

## 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 splashes and human tissue fragments on high walls.

Fiddling with this gas comes under the mischief of the Explosives Act. This is as much offensive 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 lineal gas connections 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 unthinkingly 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 sure to 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 the 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 up to may 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.

**R**AW, 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 made.

The report's worst stricture is that those who associated themselves with the mafia were doing so 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 bunting was done by anybody at any stage.

The report, which may never see the light of the day, is devastating. It exposes the

## Intelligence Report Exposes Politicians

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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 a 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

disclosure of Bofors kickbacks recipients has been stalled on one point or another. The list of names should have been with the government on March 1. But before that day the lobby of civil and military officials swung into action to scotch the attempt to make names public.

It appears that as the time for the disclosure approaches, all those who had earlier thought that their hand might remain undetected are getting

it. It was found that political parties of all shades and opinions got munificence from abroad. The government, then led by the Congress, never made the report public. Understandably, the other political parties never pressed for its publication.

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

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 phenomenon. Rao goes even one step further from her: 'He sees no evil, hears no evil and speaks no evil'.

When lower beneficiaries in government secretariats or other departments openly ask for money before forwarding even routine papers, it is irritating. But more frustrating, rather shameful, is the fact that ministers and officials accept bribe without any twinge of conscience. In the past, the dishonest among the high echelons could be counted on fingers. Now it is the other way round, the honest are a few

## BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

jitters. 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. Bommal (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-

## 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.

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.

Yet very rapid change in social or economic conditions is difficult for people to assimilate and to adjust to; it is almost impossible for the society to adjust peacefully if rapid change occurs in all areas at once.

Democracy requires, both that there be a basic level of food, clothing, and shelter available to every person, and that — at least while this level is very low — there is a severe limit to economic inequalities within the society.

Poverty shared may be an insult to human potentiality. Absolute poverty in the midst of plenty is inconsistent with political freedom. It is this requirement of democracy which makes it both so essential and so extremely difficult to attain (or at least to sustain) in the least developed countries of Africa and elsewhere.

The first priority of a hungry person is food for themselves and their children. To get it, they will lie and steal; they will also vote for any halfway candidate who bribes them with food today and 'promises them food tomorrow.

They will accept with acclamation any military coup leader or other dictator who appears (for however short a time) to have an explanation for and a solution to their suffering.

This list of the requirement of democracy is very far from exhaustive. In particular, it omits any mention of educa-

tion that leads 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 wish.

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, underdevelop-

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. How most of them finance their election is the biggest source of corruption.

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.

adopt, 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.

## 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 Takur'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 'this 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 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 not 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

their ineffectiveness in the context particularly of a country like Bangladesh. I have no doubt in my mind that the so called reforms adopted by the Bangladesh Government under the pressures of the various agencies will be too costly an experiment, at any stage, for a poor country like Bangladesh. In such a country we should be able to address our development mainly with our own resources as far as possible and go in for foreign resources or assistance or aid on our own terms, to be used to make the country self-reliant as far as possible. Our people, though poor, should learn to live a life of dignity consistent with a standard of living permitted in the main by our own resources, coupled with what we can get from abroad on honourable terms without losing our self-respect. One cabinet minister told me the other day that there was an aid proposal from a certain quarter of the value of Taka 18 crore, but of this amount Taka 12 crore was shown as the cost perhaps of foreign consultants. So what is it that is left for development? This is certainly not an aid on honourable terms.

Secondly, that the Chairperson of the BNP will like to attend the Parliament sessions regularly is not a matter of requesting her, rather this is in practice one of her main responsibilities. I have watched quite a lot of the working of the British House of Commons which is regularly attended by the leader of the House during the sessions, unless there are compelling reasons for not doing so. The presence of the leader of the ruling party in the Jana Sangsad gives the Parliament session an added importance.

The Awami League Secretary-General stated that 'we want the BNP to stay in power for the full term'. The AL will follow its own strategies for capturing power in the next general election which is really not too far off. The recent Mayoral election results have boosted the moral of the party. Meanwhile I believe that the BNP will also be aggressive in organizing or reorganizing itself in order to remove its short comings whatever these might have been so far.

Thirdly, an important issue

worth considering in Bangladesh is whether the party organization responsibilities should be separated from the governmental responsibilities. I am thinking here in terms of the arrangement which existed, for example, in Great Britain in the immediate post-war (1939-45) years when late Harold Lasky, professor of political science, at the London School of Economics and Political Science, acted as the chairman of the executive committee of the British Labour Party, while not acting as a Cabinet member. In this case the Chairman or the Chairperson will be able to devote his or her energies and talents mainly to the organizations or reorganization of the party. The status and rank of such a person should be equivalent to the position of a Deputy Prime Minister or that of a Cabinet Minister at least.

Fourthly, an important issue is to bring about some constitutional amendments which need to be considered from time to time, as a result of the working of the constitutional process on the basis of a consensus of the political parties. One such issue, to my mind, is the election of the women members of the Jana Sangsad. I feel sure that the present system of nominating the women members to the Sangsad is unfair, undemocratic and perhaps not acceptable to our women themselves. The present system smacks of colonialism when the practice of nominations was very common in the sub-continent. The seats will be reserved for women, but then they should come to the Sangsad through the system of election. One distinguished lady told us recently that the present nomination system is a reflection on the status of women themselves and on their self-respect. I feel certain that many will think in similar terms. There will be no difficulty to amend or change the constitution in this respect because there will, hopefully, be a consensus on this issue. 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.

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## 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.

The tragedy of the Palestinians are known to the world around. It is most unfortunate that the Muslim powers of the Middle East have miserably failed to realise that it is owing to their folly that has brought endless miseries to them.

The people of the world have seen how US ex-President George Bush played in uniting the various entities

mostly non-Muslim powers, collected donations in the form of men and weapon and used the base of Saudi Arabia to thrust an uneven war against Iraq, miserably affecting her political, economic and sovereign backbone.

Since the cessation of hostilities of the Gulf War, the world had abundant occasions to see the futile and abortive steps taken by UNO and some nations which have given enough impression that they have no sincere will to resolve the Palestine and other aching issues.

It is, perhaps, time for the nations of the Middle East to change the strategy and withdraw from these time-killing processes of conference and summits and try to unite the Muslim powers on some fundamental points, so that the enemies may mend their ways to provide a workable solution.

Or else, it would perhaps be advisable to ask the so-called 'peace negotiators' to provide the final fixture of the peace process as to when the quarter-final, semi-final and final of

this useless drama will be played.  
Hussain I Ahmed  
Passey, Dhaka.

### Patent products

Sir, It is observed that the registered patent products of an individual company/industry often come to our market in the same trade-name adopted by some other unauthorised sources. This is a very bad practice as the registered product gradually loses its popularity to people due to poor quality of products manufactured by unknown sources. For example, I found a very cheap quality vests with the seal of Bata Power which I am sure Bata is not making. As a result, Power product will fail to keep up its own reputation.

Unless such practices are stopped all registered quality products will always have their counter products of inferior standard and customers will be cheated.

The concerned authority should come forward to detect the unauthorised sources. Mottus Samad Choudhury  
Phulola Tea Estate, Sylhet.