

A Welcome JS Exercise

On balance, the debate on the no-confidence motion against the Government at the Jatiya Sangsad on Wednesday-Thursday served last of the purpose we had hoped for. True, much of what happened during the 12-hour discussion as well as the outcome were expected, like the defeat of the motion with a comfortable margin for the ruling party. Again, there were charges and counter-charges, mutual recriminations and occasional digging into the past, which, from time to time, changed the focus of the debate, from the issues at hand to matters whose relevance to our contemporary situation was debatable.

However, as an exercise in parliamentary democracy, the debate served a useful purpose. That it was prompted by a no-confidence motion added an urgency to the principal issue under discussion, namely, the law and order situation. In this sense, it was meant as a signal to the government that it ought to take the situation seriously and start adopting measures — administrative and political — which would help to bring about an improvement of the situation. Of course, the opposition could not resist the temptation of causing some embarrassment to the government of Begum Khaleda Zia — well, this is all part of the process of parliamentary democracy — and even divert the popular attention from the success of the Prime Minister's visit to Manama and Islamabad. Again, this, too, was expected, part of game political parties play in a parliament, which is not exactly holding a tea party.

Yet, in reviewing the 12-hour debate, one wonders if the discussion did not fall below our expectation, leaving us with the uncomfortable feeling that the improvement in the law and order situation would not come all that easily or quickly. In other words, however strong was the signal the opposition gave to the government on the law and order situation, its overall approach suffered from lack of depth and cohesion. Thus, it failed to confront the government with a plan of action on the law and order situation or make a dramatic offer as to what it was prepared to do, say, to end the campus violence. This, we believe, was the result of poor coordination among opposition members who participated in the debate. This problem — the lack of preparation in the opposition in facing any debate — will crop up again and again, a problem that can be resolved only when the opposition sets up its own think tank to train its members, especially the younger ones, in their appreciation of national issues.

The weakness of the opposition will be exploited by the ruling party, more or less in the way it did when Begum Zia delivered her hour-long speech ostensibly to refute the uncoordinated charges made by the opposition leader and, in the process, to extricate herself from the defensive position in which the government found itself, especially on the law and order situation. Since the administration did not feel obliged to accept criticisms of its existing policies, it also felt no need to announce a new plan of action as such. However, we welcome the assurance of the Prime Minister that the government would seek co-operation from the opposition in "giving democracy an institutional shape", an exercise in which an improvement of the law and order situation would obviously get the highest priority. Herein lies a good deal of hope that was the direct result of what was, in any case, a worthwhile exercise at the Jatiya Sangsad.

Managing Wildlife Sanctuary

Its existence under threat, Chunati Wildlife Sanctuary, the only one of its kind in the country, has a strong case in its favour for consideration. The Wildlife Preservation and Nature Conservation Association (WPNCA) has rightly expressed its concern over the fast depletion of the forest resources — both flora and fauna — of the sanctuary. So far as the conservation of wildlife is concerned, our record is simply dismal. But when the failure becomes monumental in the management of our only wildlife sanctuary, the malaise obviously looks incurable.

With an area of only 19,177 sq acres, this sanctuary could indeed be made a safe haven for the rare animals living there. But this is not to be the case. Poaching is a constant threat to the elephants of the sanctuary. Of the 25 elephants, four were killed by poachers in June last. Indiscriminate killing of other animals inside the sanctuary, as alleged by the Secretary General of the WPNCA, is wreaking havoc among the rare species. Add to this the ever increasing rate of felling of trees, there emerges a scenario of barrenness rivaling Eliot's Waste Land in the near future.

Just about half a century ago, the vegetation of this forest, in its pristine condition and with rich genetic resources, could match, every inch, a classified rain forest. The great canopy of tall trees is gone for ever, but enough trees, bushes and grass made good cover for the many species of animals even at the time of declaring the forest as a wildlife sanctuary. A small forest such as this is the last thing to survive any kind of mismanagement. But unfortunately, this marks the conservation effort expended for the sanctuary. Encroachment and illegal felling of trees hasten the process of the forest's destruction. As for the encroachment, it is however not by the poor people whose desperation for fire-wood is understandable, but by the men of greed that really accounts for this deplorable situation.

Considering the small forest cover of our land area, the need for conserving Chunati Wildlife Sanctuary is overriding. Failure to do so will leave a bad precedent for similar venture in future. Large-scale environmental pollution the world over has forced upon us the incumbency to take care of our forest resources as much as possible. The Sunderbans are also in a bad shape. A comparison with the Indian part of the Sunderbans with that of ours can provide us with the necessary lesson in the management business of forests. Indiscriminate plundering of forest resources will remove the natural shield against calamities of nature. This has happened in the country's south. Denudation of forests accounts for floods in the north. From the biological point of view too, the conservation of such sanctuaries is immensely important.

AMONG political prognosticators, all the "smart money" is now being bet on Democrat Bill Clinton in the race for the United States presidency. But in this volatile election campaign, the "smart money" has repeatedly been made to look quite stupid.

For the first time in almost a generation, a Democratic presidential ticket is waging a much more aggressive and effective campaign than are the Republicans.

In a remarkable popularity surge following the Democratic national convention in mid-July Clinton led republican incumbent President George Bush by as much as 30 points.

Clinton and his running mate, Tennessee Senator Albert Gore, drew large and enthusiastic crowds on a well-prepared bus tour through the US heartland, while Bush and Vice-President Dan Quayle continued to stumble haplessly along the campaign trail.

The contrast seems so sharp and solid that a few pundits have begun to predict not merely a Clinton victory but an outright rout. However, this has been an embarrassing year for pundits.

Hardly any did a creditable job in analysing the year's biggest political phenomenon: the short-lived independent candidacy of Ross Perot. First they failed to gauge his appeal, then they generally overestimated his significance. In the estimation of many commentators, Perot went from being a crank to a potential president and back to a crank — all in the space of three months.

Perot's rocketship trajectory should not have caused so much befuddlement. After all, Bush and Clinton have been on similar journeys themselves within the past couple of years.

Even in April the Arkansas governor was judged to be in desperate political condition. Even though well ahead in the race for the Democratic nomination, Clinton was widely regarded as "unelectable," owing

to the "character issue."

Many political professionals suggested that the Democrats would ultimately hand the nomination to someone else, since reports about Clinton's marital infidelities and his efforts to avoid military conscription made him look a sure loser to Bush.

The shift in the President's political standing has been no less precipitous. Under 12 months ago Bush's popularity was considered "unbeatable." Bush was still basking then in

the afterglow of nearly 90 per cent approval ratings following the US-engineered victory in the Gulf conflict.

The Clinton 2-1 lead in the polls will almost certainly prove no more durable than Bush's bubble. Even though two-thirds of the voters now disapprove of the President's performance, Bush can confidently expect a boost from his own party's national convention, in Houston, Texas (August 17-20).

The Republicans excel in staging these extravaganzas. Patriotic imagery, melodramatic filmed biographies and manipulative rhetoric abound.

Republican luminaries such as cabinet member and former football hero Jack Kemp are scheduled to give glowing endorsements of Bush. Ronald Reagan, still a master of television, will do his best to unfold his successor in an aura of glory.

Other speakers will remind the millions watching this spectacle that it was during Bush's presidency that the "Evil Empire" collapsed and that doubts about US military might were vanquished.

If all goes according to Republicans plans, Clinton's margin in the polls should be somewhere in the single digit range by the end of August. But the writers of this particular script might be in for a shock.

Some powerful Republicans have come to accept that they can avert disaster in the November 3 presidential and congressional election only if drastic action is taken at the convention.

Rumours persist, despite Bush's forceful denials, that

Dan Quayle will be replaced on the ticket by someone like Kemp or top US military official Gen. Colin Powell, Secretary of State James Baker, expected to become chairman of the Bush re-election campaign, is also mentioned as a possible substitute for the unimpressive Quayle.

One national political magazine, The New Republic, even suggested that 68-year-old Bush himself might step aside, citing health reasons. If that happened, it said, Baker would almost inevitably be chosen as party nominee, with Powell, an African-American, tipped as his likely running-mate.

Bush's personal tenacity, which took him to the White House after more than a quarter-century in politics, makes a sudden resignation seem extremely unlikely. But the arguments supporting this eventuality are not altogether unconvincing.

Bush has been floundering badly since last autumn. His unexpected postponement of a summit meeting with the Japanese prime minister was followed by self-inflicted damage to the President's image when the two leaders finally did meet in Tokyo.

The US economy has grown at a barely perceptible pace in 1992, with the national unemployment rate now almost three percentage points higher than in the run-up to Bush's 1988 election victory.

The Los Angeles riots this spring reinforced the belief that the President is not addressing the country's social and racial problems. Lacking in personal charisma, Bush has

also been unable to develop a purposeful agenda for a second term. After 12 years in power, he seems intellectually and politically exhausted.

By contrast, Clinton and Gore, both in their mid-40s, look vigorous and promising. Clearly, they have learned valuable lessons from the three previous failed Democratic campaigns for the White House.

They know how to arrange pleasing pictures for the TV cameras. For example, in Houston — Bush's home city — Clinton posed with a group of uniformed police officers as he denounced the President's record on crime-fighting.

The Democrats are also determined not to wilt under the anticipated barrage of negative Republican advertising. Both the nominee and former President Jimmy Carter all fired back in coordinated fashion in late July when White House spokesman Martin Fitzwater called Clinton "reckless" for proposing that the US might consider bombing Serbian positions in Bosnia to ensure delivery of United Nations relief supplies.

The Democrats realise that they are vulnerable on foreign policy. Clinton has no experience whatsoever in international relations, having spent his entire political career in a small state in the US interior.

And Carter, the most recent Democratic president, is still remembered most for his failure to free US hostages in Iran.

Bush will doubtless try to burnish his credentials as a statesman and take full advantage of his agenda setting ability as the world's most power-

ful political figure. US military intervention in Iraq or some other part of the Third World would thus not come as a big surprise this autumn.

Although the country seems receptive to Clinton's efforts to keep the debate focussed on domestic issues, US national security considerations are almost always vital in presidential elections.

Bush has already begun to emphasise these concerns. At a campaign stop in late July he declared: "When you get down to it, this election will be like every other, and when you go into that voting booth and pull that curtain behind you, trust matters."

"Trust" could well become the key word in Bush's campaign, for it has two pointed meanings. The electorate ought to trust my proven abilities in foreign affairs, the President is saying, while simultaneously implying that his opponent is not trustworthy.

In this way, the "character issue" is revived, with voters being subtly reminded of Clinton's reputation as a philanthropist.

"Family values" will also be used as a weapon against Clinton. Ever since the 1960s, when the Democrats became identified with challenges to traditional social and cultural norms, the Republicans have succeeded in portraying themselves as the guardians of old-fashioned virtues.

When combined with efforts to stoke whites' racial resentments, this tactic has had devastating consequences for the Democrats.

For these reasons, it is rash to forecast a Clinton victory in November 3. While the challenger does appear quite formidable at this stage, he will be sorely tested during the next three months.

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The Earth Summit '92: Consensus on Role of NGOs

THE recently held Earth Summit has recognized and appreciated the vital role of NGOs in development sectors throughout the world and urged for a broad-based public participation and the active involvement of non-governmental organizations in alleviating poverty, hunger, ill-health and illiteracy besides combating the continuing deterioration of the ecosystem on which the fate of mankind depends largely.

The summit has also emphasized on global network of NGOs operating at the international, national and local levels and called for allowing them to play their partnership role responsibly and effectively including in the conception, establishment and evaluation of official mechanism designed to review the implementation of sustainable development programmes.

The summit stressed the need for implementing Agenda 21 that addresses the pressing problems of today and also aims at preparing the world for the challenges of the next century. The Agenda 21 reflects a global consensus and political commitment at the highest level on developmental and environmental cooperation. The successful implementation of Agenda 21 is first and foremost responsibility of

the respective governments in their own countries.

It is noteworthy that Agenda 21 is a dynamic programme to be carried out by the various actors according to the different situations, capacities and priorities of countries and regions which could evolve over time in the light of changing needs and circumstances.

This process marks the beginning of a new global partnership for sustainable development and this partnership commits all states to engage in a continuous and constructive dialogue inspired by the need to achieve a more efficient and equitable world community. It is recognized that, for the success of this new partnership, it is important to overcome confrontation and to foster a climate of genuine cooperation and solidarity. Thus NGOs are recognized as sustainable development partners, of the respective governments.

According to the Agenda 21, the NGOs also play a vital role in the shaping and implementation of participatory democracy. Their credibility lies in the responsible and constructive role they play in society. Therefore, independence is a major attribute of non-governmental organizations and is the precondition of real participation. It is further stated that non-

governmental organizations possess well-established and diverse experience, expertise and capacity in fields which will be of particular importance to the implementation and review of environmentally sound and socially responsible sustainable development, as envisaged throughout Agenda 21.

To ensure that the full potential contribution of non-governmental organizations is realized, the fullest possible communication and cooperation between international organizations, national and local governments and non-governmental organizations should be promoted in institutions mandated, and programmes designed to carry out Agenda 21.

The Chapter 27 of the Agenda which deals with NGOs states, "With a view to strengthening the role of non-governmental organizations as social partners, the United Nations system and Governments should initiate a process, in consultation with non-governmental organizations, to review formal procedures and mechanisms for the involvement of these organizations at all levels from policy-making and decision making to implementation.

By 1995, a mutually productive dialogue should be established at the national level between all Government and non-governmental organizations and their self-organized networks to recognize and strengthen their respective roles in implementing environmentally sound and sustainable development."

The Agenda also elaborates the role of the government regarding NGOs and puts forward following measures to be strictly followed by the governments:

- Establish or enhance an existing dialogue with non-governmental organizations and their self-organized networks representing various sectors, which could serve to: (i) consider the rights and responsibilities of these organizations; (ii) efficiently channel integrated non-governmental inputs to the governmental policy development process; and (iii) facilitate non-governmental coordination in implementing national policies at the programme levels;
- Encourage and enable partnership and dialogue between local non-governmental organizations and local authorities in activities aimed at sustainable development;
- Involve non-governmental

organizations in national mechanisms or procedures established to carry out Agenda 21, making the best use of their particular capacities, especially in the fields of education, poverty alleviation and environmental protection and rehabilitation;

• Take into account the findings of non-governmental monitoring and review mechanisms in the design and evaluation of policies concerning the implementation of Agenda 21 at all levels;

• Review government education systems to identify ways to include and expand the involvement of non-governmental organizations in the field of formal education and of public awareness;

• Make available and access-

ible to non-governmental organizations the data and information necessary for their effective contribution to research and to the design, implementation and evaluation of programmes.

In fine, it may be said that NGOs are working globally through geographical pockets and are considered as instrumental in poverty alleviation, environmental development, etc. Their activities, programmes and campaigns throughout the world have been appreciated and recognised under the Agenda 21 of the Earth Summit. The governments of 158 countries made a commitment towards making NGO activities expanded and free from all obstacles in future.

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.

Sirajganj Hospital needs care

Sir, There is no boundary wall around Sirajganj General Hospital and its male ward remains always open in absence of a project made gate. As a result, unnecessary persons always gather on the hospital campus and cattle graze, to the disturbance of both patients and doctors. Besides, the isolation ward highly needs reconstruction with extension.

So, the authorities concerned is requested to pay their kind attention to the needs.

Shelina Kamrul Bahrgola, Sirajganj.

Social nuisance

Sir, Very recently the government has repaired at a huge expense the road starting from Sonargaon Hotel, running all through Nilkhet, BUET, Medical College Hostel, Chandkharpool, Nimtoli, Phoolbaria and ending at Hardeo Glass Factory. This road runs on the Old Railway Track and is known some times as "Sonargaon Road", sometimes as "Penetrator

Road" and at the time when it was planned it was supposed to be apart of the Asian Highway.

Before undertaking repair works the unauthorised dwellings between Nilkhet and Chandkharpool were removed and the dwellers evicted. At the moment work is in progress repairing the foot-path.

Regrettably, I find that this road is now being used, firstly, in a large scale by the transport companies for unloading trucks between Chandkharpool and Nimtoli causing severe damage and congestion; secondly, parking in double (sometimes triple) lines for 3-ton trucks and local buses; thirdly, as a virtual dumping yard for drums on both sides of the road and lastly, transport union makeshift offices have also recently cropped up. In a nutshell it has become an unbearable place to live for the local residents. And when the University area is closed to traffic and this road being the only thoroughfare, it is a nightmare to negotiate through this road.

The portion running from Nimtoli to Phoolbaria is again

another scenario because the minibuses have been traditionally blocking this road, using as a parking lot.

Having said the above, I wonder while we, the tax-payers are paying for all the repair-works and the city-dads are doing a fairly good job, how can a handful of inconsiderate people create so much of inconvenience and deliberate damage to public property! The members of the law enforcing agencies are physically present in these places but it seems there is very little that they can do. I strongly feel that time is now ripe when we the tax-payers would like to get a fair bargain for the taxes we are paying and the concerned authorities should crack down on such social nuisance.

Hasan Abdullah Bakshi Bazar Road, Dhaka

Coincidence or same prescription

Sir, National Budget of Bangladesh for 1992-93 provides some daring measures in matters of income-tax which have been termed by many as revolutionary. In place of old concept of higher rates for higher revenue this year rates of tax have been lowered and only four slabs have been introduced. This first one is for Tk 20,000 up to Tk 40,000 @ 15%, the second for next Tk 1,50,000 @ 20%, the 3rd for next Tk 3,00,000 @ 25% and for all amounts above it, @ 30%.

The other day, I came up on an article in an Indian periodical (precisely Shananda) in which the new income-tax measures regarding personal income introduced in India changing the old practices for the same fiscal year (1992-93) have been discussed in details. However, their FY starts in March/April and ours in June. Strangely enough, it also provides for four slabs, almost the same income tax-free income, the same method of calculating the income-tax for each slab, giving up the past practices. The first slab is from Rs 28,000 up to Rs 50,000 with 20% tax. Indian Rs 28,000 is almost equal to our Taka 40,000. The second slab is from Rs 50,000 to Rs 1,00,000 and the income-tax rate, 30%. The third slab is from Rs 1,00,000 and rate of tax 40%. Above Rs 1,00,000 there is the surcharge of 12 and half per cent.

Is it mere coincidence or copying, when we consider that the Indian law was passed some three months prior to ours, or just as light variation of the same prescription by the investor agencies or donor agencies like IMF, World Bank etc? When we find the Aid Consortium has granted 7.2b dollar for India and some 2.1b dollar for Bangladesh our conjecture gets its roots. Time will only say if the prescriptions would work to raise the revenue.

Sultana Jahed West Nakhalpara, Dhaka

OPINION

Meters for Taxis

I strongly support the plea for the installation of fare meters in taxis and baby taxis (Star, Down to Earth, July 25) in Dhaka city, the national capital, to start with; later spreading to the other major cities.

There was absolutely no excuse for withdrawing the meter system (abandoned long ago), and the delay in re-introducing it. When all the world can have meters, why not Bangladesh?

Vested interests might come up with long lists of local problems to resist the introduction of meters (as they have been doing for decades), but it has to be done in public interest, in this case, the interest of the passengers, who pay and sustain this industry (public transport system).

A private enterprise run on competitive basis should be able to provide an efficient service, after the initial fallout of the unscrupulous and the undesirable operators.

Metered baby taxis will cause a boom in the number of passengers, who can afford such mode of transport (more than a lakh of passengers). Haggling is nuisance, and at present the minimum charge is Taka 20/- and the incremental jump is @ Taka five. This is fleecing the passengers, pure and simple.

The metered rate for Mis-huks would be much cheaper, due to lower fuel consumption. A workable and acceptable metered fare structure can be arrived at with the consensus of the taxi owners' unions.

At present the taxis (4-wheelers) are 'invisible' and are available only at certain points or stands, thereby rendering the service useless, and where is the time to haggle? Unmetered fares do come down with the frequency of availability and use. A metered taxi system is economically viable in Dhaka, subject to its instant availability at main street corners/stands.

Initially, it appears that the initiative has to be taken by a big taxi company in the private sector, to provide the initiative and encourage the small operators to come in gradually (Phed Piper syndrome so popular in Bangladesh).

Otherwise, the money-losing Parjatan Corps, which is thinking of privatising, may start a metered taxi service in the city on a big scale (it will fail on a small scale as at present), in a tie-up with a foreign investor on BLT/BOT basis, (as in the case of digital telephones). It may also undertake a meter installation service to the existing private taxis, under contract on instalment or hire-purchase system (it is easier for BPC to get loans for the import of SKD meters).

It may be pointed out that the current electronic meters are virtually tamper-proof, and offer a number of advantages over the old mechanical meters, which made it unreliable due to easy means of tampering.

Metered taxis and baby taxis would ease to a certain extent the load on the pedal rickshaws. Also more and more passengers would be willing to share long trips within the city in case of urgency or for regular trips to the place of work (and return). Since the political parties are naturally chary of touching the cycle rickshaws. The alternative is to create diversion with metered taxi services (three and 4-wheelers).

It is a matter of shame that Dhaka is still without a metered taxi service on the eve of the 21st century. It is necessary for the Government to come out with a policy, after consulting the operators. This prior consensus is becoming a precedent due to the prevailing mood of resorting to vicious harkals and other unethical activities to thwart a new line of action.

A. Mawaz Dhaka