

Deliberate Professional Slip-up

Sharp comes the response of the medical practitioners to the suspension of 12 of their colleagues of Tongi and Gazipur Hospitals by the Health and Family Welfare Ministry. Already the doctors — their move spearheaded by their central body, the Bangladesh Medical Association (BMA) — have observed a 24-hour strike in the country's government hospitals and health care centres. This has marked, as part of their more stringent and strident programmes, the beginning of a fortnight-long protest against the government move. Already the medical professionals have demonstrated a bit of their organising ability to defend a parochial cause, being totally unmindful of the grievous harm they are doing to the ailing humanity. They are preparing the nation for greater pains, sufferings and losses.

We agree with the BMA that the suspension order could have been preceded by a show-cause notice. And for this the BMA can, and perhaps should, go to court. But bringing the country's government hospitals to a grinding halt to protest that "injustice" inflicts a far greater injustice on the people. Why should the entire community of medical practitioners on the government payroll extend unreserved support to those 12 of their colleagues without going into the merit of the case?

The reason is plain and simple. In our earlier leader we have tried to point out the cause of the profession's falling standard. Now may we be a little more direct in establishing the relation between the suspension of the 12 doctors and the virulent protest by the BMA? Surprisingly, not a word has been pronounced about the dismissal of a far greater number of doctors. Those medical men either care no more to serve the hospitals or have already left the country.

The doctors in government service have no intention to give in either to the popular demand or to the government pressure. They want to continue to carry on their duties the way they like. If they can force the government to withdraw its decision, they will continue to have the best of both worlds. That means they will hardly ever stay in places of their posting in the interior and far-flung areas of the country, but will present themselves there all right on the pay day for collection of their salary packets. For the rest of the month they will serve in private clinics or medical centres in cities and towns for lucrative money-spinning business.

In addition to the cases that have surfaced, a far greater number will be found to have done the same or worse for years together. Now that the government has acted decisively, the whole band opposes it so fiercely. Their vested interest has to be protected at any cost — no matter if that goes against all norms and ethics of the profession. That is what we resent most. To protect group interests a whole community cannot take an untenable stand. Sure enough, the government must take the blame for overlooking the irregularities for long. Now that it has decided to act, it must stick to its position. This however called for forewarning and tightening the screw much earlier. Whether it did that ground work is not known to us.

At this point we cannot help mentioning that much of the health sector's problem owes to poor management and only a small amount to resource constraint. Some put the ratio roughly at 80 by 20 per cent. If this is correct, then the ministry must be ready to admit that the problem is almost entirely its own creation. The doctors are only taking advantage of the situation. This perspective should change now. At the centre of everything is the people — neither the doctor nor the government. Let the people have the best medical service possible.

A Promising Start

We congratulate the Vice Chancellor of Dhaka University and the leaders of all the student groups who participated in yesterday's discussion on how to restore peace on the DU campus. We are delighted to learn about the "consensus on peaceful co-existence" of all student parties in the University areas. This is indeed a heartening breakthrough that belies our grim forecast of political events to come. However, we need to take a serious look into the causes of student violence and build on this positive development, to achieve durable solution.

We often hear about political parties using the students for their own ends. The students, prompted by patriotic zeal, and a deep concern for the welfare of the people — being at their idealistic and romantic best — plunge themselves into causes and issues of national importance without being much aware of the implication of their action. The political parties take full advantage of this sentiment and bring our University students into the forefront of our politics, using them, in most cases, to face violence and terror. Added to this is the relatively new phenomenon of corruption in student politics. The entry of armed cadres, terrorists and the rise of "have money, will support" type muscle men among the so-called students, have added a new element to student politics. There are now pure mercenaries among our student community who have already immersed themselves in crime and violence. These so-called students have nothing to do with the overall aims of the student community, and they have absolutely no intention of being in anyway involved with the academic or extra-curricular activities of the university.

It has now become imperative that our students, especially of all the universities, start making that initial distinction between a genuine student and an outsider. We would like to argue that political and/or ideological differences between genuine students will seldom result into the type of vicious atmosphere that our universities experience now and then. It is only when the non-student terrorists join the dispute that the situation becomes so violent.

If genuine peace is to be established and student politics is to be restored to its earlier status, then outside elements in the campuses must be weeded out. This task will have to be done by the student themselves. The leaders of the student parties must realise that for the long-term future of student politics, and for the future of our universities, they must all lend a helping hand in this cleansing. Let the latest success of talks among the DU student leaders start that process.

MAY be that we could do very little to our socio-economic uplift, but the fact that we do have a glorious past of political struggle, a struggle for communal harmony and social equity remains beyond anybody's question. The arduous journey towards political and economic freedom that started with the language movement and ended up with independence is not only a history by itself but also, probably, a model of rare replicability. As we all know, the birth of Bangladesh owes to the valour of our freedom fighters who fought against one of the most modern army of the world backed by the most powerful superpower, to the sacrifice of three million lives and to a host of immense economic, political and social pains — quite unlike the freedom struggle of many countries. The war of liberation, thus ushered and finished, clinched an independent Bangladesh on the world map. Quite naturally, the attention of the international community at that time was sharply focused on the future health and wealth of this newly born nation.

The Latest Virus
So far, so good. But the latest impression about Bangladesh, as could be derived from news bulletins of the international media, could hardly console a true citizen of Bangladesh. That Bangladesh is 'invaded' by the fundamentalists seems to be the top stories of international news media now a days. This is at a time, as said earlier, when Bangladesh is gradually posing to graduate from a bad to a good image. Whether one tunes BBC, ABC or CNN, or some other electronic and non-electronic news media, Bangladesh is reported to be a country where a writer, because of her alleged remarks on the Holy Book, is chased by the fundamentalists and the expressed fear seems to be that the fundamentalists lay a strong foothold. The international community is learnt to have expressed concerns over the apparent insecurity imbibed by the fundamentalist forces. The New York Times, the celebrated news paper that hardly publishes any editorial on even our Prime Minister's visit to

Time to Turn the Tarnished Image

by Abdul Bayes

got to be widely known throughout the world and the dream of a democratic Bangladesh was shelved for the distant future. The generalization was not far from the truth, but it took almost a decade and a half of mass movements to erase that notion. Now Bangladesh, like any other civilized nation of the world, does have an elected government, an elected parliament and even if not up to the expectations, some parliamentary practices are on and all these developments should have helped us regaining the lost image.

Shattered Image
But despite having a rosary of events that could truly pain a nation, Bangladesh soon began to be a subject of preposterous international image problem. To start with, the world tended to view Bangladesh as a country of continuous political turmoil, inimical law and order situation and also as a country of the so called "bottomless basket". That image lingered for a while and no sooner Bangladesh could heal the wounds to her image, so clinched by the international media, another bad image crept in. The impression that, in general,

America, is reported to have published two editorials within a short span denouncing the fundamentalists and the government's lukewarm attitude towards them. "Are you safe in Bangladesh?" seems to be the welcoming dialogue that a causal visitor from Bangladesh landing at Damdam, Frankfurt or other international airports is likely to face. At the very moment, it appears then that it is not natural calamity, political turmoil or any other hazard that introduces Bangladesh to the outside world but the growth of fundamentalism and all the wrecks that go with that provide the identity card for Bangladesh. Such an image outside should be an issue of top concern for a government and rightly views harts and political disturbances as constraints to development.

While none would like to dispute the fact that there are fundamentalists in Bangladesh and of late, there has been certain surge in fundamentalism over the alleged remarks by Taslima Nasrin, one could hardly be taken by the implicit projection that it is what Bangladesh is all about. Like any other country of the world, fundamentalists dominate only over a section of the community in the country. If one takes the proportion of people casting votes as an indicator of support to these forces then, as the last National and Mayoral elections would tend to show, the roots of fundamentalists are not as strong as even in our neighbouring country India or in some of the countries who are marching ahead of us.

What is, however, unfortu-

nately missing in these news coverage is the acknowledgement that the people of this country have a long tradition of fighting communalism and fundamentalism. No doubt, most of the people of Bangladesh are Muslims with firm belief in the spirit of Islam but they are, at the same breath, opposed to any attempt to make religion the arbiter of politics in the country. Most of the progressive political forces, news papers, academics, socio-cultural organizations and the student community — all have a long history of fighting fundamentalism and staying on the other side of the fence. These are definitely positive developments and occurrences that, unfortunately, hardly get any substantial international media coverage. Bangladesh thus continues to be locked to image problem, some artificial and some real.

Some Reasons

What could be the possible reasons for the alleged built-in bad image of Bangladesh? Talking to different people, one can arrive at three possible reasons. First, it is being argued that at the very early stage of our independence, small disturbances or problems used to be widely projected, possibly, to show that Bangladesh was in fact born to die very soon. This was alleged to be attempted by those who opposed the creation of Bangladesh. The news media under their control used to depict mostly the dark sides of Bangladesh. Second, the communal-non-Muslim dominated news media are allegedly hostile to Muslims of the world

to business, trade, and investment — a natural conclusion to be driven out from the growth and spread of fundamentalism.

What do We Do then?

It thus appears that Bangladesh is caught by the virus of bad image that tends to deter the growth of trade, investment and tourism of the country. A government that rightly views harts or other political unrest as constraints to economic growth, should also treat such developments as anti-development. The government's feeble or no attempt to delete the latest impression about Bangladesh from the minds of the people outside, should dishearten every Bangladeshi with a sense of patriotism. By the alleged patronization of these forces, the government seemed to have burnt its own fingers e.g. the world was annoyed. We think that the government should spend more efforts on depicting Bangladesh as a nation where the indigenous capacity of the people to fight out odds like fundamentalism is immense, political unrest is of the level of many other countries where investments are flocking in and as a nation where future occurrence of such events would be severely dealt with. The resistance of the people to the growth of anti-developmental factors should aggressively be projected to the outside world so that Bangladesh can turn to a good image. The vigorous campaign, if happens at all, might cost government few pennies but could be worth few pounds for the nation. This is not, probably, too much to expect from a government of a country with poor resources but rich heritage.

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South Asia's Democratic Institutions "Being Tested"

by Robin Raphael

Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs Robin Raphael appeared on August 11 before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific to review US policy in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal. The committee, chaired by Congressman Gary Ackerman (D-NY), questioned Ambassador Raphael on a number of political, economic and security concerns in the region. The following is the abridged text of Ambassador Robin Raphael's opening statement.

I am pleased to be here today to testify on recent developments in US policy toward Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. While much of the attention devoted to South Asia is rightly focused on India and Pakistan, significant events are taking place in the other countries of the region.

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka are sometimes labelled the "smaller" nations of South Asia, but this is very much a relative comparison. Like their more powerful neighbours, India and Pakistan, they confront significant problems affecting large numbers of people. To provide some perspective, I would note that the transition from authoritarian rule to democracy is affecting more people in Bangladesh and Nepal than in all of the former communist countries of Eastern Europe combined, where a similar process began at about the same time.

Strengthening democracy is among the Administration's highest regional priorities in South Asia, and is of particular importance in all but one of the countries we will be discussing today. Afghanistan, while democratic institutions are being tested in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, we are optimistic that these institutions will prevail. We actively support the democratic process throughout the region, although our approach varies from country to country to suit the circumstances.

Another area of importance to us in South Asian countries is economic growth and development resulting in large part from liberalization of trade and investment policies. Closely connected to this is our strong

interest in generating new opportunities for American business. As in India and Pakistan, significant economic policy changes are underway in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

There has not yet been an explosion of American commercial involvement with those countries, as there has been in India. However, American participation has grown, particularly in Sri Lanka. The Department of State and our embassies in South Asian capitals are supporting American businesses pursuing new opportunities in those countries.

While not caught up in the Indo-Pakistani dispute to any significant degree, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka all must pay close attention to relations with India. India, given its sheer size and extensive human and other resources, has a special obligation to ensure that its smaller neighbours feel they are treated fairly. Water allocation, power generation and refugee flows are among the significant issues between them and their large neighbour which need to be resolved sooner rather than later.

The three states recognize the importance of regional cooperation and are strong supporters of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. The United States also would like to see SAARC grow in stature and effectiveness. We believe the organization could better accomplish this by taking on greater responsibilities at the working level.

Bangladesh

The United States has two primary objectives in Bangladesh: promoting democracy and respect for human rights and encouraging continued economic growth and development.

The election of early 1991 was judged to be the first truly free and fair elections since Bangladesh's independence. Drawing on its clear mandate, the government of Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia expanded press freedoms and held both regional and local elections that were free and fair.

However, there have been setbacks to the democratization process in 1994. Following allegations of vote-rigging in a March parliamentary by-election, the opposition has boycotted Parliament. It has called for new elections and demanded that the Constitution be amended to provide for a caretaker government to oversee them. The government has refused this demand. The opposition leader, Sheikh Hasina, is calling for the immediate resignation of the government and has threatened to use street demonstrations to achieve this end. Political violence in the universities also continues.

Through regular diplomatic contacts, the United States encourages the government and opposition to engage in a more productive dialogue. This is essential to resolving the current crisis. Adherence to the laws and Constitution of Bangladesh is vital for the survival and development of democracy there.

United States also provides assistance to strengthen democratic institutions.

Many Bangladeshi parliamentarians have received USAID and USIA-funded training in the United States and a variety of exchange programmes are designed to broaden the exposure of Bangladesh's academic, political, labour, and military leaders to the concepts of Western democracy and human rights. This year we provided about \$2.5 million for these programmes.

Compared with its predecessors, the current Bangladeshi government has improved human rights practices. There is substantial freedom of the press, the judiciary acts independently of government influence at the appellate level and above, and the government has held a number of free and fair elections at the local and national levels as well as parliamentary by-elections.

However, the government's early response to the controversy over the Bangladeshi feminist writer, Taslima Nasreen, has raised new questions

about protection of the rights of freedom of speech, and religion in Bangladesh. The US repeatedly urged the Bangladeshi government to safeguard Ms. Nasreen's right to free speech and protect her from the death threats of extremists.

We were relieved to learn earlier this week that she was allowed to leave the country after having been granted bail on charges of insulting religious beliefs. In addition, Bangladeshi Special Powers Act, which allows for lengthy detention without charge, has been used by the government against its political opponents. The Anti-Terrorism Law, which sets up special tribunals for a wide range of crimes, also raises concerns due to its vague language, but thus far it does not appear that it is being abused.

In sum, Mr Chairman, the democratic institutions of Bangladesh, while off to a promising start, are facing significant challenges. This is to be expected as part of the growing pains of a new democracy. Experience with the democratic system is still limited and institutions are often fragile. However, the development of an educated and informed electorate, vital to the democratization process, goes on. The United States will continue to support the process of democratization through diplomatic efforts and assistance.

In spite of the notable success in curbing population growth rates, half the country's population today is under the age of fifteen. As a result, Bangladesh's population is expected to double within the next thirty years even with the lowered birth rates. Another sobering statistic is that it is likely to take 75 years for the population to stabilize. Dramatic economic growth will be needed to generate sufficient jobs. We are pleased that increasing numbers of Bangladeshis are accepting a greater role for the private sector in the economy as the surest way to increase the rate of economic growth and development. As a result of reforms already made, inflation is down and foreign currency reserves have increased. However, much remains to be done.

(The statement also covered Afghanistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka, which we are not reproducing. The text has been supplied by USISI.)

To the Editor...

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.

Taslima Nasreen

Sir, I had somehow missed Yasmeen Mursheed's column on the Taslima Nasreen affair. An adulterous endorsement in a letter published on August 7 sent me back to it, the more so as I know and admire Ms Mursheed. Reading her virulent diatribe, however, left me bemused.

I have not read the controversial novel, so I cannot argue with Ms Mursheed about its "intellectual, literary and artistic merit". I must confess I think her poetry is rather good, and her columns, though at times repetitive and sometimes, as in the example she cites, somewhat hysterical, still on the whole well and forcefully written. Nor do I want to enter into the sterile debate as to Taslima's motivations — whether or not her primary objective is to "merely draw attention to herself". I will also concede that she has been "foolish and naive". It is foolish and naive to exercise the right to freedom of expression in a society which has no conception of such rights. The sad fact is that even our intellectual elites

seem to take it for granted that such a right must be severely circumscribed. Even Ms Mursheed can write: "Taslima Nasreen should be accountable under the laws of the land for views expressed in public which question the sanctity of the beliefs of the majority of her countrymen...". There you have it — a complete negation of liberty as, say, John Stuart Mill conceived of it. The minority have no right to question the beliefs of the majority, if they try they must be gagged. If Ms Mursheed can hold this opinion, it is hardly surprising that some maulana somewhere believes, and declares, that Taslima

should be killed.

Finally, let us acknowledge Taslima's courage. This is not a commodity in such abundant supply in Bangladesh that we can afford to sneer at it, or dismiss it as "merely" foolhardiness and exhibitionism. The border line between courage and foolhardiness is in any case as elusive as the one between mature prudence and cowardice. Let us, who are not naive and fool-

ish, whose every action is based on a prudent calculus of long-and short-term costs and benefits to society as well as to ourselves, let us at least have the courage to admire courage.

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Unsafe roads, responsibility, and accountability

Sir, On June 25, 1994, at least 19 people were killed and 50 injured when two buses collided head-on on Dhaka-Chittagong highway, 25 miles off Chittagong city. On August 1, 1994, 14 people were killed and 30 injured when one of the two passenger buses, which were racing to overtake each other, fell into the roadside ditch on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway near Sonargaon, about 30 miles off Dhaka city.

Another incident took place on the Dhaka-Aricha highway on the night of July 25, 1994. This was a dacoity when the dacoits looted an estimated Tk 50 lakh in cash and kind from the passengers of a microbus. It is not known why this news was published less prominently (on page 2 of the Daily Star).

An accident or a crime might happen any time. What is disturbing is the lack of follow-up actions taken by the appropriate authorities. But what actions and whether these were

concerned authorities — the Roads & Highways Ministry, the Road Transport Authority, the Home Ministry, publicised and being monitored?

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Probe centre

Sir, The government has decided to establish 39 probe centres to ensure quick legal and administrative assistance to the oppressed people of the far flung areas of the country. The decision, when implemented, will really help the people of the rural areas who cannot reach thana headquarters. Such sufferers were demanding establishment of new thana headquarters in their respective areas. But the government considering the high administrative expenses involved have decided to set up probe centres with 21 police personnel including two Sub-inspectors.

There might be some mechanical problems or problems of road alignment and visibility. Whether the existence of the ditch adjacent to the road near Sonargaon could be filled up along with such other ditches to prevent recurrence of such fatal accident.

Then about the daring dacoity. This is not a new incident. But what action has been taken or this incident and similar such dacoities on the highways is not reported in the press chronologically from beginning. Definitely