

A Crucial Session

The winter session of the Jatiya Sangsad which resumes today undoubtedly promises to be lively, perhaps even a little contentious. Our hope is, it will also be constructive, dignified and forward-looking in its attitude on issues which will come up for discussion. Perhaps an essential condition for such a success would be the fullest possible participation of all opposition parties and groupings in all the sittings of the session. Occasional walk-outs by any or all of the opposition parties may not be unavoidable in certain circumstances. But let there be no thinking of yet another boycott of the kind and duration that marred the last session.

It is the range of issues which are expected to figure in the deliberation that adds much importance to this session, the deliberation that must indeed reflect the viewpoints of all the parties represented in the parliament. For one thing, there should indeed be a full debate on foreign affairs, covering developments relating to the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) and its twice-postponed summit, the demolition of the Babri Mosque and the repatriation of Rohingya refugees. It is also possible to set aside different separate sessions to these issues. Here, modalities may be less important than substance. Our concern is, having spoken on these subjects in different voices all these weeks, the ruling party and the opposition may not only bring their divergences to the parliament — this will be perfectly understandable — but also refuse to explore the avenues for a consensus. This is precisely what happened in the last session when, despite a general condemnation of India's so-called push-back drive, the parliament failed to pass an all-party resolution on the subject.

How the Sangsad handles these volatile issues largely depends on the leadership provided to their respective parties by the Leader of the House, Begum Khaleda Zia and the Opposition leader, Sheikh Hasina. However, considering the importance of this debate, it should be the Prime Minister herself who should open the discussion with a policy statement, outlining her government's position on the issues involved in the clearest possible language and setting the tone for the discussion. Begum Zia can indeed demonstrate that notwithstanding our anger, anguish and disappointment over the turn of recent events, our attitude is distinguished by reason, logic and moderation. While upholding our national interests, our parliamentarians should remain conscious of the fact that an unguarded remark could produce serious repercussions at home and abroad.

It is far from clear yet if the opposition would insist on bringing the Indemnity (Repeal) Bill during this session or agree to a further extension of the time limit for its discussion in the special committee which has been working on the controversial issue without reaching a consensus. No parliament can shy away from contentious subjects, but it can tackle them in a constructive manner, instead of causing further erosion of national cohesion or aggravating political divisiveness in the country. If the winter session of the Sangsad can demonstrate this capacity, it will indeed be a historic one.

Keeping an Ancient Heirloom

Betel leaf is one plant product known to all of the Bangalee population almost as much as rice is known. But then the former has no rival among leaves, specially eatable ones, in terms of popularity. Chewing betel leaves may well be an addiction but unlike other so many addictions it is benign in so many respects. The betel leaf habit is almost universal throughout the subcontinent. All the different states of this region are apparently going through something like the Jewish diaspora — millions going out and settling in foreign lands. The subcontinental expatriates have taken with them the habit of chewing betel leaves. That explains the heavy demand for Bangladeshi betel leaves in UK, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and UAE where a section of the native population has also been converted to the habit. Bangladesh has bigger and more efficient and organised competing exporters of betel leaves in Sri Lanka, India and Thailand. Even after that this nation exported leaves worth nearly 13 crore Taka in the 85-86 financial year. And knowledgeable circles believe, as reported Friday's Daily Star, this quantity could easily be raised to fetch at least 15 crore Taka. For buyers do prefer our betel leaves over others' for their taste and quality.

The story so far is rosy enough. The possibilities are even rosier. This small-capital labour-intensive farming with the world's best know-how available at home, could prove a small scale panacea for Bangladesh's economic straits. But the facts are all awry and bitter. The shrinkage of area under betel cultivation was first noticeable in 1971 when it came down to 24,000 acres from 27,000 in two years. And ever since the fall in production has been progressive, mostly because of rising production cost and a very ungenerous market. All our main three qualities: *Bangla*, *sanchi* and the *khastia gachhpan* are in demand abroad. And yet cultivation of all three are suffering everywhere in Bangladesh.

The *barut* people and their *baraj* must have two kinds of support very urgently. They need financing and they need more efficient marketing mechanism. Both the government and the private sector can help them in these — not without profit to themselves.

As tobacco, potato, tomato and such dozens of others have been the contribution to man's eating habits from the pre-Columbian Americans and as apricot and tea have been China's so have been the sugarcane and the betel leaf the contribution of the eastern zone of the subcontinent to man's palate. We should be serious about keeping this ancient heirloom healthy and helpful.

THE seventh SAARC Summit, alas, has been postponed once again. Originally scheduled for December 12-13, 1992, the conference was rescheduled to be held in Dhaka on January 13-14, 1993. Widespread violence in India following the destruction of the Babri mosque had created a situation in the region which was considered not suitable for holding the summit and certainly not congenial for promoting regional cooperation. The second postponement of the summit will not doubt be received in the countries of the region with regret but in Bangladesh it will cause great disappointment. Bangladesh had made very elaborate and, for a poor country, costly preparations for receiving the South Asian heads of government and states. Even streets were repaved and expensive fountains were installed in their honour. But it is not the money or the time spent by an army of officials in the preparations which should be the main cause of concern. It is the diplomatic embarrassment of the government which is what should be cause for worry. After all the government's record so far in conducting the external relations of the country does not inspire much confidence and one cannot but view this latest event in the broader context of the government's performance in this field.

The first point that strikes one hard is the discrepancy between the explanation for postponement given by Bangladesh Foreign Secretary and that advanced by the Government of India. Announcing the postponement, the Bangladesh Foreign Secretary said that Indian Prime Minister's decision not to come to Dhaka for the summit was taken "entirely

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due to the internal situation now obtaining in India resulting from widespread communal disturbance which has spread all over the country". Thus, according to Bangladesh, the postponement was agreed upon only because Indian Prime Minister was unable to come due to reasons of his own. However, we get a different picture from the official statement issued by the government of India. Released in Delhi on 9 January the statement said, inter alia, "India had readily agreed to the new dates (rescheduled 13-14) in the hope that the situation in and around India would have stabilized and the political tensions created by the actions in some of the other countries in the sub-continent would have abated by then." The statement went on to say, "Unfortunately, public demonstrations and acts amounting to interference in the internal affairs of India have continued to vitiate the atmosphere. This naturally impacts negatively on prospects of the SAARC summit. It is felt that the political directions, which are needed at this stage to provide greater substance and content to the functioning of regional cooperation in South Asia, could not be achieved under the present circumstances." I have extensively quoted from the statement so as to bring out fully the thinking of the government of India on the issue. Quite clearly, the reason for postponement given by the two countries are not the same. Why such differences have been allowed to come out in the open? According to newspaper reports there were frequent consultations be-

tween the Foreign Ministries of the two countries and yet there remains a fundamental difference in their perception of the situation.

The Indian authorities have blamed, not too subtly, "the situation in and around India" as the reason why the postponement was necessary. The statement referred to the "political tensions created by the actions in some of the other countries in the sub-continent." Which other country did India have in mind? Since the summit was to be held in Bangladesh, it is logical to

conclude that it is the situation in this country which was being referred to. Further, Delhi blamed "public demonstrations and acts amounting to interference in the internal affairs of India." Was India referring only to the events in Pakistan? Any sensible person can see that it was a barely concealed reference to the recent events in Bangladesh.

Thus we have a most curious situation. The summit has been postponed due to the surge of violence in India set off by the tearing down of the Babri mosque. Yet the blame for the postponement is being put on Bangladesh and other countries. Why Bangladesh should accept such unfair accusation? As I said earlier, for Bangladesh this is yet another diplomatic debacle. We failed to make an intelligent assessment of the situation and take appropriate policy decision in good time. Not only have we failed to convene the summit despite two attempts but now we are being told that the events in the other countries, (presumably Bangladesh is one of them), have "continued to vitiate the atmosphere". The position of Bangladesh has either been not defended or not defended and explained forcefully. Otherwise, how can the blame for this unhappy development be shifted to Bangladesh? In international relations no one can forecast the turn of

events. Unexpected developments can often derail the most carefully charted course of action. The Babri mosque episode was certainly an unexpected event and one can understand that the Bangladesh government was taken off guard by the suddenness of the event and the swiftness of the repercussions. But there is no reason why we could not assess the situation the second time. A few facts were there to guide us. The onslaught by the BJP and the Hindu fanatics was most vicious. Within a few days after the mosque was torn down these extremist forces regrouped and renewed their campaign of hatred against the Muslims. In the carnage the blood of thousands of innocent Muslims was shed. Was it not proper for us to think whether the atmosphere was congenial enough to talk about coopera-

tion and goodwill? In our eagerness for the glory of hosting the summit we chose to ignore the tragic blood bath that was taking place. We could, however, support the holding of the summit under these circumstances only if India and the other member countries of SAARC agreed to talk about the common threat of fundamentalism and extremism in order to forge a common strategy to resist this menace. If there was no understanding on such an agenda it was futile to go through the motion of a summit conference. Regrettably the government of Bangladesh did not seem to have analyzed the events in their correct perspective and went ahead as if nothing had changed. But a lot of things had, in fact, changed. Indeed the very basis of cooperation was missing.

The priority task before the leaders of the region, as I explained in these columns on December 27, was to restore some measure of mutual trust before we could embark on the rituals and ceremonies of the summit. We should have taken care of our home front a little better if we were so keen on assuming the chairmanship of SAARC. Our diplomats should have reviewed the record of the Colombo summit and taken some lessons from it. Bangladesh has a fine record of communal peace and harmony of which we are rightly proud. When Ershad, during the final days of the popular movement against him, tried to provoke a communal riot, the people stood resolutely against his nefarious designs. But during the days following the Babri

mosque episode the BNP government was strangely lethargic in using the law-enforcement agencies in dealing firmly with the trouble-makers.

Many temples and houses of the minority community was reportedly burnt. Although these affected people are citizens of Bangladesh the Prime Minister did not have a word of sympathy for them. Have we agreed to rebuild the temples destroyed by the extremist elements? Pakistan, despite its track record on communal issues, has commenced the rebuilding of the temples but the BNP government has not made any move. Is it because of its alliance with the communal forces? It was naive to think that these developments would escape attention. Why did we allow the messy situation that arose out of the so-called long march? Inaction and drift is no substitute for carefully considered policy.

The summit stands postponed and its future looks uncertain. The regional atmosphere is vitiated by mutual distrust. The fundamentalists, both Hindus and Muslims, are busy fanning hatred against neighbours. Unless the leaders of the region can rise above narrow national interests and take a long term view of the region's future these communal forces cannot be brought under control. And unless the atmosphere is congenial for regional cooperation, the summit should not be rescheduled hastily or prematurely. This is a testing time for the vision and statesmanship of our leaders. We in Bangladesh must not yield to pressures from any quarters in making up our mind. Mr Nawaz Sharif and Mr Premadasa may have agenda of their own but our priorities ought to be determined by our own national interests.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

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THE "gotcha" feeling is all over again. Saddam Hussain, Mr. Bush's old nemesis, has been hit in the butt, and America has found another reason to rejoice. "We zap those missile sites," declared New York's Daily News. "Mr. Bush has responded to Saddam Hussain's last spiteful finger in the eye with a punch in the nose," mused the Washington Post. Another daily, New York Newsday, was a little more laconic. "Beautiful, beautiful," it said, quoting one of the pilots who took part in the bombing raid.

A Lt Commander of the air force, Steve Boss, topped them all. He said, "Seeing the missiles slide off the plane was like watching a Roman candle."

While America savours another "heroic" mission, some analysts find it hard to believe that the US had to go for "punitive action" against Saddam Hussain only six days before Mr. Bush's departure from the White House for an offense far less serious than those committed by Israel and Serbs in Bosnia on a daily basis. Shimon Peres, the Israeli Foreign Minister, thought the US action was appropriate. "They cannot go against the United Nations. They cannot go against all their neighbours," he said, endorsing the US action. Good, but what Mr Perez conveniently forgot was that his country continues to defy scores of Security Council resolutions, including one calling for immediate return of Palestinian expelled by Israel last month. More than 400 West Bank Palestinians, many of them minors, are still languishing in a no man's land between Israel and Lebanon after they were expelled by Israel for "terrorist" acts.

President Bush's Last Heroic Act!

Hanan Ashrawi, Palestinian spokesperson, was among those who pointed out the obvious double standard. "The most obvious irony for us is the double standard between implementation and respect for United Nations Security Council resolutions," she was quoted as saying by the New York Times.

Clearly, the action was only an act of bravado, neither necessary nor entirely legal. Though carried out in the name of UN resolutions, no such military action was authorized by the UN. It took place well after the Iraqi Ambassador to the United Nations, Nissar Hamdoun, delivered a letter to the Security Council President expressing his country's readiness to negotiate on the current differences. This is clearly an uncivilized act, he later told ABC's Nightline programme, unable to contain his anger and frustration.

According to Bush Administration officials, the attack against the missile site on 13 January came in the wake of a string of Iraqi provocations: "Jet fighter flights in the southern zone where the allies have banned such flights, deployment of anti-aircraft missile batteries in similar zones in northern and southern Iraq, refusal to allow United Nations inspectors to fly to Iraq in UN planes, and armed incursions to retrieve weapons from territory that the United Nations has determined belong to Kuwait."

Clearly, there have been violations by Iraq of resolutions adopted by the United Nations.

S G Hasan from New York

It had also openly ignored repeated US and UN warnings that such violations could lead to new measures against Iraq. But on a closer scrutiny, the charges appear "very very light". The missiles that Iraq had moved were inside Iraqi territory. The airspace violation also took place within Iraqi territory. The so-called "no-fly" zone was established by the Western alliance led by the US, an act aimed to undermine Iraqi sovereignty. When pressured, Iraq actually pulled out the missiles, something the US had already certified. As for incursion into Kuwait, Iraq was only retrieving properties belonging to her lying in a base that was her territory until the UN decided to redraw the lines and award Kuwait a chunk of Iraqi territory. It had earlier been arranged with the UN that Iraq could retrieve its properties "with UN permission". Iraq had not done this and the UN was critical of it. On the question of refusing the UN observers, Iraq was not blocking their entry but insisting that they be flown in by an Iraqi airliner.

Though minor they maybe, there is no question as regards the violation of UN resolutions. Many third world diplomats expressed their surprise over Iraq's behaviour when it became absolutely clear that the US could resort to power. Some US analysts think President Hussain was hoping that during this transition phase the US would not risk

running into a new war. He might have also believed that Bill Clinton would be more conciliatory towards him. "Wrong," said Mr. Clinton himself. This week, after the New York Times carried an interview where Mr. Clinton showed readiness to cooperate with Saddam if he behaved properly, the President-elect issued a rejoinder saying he never thought it was possible to normalize relations with the current Iraqi regime.

Whatever might have been his motive, the defiance of UN resolutions has now cost Saddam Hussain new loss of face both to his countrymen and to the outside world. His promise of another "mother of all battles" is a joke and the promise of "holy war" saw no enthusiastic response from any place. This was not even a distant cousin of all battles," joked a US military commander, promising the real thing if Saddam dared any more mischief.

Meanwhile, military analysts have questioned the extent of success achieved by the air attack. Mr. Bush himself described the mission as "big success" but within 24 hours the results were reevaluated by Pentagon officials as "limited success". Only one of the four surface to air missile batteries targeted by the F 117 planes accomplished their mission. Some of the laser guided bombs were off the target and one, according to report, even hit a housing complex. Pentagon officials quickly de-

fended that the success of the mission must not be measured by the damage done. It had a political mission, aimed at sending Saddam Hussain a strong message. Saddam Hussain has got to understand, Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger said, "If he does this sort of things, there will be a response."

Several newspapers, including the New York Times, pointed out that the damage assessment emphasized the gap between public expectation of what can be accomplished with high technology weapons, "a perception the Pentagon has often encouraged in seeking support for military spending, and the gritty realities of war." With the end of

cold war, the US has come under increasing pressure to trim its military budget. Both Mr. Bush and Defence Secretary Dick Cheney strongly supported maintaining America's military machines "because little despots like Saddam Hussain continue to lurk in various parts of the world." What the soon-to-be ex-officials did not mention was that those little despots are often created by US so that the trillion dollar military budget could be justified. The point was most frankly made by Airmen Alexander Washington. Before he rode into his aircraft, he scribbled on one of his 2,000 pound bombs: "If there was peace on Earth then I'd be out of a job." Clearly, as long as such people are on job, there would be no peace on earth. (15 January '92, New York).

To the Editor...

Up the rung

Sir, Economic status of Bangladesh has improved to "tenth from the bottom" in the world of over 180 states, according to World Development Report 1992. From 5th to 10th (poor) position is a remarkable development for an LDC like Bangladesh.

Based on World Development Indicators, the increase in per capita GNP of 8th most populous state has been possible owing to "downward adjustments" in population size (110.7 million for mid 1989 to 106.7 million for mid 1990). But average inflation rate is still higher than previous years' which ought to concern the natives as regards cost of living today and tomorrow.

Even with the figures of 1990 reinforced with the nature's onslaughts next year, equally grave is the scenario over external debts of 12,245 million dollars with GDP of 22,880 million dollars plus foreign exchange reserve of 1382.21 million dollars; and as it is, a citizen must be wondering how on earth the state's value can be about half her wealth!

Public allegations often highlight corrupt practices together with percentage of wastage of national resources leading to weaker economy

experiencing high rates of birth, death, natural growth, unemployment, and illiteracy coupled with frequent natural disasters, aids pressures, alarming system loss, and so forth. Unofficial allegations also identify some "culprits" turned leaders or "top-notch" by virtue of "dark dealing" that are largely responsible for enormous national losses. What to do about it is mostly inherent in the know-how of civic duty to downplaying the "power of shadow" in order for the nation to achieve higher berth on the global economic atlas.

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"Mosquitoes and DCC"

Sir, Congratulations to Mr Hubert Francis Sarker for his wonderful write up "Mosquitoes and DCC" published on November 12, 1992, in The Daily Star. However, the following observations could be added:

Barrister Abul Hasnat was the first Mayor of Dhaka Municipal Corporation (now we call Dhaka City Corporation). Barrister Hasnat was not only the Mayor, he was also the honourable Member of the

Parliament and he was the founder of the present system. Even though there were lot of changes, the system founded by Barrister Hasnat, the first Mayor, has not been changed and consequently the Mayor of DCC has been also the honourable Member of the Parliament, an over loaded busy person.

The only problem is that for any thing and every thing we make an appeal to the Chief Executive of the country at the first chance and this tendency always helps to cripple down the executives of the other cadre without any scopes. Hence let there be scopes.

Tobacco leaves, when put in the water for 24 hours, and sprayed, mosquitoes will go.

Andrew D'Costa  
Hemendra Das Road, Dhaka

Merit prize for technical research worker

Sir, The other day, while listening to a popular science lecture in a scientific seminar I heard an eloquent speaker emphasising the need for encouraging persons with aptitude for research.

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OPINION

A Women's College with a Difference

The women's college with a difference is the College of Home Economics, the one and only of its kind in Bangladesh. Mr ASM Nurunnabi in his write-up on the subject published in The Daily Star on January 9 did not mention this fact.

The College of Home Economics is situated in the heart of Dhaka and is surrounded by other educational institutions. Its next door neighbour is the famous Eden Girls' College. Dhaka College and the University of Dhaka are not too far away either. The College of Home Economics has therefore always been well within the hub bub of student politics. Yet it has been a quiet and peaceful institution.

The result of this quiet existence is that few have really understood the value of its being. Misconceptions on the role and function of the college and its curriculum have unfortunately led to the neglect of this important institution. The library of the college is a case on hand. It still continues to use books that are outdated and therefore of very little use to the students. Little effort has been made to modernize the college. On the other hand, many facilities and functional requirements that previously existed have completely disappeared. Mr Nurunnabi's statement on this is correct — the library definitely needs modernization.

However, his statement that subjects taught in the College of Home Economics offer limited avenue for career building is not true. His contention that because of lack of adequate emphasis on science subjects a student's future in medicine, engineering and other similar disciplines is blocked is made without proper understanding of the discipline.

The College of Home Economics was established for students who wanted to graduate in that particular discipline. It specializes on subjects such as home management, child development, food and nutrition, clothing and textile

etcetera which are not taught elsewhere. Graduates of this college, besides being good home managers, have entered diverse fields. Some of them are actively pursuing their career in home economics as dietitians, nutritionists, fashion models etc. both within the country and outside. They have also entered various government services including education, information service, foreign service and even politics. One of the members of the present cabinet is a masters from the College of Home Economics. In the non-government sector they have entered banking, various NGOs, UN specialized agencies, and private organisations. As can be seen from this, like any other graduate, Home Economics students are perfectly capable of competing everywhere.

The College of Home Economics is not a general college where science is taught for student's wanting to graduate in some other discipline. Home Economics is a science and the science curriculum of the college is in line with the requirements of that particular discipline. It would therefore be wrong to even consider putting undue emphasis on the science subjects just because a few students wish to change to other disciplines. The college was established with a purpose: let us not ruin it now by converting its intermediate classes into a general college. There are thousands of such colleges around the country so let us leave the one and only College of Home Economics as it should be. If anything, more home economics colleges should be established in the country to cater to the needs of those who cannot avail the opportunity in Dhaka. Let us try to improve and modernize the existing facilities to enable the college to march ahead with time. Diversification of science subjects will be the beginning of the end of the College of Home Economics.

A Former Student  
Dhaka