

Govt should Act Decisively

Tension has gripped Chakoria Thana of Cox's Bazar following the tragic death of a young lawyer on Saturday. Reports reaching here vary on the circumstances of his death and even on his political allegiance.

Notwithstanding the different versions, what emerges as fact is that the Jamaat has everyone for its opponents and it has gathered strength to take on other parties, including the local administration.

That the Jamaat activists gheraoed the TNO office to press home their demand for his transfer was democratically sanctioned. But at no point could they assault the TNO physically nor carry or use fire arms and lethal weapons for the purpose.

Surprisingly, the threat posed by the Jamaat and Shibir to the country's democratic and liberation war spirits is being overlooked or lightly taken by the government.

Jamaat-Shibir activists are doing what they are capable of. But what is the compulsion for the government to remain inactive in face of such crimes?

People will be eagerly waiting to see how the government reacts to this latest direct attack on its local body. Now is the time for the government to act — and act decisively.

A Synonym for Democracy

Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy's was not the picture of a populist leader the way Moulana Bhashani's or even Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Haq's was. Yet when we talk of democracy, it is he who comes first to mind.

Although the two-some worked miracles by annexing the whole of the Muslim student strength in Bengal and winning the epoch-making 1946 polls for the Muslim League — Bengal was the lone province of the projected Pakistan to vote for Pakistan — Suhrawardy in the end had to pay dearly for his espousal of democracy and pro-people politics.

On the 30th anniversary of Huseyn Shaheed's death one cannot help recalling how he came past a stint of political wilderness after that and gave a charismatic leadership to the first and decisive expression of the Bengalees as a people — the sweeping victory of the opposition United Front burying for good the ruling Muslim League in East Bengal.

The Oxonian Suhrawardy, although surrounded in Awami League by left radical elements, started falling for American policies then despised as patent in imperialistic devices of international blackmail and musclemanship.

At a moment when this our polity and society is straining to consolidate a tenuous win by democracy in the event of the Shahabuddin elections, Suhrawardy should be a source of inspiration for all. He represents much that we now should model on.

Moving Ahead from Cooperation toward a Community

APEC, the acronym for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, contains a tantalising proposition. Substitute 'Community' for the word 'Cooperation' and you have the world's largest economic bloc, spanning the Pacific, covering fifty per cent of global production and forty per cent of international trade.

The widely known report of the APEC Eminent Persons Group of Experts, commissioned last year, is said to have advocated the formation of an Asia-Pacific economic community in the long run. The Seattle meeting of the APEC, held last month, was billed to consider a recommendation that the organisation should set a 1996 deadline for deciding on the creation of a free-trade community in the region.

Till the Seattle meeting, APEC has been functioning as a loose-knit consultative body where decisions could be taken only on the basis of consensus, embracing all its members. Launched in 1989, APEC had started with twelve member countries — the six Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) states, namely Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, the United States. Three other members, China, Hong Kong and Taiwan joined later.

The APEC Seattle meeting was not officially billed as a 'summit' although heads of state or government were mostly present.

So, the meeting was not a full summit; and yet, it was a summit alright, albeit informal in appearance. In the event, the summit skirted the issue of deepening integration of APEC toward a formally structured trade bloc. Or rather, the summit post-

poned taking a decision on the recommendation for setting a target date, by saying that the issue should be studied over the coming year.

Although the summit fell short of initiating a process of creating a trade negotiating body and establishing an investment framework agreement, it recorded some notable progress in forging new linkages among the APEC members.

Whatever the future may hold, for now at least, the APEC summit did serve as a forum to send a signal across the Atlantic to the European Community (EC) — telling the latter that the Pacific Rim economies want the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) sponsored Uruguay Round global trade talks to come to a successful conclusion by the target date of December 15.

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equipment, furniture. At the Seattle meeting, the GATT signatory APEC members offered tariff concessions on one or more of certain additional products such as electronics, scientific equipment, timber (other than tropical hardwood), paper nonferrous metals, toys, oilseeds.

APEC's Seattle statement on tariffs actually came in two parts. The members joined to issue a call for a successful conclusion of the Uruguay Round by December 15. All the members, however, did not participate in the tariff reduction offer. Brunei, China and Taiwan are not GATT members.

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misgivings. For instance, the agreement stipulates that the USA and Canada would phase out tariffs on textiles and apparel over ten years and Mexico would eliminate many of its own immediately. However, textiles and apparel would qualify for duty-free treatment within NAFTA only if these are made of yarn or fibre produced within NAFTA.

APEC's membership of NAFTA countries could help prevent the latter from turning into a trading bloc that shuts its doors against outsiders while throwing them open exclusively for those inside its borders.

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A Reader Appeals

To the most respected leaders of the House and the Opposition, may I, in my very humble way, request to consider holding a joint 'public meeting' on Dec 6th to mark the fall of the autocratic government? For one day, which has paved the path to democracy, can they forget their differences and allow the re-living of the same jubilation that took place on this historic date? To put it straight, the nation and the world can't but appreciate such a move.

Syed Tasleem Hussain Uttara, Dhaka

The above appeal, contained in a letter and being published unedited, was faxed to us yesterday by a conscientious citizen. We believe that the sentiment expressed by our reader echoes the sentiment of millions of people.

— Editor

Private Press No Match versus State Monolith

ITS business as usual for the government-controlled media: pleasing the new masters.

Never mind that some vestiges of the disgraced authoritarian rule toppled down in 1990 are disappearing, albeit slowly.

The government, apparently determined to tighten its grip firmly on the state media, is saying different things at different times: from 'gradual autonomy' to 'gradual privatisation' of the media it owns and controls.

A government Communications Policy Task Force in 1992 called for making the mass media an effective tool for the dissemination of information to help create an informed public opinion that would promote democratic culture.

The task force did not, however, address the issue of state control over media and its role in a democracy. It did recommend, among other things, 'gradual privatisation' of the state-owned print media (newspapers and news agency) and 'greater autonomy' to the state-run Radio Nepal and

Nepal Television.

It set no time frame for accomplishing the job. Says Bijay Gachhadar, communications minister: 'The government is determined to making the fourth estate strong and capable in keeping with the freedom of expression and right to information guaranteed by the Constitution.'

One way he can help is to direct government state corporations to advertise in the private press. This is where he has failed. Denied of advertisements, private newspapers have to survive on readership.

Welfare-related government advertisements are printed in the local press. But the income generated by such ads is peanuts as more than 90 per cent of the ads go to state-run newspapers.

But few Nepalis now see any role for the state media. Even the architects of the monolithic state media empires under the deposed regime have turned themselves to be ardent champions for dismantling the state media.

Naturally, the failure to dis-

mantle the state media has attracted criticism from the opposition parties that the state media are being used by the ruling party for its own propaganda.

What is state media doing in a democratic Nepal?

Public importance. The Press and Publications Regulations based on the 1992 Press and Publications Act lays down that an editor of an independent journal has to be a graduate with at least 10 years of experience in a news organisation and that reporters must be graduates with five years of reporting experience.

Many questioned whether such requirements would guarantee other essential attributes for editorial responsibility: writing ability, personal integrity, and concern for public welfare.

Some of the established senior journalists who had spent their life in journalism are not even graduates. It is strange that a country where the Prime Minister himself is not a graduate must ask for such qualifications from editors, one editor said.

The new Constitution now

guarantees against such closure, seizure or even deregistration, and guarantees the right to information on matters of public importance.

And violating its own rules, Tara Nath Sharma was appointed by the government as editor-in-chief of the state-run Rising Nepal. He has no reporting or editing background as required under the regulation.

Most important, little has been done to help develop private media. The crux of the problem is that the private media has to compete with the state-run media which is heavily subsidised by the government.

Mr Shrestha said that the competition is not fair. This is also the reason why there is little investment in the development and growth of private newspapers.

The state media include the Gorkhapatra (vernacular, circulation 40,000) and The Rising Nepal (English, circulation, 8,000) dailies. Radio and television too, are state-controlled.

Pitched against them are the fund-starved and staggering private newspapers: 64 dailies, 482 weeklies and 82 fortnightly. This, in a country where literacy rate is less than 28 per cent. Most of them are aligned to political parties, are concentrated in Kathmandu and thrive on political rumours.

The freedom of information guaranteed by the Constitution is a big joke because of the state monopoly in the media, says Kishore Nepal, a noted columnist and editor.

The government's reluctance to surrender its monopoly on the media it controls became clear when it sponsored a Right to Information Bill which sought to severely curtail access to information. It authorised government officials to deny information to journalists on reports of commissions and other matters of 'public interest.'

Fortunately, the Bill was withdrawn after media criticisms. But the intent of the government is loud and clear.

—Depthnews Asia.

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.

Identity cards for voters

Sir, Correct use of right of franchise and holding of free and fair elections are the prerequisites to success of democracy, establishment of an accountable, transparent and efficient government. The more the system of administration, works and functions of the government are made people oriented, easy, simple and fool-proof the more the country is developed and prosperous and the more the people are happy, disciplined, well-off and contented.

After decades of sufferings, trials and tribulations we have stepped into the world of democracy. We would be falling in our duty and plunging into darkness once again if we do not take necessary steps from now on to institutionalise our hard earned democracy.

In this connection we feel that the first and the foremost requirement is to prepare an up-to-date voters' list regularly after every three years and to hold free and fair elections after every five years at local and national levels falling which all our dreams and efforts to make our country a welfare state would be nipped in the bud.

We strongly feel that issuance of Identity Cards with attested photograph of all the voters is imperative for holding

free, fair and peaceful elections in our country. The issuance of Identity Cards to the voters is now compulsory in most of the developed and successful democratic countries in the world. We can no longer sit idle and lag behind those countries in our own interest.

We understand that our Election Commission has undertaken a pilot project somewhere in Gazipur for issuing Identity Cards to all its voters. This is highly appreciated. But we feel that the Election Commission should intensify, expand and expedite their area of activity and issue Identity Cards to all the voters of the country as early as possible. Issuance of Identity Cards to all voters would undoubtedly help check malpractice, violence and bogus casting of votes and ensure peace and discipline in our country.

The Municipal election of the Metropolitan Dhaka is likely to be held in the 1st quarter of 1994. About 12,000 voters of Ward No 77 of Dhaka are keenly interested in having Identity Cards issued to them by the Election Commission before the end of this year. Would the Election Commission kindly look into the matter and fulfil the wishes of the voters?

O H Kabir and Md Zahid Hossain Dhaka-1203

Why no taxi service?

Sir, There are so many loopholes in the planning for boosting tourism — both foreign and domestic. Please note local tourists are included!

The Tourism Month is on, but there is no sign of metered taxis in the eight-million metropolis. What is more surprising is that there is no announcement by the government why a general ordinary common taxi service is not being introduced, or when the long-expected service would be available. We are waiting for three decades. The Govt can at least give the assurance that ordinary taxi service (with meter) would be available in the next century! Is it too tall a promise by the mighty government?

The mystery is that the public sector will not have to operate the service. Why the private sector is not being allowed to start the service? If there is no bar, then what are the problems in the private sector? If the initiative from the private sector is not forthcoming, then BPC can go in for a joint venture with some foreign car-maker to start a service. Then the private sector would get encouragement to pitch in.

The point to note is that the city's current economy makes the taxi service viable, provided meters are fitted, and telephone call service is available (no waiting, no searching). The excuse is not acceptable that the city's roads are overcrowded. The solution is easy: remove the unauthorized rickshaws from the municipal areas. The gov't is strangely too sensitive and scared to touch the rickshaws or talk about it (top secret is-

suel). Will the authority throw some light on the mystery of non-taxi service? Some coterie or vested group interested which is not in public interest? Tell us why and we shut up.

Alif Zabr Dhaka

Expedite policy on leather

Sir, The use of hide and skin of animals dates back to the dawn of civilization, when the ancient people put them on as apparel. With the passage of time, its use has been manifold. In spite of the glut of some kind of synthetic materials as substitute for leather, its importance in our daily life seems to be increasing day by day.

Bangladesh being an agrarian country has been the traditional home of such animals as cows, goats, buffaloes and sheep. These animals, as a matter of fact, provide almost 90% of the raw materials required for the tanning industries. Fortunately, the finished and crust leather made of hides and skins available in our country, owing to their qualitative distinction, has pretty good demand in the overseas market. Since our livestock population cannot be increased in the short run, there is the least possibility of increasing the total availability of finished and crust leather for export. The only convenient way that we have of increasing our export in this sector is diversification of production and export of more value-added articles.

Our cow hides, though thinner in substance and smaller in size, for their fine structure of fibre and grain, are very good

for manufacturing shoe-uppers, garments and several other items. Similarly, our goat skins, especially that of Kushtia, are acclaimed all over the world for their compact structure and perfect grain. The goat skins can produce the finest quality of leather which may be ideally used for making high class costly ladies shoes, handbags, handgloves, wallets and so on.

With a view to developing this sector of our economy, we ought to formulate a policy on leather and chalk out the ways and means to ensure export of leather products instead of exporting the finished and crust leather from our country.

We would therefore request our Ministry of Industries to kindly take necessary steps to formulate a pragmatic policy on leather as soon as possible in order to accelerate the growth of our export trade.

Nitin Roy Fakirerpoal, Dhaka

What's in a dress!

Sir, Some of our ministers, members of the parliament and other VIPs do prefer to appear in public meetings, seminars, government meetings, parliament and many other such solemn occasions not very properly dressed. Some time ago while a top minister was shown by the BTV discussing some matters of vital importance with a few foreign dignitaries, he was found wearing a multi-colour T-shirt. A lady guest who was incidentally present amongst us at that time suddenly burst into laughter; we were taken aback as she had been hardly found laughing in such a way. When asked, she drew my attention simultane-

ously to her bright printed saree and the T-shirt of the minister which looked as if made of the same cloth. Even a more elderly minister is often found in too bright-colour youngmen's jacket. Aren't these to funny? I wonder, if they follow the old dictum 'Eat to please thyself, but dress to please other'. I am afraid they have miserably failed in their intention. For a dignified person, the dress should also be dignified.

Our honourable lady Prime Minister has chosen a dignified style to dress herself. Can't our ministers and MPs follow suit to be more befitting to their esteemed positions apparently?

K R Zakhrmi Khulna

Ektara

Sir, I have gone through the write-up Ms Rafiqat Binte Rashid under the caption 'A Pied-Piper of Modern Times' published in your esteemed daily on 06.11.93.

Ms Rashid point out that Bacchu Miah, the grandfather of Nuru Miah, the pied-piper, is the actual innovator of one-string violin (commonly known as Ektara) which is not all true. One-string violin or Ektara is a traditional folk instrument, usually used by the bauls of the northern districts. Maybe, Bacchu Miah added some interesting features to this violin. These types of Ektara, dotara, that are the life blood of our folk songs and bear unique characteristics, are often appreciated by the foreigners.

Kazi Nasim Ahmed 131/2, Malibagh 1st Lane Dhaka-1217.