

Permanent Meeting Places Needed

Public meetings apparently are a manifestation of the democratic rights a people enjoys. But a galore of such meetings is not necessarily going to be the true indicator of democratic health of a country, specially when they turn violent without the slightest provocation. Violence apart, indiscipline of every description is what marks most of such meetings. What is moreover allowed to slip unnoticed is the fact that not all of them even qualify to be public meetings although, irrespective of their size and nature, they create more public inconvenience than they ever could do good to the public.

Ever since the Paltan Maidan and Suhrawardy Udyan (old Race Course) were turned into a stadium and a park respectively, the organisers of public meetings are having a tough time to deal with the problem arising out of the changed situation. Streets and avenues were the natural options for holding meetings. During the anti-Ershad demonstration, however, the whole city turned into a sea of people chanting slogans and expressing their solidarity with the movement against autocracy. Significantly, not a single act of indiscipline was reported then.

The point is that those are the rare moments in the life of a nation when it rewrites history. Today, the newly earned democratic rights are being exercised, more often than not, rather too indiscriminately, to make them compatible with the democratic norms and values. Political parties and organised groups overexercise their rights to hold public meetings on city thoroughfares only to disdainfully encroach upon other's equal democratic rights. This has been going on the smallest pretext causing not only untold encumbrance to the public but also unlimited national loss in terms of both working hours and economy. Street occupation by such gatherings is becoming so frequent that they give the impression, albeit false, of becoming our national culture. A dangerous symptom, no doubt. The way things are escalating compels one to observe that the organisers, failing to muster enough crowd for the meetings, are resorting to the ploy of taking the venues to the busiest of thoroughfares rather than people volunteering to come to the meetings.

This nuisance must come to an end. We have had enough of the trick. The fact that the public has so long endured the meetingwallahs causing immense sufferings due to unannounced and often needless road-blocking is a supreme example of democratic tolerance. But of late that tolerance has been severely strained. Time has come to reassess the position of the public with regard to such meetings. Before the public turn against them, there is a need for exploring ways and means to restore the past glories of the public meetings without making the public apathetic to them. This can be done in two ways. First, open squares or spaces have to be permanently set aside for holding public meetings. The problem of finding such open spaces in the city centre is well known. But it is not yet late to leave enough open space nearer with easy access for the purpose. For example, the southern tip of the abandoned runway near the Bijoy Sarani may suitably serve the purpose. A few other locations can also be detected if the town planners give a serious thought to the problem, for it will be posing even greater threat in the coming days with the growth of the city and the swelling of its population. The use of such meeting venues has to be open to all but with prior permission, proper announcement and a small fee. Apart from creating such facilities, what we ought to do is to earmark some broad avenues for such gatherings giving due attention to the fact that we do not hinder or perhaps cause too much trouble for the traffic. The busiest roads have to be spared by all means.

End of a Grim Chapter

The release of the last two Westerners, both Germans, held as hostages in Lebanon, marks the end of a grim drama that, for eight long years, did great damage to the image of the Arabs. The devious principle underlying the hostage-taking was all wrong. Some innocent and often politically uninvolved civilians were kidnapped for no offences of their own, but only to be used as bargaining chips in an undefined power struggle, sometimes to gain the release of prisoners held by Israel and western powers. Some defended these kidnappings on the ground that they helped to focus attention on the Arab cause. But this superficial argument obscures the fact that the so-called public attention was, more often than not, an unfavourable one, if not one filled with anger and bitterness, especially where relatives and friends of victims were concerned.

While we hope that there will be no repetition of the chapter that ended on Wednesday, it is important for the international community to address the issues which often prompted the action of kidnappers. There are still several Palestinians who are languishing in Israeli jails, without any prospect of facing a fair trial. Again, even inside Lebanon, the scene of most kidnappings, the presence of Israelis in what is described as their self-imposed security zone is just as unacceptable as that of Syrians. It is for the Government of Lebanon to decide how the country's security should be maintained. However, its objective should be to run its affairs in the way it can. Lebanon should eventually regain its lost glory and reemerge as a stable, prosperous country. There are also no reasons why the capital Beirut should not once again become a major financial centre, serving all countries of the region, including Israel.

It should be in the interest of Tel Aviv to start taking a fresh view of the promises which lie ahead and move towards settling its differences with its Arab neighbours.

THROUGH the rains I see her, perched by the kerb. Thoroughly drenched, hunched against the rain, in a sleeveless frock that sticks like skin to her slender body. How old is she? Eight? Nine at the most. She holds a bunch of tiny, sparsely-threaded jasmine garlands and waits for the traffic light to turn red. As it does, she jumps up and walks to a slowing car. Anyone for a little jasmine garland? She holds the garlands against the shuttered window and probes the occupants with her eyes. The window remains shuttered. Slowly, she moves over to another car, then another, weaving her way through the tangled traffic. Then her face appears outside my window. She brings it next to the glass. It's hauntingly beautiful face, with a pair of deep, big eyes. Her hair is soaked smooth on her scalp. The shoulders are turned up a little to ward off the shivers. She pleads with her eyes and a frail, little smile. But before I can wind my window down, the traffic moves again. She steps back. In the side mirror, I see her get back to her position by the kerb.

It is past 10 at night. The rain pours on. All over the glistening tarmac, little streams of water form and flow. The dim lights along the lonely Manila road serve only to deepen the darkness. I think of the little girl. Why does she have to be there, out in the street on a cold, rainy night, trying to earn a few measly pesos for the family? Another face haunts me, from another place and time. A face on my TV. A Somali mother squatting on the ground of what appears to be a huge relief camp, with a baby in her arms, a shrunken little skeleton. For a few seconds,

the face remains frozen on the screen, number and resigned, with a pair of intensely sad eyes staring out in pain, anger and humiliation. Then the camera backs away, revealing other faces, other starving masses, other little skeletons. Hundreds of them, thousands, as far as the camera can see, ravaged and famished, waiting for some help to arrive, a little food to stanch hunger with.

Hunger so pitiless. Hunger so stubborn and abiding. So, what has changed in this wonderful world of ours? What have we achieved after all these centuries of progress? A few men have stepped on the moon, but nearly a billion people on earth still live in abject poverty.

At the Jainal Abedin Museum in Mymensingh, Bangladesh, I looked at drawings of that terrible manmade disaster, the Bengal famine of 1943. Abedin drew what he saw: children dead in the streets; mothers slumped against walls, holding out their begging bowls; men shrivelled up in hunger, misery and pain. People old enough to remember say one actually saw people drop dead, as ghosts of humanity roamed the streets of Calcutta begging for a little scoop of 'far', the soupy water that Bengalis drain away after rice is cooked.

"Ma, can I have a little 'far', ma!" In due time the famine

Slow Deaths and Bloody Killings

Will there ever be a kind, peaceful world where children will not have to pick crumbs of food from garbage dumps, little girls won't have to hawk flowers at night to survive hunger, homeless men and women won't have to curl up like kitten sin the cold of cardboard boxes under the bridge and people won't have to die

ended, but the hunger did not. One day, many years later, walking the streets of Calcutta, I came across a young mother slumped against the railings of a city hospital. She sat motionless on a jute rag, with her baby beside her. A grimy sari hung loose from one shoulder, hardly hiding her shrivelled breasts. Her legs lay stretched out in straight lines, forming a right angle to her wrinkled body. She held her face up. The eyes were vacant and motionless and looked straight

ahead. Tears had cut through the grime on her face and dried on their tracks. One of her hands touched the baby's head. With the other, she clung limply to begging bowl. The baby lay on her back, half out on the bare pavement. She was dead.

In Ethiopia, in the Sudan, in the ghettos on New York, in the slums of Manila, Calcutta and Rio de Janeiro, under the bridges of London, other babies have died in hunger since then, other mothers have slumped in silent agony, other tears have run and dried, other human tragedies have been and continue to be written. Through the years, throughout the world, as the wealth of man has grown, the great hunger continues, the great deprivation, the great human

shame. But who cares? As millions in the world go without food, shelter, education and health care, even water to drink, governments push their military spending, trying to acquire and perfect weapons of mass murder, to subdue neighbours and nations, to uphold national egos. The United States spent at least US\$8 billion on Star Wars-related research projects that were eventually abandoned.

But why blame the US alone? According to a recent

protest, the military opens fire. People die, as they did in Bangkok, but the government feels vindicated.

If the Asian countries were only to freeze their military spending in the 1990s — not cut it, just freeze — they could, says Dr Haq, potentially create a 'peace dividend' of around US\$150 billion over the next decade, enough to finance all their essential human goals.

But would they? Across the world in Asia and the Middle East and Africa, ethnic minorities and nationalist groups are fighting their nationalistic wars, as homes are destroyed, people are sacrificed and uprooted, children scramble for crumbs of food and mothers shed their tears in helpless despair. In Sarajevo, Yugoslavia, or whatever remains of it, people were simply queuing up for bread when mortar shells blew up and cut them down. Twenty of them were dead in an instant, lying on the bloodied pavement, mauled and dismembered. I will never forget that soundtrack on my TV, the pitiful sobbing of an elderly woman: 'They only wanted to buy bread, you know. Now they are all dead.'

Some people somewhere must have sold those mortar shells. Even more shamefully, some people somewhere chose to buy them. No arms pusher can stay in business if he has no one to sell to. The buying and selling of arms continue to

grow as people fight their senseless patriotic wars. Even at a time when the cold war is supposed to have ended. At a time when the world is supposed to be coming together as an interdependent global community.

Patriotism! Wasn't it William Hazlitt who said that patriotism is another name for hatred? That the bigger a patriot one is, the bigger is one a hater? How very true. We find its evidence all around us.

Will there ever be a kind, peaceful world where children will not have to pick crumbs of food from garbage dumps, little girls won't have to hawk flowers at night to survive hunger, homeless men and women won't have to curl up like kitten sin the cold of cardboard boxes under the bridge and people won't have to die standing in a bread queue?

In that wonderful Stayajit Ray movie, *Goopy Gyne, Bagha Byne*, a bloody battle between two rival kings came to a sudden halt when, by divine magic, the heavens opened up and poured a rain of mouth-watering sweets upon the frail and famished soldiers. Promptly, the two armies left their weapons and ran for the sweets. With all the wasted billions in the world, with all our resources so utterly ill used and ill spent, we could have created the magic to shower our poor and hungry and shelterless with the sweets of progress and civilization. We could have stopped the slow deaths, the bloody killings.

But would we? The writer, a keen observer of the Asian scene, lives in a capital of an ASEAN country, and, under a pen name, occasionally contributes to this paper as a guest columnist.

OPEN EYE: BY VEDETTE

lecture by Dr. Mahbubul Haq, the noted human-development economist, Asia spends about US\$65 billion a year on its military and another US\$11 billion a year to import arms. Some countries spend several times more on their military than on the education and health of their people. Some have more soldiers on their payrolls than teachers. 'When their children cry for milk in the middle of the night, their governments are out shopping for tanks instead,' Dr Haq lamented. 'When their military generals travel in air-conditioned jeeps, their children suffocate in windowless classrooms.'

Dr Haq gave his lecture before the events in Bangkok. Otherwise he would have added: 'And when people

Sri Lanka Sets up a Human Rights Task Force

Camini Navaratne writes from Colombo

The government of Sri Lanka has set up a human rights task force as well as a commission to investigate "disappearances." It is thought 100,000 people have been killed or disappeared since 1971 in the ethnic conflicts on the island. The new moves follow increasing international concern at human rights abuses and threats to cut off aid.

SRI Lanka's human rights record is coming under increasing international scrutiny in the wake of reports that more than 100,000 people have been killed or have "disappeared" since 1971, about three-quarters of them after 1983.

The United Nations Human Rights Commission based in Geneva, the International Committee of the Red Cross, human rights groups like Amnesty International and Asia Watch, UN High Commission for Refugees and several countries have expressed concern over the situation.

Some governments have threatened to cut aid unless further violations of human rights cease, especially those involving the Tamil minority in the north of the island republic. Britain, Canada, Germany, France, the Netherlands and Sweden are among them.

The police and the armed forces are blamed for most atrocities, but other forces have contributed. In the Sinhalese-dominated South, the radical Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) launched two rebellions.

The first, in 1971, was against prime minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government, the objective being to establish a workers and peasants government.

It was put down with utmost brutality, nearly 20,000 of its cadres being killed. The security forces also lost more than 1,000 men.

The second was in protest against the Indo-Sri Lanka accord signed by former president Junius Jayewardene and the late Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in July 1987 to end the ethnic conflict between the majority Sinhalese and the Tamils.

The accord provided for regional autonomy for the Tamils in the North in lieu of



In Sri Lanka "thousands of people" disappeared or were extrajudicially executed in the north east; many were tortured and then killed in custody. In the south, 'disappearances' and extrajudicial executions continued to be committed.

From 1991 Amnesty International annual report

separate homeland as demanded by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) led by 38-year-old Velupillai Prabhakaran.

The JVP opposed the grant of any major concessions to the Tamils at the expense of the Sinhalese and began killing people who supported the accord.

More than 2,000 members of the ruling United National Party (UNP) died. The government counter-offensive led to heavy JVP casualties. Its leader Rohana Wijeweera was killed.

In the North, the LTTE intensified its guerrilla wars in 1983 after thousands of Tamils living in the midst of the Sin-

halese in the South were killed by uncontrollable mobs while the police and the military looked on.

The security forces lost heavily as the LTTE attacked army camps and state property. Casualties, on the Tamil side were heavier, most of them civilians "caught in the crossfire," according to official communiqués.

The security forces were about to capture Jaffna, heartland of Tamil country, when India intervened, to save the Tamils from genocide," New Delhi said.

Actually it was trying to safeguard its southern flank from other foreign powers like

the United States and Pakistan whose help had been sought by Jayewardene to quell the insurgency.

An Indian peace Keeping Force (IPKF) of 50,000 troops was sent to enforce the accord by disarming the LTTE and restoring civilian rule.

When the IPKF tried to carry out its mission, the LTTE rebelled and there was heavy fighting. About 1,500 Indian troops were killed and more than double that number injured. The LTTE also suffered heavy losses, but most casualties were civilians because of indiscriminate shelling and air bombing.

When Ranasinghe Premadasa succeeded Jayewardene as President in 1988, a dialogue began with the LTTE to find a political settlement. The talks broke down after 14 months and the LTTE went on the offensive again in June 1990. The carnage was unprecedented. Statistics of the numbers killed are unreliable.

In 1991 an Amnesty International delegation was allowed to visit Sri Lanka for the first time since 1983. Its report was scathing indictment of the security forces and the LTTE.

It gives details of substantial evidence of large-scale extrajudicial executions and disappearances and numerous cases of torture. The LTTE, it said, had been guilty of similar crimes.

Amnesty said it appreciated the particularly difficult law and order situation created by the ethnic conflict. Nevertheless, it called on the govern-

ment to uphold respect for human rights at all times.

The report said the evidence clearly indicated that government forces, apparently acting with an almost total sense of impunity, had arbitrarily detained and deliberately killed thousands of defenceless people since the renewed fighting broke out.

Amnesty added: "Victims of the LTTE in the eastern province (which is regarded as part of the North), where there is a mixed population, include large numbers of Sinhalese and Muslims as well as Tamils considered 'traitors'.

The LTTE has also been responsible for the 'disappearance' of prisoners it has taken, including policemen and others in government service."

Human rights groups have welcomed initiatives recently taken by the government to stem this tide of human rights abuses. Two were the appointment of a commission on disappearances and of a human rights task force.

The task force, headed by a former supreme court judge, J.F.A. Soza, is expected to maintain a comprehensive register of all detainees with full details of their detention and to ensure observance of and respect for their fundamental rights.

It is also to investigate and establish the identity of every detainee; monitor the welfare of the detainees; regularly inspect places of detention; and record any complaints or representations and or grievances that may be made and take

immediate remedial actions.

According to information given to the task force by the government, there are now nearly 10,000 people in detention, Sinhalese and Tamils, scattered in jails and army camps throughout the island.

Most lawyers are scared to appear for these detainees because they themselves might "disappear."

Sri Lanka, which received an aid package of \$1,000 million three years ago, will get only \$825 million over the next three years under an extended readjustment facility organised by the International Monetary Fund.

The chief contributors are the US and Japan, but they also insist that the ethnic conflict is resolved soon through a political settlement. The ethnic war is costing the country up to Rs 15 billion annually — about 15 per cent of the government's budget.

Parts of the North are like a desert, with many houses and factories bombed out, and fertile land laid waste. No fishing is allowed in the deep sea in an arc from Mannar in the north-west to Mullaitivu in the east, one of the richest fishing grounds in Asia.

This last measure has been instituted to prevent the LTTE smuggling in arms from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu across the narrow Palk Strait.

To make matters worse, a severe drought has set in throughout the island since December, affecting tea, rubber, coconut and rice production. Without more international help, Sri Lanka will find it tough going over the next few years.

Yet unless the human rights record improves, the government may not get the extra help it expects.

— GEMINI NEWS. CAMINI NAVARATNE is a senior Sri Lankan journalist and Editor of Sandesh Press Agency.

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.

Repatriation of Rohingyas

Sir, Two-and-a-half months have passed since the long awaited visit of the Burmese foreign minister to Bangladesh was concluded on 28 March, with signing of accord between Dhaka and Rangoon for repatriation of all refugees. But according to daily reports, the influx of the refugees still continue unabated. The delay in repatriation clearly testifies to the futility of the efforts.

The quarters the refugee problem concerned, are — Rohingyas, Bangladesh, Burma and international body, and each of them has different opinion upon the repatriation process. In this connection, let's see the stance each of them has.

Bangladesh: Rohingyas are to go back without further delay. "No longer to carry such

burden of these Refugees in over populated Bangladesh'. The agreement reached with Burma is very good, it was made in a peaceful and cordial manner on the basis of peaceful co-existence. "Many international quarters have welcomed this accord." The foreign minister, to a newsmen in Dhaka, said "Without much delay the refugees must go back... the agreement was cumbersome as it involved many details... the task is a gigantic one and hence none should get unnecessarily critical or septic about the return of the refugees. The home minister in a public meeting in Cox's Bazar recently said, "No international quarters such as UNHCR is needed to involve in this repatriation process, Burma was agreed to all proposals of Bangladesh to take back all or her refugees (citizens); they (Burma) further agreed on refugees safety

and security after repatriation; stern action will be taken against those (foreign NGOs and others) who create obstacle in the repatriation process."

Rohingya refugees: "Without ensuring basic human rights on safety and security to be guaranteed by the constitution in Arakan, they will not return; they are roomed with fear and frustration that they will again be in danger of persecution, torture, jail and death after their return to Arakan. In their demands which mainly emphasize that they be declared one of Burma's indigenous ethnic races such as Kachin, Chin, Magh etc; under the Union of Burma they further insisted that international monitoring groups must station for at least ten years in Arakan to supervise the safety and security of their lives and properties."

Burma: "The Burmese side, from the beginning, has been stating that the problem with Bangladesh is a foreigner problem, of those in the bordering region north of Arakan who call themselves Rohingyas... is not a newly arisen refugee problem". They are not one of Burma's indigenous race. This

is not a matter of persecution. It is a problem of foreigners who illegaly entered from Bangladesh and live in contravention of the citizenship laws.

Even the reception camps which were opened recently on Burmese side are named "Deserted Kallas Reception Camps". "Kallas" means foreigners (hatefully).

International body: Many international quarters such as US, UK, UNHCR and Human Rights groups have expressed seriously that the agreement between Bangladesh and Burma regarding the repatriation of refugees didn't provide adequate safe-guard for the refugees upon their return... the international community should not support the repatriation if Burma doesn't allow international monitoring of the refugees' safety and security once they return home. Without adequate safeguards in place "it is unlikely that the refugees will choose to repatriate."

The fate of refugees at this stage is simply hanging between the stances of Bangladesh and Burma.

From the side of Bangladesh, there is always a stating that Burma is taking back all

of 'her citizens'. But Burma, on the other hand, is stating in radio and newspapers that "under the immigration act, the deserted people, who entered into Bangladesh, are returning to their own places in Arakan where they previously lived". (Burmese Working People's Daily 17/5/92) As such, what the Rohingyas are? In the agreement, the use of the term "Residents of Myanmar" instead of "Nationals of Myanmar" led once again the entire Rohingya community to the state of perpetual uncertainty to be ultimately perished as 'Stateless people' under the Junta's extermination policy in Arakan.

May, I request our Foreign Minister ASM Mustafizur Rahman and HE Burmese Ambassador in Bangladesh U Soe Myint to kindly clarify the present accords and states of Rohingyas and identification of these unprotected languishing Rohingyas in their own country? Because doubts and confusion are being raised in our minds and many international quarters as to the effectiveness of the agreement on repatriation.

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Children

Sir, We have very much enjoyed viewing the BTV's Notun Kuri prize-giving ceremony attended by Prime Minister Khaleida Zia which was telecast live on June 5 last.

The Prime Minister while addressing the function observed that there are many children in the country who are not getting good meals or education and they are suffering from diseases, these children are putting in their labour with weak health. She said that all our efforts would be successful when we will be able to make all the children happy.

We sincerely wish that the Prime Minister and her government will be successful in their effort to make all sections of children happy through arranging various facilities, including education, for them.

M Zahidul Haque Assistant professor Dhaka.