

Let's be Serious

The question of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is possibly the most complicated and multi-faceted problem facing the government of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia at present. Because of the existence of cross-border insurgency and tens of thousands of refugees in neighbouring India, the problem has acquired, since the mid-70s, an international as well as internal dimension. On the one hand, we have the question of the rights of indigenous people over their traditional land, pitting itself against the demands of a modern, over-crowded nation-state over territories within its sovereign jurisdiction. Internally, the three districts of Rangamati, Khagrachari and Bandarban have been under de facto military rule for years, with CHT inhabitants denied many rights that come naturally to people in other parts of the country.

The violence, the refugee problem and the denial of rights are all inter-linked and can only be solved, as the Prime Minister has explicitly acknowledged in her joint communique with Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, through a political settlement. With the goal of political solution in mind, the government, as required of it in the joint communique, has set up a committee to investigate the problems and recommend solutions. On the face of it, the whole thing sounds good enough. However, things are not as they should be. The government committee, which begins its work Thursday according to a report in this paper yesterday, has already become a controversial one. No satisfactory explanation has been forthcoming as to why the three elected members of parliament from the CHT districts were not included in the committee. How the government wishes to solve the CHT's problems without allowing the local people's representatives to play their rightful part is a mystery. Another mystery is why a parliamentary committee was not formed to probe into the problems of the hill tracts. After all, parliament was elected to deal with national problems in a democratic manner and make the decision-making process accountable to the public through their representatives. The present committee, although formed of MPs, will not be answerable to parliament, making a mockery of its parliamentary character. As it is, three opposition MPs on the committee have decided to boycott its work, weakening the initiative even before it had begun.

The issue is of such paramount importance to our national interest and international relations that the government would serve the country poorly indeed if it continued to treat it in the kind of haphazard and partisan manner it so far has. There is still time to scrap this committee and constitute a fresh, parliamentary one with the Speaker as chairman and including all three CHT MPs. That would not only enhance public acceptability of the committee, it would also send a strong signal that the government was indeed serious about its work. Also the terms of reference of the committee ought to be made public, with clear indications as to the parameters within which a solution would be sought. For one thing, the Local Government Act of 1989, which the government has wisely kept in place, does provide a basis on which a solution could be sought, provided the councils were truly autonomous and not under the overlordship of the local military commander as is the case at present. The committee should also pay extra care to holding of free and fair elections to those councils in order to ensure a representative character of the CHT's governing bodies. Most important however will be the task of regaining the confidence of the tribal people in the government's sincerity in dealing with issue justly and fairly, with human rights, cultural and religious freedoms and economic development being the deciding factors.

Gutting a Treasure Trove

Lalmai is not much of a range with its highest prominence jutting out only to an humble 150 feet and running for a poor 12-mile length. Still who hasn't heard of it or of its more famous southern arm known as the Mainamati hills? These earthy mounds are integrally related with the rise and fall of a very interesting people with their very charming ways about religion and cultural achievements giving birth to learning as practised at the Salvana Vihara more than a thousand years back.

These hillocks, in spite of being celebrated beyond their size, may be heading for annihilation after being there unmolested for thousands of years. Earth-work contractors' bulldozers are at work razing the mounds to ground. Repeated protests made to district administration has resulted in government seeing to it that the part of the range leased out by it is not molested. But bulldozers are at work pecking at the landrise day in and day out just outside the leased out area — at fringe areas near Kalir Bazar. The contractors are bringing down the hillocks quite openly, declaring as openly that when none was there objecting to their action, there couldn't be anything wrong with their operation.

This is strange indeed. Why can't the district administration tell them that no one in Bangladesh has the right to tamper with anything the size of a hill range, that it is downright illegal to lay unauthorised hands on natural phenomena of far less size and importance than this. The Forest Department, for one, could prosecute the culprits. So could the Department of Environment. May be all of them would move in when the hills would be no more.

If unresisted vandalism can harm such celebrated sites of environmental, cultural and historical importance, it is difficult to imagine anything safe from the ramming and bulldozing of the plunderers.

We want quick action at Lalmai not only to preserve the environmentally invaluable range but also to set an example to illustrate the authority's uncompromising resolve to save nature. It is also very important to keep in mind that the Lalmai-Mainamati range and the areas in its vicinity is literally cluttered with precious archaeological remains — and vandalising the hills would definitely do immense harm to this treasure trove of our nation.

A Meeting of Opposition Parties Will Boost Regional Amity

TOO bad it did not mature. A meeting of the opposition leaders from the SAARC countries, proposed by Benazir Bhutto, the Pakistan People's Party Chairperson, was a promising move. It might have offered the political heavy-weights, who are outside the government, an opportunity to have a go at the region's problems, which the parties in power have not been able to solve. Even if the meeting had failed, it would have broken a new ground. The benefits are hard to quantify or assess.

Benazir's initiative is now a few months' old. She invited the opposition leaders of parliament in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal for a meeting at Karachi on September 15. The two other members of the SAARC — Bhutan and the Maldives — were kept out probably because of the absence of the opposition in those countries. Bhutan should, however, have been associated because it has a two-year-old Bhutan People's Party, agitating against the monarchy for democratisation.

There was no fixed agenda for the meeting. Nor was Benazir trying to structure it beforehand in any manner. Everything was dependent on the mood of the participants. Perhaps such efforts yield more results if they are left that way.

LK Advani, the Bharatiya Janata Party leader, wanted an earlier date. Benazir changed it to September 7. It still did not suit him, who says that he does not want to go to Pakistan at present. He must be having valid reasons for doing so. But his 'no' has probably smothered a high level non-official discussion outside the disci-

plines and direction of those in power. Holding the meeting without him would have been staging Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark.

The governments are hoisted on their own petard. They have been stuck for ideas. Their stand on several issues has ceased to be realistic. Perhaps they are conscious of it but they dare not change it because of the fear of the opposition. Had the meeting taken place, the governments would have probably considered modifying their stand in the light of the debate.

Take Kashmir. Both India and Pakistan are diametrically opposed to each other. The non-official point of view is not so rigid as is the official one. Prime Minister Narasimha Rao has ruled out any talks with Pakistan on Kashmir and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif does not want to have any talk with India unless the problem is solved.

In contrast, Benazir has advocated a step-by-step approach and her view is that trade, contact and the economic cooperation between Pakistan and India would help them tackle Kashmir. Advani, although not so categorical, has also said that India and Pakistan should first normalise their relations before they take up any point of difference.

Again, India has an uncompromising policy on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which it wants to be crushed. The Sri Lankan government's search is for a political solution of the Tamil

problem, even if it means holding a dialogue with the LTTE. Mrs S Bhandaranaike, opposition leader from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, is in favour of keeping India's sensitivities in view while seeking a solution to the problem.

Therefore, the choice is not really between black and white; there are some grey possibilities. The opposition leader might have provided the governments with the much-needed common ground

how far the ethnic movements should be accommodated would have been pertinent. This is important because the stirrings that much of the territory is slipping beyond the influence of both rulers and the opposition. Ethnic minorities which can be described as sub-nations, are pitted against the nation. They have become assertive in the recent years because there is a tendency to bulldoze the minority opinion. The opposition leaders, by the dint of their status, can be

Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute. The BJP is seen as the villain of the piece. Advani might have given an assurance on behalf of his party that the mosque's destruction was not in the cards. He could have mollified their fears by reiterating BJP's resolve to follow a secular policy.

There are many other problems which demand the attention and confidence of opposition leaders. The very existence of the opposition is in jeopardy. Narasimha Rao and Nawaz Sharif may differ in tactics but they stop at nothing in their manipulations to break up the opposition. In India money is coming in handy in a big way. MPs have been purchased to split the Janata Dal. Instead of looking in to the allegations the Speaker has put his seal of approval on the messy goings-on and given a ruling that may open the floodgates for defection.

The PPP in Pakistan and the Awami League in Bangladesh face similar problems of pressure and prize that the ruling parties use to entice members to their side. Things should have been different in India because it has had an uninterrupted stretch of democratic rule, unlike its neighboring countries where the opposition has to watch its steps and where the military is still the third person present at every decision-making forum. But India is probably the worst example now. Narasimha Rao's anxiety to have a clear majority in the

Lok Sabha — something which he could not achieve in the election — has trivialised politics.

It is sad but true that corruption has come to dominate the region. Legislators apart, every tier of society has got contaminated. Scandals are galore. The stink of kickbacks from the Bofors gun deal in India was still tick in the air when the securities scam came to light. The Nawaz Sharif administration is reeling under charges of corruption, ranging from drawing loans from the cooperative banks of placing orders abroad.

Allegations of corruption are loud enough in Sri Lanka against President Premadasa and in Bangladesh against Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. Not that most of the opposition leaders have better credentials but their anxiety to expose the rulers might have brought things to the fore.

There is a general erosion of democratic values. This is as much true of India as of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan or the Maldives. Highhanded and arbitrary actions are carried out with impunity. Tyrants have sprouted at all levels — tyrants whose claim to authority is largely based on their proximity to the seat of power. The attitude of the general run of public functionaries is characterised by the paralysis of the will to do the right and proper thing. The ethical considerations inherent in public behaviour have generally become dim and even beyond the mental grasp of many. It is a pity that a meeting which may have highlighted these ills, even out of pique, did not take off the ground.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

if they had met. And the problems, which are draining the best of resources of the countries locked in confrontation, might have been easier to handle.

In fact, the situation has deteriorated in the past few years. The governments have stepped in to complicate matters in the countries they dislike. These are fomenting trouble and supporting armed challenges across the border. They may be low-cost operations but their fallout is the gun culture which is beginning to outstrip reason. The rights and the wrongs of a movement have receded in to the background. Now it is the amount of terror which one can instil. Instead, a discussion on

freer in their expression. Even if the governments are convinced about a sub-nation's demand they are reluctant to concede because they are not sure of the repercussions it may have.

Decentralisation of power is probably the best way in dealing with the ethnicity outbursts so that a different cultural entity gets a feeling of identity. How far to go when the centrifugal forces are on the rise is something which the opposition leaders are better placed to discuss because most of them encourage separatist movements.

The Muslim majority countries — Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Maldives — appear to be worked up on the Ram

Jolly Roger Flies Again in SE Asia

Alan Chalkley writes from Hong Kong

Piracy is rampant again in Southeast Asian waters from Penang round to Zamboanga

families bear titles like "Sultan" to this day, and do it proudly.

The "sea-gypsies" of the seas around Borneo and Mindanao are still with us over the centuries, and are not averse to a little theft on the side. They are also called the Bajajs, and if you want to see them tacking into harbour in their coloured-sail *untas*, go any day to Zamboanga, in southern Philippines.

It was not long ago that merchant ships protected themselves on the high seas. A relic of those days remains in Hong Kong.

When the Excelsior Hotel was being built over a decade ago, the construction gangs digging the foundations found an old tunnel and some underground storage which had been built over and forgotten this century. When the architects looked into the archives, they discovered that this had been the arsenal of guns and ammunition for the ships of Jardine, Matheson & Co, a founder of the colony.

When a freighter ventured out along the Asian coast in

those days, it carried armaments worthy of a full-blown warship.

Where there is piracy, there is also smuggling. This is an "administrative crime" — if there were no import duties or quotas or trade barriers, there would be no smuggling.

OPINION

Crime and Punishment

The biggest controversy raging in the nation now is the trial and punishment of the people who had not only fought against the liberation of the country but were participants in mass murder, rape, burning and looting. It is a matter of shame and a crime that these people have not been tried and punished in the long two decades the country has been independent. The reason I think for this failure of bringing them to the book is that there never has been a properly and duly elected government in power and whoever were in power or managed to seize power with cunning, guile or the power of the gun did not have the support or approval of the people. To stay in power they had to make political alliances with forces which never believed in the independence of the nation. This exigency of political expediency enabled the criminals to escape punishment. Now is time to set the record straight.

In Islam there is the concept of Jihad — for many Jihad means going out with a sword or other weapons in hand to fight the infidels. But, this is a grossly mistaken idea and distortion of the concept of Jihad. The true meaning of Jihad is the protest and fight against injustice whatever and wherever it is. If we are good and righteous human beings and not only just good Muslims it is incumbent upon us to wage Jihad against whoever took part in mass murder and atrocities that were committed during the Liberation War.

The issue at the moment is the trial of people who allegedly were not only the master mind but directly and indirectly participated in the atrocities, mass murder, rape and other heinous crimes which equals in wickedness with the atrocities committed in the Nazi Germany. But, the difference is that right after the 2nd World War the war criminals were tried by Germany herself and punished accordingly and even today after 47 years persons found of having committed war crimes during the 2nd World War are still hunted down and tried (examples of which had already been given by a columnist in The Daily Star).

At this time various interested quarters and parties including some elements in the government are trying to divert and confuse the issue with irrelevant points. These include the issue of the citizenship of Golam Azam and the legitimacy of staging of

"People's Court." None of these are relevant to the central issue of the crimes against the people and the responsibility of the government to try and prosecute the alleged criminals.

The issue of Golam Azam's citizenship is a very minor one and the High Court has given a split decision on it. The Chief Justice will now decide the matter. The matter of the "People's Court" is also a non-issue actually for the government — as none of the organizers or members of the "People's Court" claimed or pretended that it was a legitimate court and there was not the slightest pretence or expectation that the verdict will be enforced.

In some ways the "People's Court" may be termed as a street theatre — expressing grievance in a dramatic manner which is their democratic right. In this respect, the organizers of this court or event cannot even claim any originality as the late great humanitarian Lord Bertrand Russell and French philosopher Jean Paul Satre had staged a similar "People's Court" in Paris to express their outrage at the atrocities of the Vietnam war. Also, at the height of the Vietnam war such "People's Court" were staged in several US cities to demonstrate the anger of the American people at the brutality of US forces in Vietnam like carpet bombing of entire areas of the country, defoliating the countryside with agent orange or napalm bombing of entire villages. It was this demonstration of public outrage and protests that finally brought withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam and ended the war.

Public protest does not have to follow any well charted path or conventional means as long as it is not done with criminal intent to de-stabilize a legitimate government or to create anarchy or commit violence. It has been demonstrated that even the burning of a national flag — the highest and ultimate symbol of nationhood can be a valid means of protest and is legal and within the constitutional rights of a citizen according to a recent ruling by the US Supreme Court.

It should be remembered by the government that it is not a cliché that people are the source of all power and this truth and fact of life has been proven time and again not only in our brief history but also in many countries of the world. To refresh the memory of the leaders of the present administration it can be mentioned

that 1) it was people's power that removed Ayub Khan from office, 2) people's power brought independence of Bangladesh, 3) people's power elected Ziaur Rahman to Presidency, 4) also, it was people's power that removed Ershad from office. In the Philippines, again it was people's power that ultimately drove a long time dictator like Marcos from office and brought Corazon Aquino to Presidency.

Although, the "People's Court" was organized by conscientious citizens, victims and families of the victims — it turned out to be a spontaneous affair and was by far the largest gathering of any kind in Bangladesh's history. It only demonstrated how intensely people feel about the trial of the criminals of the Liberation War. As one writer has said recently that no amount of jugglery of words can convince any body that the trial was a child's play and can have no bearing how the government chooses to dispose of the Golam Azam case.

This is an irony in the extreme that the government has chosen to go after and punish the victims of the Liberation War rather than the war criminals. In this instance the government action is morally wrong and the people and protesters who staged the "People's Court", are correct as this was an act of conscience for them. The government's attempt to divert attention and put a smoke screen on the real issue and the issuance of warrant of arrest on the organizers of the "People's Court" is not unlike the action of the Myanmar's ruling junta SLORC's act of arresting Aung San Suu Kyt to stifle and thwart that nation's struggle for democracy and freedom.

In Dostoevsky's immortal classic "Crime and Punishment" the punishment Raskolnikov suffered was the unrelenting torment of his conscience for the murder of the old woman until society's laws caught up with him and was exiled in Siberia. But his tormented soul subjected him to infinitely more suffering and punishment than any court could have sanctioned. But, sadly, it seems our people including those in the government are becoming so heartless and callous that their conscience will let mass murderers not only escape PUNISHMENT but may also REWARD them to exalted position of political power and honour.

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To the Editor...

Repatriation of stranded Pakistanis

Sir, Our Prime Minister Begum Zia's success during her recent visit to Pakistan is undoubtedly remarkable in every respect, especially the stalemate in the Sharing of Assets has received a jumpstart and now it devolves on the bureaucrats for realising the rights of the nation and definitely not to rock the boat once again.

As regards Repatriation of 3,000 families in December the next, stranded Pakistanis heaved a sigh of relief and are found in excellent mood on my recent whistle stop tour of Adamjee and Mirpur, Dhaka, Gilatala, Khulna, Mymensingh, Saidpur, Rangpur and Dinajpur. Of course there were few isolated cases where inmates were found dazed with hunger, literally sleep-walking, mumbling incoherently and also those caught in the crossfire in the Adamjee, Dhaka and Halishahar, Chittagong camps were too busy gathering fuel and food before the next round of bombs and bullets rule the streets. I was witness to the mind boggling explosions, gun fires flaring up without any rhyme or reason and ceasing accordingly without any rhyme or reason, while looting of shops and houses went on with callous glee.

My visit to Mymensingh was all the more remarkable as the entire camp seems to be submerged in slush and silt with open sewers overflowing to one's ankle depth. A sickening feeling crawled all over me, after a two hour walk-around I decided to call it a day.

Sufferings more or less due to lack of job opportunities, earning avenues and poverty,

one may say, are in thorough competition with one another in these camps I visited. What baffled me most of all was when I returned back to Chittagong, all the jovial merry making had ceased and a subdued and frustrated atmosphere writ large on the faces of the inmates, particularly the top brass were in an agitated mood. The villain, I later learnt, was the interview printed in your paper of Aug 14, regarding repatriation of entire 3,000 families in Dec 1992 from the Mohammadpur Geneva Camp only. I tried to pacify the matter by urging them to write to the Chief Patron directly instead of this passive attitude as it may be a printing error and or may have been mis-quoted, or even under the prevailing circumstances due to political pressure this may have been said and done. Ample time is there to make amends etc.... I tried but was unable to rectify the matter and ultimately I was explained the workings of the SPGRK on strictly democratic principles by two committees namely, Central Committee and Supreme Council.

Alphabetical order is the bed-rock on which all decisions are taken whenever the situation thick or thin arises. Even during the most critical times of life and death this bed-rock principle was never allowed to be sacrificed so, why now? This was echoed throughout the camps.

If we are to overlook this alphabetical order, there are of course various other democratic principles on which we can work out a consensus. If political pressure is the cause, is not the democratic principle the best bet? The world has time and again proved the viability of the democratic

path, autocrats and anti-democrats are fast receding to the dust bins of history. It is sincerely hoped that good sense will prevail.

Salahuddin Jamal, Firozshah Chittagong

DU transportation

Sir, We boast of Dhaka University being our highest seat of learning in the country. Once it was known to be the Oxford of the East. Understandably, it has now not only ceased to be the Oxford of the East, but has proceeded far down to be something of the East whose Western counterpart is not in existence.

The problems bedeviling the Dhaka University now elicit the above observation. A look on a jam-packed DU bus very well expresses the dismal realities.

The DU transportation runs 22 buses in its different routes which is considered to be utterly inadequate to the growing number of the students. The sight of students sitting crooked on the windows and hanging with the doors mimics the big inscription 'Dhaka Bishwabidyalaya' on the buses. There is dearth of accommodation in the student dormitories, but nobody sleeps out of the room; there are insufficient number of buildings but no class is held out of the class-rooms, but since there is no available buses, the students travel hanging with the doors which vividly demonstrates the priority areas for DU's meagre budget allocation.

The suffering students earnestly request the DU authorities for purchasing more buses to ameliorate their grievances.

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