

The Vessels must Move

The river transport workers' strike on Wednesday brought to a standstill all waterborne passenger and goods traffic in the country. The massive strike, sparing only hand-rowed country boats, is to continue indefinitely. Although right from the end of the British colonial hold on the sub-continent — or perhaps from long before it — waterways in this region were systematically neglected very clearly to build prosperity for the roadways, the engine-powered vessels do still form the backbone of our national economy. Each day that passes without any vessel moving any goods or people, costs the nation the equivalent of maybe losses incurred in a whole week of hartal. Quite apart from the question of material losses, such a strike cuts at the root of one of the more important of our basic rights — that of movement. With the Eid holidays only days away, the government would be well-advised not to treat this crisis with its customary approach of procrastination, if not totally ignoring the thing.

We know that the government is not a party to this strike situation, at least in any direct manner. That does not absolve it of the responsibility of seeing that the nation's vessels ply and goods and people move in the normal way and the country's economy takes no beating. The government in order to do justice to its pro-people protestations will need to put its heart into the urgent job of resolving the water transport workers' strike addressed as it is to the owners of the river transport industry and not they. The record is not encouraging so far — although the strike was looming ever on the horizon every day of the past few days, government did not care to nip the thing in the bud. It should now make this lapse good by doubling up its efforts to bring the workers back to work. A tripartite meeting is stated to be held tomorrow, why so late? And who from the government side would be there above the position of the Director of Labour? Will the Labour Minister deign to make it his job to assuage the workers' anger and do some tough talking to the owners in tomorrow's meeting?

The owners are clearly in the wrong in so far they have failed to implement the minimum wages award of December, 1993. And they have no convincing answer to the striking federation's very serious charge that the owners are long practising a policy of dispensing with the services of experienced, skilled and efficient masters and drivers of vessels and getting the job done by raw hands who can be hired at the cheap. The federation, speaking for all masters and drivers of the nation's vessels, insist that this is one positive cause of river accidents involving huge loss of life and property.

The federation has on the other hand convincingly proved that the government determination of the responsibility for overloading — the main cause of accidents — is very wrongly weighted against the workers. The present regulations hold the workers alone for the crime and the workers say they only carry out orders and the extra money goes to the owners all right. If the owners deny this, it looks the truth must lie between them two. More effective ways than the present must be found to stop overloading.

The owners so far have faulted the strikers with a lack of proper notice. That is mere technicality having little bearing on the seriousness of the development. Tomorrow there is a very good prospect of persuading the two sides to see reason and end the strike amicably. But this would take adroit government handling and a true and intense will on its part to resolve the issues at stake.

One thing must be avoided at all cost. Crises such as this do not lend to handling cooked in measures of limited office hours and snail's pace file movement. That's a bureaucrat's way of doing things. The problem of all of the nation's vessels anchored beyond days calls for the government to move as a whole to set the situation right in a jiffy. The urgency of the situation must first be grasped by them.

Yemen has Not Learnt Any Lesson

When the most hated regime of apartheid in South Africa has ushered in a new era of racial amity and social peace through sinking the differences between the bitterest foes, parts of the continent of Africa in the east and central east are witnessing the worst type of human tragedies. From Burundi to Rwanda to Yemen civil wars are sweeping across a large tract of that hostility-ridden continent. Yemen so far is the last to join the bandwagon of these trigger-happy *hara kirt* lovers.

United only in 1990, the two Yemens — North and South — have once again parted their ways and are locked in a bitter armed conflict. What emerges from the reports reaching here is that the differences between the contending parties are not so much on the question of policies or ideologies as they concern the struggle for power. In fact, the two architects of peace, president Ali Abdullah Saleh and the recently sacked southern vice-president Ali Salem al-Baid, have learnt no lessons from the years of conflicts between the south and north of the country.

President Saleh has accused his vice-president of an attempt to secede from the north. He followed up his accusation with the expulsion of the vice-president along with a number of prominent southern leaders from the government. So the southerners, rejecting the accusation, have returned to their stronghold in Aden and concentrated on its defence. It is yet to be clear who is to blame for starting this latest eruption of the north-south feud. But there is no doubt that the president fired the first salvo. Whether he did plan for it or was egged on by his followers is not the important issue.

However, the fact remains that president Saleh's early success in the offensive made him think that he could cash in on it. But the latest report is rather inconclusive with the northern forces retreating to their original positions. There has been other changes in the war situation. A Scud missile has hit capital Sanaa and the president has showed a change of heart by offering a ceasefire. Although conditional, this offer marks a qualitative shift in the northern stand. Earlier, a similar offer from the south was flatly rejected by the president who sensed victory. Now that the proposal has come from the north and there are willing mediators in the neighbouring countries such as Saudi Arabia, let us hope for the best. But the parties involved must recognise the futility and tragedy in pursuing the path of conflict first.

VISITS of Indian prime ministers to the US have been trailed by controversy since Jawaharlal Nehru's exit. Being a top world leader, Washington itself wanted him. Most of the other prime ministers either wangled, managed or sought a trip to America so as to add to their importance and flaunt it thereafter.

A few even entertained the idea of playing a role in the cold war rivalry between the United States and the USSR. Lal Bahadur Shastri was the one who was taken in by such sweet talk by Chester Bowles, the then American ambassador. Lyndon Johnson, the US president at that time, cancelled the visit at the eleventh hour, fearing misunderstanding with Islamabad, a member of western military pacts against the Soviet Union. Shastri, for that matter, India, took some time to overcome the humiliation.

It is not fair to discuss to which genre Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's visit belongs, when he is due to leave New Delhi in the next few days. But the fact that he did not go on May 6 — the date originally fixed by Washington and conveyed through Deputy Secretary of State Talbott during his stop over in New Delhi recently — is a point in Rao's favour. That Washington made changes in President Clinton's schedule to accommodate Rao indicates that perhaps, just perhaps, New Delhi enjoys some importance in the eyes of the US government.

Had Rao gone six months later, it would have probably been better from India's point of view. Much of the dust over Kashmir and the nuclear question would have settled by then. At present, the visit looks like a sequel to what

Rao's Agenda in Washington

A few intellectuals' meetings in Washington, New Delhi or elsewhere do not change the people's long-term perception. The general impression in India is that America is always brow-beating it. Any step that suggests a tough line may distance the two still further from each other.

Talbott and Assistant Secretary of State Robin Raphel told New Delhi. Going by their public or private observations, it appears that their ideas are diametrically opposed to India's.

Granting that Rao will not change the stand either on Kashmir or the nuclear question, as he has said repeatedly in public and in parliament, the question arises what purpose is served by his visit. There is no evidence that the differences which cropped up during the meetings between Indian officials and Raphel and Talbott have been ironed out. Rao and Clinton have to either skirt round the problems or agree to differ. The summit will unnecessarily exhaust the option which is usually saved for the end.

Rao should be prepared that the talks can turn sour. It may mean all types of pressure, which a soft state-like ours may not resist for long. Clinton's letters — he has written on various Indian problems — give the impression that he is an outspoken person with little sagacity or judgment. He can be excessively tough if things did not go his way.

True, the effort to impose something on India will stoke fires of suspicion that India generally has about the US. The two have never been friends at the popular level. A few intellectuals' meetings in Washington, New Delhi or elsewhere do not change the people's long-term perception. The general impression in

India is that America is always brow-beating it. Any step that suggests a tough line may distance the two still further from each other.

Rao and Clinton may even hit it off well, as Indira Gandhi and Johnson did initially. But it may be a temporary phase because the interests of India and America do not coincide. In the face of deteriorating relations with Islamabad, New Delhi will expect more and more support from Washington than its new policy to treat India and Pakistan at par can

New Delhi itself is diluting the Shimla agreement, which lays down a bilateral solution to the problems between India and Pakistan. If the nuclear issue between the two can be discussed at a larger forum, whatever its size, then a time may come when even pending dispute, including Kashmir, will be brought before such forums.

It is apparent that Washington fears a nuclear holocaust in the subcontinent if India and Pakistan do not come to some understanding. This may also

anything which may look like a compromise on the country's nuclear capability.

Why should Washington hesitate in pursuing a time-bound programme that will eliminate nuclear weapons from all over the world? India has been suggesting this in various ways since the days of Nehru. What it means is that there will be no chosen powers which will be allowed to possess nuclear weapons; all will have to be denuclearised. The devastation that a nuclear device is capable of causing transcends boundaries and hence there can be no exclusive club of those who can spell ruin.

As for the region, America should persuade or pressure both India and Pakistan to commit themselves to non-first-use. This will be more efficacious than the capping of nuclear programme which Washington is advocating. New Delhi and Islamabad have already resolved not to attack each other's nuclear plants.

However, Washington may defeat even the limited chances of conciliation if it wants to combine Kashmir with the nuclear problem. The two are separate and should be dealt with separately. An American expert, who wrote that the way the non-proliferation treaty (NPT) goes through Kashmir has only heightened suspicions. Since he has been associated with the US administration for a long time, he has been taken seriously. What he in fact is hinting at is that if

India were to sign the NPT, America would support it on Kashmir. There cannot be any permanent solution on Kashmir without Pakistan.

No doubt, Kashmir must be solved; it is a time-bomb which should be diffused quickly. But by mixing the nuclear question with Kashmir, Washington will only be confusing the situation. It may bring all negative forces on one platform. Some who are willing to go great lengths on Kashmir may be unrelenting on the nuclear question or vice-versa.

Rao may do well if he concentrates on economic issues because a viable India will be strong enough to deal with any problem. Trade between India and America has touched a figure of seven billion dollars; it should double by the end of 1995. The American investment is coming but it is mostly in the field of consumer goods. India requires hi-tech industry and this is where Clinton's personal intervention may help. The US president can also ensure that the threatened trade sanctions against India under the US trade law, Special 301, do not come into operation.

America has to watch that it does not introduce such clauses to the GATT agreement as the social clause, which will impose high tariffs on goods from the third world to depress its advantage of cheap labour. The hostility hitherto in the political field may get transferred to the economic field. So far, there is only suspicion. So long as blatant attempts to twist India's arm or irresponsible statements from Washington do not spoil the picture, Rao's visit could well be heading for sustained relationship. America should not ask for more.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

afford. America has changed its earlier position of recognising India as a regional power. New Delhi's insistence or exasperation on this point will only increase the tension with Washington.

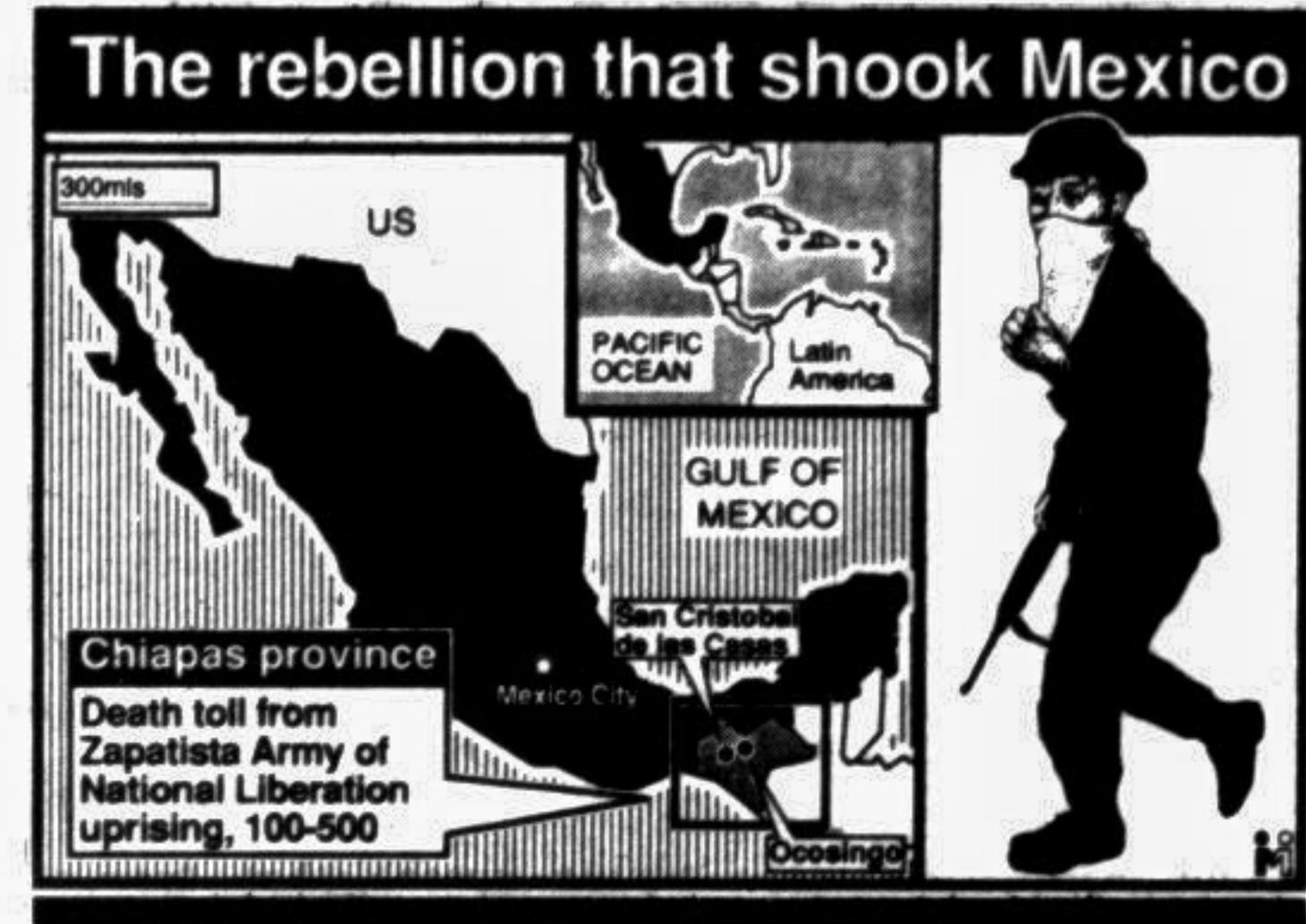
What New Delhi has to understand is that in an effort to have Washington's support, it should not give it legitimacy in the subcontinental affairs. The London talks were inopportune, not because what they achieved or did not, but because they recognised America's role. Already New Delhi has, wittingly or unwittingly, accorded America the status of a third party, if not of an arbitrator.

explain the Pentagon-inspired books to arouse panic and fear that India and Pakistan were on the verge of a nuclear warfare in 1990. I was then India's high commissioner to Great Britain and I can say authoritatively that there was not even a remote possibility of such a warfare. There was sabre-rattling from both sides but the 1990 was not the first time they had done so.

If America's purpose is to eliminate nuclear weapons in the region, it is going about in a wrong way. The nuclear prowess in the two countries has been got mixed with chauvinism and patriotism. None of them will agree to

A Conversation in Mexico City

by Dr Habibul Haque Khondker



Virginia's husband is a high level civil servant in the powerful Mexican bureaucracy. He told me that Commandante Marcos has post-graduate education, worked as a journalist and judged from his writing he could be a sociologist. I could not avoid reminding him that Guzman, the now imprisoned leader of the Shining Path of Peru was a philosopher. The

comparison between Marcos and Guzman did not make my hosts particularly happy. Virginia pointed out that some time ago when the Zapatista guerrillas kidnapped one of the former Governors of that region they treated him well in captivity and he was later returned unharmed — some thing that is unimaginable with the Shining Path who would

chop him into small pieces.

I had to mention Archbishop Samuel Ruiz's role in the process of negotiation between the rebels and the government. I quoted Archbishop Ruiz: "I oppose the neo-liberal modernization of the economy, not as a political gesture, but because the capitalist, global economy is dehumanizing — especially to Indians." My Mexican friends were not much thrilled by liberation theology. But they said: "Look what the Chiapas want, they want democracy, equality and justice." The ideals of the French Revolution still reverberate in the highlands of Mexico. When I mentioned to them the new Asian thinking on development, especially the idea of "capitalism with a human face" they were all excited.

In the conference, some younger Mexican historians and anthropologists of UNAM waxed eloquently on

"ethnohistory" and the importance for a sensitive understanding of their pre-Columbian past. Isabel Campos, a young anthropologist underscored the need to understand Aztec human sacrifices in the context of their cosmology where human, nature and god were all interconnected into a cosmic unity which gave them a sense of coherence. The Spanish replaced that cosmology by a human-centered world-view where nature was unimportant and gods were impersonal, distant. The new cosmology replaced the old one and made it look like primitive.

In the late 1930s, President Cardenas spoke of the need to Mexicanize the Indians without forgetting to respect their past, now the new generation of Mexican intellectuals would, perhaps, not mind Indianize their Mexicaness. And this unity, the fusion of the local and the foreign is the beauty of Mexico.

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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.

Black-gold of Cox's Bazar

Sir, Over twenty years have passed and, meanwhile, much has been told and lot of hue and cry has been made about valuable minerals zircon, rutile, elmenite, garnet, magnetite and monazite etc called the 'black-gold' of Cox's bazar but practically no pragmatic step has been taken by the authorities concerned for the exploration and commercial utilisation of 'black-gold' as yet.

In December last year the government had sanctioned an amount of Taka four crore for more research work and purchase of new machinery for the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission's Beach Sand Plant at Cox's Bazar set up in the year 1974 but so far doing nothing except holding one meeting after another and conducting tours one after another of its officials there.

We wonder how long would time and public money be wasted and the deposits washed away by tidal bores!

It appears that the people of our country are totally ignorant about the valuable minerals. Moreover the exploration and the commercial utilisation of the minerals are deadlocked due to lack of field work, knowledge and correct decision of our policy makers.

Our bitter experiences say that unless there is a general awareness among the people about the 'black-gold' and also a political consensus on the matter, the exploration and commercial utilisation of the valuable minerals are not possible in our country.

By no means the 'black-

gold' of Cox's Bazar is less important than Madhyapara hard rock mine or Barapukuria coal mine. Even if we simply apply indigenous method, the exploration, mining and commercial utilisation of 'black-gold' would help us provide employment to thousands of our people in the coastal areas spread from Teknaf to Kuakata and also enable us to earn crores of Taka in foreign exchange every year.

We strongly demand that an all party national committee on 'black-gold' of Cox's Bazar, consisted of members of our Jatiya Sangsad, may be formed which may kindly physically visit and inspect some of the mines in Cox's Bazar, Teknaf and Mohakhali and see the possibility of indigenous method of exploration and commercial utilisation of the valuable minerals and take a correct and bold decision thereof without further delay, in national interest.

O H Kabir
Dhaka

'Building construction laws'

Sir, Mr Kabir in his letter "Building construction laws", published in your esteemed daily on 1st May, has rightly pointed out that it is high time to amend the Building Construction Rules as we have started constructing high rise buildings. The present specification of keeping open space on the basis of size and side of the plot is cumbersome and difficult to detect any variation. It must be based on the foundation and uniform space must be kept open on all sides, so that any deviation can be easily detected by the neighbours.

The proposal made by Mr Kabir should, therefore, be given serious consideration by the government to save the existing buildings from collapsing due to deep digging for high rise buildings.

Abu Ahmed
49, Shahjahanpur, Dhaka

Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge

Sir, It is disquieting to note that some persons are demanding to change the name of Jamuna Bridge. The name of the bridge has been kept after the name of the mighty Jamuna river. The Jamuna river is associated with our culture and tradition. The name is well understood, well known and familiar to all people at home and abroad. The name is very much there in our folklore, literature, poems and songs.

All the agreements and contracts have been signed keeping the name as Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge. The levies were collected from all in the name of Jamuna. All donor countries and agencies have accepted the name.

The river has been flowing since long before the birth of the eminent personalities. As such the name of the bridge cannot be changed. The people who are demanding for change of the name are simply doing the same to delay the work of construction. It is not understood as to why the change of name has become essential before starting of the construction work. The development work of the country will seriously be hampered if minor things or sentiments are raised before starting of any important work.

The Jamuna river is associated with our life. The poet says the river sings "Man will come, man will go, but I will go on for ever". The river Jamuna will flow forever. The name of the bridge should invariably remain as the Jamuna

Multipurpose Bridge. The English Channel has not been named after anybody. We will rather undermine the importance of a mighty river like Jamuna if we change the name. There must not be any compromise in this matter.

The people, the great majority of them, will also not accept any change of name.

Mahbulul Haque Chowdhury
Kalabagh, Dhaka

Powers of foreign press

Sir, "Washington Post" threw US VP Agnew and President Nixon out of Oval. "Kualalumpur Express" closed Bangladesh embassy in Brunei as its envoy, an ex-BCCI officer, son-in-law of Ershad's minister, rode a bullet-proof 6-door Cadillac — the headline was "Costliest auto from poorest country." "London Observer" changed Bangladeshi mood on Ershad with headline "Ershad, his kickback, graft bonanza top in Asia, miracle child, richest President in poorest country." Tabloid topsy-turvyed Buckingham Palace while "London Times" forced many ministers to quit because of being accessory to spies and extra marital forays with damsels. "Yuri Shimbun," "Asahi Shimbun," "Tokyo Sakura (Sunrise)" changed MPs several times because of corruption. "Rome Chronicle" broke cabinets on rent seeking flushes. "Bangkok Post" rationed energy, water for bath houses and forced "AIDS tested" ID card by a US PACP for glamour girls. "South China Morning News" in Kowloon, Hong Kong openly disclosed deficiencies, corruption of Chief Secretary. "Statesman" of India forced PM Dr Moromohan Singh to resign on stock exchange scam... and many more. And here a Bangla news editor was arrested as he just elaborated on an upstairs.

Ghulam Murshid
Dhaka

OPINION

Administration and Political Stalemate

Alif Zabr

The administration of the 3-year old people's government is struggling heroically but rather hopelessly to lick the social problems released and generated after the 9-year autocratic rule. To add to the misery, the political opposition is in no mood to lend a helping hand to contain the evil forces. They are apparently out to skin alive the party in power, in a holier-than-thou attitude.

Laced with mega-pills of super patriotic gestures (not possible for the others to conceive, imitate or develop!). Opportunism is a timely and powerful weapon in the political arsenal. But should it be at the expense of national objectives? The sustained antics of the opposition have reached a peak of drumbeating, with storm-warning signals of on-stop *kalbasakhis*. There appears to be a deliberate and calculated move to create instability by trying to bring down the party in power, fully realizing the present historical circumstances. This political wisdom of the party (with a record of two decades in the wilderness) is supposed to take the country forward. The development efforts are being completely ignored and sought to be stalled, and the electorate are encouraged to believe in gloomy forecasts. Thanks to influence peddlers, Bangladesh has still to see the silver cloud.

Pessimism, in politics, or in life, does not pay. What the people are witnessing are partisan tactics one step above pessimism — right or wrong; the ruling party are wrong all the time. Perfection is demanded when the critics cannot deliver it themselves (even theoretically, not to speak of practically) had they been in power. The weakness of an environment is hailed as the weakness of a party. The prevailing system is inherited by the new rulers, hence it cuts no ice to wholly blame the new inheritors. The weaknesses of the ruling party are being de-

liberately mixed up with and confused with the prevailing situation in the country. The opposition's contention is that most of the present ills are created by the rulers. Some, not all. Making scapegoat is not a sign of credibility. In a multi-party system, the presence of other believers must be conceded.

The valuable time of the ruling party is being wasted by forcing it to defend itself publicly, resulting in mud-slinging bouts as witnessed by the bemused masses.

The ruling party, in three years of governance, has fared poorly in tackling the various social and other problems unleashed since the last general elections. There are apparently signs of helplessness and lack of direction in rising to the magnitude of the task. The half-hearted actions (mostly non-actions) have not generated a great deal of public confidence, and the day by day improvement is slow and uninspiring.

The list can be easily reproduced: campus violence and closures, institutional corruption, the pervading indiscipline, indifference to law and order, absence of enforcements, the cult of violence in all layers of the society. The indifference of the anonymous bureaucracy and the ineptitude of the sector corporations and the public sector are continued reminders of the bottomless-basket image.

The cabinet changes are still awaited. The cryptic silence of the Prime Minister on the major issues is baffling, to say the least (compare how vocal are the heads in other countries). The sense of urgency is missing. People like to see action every day, even if the results are not promising (a psychological factor). Dynamic action gives the impression that something is being done. It is better than silence and noises of platitudes. The mud-people wish to see bricks of development.