Dhaka, Friday, July 16, 1993

Consensus and the **Probe Body**

It is heartening, the way the treasury bench and the opposition resolved their differences and brought about a consensus decision on forming a 14-member special parliamentary committee to investigate the opposition allegation of corruption against the ministry of agriculture, irrigation, water development and flood control. The reasons for our satisfaction are two. One, that a probe body has been formed, and the other is the way it has come about. The probe attempt itself will set an important precedent as to the monitoring and supervisory role of the parliament. Questions have been raised, and will continue to be raised in the future. as to the proper function of the parliament and how far its role as a 'probing body' should be allowed to extend. Yet the very fact that elected lawmakers of the land will look into the affairs of a ministry, will send the right type of signals throughout the government and to all other administrative bodies, which will hopefully result in the overall reduction of corruption. It is well known that corruption had become endemic in our administration from the days of Ershad, and is alleged to be widespread even now. The way, the consensus on the probe body was

arrived at, indicates the growing maturity of our political parties and the spirit of accommodation among them on both sides. The differences that existed were real, and the concessions made by each side were just as substantive. The example of coming together, inspite of fundamental differences, gives us hope that in other national issues also especially the economic ones — we will see similar give and take, which will perhaps lead to a national consensus, that this paper has been suggesting eversince the formation of Begum Zia's government

While commending our law-makers for their sagacity, we would like to sound a note of warning against both sides, against especially the opposition, trying to make the probe body into something that it is not, and should be made out to be. The opposition should not use the occasion to launch a propaganda offensive of unsubstantiated claims against the government. Nor should the government get into a paranoic defensive posture of seeing conspiracy all around, and go in for its own propaganda offensive. The reason for our warning is some disturbing signs already evident in the posturing of both sides which go counter to the spirit of the consensus just arrived at

We would like to state that the impression of widespread corruption is real. It may not be the fault of this government per se, for it existed from much before. That however is not an acceptable argument of this government's failure to curb it during its tenure. The point to be made here is that the issue is real, and no amount of government denial is going to make it run away. On the otherside the opposition must treat the probe for what is it, an enquiry and not a witch hunt, and give the body as much seriousness and dignity as the process of justice and law demands.

This newspaper considers the formation of the parliamentary committee to be a very significant development. The statement of the deputy leader of the House Dr Badruddoza Chowdhury that "We would not like to do anything by the sheer strength of our majority" is in line with the true spirit of parliamentary democracy. The treasury bench has helped to make a historic decision by tabling the consensus proposal. This will help to institutionalise democracy and definitely assist in bringing about the type of transparency and accountability which is so very essential for the growth of a healthy democracy.

The challenge before us is to hold on to the letter and spirit that lies behind the consensus, and not turn the probe into a political circus.

Meeting Challenges of Nature

A series of natural calamities in the form of earthquake and floods have struck this planet of ours from Japan to Greece to India to the US. One common lesson of all these natural disasters is that man remains most vulnerable to such visitations. This, significantly, is despite the amazing scientific achievement by man in this century. While the earthquake in Okushiri, west coast of Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island, occurred late Monday and was followed by a series of tremors, leaving a wide area of the coast devastated in an unrecognisable shape, the quake in Greece is mild but the floods in the Punjab caused by the heaviest rain in two decades and the mighty Mississippi's unprecedented surge in Iowa have wrought havoc with life and property.

In case of the earthquake, the damage is massive and no other natural phenomenon causes as much destruction over so large an area in so short a time. Okushiri suffered from the combined impacts of tsunamis, the enormous seismic sea waves induced by an upheaval in the adjacent seabed or by an underwater landslide triggered by an earthquake, and the surface shocks. Compared with the stronger intensities of other major earth tremors either in Japan or in other parts of the world in the recorded history of quakes of the past 1600 years or so, this latest one's is rather mild. Particularly the death toll is quite small. But the destruction is no less terrifying. It is natural that flood waters in their fury must claim life and property in developing countries like India, but a raging Mississippi equally proves that the world's richest nation is no match for the river.

Neither the earthquake nor the floods can be contained by any scientific means. But a timely warning of the disaster can surely minimise the loss. It is because of this the death toll by India's floods of a shorter duration has already risen to 139 whereas in the US 50,000 people are evacuated almost without casualty. However, the inadequacy of scientific advancement has been pathetically brought to the fore in the matter of prediction about the earth's violent motion. Indeed, the prediction about the devastating seismic events still remains hopelessly unreliable. But at least there is one clue to arriving at a more reliable conclusion about the quakes. Certain measurable physical changes around the epicenter precede an earthquake. A system for close study and monitoring of these phenomena may come up with almost accu-

While the construction of big dams and underground explosion of nuclear devices have been responsible for much of the changes leading to floods and earthquakes, the knowledge why such calamities are making increasing visitations does not help. Only some remedial measures to keep the destruction minimum have been possible. To find out the preventive measures against such calamities is the real challenge before us.

rate prediction.

An Unprecedented Move in Parliamentary History

FTER a brief melodrama. the ruling party and the A opposition in Parliament adopted unanimously committee to probe into the alleged corruption charges against Irrigation, Water Development and Flood Control Minister Maj Gen (retd) M Majid-ul Hug and his ministry.

The move to form a committee to investigate corruption charges against a minister was an unprecedented one in Bangladesh's brief parliamentary history. But the question remains, why was this drama over the issue of terms of reference when both Majid-ul Hug and Tofael Ahmed themselves demanded a probe to go into the depth of the allegations. The minister boldly offered to resign if found guilty, while Tofael also expressed his readiness to quit his parliamentary seat if the charges were proved untrue.

Even after the formation of the committee last Tuesday a question kept buzzing in the minds of a large section of people: Why this 17-day drama by both the treasury and the opposition benches?

It is learnt from ruling party insiders (not ministers) that a group of leaders opposed the committee saying that even if a shred of all the allegations were to be proved, the image of the government would be tarnished. But another group refuted the argument, saying that refusal to form the probe committee

AUL Muite is a Member

of Parliament and the

first vice-chairman of

one of Kenya's three major op-

position parties, Ford-Kenya

He is telling his constituents to

ignore a ban by President

Daniel arap Moi on contributing

to school building funds. Moi

says the fund puts too much

circulation Daily Nation red:

Muite." A year or so ago such a

headline in Kenya would have

been unthinkable. No one chal-

lenged the head of state on a

Since the first real multi-

party election in three decades

on December 29, it has become

suggested by the ruling Kenya

Africa National Union (KANU)

Kenya became a de facto

ANTAFE DE BOGOTA —

While the fall of com-

munism is endlessly

bandied about, its primary

consequence goes unnoticed

namely, that anti-communism

is no longer viable as the

Like the plagues that rav-

aged Europe during the Middle

Ages, today's racial prejudices

have taken hold of the civilised

Germany, the next in Spain, the

next in North America, and con-

tinuously among the new na-

tions which have emerged since

the fall of communism in

Eastern Europe, racism is the

been a lot talk of human rights.

Today there is no constitution

that does not consecrate them.

example of a nation that in the

theory guaranteed equality to

all of its inhabitants, and as far

as humanitarian rhetoric is

concerned, no one could com-

pete with Germany's zeal for

human dignity. And yet racism

is as prevalent there as else-

Today's neo-Nazism, succes-

sor to the Hitlerite tradition, is

fuelled more by racial preju-

dices than by other elements of

the Nazi agenda, which

presently have minimal drawing

West Germany was a shining

In recent years, there has

sign of our age.

Appearing one day in

extremist reactionary creed.

Racism has taken its place.

party or the Moi government.

one-party state soon after inde-

pendence from Britain in 1963

About four years ago parliament

rushed a bill making it a de jure

the norm to oppose anything

national policy matter.

Ignore Moi school fund

A lead headline in the mass

strain on parents.

would tantamount to acceptance of the allegations. Such an impression would be equally harmful for the government. Hence the compromise position of wanting to limit the area of investigation.

The sacking of state minister Nurul Huda was also discussed among the BNP law markers The allegations against Majid-ul Hug came in a stronger form after Huda was dropped from the cabinet. A section of press reports said that he was dropped because of "corruption and abuse of power," but the Deputy Leader of the House denied it, saying that Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia was merely exercising her prerogative by changing a minister.

It was also considered that the opposition would score a political point if the ruling party refused the idea of forming a committee. The opposition had already started claiming that other ministers had become rather jittery, and were dallying the formation of the committee. They also have been questioning in public meetings the accountability and transparency of the government.

On the other hand, the opposition, mainly the Awami League, took it as a challenge to prove that government ministers were "corrupt."

Opposition sources said that they would continue their campaign if they succeeded in proving corruption in the

by Asiuzzaman

irrigation Ministry. They claimed that they had ample evidence regarding corruption in other ministries as well, and would demand similar commit tees for those ministries.

Political analysts feel, the opposition's strategy to paint the government as corrupt or dishonest is timed cleverly. The opposition realises that unless it can discredit the BNP in the eyes of the public as a corrupt and inefficient administration,

ment in Bhola; a favourable treatment of a particular firm in getting work of the Irrigation Ministry; and tender scams involving different projects in Magura and Bhola, the home constituencies of the minister and the AL leader respectively.

An apparently offended and aggrieved Majid-ul Huq who was not in the House at the time, replied in the afternoon session that the allegations were 'untrue'. He demanded a

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

its own prospects at the polls two years hence would suffer.

Whatever may be the eventual outcome of the present probe, one thing is certain: the whole exercise of constituting this special investigation can only bolster the Jatiya Sangsad's role as an effective monitor of the executive wing.

Tofael's speech in the morning session on June 26 was the prelude to the 17-day historic sequence of the budget session of the Fifth Parliament. The AL leader brought three

specific charges against the Irrigation Minister: Misappropriation of Tk 600 crore out of Tk 900 crore sanetioned for maintenance work of the flood protection embankcommittee should probe the

Conspicuously, the minister stormed out of the House immediately afterwards before Tofael had a chance to take the floor to accept the challenge of proving his charges.

The Speaker then sought opinion from the Deputy Leader of the House Prof Badruddoza Chowdhury who requested Chief Whip of the treasury bench Khandaker Delwar Hossain to say something on the issue. The Chief Whip said that since the minister and the opposition leader had both addressed the Speaker, it was the Speaker's discretion what decision to take.

The Speaker ended the day's

deliberation by saying that he would give a ruling the next

On the following day the Speaker announced in the House that a committee would be formed to investigate into the allegations against the Irrigation Ministry as well as the minister. The terms of reference of the committee would be

Both treasury bench and opposition members welcomed the decision with cheers and table thumping.

decided later, he added.

The Speaker also announced that the terms of reference would be finalised later on in consultation with the treasury bench and opposition stalwarts. He worked on the matter until July 7 to announce the name of the committee members with a term of reference.

But the problem arose when the Speaker suggested that the committee would only investigate the alleged misappropriation of Tk 600 crore and related matters.

However, the opposition demanded that other allegations should also be looked into by the committee. But the Speaker, as well as the ruling party members, disagreed with the opposition claim, saying that such a committee could work only on specific issues, not on the whole affairs of the ministry.

The opposition staged a walkout from the House protesting the Speaker's decision to limit the scope of inves-

Seeing that the two groups failed to reach a consensus on the terms of reference, and feeling that such a committee ought to be adopted unanimously according to the rules, the Chair announced that the proposed committee had died a natural death

Some more serious allegations came from the opposition which questioned the neutrality of the Speaker and also alleged that a distorted version of Speaker's ruling was presented

in the House Such allegations hurt Shatkh Razzak Ali who, on July 8, however, reopened the committee chapter after the opposition returned to the House, but declined to head the committee.

The committee, however, finally came into being on Tuesday after several days of discussion in the House and negotiations outside. It was also decided that the terms of reference would be finalised on the basis of the speeches of Tofael Ahmed and Majid-ul Hug on June 26.

Be that as it may, the people can only wait with eagerness for the eventual report of the com-

The opinions expressed by Kabir U Ahmad in his article "Is 'Share Economy' a New Concept toward Economic Emancipation?" published in this page yesterday are his own and not of USAID or World Bank. - Editor

Kenyans Feel Let Down by their Opposition

Robert Okinyiotani writes from Mombasa

Seven months after the controversial multiparty election in Kenya, opposition politicians are still playing little constructive role in improving the country's serious economic situation. Their performance in Parliament is confined to throwing insults and name-calling. Only the veteran Oginga Odinga is making a positive contribution.



power. Who today would rally

behind an arms build-up to

win more "living space" for

Germany or changes in the

peace treaties that ended World

the hatred of the white race, of

Aryans, for those races it con-

siders inferior : Africans, Latin

Americans, Asians, and in some

cases, Slavs. This is what is left

of the totalitarianism of the

right, stripped of its geopolitical

racism in Europe is the eco-

nomic recession, unemployment

and the clash between cheap

immigrant labour and native

workers in countries like

Germany, France, Great

The present neoliberal mani-

lestation of capitalism has

caused, if only temporarily, a

reduction in private and public

sector sector jobs. Whatever

scientific interpretations

economists may furnish to ex-

plain how unemployment de-

presses the price of labour,

those directly affected see only

their dark skinned rivals taking

continues to intensify and has

transmuted into the collective

belief that the problem is not

the economic situation but the

presence of dangerous foreign-

This hatred of the individual

Britain, Belgium

Switzerland.

away their jobs.

The breeding ground for

What remains of Nazism is

OGINGA ODINGA -At 81, stunned the country

one-party state. After the col lapse of communism in Eastern Multiparty politics was adopted in December 1991 at a Europe and the fall of the Sovict time when the country was go-Union, that section of the con stitution legalising unitary goving through one of its roughest economic and political periods, ernment was repealed.

War II?

glamour.

with double-digit inflation and high unemployment.

Corruption was almost institutionalised and mismanagement of the economy meant the meagre resources were going into the pockets of the few -President Moi's cronies with or without his knowledge and

Agriculture had been so neglected Kenya had become an importer instead of an exporter of food. It had come to rely mainly on tourism for foreign exchange - and in that sector demand was elastic. Then multipartyism arrived and political parties mushroomed to battle it out with the KANU.

So far the people have been sorely disappointed. The split in one of the two main opposition. parties - the Forum for

Restoration of Democracy (FORD), led by former vicepresident Oginga Odinga, put paid to any chance of KANU being beaten in the general elec-

KANU came back to power with 100 of the 188 seats. The two FORDs won 31 seats apiece and the Democratic Party (DP) came fourth. And what most disappointed Kenyans was that the opposition parties were reduced to tribal clubs - FORD-Kenya, of the Luo, the second largest tribe after the Kikuyu, and FORD-Asili and DP, of the Kikuyu. The lesser parties have become moribund.

Since the election, the opposition parties have lived up to their name. Opposing every thing Moi does. They have become obsessed with him. They boycotted the opening of Parliament — a non-party event and then afterwards turned the first two session into high school debating periods. The name-calling, insults

and near-physical confrontation have denied Kenyans meaningful debate. Opposition leaders have not realised that getting Moi out of State House alone will not yank the country out of its economic morass. They have not helped to

tackle the immediate problems - 40 per cent inflation, finding jobs for the 17 of every 100 Kenyans out of work, and looking for food to forestall an imminent famine. Kenneth Matiba, one-time

cabinet minister and leader of FORD Asili, said: From now on I will boycott parliamentary sit-

tings because they are useless. I will not attend even the oneweek debate on the budget." He was reacting to the presentation of the 1993-94 budget by Finance Minister Musalia Mudavadi.

Only one opposition leader, 81-year-old Odinga, seems to be discovering his proper role. While Matiba and Mwai Kibaki, leader of the DP, have vowed never to work with Moi, Odinga has said: "I will work with President Moi to bring about the changes this country needs. For the good of all Kenyans, particularly my people (the Luo) there is every need to cooperate with the government.

when he attended the President's garden party after a national day and invited Moi to his Bondo constituency to see for himself the despicable state of the infrastructure.

Odinga stunned the country

If Matiba and Kibaki follow suit then Kenyans can hope for a more meaningful opposition - though not just yet.

- GEMINI NEWS

ROBERT OKINYI OTANI is on I the stuff of Kenya's Daily Mail in

The Plague of Racism

Former Colombian president Alfonso Lopez Michelsen observes that racism has taken the place of anti-communism as the extremist reactionary creed.

ers who are willing to work for

United Kingdom.

This is case of the Algerians and Moroccans in France and people from India, Pakistan, and the Caribbean living in the

In the new Germany the death toll from racial conflicts climbs higher daily, while the conflict between certain neighbouring states in the ex-Soviet Union shows many of the signs of a civil war.

It was known, at least in academic circles, that the presence of Spanish, Greek and Turkish workers in northern European countries would have a dramatic effect on the population balance.

In addition, the difference in the rate of reproduction between the Third World and northern races was gradually transforming the Turks, Arabs and even the Spanish into a political force.

By the year 2000, it was predicted, Europe would witness the appearance of a political constituency different from

those which had previously made up the demographic uncleus of the countries of the European Community. This prediction was kept rather quiet.

The conflict predicted manifested itself economically and socially long before it could be measured in political terms, and it is this situation that now confronts us. To the Third World, the sight of a discriminatory mentality building with such force is especially troubling.

North America is in a certain respect resistant to the disease of racism. The last 25 years have seen remarkable progress concerning the position of African, Americans in the United States

And yet, racial epithets, such as dago (dirty foreigner), long relegated to dictionaries, are coming back into use again, though not in reference to the colour of one's skin but through association of certain activities with certain nationalities Italians with the mafia,

Colombians with drug trafficking, Puerto Ricans with laziness, Haitians with begging.

In the 1800s, people routinely fled tyrannical governments to find a roof and a job in the United States. No one would have thought of detaining the huge number of Irish and Scandinavians who moved to the US in search of work.

But today, US President Bill Clinton, despite election promises, feels compelled to deploy ships and airplanes to interdict boatloads of Haitians fleeing to Florida.

Racial prejudice is so strong that black Americans are as ir-

ritated as white Americans by the influx of Haitians. This is irrational racism in all its glory. If you add to this the general belief that AIDS comes from Africa you have an idea of the conflicts which will fill the coming years.

Already a third of West Germans believe Nazism had its good side and wasn't as abominable as they were taught in the first years of the German Federal Republic. Is this what he future holds?

Alfonso Lopez Michelsen is now the leader of Colombia's ruling Liberal Party.

OPINION

Should Dhaka and Delhi Avoid Trade War on Jute? A Clarification by S. B. Chaudhuri

I enjoyed the sarcasm in Abu Shakil's article published in this newspaper (opinion) on July 11 under the caption "Should Bangladesh and India Avoid Trade War in Jute Goods?"

Mr Shakil seems to sidestep the issues I had posed in my column of June 21. It's not a question of rationalising trade war. May be the term 'price war' suits the present context better. The issues that I had raised are: Should a price war (if I may use these words in this piece) be waged with the taxpayers money, where will it lead us to and, if it comes to that, can the imperatives of maintaining external competitiveness justify such a move? Then again, is it not inconsistent with our

macro economic policy stance? What is wrong in secking a viable alternative to a costly and self-defeating price war? As said earlier, this can only im poverish the 'warriors' and reward the buyer with a windfall In effect, it would subsidise foreign buyers' purchases at the cost of taxpayers in this country. Mr Shakil has summarily rejected the idea of an orderly marketing arrangement with India as untenable on the ground of jutegoods being 'a weak product'. Given the growing global environmental awareness and the diversity of the products that can be fashioned out of jute, the fibre need not remain a 'weak product' for all time to come. Taking into account the dominant share of the world market, one should, perhaps, plan a little ahead. Why should we shut our eyes

on possibilities altogether? Incidentally, earlier I had missed out on the possible implications of a long price war for the jute grower. A Price war induced continuous slide in ex-

quoted rates for the three main jute products only to make the

port prices of jutegoods will, in all likelihood, depress internal prices, punishing the grower As for external prices, I had

picture complete. However, I am undone here as Mr Shakil has brushed aside FAO prices as

'official prices' - whatever that may mean! How else can one compare international prices? It is a different matter if one has access to information on sale prices of a particular firm or organization. However, selected prices, on isolated deals, will serve to illustrate a fragmented short-term situation. As for exchange rate differential, if you take January '91 level as the base for comparison, then you would also have to take the extent to which the Indian currency was overvalued at that time, into account. However, in my write-up, I did not argue for currency overvaluation - that is a different issue altogether. I only outlined the prevailing situation. Besides, external com petitivenéss should be adjudged in its totality. I spoke of fall in India's exports in 1992-93 (the latest year) whereas Mr Shakil talks about 1991-92. Although we may differ, I do appreciate Mr Shakil's concerns and admire his alertness. Well, each of us to his own views then.

Administrative reform

Sir, It is very unfortunate that whether we have a BAKSAL government, military rule, bureaucracy, autocracy or democracy, widespread irregularities and corruption are alleged in our administration and the sufferings of the people know no bound.

We understand that our present democratic government is actively considering ways and means to bring about a administrative reform in the country to streamline the various functions and duties of the government, simplify the system and procedure of works and improve the standard of services and efficiency in various government offices and public sector corporations. This is indeed a noble intention but it is a Herculean task to accomplish.

We cannot forget how under the autocratic regime of H M Ershad a handful of bureaucrats, chairmen and managing

directors in the name of efficiency and profit of the public sector corporations formed the so-called CONCOPE (Consultant Committee of Public Sector Enterprises), accumulated more and more powers in their hands and plundered the public enterprises. An administrative reform on

the basis of report, suggestions and recommendation of the bureaucrats may not be constructive, helpful and useful for us. We, therefore, strongly feel

that a National Administrative Reform Committee with MPs, senior government servants (both retired and in-service) and members of the public may be formed to accomplish the task. Members of the public because they are directly involved with the works and functions of the government and they are beset with multiple problems and difficulties in the practical field.

The National Administrative Committee may invite opinion from the members of the public through a printed questionnaire (both in Bangla and English) on

the following points: i) Functions and duties, administrative and financial powers of the ministers. ii) Job description, adminis-

trative and financial powers of the secretaries. iii) Job description, administrative and financial powers of all class I and class II officers.

iv) Rules and regulations for

appointment and promotion of class I and class II officers, class III and class IV employees. v) Rules and regulations for posting and transfer of all class and class II officers and class

III and class IV employees. vi) Rules and regulations for dismissal, termination, suspension and submission of representation, appeal thereof for all class I and class II officers, class III and class IV employees. vii) System and procedure of

members of the public. The National Committee may scrutinise and summerise the public opinion and submit its recommendations to the Prime Minister for necessary action.

We strongly feel that a solid and concrete work on the administrative reform is imperative in the greater interest of the public service and also for the sake of success of democracy in our country. O H Kabir Dhaka

Embarrassing or deserving of 'appreciation'?

Sir, Our Foreign Ministry oflicials deserve 'appreciation' for demonstrating their patriotism. They made the mistake of despatching the message of felicitation to a dead Prime Minister of France on the occasion of French National Day because they are so busy serving our country. Our Foreign Ministry officials do not bother who the hell is the Prime Minister of another country as they are devotedly concerned with Bangladesh only! Bravo! Shahnoor Uttara, Dhaka

attending complaints from the