

Hopes for the New Year

We wish our readers, patrons and advertisers the very best of the coming year. It was another year of 'steady as she goes' for Bangladesh, without anything of significance happening either in the positive or in the negative sense.

In the political arena, the supported-by-all and subverted-by-all issue of a national consensus on a core development agenda remained as elusive as ever.

Parliament limped its way forward, gathering steam and momentum in some respects, but continuing in its uneventful path in most others.

As for the economic health of the country, the signals, at best, are mixed. We have an impressive low inflation record, which has served the consumers well.

To draw an overall conclusion from the experiences of the year just past, we continue to live on a day-to-day formula without showing the type of boldness and creativity that our development challenge requires.

However mediocre our performance was during 1993, there are definite signs that our economy is likely to pick up in the coming year.

Palliatives won't Do

To head off a further deterioration in the administrative crisis that looked impending enough with threats of more Prochrichi strikes, the government has made a dramatic overture towards the agitating cadres.

Although the full numerical implication of the move is not instantly clear, it is likely to be quite considerable much as the financial obligation being taken on by the government appears to be equally as formidable.

The Prochrichi-BCS (admn) conflict, deepseated as it is, cannot be addressed tactically, it has to be sorted out professionally. The facts have to be faced. Prochrichi's principal demand related to rationalising the working equations between the specialists and the generalists.

We have plenty of recommendations in hand to embark upon service reorganisation on democratic lines without any further loss of time.

The government has erred, we should like to think, on the side of anxiety in taking the partial move it has to end the Prochrichi agitation.

A threat to resign from parliament by the opposition leader, formation of special committees, walkouts and the usual bouts that go with democracy as well as repeated calls and vows for strengthening the parliament to reflect people's hopes and aspirations featured the year's parliamentary proceedings.

Even in the 12th session of Jatiya Sangsad that ended on December 8, Leader of the House Khaleida Zia expressed the hope that the parliament in future would be more lively, more effective.

The Prime Minister has to prove that it is not mere lip-service to the cause for a better parliament. The bill providing for the establishment of an independent parliament secretariat to render the parliament effective has been lying long with the law minister.

An independent parliament secretariat will not just meet the requirements of the parliament, it is a constitutional obligation for the government to establish one as article 79 (1) of the Constitution spells out that "Parliament shall have its own secretariat."

The bill was brought by Chief Whip Khandkar Delwar Hossain of the ruling party in 1992. It was sent to the Law Ministry for approval and got stuck there. Since then in every session when the opposition presses the issue, it is said that this bill will be ready for the next session.

The fifth national parliament of Bangladesh has many significant characteristics. Firstly, this parliament was formed through an election rated as the most impartial hustings the country has ever seen.

The fifth parliament has set a record in its duration as compared to previous parliaments. The 12 session of this parliament ended on December 8 after transacting business for 12 days.

PARLIAMENT SESSIONS Long in Duration, Short on Results

while no other parliament could meet for more than eight sessions, the 2002 parliament, however, had 206 working days.

The first session of 1993, the eighth of the parliament, began on January 3. It is traditional in the parliament of Bangladesh that the president inaugurates the first session of the year.

JP boycotted the House on the ground that the party leaders and workers were being oppressed by the government. AL did not make it clear why it staged the boycott but later at a press briefing party leaders stated that they boycotted the House as they knew that the president would dwell on the successes of BNP rather than the problems and crisis of the country.

The most important discussion of the session was held on the demolition of the Babri Mosque by Hindu zealots in India. After four days of discussion the House adopted a resolution on January 20 condemning the destruction of the 16th century mosque and demanding that it be rebuilt and communal harmony restored there.

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207 working days of the fifth parliament. Though this session was of 32 working days, the discussions were hardly concrete. No decision was made in the parliament that would contribute in anyway to the welfare of the people.

The second session of 1993, the fifth parliament's ninth, began on May 9 and ended on May 13, lasting only for five days. Only the Farakka issue was discussed. This session was held simply to meet constitutional requirements as the Twelfth Constitution Amendment made it obligatory for the parliament to go into a session within 60 days.

The most important session of 1993 was its third, the fifth parliament's tenth. This was the budget session. It began on June 6 and ended July 15, having 31 working days. A lot of work was done in this session and valuable time of the House was not wasted in idle debate.

Other important topics like the flood and relief programme in Greater Sylhet was also discussed. Alongside these routine discussions, certain topics sprouted up and proved to be considerably significant. The ministers' accountability to the parliament was made clear.

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accusations during general discussions on the budget. As the minister challenged Tofael to offer proof of his corruption, Tofael accepted the challenge confidently.

On July 6 the Speaker formed a 15-member committee to investigate the corruption charges against the minister. Though the committee was formed, till date it has not been able to reach a decision concerning its terms of reference.

Another constitutional question gave rise to a lively debate in the House during the tenth session. Sudhangshu Shekhar Haldar of AL initiated the debate on the very first day of the session. Though the House stated that the Speaker would give a ruling on the duties of head of the state while President Abdur Rahman Biswas was abroad, he eventually did not make any such ruling.

Interestingly, during this session the leader of the opposition was away from the country and the leader of the House hardly turned up in parliament. But with the two deputy leaders of the respective sides the session ran excellently and the absence of the leaders was hardly felt.

The eleventh session was neither long nor noteworthy. It began on September 11 and was prorogued on September 26, having had 12 working days. On the first day of the session demands were placed for future general elections to be held under a caretaker gov-

ernment. Violence having taken place in various universities of the country during this session led to heated debate in the parliament. At one stage members of both the Opposition and Treasury Bench demanded a ban on Jamaat-Shibir politics.

Jute, poverty alleviation, a constitutional provision and other issues were discussed in the House. The government was accused of violating the Constitution by having a large number of non-MPs in the Cabinet. The Constitution has a provision that non-MPs cannot constitute more than one tenth of the Cabinet.

However, on September 13 three members of parliament joined the cabinet, two as full ministers and one as a state minister. The government party said that it was internationally recognised that if the number was more than five, there was no problem.

The last session of 1993 began on November 21 and ended on December 8, having a total of 12 working days. Even persons not interested in politics and parliament were perturbed as it seemed to be disintegrating. The uncertainty was created by a threat of Opposition Leader Sheikh Hasina to resign from Parliament.

On November 7 at a public rally in Dhaka the Prime Minister made a somewhat disparaging comment regarding the parliament and its members. Reacting to this, 27 MPs submitted separate notices alleging breach of their privilege.

Speaker Sheikh Razzak Ali at first accepted the notice against the MP's remarks to be discussed in parliament and even fixed a date for the discussion. On November 24 when the Speaker accepted the notice against the Leader of the Opposition, the trouble began.

A unique characteristic of Bangladesh's Constitution is that it contains clear-cut rules concerning the form, work and authority of local government institutions. And the Twelfth Amendment made the local gov-

ernment institutions all the more important.

The LGRD and Cooperatives Minister placed a bill concerning the zila parishad structure in the budget session. The bill provided that the zila parishad chairman would be elected by indirect vote. Another provision in the bill held that two men and one woman from every thana would be elected to the zila parishad by the union parishad chairman and members.

The government again took initiative to pass this bill during the twelfth session. Prime Minister Khaleida Zia, however, asked that excessive importance not be attached to the zila parishad issue.

On December 7 when the bill was included in the order of the day it faced vehement opposition from Awami League, Jatiya Party and Jamaat. The opposition members recommended that zila parishad members be voted directly by the people.

While general discussions and debates take place in the House, these actually are supposed to be dealt with by the various committees. That means supervising work of various ministries, scrutinizing every law before it is placed in the House etc.

For example, during the fourth session which continued from January 4 to February 18, 1992, the House accepted a proposal of the then independent MP Nurul Islam Moni (later he joined BNP) for having coastal guards to maintain law and order in the coastal region.

In the five sessions of 1993, the parliament has met for 94 working days. A lot of people's taxes have been spent on this. On March 13, 1993 Deputy Leader of the House Professor Badruddoza Chowdhury said that the expenditure of the parliament was Taka 10 lac per day.

Prepared by PROBE News Agency



Not a Bad Year on the Diplomatic Front

by M Anwarul Haq and Asiuzzaman

feets on the economy and environment of Bangladesh. The pledges made by India at the time of commissioning the Farakka Barrage remain unfulfilled to date.

The Farakka Barrage has become an issue of life and death for us," Prime Minister Begum Zia told the foreign leaders at the UN, adding that "due to the obstruction of natural flow at Farakka a process of desertification is evident throughout the northern and western parts of Bangladesh."

This was for the first time a head of government of Bangladesh made such a critical statement against its neighbour India.

Because of the statement, India has expressed its unhappiness by saying that it is a bilateral issue and a process is on to solve it. To India, Bangladesh has

unnecessarily drummed up the issue by placing it at the United Nations.

Experts, however, feel that Bangladesh had no option but to raise the water issue at the UN, as it was influenced by the people's sentiment, which happens to be one of the determinants of foreign policy directions elsewhere, too.

He, however, disagreed with the way the country presented it to the international forum.

"It should have been placed before the international body in a very organised way," he said requesting anonymity. He said that Bangladesh should have done the ground-work by consulting friendly countries by way of seeking their support before raising the issue at the UN.

The researcher said that the relation between the two countries would not be seriously affected because of Bangladesh's stand on the issue was prompted by India's 'slow diplomacy'. The Prime Minister's visit to Nepal has been considered as a follow-up step.

Relations with another neighbour Myanmar became strained over the issue of some 250,000 refugees who took shelter in the makeshift camps in Cox's Bazar and Rangamati.

According to diplomatic sources, considerable progress has been made to settle the tribal refugees issue with India. India now seems to resolve the issue. Several rounds of talks with the Indian authorities and the PCJSS have paved way for the repatriation of several thousands tribal refugees living in different camps in the Indian state of Tripura.

Sadako Ogata and a Myanmar minister. Repatriation began under an agreement between the two countries. Some 50,000 refugees have returned to their homeland under supervision of the UNHCR but the diplomatic circles termed the progress slow.

The major credentials Bangladesh earned from regional diplomatic circles was the holding of the twice-postponed Seventh SAARC Summit in Dhaka. The summit was originally scheduled for December, 1992 but stumbled because of communal violence that flared up in the region following Babri Mosque demolition in India.

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has made its contribution to the turn of events there. India has also withdrawn its so-called 'push-back' programme under which several hundred Bengali speaking people were sought to be pushed across the Bangladesh border.

During the year, Bangladesh participated in a number of peacekeeping mission under UN umbrella. The country has participated in monitoring elections in Namibia, policing ceasefire in the Gulf, clearing mines and contributing to reconstruction in Kuwait, and also assisted UN peace mission in Cambodia, Somalia and Mozambique.

Bangladesh has also participated in the summits of different international organisations like non-aligned movement and the Commonwealth.

The foreign policy experts gave a split opinion over last year's diplomatic performances but all agreed that the year 1993 was a turning point for Bangladesh in terms of foreign policy.

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.

"The resignation threat"

Sir, May I refer to the letter under the above headline which appeared in these columns on December 10, 93 describing the threat of resignation by the leader of the Opposition as "causing an unnecessary ripple of anxiety through out the nation."

tain rights and duties. Hence isn't it the more the frequency of election the more the existence of democracy?

Indeed election is the true test of democracy and stability of a government. Neither the ruling party nor the opposition parties should be afraid of having to face an election, if there is the need. In the present context, the ruling party might say that due to frequent hartals nothing could be done. The opposition parties might say that the ruling party is not only doing any reformative works but it is also blocking the opposition initiatives in the Parliament.

In the UK the Conservatives are in power for quite some times. The opposition parties both in India and Pakistan are sharing powers alternately. The stability of these countries have not been eroded by the holding of general elections. In the United States, the Republicans had held power for a considerable period of time. Before that the Democrats were in power for more than two decades. Hence an election should not frustrate neither the party in power nor those in the opposition.

General economy of a country will boom only when stability of the government is assured. And stability can be ensured only through elections when the people would have the feelings of involvement with the government and its policies. It is through the elections that the policies are tested.

It is for this reason that the constitution framers of all countries make provisions such as "Unless sooner dissolved by the President, Parliament stands

dissolved on the expiration of the period of five years from the date of its first meeting."

Under the Parliamentary form of government the Prime Minister appears to have the privilege and the power to advise the President to dissolve the Parliament. The leader of the Opposition also, albeit by implication, has the privilege and the right to agree with or protest against such an advice of the Prime Minister. It all depends on the situation and context of the particular decision.

To uphold democracy and, for that matter, stability of the country, money should not pose a problem. Indeed compared with the expenditures of the government in other sectors, the cost of holding elections is not that much. Election will give the government the mandate to carry on its programmes more effectively. The neighbouring Pakistan and India are holding frequent elections without jeopardising their stability. The economic policies of both of these countries have been further boosted.

There is, therefore, no need for any anxiety at the prospect of a general election if both the major parties feel so. Indeed the recent utterances of the prime minister and the leader of the opposition might serve as signals that something is wrong somewhere which needs to be corrected.

Khairuzzaman Kalabagan, Dhaka

BAU exam

Sir, On the pressure of the students, the Vice Chancellor of Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU), Mymensingh recently announced the cancellation and re-holding of Plant Pathology (theory) examination of Part-III B.Sc. Ag. (Hons) which was held on 4.12.93. The examinees demanded cancellation and re-examination of the paper because, according to them, the question was not common. On the other hand, Plant Pathology (theory) exam on the same question paper was held peacefully in all the three Agri Colleges of the country in-

cluding Bangladesh Agricultural Institute (BAI), Dhaka.

The Bangladesh Agricultural Institute Teachers' Association, in an emergency meeting, bitterly criticised the decision of cancellation and re-holding of the said exam. The meeting observed with dissatisfaction that in case of Agricultural Colleges, the BAU hardly deviates from its stand even on any genuine ground of the formers'. Most of the time the BAU avoids taking steps in favour of the Agri Colleges on the plea of constraints in BAU's ordinance. This decision on exam would not only adversely affect the academic system but will also create instances for the students of Agri Colleges, which are running under the academic control of BAU. It may be mentioned here that BAU is the sole authority for setting course curricula, question papers and examining the scripts.

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