

Laudable Breakthrough

Finance Minister Saifur Rahman is not only a heavyweight by ministerial standards, he also is very generous with passing judgement on an enviably broad spectrum of subjects and prescribing antidotes for a wide range of evils preying on the nation. Although economic self-reliance of the nation is capably his very own charge, he has been found late by months in recording his appreciation of the role that pulp made from green jute plant can play in earning that very cherished and elusive thing. Months back Minister Zahiruddin Khan broke the news of the technical breakthrough involved in the green jute pulp development and rightly enough painted a rosy picture. Saifur Rahman was speaking at the ceremony of handing over some pieces of the newly innovated important machinery of the project fabricated by BITAC to BCIC who are going to make the pulp and also produce paper from the same.

A glaring and unfortunate omission, which must be deliberate, featured both the ministers' expression of high hopes over what is very genuinely an invention of the highest importance to this nation's economic as well as all-round development out of the present state of total and unmitigated limbo. These men of honour and importance as well as the whole government have been jealously guarding the secret of who made the breakthrough invention and also which agency supported the scientist in the achievement. What have Dr Amirul Islam or the BCSIR done other than inventing such a magic healer for the nation's ills to invite such terrible retribution? Is Dr Islam's being a government employee and BCSIR being a government agency standing in the way of recognising them by name in the patently wrong belief that all the glory of the fantastic leap should be the government's and not any individual's or agency's — should they be part of the government? This is wrong. In the modern world no scientist worth his or her name works as if he or she was an island. All belong to this or that kind of agencies.

Modern physics is capable of measuring the gap between the steaming cup and the wide and anticipating lips in quadrillions of spatial units. We were rapturous when we saw that within months of the news of the breakthrough four paper mills were offering to buy green jute plants. Later it turned out that both the mill's purchase commencement and our elation were somewhat premature. The mills — not one — are yet to be ready to process the piling stock of green jute plants at their gates. The BITAC has done a good job of fabricating and supplying as many as seven of the components of the 11-element machinery line — leaving a gap of four including a high density tower before the completion of which the whole thing cannot be commissioned. But the progress so far has given us hope that it is only a matter of months before paper-grade pulps begin to be produced in these mills.

M Saifur Rahman has called the potential breakthrough as 'the most important development in our economy' in the backdrop of the miserable condition of our jute both nationally and internationally. Why the condition of our jute is so miserable on all fronts, at a time when both India and Thailand are expanding their jute production and industry and World Bank is helping set up jute mills where there was none? Is it so because, allegedly, our national leaderships of all areas and for many decades have a magic touch which transforms gold into base metal?

Quota Withdrawal

The dialogue telecast by the Skynet, USA on GATT and MFA on Wednesday under the auspices of the USIS, Dhaka, has proved useful by underlining some counter-vailing factors that could minimise the losses feared by Bangladeshi garment manufacturers in the wake of an ordained demise of the quota system by 2005 AD. We could take heart from the facts mentioned by William R Cline, the reputed US economist that: (a) big exporters Korea and Taiwan would be phasing out from the business owing to increasing labour costs; and (b) demands for garments in the USA, Japan, and Europe are on the uptick presaging an enlargement of market for Bangladesh. But only time can say whether these predictions will prove to be true.

There is obviously a difference between a market secured by bilateral textiles and approval quotas under the canopy of the MFA and one that is going to be open and fiercely competitive placing all exporters on the same start-up mark. The saving grace here being that the quota withdrawal will be phased over the next 10 years allowing time to enhance the competitiveness of our garments. It is very much true that in this labour-intensive industry we have been able to seek the worker output high and at costs which are low in contrast to what Korea and Taiwan have come to regard as a prohibitive overhead. But our profit from the garment export as a proportion of investment per Taka is actually very low. The reason for this lies in our having to import most of the inputs. This is where we stand in dire need to develop low-cost and efficient backward linkages to the end-of-the-line garment manufacturing units. We must revitalise the handlooms. The Grameen Check has already been a roaring success as a pioneering product in the specialised field of indigenous fabric productions. We certainly can grow finer counts of yarn under a five-year programme. This aspect deserves an immediate attention. We have an untapped potential in turning out synthetic cloth from the jute fibre, for the major one. We can catalyse new dyes. Time-bound research is needed on an all-round basis to generate as much input as we can — locally.

We have been making the garments to order, according to the quotas though, so that we have had to scrupulously adhere to the quality specifications of the buyers. The world of experience we have absorbed by now should stand us in good stead when the quota guarantee will have withered away. We needn't be unduly afraid of open competition, although the big traditional markets, such as the USA for one, which we have served well so far, is only expected to make the transition period smooth for us. The quota withdrawals may be spread thin. This should be done especially. When the western countries are up to imposing these restrictions in regard to child labour, health and environment, this has created tension in the developing countries' production lines. They have reasons to feel they are being pressured to abide by a trade order, which still has some way to go before being fully democratic.

Political Stalemate Rocking the Democratic Boat!

by Abdul Bayes

THE adage that "a stitch in time saves nine" appears to be far more relevant in the present day context of Bangladesh politics than, perhaps, anytime in the past. Notwithstanding its intrinsic merits in guiding us for the future courses of actions, it seems that we are gradually slipping away from the benefits that we could possibly derive by walking along the routes suggested by the said proverb. The most recent political happenings in Bangladesh could be cited as a pointer to this effect. For the last couple of months, as we all know, the nation has been witnessing the herald of an uncompromising political stance that led the "position" and the "opposition" apparently to a "point of no return" and as days pass by, it seems almost to a head-on collision. Although the erosion in mutual understanding between the Treasury Bench and Opposition members in Parliament could be in evidence from some time in the past, the alleged rigging in the Magura by-election appears to have plunked the slim understanding prevailing between the two parties. Haunted by the specter of that election, probably the opposition, went to table a caretaker government bill with a view to ensuring a "free and fair" election for the nation. The government, on the other hand, bounced back with its firm commitment of meeting the opposition's demand for the same through another route

viz. strengthening the existing Election Commission. In the meantime, two sessions of the National Parliament, including the most important budget session, elapsed with the whole opposition bench out of the show. As the newspaper reports suggest, the upcoming session is likely to face the same fate since the political ice is yet to melt.

The purpose of this brief note is not to argue for either side of the coin (may be because both are half-baked bread!) but to bring to the fore the polemics of an unbending political stance that the nation is now facing and the associated costs therein. It would, perhaps, not be an exaggeration to say that the existing political stalemate, if continued unabated, might retard the healthy growth or even kill it of our democracy that is yet in its infancy.

Why at this Point?

From the very beginning of our journey towards constitutional governance, the relationship between the treasury bench and the opposition members seemed at logger heads and not at heart to heart. Political scientists should be apt in analysing the syndrome but a lay-man's view is that lack of democratic tradition possibly placed them in this kind of situation a situation. The shortage of that experience also pitted against "sensible" performance by both the sides. Then came the role of the treasury bench in upholding the cause of a

democratic norm of a variety where the opposition is also thought to be a part of the government. It is now being argued that, in general, the present regime's delayed response to the "problems" always tends to lead us to a "crisis" of immense socio-political and economic costs that the nation can hardly afford to bear. Only at one time, of course, the government seemed to stitch in time. For example, immediately after the assumption of power, the government of Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia faced its first "decisional test" on the form of government in Bangladesh. However, the party in power showed little hesitance and quickly accepted the majority option — the parliamentary form of government. What could happen, if they did not? Well, that could lead to a parliamentary havoc, at least at that nascent stage, and could possibly make life for the government more much tougher than it turned out to be later. Thus the ruling party seemed to have done well in stitching in time that probably saved many.

So far, so good. From then on, as is expected in politics, the ruling party continued to face an arsenal of moves from the opposition and the professional groups which tended to make the rulers weary. Each time, as said earlier, the government did respond with positive attitudes but appeared too late in responding with an

appropriate package. As a result, the seemingly bold steps turned out to be counter-productive. On the other hand, on many occasions, the alleged "go slow" policy of the government is also said to have contributed to a whole lot of rots that could easily be dispensed with by pursuing easy means. Just take the case of the Hon'ble Information Minister's alleged "insulting" remarks on the opposition members in response to a move for holding discussions on the attacks on Bosnian Muslims in the Parliament. Quite obviously, following the Newtonian law, the opposition bench stood on its feet to pelt the alleged remark. The anger of the opposition could only be subdued by an "unconditional apology" from the said Minister, although, as all know that "apology" is not a scarce commodity in the modern day parliamentary parleys. Even the other day, the Indian Finance Minister Mr. Manmohan Singh apologised to the opposition for the alleged lapses. However, the available attitude of the government at that time did not seem to win the oppositions heart at the cost of its Minister's and the half-hearted attempts to ease the tension that followed only failed to bring them back home. An almost similar situation arose regarding the corruption charges in the Parliament, the judicial bill, the Lalbagh killing, Taslima vs Fundamentalists episode etc.

Thus mere an apology in time or a respect to opposition bills in due course could possibly save a lot of political turmoil and enable the government to rule in peace.

Now that the opposition is firm to continue the movement for a caretaker government, the government is reported to be considering to sit with the opposition for initiating a dialogue to remove the political impasse or come up with a new model of ensuring free and fair election in the country. The report could possibly be termed as "unreliable" but the "reliability" of the positive impact of such a process should never be questioned. A conscious citizen of this country could only hope that the sooner some responses come, the better.

About the Losses

What could be the possible adverse impacts of such a continued stalemate in the economy? First, the accountability and transparency issue is at a hard stake due to major opposition's absence from the Parliamentary Standing Committees and thus causing the issues so discussed to be incredible. The unrepresented views of opposition could have been relatively more productive than the represented ones. Thus the apparent gains from such abstention of the opposition could be outweighed by the loss. Second, as the American Ambassador to Bangladesh is reported to have remarked, the US investors tend to closely watch the political stalemate in the investing

country and thus the stalemate in politics could turn out to be a stalemate in trade and investment also. The same reasoning could also be applied to any other foreigners with desires to invest in Bangladesh. Third, the uncertainty hovering around the stalemate tends to deter the public servants to be right on their toes and thus goes to widen the gap between the potential and the actual working capacity. Fourth, unless the political ice is melted, the reforms package of the government is likely to get a bounce. The opposition could get chances to make the reforms an issue of politics and thus hinder the on-going reforms. A government which vows to proceed with reforms that have very high adjustment costs should look for more friends than foes among the opposition members. To take a support in favor of the on-going reforms, the government should have given something to the opposition much earlier than the time of placing the caretaker government bill. That stitch in time could possibly save nine! There is still time and the imperatives of the government now should be to realize that a political stalemate like this is a cost to the ruling party, to the economy and to all of us. The political calculus of the opposition parties should also be rational at the very moment since the non-fulfilment of the rationality criteria might rock the democratic boat. Remember the adage, "time and tide wait for none".

Mandela's First 100 Days

Champagne and Roses — but Now the Wooing Gets Tougher

Arlene Getz writes from Cape Town

Few leaders have had to face such high expectations as Nelson Mandela when he became South Africa's first black President. Millions of his fellow citizens wanted to reap benefits from the ending of years of racism and repression — and to reap them quickly. Gemini News Service assesses Mandela's first 100 days, and examines the prospects for the longer haul.



The 100-day hurdles

of the reports.

When Keys — whose image was considered essential for attracting investment from foreigners disturbed by the ANC's alliance with the South African Communist Party — finally did confirm his intentions, his refusal to explain the "personal reasons" behind his resignation prompted speculation of a serious Cabinet split over economic policy.

The speculation has since eased. Most analysts here now accept that Keys indeed left his job for non-political reasons and Mandela was able to control the damage by swiftly appointing Chris Liebenberg, the former head of Nedcor Bank. Liebenberg, a white businessman considered a near-clone of Keys, will take office in October.

If this appointment did not find universal favour with ANC supporters, it had the desired effect on the white-dominated business community: a survey

carried out in August by the South African Chamber of Commerce found the Business Confidence Index to be at its highest level in seven years.

"My initial impression," says Dave Mohr, chief economist at the giant Old Mutual insurance company, "is that the government is not doing too badly at all."

"Although they haven't yet done a hell of a lot in terms of economic policy, they have shown a healthy respect for disciplines inherent in the world economy and I was quite encouraged by what was in the [June] budget."

Also, long-term bond rates are back to where they were at the time of the Keys' resignation, volumes are improving and there's been a bit of a post-election spending spree.

The labour unrest has more serious implications. More than 100,000 workers have downed tools since Mandela took office for reasons ranging

from demands for higher wages to protests against white racism in the workplace.

The estimated 1.4 million working days lost to strikes in the first half of this year exceeded the figure for all of 1993, and in August some 20,000 striking motor industry workers crippled the vehicle manufacturing industry.

Not only does this present an off-putting face to foreign investors, it also poses long-term problems for the ANC's support base. Most of the striking unions are affiliates of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), the powerful umbrella body which helped Mandela sweep to victory. Frustrated that their daily lives have hardly changed since the country's first black president, they are now taking to the streets to demand their post-election dividend.

So far, they have not received it. Contrary to their expectations, the new government has not sided uncritically with them against employers reluctant to grant above-inflation increases.

Instead, the Mandela administration has carefully remained on the sidelines, intervening primarily to appoint a mediator in a rowdy strike against one of the country's main supermarket chains.

This approach is drawing praise from big business, but could precipitate increasing militancy from the lower ranks of a Cosatu already struggling for direction after losing about 60 top leaders to posts in the new government.

Some analysts believe this may ultimately lead to a split in the ANC/Cosatu alliance and could end with the formation of a new workers party to oppose the ANC in the 1999 election.

"A day of reckoning has been postponed, but it will come again," notes David Welsh, politics professor at the University of Cape Town. Mandela is treading a similar tightrope in his attempts to keep election promises to improve black living conditions.

The ANC's Reconstruction and Development Programme, an ambitious blueprint to build

a million new houses and create hundreds of thousands of jobs in the next five years, has barely got off the ground.

Mandela was able to allocate only a modest 2.5 billion Rand for the current fiscal year to the plan when he opened the first full session of Parliament in May.

He coupled this with a promise to spend his first 100 days personally overseeing the implementation of a school feeding scheme for malnourished children and the provision of free medical care for pregnant women and children under six.

Planning for the food aid is underway and the free treatment for the young is placing pressure on already overstretched hospital resources, but these measures are little compensation for voters who hoped a black-led government would bring immediate prosperity.

Part of the reason for this policy vacuum is that the government is still trying to find its feet. New black ministers are having to confront white bureaucrats hankering after the old order and new parliamentarians are having to cope with unfamiliar procedures.

Some observers believe Mandela's failure to weld the cabinet into an effective instrument of government also may be to blame for the patchy decision-making and inconsistent performances by some of his ministers.

"Mandela may be a great statesman, but he's a poor manager," said one non-ANC MP. "That's one of the reasons the Cabinet never seems to deal with all the items on its agenda."

This apparent lack of direction means the Cabinet has yet to establish a way of working for the 27-member executive that includes six ministers from de Klerk's National Party and three from Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi's Inkatha Freedom Party.

"No pattern has yet emerged for the operation of the Government of National Unity," says Professor Welsh. "It is not clear if it is a coalition which agrees on common policies and doesn't criticise

decisions in public or merely ad hoc arrangements where the members happen to meet in Cabinet but are then able to launch stinging attacks on each other."

The situation is delicate one for all three of the parties in this constitutionally-enforced coalition.

National Party backbenchers are visibly uncomfortable about their inability to play a traditional opposition role, with even the usually-adoring Afrikaans press recently criticising de Klerk's "lacklustre" performance.

Home Affairs Minister Buthelezi, too, hinted in August that he may withdraw his party from the Cabinet after two years rather than wait until completion of the government's full five-year term.

For Mandela, the difficulties include a caucus becoming increasingly restive over what they see as unnecessarily generous concessions to his defeated opponents. Despite the ANC majority in Parliament, the President recently incurred the wrath of his party by insisting that non-ANC MPs should chair some of the parliamentary standing committees.

Outside Parliament, he had to deal with the recent resurgence of the violence that plagued black townships before the election. In troubled KwaZulu/Natal, a fresh wave of killings includes the murder of several people whose only crime apparently was watching a television drama perceived by Inkatha supporters as biased against the organisation.

In the East Rand, clashes between ANC supporters and pro-Inkatha residents of hostels for migrant workers took a more ominous turn when militant ANC youth warned that their leaders' failure to close the hostels has made them unwelcome in their townships.

Mandela has to address these concerns and provide further insights into the implementation of his development programme. His supporters may have given him the traditional period of grace while he settles into office, but they will want to be wooed with more tangible change if they are to maintain their commitment to the ANC.

ARLENE GETZ is southern Africa correspondent for Australia's Sydney Morning Herald.

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.

An appreciation

Sir, Please accept our heartfelt gratitude and the warmest felicitations for publishing the news on contaminated water being supplied by WASA on 7th August under the headline "WASA supplies contaminated water." And you have not rest satisfied just by publishing the news. Like a real pioneering national daily, you have again made up a follow-up news in the issue of

9th August under the headline "WASA yet to respond to their plight" with an appealing photograph.

You have really played the role of a pioneer in the news media. Probably, this is the reason why people love and read "The Daily Star" and its circulation is on the increase.

We the inhabitants of Baddanagar Lane are deeply indebted to you for your philanthropic approach through news item which has not only

stirred the administration of the WASA but also the concerned ministerial authority; and that is why the WASA authority came out with press statement regretting inconvenience caused to the people and thereby accepting their own follies.

Thanking you once again, for your deep concern about the people, we hope you will continue to play the similar pioneering role in future so that others may take lesson from you.

Md Shujauddin
Baddanagar Lane, Dhaka-1205.

CELP of the Open University

Sir, I was delighted to learn from friends that the Open

University has launched a new programme on Spoken English to telecast on BTV. BOU indeed deserves thanks from all for taking this step, which we needed most in the perspective of the present-day demand. For, all of us know that in English, written or spoken, the Bangladeshis are lagging behind in comparison with the people of our neighbouring countries.

But it is regrettable that the standard of the CELP Programme is very low. For the first time while I was watching the programme on TV, I was really confused whether it was an educational programme or just mere playing of a drama episode!

In sure repetition of the series bored the learners instead of teaching them. I would suggest the BOU author

ity to shape up the programme in a new form, less dramatization and more lesson material. The BOU authority must not forget that every minute of the BTV telecasting is precious. It would be better to engage an innovative, professional and experienced producer for this important programme.

Neema Haq
Shantinagar, Dhaka

Kyushu

Sir, I stayed months three times in two prefects in Kyushu. I take exception to a local weekly article saying that "naturalised Koreans" in 1600s produced porcelain for export. Many Korean artisans were brought as POW to Japan for

their skills, isolated severely regarded as slaves. The ruler ruled. Euro demand occurred after 1950. The learned author opens with hitchhiking which is never a proper activity in Japan as in Euro-US, where I was raised and groomed, as in Japan remote villages are very well served by inexpensive transportation. We seem to make diligent efforts to conform to Jap's unique social code, for example, open urination by a roadway is acceptable under pressure in Hokkaido, Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Nara but hitchhiking — NEVER.

A quibb trotter
Dhaka