Dhaka, Wednesday, June 9, 1993

Distortion, and the Overkill

There are at least three issues arising out of the debates in the parliament on Monday that need to be commented upon. First is that of distortion of the parliamentary roundup programme on the BTV. Second is the comment of the Information Minister about the state owned media. Finally, the decision of the opposition to stage an indefinite walkout. Taken together these three issues collectively reflect the level to which our democratic practice has fallen. It also gives us a rare glimpse of our political figures behind their public veneer, and reveals the thoughts they harbour about important issues facing the country.

There is no question that the BTV's parliamentary roundup programme was a gross distortion of what occurred and a travesty of truth. The fact that the write-up was done by someone belonging to the ruling party's organ — Dainik Dinkal — makes us hesitant to attribute the folly to professional misjudgement or to mere innocent error. We will, however, wait for the enquiry findings to come out before we give our definite view about who is to blame. But we would like to reiterate the point that this paper has made on several earlier occasions. The incident like the one that occurred on Monday is not the malaise, but mere symptom of the deep perversion that permeates our government-run media. Instead of being information vehicles, they have been turned into propaganda instruments. The supreme irony being that while the public surely and repeatedly rejected propaganda in the past, yet successive governments have kept on using our radio and TV for the same. As we have so often said that our people, illiterate or unused to free media as they may be, have never fallen for propaganda, and have always shown an uncanny ability to distinguish between facts and lies. It is the people in power who apparently fail to make that distinction and commit the same folly over and over again. The view expressed by the Information Minister

that the "electronic media is government property and it would be run the way government wants it to" is perhaps the most absurd of the many controversial statements the minister has so far made. The comment is reflective of an ideological mooring which is dangerous for any leader of a democratic setup to have. We would like to believe that it is not the view of the government, and only that of the minister. In which case the Leader of the House, or her deputy, should say so to remove the public misgiving that has been created. Such a step is necessary because the minister's comment reveals an insensitivity to the distinction between government and the state and even more serious lack of appreciation for the particular institution of media. TV and the radio are not extensions of government offices and they cannot be run in that manner. This is why journalists employed by the BTV and the radio behave as petty bureaucrats and run these media institutions more on instructions and notes than by following news and events. Then again to tell the members of the parliament to go to court is essentially to give the message that debate on the floor of the House will not have any impact on the mind of either the minister or the treasury bench. Finally, the decision of the opposition to walk

out, is, in our considered opinion, an overkill. A strong opposition like the one we have should not use the 'weapon' of walking out so often, and on such grounds. The opposition is wrong in demanding an immediate punitive action against an individual, for everybody must be given a hearing be fore any action is taken against him or her. It could have staged a one shot walkout - instead of an indefinite one - and waited for the report of the in-

If our parliament has to go through such stormy sessions on trivial issues like a distortion in a TV programme, which is too boring to watch anyway. then how and when will we have time to address the critical economic and development issues?

Language on Billboards

A Reuter report from Jakarta says that the Indonesian government is almost certain to pass soon an executive order concerning the use of foreign language. Some people involved in advertising may have to face penalties of both fine and incarceration under this order. What triggered the quick governmental response is a billboard on a Jakarta highway on which foreign language was used.

The Bengalee people take a lot of pride in the struggle that was waged for the proper recognition of their language, Bangla. And it cannot be denied that the independence of Bangladesh is a result of the Language Movement of 1952. The more thoughtful of those that love Bangla and believe that the problems with the Bengali language and its place in government and society are far from over would find much food for thought in the report. There is no doubt that our vacillations over the language question and our abject failure to make up our mind on the question of Bangla's place in education and official work as well as such an important area as the electronic and print media and advertising has a lot to do with our dismal performance in both the material and cultural spheres.

One thing the Jakarta report must do to the caring type amongst us - shame us into a realisation of our callousness about things like ensuring honour to our language and making apt use of it a matter of prestige and pride. There is perhaps an executive requirement somewhere in the governmental maze that all products on commercial sale must have legends made out in Bengali. This requirement has been responded to more with violations than with compliance as any of the plentiful cartons of cosmetic products would convince one. The less said about the billboards the better. Seeing the neon signs adorning Dhaka's night one would be at a loss to understand as to which one is the foreign language here — English or Bangla? Then there is that abominable practice manifest on the signs that shops and trading houses put up -English, but made out in the Bengali script.

There is a not-too-subtle deliberate and sustained campaign to make class and foreign language synonymous - particularly on television. There has to date no cultural or social action against this demeaning thing which has a positively eroding impact on the national psyche.

Only a self-confident nation, lacking positively in any sense of inferiority, can make the best out of using a foreign language. For historic and many other reasons we shall continue to need a broad and deep cultivation of the English language. That would be possible only when done on a strong foundation of Bengali. Our involvement with English is destined to grow but not at the expense of Bengali in which case we would stand to lose everything including our minds.

Shadow of Blue Star

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

T is now nine years since the Indian army flushed out the militants from the Golden Temple in Amritsar They had converted what is known as the Sikh Vatican into a fortified bastion to defy the law. How the army's Blue Star operation was conducted has been a subject matter of many versions. The most recent one is by Lieutenant General K S Brar, who led the operation. He claims his is "the true" story.

But is it? Brar says that Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the militants leader who blessed the conversion of the temple into an arsenal, "lay dead" in the Akal Takht — the highest scat of the Sikhs which issues edicts on religious matters. 'The Akal Takht," according to Brar, "throughout its five tiers was heavily fortified with a very heavy concentration of automatic weapons. All windows, balconies and other openings had been closed with brick masonry and sandbags with small loopholes through which machines guns were being fired."

Brar says that he had to "employ tanks to neutralise the Akal Takht concrete desences." Only after doing so, his forces went into the building. He also says that when his forces closed in from all directions to enter the Akal Takht, which by then had been partially decimated, their "probing action" was "uncontested."

According to the post mortem report of Bhindranwale's death, there were as many as 42 bullet marks on the lower part of his body. How did Bhindranwale - safely ensconced within the Akal Takht get those bullets? Brar says that his soldiers found him dead on the floor.

It is possible that the sol-

diers, who entered the Akal Takht, sprayed bullets on Bhindranwale's body as soon as they saw it in view of the heavy resistance they had met and the men they had last. If this thesis were to be believed, then why the bullet marks on the lower part of the body? Also, spraying

of bullets is never selective. The post mortem report says that the bullet marks were inflicted after his death. Then how did he die? The rumour soon after Operation Blue Star was that Bhindranwale came out of the Akal Takht following heavy firing at the building. This is confirmed by at least one of the Akali Dal leaders who was then within the premises of the Golden Temple and who was later taken into custody. But why post-death bullet marks?

That Bhindranwale has died is beyond doubt and some of those who have been circulating the story of appearance have been doing so to build a Bhindranwale cult or gather political support for themselves. It appears that the true story of his death is still to come out. At least the government should publish the post mortem report. which forms the part of Amritsar hospital records. Brar's version has only added to the confusion as far as this aspect is concerned.

the militants had put up sierce resistance when the army entered the Golden Temple. But from Brar's book, Operation Blue Star - the true story, 11 comes out clear that the resistance was far greater than recognised so far. Brar himself admits that his four pronged at-

One had always known that

tack was stalled for hours and that "the tanks were finally ordered to start using their main guns to knock down the militant fortifications ..."

Brar claims that not a single round was fired in the direction of Harminder Sahib, the sanctum sanctoram of the temple. He goes to great lengths to praise the jawans for not firing back even when the militants had used certain positions at the Harminder Sahib to fire at them. This is only partly true because when I went to the Golden Temple within a fort-

night of the operation. I counted

scores of bullet marks at the

dome and other places of

Harminder Sahib. It would have

been far better for Brar to admit

that the jawans were only hu-

man and some of them had re-

the first attack was led by

Captain Jasbir Singh Raina,

who had three days earlier en-

tered the temple voluntarily and

sance. He was seriously

wounded and lost one leg. This

example should be an eye

opener for Hindu fundamental

ists who have been less than

generous with their comments

Brar has complained about the

lack of intelligence; he says they

had no prior information about

At many places in his book,

about the Sikh community.

returned safely after reconnais-

Very few people know that

taliated in anger.

the militants, their arms, their positions or designs. Talking to top police officers of those days. now retired. I find that the army considered it below their dignity to take them into their confi-

They claim they had all the information: on the number of militants inside the temple, the arms they possessed and their plans. Their contention is that the recovery of arms after the operation and the emplacements from where the militants fired tally with the information they had collected long before

the operation. Perhaps some

cal side of the problem. Brar is

less convincing. He says that

Indira Gandhi was trying till the

end to find a political solution

to the three issues: (1) imple-

menting the award of Chan-

digarh to Punjab as its capital

and delinking the transfer of

Abohar and Fazilka to Haryana

in lieu: (2) settlement of the

river waters dispute; and, (3)

ing the talks between the gov-

ernment and the Akalis would

bear me out if I say that the

Akalis were willing to accept

something less. Some of us, be-

longing to the Punjab Group,

were summoned by Narasimha

Rao then foreign minister, only

three weeks before Operation

Those who have been follow-

more autonomy for the state.

When it comes to the politi-

day the truth will come out.

tively. The Akalis even went to the extent of accepting the split of Chandigarh between Punjab and Haryana along a 70-30 ratio. The government dilly dallied Narastmha Rao became elu-

Blue Star to evolve a formula

sive - because it had already decided to go for the military operation In any case, do these de-

mands suggest secession from India? Should their support by the Akalis have been considered an act of treachery? If the basis of the build up by the Akalis and Bhindranwale was merely that, why the situation was allowed to develop to the extent where the army action had become inevitable? The nation should reassess the distnformation that New Delhi and the Congress party had been disseminating on the Punjab problem, even if the promised and repromised 'package' remains clusive.

Now that the militancy has been curbed and peace has more or less returned to Punjab, there should be some way to pick up the thread from where it was broken before the operation. The three points mentioned are important. But the fourth point, the punishment of those who massacred 3,000 Sikhs in Delhi in 1984 following Mrs Gandhi's assassination, is more important. By all means a special court should be constituted to pun-

which would be acceptable to say that many among them and the Akalis. They had agreed to their families lost their lives refer the river water dispute and while fighting the militants. But the case of more autonomy of there are innumerable examples the state. (Anandpur Sahib where they have lost their cool, resolution) to the Supreme killed the people indiscrimi-Court and a tribunal respecnately and have inflicted the same type of brutalities which the militants have. There have been false encounters and several custodial deaths. The state cannot be guilty of violating human rights, however diabolical the acts of the terrorists.

10 to 12 years.

Only the other day a Sikh couple was killed in the security of their home in Calcutta. The Punjab police has been blamed for this tragedy. West Bengal police have supported this thesis and reportedly said that the Punjab police had no business to interfere with the law and order concerning another state. The Punjab police which hogs headlines every other day has kept quiet. Making them accountable may be the founding stone for the structure that needs to be built in Punjab.

ish all those who have killed the

innocent in Punjab in the last

the credit for bringing peace to

the state. They can justifiably

The Punjab police can take

And by this time the Akalis should have realised that their parochial politics has not led them or the state to any point of advantage. They have only communalised it. The tragedy is that the Akalis have never learned from history and they continue to persist with such policies as accentuate differences between them and the rest of India. Take for example the latest directive of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) headed by G S Tohra, that August 15 (Independence Day) and January 26 (Republic Day) will not be treated as holidays.

The UN Faces Credibility Crisis

HE United Nations is caught in a credibility crisis as many of its peace-making missions are unravelling. The world body's prestige

and clout have been rising since the end of the Cold War. The decision of the United States government to make its troops available for humanitarian efforts in Somalia is a quantum leap in the history of United Nations operations.

But with calls for UN intervention around the globe multiplying, the international group is reaching the limits of what it can do with its current organization and mandate.

The UN found it easier to confront a lone country such as Iraq — on which UN actions

AR ES SALAAM — With

no bankruptcy law to

protect them, heavily

indebted Third World countr-

ies are finding it very difficult

Northern lenders.

to make loan payments to their

country showed valid grounds

for its failure to make pay-

ment, this was taken into

consideration by the lender.

The country's economic condi-

tion was assessed and if it was

found to be sufficiently grave,

money is, after all, what banks

do. The interest they charge to

borrowers is used to pay inter-

est to depositors. If the busi-

ness for which money is bor-

rowed fails, the borrower de-

faults and the bank loses

This is the natural opera-

Germany, for example, was

tion of banks. Whether the

borrower is an individual or a

nation, the principle of risk is

heavily in debt after World War

I because it was required to

pay war reparations. When its

economy began to fail, how-

ever, and it could no longer

pay its debts, they were writ-

Today, things are different.

There is a new development in

the relationship between bor-

rower and lender which I find

slightly amazing. Powerful len-

der nations do not like to hear

that a borrower nation can't af-

the same.

Calculating risk and lending

the loans were written off.

In the past, if an indebted

sive, action-oriented body", one

force the borrower to pay

It is no longer a matter of

The banks of the North

business but of politics: one

country tells another it must

repay what it borrowed from

claim they are running a risk

in lending to countries of the

South, but this is not true. The

powerful nations pressure the

International Monetary Fund

(IMF) to ensure that the

southern countries repay their

debts, or they will never be

granted loans from anyone in

And so we are forced to pay

Tanzania is paying.

Northern countries have re-

duced or written off some of

our debt, but very little. Our

foreign debt must be about

US\$6 billion. That comes with

about ten percent interest or

US\$600 million, more than

Tanzania's total yearly exports.

How is it possible for my coun-

It's absurd even to think

try to pay that much?

the world again.

and pay.

Debt be Not Proud

Former Tanzania President Julius Nyerere

writes that the South should unite and use

its immense collective debt as a bargaining

chip to draw the Northern banks into collec-

ford to pay its debt. Now they about. If we were dealing with

tive debt negotiation — or be bled to death.

UN official said, "They are feeling their way and are not totally equipped to do so many things"

According to Boutros-Ghali,

economic and social programme, most of the burden for broad operational peace-keeping decisions at UN headquarters in New York rests on one undersecretary general and his staff of about two dozen.

A recent report by Boutros-Ghali listed certain shortcom ings of the current UN operation in Bosnia. The report said that "many of the freshly arrived units in the area had no experience or training for peacekeeping operations." The report further said that "the troops laboured under a complicated

The powerful nations approach them individually and refuse to deal with them collectively For instance, Tanzania's fi nance minister goes to Paris alone and is told to sign for his country to receive further loans. He is simple following instructions.

payments are the cause of widespread suffering and I believe these countries should refuse to make them.

The choice is a simple one tant than repaying a loan.

But now we find ourselves forced to pay. Individually

The South Commission has recommended that these countries unite on this issue against the powerful northern lenders. If they can gang up on

The indebted countries of the South should speak out to gether, in one voice, and tell the North that we are suffer ing. But this has yet to happen.

by ASM Nurunnabi

were supported by a consensus of Security Council members than to heal hate-laden internal conflicts where it can become enmeshed in local politics, or face accusations that it is failing to enforce its resolutions even-handedly. Despite highflown ideas about a "new world order", the reality is that the UN remains an instrument of last resort. "The new international order has presented us with an incredible number and variety of problems," said one Security Council diplomat. "In a few years the UN has gone from a debating society to an aggres-

the United Nations is currently involved in 13 peace-keeping operations spanning the globe with a total of 53,000 troops under its command, at a cost of more than \$3 billion in 1992 alone. The organization has undertaken more peace-keeping efforts in the last four years than in the first 43 years of its

But while the UN bureaucracy is notoriously laden with

realistic lenders, they would

have already written off

Tanzania's debts. But this is

not the case, and the country

Keynes once said, "If your owe

a bank 1,000 shillings, that is

your problem, but if you owe it

one billion shillings, then it's

According to World Bank

figures, the debt of the Third

World as of 1992 was over

US\$1.5 trillion. The projected

service on that debt for 1992

Commission thought that be-

cause we are all indebted to

northern banks, the countries

of the South could unite and

demand to deal collectively

with the North on the question

of debt. The fact that we are all

in debt is indeed a strength

which we could use to draw

The poor countries are afraid.

But we have not done this.

the North into a dialogue.

The members of the South

The British economist

remains in dire straits.

the bank's problem."

Not any more.

was US\$161 billion.

What is the solution? These

If I had a few coins in my pocket and my child was crying from hunger, would I give the coins to a lender rather than buy a loaf of bread? Who would do that? It would be a sin. If you are in debt and can pay, you should pay. But if you cannot pay, you should refuse, because eating is more impor-

in a ridiculous situation in which the indebted poor are pressured, what can they do?

us, shouldn't we do the same?

Julius Nyerere is presently

the chairperson of the South Commission.

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.

Mid-term election

Sir, Jatiya Party has been off and on demanding holding of

to the Jatiya Sangsad. By

also apprehensive that if the

Jatiya Party leaders and others who are making a demand for mid-term election know well about the financial involvement and they also know that people have given a clear verdict to BNP for ruling the country for five years. They command majority in Sangsad and still there is demand for mid-term election from vested quarters for obvious reasons, because going to power is their only motto and in a general election they will try that by any means - fair or foul.

Unfortunately our public leaders seem to maintain douonly bring miseries to common

On myths and facts

Daily Star remark in its editorial of the 30th May "the observance of Zia's death anniversary today may well be largely ritualistic" and then plunge into columns and columns of the stuff yourself. It seems to me that one should neither speak ill of the dead nor ignore facts while obituarising. However, what's done is done. I would only like to inform our honourable Information Minister that his job is to pass on information, not fabricate them as in the case of the headline on Page 2 (which, by the way, seems lately to have been reserved for the honourable gentleman) 'Azam fruit of Awami-Jamaat collaboration', nor suppress them, as in the case of the Biman accident and BTV.

Shaf Rahman,

inflexible as well as the psychological strain on operational dilemmas between overaction and underaction, with limited military capability."

Citing such limitations, Boutros-Ghali has called on the Security Council to rethink and rebuild the United Nations' peace-keeping operation. He wants UN troops to enforce UNforged peace agreements rather than stand by and watch when they fall apart. He hopes to persuade member nations, such as the United States to earmark and train troops from their armed forces to respond rapidly to the calls from the world body. But it seems that the Council is so preoccupied with pressing crises that it has had little time to consider broad reforms. But the UN Secretary-General seems determined to show that his organization does not become the dustbin of the world's insoluble problems without the necessary political backing. In fact, the wider reality is that peace-keeping operations can never be confused with warmaking capabilities and cannot provide for long a fig leaf to

pared to consider other options. Secondly, peace-keeping operations must remain an expression of collective security and must be financed internation-

governments who are not pre-

Behind the scenes, furious dispute about sharing the costs of UN operations has been going on for months. The US has suggested that, instead of outright financial contribution, it should helping kind, by placing its vast quantities of military equipment pre-positioned around the world at the UN's disposal. However, nobody is able to agree on the costing mechanisms for such payments and little has been

Instead of any fruitful result accruing from the debate about the UN's future peace-keeping operations, the UN was asked, from Yugoslavia to Somalia, to approve a series of moves, a set of incremental steps which, although well meaning, provide no long-term solution. The opcrations in Yugoslavia seem to indicate that the notion of UN collective security is in need of an overhaul. For the present precarious operation, straddling peace-keeping and peace-making promises at the same time, and bereft of political support, may collapse.

OPINION

Women's Day arranging rally,

workshop, seminar, meeting

etc. Almost all of them voiced

their opinion against suppres-

up in the field of economic ac-

tivities, they are being treated

as inferior to men and the pro-

male workers very between 21

outside world. If we go to a

garments industry, we will find

mostly girl-children below 16

in our constitution women are ily? What better way you can

given equal rights in every exploit your power and supe-

sphere of life as the citizens of riority which God has bestowed

the country. Exploitation of on you other than refusing to

women can be located every- bear human child, God's best

where in our life - whether in creation, and bring them into

household activities or in the this world?

sion and gender inequality.

Women and 'hartal'

Strike popularly known as years working in the factory, 'Hartal' is very popular and ef- although child labour is prohibfective in Bangladesh. You can ited by law. They being hired achieve whatever you want to because the owner can hire by observing a 'successful har- them at a minimum salary. If tal.' You can enhance your we look into the households we salary, get a bonus, earn an ex- would also find small girls tra holiday, shift the date of ex- working in major of houses and amination, raise or reduce the with virtually no salary. And transportation cost and what even then, we can hear lots of not? Even school-boys can stories of torturing and beating change their syllabus by calling of the young maid-servants by a hartal and breaking some the housewives. I have never cars. I cannot identify any sin- heard any boy servant tortured gle section of people who have or never come across any news not tried it for fulfilling their of any Abdul or Karim becoming demand. Doctors has called it, victim of torture like Shab so did the nurses, teachers and Meher or Noorjahan. the students. The employees of The fact remains that we, the banks, corporations, industries women of Bangladesh, want our have tried it to resolve problems rights to be established, want to with their employers. The owners of factories, business or But how?

be treated equally with men. shops have observed it to re-In my idle thoughts, an idea alise their demand from the came to my mind. Why don't we

government or the authorities use 'hartal' as a means? Why concerned. All political parties not the leaders of women-folk of have called strike or hartal Bangladesh try to settle our isagainst Government decision or sues by observing 'hartal'? Let to materialize their decision. As us think how effective it would a matter of fact, almost all par- be when we have a woman ties who felt under-privileged or Prime Minister and a woman deprived tried to establish their Leader of the Opposition! Call a rights by observing hartal, ex- strike for all women in cept perhaps one section of Bangladesh - we are not to people, fifty per cent of the pop- cook, not to do any household ulation of Bangladesh - chores - and also bear the rewomen. Women never tried it to sponsibilities of taking motherrealise their demand by observ- hood! When God created women ing hartal. On 8 March women and given them the responsibilin Bangladesh observed ities of bearing and rearing the children, I am sure, God rated us as more responsible and dependable than men. So why not exploit the superior position and try to fulfil our demand to Although women are coming enjoy equal rights in every sphere of our life? And unlike other strikes, the country would surely be benefitted by our portion of wage of female and strike. What other effort than our decision of not taking motherhood for one year can be per cent and 54 per cent. Everywhere in Bangladesh, bigger for implementation of women are being subjected to family planning and at the same inequality and cruelty though, time create an impact on fam-

> Munira Khan Green Road, Dhaka

Letters for publication in these columns should be

mid-term election for obvious reasons. By misrule for a good number of years and at the cost of people's comfort, they amassed huge wealth and now have conveniently forgotten about the mass movement against their government. This movement of November-December, '90 was not a mere stunt of the Opposition, as soon after the ouster of the Jatiya Party Government people have occasion to know much fact and data about their rule and what they had done during the period they were in power. Unfortunately, as the acting chief of the party Mr Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury succeeded to enlist the blessing of the major opposition party -Awami League - and that helped them to shake fear and

take part in the general election

spending their ill-got fund they not only won the election at places but became the third major party in the Sangsad. Although people had every reason to think that they would not be able to find courage to participate in the election, they did 'fairly well' in the February '91 election of Jatiya Sangsad and it is quite natural for them to hope that they will do much better in the next general elec-Like Awami League, they are

BNP Government is allowed to do full term, they have every likelihood to be voted to power once again. And so they do not like to take the risk and are very much serious to create conditions so that a mid-term election is arranged. Freedom Party also is clamouring for a mid-term election, although they could not get a single member elected to the Sangsad in Feb '91 election.

Although there is no serious ground for a mid-term election now, they are trying just to improve their position. In a poor country like Bangladesh, midterm election will be a costly

ble standards - when in power they talk something and when in opposition they do and say the reverse. Unlike other countries, they do not think of extending meaningful cooperation to the Government and wait for the timely held election to seck people's verdict, not following various negative politics which

M Ibne Shaikh Mirpur, Dhaka

Sir, It was sad to watch The

Chor Komlapur, Faridpur