Dhaka, Sunday, March 7, 1993

Decency and Politics

The Prime Minister's presence at the Leader of the Opposition's Iftar party and the sense of joyful camaraderie that it radiated among the numerous luminaries present on the occasion can be portentous of very many good things to happen to our national affairs. The nation, hitting a kind of nadir from the euphoric days of December '90, did not half so much expect the two leaders to sit together taking the opportunity of a socio-religious occasion- and it must be said it was patently something that couldn't have been dreamt of a week before. That Hasina hosting an Iftar party and Khaleda joining it should make such a national news splash, however welcome. betrays an array of weakness, some of them mean and extremely on the personal level, that has been vitiating our ways towards good governnance and a tolerably dependable democratic polity. While there is no reason to go wild thinking this to be that much-longed-for turning point in the relationship between the two top leaders. the two main parties and indeed two principal stands of politics, it would be simply foolish to dismiss it as of little consequence or as a gimmick performed for effects no one is well aware

There will be no shortage of people taking pleasure in researching into who of the two spurned the other's political overtures garbed in bon homie, and how many times. But that would be downright mean and would certainly detract from the good thing it really was on the afternoon of March 5. Before we get down to rejoice at the possibility of the two parties starting to talk across the table- and there is so much to talk about, so many weighty things - we should congratulate the two leaders for introducing into our political practice a modicum of oriental courtesy that costs nothing but gives so much. This aspect of the March 5 Iftar party gains in moment when one appreciates that of the many reasons contributing to the making of our political arena into a wondrous pasture land for mastani featuring a profusion of exchanges full of threats and intimidations, the most potent has been the absence of courtesy and a sense of decorum - just plain oldworld decency.

The nation simply cannot move with two horses drawing the cart into opposite directions. If the perennial SKOP thing has to be settled to the satisfaction of all the parties or the unending eruptions in the academic institutions have to be curbed for good, both the parties and their leaders must find some ground of convergence. It is difficult to imagine how without the ruling party's going along, the opposition can realise the annulling of the Indemnity thing — a question of great national importance although it is.

We are happy that the Prime Minister has been nice enough to respond to Sheikh Hasina's invitation. These things help so much and in so many ways. To both the host and the invitee we want to submit that little is gained by arrogance and a false sense of honour and superiority while these things cost much by way of sapping the life of a nation. Let the small step of Friday evening transform into a mighty stride foward for the nation by virtue of the actions that would now follow.

A Charming Message

A group of school-going teenagers in Kathmandu have passed on a charming message to Princess Diana: "Please do not get a divorce from Prince Charles.

The visiting member of the British royalty currently separated from her husband, got this touching plea on Thursday when she was touring the institution to open a new girls' dormitory.

The teenagers were polite enough to convey their unexpected message, not directly, but through their teacher, just in accordance with the traditional Asian custom. In any case, it was too delicate a subject to be brought up with the Princess without going through the proper chan-

Press reports say that these Nepalese school children had several reasons for opposing a possible divorce of the Princess from the heir to the British Throne. As one teenager put it, "It would have been better if she had come to the school with her two children and her husband. In Nepal, we always look to the Royal members as a family." To another,"If higher class people do such things (like divorce), what will happen to the commoners?" No. that's not all. Apparently, these teenagers have done quite a bit of thinking on a matter they have taken very seriously. While reminding all concerned that in Hindu society, divorce is rare and rarely approved of, another student says, "A break in an unhappy marriage may be a good thing, but these two people are very lovely and they should stay-together."

Fair enough. However, one teenager goes after

Prince Charles. It is a young boy. Not surprisingly, he finds the visiting Princess "glamorous and charming" and that's why Charles "is having a complex about that," which is "the main reason for their unhappiness.

Despite these divergences, with these teenagers making their points with surprising precociousness, the consensus is simply this: No divorce please.

Whether Diana shrugs off these advices and Charles reads about them only in a brief report which he treats with no more than a casual interest, these Nepalese school children have spoken on the subject with more sincerity and honesty than what we find in the sickening press coverage of the Di-Charles marital problems in the United Kingdom and, more recently, in Australia. Let us hope that someone in the Royal family, may-be the Queen herself, is impressed by the charming message from some unknown teenagers in Kathmandu.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

ticular, our ties with Pakistan

has certainly been strength-

ened. The statements made by

Mr. Nawaz Sharif during his

last visit to Dhaka and our

Prime Minister's warm re-

sponses confirm this im-

provement. Prime Minister

Khaleda Zia must have had this

special relationship in mind in

sending a condolence message

at the death of the Chief of

Staff of Pakistan Army. Given

the gruesome record of this

army in Bangladesh in 1971

one wonders if this gesture re-

flected the genuine sentiment

of the people of Bangladesh.

The agreement on the

stranded Pakistanis is certainly

a decision to be welcomed.

Unfortunately, only a few hun-

dred of these people have been

repatriated and until they start

going in significant numbers

one has to conclude that it was

a mere token move, a friendly

The Prime Minister visited

the United States but we do

not know what was exactly

achieved. The Prime Minister

also attended the Non-Aligned

summit in Jakarta and ad-

dressed an FAO conference in

thing that she said or did

there that made a mark in

Fourth the final arrange-

ment made with India on the

question of Tinbigha corridor

has been trumpeted as a great

success but the original

agreement has been diluted

diplomats, I am sure, are try-

ing their best but success de-

pends largely on quality of

leadership in policy formula-

tion and guidance. For exam-

ple, a lot of hard work was put

in by the Foreign Office offi-

cials in preparation for the

SAARC Summit but all this

proved fruitless because of fati-

ure of political direction. The

recent goodwill visit by the

Malaysian Prime Minister is

certainly a plus point. Perhaps

the government will tell us

more about their successes. As

I look around, I see a number

The list is a mixed one. Our

these conferences.

rather drastically.

Rome. I am not aware of any

gesture.

Do We Have a Clear Sense of Direction? cent such interference in our Our diplomats, I am sure, are trying their best but success depends largely on quality of leadership in policy internal affairs. Let me add

preparation for the SAARC Summit but all this proved fruitless because of failure of political direction.

elapsed since the fall of Ershad's autocratic regime. The whole world greeted the restoration of democracy in Bangladesh and the people of Bangladesh danced in the streets in joy to celebrate their victory. We began a new phase in our national life in the midst of hope and good will. It is time now for us to take a close look at the performance of the elected democratic government in dealing with some of the important national issues.

Let us take up the field of our foreign relations. I would be the first one to recognize at the very outset that it is often not possible to list foreign policy successes. Conduct of a country's foreign relations is a complex and continuing process. In a world full of frietions, conflicts and uncertainties, it may be a success just to stay out of trouble. I have noted elsewhere that the post-cold war world is neither stable nor peaceful. New alignments are replacing the earlier groupings. Competition and rivalry in the economic and commercial fields are getting intensified. The situation thus calls for alertness, careful study and planning but also a clear sense of direction.

I have no doubt that our diplomats both at home and abroad are most hard working, and given the opportunities and leadership, they can perform well. But has the government been able to give a sense of direction to our foreign policy? I have followed the matter closely, at least for the last one year, and the list of successes is rather modest. The government has been, for example, able to get involved in a number of peace keeping operations of the United Nations. It is a plus point for the government. Our armed forces get some experience as a result, and we earn some goodwill.

Second, we got elected to some of the elective bodies of the UN. The actual impact of membership of these bodies on our interests is limited, at

Third, our bilateral relations with a few countries seem to have improved. In parof issues where our performance far below what is desirable. Here is the check list:

1. The Rohingya refugee

problem still remains unre-2. Our relation with India, a major factor in our external relations, according to the admission of our Foreign

Minister, is "chilly". 3. The western countries. who have provided us with much needed economic assistance and who have stood by us in times of national calamities. are reportedly unhappy with us due to the alleged use of "coercion" in sending back the Rohingya refugees.

4. The United nations, normally helpful and supportive of all member states, has publicly expressed its displeasure at our handling of the refugee issue.

of the government. A resoluneighbour was officially spon-Prime Minister had paid a

passed on the spur of the moment it must have been discussed in the highest quarters tion directed against a friendly sored. Only ten months ago the goodwill visit to India in order, one presumes, to promote our bilateral relations. By holding the SAARC summit the government intended to further strengthen our cooperation with our neighbours including India. What do we see instead?

Let us take a close look at the government's handling of the issue.

The destruction of the Babri mesque was not just a case of wanton vandalism committed by a band of religious fanatics it was and organized assault on the constitution of India. It will not doubt test the commit-

formulation and guidance. For example, a lot of hard work was put in by the Foreign Office officials in here that it is quite normal, among friendly countries, to exchange views or convey concerns when events in one country cause repercussions in This, in my view, should the other but this is done dishave been adequate as a reaccreetly and in the course of tion to a tragic event in a confider tial diplomatic conneighbouring country. We tacts. In this case the governought to have kept in mind the ment ignored what was only multi-faceted relation that we normal prudence to keep in happen to have with our view the larger interests of the neighbour including unfinished country. Indian reaction to the negotiations of the sharing of resolution was sharp and even the water resources of the harsh but predictable. In a common rivers. The SAARC similar situation Bangladesh summit should also have figwould have also reacted in the ured in our calculations. It was same way. important to preserve the climate for a normal dialogue with India. Ignoring these considerations we went ahead for a debate in the Parliament. While this could not possibly help the Indian Muslims or

I have commented in earher articles about the grave ertor of judgement committed by the government in signing an agreement, with the military junta of Myanmar, in which the UN was denied any role. The Foreign Minister could ask himself a simple question: Why did these refugees leave their hearth and home? Obviously it was due to lack of a sense of security. Therefore, unless their security is assured they are not ltkely to go back. The best way and perhaps the only way to inspire confidence in the minds of these refugees is to ensure the presence of the UN on the other side of the border. Any agreement with Myanmar without this condition was a mistake and Bangladesh is still paying for

It is a matter of regret that in the last two years the government has managed to cause serious misunderstanding with the UN and its refugee agency of the Rohingya issue and in the process tarnish the image of Bangladesh. The western countries have expressed their concern about the use of "coercion" in dealing with these refugees. While we all want these refugees to go back as soon as possible we cannot but deplore the impression created abroad that Bangladesh is not adhering to the basis humanitarian principles. To sum up, the record of this government in the field of external relations raises doubts whether the interests of the nation are being properly served by the policies that are

this mistake.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

5. The mistake made in clause 11 of the joint communique with india threatens us with the prospect of further pressure for push-in across the border in the future.

6. Despite two attempts, the government has failed to hold the seventh SAARC summit. The first postponement, in all fairness, was due to an event beyond the government's control but the second one was mainly due to the inept handling of the issue. As if this was not enough, we got embroiled in an acrimonious public

shouting match with India. This is a long list indeed. One is tempted to attribute these diplomatic debales to inexperience. The latest episode shows that it is more than that it is the political direction of foreign policy which seems to be responsible for landing us in these difficulties. The resolution in the Parliament on the Babri mosque could not have been

ment of the ruling Congress party and indeed the Indian elite of all political hues to the policy of secularism. This happens to be a basic policy of their country. The internal cohesion and unity of India will also depend on how its leaders handle this crists. More than a hundred million Muslims of India are too big a community to be sidelined. But it is hard to see why Bangladesh should get involved in this difficult domestic problem of India. Have not we enough problems of our own? Of course, it is understandable that the people of Bangladesh cannot but be deeply distresses at the destruction of an ancient mosque with historical associations. Their religious sentiments were deeply hurt. They expressed, quite naturally and spontaneously, their horror and disgust at this heinous crime. Statements were issued by almost all the political par-

ties condemning the destruc-

Short of the use of the word "Condemnation" the resolution adopted by the House went as far as it could go in getting the same result. It advised India how to handle its responsibilities towards its minorities and called upon the Indian government to undertake certain specific tasks. Why should India accept this kind of unsolicited advice from the Parliament of a foreign country? Would we accept such advice from a neighbour er, indeed from any foreign coun-

try? We would, I am sure, re-

tion of the mosque.

make any constructive contri-

bution to the Babri mosque is-

suc, one can understand the

emotional factor in the deci-

sion. A debate was held and all

sections of the House made

statements condemning the

Hindu fundamentalists of India.

If it was necessary to give vent

to our anger, the debate cer-

tainly served the purpose. But

the government was still not

satisfied it proceeded to spon-

sor and pass a formal resolu-

tion on the subject. In a blatant

show of partisan spirit the res-

olution failed to take note of

the attacks in Bangladesh, as a

reaction to the Babri mosque

episode, on the members of

the minority community and

their places of worship. The

resolution tabled by the

Opposition would have met

this criticism but the govern-

ment chose to ignore it.

Canada's Mulroney Bows out — to a Woman PM?

OLITICS wears out heads of government quickly these days, it scems, at least in Canada. Whereas in earlier years men like Britain's William Ewart Gladstone and West Germany's Konrad Adenauser lasted into their mid-eighties - and in this age Malawi's Dr Kamuzu Banda has survived in power into his nineties - two of Canada's top politicians, the prime minister and his most trusted cabinet minister, also a former PM, have just

politics. Brian Mulroney resigned after eight and a half years as Canada's prime minister on Februay 24, four weeks short of turning 54. A few days earlier Joe Clark, also 53, who was briefly prime minister in 1979 and was supplanted as leader of the Progressive Conservatives by Mulroney in 1983, said he would not run for a seat in parliament in the federal elections later this

announced they are leaving

Two men have carried the main burden of government since Mulroney swept into power in 1984. Clark, solidly loyal to the man who took his place as leader, travelled the world energetically for seven years as External Affairs Minister, working to bring democracy to South Africa through Commonwealth committees and to build up trading links with Malaysia and other

southeast Asian countries. Then he took on a tougher job still. As Constitutional Affairs Minister, he tried to reconcile all the claims of francophone Quebcers, of western Canadians and of the country's one million native people, for special treatment.



McDougall

Seasoned in foreign affairs

and Indian peoples of Canada.

successful prime minister and,

while not the intellectual equal

of his Liberal predecessor from

Quebec, Pierre Trudeau, he

gained as much praise abroad,

among other heads of govern-

Commonwealth and

Francophonie.

ment' in Europe, the

He led Canada into full

membership of the

Organization of American

States. He pressed the cause of

multi-party democratic gov-

ernments at the Harare sum-

mit of Commonwealth leaders

Brian Mulroney was a more

Campbell No 'Red Tory'.

He failed when the complicated proposals in the Charlottetown Accord were rejected in a national referendum in October 1992. The respect he won for his quiet patience and transparent honesty hardly compensated for the lack of success in solving Canada's constitutional riddle. His wife, Maureen McTeer is a bustling Ottawa lawyer. So the guess is he will not return to his native Alberta, but stay in capital and try in one way or another to bring to fruition the promise made in the Accord of self-government for the inuit

- perhaps too forcefully for the taste of Robert Mugabe. He managed to keep the respect of western European leaders while extricating Canadian troops from NATO service in Germany.

Clyde Sanger writes from Ottawa

At home, his record is not as highly regarded. He has been seen as an uncritical camp-follower of United States presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush. The image widely remembered is of Reagan and Mulroney, both of Irish descent, warbling the old song, "When Irish eyes are smiling," at the 'Shamrock' summit they held in March 1986 in Quebec-

Two years later, the two leaders signed the US-Canada Free Trade agreement, and Canadian eyes have been smiling about it at all. As many as 350,000 manufacturing jobs have disappeared with plant closures of factories relocating south of the border as tariffs were reduced. The government blames these losses on the effects of world recession; but although the economy is recovering, unemployment has not come down. Also, the Conservative government's de- cision to introduce a controversial 7 per cent Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 1990 couldn't have come at a worse time for most Canadians.

Mulroney was also worn down by trying to demolish the separatist movement in Quebec. Stung by the defection of a close Cabinet friend, Lucien Bouchard, who formed the secessionist Bloc Quebecois, he was frustrated by the failure of two provincial legislatures to ratify the 1990 Meech Lake Accord which Quebec had accepted.

In interviews after his resignation Mulroney dwelt bitterly on this setback, and put the blame on Clyde Wells for going back on a promise to put the accord to a vote. Premier Wells replied curtly, "He is rewriting history." So Mulroney is leaving office with typical belligerence.

A Conservative leadership convention will take place in mid-June, and at present the favourite to succeed Mulroney is the defence minister Kim Campbell. If she wins, she will be Canada's first woman prime minister. Other prospects include Trade Minister Michael Wilson, External Affairs Minister Barbara McDougall, and Environment Minister

Jean Charest. Wilson, 55, has the support of the Toronto business community, but his association with the GST and the Free Trade Agreement may prove to be a handicap with some voters. McDougall, 56, former vice-president of a securities firm, has also served as Minister of State for Finance.

more than one reason.

Dr Mahathir Mohammad.

Prime Minister of Malaysia,

Charets, the youngest cabinet member at 34, is a Quebecois and a rising star in the party.

At 45, Campbell seems to belong to another generation than Mulroney and Clark. Unusually for a native British Columbian, she speaks excel-

Social Credit backbencher in the British Columbia legislature before winning a federal seat in the 1988 election. So she is no 'Red Tory', although in three years as federal justice minister she was respected for her progressive legislation and

She is an intelligent and thoughtful speaker, and is not afraid to shock some people. This was made clear when, for a portrait in book on Canadian women, she posed bare-shouldered holding her legal robes in front of her. "It's wonderful to be a source of humour," was her way of defusing the controversy that followed.

from certain. There will be half-a-dozen plausible candidates, and the 3,000 delegates at the convention are likely to be on the more conservative, and less progressive, wing of the party. — GEMINI NEWS

CLYDE SANGER has worked

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.

Religion-based

politics

Sir, While, for the most part, I've been inclined to ignore the seemingly endless platitudes of your most favoured correspondent, Mr M Zahidul Haque, preferring instead to let him brighten up my day with his royal 'we'-s, I cannot allow him to go unanswered on his letter on the subject of religion-based politics. After the havoc wreaked by the Shibir both in Chittagong and Rajshahi, his

depiction of fundamentalists as a bunch of peaceniks is more than I can swallow. Nor can I take the blood-letting habit of cutting off tendons as part of their 'peaceful' ideology.

Mr Haque would be well advised therefore not to emulate the ostrich. Instead, he should visit these madrasahs where young children of ten and twelve are being taught how to use the bow and arrow - presumably not to despatch messages of peace.

Shaf Rahman Chor Komlapur, Faridpur

Installation of kidney stone crushing machine

Sir, Surgical operation for removing kidney stones was quite common till a few years ago. But after invention of kidney stone crushing machine (Lithotripter) most of the patients prefer to crush the kidney stones instead of undergoing a major operation which involves lot of hazards. Since there is no such facility in Bangladesh, wealthy patients are going to India, Bangkok, Singapore etc for the purpose. In the process the country is losing lot of valuable foreign exchange.

The avoid this, and to have an essential facility installed. the government imported a Lithotripter for PG Hospital quite some time ago. But for some mysterious reasons this ' is still lying idle. It is alleged

that surgeons are reluctant to get the equipment installed because they will lose lot of patients for operation and face loss of income. If it is so and if they are so much influential that they can further delay the installation of the equipment, it is suggested that it may be installed either in Diabetic Hospital or in CMH so that the facility is made available

somewhere in the country. It is apprehended that the machine might rust and lose its efficacy if the installation is delayed further. Will the Ministry of Health look into it?

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury Dhaka Cantt

Democracy power

Sir, The recent despatches of Mr S M Ali datelined Kualalumpur were illuminating and relevant in our context for

since assuming power had been trying to reform the royalty along more democratic lines. The King of Malaysia is an oddity among the world's royalties, being selected from their number for a five-year reign by the country's nine Sultans, and they, in fact, provide a formidable 'board of governors' for Malaysia. Considering the powerful vested interest like royalty, in his long-drawn 'battle' Dr Mahathir has now won the 'decisive round' in stripping the royalties of their traditional immunity from legal prosecution. Dr Mahathir has undoubtedly scaled great heights in his bid to conform the royalty to the democratic

polity - seemingly an irrecon-

ctlable divide. The reason for

his success is fairly obvious.

His stature apart, this was

largely possible because of the strength that democracy alone can provide, and Malaysia is that rarity in South-east Asia, a genuine democracy.

May we hope that our Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia. who is also similarly empowered, would not lag behind in overcoming the hurdles that still stare at the face of the nation, particularly in the economic sphere.

The case of a potential investor from Malaysia referred to in Mr Ali's despatch is hugely disturbing, particularly when Dr Mahathir is making sincere gestures for lifting our lowly economy. One only hopes that the rigmarole of our bureaucracy which inhibits foreign investors are ended beforc long, in national interest.

Syed Badrul Haque Laimatia, Dhaka

Despite several foreign affairs successes, Brian Mulroney, the Canadian Prime Minister, suffered for years with one of the lowest popularity ratings of any Western leader. The announcement that he will step down this summer is likely to boost the strength of his Conservative party, and creates an opportunity for a complete makeover of Canadian lent French. Before training as a lawyer,

being followed.

she studied at the London School of Economics with a focus on political change in the Soviet Union. She and her lawyer sister learned self-reliance as teenagers, when her mother left home to work on boats in the West Indies and the Mediterranean.

She spent two years as a her thoroughness.

However a win for her is far

as a journalist in Britain, Africa and at the United Nations. He is with the North-South Institute in Ottawa.