

Government Should Step in to Avert Confrontation

A Bombshell from Ghali

The UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali has probably strengthened his own credibility with Israel, at the cost of his position in the Arab world, with his statement that the Security Council Resolution 242, the basis of peace talks between Tel Aviv and its Arab neighbours, was not a binding one. It is a bombshell that could not have been dropped at a worse time by none other than the highest ranking international civil servant.

In Dr Ghali's view, Resolution 242 was not binding on either side — the motion provided for the recognition of Israel by Arabs and the return of occupied Arab territories by Tel Aviv — because it was not based on chapter VII of the Charter. It was this specific chapter that contained mandatory provisions. In this sense, Resolution 242 lacked the strength of the Council's motions relating to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

According to independent sources, Dr Ghali's interpretation of the Resolution 242, obviously based on the advice of legal experts of the world body, should be correct. It is hard to think that the Secretary General unwittingly misled the international community or that his legal department has misunderstood the position, deliberately or otherwise. Then, what does the non-binding Resolution 242 stand for? How does it help in paving the way for a settlement of the Arab-Israeli problem?

It is now clear — some would say, it has been clear to many experts all along — that Resolution 242, passed unanimously by the Security Council was essentially meant to bring a moral pressure on both sides to reach a settlement on the basis of "territories for peace" where Tel Aviv was concerned and on the recognition of the Jewish state by its Arab neighbours.

This moral pressure reflected the combined will of the international community and, indeed, the conscience of the world. It is a pity that Dr. Ghali did not bring up this aspect of the resolution in question during his controversial press conference.

The UN Secretary General has put himself in a delicate position. However, he is in a situation to play a major role in persuading Tel Aviv to make some major efforts in reaching a peace accord with the Arab states and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO). At this moment, the Israeli policy of settlement of Jewish immigrants, especially from the Soviet Union, in the occupied Arab lands, in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, presents the biggest obstacle on the path to peace. Tel Aviv has so far defied all appeals from the international community to put a halt to this policy. It has also disregarded pressure from Washington at the risk of losing the US guarantee for a massive \$ 10 billion loan sought for its settlement project. On this issue, we have reached a dead-end, one that can bring an abortive end to the current Arab-Israeli talks.

Here is an opportunity for Dr Ghali to demonstrate his much-publicised evenhandedness by asking Tel Aviv to put a halt to the process which is clearly designed to change the demographic character of the occupied Arab territories in favour of the incoming Jewish population. On this score, nothing less than an indefinite freeze on all settlements should satisfy the international community — and Dr Ghali in particular. If the United Nations fails to achieve this through persuasion and pressure, it should be ready to work out a way for bringing the matter before the Security Council with a binding resolution, this time under chapter VII. Here is a challenge facing Dr Ghali.

Of Blindness and Hunger

Which is the more startling as a revelation? That one hundred babies become blind every day in Bangladesh or, 35 of all aged up to 15 in this land are victims of hunger, for which the official euphemism is serious malnutrition? There are a lot of other related information, each more painful than the other. And this endless procession of unpleasant facts at some level loses all meaning and significance — exactly as the universe will, according to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, when, hitting the highest entropy, all creation will come to the physicists' version of the doomsday. The facts of how the coming generations will fare, physically and mentally, even if the paradise is brought down to Bangladesh — is simply horrific. And we live with these either inured to all such or through a most irritatingly indifferent ignorance. If things go on on the same furrows without an iota of improvement, the first thing that will lose its meaning and justification is government. The second to go will be humanity of the Bangladesh people — people who will survive, that is.

How to stop it all? A daily helping of vitamin "A" will do the trick, say the physicians, and more, effectively and persuasively, a TV commercial. But perhaps we have got it all wrong somewhere along the line — at some crucial point. The families that spurn leafy and other vegetable and wouldn't eat other than meat and fish — do not suffer from the afflictions of children becoming night blind or totally blind. There are people that never had the means to buy to even collect meat or fish and over the whole of their short and miserable life live on 'kachu-genchu' or whatever grows out the earth wherever. It is their children, the children of the choiceless ones, who suffer from deficiency of vitamin "A" and a lot of other micro-nutrients that lead not only to blindness but to brain neuron inadequacy resulting, soon enough, a sizeable population of morons and stupids.

Why is this so? The answer is simple and easy. The treatment is very hard and almost unattainable. Those that cannot go for fish or meat, do eat kachu-genchu — but never enough of it. The answer to the riddle is hunger, prevailing generally throughout the land.

How to ensure enough food for all — there lies the treatment of not only child blindness but also a sure and certain ethnic decline of the Bengalee people.

THE Golam Azam issue was a dormant one for so many years. Late President Zia, when he permitted Golam Azam to visit his ailing mother, and never raised any objection when he overstayed, must have done so with a shrewd calculation. He must have thought that the country, plunged into a kind of political confusion, would not take notice of a gross irregularity. He was partly right. Politically speaking, things were topsy turvy and the issue remained submerged for years. President Zia, perhaps honestly believing in the healing power of time, or perhaps trusting that the gamble would pay off, simply wanted to buy time. He never suspected that in allowing the Professor to stay illegally in a country where he was condemned as a persona non grata, he was only storing away a time bomb.

President Zia's calculations were correct for the time being. For the time being, the stage was not set for unhindered democracy. Those were the grey years of politics, neither white nor black. After the grey years followed, under President Ershad, the black years. The movement of 1990 succeeded in removing one irregularity, President Ershad. By so doing it cleared the way for removing other irregularities. There are quite a few of them, the continued stay of Professor Golam Azam, said to

be holding a Pakistani passport, and since the cancellation of his Bangladeshi nationality an alien in the eye of law, being regarded as one of the grosser irregularities. I should add that this happens to be the view generally held but there are others who dispute this.

The government must be in the deepest dilemma over what to do with Golam Azam whose trial has become, over the past few weeks, a public demand. The government owes it to him to provide protection to him, particularly in view of the fact that a BNP government had permitted him to come and indulged him when he chose to overstay. If the permission was unwarranted or illegal, the government may well face the charge of connivance to the act, of having given tacit or unspoken or silent or implicit consent to what is regarded a clear case of illegality. The government must be aware of this since it has made no attempt to justify its stand, when pressed hard on the floor of the Parliament, the Home Minister had to assure his critics that the government had not granted citizenship to Golam Azam. But he failed to add that the government had no intention to do so. It is not going to be an easy decision to give and considerable mystery surrounds the government's tongue-tiedness.

Ominously however, the silence is not as innocuous as it

may appear to be. Violence has erupted again on two campuses, Dhaka and Rajshahi universities. Seeing who the targets are and who are on the attack, and noticing the curious way the police has handled the two situations the recent incidents have been seen as attempts to divert the movement demanding Golam Azam's public trial from its course. It is difficult to pronounce on this supposition but no doubt the recrudescence of violence leading to deaths has generally been viewed with the

PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

darkest apprehension. It reminds me of certain techniques adopted by past governments when faced with a problem and it bodes ill for the future of democracy in Bangladesh.

The demand for public trial, in its novelty, must have come as a surprise to many. But by now the surprise has worn off, and many people who did not understand initially have begun to see the logic of it. It was bad enough that the governments of the day chose to push the problem under the carpet and to keep it there for such a long time. It became worse when Professor Golam Azam, a foreign national, was chosen the chief of a political party and the government didn't react. This was too much for the

public's voice! It at the same time gave legitimacy to the entire constitutional process that followed. The organisers of the proposed public trial must have been inspired by the events of December, 1990. They could not have underestimated the powers behind their adversary but they have their own strength too, a resurgence of the ideology of 1971.

One does not know what will happen on March 26. The government is believed to be planning some pre-emptive action and Jamaat, in its turn, is learnt to be mobilising its forces. A confrontation could turn out to be bloody, and could lead to political consequences of unpredictable dimensions. All this could be avoided if the government would, without further dilly-dallying, come out with a clear statement on the Golam Azam issue. Already it has taken an unconscionably long time in examining the legal aspects of the question. Time to do so and to declare the results is fast running out.

solitary watcher. I miss a great deal of the excitement which company could provide.

As I turn the sports pages of our dailies, both English and Bangla, I notice the great interest that has been generated in cricket among us, Bangladesh. Though our home cricket is still a long way off international cricket, still we have internationalised our interest. Not being a playing country at that level, we have no fixed favourites. Still I have a suspicion that we would rather have a South-Asian team win than others. Call it racial or Asian preference, but there it is.

But surely the fever has taken a grip on us, particularly on our children. The other day, in the morning, I was looking down from my verandah across the street into the small yard of the house opposite. There he was, a small boy, playing cricket by himself, and rubbing the ball against his shorts in exactly the style an Imran Khan would do before starting on his bowling run, a great sight.

I have heard that great players like Pele started like that when still a child. Pickers boys on tennis courts have sometimes turned out as great tennis players themselves. I think I must watch out and follow the career of this boy, my neighbour and see how he shapes out during the next ten or twelve years.

Thanks to the limited overs version of the game, and thanks to TV, and all thanks to the World Cup, the old passion has returned. Even the relentless bloodthirsty mosquitoes cannot keep me from watching the game, of course on the TV screen. Unfortunately, this I cannot do in company. Being a

Actors, Comedians Turn Philippine Polls into 'Vaudeville'

Casiano Mayor writes from Manila

Many political pundits, noting a wide disenchantment over President Aquino's weak leadership, said the country's political future hinges on the outcome of the May 11 elections

THE Philippines is on the crossroads as it prepares for the combined May 11 national and local elections which will choose the successor of President Corason Aquino and a new set of government officials.

Politicians have hoped that the new government could put an end to the political unrests which marked Mrs Aquino's six-year rule. But prospects that the new leader could bring political stability in this deeply polarised nation hang in a balance.

Mrs Aquino, who rose to power in a popular uprising that ended the 20-year rule of the late Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos in February 1986, suffered seven coup attempts over the past six years, two of which nearly toppled her.

Her government, which inherited a bankrupt economy from Mr Marcos, was also rocked by a series of national disasters, including the 1990 earthquake in the northern Philippines, the eruption of Mount Pinatubo volcano last June and flashfloods late last year in central Philippines.

The failed puches and the series of natural disasters killed thousands of people and heavily destroyed infrastructures as well as farmlands to push back whatever economic gains the government has posted over the past six years.

Rightly or wrongly, many Filipinos have blamed Mrs Aquino's indecisive and muddled leadership for the country's political unrest and

failed to produce a new leader who could unite the country.

"Unless this pathway (elections) is rendered roadworthy by the emergence of a great and trustworthy leader backed by a powerful coalition, it will lead to... coup and counter-coup and revolution," Mr Benigno has said.

Jaime Cardinal Sin, spiritual leader of this largely Roman Catholic country, has aired a similar warning, saying the elite should help reform the country from above or face a revolution from below.

Several public opinion surveys made by independent pollsters placed Ramos, Santiago and Estrada ahead in popularity. But many political analysts give them slim chances of winning because they do not have strong political machineries or networks.

"Because there are many presidential candidates, the next president will win by a mere plurality. A plurality president will invite instability, hence it is essential that the next president should be person who has led in the presidential surveys, which are an index of public support," said presidential bet Ms Santiago.

This is an unhealthy and potentially explosive development because it can lead to a minority presidency, a fractured legislature and political paralysis," said newspaper editor and political analyst Amador Doronila. "It poses a challenge to the people and the political leadership to avert a plunge to the political disaster of a constitutional crisis."

"It's very confusing. It's so difficult to make a choice," says an office employee in the financial district of Makati. "I could vote for anyone (among the prominent presidential candidates) except for Mrs Marcos and Mr Cojuangco."

The Philippines used to have a strong two-party system but the new Constitution framed by Mrs Aquino's hand-picked commission allows a vibrant multi-party system after the ouster of Mr Marcos, who died in 1989 while in exile in Hawaii.

President Aquino's failure to keep her people united behind her as well as her indecisive leadership also allowed fiercer political foes, mainly former Marcos proteges, to regain political clout and drove her former allies to go on separate ways.

Except for Mr Estrada, Mrs Marcos and Mr Cojuangco, the rest of the prominent presidential aspirants were Mrs

turned the polls into a vaudeville.

Mrs Marcos, who was allowed to return to the Philippines in November after nearly six years of exile in the United States, is fighting a lonely battle to the presidency which her late husband lost in the 1986 "People Power" revolt.

Mrs Marcos, whom the government accused of helping her late husband loot the country during his 20-year rule and of stashing away some US \$5 billion in secret bank accounts in Switzerland and other countries, failed to get prominent politicians to support her candidacy.

In her campaigns, Mrs Marcos plays the underdog and often portrays herself to be as poor as her audience, no matter if she is staying in the US \$2,000-day imperial Suite of the Philippine Plaza Hotel and goes to her campaign rallies in late-model Mercedes Benz limousine.

Among the movie stars seeking seats in the Senate are movie actor Ramon Revilla, who often played the roles of amulet-bearing heroes, comedian and current Makati vice mayor Augusto Pangan and television comedian Tito Sotto, the current vice mayor of suburban Quezon City. About a dozen more film stars have announced their intention to seek elections in the House of Representatives and local government positions. Senator Estrada, a presidential bet, is also a movie actor.

The wide field of presidential aspirants and the entry of Mrs Marcos in the election derby as well as of television and movie stars seeking seats in the 24-member Senate have

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— Depthnews Asia

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.

No more division, please!

Sir, One of the eminent British experts on sub-continental affairs, also now dead, Ian Melville Stephens, ex-Editor of 'The Statesman' had a word of praise for the first edition of 'Meet Bangladesh', the official handbook on Bangladesh, which was edited by a leading government publicist, Mr Enamul Haq, for one beautiful thing in it. Also sharing his views with another illustrious person, Dr Percival Spear, author of Cambridge History of India, Ian Stephens wrote to me that one significant thing about the book was that its 'Prologue' did very wisely avoided references to some of the bitter and unfortunate events of '71. As an admirer of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Abdul Mansur Ahmad, a great litterateur-cum-journalist, I have had not an iota of doubt about their wisdom in matters of national interest, particularly matters of politics. Shortly after independence, Abul Mansur Ahmad, in his usual bold style wrote a post-editorial article in the 'Ittefaq' captioned (meaning) 'Sooner the better' suggesting amnesty for the '71 collaborators. And, to the utter disappointment of many party zealots, Bangabandhu declared general amnesty or 'pardon' for the 'collaborators'. One can just

surmise that while taking this historical decision he was, perhaps, influenced by the example set by our Prophet Muhammad (S.M.) who declared general amnesty to his opponents after conquering Makkah.

It is always better to forget and smile than to remember and be sad. Two decades have elapsed but things have not improved much. The alarming preparations for the trial of Prof. Golam Azam for his alleged crimes against liberation movement, as well as threat of 'counter-trial' of the yet-to-be-named offenders, are signalling bad days for the peace-loving people of the country. While the country is already on the threshold of a greater danger in the deadlock of Bangladesh-Burma relations, it is time that the protagonists of the trials and counter trials give a second thought to their decisions in view of the circumstances the country has unwittingly landed in. Any more 'in-fighting' would be dangerously suicidal for the already 'divided nation'. May be there is way out. I would venture to suggest that let Prof. Azam step down from his newly-acquired *de jure* position which is the crux of the problem. Meanwhile, the sponsors of the 'public trial' may take a move to take the issue back to the parliament to seek its verdict on the legality or otherwise of the 'general amnesty' declared by the founder of the state. Until that time the concerned circles should refrain from taking any rash steps.

Abdul Kader, Purana Pallan, Dhaka.

Time to say 'Thank You'

It is time to say a proper 'thank you' to the Sea-Angels, the Royal Navy, the Japanese, Fire Brigade Team, the Indian Air Force, and all other who came forward with deep compassion to help the cyclone-distressed people of Bangladesh.

Particularly the role played by the US Marines 'Sea-Angels' invoked the deepest emotions of faith and hope in the hearts of many Bangladeshis. But unfortunately, it seems, we have not perhaps yet said a proper 'Thank You' to those thousands of US Marines, who had to forego their well-earned home-leave and slog through long hours of relief operation under very difficult conditions. It is now common knowledge that without the assistance of 'Sea-Angels' at least one hundred thousand more helpless Bangladeshis struggling against nature on off-shore islands, after the Super-Cyclone, would have certainly perished.

Let the month of May be remembered by all those 'survivors' and the whole of Bangladesh for thank-giving to all who came with open arms and warm hearts to help us survive. Our NGO 'Sraavan' proposes to observe this occasion in a way that will be befitting our national image and at the same time generate funds to execute several field and research projects to mitigate the damages due to cyclone.

'Sraavan' would like to sponsor thousands of 'thank you' cards to be sent to each one of the US Marines, and all others, every year, for a few years. Interested persons or firms would be approached to sponsor such cards. The fund generated would be utilised for some field projects and research aimed at mitigation of natural disasters and even their prevention. We intend to take advantage of your large-circulation paper to disseminate our research findings to the reading public of Bangladesh. Let us hope that such initiatives by NGO's herald the start of effective public participation in the 'National Strategy for Disaster Management.'

Dr Mahfuzul Haq, Chairman, 'Sraavan', Dhaka.

Agri graduates

Sir, With reference to my recent letter published in this column on the issue of the unemployed Krishibids, I would like to further suggest the authorities to arrange ad hoc appointments for agriculture, livestock and fisheries graduates against vacant posts as has been done in the case of the medical graduates.

We sincerely hope that the democratic government will urgently fill-up at least two thousand vacant posts out of existing 6000 with a view to absorb the current agri-graduates thereby providing them the opportunity to join in the government's programmes.

M Zahidul Haque, Assistant Professor, Bangladesh Agricultural College, Dhaka.

OPINION UNESCO and Bangladesh

Mr S M Ali's column 'My World' has always been a favourite reading of mine and the one on "Death of a Newspaper; A Chinese Daily for Peasants; and Why Did Bangladesh Miss Out on a grant from UNESCO" published in the Weekend Magazine on 20 March 1992, drew special attention by way of being my professional concern — that is UNESCO.

Mr Ali in his feature expressed his worry by saying, "It is worth finding out why no media related organisation in Bangladesh, especially BSS, received any grant, even a modest one, from IPDC this year — or perhaps even last year or in year before last." Being the Secretary of the Bangladesh National Commission for UNESCO I am supposed to be able to explain the situation better than any one. I must also mention here that I have been entrusted with the responsibility of the Commission since November 1988 and I will only give an account of activities of last three years.

In fact, Bangladesh put up a project proposal named 'Development of Film Training Facilities at National Institute of Mass Communication in early 1989 and thus received a financial allocation of US \$ 50,000 from UNESCO late that year. The 1990 team from Paris visited NIMC to supervise the progress of work and provide expert opinion. As for other projects, we submitted one on behalf of the Press Institute of Bangladesh for Equipment for Training of Journalists and Professional Publishers worth US \$ 61,135. This project was initiated by PIB when Mr SM Ali himself happened to be the UNESCO Regional Communication Adviser in Kuala Lumpur and was as per his suggestion submitted to the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) in July 1989. But in December 1989 Mr Claude Ondobo, Director, IPDC expressed his regrets for not being able to retain it for the 11th session of the Intergovernmental Council scheduled in March 1990 in Paris. However, the same project was once more submitted in August 1990 according to his recommendation and we are still awaiting decision.

May I also mention that Bangladesh is an elected member of IPDC since 1989 and Intergovernmental Council meetings are being attended by representatives of the Ministry of Information regularly. The last meeting, which happened to be the 13th session, was held between 17 and 24 February 1992 in Paris and was attended by a Joint Secretary of the Ministry of Information. Since my assumption of this office I have not received any project proposal from BSS. But I can assure that if proposals are submitted, I shall do my best to get them through.

I hope this explains well the status of Bangladesh National Commission for UNESCO.

Abdus Selim, Secretary, Bangladesh National Commission for UNESCO