

Victory Day

If the gap between pious utterings and insincere actions was a measure of a nation's success, we would have definitely been near the top. It is as if words and actions exist in separate planets and both are locked into orbits that are taking them further away from one another.

As we celebrate the Victory Day, another gush of pious uttering will flood the front pages of our newspapers. However, the question remains 'whose victory, and whose day is it?'

Yet the significance of the day is immense. By defeating the enemy that wanted not only to dominate us politically, economically and militarily, but also to destroy us culturally and spiritually, this day ensured our survival as a people and as a culture within the borders of a free, independent and sovereign state.

In the midst of all this celebrations the question that we raised at the outset comes back over and over again: How to make the independence of Bangladesh more meaningful for the vast majority of our people?

On this Victory Day, as we remember the martyrdom and the sacrifice of millions of people, and look back on our experience of the last two years, we cannot but conclude that politics as we have now, will have to give way for something more constructive and forward looking.

As we celebrate the victory of the nation, can we not also take a step that will brighten the prospect of its future?

A Breathing Time for Yeltsin

The Russian President, Boris Yeltsin has won a breathing time in his running battle with the country's Congress of People's Deputies. In a compromise deal just worked out with the legislature, Yeltsin has been given four months to hold a referendum to decide on the outlines of a new constitution.

If this compromise had eluded the two sides, the tussle between conservatives-dominated Congress and Yeltsin would have brought about a stalemate in the country, with unpredictable consequences for the most important republic of the former Soviet Union.

However, the future remains uncertain. Much depends on the outcome of the April referendum which should decide how Russia is to be governed. It is unrealistic to expect that Communists, now usually described as conservatives, will give up their control of the Congress or give Yeltsin a free hand to run the country through a reform programme that the present Congress has virtually turned down.

The choice that lies before Yeltsin is to win popular support in his republic and secure an affirmative vote from the referendum. This is possible if only he can use the coming four months to give some relief to his hard-pressed people fighting a sky-rocketing inflation, shortage of daily necessities, unemployment and, last but not the least, a bitter cold winter.

ALMOST all present day nation-states are essentially multicultural, multi-religious and sometimes even multi-lingual. This blending of cultures and religions is beset with a host of problems if there is no potent catalytic agent.

Democracy is no longer a mere political thought. It is a way of life. It has its political, economic and social implications.

Politically it means a rule of majority by various systems of representations: economically it means laissez faire or free and competitive economy; socially it stands for freedom of thought and expression in all its various manifestations.

We in Bangladesh launched a valiant struggle 21 years ago for our liberation and were able to establish a sovereign and independent republic.

Twentyone years is not a very long time in the history of a nation. That span of time is covered in a couple of sentences in a history book. But it is a time long enough for a contemporary analysis and prognosis, to forecast what shape things are likely to take and to adopt corrective measures if necessary.

Bangladesh is coming of age, so to say. The deviations and delinquencies in the body-politic have started showing up. It is time we took note of them. A chronology of events since the day of independence will go a long way to show what is going on within our body politic.

1971—Struggle for independence. Blood bath by Pakistani army. But most significant of all — the role of Razakars and Jamaat-e-Islami. This identified the virus within our body-politic.

1972— We adopted a

constitution and pledged that "the high ideals of nationalism, and democracy shall be the fundamental principles of the constitution: and that "it shall be a fundamental aim of the State to realise through the democratic process a socialist society, free from exploitation — a society in which the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice — political, economical and social, will be secured for all citizens."

1975—The nascent pluralist democracy was overnight changed to a one-party presidential system. First deviation from our supreme commitment to democratic process.

August 15, 1975—A group of junior and mid-level army officers toppled the government by carrying out bloody and cruel assassination of president Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his entire family and other political leaders.

1977—The forces and elements which had been identified in '71 as the anti-liberation forces within our body-politic staged a comeback.

1978—Mr. Ghulam Azam decided to come back to Bangladesh.

1979—Second parliamentary election of Bangladesh under the amended 1972 constitution. The forces opposed to the liberation movement were virtually put at par with the pro-liberation forces. Ziaur Rahman apparently drew

by M U Ahmed

much of his inspiration from Ziaur Haq, his counterpart in Pakistan. Both of them apparently shook hands with the forces which had opposed their predecessors.

1981—Ziaur Rahman was assassinated.

1982—The Second martial law was imposed by Gen. Ershad. Significantly, he also was censured by the fundamentalists and got much of his inspiration from his Pakistani counterpart.

1986—Following the Pakistani pattern, Gen. Ershad also reverted to civil rule. He also exploited religious sentiment for gaining legitimacy for an illegal government by resorting to religious fundamentalism.

1988—Constitution was amended declaring Islam as state religion.

1990—Fundamentalism started casting its evil shadows. Two hundred Hindu temples were demolished and desecrated, thus setting at naught our fundamental principle of religious freedom guaranteed by Article-41 of our constitution.

1991—The election of Bangladesh under a interim government and coming to power of a BNP Government with significant cooperation of Jamaat-e-Islami in the formation of government.

The problem of Burmese refugees. The informed sources of Bangladesh are aware how this problem was created in the first in-

stance. There is some ground to detect a parallel between the connection of Pakistan Jamaat-e-Islami with Afghan refugees and Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami with the Burmese refugees. Yet another shadow of fundamentalism.

1992—February—An attack on Quadriani Mosque in Khulna. Feb/March—question in National Assembly about declaring Quadriani as non-Muslims, a demand completely out of tune with our national ethos and wholly opposed to our constitutional principles and democratic ideas.

June—The persecution of Prof. Kabir Chowdhury.

October—Dr. Ahmed Sharif accused of blasphemy. An attack on the Quadriani mosque area in Dhaka and burning of the Holy Quran, damage to property and serious injuries to 15 persons. Christian habitats were attacked and destroyed in Cox's Bazar area.

November—Wahabi and Sunni riots erupted in Satkania. Attack on Quadriani mosque complex in Rajshahi.

December—Widespread protest against the destruction of the Babri mosque and the resulted burning and demolishing of Hindu Mandirs in same areas and malhandling of non-Muslim Bangladeshis.

Even on a cursory glance on this chronology of events one is driven to an inescapable conclusion that we are drifting away from our ideals of democracy and 'fundamentalism' is digging deep into our society.

Enlightened opinions in Bangladesh seem to converge on the view that the late Ziaur Rahman and Ershad were responsible for rehabilitation of certain kind of religious fun-

damentalist forces in Bangladesh and that democracy seems to be evaporating gradually.

We are Muslims and would like to say so. But as Muslims we must free ourselves from the shackles of the obscurantist Mullahs.

Unfortunately we have failed to learn the lesson of history that the political battles cannot be won by compromising with the fundamentals and seeking to appease the rival on every issue. The more we have ignored this lesson the more we have allowed the clergy to steal power from the people.

When we urge to be free from a narrow and backward interpretation of Islam, we are only pleading for deliverance from obscurantist fundamentalism.

Fundamentalism leads to factions and strife. The thought-style of fundamentalism just does not fit in and blend with the democratic thought-style.

Fundamentalism of all kinds rejects free exchange of ideas and thoughts. It does not let any fresh air into the closed doors of the fundamentalist philosophy. As a result, such a philosophy is bound to stagnate.

In a society dominated by religious fundamentalists, democracy cannot flourish because in such a society the difference of opinion is heresy, blasphemy and apostasy. Who would take such a risk? The irony of the situation is that, the religious fundamentalists claim to extend their authority over the most mundane and secular spheres of life.

The Pakistan example proves the point. The religious obscurantism in Pakistan has not only suffocated liberal, intellectual development, but has also placed at risk the country's political and economic future.

The mushroom growth of narrow-minded fundamentalist and sectarian organisations in recent years has sharpened polarisation and divided the society along sectarian lines. The increasing incidents of public persecution of intellectuals by religious zealots, the ever-worsening sectarian strife and the persistent attempts to establish a myopic theocratic dispensation are all symptoms of a society held hostage by religious obscurantists.

The Shariat Court in Pakistan has started striking down the laws passed by the national legislature. The question is being hotly debated in Pakistan as to whether the constitution is the supreme law at all? Law making is quietly passing away from the hands of the chosen representatives of the people to the hands of the Ulema and the Shariat Court.

Fundamentalism therefore, has no place in a democratic set-up. The indications of our country gradually drifting away from democratic ideals is a "Danger Signal" which the people of Bangladesh should do well to heed.

When we pledged in our constitution that our country shall be a democratic country, it meant that the investment of the power in the people would eliminate all danger of its becoming a theocratic state.

Let us therefore, revert back to our original pledge of democracy because if the fundamentalists have any say in the affairs of the state, it would be disastrous. Left to their devices, ours will become a closed state. The country really cannot afford to bear the cost of their aspirations.

Back to democracy, and down with religious fundamentalism. Therein lies our salvation.

Lord Carrington Reflects on Diplomacy in Europe Today

by Rupert Butler

ONE of Winston Churchill's most celebrated utterances was that "jaw-jaw was better than war-war."

That the heavy spray of words can be decidedly better than the concentrated spray of bullets is also the message currently being spread by EC diplomats amid the civil war in the former Yugoslavia. This has also been the view throughout his long career of 73-year-old Lord Carrington who, as former Chairman of the EC Conference on Yugoslavia, had the task of seeking common ground in the long-running Balkans dispute.

Most people probably define diplomacy as a bid to find that same common ground between parties holding different and seemingly irreconcilable points of view. Lord Carrington concedes that the definition is as good as any, but also believes that it does not go far enough.

He elaborates: "There is not just the need for tireless effort in seeking an accommodation. It is equally important to be able to judge the moment when all sides one is dealing with are really interested in finding a solution. A negotiator has to sense that the will is there."

Civil War

Lord Carrington adds that, whatever the issue, a great deal of spadework has to be undertaken before any diplomatic process can even start. "With the former Yugoslavia, I was dealing with a sovereign country which had broken up and was in a state of civil war. One milestone had to be passed before talks could even start — and that was agreement by all sides just to sit down."

"At this point, you are very far from even beginning to resolve anything. Indeed, the various sides can be miles apart, possible not even subse-

ribing to accepted principles with in a democracy such as the basic need for discussion.

That moment of success may be months, even years away. And it is unlikely to come unless the negotiator can convince the other side that there is no option but to talk. It may be said that, once a solution is found, it may not necessarily be the one originally sought. But it is one on which all sides feel they can agree."

Lancaster House

At the end of 1979, Lord Carrington, as Britain's Foreign Secretary — a position he was



Diplomacy at work: Lord Carrington in conversation with President Slobodan Milosevic during negotiations in Belgrade.

to hold until 1982 when he resigned with the onset of the Falklands War —, was Chairman of the Lancaster House Conference which led to the solution of the Rhodesian problem and the formation of the Independent Republic of Zimbabwe.

He recalled: "With Rhodesia, I applied one of the first rules of diplomacy: the need to avoid cluttering up negotiations by a presence that is not strictly necessary or relevant."

"Britain, by virtue of being in the Chair, had a direct re-

sponsibility for finding a solution to the problem of Rhodesia, but there were nonetheless many other interests who wanted to be in on the act. I was pressed, for example, to include the Americans, members of the Commonwealth Secretariat, of Zambia, Mozambique and South Africa. But I was absolutely firm: no one but the parties directly involved in the Conference — the British and the Rhodesians — would be admitted. This not only saved time but helped cut out possi-

reconstituted body whose future shape must be acceptable to all and in particular to the United States, its most powerful member.

He expanded: "NATO was created in response to what was seen as the threat of the former Soviet Union against west Europe. Although all that has of course changed, I am all for NATO being preserved with its present members but at much reduced cost and with a lower level of armaments. It is a valuable forum as the only way by which the United States as the most powerful country can talk to its European friends."

But Peter Carrington foresees difficulties, not least that some of these European countries have no wish to preserve such a state of affairs: they cannot accept a NATO with a dominance, as they see it, by the United States.

Military Structure

"I can see no reason why such American dominance should continue as of right. If there is going to be an integrated military structure as well as a political one there is, in my view, no automatic need for an American commander. He could perfectly well be a European. It is possible too that he would have a remit to change the structure of NATO so that, if necessary, it could intervene outside the North Atlantic area. That might be in parts of the world where there are perceived threats — from Islamic fundamentalism, for example."

Lord Carrington concedes that such a radical change might not find favour with all the 16 European countries. But he believes it could be possible to evolve a mechanism where, through the existing forum of the North Atlantic Council, they would have the chance to intervene in any crisis.

"But they would also have the chance to opt out, a provision that would obviously be welcomed by some of the smaller countries. In other words, a future NATO would be a far more ad hoc affair."

He does, however, sound a note of caution about conveying to the United States any suggestion that Europe would welcome a total pull-out of the American presence and was seeking a form of defence outside NATO. He foresees such a suggestion as giving the Americans an excuse for withdrawal from Europe which, in view of that country's very severe economic problems, could prove a tempting option.

"I believe this would be a serious matter in view of the feeling of very great stability the Atlantic partnership has engendered on both sides. Reconstruction of NATO may be desirable but it would have to be discussed very carefully."

Closer Integration

Lord Carrington, who was in 1981, President of the Council of Ministers of the European Community, is convinced that, as far as Britain goes, desire for closer integration with Europe is tempered by a perceived fear of losing sovereignty and submitting to a centralised bureaucracy controlled by the EC in Brussels. Although he has considerable sympathy for the latter view, particularly in what he sees as "petty and ridiculous Community directives", Lord Carrington believes these reservations should be approached with caution.

"There is no suggestion that the British are going to be any less British as a result of becoming closer Europeans. The problem, I believe, lies within the British character. Many of the British, to put it bluntly, do not like foreigners. They distrust them — a characteristic of Right and Left of the political spectrum."

"This is also relevant to international diplomacy. There is a deep ingrained feeling that to indulge in diplomatic initiative — to actually talk to foreigners — is deeply suspicious and not designed to be in the best interests of one's own country. It is a characteristic, incidentally, the British tend to share with Americans."

"This profound distrust explains very largely why Britain is indulging in such soul-searching about Europe. It is particularly hard for the British to reconcile with their knowledge that, deep down, many closer ties are inevitable, although I believe many EC directives need not necessarily apply to Britain. Our own laws can be quite adequate without the need to import Community 'ones.'"

Single Market

From the perspective of a businessman dealing with the EC, Lord Carrington — he is now Chairman of Christie's International PLC, one of the world's leading auction houses — foresees dangers for the EC within a Single Market if trading was ever allowed to become "incestuous" or if a "ring fence" was put around Europe to exclude outsiders.

"That would run the risk of a Community becoming too inward-looking, each country contemplating its own navel and forgetting there is a world outside with whom it should be trading vigorously. Provided that danger is recognised and avoided, trading, particularly for Britain within the continent of Europe, could prove both vigorous and rewarding."

"What is needed above all — and this applies equally to my experiences with diplomacy — is the basic will first to recognise that there is a problem and then to go ahead and suggest how it might be solved."

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.

Communal harmony

Sir, The demolition of the Babri Mosque in India is undoubtedly a barbarous act. Although to wrongs do not make a right, this act by the Hindu fundamentalists has unfortunately triggered communal disharmony in the neighbouring countries, including damage to and destruction of many Hindu temples. It will indeed be a courageous act on the part of our Government to publicly announce that all damaged Hindu temples will be restored. It will also go a long way to assure the minority communities here that we are a country of communal harmony and we both preach and practise democracy in our country. Such an announce-

ment will also strengthen the hands of the Indian Prime Minister to restore the Babri Mosque. A Gayum Gulshan Avenue, Dhaka

Secularism and communal maelstrom

Sir, Apropos "The Destruction of the Babri Mosque: A Threat to Secularism All Over the Region" published in December 8, issue of your daily.

I would like to thank you learned columnist for condemning in unequivocal terms the sacking and desecration of historic Babri Mosque. This dastardly act has outraged and

shocked all civilized communities. We wonder if the Administration was a party to such a heinous crime! It is felt, they gave free reins to commit such an act of Frankensteinism which has eventually left professed Indian secularism in a shambles. Ayodhya has become a microcosm of India and its "much touted" secularism a ruse for the minorities.

While communal frenzy is endemic elsewhere, thanks to the genius of our people, Bangladesh is almost immune from such a malaise. It is derogatory to our reputation if we invent 'forces of divisiveness' amongst our rank, harbouring design to destabilise our social fabric. We have reasons to be euphoric in this regard. Ours is a compact and cohesive society, having a firm commitment for upholding our sacrosanct values. We do not have legacy of fanaticism. Vermins virtually do not exist in our society and ignition of communal frenzy — has little possibility as such. We have stood the litmus test of maturity and decent human values.

Fulsome tribute to Indian brand of secularism is unwarranted. Indian prototype is anything but worth emulating a constitution. Flouting of Indian constitution has become a norm rather than an exception Indian commitment to secularism is suspect as such. Golam Nabi Nasrabad, Chittagong

Bureaucratic fiddle?

Sir, This refers to a news item published on 20 November in a popular Bangla daily. If based on facts it reflects seriously on the competence, capability and adequacy of the functioning of our government. Valuable materials from International Red Cross are rotting since March at Chittagong and Dhaka. Customs authorities have levied duties which is beyond the resources of Bangladesh Red Crescent Society to pay. The solution apparently lies with the Prime Minister. Between the idiosyncrasy of the Ministry of Finance and the incompetence of the

PM's Secretariat much needed materials for offshore cyclone protection are rotting, while files are moving and moving between the devil and the deep sea. What incompetent people we are that we even do not know how to receive and utilise much needed aid! The basket case syndrome has come back to roost with a vengeance!

If the report is what it says, then as citizens of a democratic country it is our right to ask the authorities to explain why much needed equipment required for the safety of the poor people are rotting while crores of taka is wasted over the shiny roads of Dhaka for the unnecessary vainglory of SAARC summitry. Will the spokesperson of transparency kindly make this issue transparent?

Mrs Samiha Saman Comilla

Market economy

Sir, In the name of market economy, many a whim is observed as being tried in the

economic arena. Market economy in our country should not be made to understand in a sense as to pursuing a policy which allows no protection for the growing or infant industries. Here market economy should mean protection for the desired industries creating atmosphere of competition initially amongst the private and public sector enterprises. When infant industries gain sufficient strength to withstand outside competition, degree of protection may be relaxed in phases in order to ensure qualitative improvement of the products. Government permission for importing potato and eggs from external market will surely destroy our cold storage units and the infant poultry firms. The way market economy is presently interpreted and experimented is not the appropriate one, rather it should be tried without destroying the base upon which future development of the country is largely dependent. Imtiaz Zaied Jheeluly, Faridpur