

## 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. Headliners 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 farsightedness and imagination necessary for the occasion, to seize it and move towards the goal of lasting peace.

Along with 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 para-military 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.*

RESPECTIVE of whether that was actually his intention, the incumbent Chief Election Commissioner has succeeded in drawing attention to a major weakness in the Indian Constitution: a single individual, he has shown, can bring the country's democratic processes to a screeching halt. Article 324 of the Constitution defines the functions and activities of the Election Commission. It is a short, matter-of-fact Article; at the time they drafted it, the authors of the Constitution could not have imagined that it would be capable of generating the slightest controversy. They had at the back of their mind the framework of a stable polity; the circumstances obtaining today are, however, qualitatively vastly different. The on-going controversy mainly concerns the extent of control the Election Commission is to exercise over personnel seconded to it by the Union and State governments for conducting elections. In the view of the Chief Election Commissioner, this control is total and absolute; even the police and para-military 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.

The State government — and initially it seemed the Centre as well — were unable to agree with this interpretation of either Article 324 or of the relevant sections of the Representation of the People's Act. The Election

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 taken aback 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 languages have been deployed 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.

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 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, 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.

The writer is a former finance minister of West Bengal.

Syndicated and distributed by Mandira Publication, New Delhi for exclusive use in The Daily Star in Bangladesh.

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 on the region. Different ministries, together with the governors 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.

## 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 Locut 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 Bisharayat 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 will unleash the fury of the Egyptian government and open a Pandora's Box.

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

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 reactions of both countries to the Halayeb issue indicate that it is not inconvenient 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-

## 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

a

good

and

encouraging

sign

of

recognition

and

tolerance

. It

is

a

good

and

encouraging

sign

of

recognition

and

tolerance

. It

is

a

good

and

encouraging

sign

of

recognition

and

tolerance

. It

is

a

good

and

encouraging

sign

of

recognition

and

tolerance</p