

## Peace Finally at Hand

Like magic, things are falling into place for Israel. Will they fall into place also for PLO? This question is uppermost in our minds. One by one, Arab countries are burying the hatchet and signing peace accords with their enemy of many decades. The effect of it is bound to reverberate in other continents, leading to further normalisation of relations with Israel. Already Zimbabwe has decided to establish diplomatic relations, which is certain to influence many other members of Non-aligned Movement to follow-suit. Bangladesh will, perhaps, wait to see how OIC members react, before making up its own mind about recognising Israel.

The point is, though the PLO and its backers were not able to corner Israel militarily, yet they were quite successful in isolating the Jewish state and confining its trade links to only a few. The diplomatic and commercial isolation had a devastating impact on the Israeli economy, leading to increased dependence on US help. The current peace accord opens Israel to the world, and makes it an equal member of the international community. In return PLO has got precious little in concrete terms. The most important advantage it has gained is recognition, by Israel and its key ally, the United States. In addition, a fragment of their original and rightful homeland is now theirs, with the promise of something more equitable and fair to follow.

We can make an intelligent guess that what followed like magic for Israel, will not be so easy for PLO. But Israel and its backers, especially the US, must understand that the opening for peace created by PLO's agreement for the present deal is unparalleled. They must also understand that Arafat has really put himself out on the limb, and everything must be done to strengthen his hands. Arafat stands on a house divided. Hardliners opposed to the current initiative, are carrying on an intense propaganda against him. Much of it can be overcome if all the commitments made in the accord, and the timetable agreed upon, are scrupulously observed.

All said and done, the most formidable obstacle to the peace process is the deep seated distrust that exists between PLO and Israel. There are very good reasons for the distrust. But at the moment there are far better reasons to overcome it. When Arafat and Rabin shook hands, they were extended over centuries of prejudice and five decades of bitter, violent and brutal armed struggle. However momentous the present breakthrough is, nobody should forget the negative historic legacy that both sides need to overcome in moving forward.

In this process, the role of the United States is critical. As the sole superpower, and arbiter of events in the region, it is the only party that has the clout and the credibility to effectively implement a fair and lasting deal acceptable to both the parties. The moral bankruptcy exhibited by President Clinton in dealing with the Bosnian crisis notwithstanding, we hope he will show the far-sightedness and imagination necessary for the occasion, to seize it and move towards the goal of lasting peace.

Alongwith the US, the EC countries will also have to play a very involved role in seeing to it that all the elements of the present accord are implemented. Self-rule and land remain the keys to durable peace. Now that Israel's security threat from PLO is over, everything should be done to ensure the right to freedom and economic prosperity of the Palestinians.

## Return of Cholera?

The news of the return of a germ likening cholera could not perhaps come at a worse time for Bangladesh. Recuperating from the combined effect of rains and floods, a large tract of the country appears to be the special target for the attack of this new type of diarrhoeal disease that at the beginning of the year accounted for 2,000 deaths and affliction to another two lakhs. This is, moreover, the time when other water-borne diseases make their yearly visitations with the receding of waters from all inundated areas. Clearly, the vulnerability of the common people at this time of the year is at its highest.

Although doctors claim they know how to treat the disease, the death toll of 300 since the beginning of June does not quite conform with their claim. Maybe, some people respond to the treatment the doctors have prescribed for the disease. The alarming spread of the disease points to the fact that further research is necessary to control it. Already the new deadly bacteria have been identified to be as deadly as the known cholera germ. One most worrying fact is that most of the diseases of epidemic nature once thought to be conquered are again staging a comeback. As pests are increasingly developing their resistance to pesticides, so are doing the bacteria of such diseases to medicine.

The deadly diseases are returning with a vengeance, specially in parts of the world where a few years back such things could not even be thought of in one's wildest imagination. Russia is one such place where a number of unheard-of diseases have appeared, making the lives of the people there further miserable on top of their economic wounds. Asia, Africa and Latin America were always the breeding grounds of such diseases, now the former communist countries of East Europe have joined them. It appears poverty and diseases are bed fellows and worldwide their number is increasing.

What is, therefore, needed is a coordinated move on the global level to integrate hygiene, sanitation and quality food and drink — as a preventive measure on the one hand — and on the other, the research on the diseases not only for effective cure but also for their elimination from the earth. The precedence of such moves are there and once again the world leaders must rise up to the occasion.

# One Man Can Create a Constitutional Anarchy in India

Ashok Mitra writes from New Delhi

*In the view of the Chief Election Commissioner, his control is total and absolute; even the police and paramilitary forces deployed for election duty are to be, according to his claim, under his jurisdiction; how many of such personnel are to be deployed where would also be his decision; should there be any dereliction of duty on their part while they are serving the Commission, the punishment too on that score would be meted out by him.*

Commission could have, on its own, sought a ruling on the matter much earlier from the Supreme Court; pending the verdict of the nation's highest judiciary, it could have continued to perform its duties in the manner these have been performed till now. The Chief Election Commissioner chose otherwise, pushing the controversy to the flashpoint of crisis. His primary constitutional obligation, there can hardly be any question, is to hold elections. He has, instead, decided to hold up elections. He remains firm in his view that he is actually furthering the cause of the democratic process by his seeming intransigence: he wants to purify the system, and eliminate the scope of partisan intervention in the conduct of elections by governments both at the Centre and in the States. By joining the battle on this issue and ordering the stoppage of all elections in the country until the Central and State administrations render him full satisfaction, he is, he asserts, by no stretch hindering the functioning of parliamentary democracy; quite the contrary, he is strengthening its foundation.

There is on the other hand a seemingly large measure of agreement among the political parties that the Chief Election Commissioner has acted in altogether an arbitrary manner and, in case he is allowed his

head, it could only hasten the end of the democratic experiment in the country. In their judgement, the fact that he did not exercise the option of approaching the Supreme Court before sending down his flat indicates the perversity of his mind: even if he were to be granted the benefit of doubt with respect to the motives which have impelled him, it would still be impossible to underplay the implications of what he has done.

The weight of public opinion would appear to be in favour of judicial and legislative initiatives to thwart the consequences of the Chief Election Commissioner's action. Many have also been taken back at the choice of language on the part of the Chief Election Commissioner while criticising institutions established by the law of the land. Governments at the Centre as well as in the States comprise elected representatives of the people. To challenge their credentials and describe their conduct in terms that are palpably derogatory should be normally regarded as impermissible. That such challenges have still been thrown and such language has been employed epitomises the decline and degeneracy of the system. A situation of this kind could not, it will be argued, have arisen during, for instance, Jawaharlal Nehru's tenure as prime minister.

Thus viewed, the Chief Election Commissioner's decision to have an open confrontation with the political establishment marks a departure of considerable import. Politicians, including those formally enjoying the mandate of the people, have forfeited the respect that was reserved for them in the past almost as a matter of course. The Chief Election Commissioner has dared to take advantage of the diminished stature of the politicians. He has gone to the length of suggesting that the constitutional process has been brought to ridicule not by him, but by the politicians, supposedly the praetorian guards of participative democracy.

He could in fact proceed further, and refer to the scandalous manner the ruling party recently went about in search of votes for ensuring the defeat of the no-confidence motion on the floor of the Lok Sabha. No holes were barred; making a mockery of the anti-defection legislation, the government side actively encouraged defections from other parties. Allegations were posted about money changing hands to induce a shift in political loyalty on the part of some members of Parliament; such allegations have been denied only perfunctorily. That apart, the charges of corruption hurled against the government, particularly against the prime

minister, have yet to be rebutted with any degree of effectiveness. While intervening in the discussion on the no-confidence motion, the prime minister carefully passed up the opportunity to touch on the issue of corruption; at about the same time, a story got leaked about the law minister's off-the-record conversations with a television interviewer. Which suggested that in fact several of his ministerial colleagues were at the receiving end of monetary favours dispensed by the now notorious stockbroker from Bombay.

The majesty of the political system has been sullied by developments of this nature. No dignity attaches any more to the processes of the polity. In this milieu, even extraordinarily outrageous behaviour passes muster. At least such is presumably the conclusion reached by the Chief Election Commissioner. Such may also be the general verdict on the Chief Election Commissioner's own conduct. He may be a well-intentioned individual burning up inside on accounts of blatantly irregular electoral practices perpetrated by ruling politicians, including unashamed use of the governmental machinery. Or he may indeed be a megalomaniac of an autocrat with an eye on the main chance so as to establish himself above the Constitution. Or, as some have begun to sus-

pect, he has struck a deal with the nation's prime minister to so manoeuvre things as to clamp a moratorium on a number of inconvenient elections and by-elections. Whatever the truth, the Chief Election Commissioner could venture to do what he has done because he has felt himself to be morally superior to the politicians.

The possibilities here likely to be unleashed are endless. For there may soon be others joining the game of openly baiting the system. While the Chief Election Commissioner perhaps justly deserves to be disciplined — the modalities of such disciplining are currently under discussion — there is therefore an equal need for politicians to engage in some introspection regarding their own conduct. The acrobatics indulged in by the Chief Election Commissioner, it can be well argued, do militate against the spirit of the Constitution, but politicians, especially politicians holding office, ought to conduct themselves in such a manner that they remain immune from either moral or legal blackmail.

The underlying issues have scarcely been resolved by the sort of compromise the Union government has for the present reached with the Chief Election Commissioner. A cynic will therefore be quite within his rights to describe the situation obtaining as anarchy sanctified by the Constitution. And this anarchy can soon have other manifestations.

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## Oil Lies at Heart of Sudan-Egypt Tension

Eva Dadrian writes from Halayeb

*Egypt and Sudan are locked in a border dispute over the Halayeb area. The mineral-rich region has been under Sudanese administration since colonial days. Cairo maintains that it belongs to Egypt. Now there are possibilities of large off-shore reserves of oil. Sudan has signed up with a Canadian company to carry out a seismic survey off Halayeb. This has brought angry reaction from Cairo.*

### Disputed desert

Both Egypt and Sudan claim 18,000 km semi-arid region of Halayeb



of tunafish and cigarettes, the Locust Early Warning unit and an Egypt Air control station.

Life has always been different in Gebel Elba, the most populated inland area where the nomadic tribes congregate. Irrigated by seasonal rains, the numerous valleys crisscrossing Gebel Elba offer good pastures for the herds of camels and goats. The Bisharas walk them across the borders without questioning which country they are leaving behind and which they are heading for. Until 18

months ago, not many people, be it Sudanese, or Egyptians, had heard of Halayeb, or even knew where to look it up on a map. Today Halayeb has become a household name in Egypt and Sudan. The reason is simple: oil.

When it signed a contract with the Sudanese government to carry out a seismic survey off Halayeb, Canadian International Oil Corporation never expected that it will unleash the fury of the Egyptian government and open a Pandora's Box.

With 48 hours Cairo sent, 5,000 heavily-armed troops to take position on the 22nd Parallel, which, according to the century-old documents, was always considered the accepted political boundary. Since then, both governments have accused each other of escalating the dispute.

The crisis has an element of mutual aggressiveness based on feelings of insecurity and vulnerability. Khartoum's brand of militant Islam could pose the kind of threat to Egypt that no

army can suppress. The Sudanese, too, have cause to be equally sensitive about Egypt's ability to activate, in earnest, Sudan's opposition groups, which took refuge in Cairo after the military coup of 1989.

The reactions of both countries to the Halayeb issue indicate that it is not inconceivable for either to have an external focus for their internal problems. However, while for the Sudanese regime an outside threat might help strengthen national unity — in disarray since the military took power in 1989 — it would be hard to believe that Egypt's internal problems have reached such a pitch as to necessitate foreign adventurism as a solution. The possibility of full-scale war between the two countries is remote. "I will never give orders to an Egyptian soldier to fire on his Sudanese brother," declared President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt after a 75-minute meeting with Sudanese leader General Al Bashir during the June summit of the Organisation of African Unity in Cairo.

The two presidents agreed that their foreign ministers would meet to draw up a workable agenda to "address all aspects of Sudanese-Egyptian relations." Despite the signs of goodwill, Egypt will not give up its national rights over the region. In Cairo's view, Egyptian sovereignty over Halayeb is un-

questionable and hence its military presence in the region is legitimate.

Egypt has imposed a news blackout on the issue, doubled its soldiers in the area, and increased the number of border checkpoints all along the 22nd Parallel. It has taken further steps to assert its sovereignty over the region. Different ministries, together with the governorates of Aswan and the Red Sea, have been asked to produce feasibility studies for the development of Halayeb. The Ministry of Housing proposes to build 5,000 units to house 15,000 Egyptian settlers by the year 2000.

A seminar organised in June by the Cairo University proposed various human development projects in the disputed region. Its organiser Dr Ibrahim Habib, of the Faculty of Agriculture, said building the infrastructure of the region is necessary to serve its human potential. "Let's forget about the minerals — main cause of the problem between us and Sudan — and concentrate instead on the human development," he said, insisting that with adequate development the area could become a "paradise".

Recent data shows the region receives 400mm rainfall a year, against 130mm rain the rest of the country. Halayeb offers agriculture potential which, says Habib, should be put to better use.

Indications are clear that, given the interest shown by the university and the government, Cairo will never accept Khartoum's claim on the region.

— Gemini News

About the Author: Eva Dadrian is a freelance writer and broadcaster who contributes to the BBC African Service and several Middle East and African publications.

## To the Editor...

*Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.*

### Law and consensus

Sir, The recent televised dialogue on a proposed bill to amend laws was heartening to those who might hope to see, in this media effort, the beginning of an exercise to elicit public consensus on the important issue of laws.

The subject was the law relating to polygamy. The amendment proposed by Farida Rehman (MP) is intended to tighten the sanction against the polygamous practice in Bangladesh. The participants were lawyers, social workers, leaders of women's organisations and government representatives including Farida Rehman and respective ministers from the social welfare, women's affairs and establishment (the rank of a state minister) ministries.

The family law ordinance of 1961, retained by Bangladesh, restricts polygamy to a conditionality of permission of the arbitrary council which body is again authorised to look at all aspects of the reason for the second marriage including permission from the current wife. Marriage without permission of the council is a punishable offence, although the marriage itself is not invalidated.

Farida Rehman's proposed bill of amendment will further restrict the practice by taking the obligatory permission from the council to the court.

In the current situation of Bangladesh, most marriages are unregistered, therefore it is easy for a spouse to slide from marriage to marriage, without documents and without enforcement of law which declares unregistered marriages punishable but does not invalidate the marriage in question.

Anomalies in our laws is important to be dialogued by experts. More important is the need for demystifying these laws for the lay person, in particular those affected by the legislation or the lack of it.

Public consensus (specially women's) is the findings on which the expert law givers should base their deliberations.

What we saw on the TV screen on the 6th August, was a commendable step in bringing a public human right issue at the media forum. It was an effort to think together, to represent views from the field, to apply expertise both of Govt and Non-Govt representatives in discussing the effects of this particular law. It was good to hear from most participants that a

law banning polygamy was an ultimate aim though this was not explicitly voiced, nor was it clear why the banning of polygamy could not be suggested right away?

However, we were told that it would take not less than a year for any bill to be passed in the house of parliament. If this is so, then we have time to project this law to the people, specially women through different efforts of socio-legal literacy. The television can play an important role in introducing serialised screenings on the law of polygamy through a controlled exposure for the understanding of the lay person. Once we have the views of an informed public, then it is justified for the experts and lawgivers to take the popular step. For, after all, "the law is for the people" as it was reiterated by the participants at the viewing on the 6th August.

The point raised by one of the participants, Advocate Sultana Kamal should be taken up in all seriousness, with reference to strategy and form, when she asserted that changes in laws would mean much more if laws were taught to people and social awareness given to those oppressed by feeling of perpetual subordination in terms of class and sex.

The government plans reform in education with improved curriculum and inclusion of new subjects like population and reproductive health in the primary education syllabi.

It would be relevant to include also teaching of human

rights or legal literacy in our expanded vision for education reform.

Khurshed Erfan Ahmed  
Ain O Salish Kendra, Dhaka

### Israel and the UN

Sir, By indiscriminate bombardment and killing of innocent people in Lebanon, Israel today pre-qualified to become a permanent member of the so-called Security Council of the United Nations (Bravo!). Paradoxically though, it appears that all permanent members of this Security Council, except China, became members after committing similar crimes to the human beings of this world. They invaded other countries, killed innocent peoples, and even exploded nuclear bombs. Even after formation of the United Nations, they invaded other countries and used weapons of mass destruction to kill innocent people. In the thinkings of ordinary people, it seems that as pre-qualification to become Security Council member, one has to possess nuclear weapons and legalised terrorist records, such as Israel is today.

The present United Nations should be abolished and a new united nations should be formed. The permanent members of the Security Council should not be the nations with nuclear weapons and terrorist records. Countries with clean records should become new security council members. Only then this world can expect justice and peace.

Anwar  
Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

## OPINION

### Let Wisdom Win

A Mawaz

After two years of "enjoying" power, wisdom dawned on the ruling party to recognize that somebody called Sheikh Mujibur Rahman exists in history, and in the mind of the people. The party leader for the first time mentioned this national hero's name during the recent party convention.

It is a good and encouraging sign of recognition and tolerance. It is sincerely hoped that the other political parties would reciprocate this noble gesture and offer cooperation to work in harmony in the political field in the interest of the nation as a whole; as the country belongs to the people, and not to any political party, however, important a role a party played at sometime or another. Serving one's country cannot be monopolised and the credits cannot be usurped.

The inherent greatness of a leader is independent of party affiliation, and of time and place. The exceptional qualities of the head and the heart will shine through all controversies and subjective mortal assessments, and will also stand the test of time, that is, the achievements will be recorded in history, (if correctly recorded).

There is no controversy about the Sheikh's greatness and his contribution towards the creation of Bangladesh, and there should be none. For the

dissidents, only to point out simply the weaknesses of a great leader is unfair, as half truths are dangerous, and therefore condemnable.

This is one of the weaknesses of new-born political cultures, in that the whole picture is not projected, and certain facts are denied recognition. In a developing political atmosphere, the root and the sapling have to be protected and nurtured, the temptation has to be resisted to rush to claim the credits, and to discredit others. The politicians tend to forget that it is not easy to earn the benefit of the doubt.

This is one of the weaknesses of a political style based on charismatic leadership. On the other hand, without this alluring weapon, it is a Herculean task to rouse the uninitiated and sleeping masses. The cult of the charisma has to taper off in the successive generation; remembering that it is not self before service, but service before self.

One is familiar with the classroom proverb: do good and throw your ego into the river (or, let not the left hand know what the right hand is doing).

Let us all pray for a change in the local political atmosphere. Political parties will come and go, but the country and the people will remain.