Dhaka, Thursday, May 26, 1994

Can Anything be Done to Prevent Such Tragedies?

We deeply mourn the death of nearly 800 or so Hajis who have been trampled to death due to a stampede, which was reportedly caused by some over-anxious pilgrims trying to push closer to a spot from where the act of symbolic stoning of the devil was to take place. The record congregation of 2.5 million (25 lakh) pilgrims is not an easy event to manage by any stretch of imagination. The situation is made complicated by the fact that many of the pilgrims, are elderly people, almost at the very end of their mortal existence. These people become particularly vulnerable to physical pressures that the various steps the process of Haj entails. The onrush of a crowd as huge as 2.5 million is beyond the physical capacity of anybody to endure. The elderly pilgrims are almost natural victims of such unpredictable crowd behaviour as a stampede.

It will never perhaps be clear what triggered this tragedy. In all probability, the cause was a trifle - a desire to push ahead of others, or to jostle for a vantage point to perform the rituals of Haj. But what is clear is that the 'trifle of a cause' led to the definite deaths of such a large number of pilgrims.

It is not for the first time that tragedy struck the Haj pilgrims. In 1990, a fall of some people from an overhead bridge led to a panic run, resulting in the death of about 1,500 pilgrims. But since then the Saudi authorities have taken a large number of steps with a view to preventing any accidents. What is to be borne in mind about the latest tragedy is the fact that it was caused by human behaviour, and not triggered by any accidental breakdown of the facilities.

The question before us is, what can be done to prevent such events from recurring in the future. The number of pilgrims are likely to rise in the future with Muslims from all over the world coming in ever larger numbers for this Holy Event. What can be done to improve 'crowd management' and behaviour of the pilgrims while performing Haj? We believe a massive pilgrim education programme could be thought of. For example, immediately after the pilgrims are selected at the country level, they should be shown documentary films of the lay-out of the Haram Shariff, and its vicinity, Mount Arafat and other spots connected with Haj. They should be shown a film of all the things that need to be done step-by-step - when to move from one place to the next, how fast or slow to move, and how best to behave during Haj. This 'awareness' film should also clearly show a number of things that pilgrims should not do, while in Haj, like run, or try to push ahead, create a human wave of pressure, etc. The film should be supplemented by personal and group lectures by national officials, who can explain with the help of photographs, charts and diagrams the dos and donts during the

Field briefing of a step-by-step process of Haj and raising the general awareness among the pilgrims as to what causes dangerous crowd behaviour are the surest way of reducing the possibility of recurrence of such tragic events during the Haj.

IJO and US Withdrawal

At the 21st session of the International Jute Council (IJC) and the Committee on Projects (COP) of the International Jute Organisation (IJO) which ended in Dhaka in mid-May, two topics claimed prominence. One was a piece of good news. The other — not so good — rather, a discouraging development.

The good news was about the major advance made by Bangladesh in diversifying the use of jute. This concerns utilising green jute to produce pulp for making paper. Using green jute for producing pulp brings a new opportunity for accelerating diversification of products made out of the fibre on a large scale, it was pointed out at the meeting. The IJC session took particular note of the significant improvement in the long-term prospect for jute that its use in bulk under the new process would bring about. Use of the fibre for bulk consumption items like pulp and paper will decidedly make the future of jute brighter in the global market place.

At the moment, IJO has as its members, 28 countries. Only 5 of them are jute producing and exporting countries. All the rest are importing countries. The United States is a major importer of jute products. The US decision to withdraw from IJO by June this year is naturally a cause for dismay, particularly among the exporting countries, all of whom are developing nations. As it is, the jute market in the USA is said to be declining. US withdrawal from IJO at this juncture makes it appear all the more alarming.

Budget constraints had reportedly been mentioned as a ground for the US decision to leave IJO. This hardly is a convincing reason. USA's contribution to IJO stood at 68,000 dollars in the current fiscal year. Surely, this is not an amount which would dent the US budget!

More potent is the argument that the United States was pulling out of IJO in pursuance of a general policy of gradual withdrawal from international commodity agreements. Global arrangement among producing and consuming countries aimed at regulating supplies and prices of commodities is considered by the purists as an antithesis of free trade. As a proponent of free trade, the United States could, for understandable reasons, disassociate itself from international organisations which espouse such arrangements among commodity producers and consumers.

IJO hardly answers to such descriptions of a commodity agreement. All that it has been doing is promoting research for reducing the cost and improving the quality of jute, strengthening and developing markets for goods made from the fibre and for product diversification. Jute is environment-friendly. Heightened global concern for environment rather calls for increased support for jute from a country like the United States.

One redeeming feature of the IJC session is that the other member-countries have reiterated their commitment to IJO and asked the secretariate to start preparatory work for renegotiation of the current international jute agreement. Some of them have also come up with additional contributions to the IJO work programme.

The IJC session regretted the US decision to withdraw from IJO and requested the United States to reconsider the matter. Let us hope that Washington would respond positively to this request before its withdrawal from IJO becomes effective from July this year.

The Daily Star Public Debate

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

There is a saying that when money talks, politicians listen. If it is felt by political parties in Bangladesh that

this sort of contributory money influence should be eliminated or at least reduced from political processes

including election process, then, I am of the opinion that our legislators can sit together, change electoral

laws accommodating for the financing of political parties from the state fund. Because you will note at this

moment we are spending over Tk 20,000 crores in revenue and development expenditure. In five years we will

be spending over Tk 1,00,000 crores. Even if we spend 1/4 of one per cent of this sum, we can spend to finance

political parties on the basis of certain criteria determined by the political parties, say on the basis of popular

votes obtained by each political party during last election subject to excluding those parties who would not get

HERE is no precedence so far for election to be held under a caretaker government where a legally elected government is already in power. Besides there is no provision in the Constitution for a caretaker government. If in the process of every periodical election a nonelected person has to assume the responsibility of a caretaker government to conduct the election, democracy

society The question of such a government comes only if there is a situation following a revolution, or end of an autocratic rule. Where also the nation as a whole and the political parties together demand election to be held under a caretaker government as no legitimate government exists at that time. To bring legitimacy to the government a caretaker govern ment of the style that we had following the end of the Ershad rule could be thought

can never be stabilised in a

But in our case at the moment a duly elected government with full legitimacy is in power and such legitimacy has been acknowledged as such in the election by people from all over the world. Therefore, under the present circumstances the question of a caretaker government is totally out of place, and as such, irrelevant. Only those people who do not believe in democracy or its institutionalisation in our society and who had in the past themselves indulged in autocratic governance like the Awami League in the form of BKSAL, Ershad in the form of martial law and later through a fake election process, can think of a caretaker government.

A person who genuinely believes in democracy will believe in democratic process for changing a government. The demand for a caretaker government raised by the opposition, on the plea that election process could not be fair under BNP, if accepted, will lead to a situation where in order to hold all future elections

TRAQ faces yet further eco-

re of its leaders to secure the

removal of United Nations

ried out conditions on wea-

pons destruction and Deputy

Prime Minister Tariq Aziz

received some sympathy from

several Security Council mem-

bers during his most recent

of the UN weapons inspection

team monitoring Iraq, Rolf

Ekeus, said on President

Saddam Hussein's 57th birth-

day (28 April) that "the atmo-

sphere has changed. Iraq is

leaguered country to tell the

population of 18 million that

no respite is in sight. Eco-

nomic conditions are expected

to worsen, and the effect on

clude medicines, but deputy

Health Minister Dr Showki

Marcus says that in practice

the economic embargo all but

prevents medical imports. "We

cannot import medicines, and

foreign medical assistance

amounts to barely five per cent

of our need," he says. "It's the

who once readily provided

statistics to reporters, to-

day refuse interviews. They re-

Iraq Red Crescent officials,

Sanctions specifically ex-

But Aziz returned to his be-

trying to be of assistance."

health is devastating.

boycott."

In addition, the chairman

Baghdad claims it has car-

trade sanctions.

visit to the UN.

nomic strain and moun-

ting deaths with the failu-

arguments against the proposition. **Interviewed by Inam Ahmed** munity or raising of subscripelected governments will have tion from unidentified sources

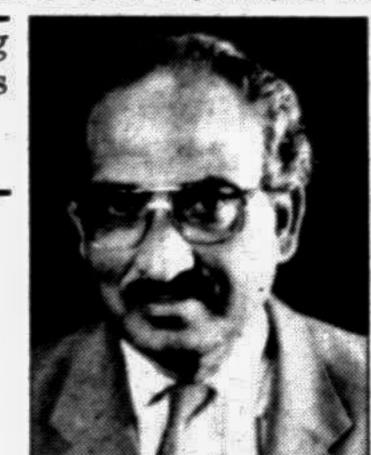
to surrender power to non elected persons three months prior to election. This will bring instability in the continuation of the democratic process. The Opposition is interested in ensuring a free and fair election. We are equally interested to see that elections are held in a free and fair environment. If it is felt that in the existing institution of Election Commission and its procedures there are certain weaknesses making it difficult to ensure fair election, then

for financing political electoral process or day to day political activities is found to be corrupting the democratic process even in the developed societies like Italy, Japan, India and Spain. All of them are matured democracies, faced with corrupt money influence in politics resulting in the fall of governments in quick succes-

There is a saying that when money talks, politicians listen. If it is felt by political parties in Bangladesh that this sort of

who would not get more than five per cent of the votes. Then we think national politics can be free of evil influence of illegitimate contributions.

I think it will be worthwhile for the nation to spend Tk 250 crore over five years to nurse democracy and to bring about a healthy political process to remove unhealthy money contribution into politics, and bring more transparency in the area of financing of political parties. This financing is a factor in corrupting politics The opposition parties and government can work together



government, people's right to

voting is negated this way. If the main objective would be to strengthen the election commission then any group feeling aggrieved, can get their grievances redressed

which all political parties would agree to an individual where the majority party duly elected in the parliament is governing the country, as against the situation of Ershad who was leading a government with no legitimacy. Nowhere am I aware of an example of a caretaker government which is entrusted with the task of holding election by replacing an elected government. We will be creating an extraordinary example and I as a founder member of BNP and also its standing

Shahabuddin's caretaker gov-

ernment. But Justice

Shahabuddin's choice was uni-

versally accepted following the

end of autocracy through our

struggle. All the political par-

ties accepted him, accepted

his appointment, but no such

situation is likely to arise in

committee member could not persuade myself to agree to such an absurd proposition for a neutral government. I am convinced my party will not agree to such a proposition. For our party to bring a Bill for neutral government is to ask for committing political suicide. Our party has given no such promise and commitment to the electorate for bringing such changes; and BNP being a democratic party in words and spirit, could never agree to such a proposal for which it has not been mandated by the electorate. Let me conclude by saying that I as a member of BNP am overwhelmingly interested in a free and fair electoral process in which the voters can exer-

cise their franchise free from

fear and favour. BNP has not

learnt how to tamper with the

electoral process, nor does it

We wish to uphold the spirit of

democracy in all its forms, in

every sphere of our national

wish to learn the technique.

Tomorrow Moudud Ahmed, MP, Jatiya Party's Parliamentary Leader and Member of Presidium, advances his arguments for holding the next general elections under a caretaker

M Saifur Rahman, Finance Minister and Member, Standing Committee, Bangladesh Nationalist Party gives his

more than five per cent of the votes. Then we think national politics can be free of evil influence of illegitimate contributions. strengthening the election

there are many ways of

process. We can start with identity cards for voters to prevent fake voting and we have already committed funds for doing so. The power of the Election Commission could be strengthened, the rules concerning conduct of election can be strengthened, provisions can be made for supervision of election by independent poll watchers like the Commonwealth polls watchers or persons of eminence and standing, both nationally and internationally. There are various other ways one could think of including adjudication of complaints subsequent to completion of an election.

In fact, to my mind, sometimes the financial contribution from the business com-

contributory money influence should be eliminated or at least reduced from political processes including election process then, I am of the opinion that our legislators can sit together, change electoral laws accommodating for the financing of political parties from the state fund. Because you will note at this moment we are spending over Tk 20,000 crores in revenue and development expenditure. In five years we will be spending over Tk 1,00,000 crores. Even if we spend 1/4 of one per cent of this sum, we can spend to finance political parties on the basis of certain criteria determined by the political parties, say on the basis of popular votes obtained by each political party during last election subject to excluding those parties

and think of such possibilities Several legal provisions could be provided to punish politicians and parties who violate this procedure and receive contributions from known and unknown sources.

I could think of many other alternatives to strengthen the neutrality of electoral process by changing the public representation act of 1972 and bringing in a reformed election process - more transparent and accountable for conducting election by a legitimately elected government for which you do not need a caretaker government.

By demanding a caretaker government, the opposition is discarding democracy and the electoral process by selection process. So democracy has no If every time a political party candidate is defeated in an election, and the party concerned resorts to extra legal process in mitigating its complaints, instead of taking recourse to the due process of law then democracy will never be stabilised and the electoral process can never gain respectability to the people.

through the appellate process.

Then how the by-elections will be held? Under caretaker government? Who will hold local government elections. To whom are we are trying to give political power, to promote grassroots level democracy? How will the head of the caretaker government be selected and who will choose him? Perhaps we are taking a warm comfort from the fact we had a

government. world's denial of these facts "a

Failing Health is the Diagnosis for Iraq

Barbara Nimri Aziz writes from Baghdad

Baghdad marked President Saddam Hussein's 57th birthday on 28 April without the usual celebrations, as people struggled to make ends meet in the fourth year of UN-sponsored economic sanctions. Gemini News Service reports that the effect of sanctions may be even more severe than was thought.

Four years of sanctions Sep 1991 **UN Security Council** resolutions on Iraq Oct 1992 Provision for seizure of frozen Iraqi assets to Aug 1990 Economic embargo 1 Apr 1991 Nov 1992 Iraq to destroy chemical and biological weapons; protection for Iraqi civilian population demanded, especially Kurds raq accepts long-term apons programme ~~ Aug 1991 March 1994 UN supervision allowed President Saddam Hussein

ply "Go to the hospitals; see for

Their professional despair is magnified by direct personal experience, every Iraqi offers first-hand testimony of family members suffering and dying

unnecessarily.

"My sister had a caesarean without anaesthesia:" "Our father had no medicine for his hypertension." "The lad next door has lost his teeth due to a bone cancer." These and other

now traumatic conditions were once routinely relieved by easily accessible drugs, they

Such anecdotes reflect widespread difficulties on a scale which may be even greater than revealed by the government.

In January, the Ministry of Health released a report on deteriorating health conditions and the rising death toll, particularly among children. It said 330,000 young Iraqis had perished due to malnutrition and disease, largely caused by lack of food and drugs.

But a UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) office in the Middle East privately estimates that malnutrition and disease have killed up to a million - not 330,000 - children since

Medical shortages and the spread of disease are aggravated by food shortages. Prices are so high - 10,000 per cent of 1990 levels — that many families now go hungry.

"Government rations — for sugar flour, tea, oil — meet 70 per cent of a family's needs," said an official. Milk is in critically short supply and is likely to, remain so without imported vaccines and other agricultural needs to build up herds.

But the UN will not take responsibility for the mounting deaths. For example, it disclaims a recent report that directly links the rising death toll to sanctions.

The report, prepared by Dr Eric Hoskins, a respected Canadian doctor, was commissioned by UNICEF to document the health conditions of children in Iraq. The organisation refused to release the devastating 1993 report under its name.

So it is necessary to go back to a 1991 study by a Harvard University team which documented rising mortality and disease among children. Says Dr Marcus: "The facts are there for anyone who wants to see them." Marcus calls the

last three years but still falls far short of providing all the nation's needs.

"What we want," says officials, "is to sell our oil and buy what we need - pharmaceuticals, milk, grain or machinery

- on the open market." In 1991 the UN authorised

oil sales worth \$1.6 billion. partly to pay for UN operations in the country. Baghdad rescued on the grounds that it was an infringement of its sovereignty.

Some Arab observers suggest that oil politics rather than UN resolutions lie behind the unyielding sanctions pol-

"The price of oil is low, down to \$12 a barrel from \$20 in 1989," points out political scientist Omar Ali. "If Iraqi oil were added to world supplies, the world price would drop

further." As a result, he suggests, major producers such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have an interest in keeping Iraq out of the picture. This may count more than the military threat of Saddam Hussein in defining Washington's continuing hard line against Baghdad.

BARBARA NIMRI AZIZ is a writer and broadcaster on Middle Eastern affairs.

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.

'Questionable Trade'

Sir, In the editorial titled "Questionable Trade" published in the issue dated 11 May, 1994 you got your arithmetic wrong. One lakh ton is equivalent to 100,000,000 kilograms of oil. Since oil is lighter than water, a litre of oil is less than a kg in weight. Even if we consider a litre of oil equivalent to a kg, hapless consumers were cheated out of one billion taka considering Taka 10 per kg extracted in excess for inferior Palm oil. So your estimate of one crore taka is one hundredth of the actual amount involved.

A few months back the government announced that action would be taken against traders resorting to adulteration and cheating in weight. As always nothing came out of

that. Now that poor consumers have been fraudulently compelled to part with no less than 100 crore taka would the government dare take actions? Or are dishonest traders and immoral industrialists too powerful a combine for the government to tackle? Khalid Hasan

Siddheswari, Dhaka

Loadshedding Sir, I would like to talk

about the "power failure" situation of old Dhaka especially in Lalbagh area. Everyday electricity goes off for 1-2 hrs in the evening besides several times during the day and night The point is why is this

loadshedding only in the area from Lalbagh to Nawabganj? The answer is that overloading is greater in this area. Our elders who think of a little rest and we sit for studying, the electricity walahs do not seem to like that while the mosquitoes too make use of the chance cent per cent, May be the alleged overloading is

due to the nearly 2000 'illegal electric connections used by small factories located in such a small area. Imagine the number! How dare they do so? It is really a shame. Point to be noted is that, allegedly the electricians themselves search for such chances and they encourage the factory owners to do so. I sadly recall what the electricians perhaps have forgotten - last years thrashing on switching off the electricity while BTV was live telecasting Italian football league final They tried to escape by saying that loadshedding of 2 hrs daily was an order from higher electric office. But when reported there, it was known that no such orders were given, instead they were doing it to make up for the overloading by those illegal lines.

How can a society advance that cannot restrict such illegal acts and where trusted officers/employees are involved allegedly in such crimes? I just cannot brush off the suspicion that the public having lost its patience might again rise in

anger. So may I request the government and the high electric supply authorities to make a survey because not only the factory owners but also the electricians who encourage them are blamable in the eyes

not only of the public but also of the government. Faranuddin Lalbagh, Dhaka

All about cricket

Sir, It is almost half a century since we first started playing cricket. Yet, for all our efforts, it is at its nadir as ever. Perhaps the cause lies in our naive approach to it. Our efforts flounder halfway. The consequence: 'rebuff' and loss of confidence. In both batting and bowling we lack power and sting. Absence of striking bowlers is all the more acute. Our batsmen cannot face up to the pace, swing, bounce and spin of classy bowlers. So far, we've failed to groom up fast bowlers, capable of delivering the ball with accurate length and direction. This is largely due to the fact that our cricket has not developed both vertically and horizontally.

Even in Dhaka, we don't have a permanent ground for playing cricket leave alone the district headquarters. These are great for bidding factors. We all know that a pitch is to a cricketer what an anvil is to a smith. The pitch is the breeding ground or nursery of cricketers. The oval-shaped Dhaka stadium is ideal for cricket. But it has been turned

result, it has become slow and soggy. Its outfield is still more slower. Its pitches are roughed up on and off. It does not help cricket. We are rather tinkering at cricket. Cricket without a permanent pitch is as like as a bird without a perch. Under this circumstance,

into an all-purpose arena. As a

we cannot expect our chaps to do well let alone earn any laurel. Cricket culture is a demanding culture. It requires right attitude. Adequate infrastructure is necessary to groom up cricketers with right temperament.

The rebuff, if at all, in the ICC tournament had exposed the potentials and weaknesses of our young cricketers they did their best. They from the nucleus of our cricketing strength. They played under pressure. So we don't have room for despondency. Given proper coaching and leadership, they can still deliver the goods to the nation. Development of cricket requires both short term and long term planning. We can develop at least on cricket ground in each district head quarters with the existing resources. Such facilities will help foster a cricketing envi-

ronment For filling the present lacuna, we need to know that many fairly developed cricket-

ing countries are inducting foreign nationals into their teams. For instance, England cricket team comprises men also of Caribbean, South African and Pakistani origin. Indian born Asif Iqbal ended his career as captain of Pakistan cricket team. Indian origin Dipak Patel is playing for New Zealand. We can also emulate them. Success will provide an instant fillip to our cricket. Then a stage will come when our own boys will be able to take up the mantle for themselves. For it, we may require broader outlook and vision. Golam Nabi

Nasirabad, Chittagong **BBC Dhaka**

programme Sir, I do agree with the

views (letter) of Mr Haroon Huq about BBC Dhaka programme published in your daily on 19 May '94. The extended programme of BBC for the listeners of Dhaka City and it's surrounding area is fully non-Bangladeshi in nature. All songs, music, poems are of Indian origin. I do not understand why our Information Ministry has imported an Indian brand of BBC into Dhaka market through FM band?

Kamal Mahmood Magh Bazar, Dhaka

good election under Justice meaning. People voted the human rights violation." Domestic agricultural production has increased in the