

Matter of Public Order

It is said, knowledge is responsibility. Forewarnings are even more so. And, if actual incidents should occur boding a breakdown of law and order, the failure to act even as late as that would be an unpardonable breach of responsibility. The untoward happenings in Chittagong on Monday and Tuesday centering on a Jamaat rally where party chief Golam Azam was to appear and speak, in the face of stiff opposition by a combined student front, basically reflected a miscarriage of ill-conceived law enforcement.

It goes to show that with a fuzzy mind the home ministry mixed up the political rights to holding meetings and making speeches with what was brewing up to be an explosive law and order situation. The ground level law enforcement officers accounted for only an extended vagueness of the policy tenor permeating from the top. They appeared to be either marginalised as if observing a bull fight from a distance and, where they had to intervene, they were alleged to be partisan. On Monday the alarm bell was set off as the revulsion against the next day's Jamaat rally raged over possession of venue — the Lalbagh maidan. In the ensuing rapid-fire clashes between the police and the students marked by gunfire, lobbing of teargas shells, and cocktail blasts, quite a stretch of area was engulfed with panic bringing life to a halt. Fifty people were injured. This was enough of an early warning for heading off Tuesday's running battles between Jamaat activists and APSU supporters for hours. At the end of the day, dead bodies had to be counted this time around — four. Two hundred others including policemen were injured in armed clashes. Death count may mount.

There has to be a line of demarcation between taking cognisance of threats to public order and defending political rights, of either a party or an individual. It needs to be drawn by the custodians of law at the policy-making and the operational levels. The political parties may see the wisdom of cooperating in this. The Jamaat-e-Islami as a political party having seats in Parliament and a following interacts with other political parties, does hold public meetings, takes out processions and their leaders speak out their minds at the rallies. But why have they to force Golam Azam on the scene when this creates a lot of avoidable commotion in public life? By a court verdict he may have had his citizenship restored and, he being the Amir of Jamaat his party would insist on his speaking in public but, how can one be blind to the fact that there is not just controversy about him in public perception but also a burgeoning public resentment against him. This is no pejorative but stating a fact. Chittagong is not the only place where his party's insistence that he make an appearance has been vehemently opposed, in some other places, too, his footprints were dogged by resentment against his role during the Liberation War. For a single person whose areas cannot be allowed to be turned into battle grounds. The political party concerned may agree that discretion is the better part of valour. And it should be the policy of the government to keep the need for civic peace uppermost in its mind.

The state of political confrontation in the country is getting acuter by the day as is evident from choosing the same venue for political rallies or scheduling hartals for the same day, knowing fully well that the general public for whom these are meant disapprove of such things. Such tendentious behaviour does not help politics, far less democracy. There must be an end to body-line politics.

Politics or Trade

Hopefully SAFTA (South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement) will have taken one more step forward through the holding of the just concluded seminar in Dhaka. It was fourth in the series of national seminars, being organised by SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industries in order to raise public awareness of what SAFTA is all about.

Every time we talk about SAFTA the question that naturally comes to the fore is how little progress has been made in putting this idea into place. Pious claims and ambitious utterances follow every such gathering. Then life goes on as usual with very little to show as follow up, till the next such meeting comes our way.

There are two radically different views as to how SAFTA can move forward. One view is that political problems will have to be solved first before economic relations can take root. The other view is that let political solutions take their own course, while trade and economic relations develop on their own momentum.

Some speakers drew attention to the immensely complicated political relations between Pakistan and India due to Kashmir, and the gradually deteriorating relations between Bangladesh and India caused by the water sharing problem. They felt that trade cannot move forward without the political problems being solved first.

It is obvious that such soured relations are actually responsible for the slow progress of SAFTA. However the FBCCI chief, Mahbubur Rahman laid stress on the economic and trade relations going their way, while politics remains unresolved for the time being. "Economic cooperation must continue despite political differences prevailing in the region. By such cooperation we can expand and develop our production and add new product to our trade basket." While we are fully aware of the centre stage that political problems occupy in our relations with our neighbours, we are also fully conscious of the fact of what is going on between other countries and in other parts of the world.

The most recent example of India and China increasing their trade and commercial relations while their border problem, for which they had gone to war, remains unresolved. If we look at the evolution of ASEAN, one of the most successful regional cooperation bodies, we see the correctness of the position of FBCCI chief. There were serious problems between Thailand and Malaysia, and between Malaysia and Singapore. The ASEAN members did not allow their political problems to hamper their commercial links.

While neither undermining the importance of political problems, nor understating the need for their early solution, we would like to lend our full support to the view of the FBCCI chief and urge the SAARC members to take a leaf out of the experiences of other regional bodies, and do what they did and are doing. Free trade and commercial relations from the fetters of political problems, and allow them to follow their own logic. Let the logic of free market operate in the SAARC region. Only then will SAFTA take off.

FOR the United Nations the road to Rwanda has been paved with good intentions — and hell it is indeed.

Intentions being safer than action, action at the UN is often left by default to those with an agenda or ambition or both; in the case of Rwanda, to the French and the man they sponsored for Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

Whether the French prove to play their self-proclaimed role of angels of mercy, or are doing the devil's handwork, as feared by Rwanda's victimised Tutsi minority, the international community and even the Security Council will be glad to see the Foreign Legion pick up its guns and go.

There is much public criticism of the Council's accusations of "complicity and collusion in reestablishing French colonialism," even of "complicity in genocide," for supporting the French who support the Hutu government which is seen as guilty of genocide.

So many problems: the French in Rwanda, the French in the Council; the Rwandans in Rwanda, Rwandans mostly Tutsi, in camps in Tanzania, nearly a million Rwandans in Zaire — mainly Hutus stampeding across the borders, incited to create this humanitarian catastrophe party by the Hutu regime's radio broadcasts sheltered in the French safety zone.

The Council President felt it "inappropriate" to ask the French to jam the broadcasts despite recommendations from non-government organisations and some Council

UN Fiddles while Rwanda Burns

Elvi Ruottinen writes from New York

Frustrated by the difficulties of reporting the ditherings of the UN Security Council over the crisis in Rwanda, Gemini News Service's United Nations correspondent lets fly with a personal view from the world organisation.

members and numerous letters to the Council from the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), in which they pledged a national unity government and no harm to anyone apart from war criminals and murderers.

The Council finds decisions difficult, with 15 heads around the table — or, more accurately, 15 tails wagged by dogs in 15 capitals.

Letting a sleeping dog lie may be a sound policy but some were dozing off when the Secretary-General, none-too-affectionately known as Bou-Bou, helped to sell 10 of the 15 on the wisdom of the French returning to their old

colonial patch of francophone Africa. It was expected homage would continue to be paid to the Eiffel Tower, a powerful emotional symbol of one of the top dogs of yesterday.

A senior diplomat admitted: "Bou-Bou made a booboo. The French miscalculated. The year is 1994, three decades too late for colonial solutions to African problems."

But there were few fights over the French venture — some call it adventure — into Rwanda. After all, it was only Africa. The loudest noise came not from the conference hall, but from reporters yapping at the heels of the elusive French Ambassador.

The Security Council's secretive seclusion in UN language is called CONSULTATIONS. In capital letters because it is the Council's main business. That is what it does best.

There have been many CONSULTATIONS. After witnessing a massacre of people hacked to pieces and doing little about it but recall most of the UN troops who were in Rwanda at the time of the April outbreak of violence, the Council decided to "review the situation" frequently. And, as it keeps assuring the media in Council jargon, "to remain seized of the matter."

For reporters affiliated with

Boutros Boutros-Ghali: Backing French intervention

Boutros Boutros-G