

Some Basis for Talks

Marking a welcome departure from generalities, the Opposition has placed its formula for a caretaker government to hold general elections before the nation, and operatively, before the government of the day. The smokescreen of ambiguities and rhetorics that shrouded the question should now dissolve into the thin air. The wrangle over it raging for months in a barren state grew acrimonious and proved to be energy-sapping with each passing day. It came to produce a parliamentary grid-lock that tended to cast a shadow on the future of democracy in the country. From this standpoint, one wished very much the enunciation of the major opposition parties' position in such clear terms had come sooner.

Although belated, we regard the opposition's move as a positive development in the present scheme of things; because we have, for the first time, some concrete basis — a set of talking-points — to start the process of negotiations pegged to the same. We have a frame of reference now where there was practically none before. Without delving into the merit of the opposition's formulation or any prejudice to it, we can assert that playing Ostrich over the question can no longer do. The common and shared concern is palpably for ensuring free and fair polls to the satisfaction of all parties concerned.

The ruling party has gone on record quite a few times over with its frequently expressed desire to bring about some much-needed electoral reforms. Let the government now place the electoral reform bill on the table of the House or make its details otherwise known by way of responding to the opposition's now-formulated demand. We urge both the sides not to brush each other's proposals aside or dismiss them out of hand with a burst of intemperate utterances in a kind of knee-jerk reaction. They should instead give serious consideration to these. There is obviously no quick fix or set-piece solution to the problem. More important, there is no last word in politics, especially in constitutional politics geared to statutory amendments. Taking rigid positions will be self-defeating where the situation unavoidably demands a minimum working consensus to forge even an inch ahead.

The opposition cannot expect any magical outcome of the move they have just made and lose patience quickly down the road. They must allow reasonable response time to the other side. It would have been ideal had the opposition's call for movement not come with its enunciation of the formula for a caretaker government. This may have been done to underscore the seriousness of their commitment to the demand or to strengthen their position on the bargaining counter. But any further persistence along this line could mar the chances of negotiations without which the issue cannot be resolved in the first place. At the same time, the government leaders should not be raring to reject the opposition proposals outright thereby making a short shrift of their initiative.

We are for a new, fruitful phase of negotiations to begin between the ruling party and the opposition. And they must be prepared to do whatever it takes to ensure that.

Accident and Insanity

Hell was let loose in and around the Dhaka Medical College. On Sunday about a dozen vehicles were damaged by frenzied students and mobs — mostly transport workers — clashing each other. It all was triggered off by the tragic death of a student of the Dhaka Medical College. A head-on collision between a micro-bus and a truck near Lama Bazar, Sylhet, caused the death of Tanveer Ahmed Ferdous, a meritorious student, and also injury to two other students. When the news of the accident reached the medical college, the students staged a violent protest and then brought out a rally. On their way to Dr Fazle Rabbi Hostel in Baksia Bazaar the students suddenly allowed their passion to run as high as to attack eight to nine trucks parked on the wayside.

This was enough provocation for the transport workers to retaliate. They chased the students, damaged the college bus and a micro-bus of Sandhani, a voluntary organisation, ransacked the ladies' common room and even broke the doors and windows of the college principal's room. The free-for-all incident that took place there is not the first of its kind. It has all the making of mob insanity, no doubt about that. But it is even more. The expression of insanity is also an explosion of bottled-up frustration and anger of a long time. The frustration is because of the abnormal frequency of such accidents and yet no effective government measures to bring the erring vehicles in order. And the anger is from helplessness in the face of constant threat of insecurity.

This is what really explains the collective insanity and irrational behaviour we most of the time become a witness to. Mob insanity knows no discrimination and mete out punishment to someone for the crimes of others. In such a fluid situation the values and principles that hold society together suddenly fall apart, making way for a sort of anarchy. This is exactly what is now happening in the country. Most of the time the organised groups enforce their numerical superiority on the disorganised but majority of the population.

So what is the lesson for us? The lesson is that the authority has to act fast. The autocratic regime understandably had to pamper the organised groups so that it could reap political dividends from undue concessions. If the same tradition is allowed to continue, we are really heading for a catastrophe. In the first place an atmosphere has to be created where law and order can be the modus operandi of the system. All the known causes of accidents and the crimes have to be removed first; and even after ensuring every possible precaution, if an accident should take place, it has to be thoroughly looked into to bring out the truth. It is the transparency that is absent in all such cases. If this transparency along with proper punishment for the law-breakers could be ensured, people would not feel tempted to take laws in their own hands.

THE four-day Foreign Ministers' Conference of the 109 member Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) ended in Cairo on 3 June, with the adoption of a high-sounding Declaration, called Cairo Declaration, expressing lots of pious wishes and good intentions, on issues, both political and economic. They cover a wide-range of fields including strengthening of South-South cooperation. North-South etete, request to the UN for taking measures to restore peace in Bosnia, Rwanda, Yemen and other hot spots. So on and so forth. Such repetition of "old wine in new bottles" is nothing new on the part of NAM. Since the Jakarta Summit in 1992, much water has flown down the Nile, when the recent NAM 11th Ministers session was held in Cairo.

The Cairo Declaration sounds like a "family will" made by a dying father instructing his children what to do with the property he is leaving behind for them. But what happens if no property is left at all and the sack is empty? It reminds us of an English proverb: "An empty sack can't stand upright." Is it true? That is why the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, an outspoken statesman, sounded a note of warning in his inaugural speech for the wise men to follow. And the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister went a step further to voice his "fears" for NAM's future when he said it had lost its "clout" and asked whether it was being "nummified".

President Mubarak, like a practical statesman, sounded the warning bells at the conference without any ambiguity and rhetoric, when he said that NAM had to "change or face irrelevance". He also warned saying: "If we don't act with open minds and great adaptability, we will be justifying the argument that the movement has become empty of content or an image without reality." Thus he had set a tone, a clear trend and given a sense of direction. Unfortunately, the Declaration, adopted at the Cairo conference of NAM FMs, has not lived upto that expectation of President Mubarak. No constructive thinking has been reflected in the Declaration, except routine rhetorics.

Indeed, NAM has been "nummified," as apprehended by the Sri Lankan FM, and it has been turned into an empty vessel making too much sound, compared to its colourful and eventful past. NAM made a glorious and historic debut in 1961, with four charismatic world personalities as its strong pillars. They were Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia, Pandit Nehru of India, President Soekarno of Indonesia and President Nasser of Egypt. It was born with the main

Is NAM at its Journey's End?

by A M M Shahabuddin

Now, with the demise of the Soviet regime and collapse of the Warsaw power bloc, the East-West cold war has also come to an end, opening new vistas for the creation of a new world order, realignment of relationship between states and more comprehensive North-South equation. In this changed scenario, NAM, with its original motto and programme of action, is a total misfit; the change in condition demands a change in strategy.

purpose of serving as a bulwark between the two opposing world forces or power blocs — East and West, when the cold war fever was at its peak. Besides political issues, NAM also aimed at promoting the economic interests of its member states, comprising mainly the Third World countries. NAM made its presence felt both in the political and economic fields, thanks to the sagacious policy of its four founding fathers. It was gradually considered by both the blocs as a third power to reckon with. Its voice was heard and respected in the corridors of power both within and without the UN. In fact, it left a blazing trail of its glittering achievements during the sixties and seventies. But with the gradual 'exits' of four of its main architects, NAM gradually lost its luster and vitality.

During the last two decades, it had been wandering like an aimless stray horse, lacking its characteristics.

When NAM should have played a vital role on political issues affecting one or the other member states, it proved totally impotent and lacking strength and initiative. The glaring examples are its pi-

tiable role in Iran-Iraq war, the Gulf War, Bosnia, the Middle East, Ethiopia-Somalia, Vietnam-Cambodia, etc. It's political bankruptcy was shocking. NAM was either a silent spectator, a by-stander on the sideline or sitting on the fence, when terrible things were happening and its intervention was solicited and expected. In fact, NAM which took off with a big bang as a Movement, could not pick up and gather that vitality and sagacity, even after crossing three decades, to serve as a living organism to cope with the changed situations. It is now singing out of tune.

One of the purposes of NAM was to protect the economic interests of the Third World countries, there also its record of performance was very poor. The poor performance of the Group of Fifteen (G-15), created by NAM, is a case in point. The G-15 was established at the initiative of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi at the Belgrade NAM conference in 1989, mainly to counter the economic might of the Group of Seven (G-7), representing the developed countries. But it seems to have died a natural death as evident from its poor

show at the last G-15 summit held in New Delhi a couple of months back. Out of 15 members, only four showed up, besides the host country, India, and that also after earlier postponement of the summit due to their attendance. The Delhi summit was specially convened to prepare a strategy for the Uruguay Round of talks of the GATT. That miserably failed. It proved once again that the days of 'talk-shop' are over. Now mere hollow and vague calls for South-South Cooperation and chauvinistic tirades against North would not bear any fruit. So, instead of strengthening G-15, NAM member countries are exploring to join more profitable regional organisations, like APEC, ASEAN, NAPTA and SAPTA. A popular Calcutta English daily, in an editorial on the poor show of the G-15 at Delhi, lamented, saying: "Having fathered this anaemic child, India can at least arrange for its decent burial." What a sad commentary!

As is well-known, the Third World countries took the role of 'non-aligned' to avoid being dragged into the East-West stand-off. Now, with the demise of the Soviet regime

The writer is a retired UN official

PRESIDENT Nelson Mandela has urged South Africans to get down to work as soon as possible, and Johannesburg residents Mike Smith, Cassius Plaatjes and Chris Dlamini are following his instructions — literally to the letter.

The trio are contributors to *Homeless Talk*, a newspaper launched by and for the homeless in May, the same month Mandela was sworn in as the country's first democratically-elected leader.

Smith and Dlamini live with 2,000 others on the platforms and passageways of Park Station, Johannesburg's biggest railway terminus. Plaatjes lives on a pavement near the centre of town.

Part of the idea of *Homeless Talk* is to give these forgotten people a voice. But it also aims to put money in the pockets of the city's most destitute people.

"It's sold to members of the homeless community for 10 cents," says Smith. "They then sell it for a rand."

So far so good. "It was all sold in three weeks, 10,000 copies," Smith says. "Now we have printed another 20,000."

Production of the second issue

is underway.

In the first issue, 21-year-old Dlamini described a young orphan he met at Park Station, who had never known his parents: "He was like an island, all alone surrounded by water, like weeds in the field that moved side to side as the winds blew."

Dlamini said he completed school but "never took myself as someone who could write well. When I heard about the newspaper I went back to the station, and I couldn't sleep I had so many ideas. The next day I asked for pen and paper and wrote it in 10 minutes."

Dlamini is determined to keep the promise he made to his family when he left the Durban township of Umlazi: "It's not easy to just go back home, because with my mother not working I then become a bigger problem. That's why I stick on here trying to change my life, so that when I go back home I don't go empty-handed."

Dlamini never got a foothold in Johannesburg but Smith once held a senior job, training kitchen staff for a major

restaurant chain. After falling out with his employers, he went in search of a better job. Instead, he ended up with a job so menial that he "couldn't afford a place to stay, couldn't buy a pair of shoes." He took refuge in Park Station. Contact with groups helping the homeless led to his enrollment in a computer course.

I attended classes and slept at night on my books," he says. "I would then go to a centre in Bertrams [half an hour's walk away] every morning to wash. One of the churches was helping me with clothing so that I could at least look respectable among the other students."

Smith says the idea for *Homeless Talk* came from Reverend Diane Wicks, a minister from the United States

who worked from a church near the station. "She mentioned to me that in America the homeless have a newspaper called *Street Voice*."

Smith had been doing work with the Central Johannesburg Partnership, a non-governmental organisation which has a homeless people project: "They agreed to offer us office space and the hardware we needed."

There was some debate about the name. "There were suggestions like 'Cry of the Destitute' and 'Suffering of the Forgotten'." But we didn't want to come forward as people begging for sympathy," Smith says. "We want to show the broad society that we are human and that we have feelings and we are only here because of social pressure. We were

giving the homeless an opportunity to speak, to talk out to society."

That view is echoed by Plaatjes, standing outside his "home," a roofless shelter made of thrown-away plywood, clinging tenaciously to a windswept pavement. He has been there since 1992.

Through this newspaper everything is possible. We took a chance and now we see it working," he says. Plaatjes wrote a poem in Afrikaans for the paper. "I never wrote anything before," he says. "It took me just one minute. It just came up in my mind. I was sitting right here with the people when I wrote it."

A soldier in the South West African Defence Force, he left Namibia after independence and found work in an armed security company. "Circumstances turned against me and I lost that job," he says. "Since that time I've turned to Rastafarianism so I can't work with firearms."

Plaatjes points to a cardboard box: "That's a bed, that's a blanket."

ministerial berth as pre-condition to joining the party. BNP leadership measured their pull and eventually discarded them.

The emergence of Gano Forum and its membership has not been in any way different from scores of other smaller political parties taking birth in consequence of leadership discord in the parties to which they originally belonged.

The ceremonial installation of Gano Forum's saw enthusiastic people, mostly political dark horses thronging around. The country witnessed similar wed-locking many times in the past and none survived the test of time. Dr Hossain's 'Gano Forum' did, however, stir quite a commotion amongst the political non-entities and destitutes.

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Between the time at least one MP from Dinajpur publicly pronounced his allegiance to Shahid Zia's ideals in a BNP-sponsored meeting where Prime Minister Khaleda Zia was the main speaker. Thus, it may be seen that the aforesaid tangles in the leadership of the smaller parties opened up the floodgate to their leaders and workers shifting to other big parties en bloc. Such deserting of one party and embracing the other, which only yesterday they used to castigate ruthlessly, has been a funny gamble in the sub-continent for long.

Unfortunately, the receiving end becomes utterly infatuated because the deserters from one party are taken as friends'.

In fact, the issue of a 'caretaker government' during national elections has given a fresh booster to GF activities. Initially, subsequent to its council session in late September, 1993, Gano Forum was very vocal against terrorism and asked for a rational consensus to tackle it effectively.

Dr Kamal Hossain and some of his senior colleagues in the Forum are making the selfsame recommendation, that of Begum Khaleda Zia, asking the opposition in particular to settle such issue within the four walls of the Jatiya Sangsad. Concurrently, they seem to have been discounting the demand of the opposition. They would rather have the Election Commission revitalised and made more effective with greater authority. This is again a replication of BNP's proposals.

Consensus — the Main Casualty

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

emerged at General Zia's instance. True to his words and deeds he had by now successfully created inroads in some big parties and had some of their stalwarts defect to his side. Significantly he looked for some docile elements and in the process of enrollment, men like Shah Aziz, Abdul Alim got birth despite their ignominious role during the war of liberation. Such controversial induction of anti-liberation elements along with entry permission granted to Golam Azam, certainly defiled, to an extent, Zia's own image as a valiant freedom fighter.

The knowable sources would vouch that there had been some embarrassing tangles within the party high-ups. But such discord would not be that difficult for a person of Dr Kamal Hossain's stature to overcome. Instead, he seemed to have given up timidly. Still then, it is very hard to believe that he did not have enough materials to defend his fort.

From the passing events it transpired that Dr Kamal Hossain was not well at ease with his colleagues in the Party. Added to this, he had distanced himself from his own party remaining totally detached. He did not intend to exert himself. His frequent absence from the policy meetings bore testimony to his disinterestedness.

Gano Forum — Dr Kamal Hossain's brain child was

floated with all the drum-beating needed to attract attention. The initial spate of enthusiasm was reasonably encouraging but the ultimate response came from some feuding and disgruntled members of CPB. This party recently tried to settle its own disputes in the house but eventually broke into pieces. Sufiuddin Manik joined Gano Forum with his followings. The lone JSD member of Parliament Shahjahan Siraj also shook hands.

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Domestics

Sir, Before the liberation war, even relatively poor household had at least one maid to assist the daily chores of life. There after household got smaller, wages got larger and working-class girls started preferring service away from homes; therefore, serving class dwindled especially in Bangladesh.

The decline of the age of domestics and the complex human relation of mistress and the servant have gone. Modern families try to march on — fridges holding the week's perishables,