gulf partners meet the costs of the war.

"Superpowers pay their own way," was the wry observation of columnist William Pfaff at the time. Washington's inability to impose order and its will on the post-Gulf world is now clear. Unable to stop Germany from recognizing Croatia and raising interest rates, or Japan from investing in Vietnam, Bush cannot be considered the leader of a global hegemony.

The greatest effects of the war, of course, have been felt in Kuwait, Iraq and the Middle East region, but even there the results remain unclear.

As Democratic presidential candidates and cartoonists here never fail to point out, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein remains in power, a fact Bush appears to find so exasperating that leaks about new covert-action plans to bring about his definitive ouster have become a predictable monthly news item.

And while Iraq's ability to threaten its neighbours has been sharply reduced, the Pentagon itself admits it has not vanished. Meanwhile, Baghdad's defeat, the destruction of much of its infrastructure, and the post-war civil war have tilted the regional balance towards Iran, which, thanks to a reported multi-billion-dollar arms buildup and recent actions in Sudan, is now said to

be causing grave concern in Israel and the Gulf states, the same countries most threatened by Iraq one year ago.

Still, the Bush administration points to the successful launch last fall of the Arab-Israeli Middle East peace conference and the recent release of all US hostages held in Lebanon as evidence of the unprecedented influence Washington is now said to enjoy in the region.

But critics warn that influence may be fleeting, both because the peace process is likely to be protracted and because major cleavages within the Arab world — between rich and poor and populist Islamics and traditional authoritarian elites — that were exposed by the crisis are simply not being addressed.

Indeed, the economic and psychic wounds inflicted by the war on the regional body politic may actually render it more unstable and more anti-Western than it was before US warplanes lit up the skies over Baghdad one year ago.

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.

Fuel price and bus fare

Sir, The recent country-wide transport strike seemed to me as a deeply-rooted mechanism towards dwindling the economy of the country. With improvement of the value of Taka vis-a-vis foreign currencies, smugglers and anti-state elements are suspected to be active and may be they were behind the scene of this strike. It has become the talks of the town especially among the sensible transport managers/conductors and owners that the strike might have been hatched by foreign agents to pave the way for smuggling diesel/petrol oil from Bangladesh.

We demand that the fuel price should be linked with actual fare reduction in any case. Earlier the transport owners virtually did not reduce the fare although the Government reduced the fuel price.

We also demand an urgent legal action against autocrat fare selectors and illogical fare charges an urgent legal action against autocrat fare selectors, and illogical fare chargers. Bus fare in Dhaka is certainly higher in the world by any standard.

Vox Populi

The UN and leadership

Sir, An Egyptian elected as the new Secretary General of the United Nations Organization — is the first African ever to be made the chief executive of the 166-member world body. And, of course, with more representation from the Third World, if it is so achieved, the UN obviously would play a better role for the majority of its members.

Ever since its creation, UN's contributions in all disciplines have been greatly beneficial to mankind and in many instances are milestones in advancing civilization. Some of its recent decisions on explosive issues such as Korea, Vietnam, and Kuwait can be regarded as the deterrents to the Doomsday. After UN assisted independence of Namibia, the

current UN peace processes in Cambodia, Palestine, Yugoslavia, and Central America are all the more promising.

Having accomplished so many turning points in the 20th century, the UN has instilled confidence in the humanity to address increasing emphasis on the enrichment of human qualities, improvement of living conditions and ensuring sound life for future generations, among the most preferred issues. Because optimum basic needs of the earthlings replacing materials that are detrimental to decent development of human beings have to be guaranteed for a prosperous habitat.

As an initial measure toward a more justifiable world order, a review of veto privileges of the superpowers may be necessary with respect to human

rights as well as to establishing equal status of member states in the world forum. The Security Council, depending on the changed global scenario, should now consider Germany, Japan, Spain, and India as its permanent members on the basis of economic-political significance rather than of military power. If the existence of Security Council is essential in the UNO structure, above all, an independent administrative territory for UN Headquarters under its own jurisdiction may be more productive especially in implementing peace faster in the multipolar world.

Of late, specially following the Gulf War, the organisation has come up assertive with issues unlike its previous dragging role. It is time it should assert more with its position and role in mitigating many an old problems still confronting some its members, to the ultimate welfare of humanity.

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Mother

Sir, I received a note from a mother appreciating one of letters on "mothers" published in your column recently. She also left a note for dissemination which reads: "A mother is a mother who never craves for any return for her love and service and who always strives hard to adjust herself with any situation whether adverse or extra-ordinary without any complaint. What a mother expects is a sound family where love and affections are the main source of inspiration for living."

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