

The Rohingya Impasse

The 10th round of meeting between officials of Bangladesh and Myanmar, held in Chittagong Saturday, evidently produced very little that could be described as a path-breaker. A renewed pledge to "speed-up" the repatriation process was no more than the same kind of commitment that was made in previous meetings. One positive aspect of the latest meeting, however, was the apparent undertaking given by the Myanmar side to allow Bangladeshi journalists to visit the province of Rakhaine, along with Dhaka officials. While this certainly points to a less rigid approach by Myanmar, the real value of media visits can only be judged after such visits take place and by the amount of freedom the newsmen are allowed while making enquiries in Rohingya villages. If the visits turned out to be guided tours with Myanmar officials constantly playing the role of chaperons, then this new-found openness would have to be declared to be nothing more than cosmetic.

The real question, as before, appears to have been left unaddressed, or at best unresolved. The meeting failed to produce any concrete proposals as to how this "speeding-up" was to take place. More importantly, the two sides have yet again failed to come up with a definitive time schedule for the repatriation process. Since the Dhaka-Yangon accord was signed on April 28, only 112 refugees, out of a total of 265,000, have been sent back in two batches. Of course, we do not seriously expect the process to continue to proceed at this pace (if it can be called a pace at all). But, we are yet to see any move on the part of our government to remove the obstacles on the path of smooth repatriation. Bangladesh government officials claim that "the vast majority of refugees" are willing to return, but at the same time these officials are making it quite clear that a "handful of disturbing elements" among the refugees and their local political backers are intimidating the majority to prevent them from volunteering for repatriation. The role of one or two relief agencies, funded by supposedly friendly countries, has also been questioned.

The government undoubtedly has adequate information on who these "disturbing elements" and their backers are. The time has now surely come for our government to take a clear-cut decision on whether or not it is prepared to tolerate the present state of affairs, with all the social, economic and environmental price that the country is having to pay to play host to the refugees. Public interest dictates that these "militants" are isolated, rounded-up and dealt with according to the law of the land. In order to ensure the right of the refugees to decide their course of action in full safety and freedom. So long as the government continues to prevaricate on this crucial point, it may give rise to damaging questions about its ability to deal with the crisis effectively.

It was encouraging to note that, during the repatriation of the second batch, officials of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) were present to ascertain the voluntary nature of the return. This low, but significant level of UNHCR involvement, may have an immensely positive effect on the morale of those Rohingyas wishing to return. However, the Bangladesh government should try to follow that up by persuading Myanmar to allow UNHCR officials to accompany future groups of returnees back to their villages in Rakhaine. This short-term observation will fall far short of the full-time supervision and monitoring by the UNHCR demanded by the refugees, but it would nevertheless help to build confidence among the Rohingyas.

How to Get to Some Semblance of Humanity?

Not many a city has a patron saint of its own as Sylhet has Hazrat Shah Jalal and Bagerhat Hazrat Khan Jahan Ali or Dinajpur their Chehel Gazi — the forty heroes — or to try another tack, Dhaka its Dhakeswari Devi. Chittagong is doubly blessed that way. The town at once reminds one of Bayezid Bostami and there again are the Twelve Awliyas guarding the city.

Sociologists please note that the literally charmed city is currently undergoing very serious changes. Let us first take the apparently hilarious aspects of this first. The other day police nabbed two prostitutes and prosecuted them. The honourable court fined the two. Believe it, the indicting policemen themselves gave the fine and marched the girls to their barrack in a victor's jubilant mood. But the sense of triumph was short-lived as a very big group of people — armed no doubt and sure enough they were miscreants — attacked the police barrack and took the girls away. One never knew Chittagong to be that chivalrous.

The very next day in the Nasirabad area there was an open battle between two groups of people, mostly young men. The whole C&B colony was terrorised till half of the night. The warring parties fought over the rights to a street-walking girl. Very gallant, indeed. A certain amount of romantic element is unfailingly there in both the incidents and those that would find in these only the prurient must be philistines of the first order. Chittagonians were never known for such weaknesses and that is where the sociologist should come in.

As against this there is a regular horror story that occurred in downtown Chandanais the same day. Sudarshan Barua of the local Buddhist mahalla had gone to police some days back complaining of an attempted dacoity on his house. The enraged dacoits took a dreadful revenge. They broke into Sudarshan's house and rained bullets on all inmates — some five or six of them hit Sudarshan. Then they put his homestead and entire property to fire — a fire in which Sudarshan was roasted alive, not only in front of the dacoits but also of hundreds of witnesses that threw a ring around that inferno of a place but would not come to the help of the burning Sudarshan as the dacoits stood guarding his death with automatics at the ready. Shall we plead with the sociologists to have a look into this too, or the psychologists?

We don't know who to go to for a prevention of all such acts of degradation and inhumanity. We, however, know about one quarter that we would not need to go. The politicians and their best aspired chamber of beautification — the government. Chittagong is not alone in this slide — its examples are but symptomatic of the malaise that has overtaken the whole of the land. How to get out of this? How to get to some semblance of humanity?

FORTYSEVEN years ago on 24 October the United Nations was formally established. It marked the beginning of a new era in international relations. The United Nations Charter reflected its founding fathers' vision of a new world order free of the scourge of war and built on the rock-bed of faith in fundamental human rights, dignity and worth of the human person, equal rights of men and women and of nations, large and small. The goal was to ensure international peace and security and promote social progress and better standards of life. Since 1948, 24 October has been observed as the United Nations Day throughout the world.

The observance of the United Nations Day is an occasion for profound and renewed reflection on the role of the United Nations in a rapidly changing world environment. In recent years the world has witnessed some epochal developments with their far-reaching impact on international peace, security and development. The world was literally swept by the wave of democracy and freedom. Dramatically and almost incredibly the frightening cold war between the two power blocs suddenly ended. Well-entrenched social and political institutions were shaken to their very foundation. The mighty Soviet Union ceased to exist. There was a growing movement away from a totalitarian and regimented social order towards an open, demo-

cratic and pluralistic way of life. The political shape of the European continent was also undergoing a transformation. With two parts of Germany reunited, politically and economically the united Germany has clearly emerged as a power to reckon with. Outside Europe the peaceful transition of Namibia to the status of an independent state, the initiation of the political process towards the dismantling of the apartheid system in South Africa, withdrawal of Russian troops from Afghanistan and Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea, the installation of an elected government in Nicaragua are, indeed, momentous developments.

Arms Reduction
Another epochal development was the progress made in arms reduction. The much-dreaded nuclear threat was not altogether eliminated, but its threshold was lowered. More importantly these events reflected a shift from authoritarian rule to democracy and freedom, from power rivalry to co-operation and conciliation and respect for popular will by

the developing Third World and drove most of the developing countries to spend more on arms at the expense of nation-building efforts which were of critical importance to their national security. Despite the constraint of resources, quite a few of them (like Argentina, Brazil, India and Pakistan) are waiting at the threshold to emerge as nuclear powers.

(2) An inevitable consequence of such a proliferation of the arms race is the emergence of a pyramidal power structure with the superpower at the apex, followed by the great powers, middle powers and regional powers. Thus, the militarily weak nations, whether with or without super-power intrusion, find themselves more vulnerable than ever before.

(3) The arms race has also seriously eroded the world economic base through dissipation of nearly 1000 billion annually in wasteful military expenditure. The developing nations have been worst hit. The flows of external resources into these countries have been drastically reduced.

It will, however, be simplistic to think that the United Nations is now assured of an effective role in securing enduring peace and promoting international co-operation for the establishment of a new world order based on freedom, justice and equality. The United Nations faces a formidable challenge. There are many flash-points of regional and domestic conflicts rooted deeply in ethnic, religious and linguistic factors. The problem is compounded by the forces unleashed during four decades of "cold war".

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The United Nations in a Changing World A Growing Movement towards Democracy Marks the Time

by Muhammad Shamsul Huq

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thus retarding the pace of their development and making them more vulnerable to the explosive domestic problems.

(4) The increasing burden placed on the developed nations by the escalating arms expenditure led them to adopt a policy of dwindling development assistance and manipulation of market forces and a "squeeze" policy resulting in diminishing prices of primary commodities (major exports of the Third World) and increasing prices for capital and finished goods (major imports of the Third World). The consequence is a staggering net transfer of resources exceeding 31 billion dollars annually from the poor to the rich countries. The cumulative effect is a widening disparity between the rich and the poor countries. During the decade of 1977-86 the per capita income of the developed countries rose from \$6980 to \$12960 compared to the insignificant rise from \$1140 to \$1270 and from \$170 to \$270 for middle income and less developed countries respectively.

To be concluded tomorrow.

The author is a National Professor and former Foreign Minister. He addressed as chief guest a distinguished gathering on the occasion of the United Nations Day, October 24, at UN Information Centre, Dhaka. The article is based on his address.

Al-Sabah Family Faces an Assertive Parliament

Mohammed Aslam writes from Dubai

KUWAIT'S all-male electorate seems to have returned more or less the same breed of assertive and outspoken representatives to the new parliament which led to the dissolution of two previous national assemblies.

However, the October 5 election was held in different circumstances, and the newly constituted 50-member legislature reflects the Kuwaiti mood in the post-Gulf War period.

The polls were promised at the height of the crisis created by Iraq's invasion in August 1990, and their outcome represents an entirely new political formulation.

In the prevailing environment of continually threatened national security and the persisting fall-out from the seven-month occupation, neither opposition nor government are inclined to make any move which might put the revival of democracy at risk.

Concern over national security was the high point of campaigning, which became enthusiastic and heated in its final phase with well-attended public meetings and protests by voteless women.

The concern was not without substance: three Kuwaiti soldiers were injured when Iraqi troops attacked a border post on the day the election results were out.

It is, however, almost certain that the new legislators will question government moves much more confidently after receiving strong backing from the voters in seeking restoration of the fully elected parliament, even though only 14 per cent of the country's population was eligible to vote.

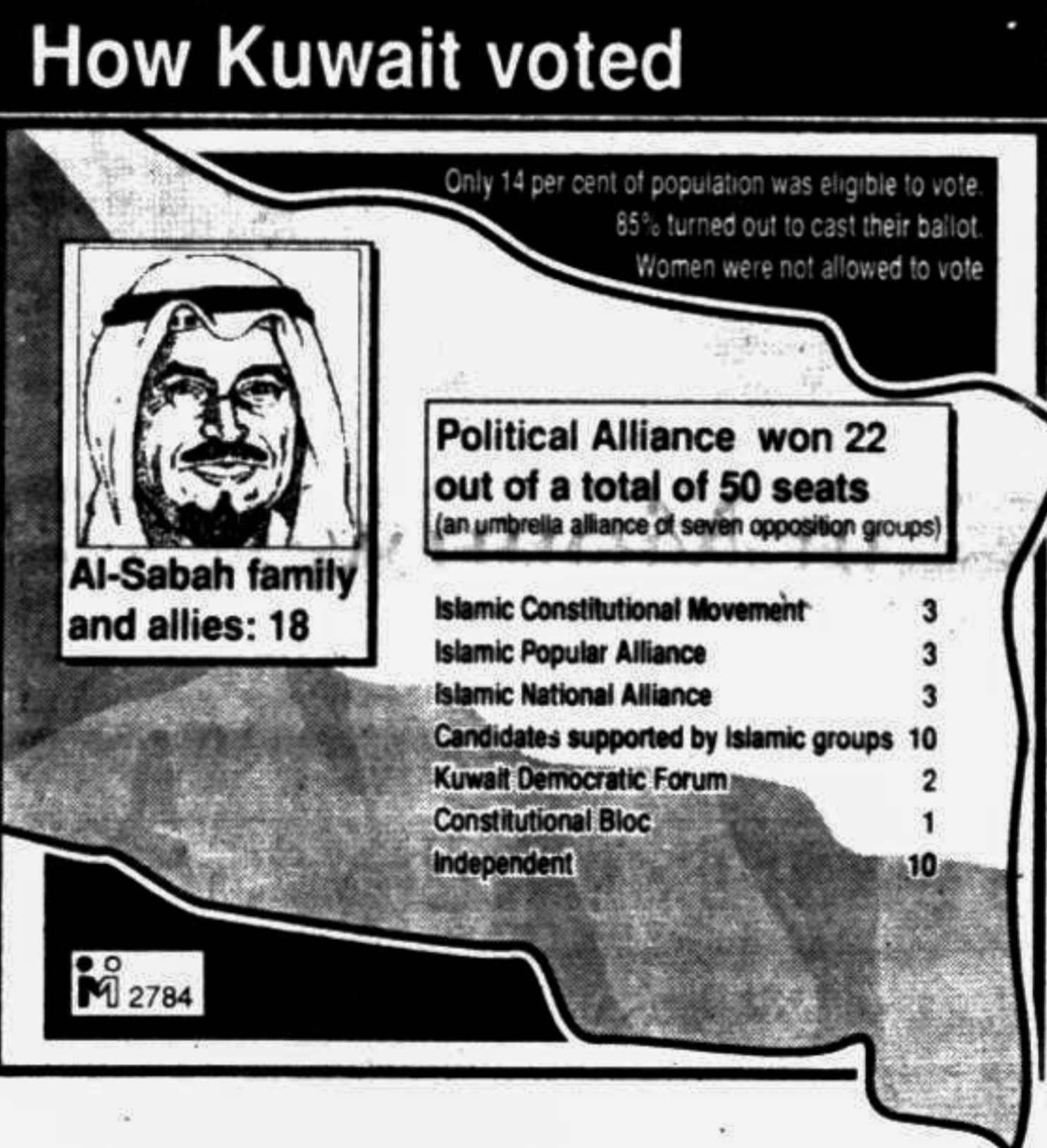
The last such legislature was elected in 1985 but was dissolved a year later.

Overall, those who turned out to vote (some 85 per cent of the 81,400 voters) showed considerable political maturity. They returned representatives of almost every hue and per-

suasion that was on offer at the hustings.

The "opposition" (there are still no formal opposition parties in Kuwait) gained a significant edge — for the first time since elections were first held in 1961. But their political affiliations were rather confused and uncertain.

The opposition's share of the seats, including independents, worked out to 32 of a total of 50. The three main



Islamic groups bagged 20 seats. The Kuwaiti Democratic Forum (KDF) won only two of the eight seats it contested. Most victories in the camp critical of the government were scored by independent candidates.

One notable feature of the election results is that prominent members of what has come to be known as the "group of 85" (members of the previously dissolved assembly

elect in 1985) have been chosen with large majorities.

They include Abdullah al-Naibari and Ahmed al-Khateeb of the KDF, former Parliament Speaker Ahmed al-Saadoun, and Hamed al-Jouan, who is wheelchair-bound after being attacked soon after Kuwait's liberation early last year.

A number of tribal nomads were elected from suburban districts, the traditional strongholds of the loyalists of the ruling Al Sabah family. The opposition majority can be blunted when a new cabinet is named ministers automatically become members of parliament with full voting rights under the 1962 constitution.

The only common factor among the opposition factions and independents is that they stand for democracy and had jointly campaigned for the revival of a fully-fledged parliament. On other key issues, they differ of the basis of personal ideology or the platforms adopted by their respective groups.

One major demand that surfaced during the campaigning relates to investigation of the circumstances of the Iraqi aggression and into the conduct of the Kuwaiti authorities, who went into exile in neighbouring Saudi Arabia. The opening of the "invasion file" is demanded by the KDF and other liberals.

The issue involves the ruling family itself. Days before the election, Kuwait's English-language daily Arab Times quoted Crown Prince Sheikh

Saad al-Sabah as saying that his government "will not stand against going into the file of August 2, 1990, in light of persistent demands....."

Religious radicals, included mainly in the Islamic Constitutional Movement, are demanding the amendment of the country's constitution to stipulate that "Islam is the source of legislation" rather than it being "a main source" as stipulated now.

The other demand involving a possible change in the constitution is for the right of women to vote.

This has become a highly emotive issue, with Kuwait's educated women mounting public protests during campaigning and on polling day. Activists carried banners at marches reading, "We're going to join you in '96" and "Men and women together in parliament in '96".

Their message was clear: the new assembly is supposed to be changing the electoral law to enable Kuwaiti women to vote as well as be candidates in the next election four years hence.

However, there is deep division among the legislators on this point. Shia Muslims are ready to let women participate in "the electoral process (women voted in Iran's parliamentary polls in June), but the Sunnis are opposed to the idea.

In the end, the opposition may not force the issues that require constitutional amend-

ment for fear of triggering a debate on the entire constitution, putting the little democracy Kuwait has wrested from its ruling family at risk.

The Government, which has for a long time been led by Crown Prince Saad in his dual capacity as Kuwait's prime minister, is known to be keen to review the constitution in order to clip the legislature's powers, which are out of step with the rest of the Gulf region. The opposition may not afford the government such a chance.

Finally, there are also calls to broaden the Government by reducing the power of the Al-Sabah family, replacing ministers from the family with elected representatives.

For example, there have been demands to stop the automatic occupation of the Prime Ministerial post by the Crown Prince. While this is not likely to happen soon, there is a possibility of the Emir, Sheikh Jaber al-Sabah bringing so-called "outsiders" into the new cabinet.

In fact, the ruling family can turn the tables on its critics by giving ministerial jobs to some of the newly elected legislators. In doing so, it would meet the long-standing demands of pro-democracy activists while taking the sting out of opposition requests for "ministerial accountability".

There can be little doubt, though, that the composition of parliament is such that the government will have to tread warily and deal with it tactfully.

The new legislators are experienced and refined in their thinking. Observers are even calling the new assembly as one of the most educated in the Arab world, having eight doctorates, seven lawyers and two engineers. —Gemin News

MOHAMMED ASLAM is Assistant Editor of the Khaleef Times.

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.

BTV's Fall Guy

Sir, The film "The Fall Guy" screened by BTV on 7th October had an outrageous scene. The elderly but magical hero and his coquettish girl friend, were understandably making love inside a tent. Upon an unexpected call from their do-gooder friend-couple, both of them came out of the tent, with their naked love-tried bodies wrapped with loose cloth-sheets. The camera showed them in close-up for quite sometime. Myself, and my wife, were perishing with shock and awe, with the thought that, our 13-year old son sitting by our side, would have the scene's character-killing drug injected into his imagination.

BTV's failure to cut-out this obscene and unnecessary portion from the film, was unpardonable. If, in future, BTV fails to cut-out such scenes from any film or programmes, the intelligentsia may hold a trial against BTV, under the law relating to prevention of obscenity.

By the way, I wonder if our agile and active Information Minister had time to watch this film. If not, I would re-

quest him to have a private screening of it — or at least the portion mentioned above. Abdul Hye Paikpara, Dhaka.

Medical facilities in a shambles

Sir, Extremely disquieting facts regarding medical services in Bangladesh have started to shock us. It has been the opinion of the public that the medical practitioners including a good number of professors are invariably toying with priceless life of many a patient. That the doctors should hold cheap the value of life of patients and thus lower the status of this noble profession is really a painful realisation in our accursed existence.

In the absence of any viable check against unethical practices by such doctors, people are placed in a pitiable position gradually.

In utter disbelief, we come to know that there are doctors who despite a trail of degrees from abroad consistently fail to diagnose properly and often prescribe wrong medicines. A complaint goes like that a professor prescribed a certain

tablet for an old patient with a dose of one tablet per day. The condition of the patient deteriorated and the patient was rushed to London in a serious condition. The doctors in London expressed astonishment and horror as they learnt of the dose. The prescribed for a much lower dose; a tablet a month, not 30 tablets a month. The old man could not be brought to life. The doctors of that alien country told the relative of the old man that such a mis-diagnosis or bad prescription would have resulted in the confiscation of the licence of the doctor and a penalty of millions of pounds in compensation in their country.

In another instance, a female patient was diagnosed by a professor to be suffering from brain tumour; the prognosis was done on the basis of the x-ray report from a reputable diagnosis centre of the metropolis. The doctor declared that the patient needed to undergo an operation immediately. The worried relatives having little confidence in our professors took the patient to Valore in India. The doctors after re-examination, assured the patient that she did not have any tumour. The patient was treated and without undergoing any operation, is now hale and hearty.

In another typical case, a patient was diagnosed by an FRCS holder that he had cancer and should be operated upon immediately. The Almighty only knows what ac-

tually prompted them to diagnose like that. A Calcutta doctor, after rechecking, told the patient that he didn't have anything as malignant as cancer in his body. Similar types of mis-diagnosis or bad prescription are reportedly frequent in the metropolis. We are nonplussed as the number of such wrong diagnosis of patients are gradually increasing. People wonder if there is any rules and regulations in Bangladesh to prevent one (Doctor) from unethical practices.

People complain that the doctors do not want to treat the patients at the government hospitals. Instead, they advise the patients to go to their chambers or to the clinics they are attached to. Thus they force the desperate patients to flock to the chamber or clinic. Interestingly, these medical centres are more of a bazaar than a place for treating people of serving the suffering humanity. The people complain that the fees for medical services charged by the private practitioners far exceed the financial capacity of an average Bangalee. How can you blame the commonman who often leans to superstitious practices as the medical service has become increasingly unaffordable to them?

It has been complained that the so called clinics that have mushroomed in the capital city do not give service commensurate with their high monetary charges. The doctors also do not give a required period of time. If the status quo is al-

lowed to continue indefinitely, the much pronounced "Health for All" will be adjourned indefinitely.

Some knowledgeable quarters say that one way of getting service from the doctors of nationalised hospitals is by banning private practice by them. The outcry, accompanied by strike, that the doctors raised earlier, says that it will not be an easy job for even any popularity-conscious government. But it is a viable option. The poor and underprivileged will suffer as the doctors will adversely react. But these people are already victims of negligence and mistreatment. The strike by the doctors only tell us once again of another side of the character of the doctors other than saviours of the patients.

We believe that all the doctors are not just like vendors of medicines. Some still try to stick to the code of conduct of the profession but they are a negligible number.

Further allegations go that doctors knowingly prescribe medicines manufactured by pharmaceutical companies having bad reputation. Pharmaceutical companies in Bangladesh resort to various ploys to appease a doctor. But why should doctors go that way?

The professional commitment, dedication, integrity, nobility that used to go with the medical practitioners have almost gone into oblivion. With a few exceptions, the doctors are considered as traders rather than persons of dignity.

People feel that if binding disciplinary measures are introduced against unethical practices, doctors will soon learn to behave responsibly.

A M Sayed Khan Farashgari, Dhaka.

BCCI

Sir, I congratulate you on your very timely and topical editorial in 5th October issue on the BCCI affair. What bother us is that you stop short of demanding that the seized papers of the BCCI-Dhaka should be subjected to a local non-partisan enquiry. It was your newspaper — I thing — that on the morrow of seizing BCCI documents came out with the coup — nor confirmed — that Ershad had through his inlaw transferred Tk 60 crore to Hong Kong. No sooner had this was published, there were perhaps hidden hands to stop any further reference to it in any newspaper. It is common knowledge that it was not just Ershad but quite a few of his close associates who transferred funds through BCCI. It is also common knowledge that some people in authority today had also either directly or through their families benefited from BCCI. Is there now a brotherhood of these scoundrels who want to keep the jimmie in the jar? Further intensive enquiry is clearly indicated.

A Aziz Haikola Rd, Dhaka.