

Wanted a More Effective Initiative from Govt

The river transport workers strike has entered its sixth day and it is only five more days to go for the Eid holidays when millions make a move to be with their families. Most of these people cannot ever reach destination with launches anchored. How with the produces of the interior avail the Eid market boom with all the vessels tied to the shore? In the last four days the river transport standstill has pushed the national economy as well as human suffering to limits. What will happen if the situation continues unresolved till the Eid day or even past that? An unmitigated massacre in both economic and human terms will result — the injuries inflicted would be beyond easy repair.

Perhaps the owners are using the Eid as their trump card to rake up the human issue as pressure to break the morale of the workers. After all the workers cannot afford to let the nation down in the celebration of one of our people's biggest festivals — and they would be compelled to go back to work without the other side's conceding anything on any point of demand or contention. So may run their thinking. The government, by allowing themselves to be ineffective for long four days, is helping capitolly the owners to succeed with their ploy. The government cannot possibly go back on what it has committed in print and after necessary deliberations and the workers are mainly demanding the materialisation of the government award only. This is not a case where the government can afford to fail the workers.

In Saturday's two meetings, one presided over by the BIWTA chief and, the other the Director of Labour, talks broke down on the question of implementing certain clauses of the award. The government, of course, cannot force the owners to accept what they are balking at saying these were out of the operators' power to implement. But the government can persuade — and that the government's sincere and serious wishes have in tow both carrots and sticks, shouldn't be unknown to the operators of river transport. We are getting a feeling that the government so far has done little better than allowing its good offices to be used by the contending parties. We have in these columns counselled the government to give of itself much more to find a quick resolution.

The government is failing to impress that it cares. The citizen's wellbeing and the national economy cannot be hostages to trade union bargaining. We had said at the outset that at least the concerned minister, if not the Prime Minister, should throw his weight in and handle the impasse bypassing lackadaisical bureaucratic ways. We had expected good tidings from the May 13 meeting — nothing came of that. The May 14 double meeting also failed to yield result. If Eid, and not the government's good intentions, imposes an end to the strike — that would be bad for the workers, for the nation at large and, more importantly, for the government itself. If the developments fail these three, the owners' gains at the moment would avail them little ultimately.

The government's record about meeting the challenges of nation-sized strikes is far from creditable. The strike involving two hundred thousand teachers staying out of their classrooms is hanging with little initiative from the government for its resolution. Is the government taking the tussle for a war of attrition knowing that they can wait out the teachers? This would be a very foolish approach. At stake is nation's education.

Family at the Centre of Democracy

As urged by the United Nations, we, in line with the rest of the world, observed the International Day of Families yesterday. It is heartening to note that this World Body, in the midst of all the global, regional and humanitarian crises, has had time to concentrate on this most basic of human institution, one that lies in the very core of civilization. Family, for a country like ours, is far more important as an institution than we realise. Given the fact that so many of our traditional institutions have fallen apart, and whose influences on the members of the society are on the wane, family continues to hold its own. Family values remain central to our own way of life.

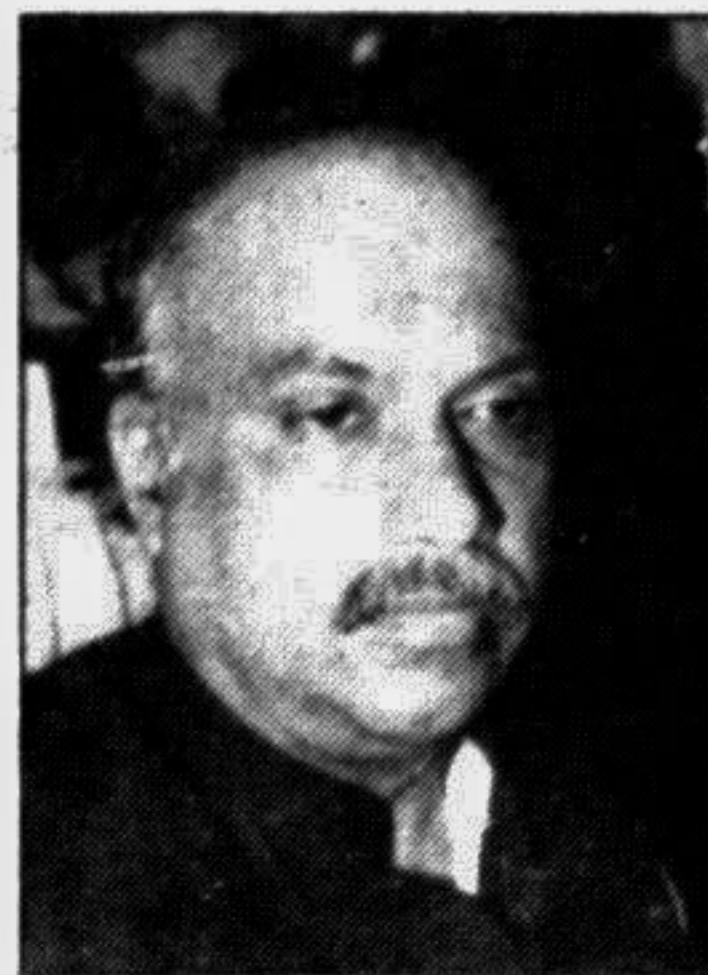
Not only in terms of philosophic values that we inherit but also in mundane economic terms, families continue to be the most important source of our wealth. Just think of all the money that flows in from our expatriate citizens who send in a lion's share of whatever they earn, for the welfare of their family members back home. There is something to be glorified in this devotion to the family. What prevents these young men — they are mostly so — out in the far flung parts of the world (it is not only the Middle East, but the South East and the Far East, from where the cash now flows in) from being selfish and not send in the money to help the families here? For most of these people are not in the best paying jobs in the first place, and it is at a high hardship cost that they send money back home? All this is due to the bond that families still provide for us in this world. And this is where Bangladesh must look for most of the support in its struggle to build its future.

The slogan on the subject as coined by the UN is "Building the Smallest Democracy in the Heart of Society." There are two clear messages that comes out from this slogan: one that families are the smallest unit of democracy, and second, that families themselves must be democratic in form and behaviour. Let us start from the second. There is a lot that can be said about making our families less hierarchical and more and more open. Too often our families are too strongly patriarchal and bit too dominated by the father figure. This must change if democracy is to be nurtured from the very bottom and from the earliest possible stage. Taking the other message, we as a society must understand the value and importance of this institution. There are too many factors that are tearing this vital and core body apart. We have to create supportive institutions to help build better families.

Of course it is poverty which is mostly responsible for abandoned families. Too many female-led families have no social mechanism to support their father-abandoned child. Maybe we can think of putting up community-based childcare centres for such children while the mothers are engaged in back-breaking job that we see them doing all the time.

This could be one practical decision we can take on this occasion. Let us start with a few in Dhaka city slum areas.

The Proposition is: Should the Next General Elections be Held under a Caretaker Government?



We know that there will be a general election in 1996 when the people will get the opportunity to express their opinion and give their verdict. Now, the demand for holding that election under a neutral, non-partisan, caretaker government has been raised. It has been raised, because, we have reasons to believe that the BNP government is conspiring to snatch away people's right to vote which was achieved through long-drawn struggle.

We did never claim that a caretaker government is the alternative to an elected government. Let me clearly state that the tenure of this BNP government is upto February 1996. After the expiry of five-year tenure, the President will dissolve the parliament as per constitution and the government will also have to resign. During that period, until the election, the BNP will remain in power as a caretaker government and it is quite clear that they will play their role in conduct in and supervising the election. During those three months, they are supposed to run the government not as an elected one, but as a caretaker government. But in fact they will have 100 per cent opportunity to influence the electoral process as a party-government, which is most likely to be partisan.

We have no intention to dislodge an elected government by any other means, we want change of the governments only through ballots.

Now, the leaders of the ruling party say that there was no mention of caretaker government in the joint declaration of the three alliances made in 1990. Actually, at that time, we reached consensus on certain fundamental issues on the basis of our commitment, sincerity and spirit of struggle. The issues were — protection of the spirit of liberation war, autonomy for the radio and TV, repeal of black laws and protection of democratic rights. We believe that protection and establishment of all these things would ensure a smooth democratic atmosphere. Any elected government can help build up an atmosphere for a free and fair election by ensuring those rights of the people mentioned in the joint declaration.

But it is unfortunate that the BNP did not implement the joint declaration. Even, before placing the bill for introducing parliament system, the ministers of the BNP government did not hesitate to term the joint declaration as an 'unimportant' and invalid document. Now they are speaking about that document. Especially after the Magura by-election, we have come to believe that the government wants to remain in power by any means and to achieve this it will not hesitate to hinder the process of fair election by obstructing free exercise of voting rights of the people. We want to amend the constitution to incorporate provisions for holding not only the next parliament election, but also a few more of the following elections of the Jatiya Sangsad under a caretaker government. Therefore, we propose that a non-political, non-partisan and neutral caretaker government will run the administration only for three months and will hold the parliament elections during that period.

In today's section of the debate the Chief Whip of the Opposition in Jatiya Sangsad and Organising Secretary, Bangladesh Awami League, Mohammad Nasim argues in favour of the proposition.

Interviewed by Chapal Bashar

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Ours is an undeveloped country which was under military rule and remained without democracy for a long time. There was lack of opportunity to build up a permanent and independent electoral process in this country. The right of the voters was snatched away time and again in the past. Moreover, the administration, in most cases has become used to working in line with the ruling party during elections (may be due to pressure from upper level or for personal greed or interest).

So, in this situation, you cannot expect a free and fair

term. We want a caretaker government only for three months when the five-year tenure of the BNP government expires. However, due to the ruling party's attitude and continued failures to run the government, the demand for a mid-term election is now coming up. Immediate resignation of the government and holding of election under a caretaker government is also being demanded.

If the government sincerely wants to give democracy a permanent shape then they should accept the demand and bring a bill in the parliament regarding caretaker government. In that case, the opposition will consider allowing BNP to complete its five-year term.

Some of the BNP leaders

Moreover, the people will have a guarantee that they can vote for the candidate or the party of their choice and that is the major condition for ensuring democracy. This power and right of the people will, ultimately, keep the government and the ruling party cautious.

BNP leaders say that fair elections can be ensured by strengthening the Election Commission. We also want a strong EC — that is our demand too. But there are some other points for holding fair elections. These are: independent EC having adequate authority; an administration free from political influence, and a neutral government in the true sense during the election period. Such conditions exist in many countries including Britain, India and Japan.

Therefore, against the backdrop of the existing situation in our country, we believe that there should be a constitutional provision for holding elections under neutral and non-partisan caretaker government. We need this system until an atmosphere for holding fair elections under party-governments is created. We hope to have this atmosphere sometime in future.

If BNP is confident that it is acceptable to the people, than why are its leaders hesitating to accept a caretaker government only for three months? In an election under caretaker government, all the political parties will get similar facilities in the government. — There will be no controlled media. So, no party will get the opportunity to influence the electoral process.

For strengthening democracy, we switched over to parliamentary system. Now, for institutionalising democracy, we demand holding of the next election and a few more, under caretaker governments.

I have already stated that this is now a national demand. Despite gulf of difference in political ideology, all the opposition parties are now unanimously supporting the demand.

But due to the uncompromising attitude of the ruling party, a political crisis has been created. If the government brings a bill in this regard in parliament, we can discuss everything there. That is the only way to solve the problem.

Tomorrow Barrister Rafique Islam Mia, Member, Standing Committee, BNP and Minister for Housing and Works, argues against the proposition.

REBIRTH OF PALESTINE

The Process has Begun, Not to be Stopped Any More

TODAY there is a birth of a new reality.

Itzhak Rabin said in his concluding remarks after having signed the Palestinian self rule agreement in Cairo on May 5th, 1994. He does not and probably cannot use now the home 'Palestine'. In his heart of hearts he believed that with his and Yasser Arafat's signatures in the agreement there was the birth of a new Palestine. It is the result of the chain of events that went on unfolding for a century — it is a force of history. It was to happen Israeli Foreign Minister Peres also apparently felt the same way. He said, 'We are mapping today our relations so we will make borders in the future.' Therefore, the process of rebirth in on. There may be ups and downs, but it can not be stopped any more.

Interestingly, the landmark Palestinian self-rule agreement with Israel was signed in Cairo — the capital that broke rank with other Arab capitals and signed the peace agreement with Israel.

Egyptian and Israeli peace agreement still holds. However, the self-rule process has to travel a long way before the rule will become sovereign and final. Prime Minister Rabin indeed started his speech in Cairo ceremony by saying, 'This is just the tip of the iceberg of the problems that would have to be solved in implementing the declaration of principles' (signed in Washington last September). Arafat is quite aware of the problems. He called the agreement a 'true beginning to complete the march of peace and guarantee the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people'. He rightly avoided mentioning the word — Palestinian state. Such utterances could have even wrecked the signing ceremony. Indeed, there was a 'Brief glitch in the ceremony' when Arafat walked up to the Egyptian President Mubarak, Secretary of State Warren Christopher and Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev who were standing nearby and wanted a written understanding on the boundary issue. However, the present area of Jericho under self-rule stood at 62 sq. km. in place of 54 sq. km. earlier offered by Israel. Briefly, the accord includes the following main features:

Palestinians shall have control over their daily affairs. They shall be allowed to pass legislation, collect taxes and issue a travel document containing the word 'Passport'.

This will also contain the word 'Laissez-Passer' which is normally given to the people having no passport. The term 'laissez-passer' indeed dilutes the concept of sovereignty that the term 'passport' carries. Israelis know that the term 'laissez-passer' will ultimately be dropped from the Palestinian passports, however, for the present this should stay. This only shows

how difficult the negotiations were and how these two parties tried to accommodate each other. Arafat will be designated as 'Chairman' of the Palestinian authority governing Gaza and Jericho. The accord also stipulates joint approval of all laws by Palestinian-Israeli Committee for the purpose. Israel shall also exercise control over Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. It was obvious that Israel being the occupying power shall retain control over security and foreign affairs but the specific provision permitting Israel to move troops into the areas under self-rule 'in the event of outbreak of general hostilities or imminent threat of such hostilities' was most damaging. This has given further opportunities to the radical Palestinian groups to denounce the accord. Cairo agreement has the provision for negotiations within three years on a permanent settlement for the rest of the West Bank and Arab East Jerusalem.

The accord obviously created mixed reactions in the occupied territories. 'Yesterday, I did not believe they would sit and sign it. Now, I am less worried. I see that it's real', said Maalam, a resident of Gaza.

Various reports from Jericho show 'no joy in Jericho', the only piece of land in West Bank that will first enjoy freedom and temporarily accommodate the headquarters of Arafat, the Chairman of Palestinian self-rule Authority. Apparently, the first step toward transfer of authority to PLO immediately after Cairo ceremony was faulty. An advance party of PLO representatives arrived at Jericho on May 04 in Israeli jeeps and they were pelted with stones by Palestinian youths. The very idea of coming with Israelis in Israeli jeep was preposterous as this added to the already held view by many radical Palestinians that Palestinian leadership in Tunis were Israeli 'agents'.

Abud Sider, a local PLO official, said, 'They should not have come with the Israelis. They should have told us they were coming and we would have taken measures to give them a warmer reception'. Indeed, tumultuous reception was given when some 150 Palestinian policemen arrived at Gaza from Egypt. About 10,000 Palestinians warmly welcomed them; 9000 Palestinian policemen will finally form the Palestinian security force in

Gaza and Jericho. As a first step towards handing over charge, Israeli army has already handed over one army base to Palestinian police.

The transition to Palestinian self-rule is going to be extremely difficult. As West Bank and Gaza have been totally dependent on Israel for everything, Palestinians will have to go through this painful transition. However, every thing will depend on how Palestinian self-rule administration is going to be formed. The local Palestinians fear that if people with no direct knowledge and experience of the occupied territory try to control and dominate there will be chaos. Only hope is that Arafat would try to take the local Palestinian leadership into confidence and involve them adequately in the self-rule administration. Hamas leadership should be induced to join the administration on the clear understanding that they will no longer carry out or even support terrorism and violence.

Recent reports indicate that Hamas is prepared to work with PLO administration in Gaza and Jericho provided some understanding could be reached on future political relationship. Hamas members probably realised that fratricidal war is no longer in their interest as they could build on the present tract of liberated land and ultimately free entire occupied territories. Arafat should extend olive branch to them once they agree on the process of negotiations.

Arafat has an extremely difficult task ahead. Most of the young Palestinians in the occupied territories have been involved in fighting Israeli forces. The overall situation in the occupied territories is highly chaotic. The proposed election in about four months time will further destabilise the political situation. Palestinians may turn their guns towards each other. Arafat has to have enough patience and logistic and financial means to deal with the new situation in the liberated part of Palestine.

SPOTLIGHT ON MIDDLE EAST

Muslehuddin Ahmad

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To the Editor...

"Our Leaders are Letting Us Down"

Sir, We highly appreciate the profundity of thoughts and also trust the veracity of views expressed by Mahfuz Anam in his lucid, informative and objective article "Our Leaders are Letting Us Down" published in your esteemed daily recently.

We feel that both Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia and the Leader of the Opposition in the Jatiya Sangsad Sheikh Hasina are suffering from pride, prejudice and superiority complex for one reason or other. This is not good. This is also not desirable.

As well wisher of both we would like to say that in democracy one who earns more and more love and affection of the people always wins the race. It is the will of the majority of the people and not the individual wish which

crowns a person as the leader of the country.

It is time for conciliation and not collision. We sincerely hope that our leaders Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina would not let us down.

O H Kabir
Dhaka

Food-for-work projects suspended

Sir, We are shocked. An American NGO — CARE — has suspended 3000 projects. Projects are road construction, pond and canal digging. Government will lose a grant of 1,20,000 metric tons wheat. Nearly 3,04,000 people will be jobless.

We believe, these are the side effects of hartal and Fatwabaji etc. We understand that 'head is not above the veil

or the cap' but still we fail to act upon.

L R Khan
Serail Colony, Rajshahi

From 'jutton' to jute plant

Sir, As a school student during Pakistani days I along with my fellow students were convinced that jute was the golden fibre produced mostly in the then East Pakistan. The foreign exchange earning of the country was mostly through export of raw jute and jute goods while poor jute growers were deprived considerably in those days.

More than three decades have elapsed while we continue to read about the success stories of jute and cotton mixed fabric named 'jutton' developed by PCSIR, now BCSIR. Worth millions of Taka tax payers money had been

spent so as to produce jutton fabric to be used in clothing. Unfortunately, the return on investment can only be determined by learned economists.

However, very recently the use of green jute plant for paper pulp production is often being publicised. Fortunately, the production of paper from pulp produced from banana leaves, banana plants, water hyacinth, waste cotton, old rags, fibrous grass etc. is being regularly shown in exhibitions. Let us hope that our future newspaper from raw jute plants will be of good standard!

Sadiq Alee
Moghbar, Dhaka

Abhimanyu politics

Sir, It's time to stop abhimanyu politics by the leaders. Alf Zabr
Dhaka