Dhaka, Friday, February 19,1993

No. Don't Do it

This is absurd and totally uncalled for. Unjust and injurious to the nation in so many ways. Hardly has a month elapsed after the Shilpakala Academy held a month-long festival of Jatra — the traditional folk theatre - opened by the Prime Minister who said Jatra was a national wealth comes an order, as reported yesterday in a vernacular daily, banning the same.

We welcomed in these columns the Prime Minister's appreciation of the value of the glorious native theatre form that has come down to us at the cost of tremendous sacrifice and unmatched love for art by a handful of people. The present ban, said to have been clamped on February 10 but not as yet stringently enforced in many areas so far, amounts very plainly to an insult to the Prime Minister, whatever way the government functionaries may interpret it. It is likely that the PM's speech was a production of the Ministry of Culture whereas this ban comes from Home. The government is very plainly suffering from lack of organisational and even attitudinal integrity.

We frankly do not like this order. We have already stated our reasons for believing that making cultural activity of whatever kind and merit subservient to executive flat is foolish. If the government doesn't like the so-called 'exhibitions' and mina-bazars' and 'melas' — it is their pleasure, for many of these, although held directly under the aegis of district administration or some directorate or ministry, are indeed events dominated by gambling and erotic stage performances.

And it indeed would be injurious to our nation as a whole if the ban hurts and harms the Jatra the only surviving folk theatre of the Bengalee people that still retains much of its merit and power. Unaware of the value of this form and its importance in the context of the arts of Bangladesh — let us here forget what the chief executive of the land has said about its greatness - the administration seems to be completely ignorant of the fact that in most of South Bengal. Jatra is culture per se — a family entertainment participated by all in the family, and teachers and students, brothers and sisters.

Professional Jatra has been forced to compromise its serious form with interludes of titillating dances only in order to survive. Why has it to stoop low? Because government has neither the will nor the power to save the society from the growing addiction to video-cassettes and even more harmful average big-screen Bangladesh films of bad taste and suggestive sex that corrupt the mind more. The serious Jatra theatre has as its clientele the largely illiterate and rustic and poor masses whose taste, already corrupted by cinema, video and television, does not necessarily coincide either with that of the moralising hypocrites or of those that pass the orders and clamp the bans. Anyone conversant with the socio-economic as well as sex-related psychopathological realities of the Bangladesh society would like to care a little more for the preferences of the rural masses rather than dictating them from the town. Banning the gambling dens that adorn the Jatra venues and, in addition, highly subsidize the performances, can be justified. But feigning to be scandalised by the dancing sequences of the jatras is downright hypocrisy - the middle class, keeper of the nation's morals, is exposed, indeed used, to much more explicit sexist visuals than these. Saving the morals of the people subjected to appeals over radio or television or on the billboard to buy a packet of condoms here and now.

Let the government refrain from tampering with the arts, and dictating to it under whatever pretext. A jatra team is the farthest removed thing from a flesh-trade joint and these hardworking art-workers do not relish wallowing in an atmosphere of gambling and narcotics and mastani and exhibitionism. What the government should do in all earnest is to salvage the jatra people from this inferno and ensure the performance of whatever the artistes have to offer.

Misuse of Laws

Two reports have dealt with two similar criminal cases - one in Gournadi and the other in Hobigonj — in which members of the law enforcing agencies took two civilians to court and got the verdicts against themselves instead of the accused. The police constable of Hobigoni was found guilty by the court of not paying the price of 350 grams or so grapes he bought from a fruit vendors and was ordered to pay. An altercation that ensured on non-payment of the price of the grapes enraged the constable to file a case against the fruit vendor under the Special Powers Act (SPA). In the other case, a police officer of Gournadi Thana brought charges against a candidate for chairmanship under the Anti-terrorism Act. The man was elected chairman of Nalchithi Union by a wide margin later on. The court not only declared him innocent but warned the police officer of not indiscriminately taking recourse to the same act.

The two cases in Barisal and Sylhet bring into focus one fundamental issue: how safe are the human rights of our people at the hands of such men of the law enforcing agencies, specially when anti-democratic and arbitrary laws like the SPA and Anti-terrorism Act are around. Our police are famously known to be misinterpreting laws and do not mind overdoing their role. In the two cases under discussion, it is not a question of misinterpretation but of motives guided either by revenge or graft. The constable of Hobigonj is not alone to have acquired the habit of taking things free through intimidation. Hardly they realize that by doing so they simply desecrate their uniform. In the case of the police officer of Gournadi, it is clear that he did not do his job properly. That he reported against the prospective winner may be not for nothing.

Even if we rule out an ulterior motive, the police officer's biased report could have spelt unmitigated tragedy for the now-elected chairman. But not everyone is fortunate enough like him to turn the table against the police officers and constables. When the members of the law enforcing agency are vindictive, there is little chance of the common people getting justice under our judicial system. Cases in which innocent people are kept confined for several years together point to the fact. Nor are these victims of illegal confinement even given monetary compensation. Keeping these anti-people and mindless laws intact, it is futile to hope democracy will work in a desirable manner. The prerequisite for democracy to reach its benefits to all people of the country is to strike out all such black laws and let in fresh air into the legal system.

Mirpur By-election: A Victory that Looked Tainted

O-DAY, a half-day hartal day throughout the co untry, as I sit before my type-writer, I face a problem I have to choose among a number of contending themes. Normally, the problem is quite different : sitting with a vacant mind for a good quarter of an hour - sometimes more brooding and groping for a theme. This time I have to choose between Ekushey, which has literally burst upon its traditional site. Bangla Academy grounds: Kabir Choudhury, on whose 70th birthday a most heart-warming civic reception was held in the lichi-groves of Fine Arts institute; and finally, the Mirpur bi-election, the unfortunate consequences of which is the reason we have a free

There was a possible fourth, as a likely topic, which I can't leave without mentioning, the bloody battle between student groups on Rajshahi University campus which has left five dead — unofficial figures would put it around ten - and more than forty seriously injured. This is clearly the worst to have happened so far in the university. Of course, I have to leave out the nightly killings by the Pakistan army in 1971 when they turned the campus into a cantonment, and the grounds adjacent to Shaheed Shamsuzzoha Hall into a mass burial ground.

half-day today (February 10).

cannot write about the Rajshahi killings now, the lat est campaign mounted by Jamaat-Shibir on the rest of the student community, not excluding the JCD followers. The university is too close to my heart; I worked there for nearly nineteen years. Though I have given another nineteen years to Jahangirnagar, I still regard Rajshahi as my university, in a very special sense. This feeling, I know, is shared by all my friends who had gone over to Rajshahi in the mid-

fifties, and grew there over the

THEN Warren Christ-

opher testified in

the US Senate on the foreign

policy priorities of the in-

coming Clinton Administrati-

on, the US Secretary of State-

designate almost skipped

the Association of the South-

east Asian Nations), only

Cambodia," says John Bresnan

For Asian governments and

analysts, that near-omission

was yet another sign that

Washington's neglect of Asia in

likely to continue if not worsen

under the newly sworning gov-

ernment of US President Bill

continue to be a blind spot in

US foreign policy at a time

when a new delicate balance

between the major powers in

the region will have to be

did not have an Asian policy,"

Bresnan told reporters after a

conference on ASEAN security

and economic cooperation.

"Early indications do not in-

spire confidence that the

Clinton administration will be

aware that Clinton's priority is

to revive the troubled US

economy. What he does say

about foreign policy raises

questions about long-term

commitment to maintaining a

presence in Asia or spells

trouble for individual Asian

Asian governments are well

much different."

"The Bush administration

Their worry is Asia will

of Columbia University's East

Asian Institute.

Clinton.

found.

"He did not discuss ASEAN

South-east Asia altogether.

early January before

years with the newly-established university. There was an intense feeling of sharing, the joys and the woes and the ecstasics. The happy nest was blown off by the blasts of '71, scattered the group, leaving only a common nostalgia for

the place and the days. I shudder to think what has happened in the university and cannot in this frame of mind write with reasonable poise on the tragedy. I notice that no top-level political leader from the government party has visited Rajshahi vet. I am not surprised. An impassivity, a perfect equanimity on a beautiful face is the image one will remember, a hallmark of the government of Begum Khaleda Zia. It is as if, after weathering many a storm, the pilot, now safely anchored on the shore, refuses to believe that there can be another storm.

As for the bi-election of Mirpur, everyone knew that the battle would be a close one, and any of the two main candidates winning, would do so on a narrow margin. In the background of the Election Commission's increasing authority, there was also a confidence that the election would be reasonably fair, that irregularity, if any, would be limited in scope, and would be firmly dealt with. These expectations were not belied. The polling itself was, to quote Enayetullah Khan Holiday, February 5, under the caption BNP has lost its face) 'smooth as silk — almost civil to a point -, and fairer than an early spring." But, if the beginning was good, the end was not. And this has left a question.

I hope every one has read, and read carefully, BNP Secretary-General Mr Abdus Salam Talukdar's statement on the disputed election results in his press conference of February 8, reported in detail in The Daily Star of February 9. As I gave a second look at the statement, and tried to picture

the scene, with pressmen listening to the honourable minister and the secretary-general of the ruling party, with a mixture of deference and scepticism, the tongue-in-cheek manner of the speaker, thought that, as a counsel Mr Talukdar was perhaps defending a case one of the weakest in his career. On this occasion at least, he could not have relished his role. His whole manner suggested that of a defence lawyer, since he was replying to the 11-point allegation that the Awami League press conference of February 5 brought

Mr Talukdar, as one would have expected, refuted all the charges of irregularity, and violation of electoral rules committed at the latter phase of

results, the BNP Secretary General found nothing wrong, nor in BTV's telecasting the news in its 10 O'clock bulletin But the fact is that both the propriety and the legality of the procedure have been questioned. Awami League is not alone in raising objection to this. The objection gains strength from the reported surprise of the Chief Election Commissioner when his atten tion was drawn to it. The way the Secretary-General made light of a matter which others have viewed as a serious infringement of the rights of the Election Commission was disappointing, to say the least.

The Secretary-General's press conference was a fine blend of defence and aggres ston though the aggression ap-

thrust. It was ludicrous to sug-

gest that the Awami League

was out to erode the EC's au-

thority or to cast doubts on its

integrity. In fact, as far as I can

see, from the speeches in the

Jatiya Sangsad and those in

AL's press conference of

February 5, Awami League

Chief and her colleagues made

it perfectly clear that they had

no complaint against the EC;

they were blaming the ruling

party and the administration

for the lapses and aberrations,

and especially for infringing on

that though the Secretary

General was ostensibly reply-

ing to the 11-point allegation

One gets the impression

the rights of the EC.

Raqibul Huda's 'forcing his way' into Mirpur control room, ignoring the EC's request to absent himself from the scene the EC had reportedly en trusted the responsibility of maintaining law and order to the Additional Police Commissioner - Mr Kamal Stddiqui's unexplained visit, all this proving beyond doubt the government's impatience with the procedure and a certain nervousness about the outcome, - these were some of the more specific charges. Reply was evasive; also, regrettably, referring to certain irregularities seen in 1973 elections, the spokesman seemed to justify the present irregularities. A press conference is not a court of law. There was nobody there to snub an erring

counsel. The government should know very well that something has gone awry, and the victory of the Mirpur bi-election has, in fact, brought no credit to the winners, because the method has not been above reproach. A victory for BNP was very much an expected thing, though by no means a sure one. The right attitude should have been to desist from doing any thing which looked like wresting a result. Unfortunately, that is exactly what the government

The Election Commission has come out unscathed. It has made a supreme effort though every things was foiled by the arrogance of the rulers and the impatience of the BNP leader-

Was it wrong to call the hartal? Hartals have lost their appeal and as far as I can see, the latest recourse to this wasteful method of recording your protest has brought a good deal of blame on Awami League. Awami League leadership, according to many fully sharing its grievances, overreacted in giving a call first of a six hours' hartal in the city,

and then an eight hours' hartal nationwide. It could do with less, because it is not alone in its effort of protecting the institution of election. Virtually all the opposition parties have expressed their deep dismay at the way the results were announced Press reports, editorials, posteditorials of the last week should prove that if anything, the defeated have won a moral victory. Even if the official results are upheld, on technical grounds, by the court or courts of appeal, this will remain unimpaired. A serious dent has been made in the credibility of the government and surely there were other methods available to AL to drive home this feeling across the nation e.g. a ten minuets' stoppage of all work, all traffic, - a telling way of recording damage to the nation's economy. It is this sense of respon-

one's protest, without causing sibility that the nation expects of its political parties. The country is slowly moving to a two-party system. That imposes a great responsibility on both BNP and Awami League. They must learn to accept each other, and in this the ruling party must show the way.

POST SCRIPT FEBRUARY 17

The recounting of Mirpur polls has partly vindicated Awami League's stand, and though AL has gained morally. it has finally lost the seat. It should be able to take it in a gamely manner. If it still decides to go to the law-courts, it should keep in mind that the outcome may be either way. In a sense, the honours have been shared by both the parties, especially in the way they submitted to the supremacy of the Election Commission. The EC. in its turn, has retrieved some of the losses it had suffered when its authority was flouted All the holes now should be plugged to avoid repetition of what had happened in Mirpur

PASSING CLOUDS Zillur Rahman Siddiqui pears to have lacked rea

counting of polls. He put his main emphasis on the fact that ballots were counted in all the 117 centres in the presence of the polling agents of the candidates. None of the polling agents, either from the BNP or the AL, had raised any objection to any of the centres. He added, perhaps referring to the next phase of the counting. that 'all the result sheets had been duly signed by the presiding officers'.

Mr Talukdar ruled out the possibility of repolling in 18 polling centres, quoting rules, under Election Act. While he blamed Awami League for its inability to accept the verdict of the people, hinting as if this was the chronic case with the party, he, almost in the same breath, and quite unnecessarily, gave a certificate of good performance to the Election Commission, a pat on its back,

ficial publication of election

of Awami League, point by point, and had done some homework beforehand, the spokesman had really no answer to some of the most specific charges. Why, after the tabulation of 78 centres, no poll results were received

DMP Commissioner Mirza

US Policy Still Blind to Asia

Prolificration Treaty (NIT).

But South Asian experts say

the Clinton administration will

also be looking for stability in

South Asia and in the Gulf. The West is worried renewed civil war in Afghanistan and growing instability in Central Asia fuelled by the spirit of resurgent Islam may spill into the region.

An Islamabad-based political analyst points out, however, that Washington's preference for stability and the status quo in South and Central Asia does not spring from love for the regimes in power, but fear of

the unknown. The fact that free elections have spawned Islamic parties with anti-Western leanings has sent fitters in Washington," the analyst said.

In the Asia-Pacific, meanwhile, there is now growing acceptance of Japan's political and strategic importance in line with its status as an economic giant and the inevitability that an increasingly prosperous and assertive China will exert more influence in re-

But there are clear limits to this emerging recognition of the role of Japan and China as regional economic and military powers.

Some degree of "regional aversion" remains with respect to an enhanced military role

argue that Japan's economic domination also needs to be counter-balanced.

this time.

The presence of Japan as the only economic power in the region could create new political problems for the region," Wanandi says. "Japan's economic presence is already so overwhelming that an additional military role would likely

destabilise the region." To arrive at a "new, peaceful balance" between the major powers, Wanandi says Asian countries need to keep the United States militarily and economically engaged in the

regions Besides sharing the US military burden, Washington's allies and trading partners further open up their markets. including the area of services and government procure-

"An increasing US economic presence in the region would preserve US politicomilitary presence," Wanandi

But these experts fear that the Clinton administration committed to resolving stubborn domestic ills and distracted by conflicts in Bosnia and Iraq — has neither the time nor inclination to slowly build a new balance of power

"There is a lot of concern about the drift in Washington's unwelcome outcomes.

for its 'remarkable fairness and integrity'. There was an unconscious irony theref in the premature and unoffrom the remaining centres,

According to Christopher, the United States needs to "revamp its military force structure" - a phrase that Asians take to mean more cuts in US military presence in the

He also speaks of the need to promote democracy on a worldwide basis and to press for "fairer trade" in Asia policies that could exacerbate US ties with China and Japan.

But security experts who gathered here a week before Clinton was sworn in January 20 say Washington is unclear about what concerns Asian governments the most: how to build a new balance of power as the United States reduces its military presence in Asia.

"Since all of (the big powers) could not be removed from the region, it was better to have all present, in some degree balancing each other," says Robert Scalapino of the University of California at Berkeley.

Especially after the US withdrawal from bases in the philippines, many analysts take it for granted that US*presence in the Asia-Pacific region was on the decline.

"It is unrealistic not to expect that there will be some reduction in US military presence in Asia," according to Paul Evans of the Centre for Asia Pacific Studies of the University of Toronto.

The new US administration seems to be leaving out Asia in its foreign policy plans even as experts worry about the need to strike a power balance in the region. Ramon Isberto and Mushahid Hussain of IPS report from Manila.



"Given the many problems that the United States is facing at home today, and in the absence of a concrete threat as the Russian threat during the Cold War, priorities will be given to domestic affairs," says Jusuf Wanandi of Indonesia's Centre for Strategic, and

International Studies. Adds Korean strategic analyst Chin Kin Wah: "Domestic economic pressures are likely to result in an acceleration of the military retrenchment in Asia Pacific."

In South Asia, analysts believe US policy would focus mainly on the nuclear arms proliferation issue because of Pakistan and India.

Washington cut off vital economic and military assistance to Pakistan last year after Islamabad insisted on keeping its nuclear programme under wraps as long as India refuses to sign the Nuclear Nongional affairs.

for Japan, says Chin. Others

Asia policy," says Evans. We need to see that inattention does not lead to unintended.

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.

Education Boards

Sir, It is learnt from newspaper columns that the present government is contemplating to set up a Central Education Board in Dhaka by remodelling the present four Education Boards into regional Boards. This concept was recommended in 1984 by the much talked "Enam Commission" set up by the past autocratic regime.

In the past, there was only one Board in the country to conduct the Secondary and Higher Secondary examinations of the country. But with the increase in number of students, three more Boards have been set up to fulfil the demands of the time. At present the Boards are conducting their examinations and other works within the time schedule as they are independent to take any necessary decision for smooth functioning of their affairs. Moreover, the Boards which are autonomous bodies, are self-financed. The Boards are being run by a high powered body constituted by the government. Above all, the Education Ministry is supervising their affairs. So there is little scope for any maladmin-

istration. The proposed

Central Board will surely cut

down the autonomy of the Boards and as such there will be inordinate delay in taking quick decision resulting in sufferings of the students and other related institutions. Besides, unlike in other organisations, trade unionism is less seen in the Boards and for this the Boards are performing their functions within the scheduled time.

So it is keenly felt that before taking any decision to set up a Central Board, all merits of the present Boards should be taken into benign consideration. Any hasty decision will surely entail more harm that good. When demands are rampant for setting up more Boards, the idea of framing a Central Board should be done away with for the overall development of education.

Md Sekander Hayat Khan Green Road, Dhaka

Mosquito menace Sir, Mosquitoes are no more for jokes and humourous sketches. Whatever measures to control mosquitoes have so far been taken by the relevant departments proved to be inadequate and ineffective. Some pragmatic steps have to be taken immediately to eradicate the menace before the

dreadful malaria attacks the entire population.

Mosquitoes are increasingly making the lives of the people miserable, and need to be controlled at any cost. We want complete eradication of mosquitoes in the interest of protecting public health and hygiene.

M Zahidul Haque Assistant Professor, Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Dhaka

Disinvestment: Ctg Cement Co Sir, It is quite sometime

that the management of Chittagong Cement Clinker Grinding Co declared a dividend of 40% for the year ending June, 1992 but has not so far taken any action to convene the AGM of the shareholders to approve the same. In the meantime an EGM of the Board was held on 29.12.92 at Chittagong to approve the decision of the government to sell the majority shares of the company to the highest bidder. The shares which were being traded in the Stock Exchange between Tk 350/- and Tk 400/- in recent months are now being quoted at Tk 270/or so. Speculation is ripe in the market that the successful bidder is putting pressure on the government to hand over the management before hold ing of the next AGM, maybe with a view to declaring a much lower dividend despite

BCIC's public declaration of

40% dividend. The minority

shareholders rightly appre-

hends that they will face the same fate as in the cases of Dhaka Vegetables and Kohinoor Chemical Co whose shares are being quoted much

For the sake of equity and justice we urge upon the concerned authorities to convene the AGM before handing over the management to the private party and save the small investors who bought the shares at very high prices in the hope of getting handsome dividend.

Adeebur Rahman Outer Circular Road Maghbazar, Dhaka

below par values.

Undemocratic

Sir, I have gone through the interview of Mr Kamal Ahmed Majumder, candidate of Awami League for Mirpur by-election, in "The Daily Star" on February 2, where Mr Majumder demanded unparliamentarily that Mr S A Khaleque (feather of Mr Syed Mohammad Mohsin, MP) be declared unwanted in Mirpur during voting hours and also accused "Mr Khaleque is the root of all acts of terrorism in Mirpur" without establishing legally any charges against him. Mr Majumder also claimed that more than 80 per cent of the residents are set tlers and "the minority" electorate that supported the Awami League, without any documentary evidence.

However, in view of the above, I wish to know from Mr Majumder that being a conscious candidate of Al. "how and to whom he has addressed specifically as "the

minority"; what does he mean by "the minority"? To the best of my knowledge, there is no such indication or term in our Constitution as "minority"; we all are bonaside citizens of Bangladesh. And still it is not clear to me what he means by "settlers". If the inhabitants of Khulna, Jessore, Kushtia, Chittagong, Sylhet, Faridpur are residing in Dhaka, how they can be "settlers" being the bonafide citizens o Bangladesh? 'Settler' virtually means a person domiciled or settled here from a foreign country.

Really, it seems to me very much undemocratic and also unethical which should not be repeated and I hope it should be rectified by statement in the national dailies.

Shukeel Ahmed Shaku Musulmanpara Cross Road, Khulna

Hold a newspapers' annual exhibition

Sir, It is said that over 400 Bangla and English dailies are published from Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Khulna and from different district and thana headquarters of our country. But how many of us have seen all these dailies? We strongly feel that

National Press Club, Dhaka, may kindly hold an annual exhibition of all dailies published from different places of our country for the members of the public. In such an exhibition display of various weeklies and monthles may also be in-

We would request the National Press Club, Dhaka. which is an ideal place, to kindly organise the first newspapers' exhibition in March, 1993. It may be mentioned here that we have an annual 'Boi Mela' (book exhibition) at Bangla Academy in February every year; why don't we hold am annual newspapers' exhibition in National Press Club in March?

() II Kabir

in Asia.

Fees on TV, VCP and VCR

Sir, My attention has been

drawn to the letters published recently in the national dailies on licence fees for TV, VCR, and VCP. Really it is sad that the year 1993 has started with violence and increased fees on TV, VCP and VCR to the bewilderment of the common It is our pride to think that

the present government claims to have great success in waiving taxes on 25 bighas of agri land and exempting agriloan up to Tk 5000/-. Is it a compensatory or token recovery of revenues so exempted? Wrong taxation at the growth period should have been carefully dealt with before announcing and, to my opinion, totally avoided considering the financial sufferings of the common people who are em bittered with the day-to-day price hike of the essentials.

J R Barua Joy Nagar Lane, Chittagong