

Resisting Toll Collection

Illegal toll collection has become the order of the day. The toll collectors have been growing ever more desperate and making the lives of small traders and retailers increasingly difficult. Hardly a day passes without someone falling prey to the unstoppable extortion by the organised groups. A small township, Jhenidah, is not even free from these social parasites. The other day a watch shop there was looted by the armed thugs who just go berserk if their demand for toll is not promptly met. But the traders and shopkeepers in the town have thought of a unique way of protesting the incident. First they observed an eight-hour strike on Monday. But failing to rouse the district administration to action against the culprits or even receive an assurance of protection or security against extortion the Shopkeepers and Traders Samity has decided to carry on its strike for an indefinite period.

The point to ponder in this case is that the traders have been forced to go for a programme which, they know better than anyone else, will cause them financial losses. But that is how they can protest—inflicting pains to themselves—when the administration is unresponsive. The other point is that society cannot go on keeping its eyes shut to the problems like toll collection and terrorism. With its back against the wall, society no more can even afford to pretend its ignorance of the accumulating chaos all around.

Stretching the idea one simply comes to the conclusion that the failure of the government in controlling the toll collectors and terrorists is quite comparable with the refusal or inability of the Jhenidah district administration. Signs are clear that the terrorists and toll collectors are out to outsmart the government and bring trade and commerce to a standstill. The process seems to be irreversible unless the trading community and the people in general, like the traders from Jhenidah, take a bold stand and force the government to spell out its programme for tackling the crisis. When small shopkeepers are exposed to the constant threats of illegal demands of money and, on refusal, of dire consequences, all economic activities are bound to collapse—a very bleak prospect for a nation on course of democracy. And there is little doubt that if people's rights and security are violated with impunity, democracy does operate least of all in the situation.

Shopkeeping and other economic activities are inseparable from the development efforts of a nation. Law and order situation determines the economic reading of a country. The government, however, betrays no sign of remorse when dwelling on the subject. Its penchant for stricter laws cannot but be ludicrous when the existing ones are scarcely applied. Along with the government, society seems to be condoning the crime. The outrage it ought to have elicited has never really come about. The Jhenidah case should act as an eye-opener. But there is another point one must take note of. Unemployment is a direct cause of young men resorting to illegal means of getting money. Increasing production along with a more rational distribution of wealth is what can be a permanent solution to the problem. But at the same time the traders must resist the temptation of not being a party to illegal and corrupt deals which give the toll collectors enough reason to poke their noses into their businesses.

Let the Energy Dream Come True

Researches by a US-based Bangladeshi physicist may lead to low-cost solar power generation bringing the inexhaustible power resource of sun to within the harnessing capacity of Bangladesh. This was the bottom line of a seminar given at Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission by Professor Zahur Anwar of the California State University. Although most of world's present energy production—mechanical, chemical and electrical, every type except one that comes from muscle—is consumed by a handful of nations of the North, the need for this prime mover of civilisation is greater in the countries of the so-called Third World. They need it to make up for the backwardness into which they were thrown by the naked and unabashed colonial exploitation perpetrated by the industrialised nations. The case of Bangladesh is even more critical than any in the impoverished countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

A population of close to 2000 people to a square mile sets us apart from the other poor nations—and this population means that Bangladesh must use energy worth Tk 2000 crore every month only to allow its kitchen ovens to cook the daily morsel. Bangladesh doesn't produce even a minuscule part of this huge and basic need. The shortfall is made up by, first the eating up of the forests and all green life standing on the land and, second, giving up cooking and going hungry. None of these two can be allowed to continue even for a single day. How to stop these and help the polity continue instead in a meaningful life giving manner?

We need far more energy-based activity than mere cooking for a civilised national existence. Where will this energy come from? The promise of nuclear energy as a very pliant substitute for fossil-fuel turbine-movers has melted away in a mist of disillusionment—for the poorer nations. Two sources still hold some hope for us—energy from biomass and from solar cells. For one thing, none of these would call for investments on the scale required by nuclear power plants or even respectable hydel establishments. As the nature of the generation of such power would prompt the need for producing it on a local basis, the very big funds-guzzler, namely, the transmission systems and their concomitant nuisance of systems loss—could be done away with.

Then what's the wait for? None of those Aladin's Lamps have quite come of age. They are cheaper by some comparisons but still not within Bangladesh's capacity. Mass production of solar energy, which is the cleanest, of all man-produced energies, now calls for vast tracts of land.

Dr Anwar's researches promise to be helpful to Bangladesh in both of these. A low-cost solar energy plant, with cells far efficient than at present making the plant's housing possible on much less land than now—is something we have been dreaming for some time. Let the dream come true.

Babri Masjid Issue: It is All About Secularism in India

THIS is one situation India should have avoided: polarisation. The country has experienced how reason dips when religious fervour rises. The grey area shrinks and there is only black and white. Even the best of liberals then array themselves as Hindus and Muslims. The many-year-old dispute over the Ram Janambhoomi and the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in UP has this lesson.

Alas, it has not been learnt. Again we have allowed passions to take over. Nothing was attempted to sort out the problem in the later part of 1990 when frenzy and fanaticism in the wake of the Rath yatra by L K Advani, then Bharatiya Janata Party chief, had cooled off.

At least Prime Minister Narasimha Rao should have taken up the matter when he assumed power in June '91. He had developed close contacts with BJP after trading with its speakership for deputy speakership. Till recently, his equation with the BJP was so good that his minority government depended on its support in the Lok Sabha for passing the budget, which other parties opposed.

That was, in fact, the time when the BJP was on the defensive, announcing repeatedly that it was opposed to demolishing the Babri Masjid. The Narasimha Rao government should have asked it to make its announcement good. Perhaps the BJP realised at that time that overwhelming Hindu opinion, although in favour of building a temple, was against destroying the mosque. Several opinion polls had indicated that the Hindus did not want the temple at the

The controversy is not between Hindus and Muslims; the BJP is only trying to give it a communal colouring. The controversy is between the supremacy of law and its defaulters.

expense of the masjid. It appears that the BJP feared wide resentment and hence it adopted surreptitious ways to go about its job. It acquired 2.7 acres of land near the Babri Masjid on behalf of the state tourism department and then levelled it in the guise of a park, Ram Katha Kunj. When some people saw through the BJP game and challenged the acquisition, the UP government readily accepted that "no structure of a permanent nature will be put thereon." But once the case was out of the way, the government leased the land and the adjacent area, nearly 50 acres, to the Ram Janambhoomi Nyas, a front body of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), which is the fundamentalist face of the BJP. The matter was left at that for some time.

The party's intention all along has been to build a temple where the Babri Masjid stands. But since a preponderant majority in the country is opposed to demolishing the mosque, the BJP has been hoodwinking the public. The VHP has jumped the gun. The BJP wanted the crescendo to rise near the general election to draw the blood as it did in the last poll.

If one were to look back, the laying of the foundation stone (shilanyas)—an unforgeable blunder of the Rajiv Gandhi government—of the temple in November 1989 was on a false pretence; the understanding was that no structure will be built on it.

Buta Singh, former home minister, confirms that the VHP has gone back on its promise. Resorting to lies for building the temple of Lord Ram, who represents the truth, is a travesty on Hinduism.

Even now the BJP has not stopped its double talk. On the one hand, it says it will not demolish the Babri Masjid and goes over the exercise of ordering the stoppage of construction after having allowed it despite the court's directive. On the other, party chief Murli Manohar Joshi

returned to power on the mandate that the public had been beguiled. Such arguments do not behave a party which often talks of values and moral standards.

Yet another curious reasoning is that since the dispute involves the "sentiment of Hindus", no court has any power to adjudicate on it. The constitution talks about equality before law. Should there now be a caveat that the constitution will cease to operate if and when there is the question of "sentiment of Hindus"? Strange, the BJP

assurance has no meaning unless the blueprint of the temple is made public. Kalyan Singh refused to do so even when requested by all parties at the National Integration Council meeting in New Delhi a few days ago. He did not even give a categorical assurance that the masjid would not be touched at any stage.

But as late as April 1992, a BJP team, after visiting Ayodhya, said in its report that "pending a final solution the government of UP will hold itself responsible for protection of the Ram Janambhoomi-Babri Masjid complex; orders of the court in regard to land acquisition proceedings will be fully implemented." And now the BJP says it is helpless to enforce the court order.

The BJP should realise that any damage to the masjid will amount to administering a blow to India's constitution and the fundamental right of equality before law. It will not only hurt the feelings of Muslims in India and abroad but also the democratic forces all over the world. It will be against the ethos of the country or, for that matter, Hinduism.

Still the way out is that the temple should be built up to the point where the Sita chabutra (platform) is located. In other words, the proposed temple should stand by the side of the masjid, as is the case in Mathura as well as Varanasi. Atal Behari Vajpayee, the BJP leader, has made a cogent proposal: the Supreme

Court's advice should be sought on the question whether there was an ancient temple at the disputed site and whether the temple was destroyed in order to build a mosque.

It is, however, unfortunate that the Pakistan government has tried to make capital out of the dispute. By drawing the attention of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), it has given a communal twist to the problem as the BJP has done in its own way. We wish the Pakistan government had told the OIC how hundreds of Hindus and Sikhs had sought shelter in Peshawar, Rawalpindi and the areas around after being hounded out by an Islamic government at Kabul. If protection of Islam is the job of OIC, human consideration of minorities is part of Islam.

Some elements in Pakistan are gloating over the weakening of secularism in India. Their assessment is not correct because the BJP stands isolated on the masjid issue. I have no doubt that the party will be rejected at the next polls because the faith of Indians in a pluralistic society is deeply entrenched. But if ever India loses the battle of secularism, the whole region would suffer, Pakistan probably the most.

The article was written before the VHP, the militant Hindu group, suspended the construction of the controversial Hindu temple near Babri Mosque. Since then, the Indian Judiciary has been given time until November by the Rao government to settle the dispute, taking into consideration all legal aspects relevant to the matter. — Editor

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

argues that UP chief minister Kalyan Singh is carrying out a mandate.

Which mandate is he talking about? The BJP had polled only 32 per cent of votes in the UP assembly election. It secured a majority in the house because the anti-BJP vote got divided among the Congress Party, the Janata Dal and its breakaway group, the Samajwadi Janata Party. Surely, the opinion expressed by less than one third of the electorate cannot be considered a mandate.

If it is so, the same logic should wash off the crime of a murderer, once he gets elected. The Bofors gun scandal should have been dropped because the Congress Party

should be at pains in calling upon the central government to uphold the constitution in Kashmir, Punjab and Assam but should argue the other way round when it comes to violations in Ayodhya.

The controversy is not between Hindus and Muslims; the BJP is only trying to give it a communal colouring. The controversy is between the supremacy of law and its defaulters. And the more the effigies of judges are burnt, the greater will be the revulsion against the BJP.

Perhaps sensing this, VHP leader Ashok Singhal, who is supervising the construction, has said that the Babri Masjid will not be demolished. This

Disease, Despair and Destruction Still Plague Iraq

by Ross B Mirkarimi

The International Study Team reports that from being an advanced nation with sophisticated public amenities, Iraq is now one of the most impoverished countries in the world, as a result of the Gulf War and the stiff UN embargo.

Some 70% of the conventional bombs dropped missed their targets.

A farmer named Hassan who lives outside Kirkuk lost two family members when allied bombs struck his farm. His barley field was destroyed along with his house. His wheat field was the recipient of two unexploded bombs. To detonate the weapons, he had to slash and burn most of his crop, an act symbolic of the agricultural crisis now confronting Iraq. Hassan's confidence was clearly gone.

More than half of Iraq's livestock population of cows, buffalo, goats, sheep and poultry perished as a result of the allied bombings and the spread of livestock diseases, which run unchecked because Baghdad's veterinary vaccine factory was also bombed. These problems are compounded by food costs that have risen as much as 2,000%, while real earnings have dropped to less than 7% of their pre-crisis level, making Iraqis poorer than people living in rural India. Well into 1992, the situation has improved marginally owing to the prevalence of counterfeiting. Black markets are enjoying a robust business.

Women and children first: Women and children have been among the war's greatest victims. According to the Study Team report, 'Eighty per

cent of the children had lost members of their families in the Gulf War.

Iraq's electrical system, the backbone of the country, was completely bombed. As of April 1992, reports indicate that Iraq's electrical system is operating at a precarious 60%. Breakdown is frequent. Owing to the embargo, Iraq is forced to cannibalise spare parts for makeshift repairs.

Iraq's agricultural industry has also been devastated. The lack of electricity has crippled the irrigation network. There is a severe shortage to seeds, fertilisers and pesticides. The Study Team's forecast for the June 1992 harvest shows a yield equal to 17% of Iraq's food needs. That's half the 1990 harvest.

Black water: Most of the population outside of Baghdad is susceptible to a high incidence of waterborne diseases. While some northern cities have stabilised their potable water supply, Iraq's southern half is feverishly trying to get on line. Recently, observers in Basra spoke of the uncontrolled sewage that flows throughout the city.

The Basra Petro-Chemical Plant, built by Loomis USA, was the largest producer of chlorine in pre-Gulf War Iraq, at 45,000 tons per year. Ninety per cent of its production went toward water purification. The plant was destroyed by three separate bomb attacks. Loomis employees were working until two weeks before the bombing began. It should have been clear to Western forces that a plant like that couldn't be converted into a chemical or microbe weapons plant in two weeks.

Although Iraq was a major

exporter of chlorine prior to the Gulf crisis, international relief will have to satisfy its needs for water treatment.

The environmental effects of the Gulf War will continue to harm Iraq for years to come. Most scientists have been examining the environmental degradation in Kuwait and ignoring the environmental tragedy in Iraq. Scientists have yet to discover whether there was any residual impact of the allied bombing on Iraq's chemical, biological and nuclear facilities. The United Nations Environmental Programme has yet to include Iraq in the environmental assessments by the UN Gulf Task Force.

Iraq is now paying the price for the war. However, if the international community is to have any hope of rehabilitating Iraq, the people and the environment must be saved at the same time that weapons are being destroyed.

Iraqi civilians, especially children, must not be sacrificed because of the behaviour of their government. The international community should beware of sowing the seeds of Iraqi disaffection so deeply that this war could be a prelude to an even greater one a generation hence. Lifting economic sanctions is the prescription for mitigating a suffering civilian population.

One cannot wage war and escape responsibility for its aftermath. It is ultimately a matter of paying now or paying later. — Third World Network Features/In These Times

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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.

The government and the pressmen

Sir, The nature of intervention and conquest of the press club by a vital organ of the Government exposes the weaknesses and shortcomings of the new-found democracy in Bangladesh. Allegations go into air that things had occurred rather to give a note of threat. A threat, telling the journalists not to take up any journalistic knighthood! Of course, it tends to cut the wings of a free press.

Here, it would not be wrong to say, through it might be shocking to some degree to journalists, that pressmen themselves have to be blamed to some extent for inviting a dastardly attack like that on that Sunday. A good number of newspapers work as faithful organisations of one or another political party. They invariably suppress some facts and highlight some other proving their allegiance to a party. A handful of journals can claim to be independently objective, calling a spade a spade.

Journalists will not only

find countless friends in the silent majority, they will be able to educate and animate the people to stand for truth if they honestly project facts and figures. Also, the government should realise that they can be really people-oriented only via a free press. A free press alone can diagnose the flows of a government and a government in turn may grow stronger through sincere corrective measures. It is one of the unavoidable essentials for establishing democracy and rule of law.

Hubert Francis Sarkar
Singtola, Dhaka

Plight of small investors

Sir, Quite a few letters have appeared in your and other dailies in recent days regarding the sufferings of the small investors, many of whom are more dead than alive due to the inconsistent manner in which the officials of ICB dealt with the various accounts of the investors. ICB have so far failed to come out with any rejoinder to counter the allega-

tions made publicly and thereby they have accepted the wrong doings. In some accounts they purchased five or 10 shares, the minimum number as the case may be, and in others ten to twenty times the minimum number of the worthless shares which have not been otherwise subscribed by the general public. The classical case is that of M/S Magura Paper Mills which have not even been listed in the Stock Exchange.

The contribution of the Controller of Capital Issues towards this unfortunate situation is not negligible. This is rather a lifeless organisation, its presence or absence makes little difference to the investors. The Controller sanctioned issues of right shares to M/S Saihan Textile, Bengal Process, Progressive Plastics and to others when their shares were being quoted below par values and the ICB very conveniently debited the accounts of the investors with those right shares, since, as underwriters, its (ICB's) interest always lies with the companies and seldom with the investors.

We also really don't know how a company like 'Swan Textile' could still be listed in the Stock Exchange although it did not call even a single AGM since 1986 when it was turned into a public limited company and floated shares. There are others who do not pay dividends even after a

lapse of six months or more, although they are required to pay declared dividends within two months. There are still others who apparently as a routine manner backdate all their warrants/checks to show that those have been posted/delivered within the stipulated period. The worst are those who compel the small investors to call on their department officials twice or even thrice to collect a dividend worth Tk 100/- or less at a total cost of Tk 40- to Tk 50- on transport, not to speak of the time involved. The Controller of Capital Issues seems oblivious to all these pinpricks suffered by the investors. These organisations need to be pulled up in the interest of revitalising the capital market. I beg to draw the kind attention of the hon'ble Finance Minister.

M Hassan
Siddeshuari Circular Road,
Dhaka.

Diana and Charles

Sir, Once again the personal life of Princess Diana has become an issue of public discussion. It has been revealed through the Press that she had driven to five suicide bids by uncaring Charles. The Princess is stated to be deeply unhappy for most of her ten years married life. Princess Diana who is assumed to be suffering from some sort of depression-linked illness believes that she will

never be a queen. According to her friends, she blames the lack of support from Prince Charles in particular and the royal family in general for an increasingly uncaring attitude which drove her to the depths of despair.

I can still remember that some years back, the marriage of Charles and Diana was about to be broken when some well-wishers bridged their differences and saved. The union of Prince Charles and Lady Diana stands as a legend among their huge admirers around the world. I sincerely hope that the couple would find back their happy life with the blessings of their close well-wishers.

M Zahidul Haque
Asstt Prof, BAI, Dhaka.

Bravo Gower

Sir, Weeks ago, the Third Test between England and Pakistan was finished at Old Trafford in a draw. This Test was exciting in many ways. The Pak team, with their superb batting and bowling performance, managed to retain the previously 1-0 lead in the series. This Test saw a versatile double century by Aamir Sohail (205 runs off 284 balls with 32 boundaries). It also saw Aaqib Javed being fined for misconduct with the umpire.

However, the most spectacular side of this Test was David Gower's crossing of Geoffrey Boycott's mark to become the

highest English Test scorer with 8154 runs. He crossed Boycott's limits with a boundary and also managed to score a nice 73 runs, before Wasim Akram took his wicket.

Hats off to this legendary left hander David Gower, for this spectacular and memorable feat. I for one, personally hope that you manage to maintain this form of yours in the future.

Asrarul Islam Choudhury Ronnie
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Let us live

Sir, I fully support Mr Abu M. Faiz with his appeal (let us live) in your letter column on July 22. I should cry out 'let us live or perish'. Will our Finance Minister explain why he is making such statement in our highest platform of National Parliament that "the poor consumers have been given relief" as he has not touched power, gas and water? The Titas Gas Company has increased the rate by 10 per cent on our domestic account, effective May 1, 1992. The World Bank is dictating in our domestic and daily life as well. Maybe they are the donor agency but that does not mean that they will dictate in every step of our domestic life. So it is our humble appeal to our beloved Prime Minister to cut down the gas rate to that prevailing rate of April, 1992.

"Poor consumers"