Dhaka, Sunday, July 31, 1994

Politics on the Slide Down

Politics in Bangladesh is going in all sorts of directions, and all of them are ominous. The will of the people is becoming increasingly defined as the will of the party or the group that shout the loudest. The democratic norms of acceptance of the majority view, tolerance for each others positions, and trying and working out some sort of accommodation between the divergent positions, are talling by the wayside. Over the last few days we have seen a flurry of political activities. Starting with the public meeting of Jamaat in Chittagong (that resulted in the death of five people and the injury of several hundreds), followed by Awami League's mammoth public rally, which in turn was followed by the rally of Jamaat and the United Action Council (UAC) of 13 religion based political parties and their allies on Friday, and finally the daylong 'hartal' (general strike) of yesterday called by the AL (half day) and the Anti-Communal Student group (for the rest of the day) It one listens to what is being said, and demanded in these rallies, it becomes clear that our politics is being pulled by these parties and groups in different directions, none of which is aimed at strengthening our troubled democratic experiment. The demand of the combined opposition for a caretaker government stands totally deadlocked with the government saying everything else but, and the opposition saying nothing but, a caretaker agreement will be acceptable to them. While this issue stands unresolved, in its rally on Wednesday, the party chief Sheikh Hasina said that for AL, there is now only one goal, that is to remove the sitting BNP government. No demand of the leading opposition party has ever put it on such a confrontational course against the ruling party, as this has done. Obviously, if the AL is to carry out its aim, then the issue will have to be decided in a manner other than through the parliamentary procedure. In fact the AL has called for mass struggle, to be decided in the street, and not in the Jatiya Sangsad.

Then take the demand made in the rally of Jamaat, and of the 13-party United Action Council of the religious parties and their allies. Their demand is to hang all writers and others who are against Islam, to enact a blasphemy law, ban newspapers and publications that speak against Islam, and to reform Bangladesh's Constitution to make it an Islamic one. And all this is to be done within a specific period of time, otherwise these groups will launch their own mass movements. In all these rallies, regardless of their demands, violence and lawlessness occurred at a very disturbing level. In Friday's UAC rally a group of enthusiasts had the temerity to attack the sacred Parliament and damaged property of the MP hostel. Why shouldn't such a thing happen? Didn't the speakers in the rally denounce the Jatiya Sangsåd as an 'un-Islamic' one. Bombs and explosives were used against the police. AL workers in a separate rally on Friday were hurt by bomb blasts. In other words, increasingly, violence is taking over political demonstrations, and rights and wrongs of issues and demands are not being settled by the public support behind them, but by the muscle power (or better still armed power) that the proponents are able to exhibit.

The point that we would like to make is that in the enthusiasm of each party making its demands and announcing its ultimatums, something very fundamental to democracy is being eroded - and eroded fast. That is tolerance and the practice of dialogue. It is being replaced by violence. We appeal to all political parties, especially the government, that urgent initiatives be taken to stop our slide towards lawlessness. Without law and order, and democracy none of these demands will mean anything.

A Costly Deception

It is unbelievable. But in a land of the impossible anything can happen. One such imponderable is the submission of fictitious lists of death and birth by the union parishads to the relevant higher authorities. What else would have been more befitting than this manufacturing of death and birth records of the population in a country with the the world's highest human concentration! The snag however lies not entirely in the bottom last tier of the administration. It lies in the casual approach to this important job.

The legendary indecision and changes in decision on the part of successive governments are mainly responsible for this chaotic situation. It is a long story but to make it short let us refer to a report carried in a Bangla daily. According to the report, the duty of recording birth and death used to be discharged by thana registrars and thana inspectors in the past. From 1979 the responsibility was given to the union parishads and these local councils had the job done by village chowkidars and dafadars for some extra remuneration. After the introduction of the upazila system, the job was handed over to this important administrative set-up in 1986. Again after the abolition of this system the job has been reverted to the union parishads but amazingly without reviving the extra payment for the chowkidars and dafadars. So these low-paid men are naturally not inclined to perform the duty. But the order is there alright and the union parishads have little option but to manufacture and submit a list.

If this is how we continue to make fool of ourselves, nobody stands to lose except the entire nation. If the authorities concerned cannot foresee the outcome of such frequent decision changes and also of the imposition of orders without making supporting provisions, we simply end up rendering any system inoperative, or operative only in the most dubious way. We are allowing such a tinkering not only in demography but in almost all areas of our life. Even in research works, data and statistics are manufactured and bungled to suit our purposes. When national information and achievements are built on such massive lies, the whole structure is bound to fall apart. The differences between the reality and the make-believe can be so massive that our preparation against a catastrophe arising out of the situation is bound to be miles off the target.

This indeed is a peril we are inviting for ourselves — little aware that the self deception can backfire any moment. In the case of the chowkidars and dafadars, they are hardly a party to this falsehood. They cannot do an extra job without extra benefits. But the union parishads have been forced to be a party because they have to obey orders from the top. But the top should know that in such a situation records will continue to be manufactured, putting the whole system in jeopardy. You have to put a workable and efficient system first to get the best results.

The Visit of Japanese Corporate Team and Investment Prospects

and watch the economic and political developments of the prospective country year after year. Undoubtedly, the practised rule of investment is followed. This rule of investment is that every investor wants his investment must remain safe and a desired level of return must accrue there from. Until and unless the safety and security of investment in the foreign land is more or less ensured no investor would feel to go abroad with his investment. Alongwith the future prospect of any investment proposal. the Japanese investors evaluate the above criteria very cautiously. Definitely the political trend overseas becomes a major consideration. Uncertainty in any respect cannot have a positive impact on the process. But once satisfied, the Japanese investors are the most aggressive in the world. They accomplish their ventures within the shortest possible time. Their investment tendency in the ASEAN economies and in Latin America has proved this char-

HE visit of a very high

month of May raised much

expectations and hope that

Bangladesh has finally knocked

the jackpot of FDI flows. Or at

least the extensive media

coverage of the team as well as

the government officials'

drumming of views created an

impression of that kind. There

is no denying that Japan is

passing through a protracted

recession and the ASEAN

economies where the Japanese

investors were earlier rushing

with their funds are reaching

to a point of stagnation fast. As

a consequence. Japanese

investors are desperately

looking for some alternative

sites for their investment.

Bangladesh, with some inher-

ent advantages and recently

achieved fiscal consolidation

and macro-economic stabiliza-

tion, could be a prior choice

for many Japanese investors in

this context. It could be reas

sonably thought. But before be-

ing over-enthusiastic about this

prospect, we should be aware

of the nature of the Japanese

investors who are also famous

for their extreme caution in

evaluating and selecting the

destination of their invest-

Investors' Characteristics

investors to new foreign in-

vestment project or destina-

tion is such that they will wait

long-simmering news-

capital exp-loded into

One newspaper vendor was

stabbed, several others seve-

rely beaten and paper dis-

tribution networks in the city

hoods newspapers were dis-

tributed under police escort

and several newsagents and

newspaper vendors arrested in

the fallout of the bitter price

war launched by the country's

pre-eminent daily The Times

Tension after the March

decision of the 150-year-old

Times, with a circulation of

around 200,000, to slash its

weekday price from 2.40 ru-

pees to 1.50 rupees per copy

took to the streets when

newspaper vendors tried to

distribute The Times in defi-

ance of an ultimatum by the

Delhi Newspaper Distributors

Association (DNDA) that the

newspaper should revert to its

bers beat up scores of vendors,

many of whom suffered broken

bones, and for weeks tens of

thousands of copies of The

Times were either destroyed

25 per cent commission on all

she is at a family planning

clinic on an island near the

Maldivian capital to get some

advice on nutrition for her

children, to vaccinate her

Indian Ocean south-west of Sri

Newspaper vendors get a

T the age of 37, Najma

has nine children from

seven marriages. Today.

Enraged Association mem-

In June, however, the feud

for five days a week.

original price.

or sold as waste.

In many Delhi neighbour-

violence recently.

were disrupted.

of India.

paper price in India's

The approach of Japanese

level Japanese Corpor-

ate delegation in the

Present Eco-political Turmoil

On both economic and po-

by Munim Kumar Barai

litical grounds, Japan seems to be in a turmoil. The Japanese economy which was racing ahead like the "shinkansen" (the famed bullet train) has screeched almost to a halt.

The spectacular rate of growth in 60s and 70s seems a history of long past. Rather a quick deceleration in growth oc curred in the later part of 80s and Japanese economy is passing through a rough testing period at present. Inflation is up, unemployment is high and rate of GDP growth has come down to a percentage figure less than two. On the other hand, the trade conflict with the US has sharpened in the meanwhile. A deliberate effort by the US to depreciate dollar against yen, allegedly aimed at sabotaging the Japanese economy, has also started showing it's negative impact on exports and imports. This has added an extra pressure on the economic policy makers of Japan as it is hampering their endeavour to anchor Japan to a higher economic growth plane

Again, compounded with the economic troubles, the political developments are mak-

ing the scenario worse. ironically, political developments in Japan seem to prove that political instability is not a third world monopoly. The newly elected Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama is the fourth Premier in the last one year and the first socialist however, to hold the post since 1948. With the change of the government there is likely to be a change in policy-emphasis also, because the previ-

in the policy making. Moreover, the present LDP-Socialist coalition is also a shaky one. This prevailing sense of uncertainty is likely to have some impact on Japanese internal and external eco-

ous two governments of

Morihiro Hosokawa and

Tsutomu Hata led a reformist

coalition of the non-LDP par-

ties while in the present ar-

rangement, LDP holds the key

Uncertainty Syndrome

nomic priorities.

The success of the Government of Bangladesh in stabilising the macro economic front seems to have so far drawn all but FDI to the vol-

ume. The rate of inflation is low, the deficit against GDP is upto a manageable limit, forex reserve is satisfactory and the country now has a moré open and liberal environment for foreign investment than ever before. All these could have a very strong effect on enticing the foreign investors.

Unfortunately, that did not happen. At this juncture, two high profiled visits to Japan by Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and the Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina and the subsequent visit of the Japanese business delegates to Bangladesh generated an impression that the dearth phase of FDI inflows might have come to an end. But the recent developments, one apprehends are likely to cast a shadow of doubts among the prospective investors as well as their governments. The almost inactive role of the government to contain the fundamentalists' stride against the NGOs in Bangladesh has most probably created a confusion among the foreigners. It would be to the chagrin of the gov ernment that many in outside are trying to draw an analogy between the trend of devel-

opments in Bangladesh and those in Algeria or Egypt. This very analogy may be detrimental to procreate a second thought among the foreigners about the investment prospects in Bangladesh. Conclusion

The people of Bangladesh need economic progress more than any thing else. The internal resources of Bangladesh are too meagre to meet the uphill task of industrialisation by her own. So she needs FDI to set up industries, to provide jobs to the people and hence to provide a better standard of life to her citizens. Any deed that has the potential to hinder the inflow of foreign investments will simply succeed to mar or slow down the pace of economic emancipation. There should not by any room for complacence on the part of the government for the much talked-about macro-economic stability it has achieved. Because it will not lead Bangladesh to the desired level of economic growth without foreign capital. The sort of ambiguous stand of the government to tackle the untoward developments, if continues might eat away much of the gains it has achieved so far. It must act so that the interest and encouragement the Japanese and others have shown so far in Bangladesh economy must not end up where they-began.

Tensions and Circulations Rise in Newspaper War

Rahul Bedi writes from New Delhi

Months of tension have spilled onto the streets of Delhi as a newspaper price-cutting campaign has turned ugly. Vendors have been injured, journalists have resigned and the reading public may ultimately pay a heavy price.



sales and the Association, representing around 6,000 vendors in Delhi, said a price war would greatly reduce the earnings of its members.

But Bennett Coleman and Co, owner of the Times of India Group of publications, which seems prepared to suffer losses in order to increase circulation, introduced an incentive scheme to ensure vendors' earnings did not suffer losses in order to increase circulation, introduced an incentive scheme to ensure vendors' earnings did not suffer and

necessary precursors to low

this Muslim nation also play a

with family planning are volun-

tary groups like Society for

Health Education (SHE) which

runs a free family planning and

health counselling centre in

With help from the United

Nations Population Fund

Helping the government

thus hopefully stem their negative reaction to the price

DNDA officials, however,

said there was no guarantee that Delhi's other seven English language newspapers would not compete with The Times by slashing prices.

And in order to ensure the vendors' "survival", the Association issued an ultimatum to The Times to end its price-cutting or face the consequences.

Association members privately admit that price cuts

have substantially driven up circulation in the last few months.

Over a three-month period The Times of India claims to have increased circulation by 20,000 copies to more than 210,000. The Vendors Association puts the increase at 15,000.

Another high-quality newspaper from the Times Group. The Economic Times now priced at two rupees, or 60 per cent cheaper (except on Sundays, when it is 10 rupees), has almost doubled in circulation.

The Bennett Coleman Group plans to offset losses by increasing advertising rates based on higher circulation. It also conceived a strategy of giving management the deciding role in editorial matters.

According to Samir Jain. managing director and partowner of the Times Group, managers in editorial positions can guarantee increased sales irrespective of editorial content. Jain says marketing newspapers is little different from selling consumer goods.

His implementation of this policy, however, by which a former cigarette company marketing executive was recently made editorial manager of The Times, led to protest resignations by the paper's editor and more than 30 journalists. Despite this exodus, circulation rose as prices were slashed. So did advertising

Meanwhile, beleaguered Bennett Coleman officials accused other Delhi newspapers of inciting the vendors. The Times Group carried daily reports that their rivals were present during the roughing up of vendors attempting to stock Times Group publica-

revenue.

And as the price war raged. leaving a trail of battered vendors in its wake, members of The Times of India employees union moved around Delhi in groups delivering their paper. The also sold the paper in two of south Delhi's worst "war zones", reportedly "controlled" by a rival newspaper through vendors.

The first response to The Times' price war came from

most widely read English-language newspaper with a circulation of over 343,000. After initially refusing to cut

The Hindustan Times, Delhi's

prices, on the plea that prices did not determine readers' choice. The Hindustan Times succumbed. In mid-July, it sliced its weekday price to 1.50 rupees, down from 2.40 Senior editors at the paper

said the decision was taken after The Times of India price reduction began to slowly "bleed" their circulation. According to one editor it was a choice of reducing prices right away to win back lost circulation or waiting a few months and finding it was too

Managements of other English-language newspapers, following similar reasoning. are expected to cut costs in order to survive in a pricedriven market.

Media analysts say the price war is bound to hit Hindi newspapers too. And though this will generally benefit readers in the short run, the analysts say the public is still at the mercy of newspaper management who may arbitrarily raise prices after riding out the current crisis. - GEMINI

RAHUL BEDI is a freelance

Maldives: Bursting at the Seams

Tiny Maldives tries to tackle the problem of having Asia's highest population growth rate. Kunda Dixit of Inter Press Service re-

youngest son and obtain some ports from Manila. contraceptives for herself. Her consellors at the family planning clinic say Najma is rates need to be addressed. fairly representative of moth-These factors seem to ers who come for help in a negate parameters like the country with the highest popu-Maldives' low child mortality lation growth rate in Asia. level (56 for every thousand The Maldivian archipelago live births) and high literacy consists of about 2,000 islands rate (90 percent) which in the strung out like beads in the rest of South Asia are seen as

Lanka. There are 227,000 birth rates. people living in the two hun-The Maldivian Departmen dred inhabited islands, making of Public Health says it wants a living off fishing and tourism. to raise the contraceptive Its population may be negliprevalence rate to 30 percent gible in comparison to the in the next two years, but South Asian mainland's 1.3 bilsome experts say the target may be too ambitious.

part.

Male.

lion people, but the Maldives' land area and resources are so Social workers say mothers limited that demographers are like Najma are not the exception. The country's high diconcerned over how the country can cope with a population vorce rate seems to be directly growth rate of 3.4 percent a related to the exodus of young males from outlying islands to Recent surveys showed that find work in tourist resorts or in Male. Religious factors in only nine women in the capital

of Male, which has a population of 60,000, used intrauterine devices. Only 590 used condoms and the national contraceptive use rate is eight percent - compared to 62 percent in Sri Lanka.

Experts say although easier availability of contraceptives would help, social and cultural factors affecting high fertility

(UNFPA) and the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF). SHE has become the only non-governmental distributor of contraceptives.

we are trying to ensure that every child born to Maldivian parents is a wanted child," says Ahmed Shakeeb, SHE's chairperson. The group also regularly takes multi-purpose health clinics and floating family planning centres to outlying islands.

SHE is also working on the

Up to 18 percent of the people of the Maldives are thalassaemia carriers, and public health experts say the high incidence is partly due to the propagation of the recessive genes through inbreeding.

and a transfusion every month.

SHE operates a blood lab



children.

Indian journalist.

segregated into resort islands.

means AIDS is not a major

problem, but some officials are

worried about Maldivian sea-

"We know the problem and

Maldives' number one health problem: thalassaemia, which is a congenital blood disorder that can be fatal.

Thalassaemia carriers do not exhibit symptoms, but the full blown disease usually kills a victim by the age of 16 unless treated with expensive drugs

and together with the govern

through our own indigenous

ment is working on a national thalassaemia screening campaign together with an effort to make prospective marriage partners award of the dangers

and persuade them not to have

SHE's other effort is AIDS prevention through education. The Maldives is a tourist

NEWS

haven, but visitors are carefully The absence of sex tourism

men returning home and the presence of 18,000 migrant workers (mainly from Sri Lanka and Bangladesh) in Male.

Being a small country and despite the great distances between islands, the Maldives has an easier time getting results with vaccination and other health campaigns.

Figures from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) show that 95 percent of Maldivian children below one year are vaccinated against the six most prevalent

Unlike the subcontinent which has sweeping epidemics among children of measles, polio, diphtheria and other infectious diseases there has been no polio or measles in the islands since 1985 and fewer than 10 cases of neo-natal tetanus.

And only 0.06 percent of diarrhoeal cases among children last year resulted in death - down from two percent in 1991. The Maldives has slashed its under-five child mortality rate from 258 per thousand births to 78 in the past 25 years.

Says Ramesh Shrestha, the UNICEF representative for the Maldives: "There is no doubt about it. The Maldives has done very well indeed."

An appreciation

and enjoy the relevant and

sound medical advice that Ms

Farhana Ahmad is providing us

through her articles, published

Her writing has an original

style, and she has an excellent

command over the English

language. She provides techni-

cal information in a lucid

manner which can be eastly

Keep up the good work

understood by the layman.

on your "Living" page.

Sir, I very much appreciate

Whither 'black-gold' or Cox's Bazar?

Sir, May I invite your kind attention to a news report entitled 'Foreign firm keen to extract beach sand minerals' published on the first page of The Daily Star on July 19, 1994.

The report says that an Australian company, Minerals Pvt Ltd, Queensland, is interested in the extraction of heavy minerals from the beach sand in Bangladesh and has applied to Bangladesh Government for an appropriate exploration and mining permit for Moheskhali island and Cox's Bazar areas.

The report further says that the beach sand in Cox's Bazar coast and off-shore island of

ciable quantity of heavy minerals such as zircon, rutile, ilmenite magnetite, kyanitie and thorium etc which are in high demand for industrial use both in and outside the country. I express my grave concern

Moheshkhali contains appre-

over the news and strongly oppose involvement of any foreign country in the extraction of valuable minerals from the beach sand in Bangladesh. This would deprive us of billions of dollars of our national wealth 'black-gold' available in huge quantity in some coastal areas from Cox's Bazar to Kuakata. If we do so we would be committing the biggest blunder of our life.

In fact we are capable of extracting the valuable minerals from the beach sand

technology and method and our limited resources either in the public or private sector. And by making a humble beginning we may establish a giant industry of our own within a few years' time.

I wonder if we can produce salt, make shrimp cultivation in the coastal areas and earn crores of Taka why can't we utilise our more valuable natural wealth 'black-gold'?

Unfortunately most of our public leaders and bureaucrats are perhaps in the dark about this 'black-gold'. They are completely ignorant about this valuable minerals

Would the print media depute reporters/photographers to see for themselves the O H Kabir 6, Hare Street, Wari, Dhaka-

terest of the country?

'black-gold' of Cox's Bazar, is-

sue special supplements on it

and help create a general

awareness and interest among

our people on 'black-gold' of

Cox's Bazar in the greater in-

Alladi-pana

Sir, How long this alladipana will continue in local politics? Some political parties ask for the moon like spoiled brats. What gives them the right to hold the electorate as hostages to fulfil their wishful

In economics, now we have the free market. In politics do

dreams of phantasies?

The voters should introduce 'yellow' and 'red' cards for political fouls and misbehaviour.

we see free market interplay?

The citizens have given the spoiled politicians a long leash for too long a time. It is time to introduce movement against undesirable political activities.

The politicians should not force the people to go in for a third force to rule the country. It has happened in this and other countries

One cannot have the cake and eat it too. The power and the decision-making belong to

managers.

A Zabr

Dhaka

the people, and not to the

M A Zafar Shah DU. Dhaka

Farhana!

Assit Prof. Deptt of PR