

Who Makes Strikes Unavoidable?

No medicine were available anywhere in the nation for an incredible span of 48 hours. The pharmacists were on strike on Monday and Tuesday. On Wednesday started the nationwide three-day physicians' and surgeons' strike led by the Bangladesh Medical Association. Ours is not a nation with an ideal medicare cover. Proper scientific treatment of diseases and injuries here is a matter of both money and luck. For long five days even money and luck would not do. The nation must suffer through a complete medical blackout for 120 hours. One very naturally would shudder at the thought of a power blackout of a similar duration. If we are going to take in our stride the health blackout without as much as a public protest is it because we put less value on life, specially if it is our own people's, than we do on machines and facilities and comforts? We, for one, do protest this most unacceptable situation clamped on the society.

Who should we protest to? Whom should we condemn as the agency responsible for consigning the society to such misery? The doctor's calling, by its involvement with man's life and death and suffering, is so delicately placed as to make its practitioners vulnerable to social expectations and exactions other sections are not generally subject to. The society expects the doctors to be caring about that special position and not act or react like office or industrial workers. The 21-point demands, for the realisation of which they are now on a lengthy strike, are too general to be made the butt of a drastic nationwide action programme. And the conjunction of the strike with similar programmes of the pharmacists and the Prokichi has worked to show it in a most unkindly — almost cruel — light. In spite of all this, we would rather address our protest to the government and not to the doctors.

If indeed BMA has been rash and wrong about their strike decision, what did the government do to persuade them out of it? The question is very simple: who is in charge here — BMA or the government of Bangladesh? The nation has been subjected to an unrelenting 120-hour medical blackout. Whose business was it to protect the nation from such positive harm? We want to be assured that the government knows its job and can differentiate between browbeating into capitulation what to them might be a wayward band of professionals and pushing the nation to a catastrophe by deliberate inaction.

We have censured many a strike programmes maintaining that recourse to this ultimate measure tends to make the society come off at its important joints of cohesion and collective action. And governance is undermined in irreparable measures. Having exhausted our quiverful of admonitions on the strike-minded sections, we now want to identify one very compelling factor contributing to most of these unfortunate strikes. The government's has been a very major role in the making of many such strikes. There is a long history of government imperviousness to suggestions of even the most urgently necessary redressal measures — and of retractions from agreed positions. There are so many of such cases and of such flagrant nature of obduracy and unfairness that the different sections of citizenry have been left with no choice but to go for the ultimate. The doctors' strike or for that matter the pharmacists' or the one that is certain to come by way of teachers' resistance to government's tinkering with the University Ordinance '73 are no exceptions to that.

Now that the strike is here, what precisely is the duty of the government? That it is off with the minimum of toll in life and suffering. How would they do it? One test that can be applied to measure the relevance — and ultimately the fairness — of the doctors' demands consists in determining whether what they are clamouring for are geared to ensuring health for all by 2000. If this criterion is broadly met, we do not see why some no-nonsense dialogue cannot ensue between the two sides in all earnestness to spare the society an irreparable damage.

No to Acid Throwing

Shukla Dey, a student of class X of Manikganj Girls High School, became yet another victim of acid throwing on Thursday night. Her death three days later at Dhaka Medical College Hospital has sent shock waves across the town she hailed from, if not across the nation. But the mourning apart by the people of her native town, the protests have been highly vociferous against the inhuman cruelty to which a girl in the prime of her life succumbed. Clearly, Shukla's death has given a tug at the people's heart like the death of Shab Meher — another young victim of sexual perversion — did a few years back.

Acid throwing appears to have staged a comeback after quite a welcome respite. The fact that its spree once took this society of ours by storm should be a rude reminder for everyone, particularly the government. No palliatives but the provision for capital punishment for the crime — made earlier on — was actually responsible for reducing the incidents of acid throwing. Armed with this legal provision, judges were able to mete out the harshest punishment possible under the relevant act. And that seems to have made all the differences in the amorous advances of the depraved Romeos.

Shukla's premature death at the hands of such desperate and deranged sex-perverts has once again opened up an issue that was thought to be closed. For one thing, we would like to know where do the acid throwers get the highly sensitive substance from? Acid should not normally be available at any shop at the street corner. Somehow some people manage to get it out of its usual protective range. A stricter control over its sale and use can perhaps be of tremendous help in curbing the incidents of acid throwing.

Together with stricter enforcement of the law in case of such sexual aberration, highly regulated and discreet use of acids can certainly bring about some improvement in the situation. But this is not likely to be enough to completely do away with this devilish practice. Since the crime actually takes place in the impressionable minds, the cure must be brought about in the mental make-up. Otherwise, the successes — legal or otherwise — cannot be held for long, as it has happened this time around. Impressionable minds have both advantages and disadvantages. A healthy society free of dogmatism, taboos and superstitions can easily help its younger generation to come out of its excessive sexual obsession and its consequent tragedies. Right type of education and entertainment, sports included, can do the miracle. The predatory nature of the youths explains; more than anything else, society's failure on this count.

M-E Peace Accord Remains Unimplemented

The ensuing Taba talks seem to be very crucial as another breakdown may risk the entire peace accord. In such an event PLO is mainly to lose. PLO stands particularly alone in the Arab world after the Gulf war. By going all alone for the peace accord with Israel, it has again incurred the wrath of the radical Palestinians and many in the Arab world.

THE "Sacred" deadline of December 13 for implementation of the M-East peace accord on Palestinian self-rule passed off and not even a symbolic action on Israeli withdrawal was taken on the ground. At the conclusion of his last meeting with Prime Minister Rabin in Cairo on December 12, Chairman Arafat realized that Palestinian self-rule could not start from his "sacred" date of December 13. After all Rabin is the occupier and until he makes a move Arafat must wait. This failure on the part of Israel — may be PLO is partly responsible, has left Arafat still weaker and indeed strengthened the hands of the "enemies of peace". Even those who were marginally in favour of peace got grounds for doubt. Israeli intention. Violence increased in the occupied territories which left about 70 Arabs and Jews dead, several hundred injured since the peace accord was signed in September '93 in Washington. Indeed, Israel called in more troops to quell the violence and thus Rabin went one step backward in terms of implementation of the peace accord.

The peace negotiators were, however, aware of the vulnerability of the peace accord as there were "enemies of peace" on both sides — the radical Palestinians and rightist Israelis and settlers. As it seems, both parties in the negotiations and particularly Palestinians wanted to have the breakthrough by setting only the principles and not getting involved in details which could have risked the peace accord itself. Probably it was the right approach; it was necessary to pin down the Israeli government to the principles of Israeli pull-out from the occupied territories. It was the right time and environment as the Israeli government itself was visibly serious and had the support of the majority Israeli people and also the Knesset to seriously go for the peace with the Arabs — starting first with

the important enemy — the Palestinians. The Palestinians also saw it as the right opportunity to go for the peace all alone as they were indeed left alone in the Arab world after the Gulf war. This suited Israel as it always wanted to deal with Arabs separately one by one in line with the Camp-David accord.

However, as the US and the world community witnessed the signing of the peace accord in Washington and committed themselves to the M-East peace, they are obliged to see it properly implemented. It is now somewhat odd particularly for the US to detect "loose ends" in the peace document and ask Israel and PLO to tie them up. As the US is an active partner in the peace process, it must engage itself to help untie the knots as the peace accord now appears to be in jeopardy. Both radical Palestinian groups and the rightist Israelis and particularly the Israeli settlers are set to undo the peace accord. Both Israeli government and PLO must do everything possible to stem the violence in the occupied territories. PLO has distanced itself from the Palestinians who are engaged in the violence. Israeli authorities have reportedly issued orders to the Military to deal effectively with the settlers, but there is no surety that Israeli soldiers will ever be in a position to take stern action against the settlers. Some Israeli troops said that they would indeed leave the army before they take action against Israeli settlers. A former Chief Rabbi of Israel Shlomo Goren said 'Israeli soldiers must disobey any order to evacuate Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza strip asserting that the 'Law of Moses overshadows Government policies in

the Jewish state'. Though his remarks were denounced by the Israeli cabinet, Rabbi's words will have considerable influence on troops and settlers.

The series of talks between PLO and Israelis in Cairo and Taba have not been able to parrow down the differences between the two parties. Indeed the latest round of talks between Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and PLO's Mahmud Abbas which was set to reach a common position on three major issues — control of border crossings into self rule areas, security arrangements

tioned the reliability of the PLO and its Chairman, Yasser Arafat. Prime Minister Rabin also said — 'he was in no hurry and would let the Palestinians "sweat" before resuming talks'. Again, Rabin has the upper hand as the occupier and he can question Arafat's reliability but Rabin should also keep in mind that he had let December 13 pass without any pull out action. Therefore, Arafat can also question Rabin's reliability as a peace partner.

However, it is encouraging that both sides have now agreed to sit down again in Taba, Egypt

sition in Israel is precarious. It has very little possibility of getting majority in the Knesset if a general election takes place. The support of religious and rightist parties, remain uncertain after all the violence in the wake of the peace accord. If Rabin faces a parliamentary defeat in the Knesset election he would not lose much except that he would miss the Nobel Peace Award as a co-partner of Arafat but PLO's chance of getting self-rule, hopefully the first step towards the statehood, would virtually be nil if Likud takes over. The present Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu very clearly said recently that 'if his Likud Party were to return to power he would feel no obligation to honour the present Labour Government's agreement with the Palestinian Liberation Organization. He made it abundantly clear that 'he would not be bound by PLO accord'. Thus PLO's effort should be to get as much as possible under the present situation; the aim should be to find a place within the occupied territories with the internationally recognized authority to rule. The bigger size of the area of self-rule is important but not a must. When the target is to recover almost the entire occupied territory, may be over a period, then a few kilometers should not make much of a difference.

On the border crossing, however, PLO should have the overall authority, but again it must recognize the limitations imposed under the self-rule principles. Joint control seems to be the only alternative now, but for determination of entry of any Palestinian in to the self-rule area, the PLO must have the final say.

The security aspect appears more sensitive as the settlers have refused to be under Palestinian Police force. There again some joint control has to be set up initially and Palestinian Police force should cooperate fully with Israeli forces to build up confidence among the settlers. Once settlers feel safe Israeli forces may withdraw.

But above all, PLO's leadership must try to maintain the credibility it earned before Washington peace accord. PLO leadership appears divided — main reason seems to be Arafat's "autocratic" way of handling policy issues and directing the negotiations and also dealing with political and administrative issues of the proposed self-rule areas. The recent Palestinian delegation from the occupied territories to PLO Chairman clearly expressed its frustration over these developments. Two types of Palestinian leadership have emerged — one in the occupied territories with the knowledge and experience of the problems of the occupied areas — the other in Tunis which deals with the overall political issues relating to liberation of Palestinian homeland. The latter group of leadership has limited knowledge of the problems in the occupied territories. However, it is encouraging to note that Arafat has "agreed in principle" to loosen his grip on policy issues and involve as many as possible from the occupied territories. This may restore PLO's credibility and thus help strengthen its negotiating position with Israel. This is important to get the best deal in the self-rule talks.

(The author who is the President of North-South University, the first private University in Bangladesh, apologizes to the readers for his inability to contribute under his column in the month of December as he was away to the USA in connection with his University work.)

SPOTLIGHT ON MIDDLE EAST

Muslehuddin Ahmad

for Israeli settlers and self rule area of Jericho — created a crisis of confidence between Israeli and PLO leadership. PLO and Israeli negotiators reportedly reached some form of understanding — indeed 'meeting of minds' on these three major issues in their talks in Cairo in the last week of December reflecting joint control of border crossings and 60 sq km as the size of self rule areas of Jericho. PLO's demand was around 150 sq km. Later PLO headquarters in Tunis denied any understanding on these issues. Reportedly Chairman Arafat by a fax to Prime Minister Rabin indicated own position on these issues which were different from those "agreed" upon in Cairo. PLO office also said that the document was only the Israeli position paper for consideration in Cairo meeting. This enraged Israeli leadership and they refused to have any further talks with PLO on these issues. Reportedly Rabin ques-

tioned the reliability of the PLO and its Chairman, Yasser Arafat. Prime Minister Rabin also said — 'he was in no hurry and would let the Palestinians "sweat" before resuming talks'. Again, Rabin has the upper hand as the occupier and he can question Arafat's reliability but Rabin should also keep in mind that he had let December 13 pass without any pull out action. Therefore, Arafat can also question Rabin's reliability as a peace partner.

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LOOKING INTO 1994 — THE AMERICAS

South Faces a Big Test for Democracy

Kevin J Kelley writes from Washington

The new year sees tighter economic and political ties between North and South America. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which took effect on January 1, will be a key factor. The pact gradually eliminates tariff barriers between the US, Canada and Mexico. Meantime, South America starts the year free of dictatorship for the first time in history. Will it survive?



BILL CLINTON
Economic headaches

constitutional 'normalcy'. President Alberto Fujimori is believed capable of carrying out another 'self-coup' at any time. His previous suppression of the legislative branch, with the backing of military, proved a popular move among segments of society disgusted by governmental corruption and terrified by guerrilla violence.

Some analysts suggest that the 'Fujimori model,' as it is sometimes termed, might inspire similar usurpations elsewhere in Latin America. Indeed, a 'self-coup' of sorts was attempted in 1992 in Guatemala, a country that faces many of the same problems as Peru.

Corruption does appear rampant in many nations in the region. The incidence of official misconduct may actually be increasing, due in part to the get-rich-quick mentality that is often a by-product of moves toward economic liberalisation.

At the same time, public tolerance for corruption seems to have diminished. It may be that the poor, now less fearful of government repression, are becoming more inclined to denounce misdeeds in high places as their own economic circumstances grow comparatively more miserable.

The peaceful removal from office of two presidents implicated in corruption scandals has heartened Latin American democrats. Those achievements in Brazil and Venezuela do not guarantee that constitutional processes will be respected whenever and wherever similar

crises arise. Latin America's relatively recent commitment to democratic governance has not yet fully supplanted the long tradition of military takeovers.

In Washington, President Bill Clinton will keep a close eye on political developments throughout a region that is steadily growing in economic importance to the US. In 1994, as in 1993, Clinton will surely try to focus on domestic problems, even though the world may once again divert his attention.

The prevalence of violent crime will occupy a central spot on Clinton's agenda for the coming year. His sensitive political antennae are telling the President that the country as a whole is starting to undergo a major shift in its attitudes and mores.

Forms of social behaviour that not long ago were widely accepted among liberal opinion-moulders are coming to be seen as intolerable. Jesse Jackson's current crusade against black-on-black violence, with its attendant demands that young African-Americans exercise self-discipline, is but one sign of a growing resurgence of traditional values.

The looming debate on reforming the US welfare system will ensure that issues of personal responsibility are further addressed in 1994. Competing proposals for overhauling health care financing and delivery will likewise preoccupy political leaders and the general public in the new year.

Along with the outcome of these policy battles, the state of the US economy will do much to determine the winners of the congressional elections next autumn.

Clinton's Democratic Party had a rough ride in 1993, losing every major contest from the mayoral campaigns in New York and Los Angeles to governor's or US Senate races in Texas, New Jersey and Virginia.

While it is unlikely that the Republicans can capture control of the Senate in 1994, the loss of even a few Democratic seats will cause severe political headaches for Clinton during the second half of his four-year term.

The President is hoping that the successful conclusion of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) would pact will provide the anticipated boost for the US economy. Nationwide unemployment rates are already dropping as the new year begins, but some regions, including politically potent California, are still experienc-

ing little growth. The continuing economic malaise in the nation's biggest state accounts, to some degree, for the high priority Clinton is assigning to US economic relations with East Asia. California's ports and high-tech industries are likely to prosper if trans-Pacific trade expands significantly in the coming year.

Japan, China and the Korean peninsula will thus continue to be focal points of US foreign policy. The Asian dynamism still show little willingness to follow the freer trade course that Clinton continues to advocate.

Given the bitter experience of intervention in Somalia, it is unlikely that US troops will be dispatched to Third World or Eastern European trouble spots in 1994. Aerial bombardments, because they involve much less risk of US casualties, cannot be ruled out, especially in the case of Iraq.

The Middle East and Russia are sure to remain in the forefront of US geo-political thinking. The sub-Saharan region, on the other hand, with the exception of South Africa, will once again be relegated to the State Department's list of secondary concerns.

Western Europeans must be wondering whether they will not be placed in the same category in 1994, as the US steadily shifts its economic and political orientation in the direction of Latin America and East Asia.

— GEMINI NEWS
KEVIN J KELLEY is Editor of the international affairs journal Toward Freedom.

OPINION For an All-party Government

The recent very courageous move by nine members of the Janata Party in the Indian Parliament in joining the government, is a commendable move in the right direction. They sank their differences in taking this step by which the Government achieved absolute majority. The government will now be able to move slowly towards planned targets unhampered by Opposition clamouring and speaking. We would, however, propose a step further — to look for consensus — and achieve a national all party government.

At a juncture in history when most standards and values in the world appear to be in the melting pot — the breaking up of the Soviet Union, the unification of the two Germanys, disruption and disintegration in some East European states have placed severe strains on the Western world generally. The time may not be far off when these events will cast a shadow on our own prospects and expectations. Reduction and/or drying up of foreign aid may be a direct result. We must therefore undertake every means and strategy to safeguard our national identity and work steadily towards attaining a self-reliant and self-sufficient economy.

In this view of things, what is better than the formation of a national government, in which all parties may join hands for the national good? Doubtless, a wealth of talent exists in each party, and all these can be brought together to work out and execute plans for the national interest. The 21st century, just around the corner, is likely to throw up daunting problems. For all those in the political arena — whether in the government or the opposition, they have an onerous duty to examine the situation and spare a thought in the above lines to prepare a united front. In your esteemed paper, of 9th January, while reporting on the dismal prospects of privatisation of industries proposed by the government, similar sentiments were expressed: 'Total commitment of the government and the opposition is needed to make the privatisation drive a success.' Our suggestion is to take this idea a step further and embrace all essential and important nation-building matters. The Western nations have taken great heed of the situation and are taking quick steps to join hands in facing the eventualities: e.g. NAFTA, the European Economic Community and others. We should not stand on the sidelines when great opportunities for constructive action come by. Enlightened decision now will pave the way for a bright and prospectus future.

Syed Zahur Hosain
Guilshan, Dhaka

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.

AIDS and religion

Sir, An ad in your esteemed daily given out by the Bureau of Health Education, Directorate of Health on 1st of December '93, on the occasion of World AIDS Day, has raised a few questions in me. It instructs people to follow religious directives to avoid the scourge of AIDS. The exact language used by the ad says "dharmiyon anushasan mene chalu" (follow the tenets of religion) in Bangla. It has also given some other health related precautionary advices to avoid contamination.

Now, I would like to know from the learned doctors (or should it be religious doctors?) of the Directorate of Health as

to what religion they are referring to when they advise people to follow the directives of religion? As many as four major religions are practiced by the people of the country. Adherence to the tenets of which one of them would help people? Besides, I would also like to know exactly what those directives (anushasan) say about AIDS? If the ad is making an oblique reference to 'homosexuality' then I would say that homosexuality is as old as human existence in this planet, but AIDS, unfortunately is a comparatively new disease to afflict mankind. I am also not sure as to what exactly the major religions of the world say specifically about homosexuality. Some of the world's de-

veloped countries have either taken steps to or have already legalized homosexuality. Are these countries doing something which is in conflict with basic tenets of religion? I don't think so.

I would also like to know how would one categorize homosexuality? Is that a disease or an aberration or a human condition which is there since the beginning of life on earth and is going to stay as long as the world exists? Besides, does not modern science say something about there being a trace, in rudimentary form, of bisexuality in all human beings? I also know that occasional homosexual behaviours are observed in animals, specially in some primates. What is the incidence of AIDS in them?

What intrigues me in why the Health Directorate had given the point regarding religion top priority. They had drawn special attention of people by mentioning that 'following religious directives is the easiest way to live an AIDS-free life.' Is that the real

truth about AIDS? Can a deeply religious man abiding by all the religious directives avoid AIDS if an ignorant but religious doctor or para-medical uses a used injection syringe on him?

A Z M Abdul Ali
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Sylhet lemons

Sir, A wide variety of lemons are produced in greater Sylhet area. Some of them such as 'Ada', 'Satkara', 'Thakkar', 'Sasni', 'Kata' etc. are produced only in this area. But gradually these are becoming scarce and may some time become extinct. Hence I request the Horticulture Department to take initiative for their preservation and multiplication through some nurseries in Sylhet area. These proposed nurseries should sell the saplings and grafts at a nominal price to the general public.

Such a measure will be highly appreciated by the people. Will the Horticulture Department look into it?
Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury
Dhaka Cantonment.