

New Polarisation Apparent on the Political Front

by Chapal Bashar

Removing Causes of Fire

Dhaka, it seems, is sitting on a volcano and the volcano erupted the day before yesterday. In one of the fiercest fires of recent times, 1000 slum houses and small factories were gutted on a kilometre-long area along the Buriganga River in the old part of the city. At least one life was lost and more than a dozen people sustained burn injuries and an initial rough estimate has put the loss at Tk 12 crore. Almost the same locality witnessed an equally devastating fire in 1992 and there is no reason to believe that it is the end of such incidents. Rather, it should be considered a signal of what is to be expected if unplanned expansion of the city is allowed. Yes, the volcano, literally, is created by man, thanks to the lack of plan in the construction of the city's physical infrastructure.

According to the United Nations, one-third of the population in Dhaka live in sub-human condition. The ever-increasing growth of slums, here — as in any other big city — is linked to urban economic deprivation. Dhaka's insensible growth has made it specially vulnerable to calamitous accidents like fires. In the 1992 accidental fire, nine people lost their lives; this time the economic loss has been greater. One thing becomes clear that no lesson has been learnt from the earlier tragedy. Nor there is any guarantee this calamity will leave a lesson for the affected people or the city authority. This is the worst part of the whole tragedy. The uncontrolled growth of slum is linked to the much bigger issue of landlessness in villages. But this should never be an excuse for leaving the total management of their affairs to the slum people.

The contribution of the people living in slums to the urban economy is significant and to consign them to the dungeon is not only inhuman but also uneconomic. On several counts the impacts of such an unhealthy economy weigh heavily on the nation. Accidents apart, the sub-human life they lead eats into the very vital of their energy and skill thus reducing the average output of our workforce. Deprivation in one form has its back-lashing effects in another. The bitter irony of the under-class may not continually prove advantageous for the privileged. It is precisely at this point that the question of low-cost housing forces its way before the policy-makers and economic planners for sympathetic consideration. If the house of the underprivileged is on fire, the castles cannot save itself of the heat generated.

Evidently, the issue of accidental fires should be placed against the backdrop of this obtaining reality. If the socio-economic life of the village people can be improved, slums in the urban centres can be automatically checked. Until, however, that happens people will be crowding in greater numbers to cities where some sort of jobs are assured. To deal with this increasing flow of rural migrants, the work places and the makeshift shelters must be brought under some form of control. At least some plan must be there to regulate the construction of the houses preferably at the minimum cost. Ambulances and fire-brigades should have easy access to such places so that appropriate steps can be taken in situations of emergency. If the plan is there, perhaps the slum will be able to get rid of some of its ill reputations as a breeding ground of diseases, crimes and a host of social ills. Avoidable accidents like fire may be a thing of the past. Surely, it will call for investment but investment in human development always pays many times more and in wonderful ways.

True Press Freedom — Full or Half

Although all of the citizens of any state in the world are largely governed by politics and as such many of them participate in it in a most multifarious array of ways, people in Bangladesh, being no exception, however, largely believe that those that make a calling of politics, hardly ever speak the truth. When the other day Mr Abdus Salam Talukdar, claiming credit for his government as is a minister's ordained job, said the nation was now enjoying full press freedom, he was undoubtedly for once nearer truth than otherwise.

There are proofs of this on the pages of the newspapers if not quite on the radio and on the television, which is to say that the electronic media entirely controlled by the government and having the biggest clientele in the land, more than ten times over the private print media, is totally unfree while the latter forms of mass media do enjoy Mr Talukdar's freedom to a very heart warming degree. On Wednesday we stumbled upon a news story on the pages of The Daily Star which very dangerously compromised Mr Talukdar's talk of that dreamland of right to information.

Some cattle traders were walking their moving wares to the Modhukhali Bazar with the intention of making a profitable sale. Then "some members of an agency" snatched 59 cattlehead from them. On their way to Tapakhola, the biggest cattle bazar, the report repeats, "they were halted by some armed members of that agency near Arkandi Bridge on the Kamarkhali-Faridpur highway. When asked for, they showed documents to the agency men to prove that the cattle were not Indian." But the group, according to an FIR lodged with the police, "became angry and injured Shahadat, Golam Rasul and Mahiuddin by beating them with rifle butts. They then took away 50 native cattlehead of the small cattle traders and nine of the farmers worth some Tk 232,400. Some traders and farmers went to the barracks of the agency in Kushtia and found three of their cattle slaughtered for a feast. However, the farmers got back five different cattle instead of their own." At the moment we are not concerned with that.

What makes us worry our heads off is the correspondent's sturdy refusal to name the 'agency' at fault — a state agency of armed people who reside in barracks. Why does he fear, who does he fear? Why should he fear? There is an FIR to back him up — still?

It may not be quite Mr Nazmul Huda's or Mr Talukdar's fault or the over-sensitive armed forces' dictatorialism and autocracy. Bangladesh journalism has become adept in self-censorship or discreet to the point of becoming experts in self-defence. The profession must be healed of that. As long as there continues to be many things tabooed or too many sacred cows and the government continues to gloat in its information opaqueness, there cannot be true press freedom full or half. And as long as all aspects of the state including defence and the judiciary are not made reportable and the electronic media independent — the less they bring about press freedom the better.

SIGNIFICANT developments in the left, the right and the liberal political fronts in the last couple of weeks, are expected to have far reaching impact.

The developments saw the virtual split in the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), Dr Kamal Hossain's move to float a rightist alliance that brings elderly politician Khandker Mush-taqe Ahmed back into limelight. These developments indicate new polarisations of forces that might set some new trends of activities in the political arena.

After having inner contradictions on political philosophy for over a year, the CPB's central committee finally adopted a resolution for bringing major reforms in the 45-year-old party.

The resolution, passed by overwhelming majority at the end of central committee's three-day meeting Sunday, proposed changing of name and flag of the party and major structural reforms in the light of nationalism and open market economy. The committee passed the resolution with 40 votes in favour and 13 against while five abstained. Fifty-eight of the 75-member committee attended the crucial meeting.

The central committee's resolution will be placed before a special conference of 750 delegates on May 14-16 for approval. The sponsors of the resolution are certain about its passage at the ensuing special conference.

If passed, the resolution will lead the party to a formal split, since the hardliners, who oppose the reforms, have already expressed determination to uphold Marxism-Leninism and to continue party activities with its old name.

However, the CPB hardliners are still optimistic that the

central committee's resolution will be rejected by the majority of party delegates.

The idea for a major reform abandoning communist philosophy gripped two-third of party's central leadership when the Soviet Union and the Socialist block in Europe collapsed in 1991. Nevertheless, a small group of 13 in the central body, led by Muahidul Islam Selim opposed the structural and ideological change from the beginning. CPB president Saifuddin Ahmed Manik, General Secretary Nurul Islam Nahid and Samsuddoha MP are among those who lead the reformist group.

The Communist Party was formed in India in 1921 and its activities expanded to all over the sub-continent during the following decades. After the partition of India in 1947, the party was also organisationally divided and a committee for the then Pakistan was formed in 1948. Under this, a provincial committee namely, Communist Party of East Pakistan (CPEP) was constituted with the initiative of Moni Singh and others. With the passage of time the CPEP started functioning as an independent party.

During Pakistan rule until 1971, the CPEP remained banned, but continued underground activities and held its first congress in 1968.

Soon after liberation, the party started open activities with the changed name of CPB. In the second congress in 1972, Mohammed Farhad was elected general secretary while Moni Singh was made president. Afterwards two other party congress were held through which Manik, Nahid, Doha, Selim and other young leaders climbed to central leadership.

The party experienced its first major split in 1964 following the rift in the international communist movement that divided communist forces in two camps — pro-Moscow and pro-Peking. The CPEP was also divided in the same way, in which Moni Singh and Khoka Roy led the pro-Moscow faction while Mohammad Toha and Sukhendu Dasidhar took the leadership of the pro-Peking group.

Now, after about 30 years, the pro-Moscow party is facing another split.

If the reformists' move is okayed by the special conference in May, then the party with its new name is expected to move for establishing a

last year. Bangladesh Democratic Forum (BDF), a political platform was launched by Kamal in June, just three months before the AL council. In this effort, he enjoyed support from a good number of AL dissidents and other like-minded persons.

The launching of BDF was not approved by AL hierarchy and as a consequence, Kamal was dropped from party presidency during the council. However, he was inducted in the newly-created council of advisors of AL, which Kamal declined to accept.

Since then, the former Foreign Minister and his political associates have been continuing efforts to bring a third

clude, CPB's reformist group, NAP(M), Ganotantri Party, JSD(Siraj), Gano Azadi League (Samad) and splinter groups from some other parties.

Meanwhile, the AL leadership is said to be considering disciplinary action against the former President member. However, the leadership is yet to decide if the party would go for such action before Kamal launches his new organisation.

New alliance

The floating of a new political grouping named National Democratic Alliance (NDA) was announced on February 22, through which Khandker Mushtaqe Ahmed reappeared in the political scenario ending a long silence.

Mushtaqe has been made chairman of the NDA, a rightist alliance comprising ten political parties, most of which are little known. The parties are: Democratic League (Mushtaqe), a faction of Freedom Party led by Col (ret'd) Rashid, Krishak Samik Party, Bangladesh National Democratic Party (BNDP), Muslim League Oikka Prokria, Bangladesh Islamic Party, Bangladesh Islami Andolon, Naya Jana Ganotantri Party, Liberal Democratic Party and the Islamic Democratic League.

Freedom Party chief Col (ret'd) Abdur Rashid and BNDP president Anwar Zahid have been named Executive Chairman and Secretary General of the NDA respectively.

Political circles observed the emergence of the alliance with keen interest since it is headed by a person like Khandker Mushtaqe who became controversial for his role during the political changes in 1975.

Mushtaqe became president of the country following

the killing of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and overthrow of his government on August 15, 1975. He continued with this position until November 3 that year when an abortive coup was staged.

Once an Awami League stalwart, Mushtaqe was in AL government as a cabinet minister since independence. But he had to face the blame for the incidents of August while the Awami League believed that Mushtaqe was involved with the military putsch that brought an end to Mujib rule.

Mushtaqe formed his own party, Democratic League, which later split. However, he was more or less active in politics during the first half of the 80s and led another political front with some smaller parties. Afterwards he stayed away from active politics and virtually remained behind the screen.

At the press conference, where the launching of NDA was announced, Mushtaqe told newsmen that he has taken active part in forming the alliance on grounds of urgent national interest.

The NDA Secretary General Anwar Zahid, a former minister of Ershad government, was once known as a veteran left politician.

Col (ret'd) Rashid is often accused by Awami League and other quarters of being involved in the military upheaval of August 75. He took over as the chief of a faction of Freedom Party after its recent split.

The NDA has announced its plan to go for country-wide organisational and political activities immediately after Eid-ul-Fitr. The line of action of the newly-launched alliance remains to be observed.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

broad based liberal democratic party with like-minded political forces.

What will be the line of action of hardliners if they fail to resist the move for reform at the special conference?

On this question the leaders of the hardline group categorically said that they would continue party activities with the name, flag and ideology they carried for 45 years.

Kamal's move

Dr Kamal Hossain's initiative to float a new political party through a national convention in May has generated much interest in the political arena. Kamal, who is still a member of Awami League, disassociated from the party activities months before AL council was held in September

force in the political field uniting like-minded party and personalities.

On February 26, at the initiative of BDF, a meeting of the like-minded politicians, professionals, and personalities was held at the residence of Kamal. The meeting decided to hold a national convention in May, which, according to Kamal, would aim at building a unified political stream to give the hard earned democracy an institutional shape through economic emancipation of the masses.

Observers believe that Kamal Hossain and his associates' effort for creating a 'third force' will ultimately give birth to a new political party. Other than the AL dissidents, the parties which are likely to be involved in this process in-

A disabled person refers to one who suffers from abnormalities or loss of a certain organ or function; psychologically or physiologically or anatomically, and has lost wholly or in part the ability to perform an activity in the way considered normal.

The term "disabled persons" refers to those with visual, hearing, speech or physical disabilities, mental retardation, mental disorder, multiple disabilities and or other disabilities.

In Bangladesh there is no firm data about the number of people with disability. A sample survey by the statistical division reveals that there are 0.77 million of disabled people in Bangladesh. World Health Organization and International Labour Organization provide altogether a different figure which is 10.96 million. Although confusion persists about the number it is reckoned as 3.3 millions and projects/programmes have been taken up accordingly in the country. Present study by the world body shows that about 10-20% of the population are generally in some way or other disabled.

Types of Disability

There are, in fact, four types of disability in Bangladesh. These are: (a) visually impaired; (b) hearing impaired; (c) mentally retarded; (d) orthopaedically handicapped.

Leprosy and prolonged illness of old age are not yet recognised in our country as disability although aging is recognised as disability in terms of UN declaration. In some developed countries patients of heart diseases, CP (Cerebral palsy), AIR (Air respiratory infection), diabetes,

hypertension etc are also considered as disabled.

Programme of Action

UN declared 1981 as the year of the disabled persons. The result of the declaration was formulation of the world plan of action concerning the disabled persons. The main objective of the programme of action was to promote effective measures for the prevention of disability, rehabilitation, education and realization of the goals of full participation and equality of persons with disability.

The world programme of action laid emphasis on its implementation at the national level which necessitated the member governments to (a) support the establishment and growth of organizations of disabled persons; (b) facilitate participation of disabled persons and their organizations in decision making process related to the world programme of action concerning the persons with disability.

Decade of the Disabled

In an effort to provide a framework for action in the area of disability, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 1983 to 1992 as the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons.

It has been evinced that in countries where the will and commitment is strong, and where resources are available, Govt service agencies, business, industry and other organizations have worked with the disabled community to institute change. As a result of this united effort, significant progress has been made.

NATIONAL RESPONSE: It is heartening to note that some works have been done under the auspices of the

by Jalaluddin Ahmed

Ministry of Social Welfare through the Deptt of Social Services and notable works have also been done by a number of NGOs. At present, about 117 NGOs are working in this area. In the year of the disabled and during the decade of the disabled, many workshops have been organised creating awareness among the people.

Prevention of Disability In our country for prevention of disability the extended programme of immunization and primary health care activities have been toned up with the help of UNICEF, World Bank and other UN bodies.

The Government, besides running quite a number of programmes, has recently established a National Centre for Special Education (NCSE) at Mirpur having provisions for education and training of disabled children with visual and hearing impairment and mental retardation. It will work as a resource centre. It has capacity to train teachers for special education with residential facilities.

QUOTA IN SERVICE: The government has fixed quota for the disabled in all non-gazetted govt, semi-govt and autonomous services of the republic.

DISABILITY TRUST: A trust for the disabled is awaiting finalisation. Government has sanctioned Tk 50 lac initially for this purpose.

Government has set up a committee to examine the probability of creation of jobs for the disabled.

Role of Mass Media

Mass media, specially BTV, have started highlighting programmes regarding disability.

There have been marked changes in attitude towards the persons with disability.

However, these activities are very negligible compared to the need of the persons with disability in Bangladesh. Some countries of South Asia and the Pacific region have enacted legislation for protection of the rights and privileges of the persons with disability and also developed various physical facilities for them such as, residential care, sheltered workshop, technical aids, public facilities for barrier free movement etc.

The non-governmental activities have also been toned up under the world plan of action concerning the disabled generated by declaration of the Year of the Disabled by UN in 1981 and, thereafter, the Decade of Disabled terminating in 1992.

Role of NGOs

A number of NGOs are working with dedication and earnestness with the active cooperation of government and foreign donor partners. But these non-governmental organizations lack necessary direction. In absence of a comprehensive national policy guidelines they are working in their own way on the basis of resources and facilities they can create. These NGOs have only been able to communicate with international bodies working for persons with disability. The concept of equalization of opportunities to persons with disability is yet to find place in the thought process of the planners, policy makers, academicians and philanthropists. A person with disability is not yet considered equal to other

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.

Turkish Cypriots

Sir, I have read the article by Anne Charalambous and Derek Ingram, titled 'Tough Days Ahead of Veteran Clerides', which appeared in the March 1, 1993 edition of your distinguished daily.

Although it is beyond my scope of interest to comment on the article as a whole, since it mainly focuses on the life of Mr Glafkos Clerides, I wish to offer correction for one particularly misleading paragraph, which contains reference to a so-called "Turkish invasion" in 1974.

It will be recalled that bloodshed in Cyprus dates back to the 1950s when the EOKA terrorists waged war on the British, with the aim of annexing the island to Greece. Following negotiations between Turkey, UK, Greece and the two communities of the island, a Constitution was accepted for Cyprus in 1960.

However, the Greek Cypriots did not give up their dreams of joining the Greek

truth to your esteemed readers' knowledge, I remain.

Salih Bogac Guldere
Head of Chancery
The Embassy of Turkey, Dhaka

Women on the Move

Sir, The exclusive interview of Maneka Gandhi published on January 21, in your feature page was quite good. However, it has little to do with 'Women on the Move' issue. Her gender does not necessarily entitle her a space in the women's page.

It would have been much more interesting to know what were her contributions in trying to halt environmental degradation, challenges and problems she has faced and is facing as a female politician etc than her political stand and views on environmental issues.

Sheeba
Kalabaqan, Dhaka

Money talks

Sir, If "money is no problem" and the country has her own resources (declared by Bangladesh Finance Minister), then what does the country need aids for? Is she confident about the availability of aids as and when needed? What makes her request Aid Club's

billions of dollars 'after all'? More aid questions may face the administration sooner or later.

As revealed by the minister, World Bank does not always endorse government priorities (mostly due to its own preferences for individual recipient states), what WB prefers — for instance, taming rivers — are obviously justified in case of LDC Bangladesh that is afflicted with natural calamities like floods.

Besides, WB has already suspended aids to power sector of the country on account of unsatisfactory performance producing high systems loss that powered her way to the "wrong end".

In order for her to reach the right end, corruptions in utilizing aids (intended for improving the nation's condition) have to be appropriately dealt with, since corruptions engulfed previous administrations retarding national development pace.

Now both the government and the opposition organisations can work for refraining from corrupt practices so as to prevent this poor nation from eventually meeting the dead end. Also, concerning all state matters, regardless of magnitude and character, citizens

have democratic rights to question the activities of their government especially to uphold national prestige.

M Rahman
Zila School Road, Mymensingh

New schools for Dhaka

Sir, It is well-known that there is acute shortage of seats in almost every school at Dhaka. The problem becomes all the more serious at the beginning of every academic session. Number of seats available is only a fraction of the number of applications received for the purpose. As a result most of the candidates and their guardians have to go back frustrated. If some fifty new high schools are set up and extension of the existing schools are made, wherever possible, this problem can be solved to a great extent. In fact, there is scope of expansion in many schools like Udayan, Shaheen, Adamjee and many others.

This is a major problem of the city dwellers and should not be taken lightly. This will not involve an unmanageable amount of investment. Roughly this may cost the exchequer some thirty crore taka. But this investment is very much

worthwhile and will have a long run impact on education of the city children. In fact, investment on education is the best investment and should be given due priority.

It may not be out of place to mention here that the other day an indoor games stadium was opened at Mirpur at a cost of Tk 30 crore. I am not against it. But utility of additional schools in the city is hundred times more than this. Every project of PDB, WDB etc costs Tk four/five hundred crore and the extent of their 'systems loss' is well-known.

By spending a fraction of the amount a major educational problem of the city can be solved. What is needed is a little initiative, imagination and interest on the part of the relevant authorities. It may even be possible to find some donor countries and agencies for this project.

May I, therefore, request the Planning Commission, Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Education to go into the matter and do this favour to the city dwellers.

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury
Dhaka Cantonment