

A Bad Border Situation

India has reportedly massed huge troops, two divisions according to some, on top of alerted BSF personnel in the Chengrabandha area opposite our riverport Burimari in Lalmonirhat. Tension has been mounting there for some time and in an attempt to defuse that BDR battalion commander Major Emran had sat in a flag meeting with counterpart Kamalshwar Singh of the BSF on Saturday but with no result. The failure has been underscored by the fact of the two sides not meeting on Sunday in spite of things escalating to a critical state.

The genesis of the present uneasy development is flimsy if not altogether silly. Our Water Development Board people were on a loop cutting operation on the right side of the Dharala River — this being necessitated to protect the Burimari port from erosion. BSF objected to this. When Water Board people resumed work after a break, there was no move to stop it — but BSF started building bunkers within 50 yards of the border — something not permitted by the border agreement of 1974 with India. By Sunday, the build up on the other side accompanied with loudspeaker warnings to the local people to move away from the border area had created a very panicky situation on our side of the border. Some newspapers have reported BDR as responding to the development by building their own bunkers.

Things could not possibly be more ludicrous with the Indian chief of army staff now in Dhaka on a six-day goodwill visit and most newspapers publishing the news of both the bad border situation and the good friendship visit almost alongside. We value our friendship with our big neighbour and go out sincerely to welcome General Bipin Chandra Joshi among us. And we also believe that because of historical and cultural reasons India would continue to extend us her best hands of friendship into the future exactly as it had done in the past.

How then are we to take the Burimari developments? Or the frequent border skirmishes always ending in the death of innocent uninvolved people? Obviously, these are very localised situations created not necessarily after appropriate signals from the high-ups. But our two friendly nations should by now have known better than allowing border forces to react on their own, specially if the other side is Bangladesh, or India.

If there is any substance in the report of an army build up across the Dharala, the thing becomes such as warrants very serious consideration by our government. It should, of necessity, be impressed upon New Delhi that our comparative smallness as a nation tends to increase our sensitivity as a sovereign nation in an inverse proportion to that — and this is both natural and healthy for us and, in fact, for all of us in the region. It must be categorically understood that unless there is serious deterioration of relationship at the apex, between our two nations, there is no scope for involving army in the border zones.

What is happening in Burimari-Chengrabandha can be a very foolish thing. We hope this to subside very soon in an amicable manner. The sooner our good neighbour acts to dissipate the tension on that border as well as the panic among the people there the better for the forging of still better friendship with her.

New Dawn in S Africa

South Africa is poised to make history. With the voting starting today to continue for two more days for the country's first multi-racial election, the nation is set to leave behind a most bizarre history. After centuries of an inhuman and loathsome system of racial discrimination and apartheid which has been responsible for denying the black people the dignity and respect they deserved as men and women, S Africa is all intent to make a new beginning.

However, the country's road to this new destiny has so far not been smooth nor is it going to be so in the coming days. The threat of violence still looms large on the election days. Just three days before, three election workers of the African National Congress (ANC) were killed at the time of campaigning in the stronghold of Zulu Chief Mongosuthu Buthelezi. The question now is: even if the Zulu chief has decided to take part in the election in the final weeks, can the election be held without violence? The issue of a free and fair election perhaps comes next.

Despite the highly respected 16-member Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and its 10,000 monitors' sincere attempts, the shadow of the recent incidents of violence will pale the euphoria that has been marking the country's transition to democracy. ANC leader Nelson Mandela has been saintly in his approach to the hostility that is still encumbering the whole process. He has time and again appealed for calm, peace and forgiveness, but his appeal has not always found receptive ears. Zulu king Goodwill Zwelithini had to be appeased before Inkatha chief Buthelezi made his mind to contest the polls.

After years of killing, hatred, bitterness, humiliation, suffering and sacrifice, the black people have got the chance of their lifetime to correct a wrong they have been a victim to, thanks to black leaders' unflinching commitment to the cause. They have earned for their people a respect they were denied and this is why it will be more painful if any quarters opposing the new mould of S Africa can succeed to frustrate in any way the transition process. We hope any groups harbouring such ill motives will not be allowed to carry on their design.

It is good to know that on the basis of which the compromise formula for the election has been worked out is in effect a way to reaching a consensus. There is provision for accommodating groups and parties of divergent interests, shades and colours. A minimum five per cent of the total votes polled will ensure for a party a cabinet post in a government of national unity. The top post is for Mandela to grab, but others will not be totally ignored. The spirit is what really matters. The dissenters ought to see merits in this provision and co-operate with Mandela to take S Africa to a new and happy dawn of history.

Teachers on Strike: Minister on the Defensive

THE ongoing strike of the non-government school and college teachers, particularly the school teachers, is a matter of grave concern. I have come across a number of dailies making editorial comments on it, all urging the government to find a quick solution to a problem which, in its present shape and its timing — the SSC examination is just round the corner — has assumed critical proportions. The Education Minister has called the whole thing 'politically motivated'. May be he is right. Diverse forces have chosen the present moment to press home their respective demands. These include the majority of the BCS cadres who want equity, if not equality of all cadres, within the government; the people of the greater Sylhet district, who want a new administrative division for themselves, not to mention the less powerful but by no means less admissible demands in other sectors. The last are the sort of things which keep cropping up from time to time and which all governments must expect as normal, and which all governments must learn how to deal with. The ongoing strike of nearly two hundred thousand school and college teachers is not one of those routine matters and cannot be dismissed as such. The problem has been accumulating and getting more and more complex for over three decades now.

One feels sorry for the Education Minister; he is clearly on the defensive. The problem is not of his making. He is the one the sins of the past to be visited upon. He is so confused, so innocent about the nature and origin of the problem that he cannot even put up a defence which will stand to reason. He simply says that he cannot meet the demands because these are beyond the resources of the government. He cannot quote any principle — because there is none — which negates the demands of the striking teachers. A minister is entitled to his innocence, but only at the beginning. His Ministry is supposed to be knowledgeable and his top officials are expected to equip him with all that he needs to know. If they have done so, correctly and fully, then he is to blame for what appears to be his reluctance to face the issue fairly and squarely.

The striking teachers don't demand nationalisation of private schools and colleges; they want the benefits, salary, allowances etc. without the constraints which nationalisation will entail. May be, some will jump at the suggestion, but I suppose only the weakest in financial terms. But there are a considerable number of schools and colleges, financially prosperous, that would rather reject the offer. They can enrol any number of students, and charge tuition fees several times more than what is charged at government institutions. Teachers serving in

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these institutions are generally better off than their opposite numbers in government schools and colleges. This will be borne out if an enquiry is made into the financial status and practices of these teachers. Why they too have joined the bandwagon is the big question today.

Both the principles — that of nationalisation and of salary support — call for a close scrutiny. The two are interrelated, the one followed the other. In the early years of independence we had the policy of provincialisation, of private schools and colleges. From 1972 onwards it was nationalisation, the same thing under a more dignified name. In the early years, under Pakistan, the government adopted the schools (and colleges) least in the need of help, not the ones that really needed it. I question the soundness of the policy. Most thriving private institutions were taken over, without their asking for it, by the government. In the process they all lost their identity, their dignity, and all possibility of their future growth, of forming in due course of time, a strong private sector in education, at the secondary and

tertiary levels. That would have given us a situation resembling or duplicating the situation prevailing in many countries of the world: two parallel sectors of education, one state-supported fully, and the other, generally more prosperous and creative, the private sector.

The government here, unable to go on adopting the sick and the limping institutions, because the financial involve-

ment would be too high, came up with the idea of providing financial support to the private institutions. It took the form of salary support, which was gradually raised to 70 per cent of the salary a teacher would have drawn as a government school teacher. I do not claim full knowledge of the detailed planning of this scheme of salary support but I know that this is something that goes beyond the recommendations of two successive Education Commissions.

I would now draw attention to the two chapters in the two Reports dealing with the issue of providing finance for education. These are Ch 35, para 20, page 287 of the Education Commission Report of 1974, and Ch 22, para 22 (13), page 359 of the Education

Commission Report of 1988. The first Report made a precise recommendation of half, 50 per cent of the expenses of secondary school and college-level education to be borne by the recipients, through tuition fees, while the remaining half of the expenses were to come from other sources including government grant-in-aid. There was clear suggestion of fresh taxation and endowments from the affluent section of the community, to meet the deficit.

The 1988 Report is but an endorsement of the same idea, almost repeating word for word part of the recommendation.

No where do I find the faintest suggestion that, beyond the all-important free, compulsory, eight-year-long primary education, the government can or should play more than a supportive role at these two levels of education we are talking about.

The 70 per cent salary support, if it is irrespective of the financial status of a school, needs a thorough scrutiny. There are schools that do not need any support whatever, and these should be kept outside the pale of the scheme. There are others who would be happy with a 25 per cent, yet others, with 50 per cent salary support. There must be a considerable number, mostly in depressed rural areas, fully jus-

tifying the already generous support they are receiving. There is no justification in lumping together all private schools and colleges, irrespective of their actual needs.

There is one danger in accepting the demand for raising the level of salary support to the level of government pay-scale. This will be a short step away from the inevitable and unavoidable next step of fully nationalising the private schools, all and sundry. That cannot be the national policy for secondary and college-level education, especially when we are far from meeting the more urgent demands of primary education. In its desperation to achieve the goal of a literate nation by the turn of the century, the government is very much counting upon the work of the NGOs realising its own resource limitations.

There is no scope, either, for the beleaguered Education Minister to turn his face away from the commitments claimed to have been made by him or his chief, wittingly or unwittingly, some time in the past, in partial fulfilment of the demands of the striking teachers. Were these firm agreements or mere hopes and promises held out, just to avert a present crisis, a familiar but self-defeating strategy the government often takes recourse to? Why doesn't the Minister come out with an explicit statement in this regard? He owes it to the public to make a clean breast of everything he has to say. A well-informed public could be a strong support in his present difficulties.

South Africa Bites the Ballot — II

Emergency may Secure the Election, but Not the Peace

John Perlman writes from Cape Town

The causes of conflict are varied and deep throughout the province of Natal and will not be solved by the state of emergency imposed in the final weeks of the election campaign. Gemini News Service reports from an area certain to pose problems for the new government.

THE State of Emergency imposed in the troubled Natal-KwaZulu region may be sufficient to secure a reasonably successful election, but securing peace thereafter will not be achieved by security measures alone.

The Emergency has focused on ensuring a visible security force presence. The new government, almost certain to be led by the African National Congress (ANC), will not be able to avoid what many believe should have been the first step: cutting off weapon supplies, arresting the gun-runners, detaining the warlords and hit-squad men.

Names of key warmongers on both sides are generally known. And in announcing the Emergency, President F W De Klerk said he was acting on detailed intelligence reports.

An ANC government taking such steps would fundamentally shift the nature of the conflict between itself and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP).

There will be other shifts as well. The IFP is certain to lose its grip on the key state resources it has been able to wield through the KwaZulu government. The loyalty to the IFP of civil servants, chiefs and even the KwaZulu police is going to be strained when the purse strings are suddenly in different hands.

That and other realities may allow an ANC-led government to assert some degree of control over the region. But control will not necessarily mean peace because the Natal war has always been far more complex than ANC versus IFP.

For a start, bloody conflict has a way of developing its own vengeance-fuelled momentum. And every major clash, like the battle in the streets of Johannesburg which left 53 IFP supporters dead, produces fresh bitterness.

Says Siphso Mlaba, an IFP leader in Mpumalanga township, known as Natal's one island of peace: "One young boy came to me yesterday and said 'Are you still saying to us there is peace when our people are dying like this in the Transvaal?'"

ANC leaders in the province are acutely aware of this. "They were made to be boys when they thought they were men," said one. "And they were killed in front of women, humiliated in front of women. They will not be able to tolerate that the ANC can exist in their areas."

Each incident of violence also drives unaligned people to take sides. "Any person from the township that goes into the hostel gets killed," said one woman from the violence-ravaged Kwa Mashu township. "Now we've decided that any person from the township will be killed. Then it is 50-50."

Even in places where there are no violent clashes, people talk of tension and grievance infusing daily life. "Some of my teachers are ANC," said one young man. "They know my father is IFP so they are keeping me down."

These are the issues that come up when ordinary people talk politics, not the great debating points, like federalism or even a Zulu kingdom. And often the quarrels are as much over tradition and attitude as they are over political ideas.

"You get these young comrades in the townships who come to older men in the hostel and tell them they must stay away," says an IFP leader. "They show no respect. Can you imagine how much hurt that causes?"

ANC followers with roots in the rural areas readily concede this kind of brassiness has caused unnecessary trouble.

Similarly, you do not often hear people criticising their opponents for their policies. Instead, ANC followers talk of the IFP faithful as ignorant, uneducated, misguided. "Buthelezi is just using these people who are not clever enough," said one official.

IFP supporters, in turn, caricature the ANC as destruc-

tive, disruptive and dominated by unruly youth.

Perhaps the bitterest conflict of all is over the Zulu king, where ANC supporters angrily insist that Goodwill Zwelithini is their King too.

A senior ANC commander commented: "He can say anything, swear at us, but he is our King. I could never point a gun against him because he is our King."

Both sides agree that neither will back off from a fight because "that thing is in us. We grew up in rural areas, where we would take our sticks and fight until one surrenders," says Meshack Radebe, ANC leader in Mpumalanga. "Even now, if I go back to Greytown, I will take my sticks and just fight someone I know to see if I can still beat him."

Says Phindli Duma, an ANC Women's League member in Kwa Mashu: "We said we want women and children and the sick who can't fight and defend their houses. The men must stay behind. That is what is expected of them."

One KwaMashu woman, whose 17-year-old son was in the township helping to hold the line, did not see it like that: "I'm not proud. I am afraid," she said.

She, like many others, feels she is caught in a storm. "We never been safe," says Sibonginkosi Mzimela, principal of a high school in Mpumalanga, with a rueful smile. "The Left say I belong to the Right, the Right say I belong to the Left."

Both sides share a deep-rooted belief that the best way to end the conflict is to pound the enemy into submission.

"People are saying, Let's drive them out once and for all," says one ANC leader. "The IFP say the same thing."

But perhaps the biggest problem facing a post-election settlement is that many people

in Natal have a hard-nosed view of justice and an even tougher attitude to security.

"When people do get arrested they are outside the next day," said one young man.

As for disarming people as a first step towards peace, one

young combatant in Bhambayi, a squatter settlement near Durban, put the prevailing view quite simply: "It is not OK to take our weapons because I am likely to be attacked at any time."

If anyone from outside

OPINION

Magura By-election and Democracy

by T Hussain

On the Magura by-poll, it is worth discussing the points raised in the "Opinion" column of The Daily Star of March 30, 1994. The writer, Mr Abu Imran raised the following points, which he terms as 'intriguing' and need to be answered. I would discuss these points, one by one.

Why the BNP did not agree to join an all-party vigilance team, as reportedly proposed by the Election Commission? This "vigilance team" was to be composed of four representatives each from the main contesting parties. It was assumed that both Awami League and Jatiya Party had joined hands together in opposing the BNP candidate. So, it was not expected that the verdict of the vigilance team as to the fairness of the elections would be free from bias, if the result went against the two main opposition parties. A vigilance team composed of persons coming from interested political parties could not naturally be acceptable to BNP.

The Chief Election Commissioner had, of course, his own reasons for leaving Magura on the evening before the election day. But, in my humble opinion, one should not make a capital out of it, because as CEC he is not always supposed to supervise a by-election personally. Being himself the ultimate authority to sit on judgement on all election disputes or malpractices, it was perhaps the right thing for him to abstain from being present at the site of a highly contested election. The writer himself observed that his integrity is unquestionable.

The circumstances surrounding a city mayoral election and a rural by-election are different. In the Magura contest, the credentials of the BNP and Awami League candidates, as reported in the press, were not comparable. Secondly, Salikha thana voters gave a united bid for winning this parliamentary election for the first time. Thirdly, the minority votes were divided between all the major party candidates of whom a minority community candidate sponsored by Jatiya Party got a substantial number of votes which presumably were mostly minority votes.

As for turnout of voters, it is quite natural that the most intensive campaign undertaken by the major contesting parties in this constituency resulted in an unusually big turnout. As the Chief Election Commissioner's integrity is admittedly beyond reproach, we should not question his ac-

tion in making unofficial declaration of the Magura by-election result.

In Mirpur by-election held some time ago, the same Chief Election Commissioner ordered a recounting of votes; but in Magura by-election, he was not obviously satisfied that there was any genuine reason to hold a fresh poll.

The Awami League and Jatiya Party were both losers in the Magura by-election. Allegations of rigging on their part cannot be accepted as credit-worthy, unless supported by information from independent sources.

The writer, Mr. Imran took it for granted that there was politicisation of bureaucracy by the ruling party by way of large promotions to officials in 1992, which is open to question. This shows that the writer is already biased and his comments are not objective. Even so, the argument of politicisation is too far-fetched in establishing that the officials involved in election process did not maintain desired neutrality.

It was open to the losing candidates to bring specific cases of alleged rigging before the Election Commission for a redressal. So long as a proper verdict in specific cases of alleged rigging is not available, any vague allegation of such rigging or election malpractices will not lead us anywhere. Nor will such wild complaints or demonstrations promote the cause of democratic practices. Let us learn to accept electoral defeats in good grace in a genuine democratic spirit. Let the ruling party have an opportunity to run the country as best as they can. If they fail to satisfy the people, the next general election will decide their fate. But, in the meantime, strikes, hartals, rallies or sieges must be shunned in the larger interest of the country and the nation.

The last general election and the subsequent by-elections were all conducted by the same Election Commission as was responsible for the Magura-2 by-election. If all the earlier elections/by-elections were acceptable, why should Magura by-election be picked up as one "vitiated" by so-called "rigging" and other supposed malpractices? Is it because a parliamentary seat which was held for long 20 years or more by a particular political party was this time bagged by a different political party? But there is nothing new or strange about it. No parliamentary seat can be

"reserved" for any particular party. Otherwise, how can political character of a democratic government change from time to time? Nor any such seat can be regarded as hereditary or dynastic. Naturally, a vacancy caused by the death of a sitting MP can go to any candidate who answers the demands of time or suits the current mood of the people.

The by-election conducted by an Election Commission whose integrity was never questioned, cannot be cancelled just because one or more losing party or parties resorted to repeatedly calling it "rigged", irrespective of the actual truth. Electoral law and rules provide for redress in cases of alleged rigging or "vote-dacotomy" as it is loosely called. If there be any specific case or cases of this nature, the Election Commission must be allowed to apply its judicious mind in deciding such cases, filed in a proper manner and under relevant law/rules. Otherwise, the Commission cannot be coerced into cancelling an election held in a proper way in their eyes. It is equally absurd that for each by-election there will be a so-called "caretaker government" to arrange it.

In the last analysis, all patriotic citizens of Bangladesh would like to see that the newly achieved democracy works without any hindrance. A democratically elected Parliament must function in the normal way. Differences of opinion will, of course, be always there. These must be thrashed on the floor of the House. Opposition parties which value national interest above party considerations are expected to behave in a way conducive to the cause of democracy and its practices. If the democratic institutions are destroyed in achieving party interests, the party at fault will be accountable to the nation. We must have patience to learn by experience. This is how democracy has taken roots in our neighbouring country.

Losing a by-election cannot be an issue to boycott the democratically elected parliament and resort to street agitation and give call for rallies, hartals and sieges. By doing this, one will be threatening the stability of the country and thereby ruining the national economy and blocking industrial development, foreign investment channel and other avenues of national growth. Certainly, no patriotic citizen of the country would be a party to this kind of agitational politics.

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.

Fragile peace in Bosnia

Sir, Forgive me if I cannot see eye to eye with Mr O H Kabir who was quick to point an accusing finger at China for not sending troops to Bosnia.

Well, the US didn't either. Yet it is the de facto superpower with all the pretensions of Big Brother. World Policeman. Did the Chinese ever lay such claims? They just don't want a Chinese soldier to die in foreign soil for that may taint him to be an agent of occupation. The Chinese believe that a soldier's job is to defend his own country, not to build empires abroad. Wouldn't you allow them that national pride?

So, the UN didn't do all they could or still can. But they

did some. What did the OIC do? Shed crocodile tears once in a while and go into comfortable hibernation of inaction and responsibility transfer.

The whole world should hold the Bosnians in admiration and do everything possible to bring succour to this to this heroic people. Beleaguered, outnumbered, outgunned and their hands tied behind their backs, they are fighting on with an indomitable spirit that should be an example for all times to come. And all for "liberate, egalite and fraternite". Lincoln could not be wrong in his conviction: "..... government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish....."

Bilon Nikariy
Dhaka

Dhaka-Khulna communication

Sir, Forty years from now or earlier one could travel between Dhaka and Khulna by paying Rs 60/- to PIA Helicopter service and it used to take 55 to 60 minutes only.

Billions of Taka have been spent since liberation towards the improvement of communications, but, unfortunately, today it takes at least 3½ hours by Biman via Jessore, 7-9 hours by bus or minibus, 24-28 hours by train or steamer service. Yet Biman Bangladesh continues to advertise through catchy slogans like "world is becoming smaller".

Under the above backdrop, it is quite natural to remember communication system of the past as above and compare with that of the present day. Let the authority look into the matter in the context of equal development in all the areas of the country as often preached by top brasses in the Government.

Sadiq Alee
Magbazar, Dhaka.