

We Demand an Inquiry

The three-day Eid and Independence Day holiday of the newspapers has deprived the nation from learning about an incident that we consider to be of tremendous significance in terms of constitutionality of governance and legality of administrative action.

As reported, the police on the night of 25 March, dismantled and carried away the dias set up by the Nirmul Committee for its meeting on the 26th. On the day itself, the police cordoned off the Suhrawardy Uddan and the Ramna Park area where the Nirmul Committee planned to hold its public demonstration.

We would like to raise several questions. Why was the Nirmul Committee prevented from exercising its constitutional rights? The right of freedom of speech, of assembly and of public demonstration are guaranteed by our Constitution.

Then there is the question of public convenience. Cordoning off such a huge area, especially when it included such popular recreational areas like the Shishu Park (Children's Park), Ramna Park, created unmeasurable inconvenience for the public.

We consider the police action to be a violation of the Constitutional rights of the citizens. We therefore demand an immediate inquiry as to the origin of the police action, the legal basis on which it was based, and the reasons for the public assault on prominent public figures.

Credit to France

It goes to the credit of the political system of France that the stage is set for what has come to be known as 'co-habitation' between the Socialist President, Francois Mitterrand and the Conservatives-dominated parliament.

Part of the success would lie in the respect for tradition, based on acceptance of constitutional norms. What is more important, there is an unwritten broad-based national consensus, binding most parties, on domestic and external policies.

It has helped the national consensus that the rightist National Front of Jean-Marie Le Pen and the Communist Party secured less than 10 per cent of popular vote, with the two Green parties emerging stronger, winning 15 percent of votes.

This is, in effect, the multi-party system at work, a system in which organisations, like the two Green groupings, are not fighting to come to power as such. Instead, they are more interested in educating the public on issues and, through their parliamentary representation, acting as lobbies in moulding official policies.

Here is a lesson for a developing country like Bangladesh, one that believes in a multi-party parliamentary democracy, to learn from.

This hardly means that with all its strength, the political scene as we see in France today is without its hidden power struggle. There is some inevitable tension, almost bordering on bitterness, between the two mainstream opposition parties' leaders — former President Valery Giscard d'Estaing, 66, and his former prime minister, Jacques Chirac, 60 — with both wistfully looking at the presidency in 1995 when the present term of Mitterrand, now 76, ends.

I FTAR parties have been a regular part of our political and social landscape during the month of Ramadan. Lavish parties were arranged by the highest dignitaries of the state for selected guests. Ministers, members of parliament, government officials, journalists, lawyers, doctors, businessmen, diplomats and other worthy citizens (of course selected along party lines) were invited to these officially organized parties.

The opposition political parties, including the Awami League, did not want to be left out. They joined the spree, on a big scale. They felt that a comparison with the government's generous hospitality would cast them in poor light. Besides, they used their own private funds and therefore their parties fell in a somewhat different category.

Sooner or later, the people are going to ask embarrassing

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Questions. Somehow the issue has not yet been addressed seriously. The press is wary of commenting on a practice which carries a religious cover. But should we not look at it from the point of view of those illustrious beings — the common men and women — of the country? How do they view these glittering state affairs? Do these parties serve the interests of the nation? One can appreciate if an Iftar party or indeed any party is arranged for a visiting foreign dignitary or if it is linked directly with a state activity but these are not occasions of that nature.

Millions of people in the country living at or below the subsistence level are expected to take satisfaction from the fact that their leaders are feasting in Dhaka at their cost in the interest of their welfare in the past one used to hear the word 'austerity' from time to time but under the present democratic government this seems to have gone out of fashion. The use of public funds for one's personal religious purposes seems to have entered our political culture.

personal sacrifice in the performance of such religious duties. Where is the personal sacrifice when state funds are used to advertise one's religious devotion? The hypocrisy inherent in this practice has not escaped public attention. I do not know why the BNP government is so insensitive as to go on with these questionable traditions with such gusto. The ordinary people certainly know that these promotional parties in the garb of religious observance, held at the cost of the taxpayer, is not an acceptable Islamic practice.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

I have often wondered why questions are not raised by political quarters about the moral and legal justification of using public funds for this kind of activities.

The elite of this country believes that what is good for them is good for the country. Perhaps that is why the practice of entertaining each other at the cost of the public exchequer does not appear to them to be unethical at all. The use of religious cover gives them an additional measure of safety against public criticism.

Those who are fortunate enough to have already moved up the social and economic ladder to become a member of the ruling class are too busy in taking care of themselves. A very large slice of the education grant is directed to the higher education. The primary schools for the children of the peasants continue to be housed in thatched cottages often without a roof or a wall or other elementary amenities.

other urban centres. It is a fairly large class. People with education and white collar job or a businessman or a professional man or just anybody with some school education or good family background has access to this class. It is not an exclusive class and yet it can be so self-serving. The whole political as well as economic system is organized for their benefit. Take the education system, for example. We have had a modern education system for over a hundred years but the percentage of literate people has not increased a

great deal during this long period. Despite a liberal budget allocation on education the percentage of literacy is stuck somewhere around thirty. The rate of female literacy is undoubtedly much higher. The reasons are not unknown. But one reason that is often ignored is the absence of genuine commitment on the part of the elite to universal education.

The upper classes could not be bothered if the children of peasants go without schooling. Why should we not have a primary school in every village or a vocational school in every Union? This, in their judgement, would be too expensive though they are most vocal in demanding new universities. The children of the upper classes must have 'higher education' carrying both prestige and high income. Thus the nation's priority is determined by the perception of the priority of the upper class.

It is interesting how the members of the urban upper or middle class — people who actually run the machinery of the government — look at economic issues. They are very happy if the price of rice is low. Reflecting their wishes, the government makes every possible effort to keep the price low even if the farmer's income falls below the cost of production. Public opinion, for the government means the opinion of this class of people. Every thing is fine for them if the price of rice or fish or vegetables is cheap. What happens to the farmer or the fisherman is no one's concern. Indeed the peasants and the fishermen, in the perception of these privileged classes, exist simply to serve them. Such an attitude often determines government policies. When a project is launched for the ostensible benefit of the rural poor, the main interest is around the white collar jobs created by the project rather than its substance.

The government talks about 'dal bhat' for the poor. One is certainly entitled to ask: why 'dal bhat' for the poor and lavish Iftar parties for the rich? This is such an old slogan that

it hardly fires anybody's imagination. I believe Sher-e-Bangla Fazul Hossain used this populist slogan in his days. Today the people are not likely to be satisfied with such a hackneyed phrase. They would expect a programme with specific targets for the alleviation of poverty in the country. A slogan is no substitute for a well thought-out and honestly and efficiently implemented programme. Instead, the people are told, time and again, that certain unpatriotic forces are conspiring to thwart the development efforts. But how long can one conceal a policy of drift and aimlessness by fulminating against political opponents?

These Iftar parties expose the hollowness of the so-called dal bhat policy. There is a fundamental mental barrier between those who are privileged to rule the country and those who are ruled. One may think that I have digressed from my original premise but a moment's reflection will show that the Iftar parties bring this hiatus in our society out into the open. To my mind, these parties are a symbol of the chasm separating the urban official community which is ruling the country and the ordinary people of this unhappy land toiling from morning till night to eke out a living. These parties are also an example of how religion is used for political purposes. Awami League ought to consider the practice in the light of its commitment to secular values. As for the government, the least that a responsible government can do is to put an end to this extravagance and unbecomingly feasting at the taxpayer's expense.

In fact the public has a right to know how much of the taxpayer's money has been spent for these Iftar parties during the month of Ramadan.

Western Creditors should Resolve Debt Crisis Now

CONSIDER these numbers. At the end of 1991, the developing countries' total debt stock stood at US\$1.3 trillion, with the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean owing a third of the total.

Roughly half of the long-term debt is held by official sources (meaning multilateral and bilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund). Private creditors account for the remaining amount.

This average, however, masks regional variations. In sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, private creditors hold only about a quarter of total debt whereas in Latin America, they account for two-thirds. Measures of the debt burden also highlight regional differences. The ratio of interest payments on debt to the value of exports ranges from 2.1 per cent for the developing countries of Europe and the Mediterranean to 16.4 per cent for Latin America and the Caribbean. Total outstanding debt as a proportion of gross national product ranges from about 30 per cent for South Asia to more than 100 per cent for sub-Saharan Africa.

Collectively, the developed world has the resources, institutions and mechanisms to resolve the issue more expeditiously than has been seen to date. By one estimate, 350 distinct proposals to deal with less developed country (LDC) debt had been put forward by the end of 1989.

As a result, the combination of realised piecemeal solutions — ranging from forgiveness and abrogation on the one hand, to more choreographed re-schedulings on the other — have changed the nature of the 'debt problem' today.

A little over 10 years ago, in August 1982, Mexico announced it could not make in-

terest payments on the US\$80 billion it owed to external creditors. It was the first major debtor country to default on its loans.

It marked the beginning of a large debt crisis. In the next 10 years, more developing countries stopped or delayed interest payments on their debts.

Given that the bulk of the problem is concentrated in Latin America (and there in the three largest countries), it is not surprising that the most concerted efforts at a managed resolution of the debt crisis have focused on this region.

In Chile, a combination of severely disciplinary macro-economic policies, an export boom, and the innovative use of such measures as the exchange of debt for stock reduced the country's debt burden. In almost all the countries where the debt burden has been reduced through concerted official action, direct and indirect benefits have followed. Direct benefits include the reduction in a country's debt burden — 35 per cent debt relief for Mexico, and up to 62 per cent relief for Costa Rica.

The indirect benefits include lower domestic interest rates (as pressure on the exchange rate eases), encouraging higher levels of domestic investment and the return of foreign direct investment and capital flight to the country.

Although not all countries — and particularly not the smaller ones — can expect to achieve the same success as Mexico and Chile, this scenario must be compared with the alternative of continuing in arrears, snubbing the international financial community or dragging out negotiations over long periods of time.

The situation in Latin America has improved dramati-

cally. In Asia, the crisis was always confined to a few countries. But in Africa, where most countries are afflicted with unmanageable debt, the crisis continues unabated.

Nigeria, by virtue of its size, always seems to dominate the scene in sub-Saharan Africa, and the same is true on the debt front. Although its debt is much more weighted to private sources than in other countries in the region, its general predicament is very similar.

Judged by the raw numbers, the multilateral institutions may not seem like big players in the debt game. Although the situation varies in individual countries, less than a fifth of the developing countries' total debt stock is due to the multilaterals.

However, this belies the multilaterals' true power and role in the resolution of the debt crisis. Their loans carry with them a 'seal of approval' which then leads to lending from other sources.

The input of the multilaterals — in particular the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank — is critical before, during and after debt negotiations. Furthermore, for the smaller and/or poorer countries, especially in Africa, the multilaterals hold the bulk of the debt.

To alleviate the situation for the debtor countries, a number of changes have been suggested. The IMF could increase its lending resources by selling its stocks of gold (an idea endorsed by the organis-

ation itself). Grace and amortisation periods could be lengthened, providing some relief to debtors without affecting the income — and thus the credit ratings — of the multilaterals. A larger proportion of the multilaterals' (substantial) profits could be ploughed back into a debt relief operation.

Clearly, needy countries could be identified and given meaningful debt relief, thus easing the burden where it is most severe, without affecting the multilaterals' balance sheets. With or without the multilaterals, there exists an international market for capital, where suppliers (creditors) and consumers (debtors) interact to arrive at a price (the interest rate) and quantity.

On the demand side, the restructuring of the economies of Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (the former Soviet Union) will put greater pressure on the pool of available capital. This pool will shrink, as the two principal providers, Germany (owing to unification) and Japan (due to an aging population) generate smaller surpluses.

At the same time, other factors are operating to increase available savings and reduce the demand for them, including lower military spending. The overall gap between planned savings and desired investment is unlikely to be very large, and is even less likely to be a critical factor in determining the prospects of

individual countries. Instead, more attention should be paid to domestic savings rates, the ones that national governments have more influence over anyway. But, as is often the case, the weakest countries are the most vulnerable to the international context.

This, then, is the debt crisis as we see it today. One common link emerges and that is how much of the solution still lies within the West's grasp.

Granted, as stable political environment and sensible economic policies in developing countries are prerequisites for success. But they are only necessary, not sufficient, conditions for success.

The rest depends on creditor countries and institutions seeking a solution — through flexibility during negotiations, adapting institutions to changing realities, and recognising the highly integrated nature of today's world.

Some issues remain outstanding. It is not entirely clear whether the headlong rush of the international community into the East is foresight and recognition of the opening of a 'new frontier,' or the start of yet another 'debt crisis.'

And what of the countries that are not big enough, devel-

oped enough or strategically important enough to command the attention of the international financiers?

Finally, even if the current crisis were thoroughly resolved, are the structures now in place to prevent this from happening again?

Ultimately, the debt issue has two dimensions. First, the existing situation remains to be completely resolved. Using the generally accepted criterion of 'return of creditworthiness,' the debt crisis is not over for many least developed countries (LDCs) (and particularly those in Africa, as they are still not 'bankable' in the eyes of the international financial community).

Second, measures must be taken to ensure such a crisis does not happen again.

No doubt, a properly functioning market must have winners and losers. Not every loan that is made can be collected, and not every delinquent should expect charity.

That said, more work needs to be done to design responsive institutions and to develop mechanisms for the efficient provision of information to the markets and to the players involved, before one could say with confidence that a debt crisis of this magnitude could never recur.

— Dephneus Asta

To the Editor...

Zakat fund

Sir, Almost in every year, in the month of Ramadan, Zakat money is asked to be deposited in the national Zakat fund.

To make the step more meaningful to the people, I think a full programme to utilize the Zakat money needs to be given to the people's knowledge through the national dailies and ITV. As for example, if the concerned authority intends to rehabilitate a section of our slum dwellers with the fund by making low cost houses in different areas, I think the step will yield better result as this can be a process of gradual solution of this serious problem.

So the actual programme of the fund and its utilization need to be known to all before starting the collection. If this is implemented, people will get more and more interest to pay Zakat money there. Instead of solving one or two persons' problem haphazardly, I think the concerned authority can

identify one major problem of our ill-fated people to solve in a systematic process.

Motius Samad Chowdhury Assistant Manager, Phultola Tea Estate, Sylhet

Vegetable garden

Sir, The vegetable cultivation model initiated by the Deptt. of Agricultural Extension, BAU is a practical one and should be expanded throughout the country. If all the schools can set up their respective model vegetable garden, it will not only strengthen the students' practical knowledge about vegetable farming but will also help in popularising vegetable growing among the people.

The Ministry of Education should take appropriate measures to set up such model vegetable gardens in all the Govt. and private schools and colleges. Meanwhile care should be taken so that establishment of vegetable garden may not squeeze the land for

play ground. Every school should have a play ground because playing and physical exercise is also a part of education and very much essential for building up healthy citizens.

M Zahidul Haque Asstt. Prof. BAU, Dhaka

Scarcity of water

Sir, We, approximately 1000 people living at Sardar Goli (beside north lane of Fakirerpool water tank), Fakirerpool, Motijheel, in this metropolis, have fallen helpless victims to insufficient and irregular water supply by WASA for the last two months.

The scarcity of water supply has reached to its worst peak very recently following the so-called renovation of the water pipe line of the area by WASA.

The unavailability of required quantity of water is forcing us to refrain from the most urgent day-to-day works

like bathing, cooking, washing of clothes and utensils and even responding to the call of nature in due course of time.

Many of the tenants of the area, who have been living here for quite a few years, have started vacating their flats owing to this serious problem.

Therefore, we humbly request and urge the higher authorities concerned for an immediate action to ensure sufficient and regular supply of water in the area and help the residents to live in peace.

Mohammad Siddiqur Rahman 114, Fakirerpool, Dhaka

Kuldip Nayar

Sir, Mr Kuldip Nayar's reputation is formidable. His piece in The Daily Star of 10th March was as good as ever. Unfortunately, it did not end well. His concluding paragraph smelt South Bloc plus naivety.

Rais-ul-Haq Dhaka

OPINION

Get the Killer Drivers

When two heavy vehicles clash head-on on the highway, it is not due to mechanical fault, but human error. In the press reports we read that the driver's 'escape' most of the time. During head-on crash they should be killed along with a number of innocent passengers, but such news is not prominently displayed in the headlines.

A big publicity campaign should be mounted by the traffic police and the front organisations of the political parties against bad driving. Killer drivers should not be tolerated by the society. A strict safety campaign should be mounted and continued 365 days in the year, involving not only the regulating agencies, but the lakhs of people who can afford to attend the innumerable political meetings called by the politicians who are supposed to run our country, and not run the administration, which counts in everyday life.

The PR wing of the Police have to be strengthened not only with professionally trained personnel, but also psychologist-consultants to guide the campaign. The public must be fed up of reading the daily reports on vehicle accidents (and hijacking). The ministers and the Opposition are mum on the issue (and many other issues which need tackling on a war-footing).

Why the public are not informed how many bad drivers have been punished by the court? Such news and investigative reporting are absent in our press. What the vehicle

owners' association have to say on the frequent accidents involving buses and trucks? Why such accidents are so low involving the private cars?

Here we are facing a social problem — the bad habit of driving fast and recklessly. Has some academician found out how much this habit is related to the level of education of the driver? Is it not a sign of undisciplined mind? Over-taking has become way of with the professional drivers, who are generally educated up the primary level or are secondary school fall-outs.

It needs a lot of experience, foresight and judgement to overtake another vehicle on the road. Recklessness is a disease of the untrained mind. Here even a good driver cannot prevent accidents, because the other party might be making the mistake (such as a rickshaw driver). Therefore the well trained driver has to be alert all the time to save his own vehicle in the first place, for no fault of his own!

Since we are unable to tackle this continuing killer driver menace, let us get a few experts from abroad to train up the local regulating agencies, after drawing up a master plan of re-organization. It is fatal to rely on common sense and amateurish half-baked experience with limited radius of consciousness.

First we must know what we don't know, before we become aware of what we know.

A Mawaz Dhaka