

Death by Playful Ignorance

It was mind-boggling, grotesque and heart-rending. Those nine killed in an instant body count and two dozen others injured with burns, lacerations and severed parts in a gas balloon cylinder explosion, have written a message in bold, bloody letters. It reads: how cheap human lives have become in a rabbits-of-a-warren situation! It is of course not the melee that caused the accident but a good part of the same has fallen victim to it nonetheless. Overcrowding in a populous city like Dhaka cannot be wished away though the obvious and the hidden dangers to civic life certainly can be minimised.

The tragedy is, however much one may try to keep out of the harm's way in Dhaka city, dangers lurk all around — these stalking everybody's footsteps.

There were all sorts of ominous possibilities with that kind of making a living — gas balloon vending. The formula used by the vendor to make hydrogen gas — a solution of aluminium sulphate and sodium hydroxide is a crude improvisation. Some light smoke oozing out of the cylinder opening, the gas balloon seller took it to the nearby hydrant and poured some water into it. Contrary to amateur thinking, the boiling inside of the cylinder in contact with water, far from cooling off, exploded with a din heard within a radius of a kilometre, to say nothing of the blood splotches and human tissue fragments on high walls.

Fiddling with this gas comes under the mischief of the Explosives Act. This is as much of

fensive as the making of bombs, molotov cocktails, grenades and the like. How the gas vendors were being allowed to do business with such a highly inflammable substance without any check whatsoever, surprises everybody. They have been the purveyors of a trade they had picked up from self-proclaimed *ustads*. This bunch of novices played with something that trained scientists, because of their knowledge, will not dare. A chemical mix of remotely that kind would not be attempted in-less-than-ideal laboratory conditions.

We wake up to something dangerous after we have lost several lives to it. Despite the cylinder blast of a couple of years ago in the city we let this risky fun continue. No tests were officially carried out as to the formula the gas vendors were using, on the availability of a meter to gauge the pressure. Above all, who gave the vendors an authorization to do the business? The mayor has, of course, in an order prohibited the use of cylinders for selling gas balloons from now on. All this brings up the impelling necessity for some authority to zero in on other dangerous forms of making a living.

There is an allied aspect that relates to domestic gas cylinders in some district towns or the *tineel gas* corrections in Dhaka. These need to be switched off when no cooking is on. Any callous indifference to a live gas connection could be lethal. Even without the flame on the burner, the highly inflammable methane, leaking through the nozzle, could invisibly mix with the air in the kitchen to an explosive point. A match stick unmindfully lighted could start a hell-fire.

The Mosquito First

Mayor Mohammad Hanif has as yet not got into the exercise of choosing which of the hundred and odd ways he would take for eliminating Dhaka's mosquito menace. He should better be on the job without a further moment's delay or the golden juncture would slip by and the first enthusiasms on his victory die. He would need time, knowledge and judgement to hit on the brightest idea that would click. Would he not need a potful of luck? Sure enough, The Dhaka municipal authorities emboldened by sympathetic support from the national government had-time and again embarked on costly expeditions on the wee little creatures and resign each time accepting ignominious defeat. Hanif must make sure that he hits right at the first go. If he can his will be a long living memory with the nation — counting may be in centuries. If not, it would be a nightmare for him, very hard to get over with.

The Rangpur chairman's patience ran out and he, throwing discretion out of the window, blurted out a reward — a taka for every five mosquitoes killed. Seventy-two hours later some 50,000 bodies of mosquitoes, packed neatly into envelopes, arrived at the municipal HQ with as neat a pack of bills for Tk 10,000. This is not a daunting sum but the task of checking the bills before payment by counting the mortal remains of every mosquito has proved beyond the capacity of the municipal staff. As an afterthought authorities are thinking to insist on the mosquitoes to be hand-killed rather than sprayed or choked to death by chemicals. In that case rigorous chemical tests on the individual body of the mosquito will have to be made by sending the lot to a high-tech lab in Dhaka. The current cost of Tk 0.20 per mosquito could then run upto be Tk 200. Perhaps the Rangpur city-fathers are ready to go to any length to buy a reprieve from their maddening punishment. But the question is whether this exercise is going to cut the population size of the mosquitoes in any significant manner. Mohammad Hanif should be wary of any such brave act of foolishness.

The challenge of the small creature will prove a truly big one for Hanif to overcome. That wouldn't however, mean that the big things, conservancy and health and power and roads, would, conversely, prove small as challenges. For one thing, none of these does lend to tackling by a single authority. And then again, Hanif isn't there only to untangle problems. He must do positive things too. More schools and playgrounds, to be sure. And above all more parks. Real ones and not rendezvous for mastans. And strewn all over Dhaka.

Can he, on top of stopping the filling up of existing ponds and beds of erstwhile water reservoirs, indeed excavate some spacious Ramsagar or Dharmasagar-type artificial lakes in Dhaka? The central jail will yield an ideal spot for that — and there will be space too for a garden-promenade to be thrown around that. No, this is no day dreaming. Sher Shah had the same in four years as Hanif will get and he did a little more than we are asking Hanif for.

RAW, IB and CBI have affirmed in a joint report that there is a nexus between politicians and the mafia in India. The report, done at the behest of State Home Minister Rajesh Pilot, following the bomb blasts in Bombay early last year, is yet a hush-hush affair. But the report is a sad reflection on politicians from almost all parties.

The report does not contain any name. But there is enough information to identify three central ministers (also involved in the scam). Some Maharashtra ministers and members of the state legislature also figure in the revelations.

The report's worst structure is that those who associated themselves with the mafia were conscious that what they were doing was against national interest. For reaping personal and pecuniary gains or for saving their friends' skin, they have acted in a manner which, to say the least, is harmful to the country.

The three intelligence agencies have admitted that if all the central agencies, working under the aegis of different ministries, had pooled their information, the Bombay blasts would have probably been detected and stalled. It has been revealed how the information about explosives remained with one department, about the smuggling with another and about suspicious perpetrators with yet another. No bunching was done by anybody at any stage.

The report, which may never see the light of the day, is devastating. It exposes the complicity of politicians on the one hand and the confusion prevailing among the intelligence agencies on the other. Both disclosures do not come as a surprise because public perception, built over the years, is that politicians and criminals have come to join hands. Politics has been criminalised and crime has been politicised. Regarding the intelligence the impression is that too many of them are chasing too little information, which they often get from normal sources.

The politicians' connection, with the, Bombay blasts is, however, disconcerting, particularly when the government has said more than once that there was foreign hand behind the incident. Not that the politicians' partnership was ever ruled out, but the linkage of some sitting ministers, both in Delhi and Bombay, is ominous. It is a serious matter.

One cannot imagine Prime Minister Narasimha Rao taking any action because he hates disturbing things, which is bound to happen if any minister or important politician is put on the mat. From the Bofors gun kickbacks to the scam scandal, it has been dismal, story of cover-ups. The last two decades are replete with instances where corrupt and sleazy have gone unpunished.

For the last eight years, the

Intelligence Report Exposes Politicians

The most painful aspect is that even Parliament is ceasing to evoke trust.... Many of its members are believed to be in the pay-rolls of lobbies, industrialists or multinationals.... The way many members are elected — with money and muscle power — has devalued the image of democracy.

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integrity of the system has become a question mark. If nothing is done to clean the mark, every decision or, for that matter, every action of the government will be suspect.

Whatever kudos we may try to earn for our open society, they will be of no avail if even, the highest in the land is not considered above board. Japan and Italy were recently shaken by the exposure of corrupt deals. Crores of rupees had been offered and accepted as bribes. Ultimately, public opinion made topmost leaders quit politics. Nothing like that is happening in India because the people, tired and exasperated, have begun to accept corruption as part of life. Indira Gandhi brushed all allegations aside by the remark that corruption was a global phenomena. Rao goes even one step further from her: 'He sees no evil, hears no evil and speaks no evil'.

As regards lack of coordination among the intelligence agencies, the government may not be wiser by the report. This malady was diagnosed by a committee headed by former home secretary L P Singh, more than 15 years ago. No ministry, which has an intelligence agency under it, wants to give up the control.

This is already evident from what has happened after receipt of the report. The Union Home Secretary wants to be a coordinating point. But the proposal is not finding favour with the intelligence wings of finance and commerce ministries, neither with RAW and others, because they want to stay autonomous.

The coordination may plug one aspect of the nexus between politicians and the mafia. But until the institutional malaise, the lowering standards of morality and cynicism over cleanliness continue, India will not be able to free itself from the dominance of politics and crime that stalks the land.

and far between.

The most painful aspect is that even Parliament is ceasing to evoke trust. It is considered part of a system that is corrupt and antiquated. Many of its members are believed to be in the pay-rolls of lobbies, industrialists or multinationals and, even when an MP expresses himself honestly, there is a tendency to see some kind of hand behind him. The way many members are elected — with money and muscle power — has devalued the image of democracy.

The other day Delhi Police seized a diary of *hawala* operators. It carried names of serving and former ministers and of the late Rajiv Gandhi (Congress). L K Advani

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

jittery. They have now joined others to defeat the course of justice at the Swiss canton, which is in the process of giving its verdict. Some beneficiaries have appealed to an upper court to stop the list from coming to light.

Some government leaders have once again renewed the campaign that the kickbacks were never appropriated by anybody: they went to the party coffers. This reminds me of an inquiry, which was carried out many years ago, to ascertain which among the political parties was a black-sheep, receiving foreign funds. CBI conducted the investiga-

(Bhartiya Janata Party) and S Bommali (Janata Dal). CBI has authenticated the existence of the diary but has not divulged its contents.

One journalist, Rajinder Puri, and a video magazine producer, Vineet Narain, have disclosed the names of recipients at a press conference in Delhi. In a way, they have thrown the gauntlet but none in the government or the opposition has picked it up. The allegations have remained unanswered. The press, too, has forgotten about them.

What all this indicates is the degradation of political activity in the country. The very in-

opied, and poor nations to adopt particular kinds of democratic machinery.

And it is particularly obscene for leaders of the North to tell the South: 'Be democratic, be responsive to the people, be pluralistic, allow a free press,' while simultaneously calling upon them to adopt extremely unpopular policies (laid down by the North) of 'structural adjustment'.

Indeed, under such policies, the people of the South are exposed to the negative effects of an unjust international economy that the North controls in its own interests. It is just possible that another condition for democracy, specially, for those who like to pontificate about it, is a little bit of honesty.

In the end, political democracy must be international, so that it can exist sustainably in its various forms within each nation. And democracy everywhere must encompass control of economic factors as well as of politics.

Democracy Must be a Native Flower

Former Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere writes in this exclusive Inter Press Service Column that democracy must grow out of the cultural, historical and geographical realities of the societies that practice it.



evolve, or be built up, if it does not exist. People have to agree to live together, or to co-exist within the society, and to work out a mutually acceptable system which provides for that.

Democracy requires security of life and liberty. It is nonsense to talk about democracy when warring groups, nowadays with modern weapons, contend for power within a state.

Further, the people of the majority view have to accept the rights of the minority to express their opinions without intimidating social pressure, and indeed must accommodate those views as far as possible. The people of the minority view, at the same time, have to abide by the laws enacted by the majority.

In particular, democracy requires freedom of religion. Some persons can be forced to conform to the outward rites or ceremonies of a religion in which they do not believe.

As history shows very clearly, however, others would rather die or suffer torture. And if a sizeable group of people adhere in their hearts to a suppressed minority religion, they will constitute an ineradicable source of potential instability.

A functioning democracy also requires a reasonable degree of stability within the society. The vast majority of the people must be basically satisfied with its structures and organisation, and have the possibility of changing them by peaceful means, for stability is not the same as stagnation.

Democracy requires a culture with encompasses tolerance — a culture which has to

lead people to some understanding not just of their own needs but also of their duties and capacities, and of the world's economic and other conditions within which their society is operating and which indirectly affect them.

And while it talks of freedom, the list given here omits reference to the inevitable limits of freedom in any society — for political liberty does not and cannot mean the freedom to do anything you want.

Freedom must be limited by the obligations of duty and by the needs of the society as a whole. For the needs of a democratic society come down to the need of each member to live in an organised and just community for their individual

and their common good.

It is within the context of limits that individuals in a political democracy are given the maximum possible freedom to live their own lives as they

which indirectly affect them.

One thing, however, is very clear: the organisation of political democracy — its mechanisms, structures and conventions — must be appropriate to and determined by the history, geography, culture and economic conditions of the society in which it operates.

It is not only nonsensical, but also dangerous to democracy, for politicians and others from the old, developed and wealthy nations to put pressure on governments and people in new, underdeveloped

OPINION

BNP and AL at Crossroads

Dr M T Haq

It was very interesting to have read the contents of talks of the Secretary-Generals of both BNP and Awami League, as reported in The Daily Star of March 13, 1994. I have not found too many points in Mr Abdus Salam Takukur's statement where I could not agree with him. His assessment is quite balanced and very realistic in the context of the BNP's present problems and policies covering most of the fields.

However, the point in which I wish to differ from the BNP Secretary-General, first, is where he says that 'his party will not abandon the on-going reform programmes even at the cost of power and victory in the next election.' This is too sweeping a remark and many in his own party may not like it. The BNP Secretary-General continued that 'Somebody should have to do the unpleasant work for the long-term betterment of the country.'

Life consists, in the main, of short-term, medium-term and long-term aspects of the problems we face and policies we evolve. A choice has to be made, from among the problems and the policies with an eye to the short aspects. But, then the people perhaps will not be ready to sacrifice their short-term and medium-term goals at the altar of their long-term goals which cannot be so clearly foreseen. Of course we have to take care of our posterity, but then we have to take account of the fact that we do not have to ignore our short-term and medium-term interests disproportionately. Was there a time when we had no price-system and the free market economy in our country? Quite clearly there was none, to our memories, except in war-time. We should look not only at the virtues of these systems but also at their enormous wastes even under conditions of working competition. The ideal conditions of perfect competition do not exist anywhere, as we all know.

In the above context, I can do better than quote from the most powerful economist of the present century, late Lord Keynes who said that 'in the long-run we are all dead'. What in fact we are going to have by way of reforms are not something new but something which was tried before and discarded long ago because of

far-reaching consequences. The talents of our women will come out much better through a full, free and fair play of the forces guiding and shaping their careers and not through any restrictionism.

The writer is former Professor of Economics, Rajshahi University and former Senior Industrial Adviser.

To the Editor...

Muslim unity

Sir, The state of Israel was established on the soil of Palestine as far back as 1948 with the connivance of the US, the UK, France and certain other mighty powers with the apparent objective of having control over the oil resources. Since then the role of Israel has been very much hostile to the Muslims of the Middle East, who are virtually rendered to the status of refugees in their own homes. After grabbing a substantial portion of the Middle East territory they have become so much emboldened that they even flout to act on the request of those powers with whose blessings the country had taken its national entity.</