

Hoping for the Best in Haiti

Haitian junta leader Raoul Cedras has agreed to step down from power making way for restoration of a legitimate democratic government in the Caribbean island country. He is to stand down, and depart from the scene altogether, within a month, after the Haitian parliament passes an amnesty law, apparently absolving him of all responsibilities. Cedras should thank his stars for being able to negotiate his own exit in terms of a Haiti-USA accord which also envisages the beleaguered forces' cooperation in setting Haiti firmly on course to democracy. So, he has capitulated, but in some style.

He had pressed his luck too far doubting the US President Clinton's resolve to go for an outright invasion of Haiti, even though by all sights and sounds, this seemed an imminent possibility. What made him deceive himself into testing the American will so long was the US Congress' opposition and an express popular aversion to an invasion plan. But when, on top of moving a 20,000-strong multinational force aboard 20 carrier ships closest to the shores of Port-Au-Prince, sixty-one US war cargo planes actually set out from California, the US resolve was too eloquent to be doubted.

So, Cedras and his men cringed before the US military might and a robust international will combining to end the three-year rule by junta that had usurped power in 1991 by ousting elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide. There are three underlying details of the scenario that make an interesting reading. The supporters of Aristide who himself is in exile in the USA, think that they have to live with the reality of letting Cedras and his lieutenants leave the country with impunity. By contrast to this reconciliation on the part of Aristide camp, there seem to be elements in Haiti who are opposed to Aristide's return to power. And thirdly, not all military associates of Cedras are willing to leave the country, so that a seed of conflict could be there.

The military plan for invasion was orchestrated impeccably with a special diplomatic mission led by the quiet and intrepid negotiator in former US president Jimmy Carter. The other members of the team Senator Sam Nunn and retired General Colin Powell, too, made their invaluable contributions in the patient diplomacy. This helped avert a blood bath and made the landing of multinational troops relatively risk-free. The countries contributing troops to the military campaign, including Bangladesh, have reasons to be grateful for this. The 'permissive entry', as it has been termed, is going to be less hazardous than a forced one.

But it is not all joy and relief — as yet. Haiti has had a troubled history and a military ego dating back to its defeating French troops once. Cedras himself tried to give Haiti an ego ride of his own. He almost succeeded in mixing his nation's ego with his own. Haitians should now be better able to separate the chaff from the grain. The country is yet to break out of a potentially violent political circle. The forces which are now moving into the country to restore order and bring back democracy, may have to negotiate through some booby-traps, figuratively speaking. Power still comes from the barrel of gun in Haiti.

The UN-authorised transitional take-over in Haiti will have made a good start if the economic sanctions which have hurt the common people were first withdrawn.

A Fatal Bashor

Rabeya Khatun, an 18-year old young woman, was given in marriage to Nurul Alam on Friday in village Kalma, Sabhar. No one knows what kind of a *bashor* she or the groom had for next morning she was found dead, hanging from the ceiling, in their *bashor ghar*. Her body has been sent for postmortem to the Dhaka Medical College morgue. We have no material with which we can guess the possible unhappy scenario and nor is it indeed fit to speculate on that at this stage of investigation and before the legal proceedings that are certain to follow.

So why talk about it at all? It is from a sense of shock that we feel that we must record our grief over the end of a life at precisely the point at which it socially is reputed to unfurl. Bridal parties on way to a wedding or returning from it and meeting with fatal accidents are shocking enough. They become news for the drama element of a surfeit of pleasure turning into an abyss of unremitting pain — all of it before you can say knife — something expressed so pithily by the Bengali phrase *horishey bishad*. But this kind of news is familiar to all — coming in every two or three years if not each vernal marriage *maosoom*. A girl of Rabeya's age hanging herself or being hanged only hours after they have been married is the farthest removed thing one finds in an ordinary day's news. Whatever happened in their *bashor ghar*, no accident took place. It was either a case of suicide or of murder — both ways an act of volition. What a time to go for such a choice!

Whether she was a victim of a man's lustfully criminal ways or of her own foolhardiness about her problems on the night, it is Rabeya's life that is now no more. And the wedding is certainly what brought her, together with the gifts and the lights and the joyful cavorting by the young ones, death as if on a platter — or was it in a cup resembling the one that put hemlock to Socrates's lips? For the millennia-old ultimate ritual combining two human lives into one to turn into a deliberate act of taking life — one's own or the spouse's — is tragedy beyond Romeo Juliet, or maybe crime worse than the serial rapist's.

We cannot bring Rabeya back to life. But we can make the best out of the situation and recreate her in our minds with the best attributes we individually are capable of. This we do in our adulation for the age — 18 — and our sincere grief over her exit at the point of her life's take-off.

Strike and Siege or Meeting and Demonstration?

by MM Rezaul Karim

THE recent spate of nationwide strike and hartal, and the attempt to lay a siege to the capital city of Dhaka have prompted the people once again to reckon the immediate and future consequences of such dire actions on the nation and the people.

The immediate outcome has been to cause much disgust and, in some measures, resentment among the bulk of the populace at their involuntary confinement to home or at their compulsion to go to work at considerable personal risk. By and large, people abstained from work due to the physical difficulty faced by them in travelling to their offices and establishments. Quite a few stayed back home as they did not wish to see their cars to be broken or damaged. Still others enjoyed the period as forced rest and happily loused at home. There were of course some who had been motivated by the cause itself but their number was limited and they belonged largely to the groups of party activists and direct or indirect beneficiaries of the movement.

The negative impact of such actions on the national economy has been aptly described by the leading federations and associations in the fields of commerce, industry, investment and employment. Their statements merely made public what they and other industrialists and businessmen as well as intellectuals had been feeling for a long time.

The enormous loss of production and shying away of foreign investments are most unfortunate, to say the least. Even

countries like Indonesia and Vietnam banned strike in export-oriented industries or in any enterprises where it's likely to cause loss to national economy. The assessment made by a leading business chamber of a loss of Taka 600 crores to our economy during these four days of strike and siege is alarming. Of, all the people, those of Bangladesh, among the poorest in the world, can ill afford such as staggering waste of time and resources which could otherwise have been utilised for promoting their well-being. Our people have been used to being hit hard under the belt, often by natural vagaries, but this time they have been cruelly hit by their own people.

One must, on the other hand, ask oneself whether the purpose for which such economically harmful political acts have been accomplished or not. The opposition demand is to form a caretaker government to conduct parliamentary elections. The ruling party rejects it and suggests alternative measures to secure a free and fair election. The holding of such election, in fact, constitutes the *raison d'être* of the opposition demand. The caretaker government is one of the means to attain this goal. All other means, the ruling party argues, must be explored and exhausted. To this effect, they have introduced in the Parliament a bill and hope to ensure free election by vesting greater authority in the office of Chief Election Commissioner and by incorporating other measures, including some designed to curb abuses

of governmental facilities and patronage. Their invitation to the opposition to introduce their proposal still remains unheeded.

The

opposition now hardly speaks of their ostensible goal, which is to secure a free election, and concentrates on the one and only demand for a caretaker government. Cynics quip, if a caretaker government is so good and fair, why not continue with it permanently and save the enormous national costs and bickering amongst political parties?

Neither the opposition nor the ruling party would be inclined to subscribe to it on the justified plea that such a proposition would be totally undemocratic. The latter contends that such an undemocratic institution, even for a short time during the election, should not be made a special feature in our political system.

Moreover, this would be quite unprecedented in a practising democracy, including those in our neighbourhood, and would

constitute a negation of the principle of democracy itself. The general public are little aware of these implications and prone to be swayed by the happy experience of the last caretaker government, which the nation was obliged to constitute as the only means of transition to democracy at the time when there was no government.

Under these circumstances it would be unrealistic to expect that the present government will yield to the opposition.

Having weighed the pros

and cons of the arguments of both sides and examining the current situation, there appears no certainty for the opposition to be able to muster enough strength to mobilise people for a spontaneous mass upsurge in order to topple the government. The Dhaka siege fell short of the aspiration of its sponsors. Thanks to the restraint exercised by all concerned, casualties were relatively small and no martyr produced.

The second allegation of

corruption however has been made and made forcefully which is, as expected, disputed by the government.

Corruption has no doubt been as widespread as one could conceive in many developing countries. It has been so in the past and will remain so in the future. It is endemic in our body politics. Still, there can be no question of condoning it. Can anyone justifiably claim to eliminate it altogether in the future? No one can. One can

only seek to curb it. Ironically, whichever government comes to power pledges to wage a war against corruption but factually retreats by inaction, often miserably.

Another allegation has been made against the present government of its being ineffective. This has been vehemently contested by the government party claiming that it has fulfilled many of its election pledges and presented an impressive array of achievements in various sectors. To the contrary, it holds the opposition party responsible for the unfulfilled pledges for creating disruption in the economy.

The primary reasons for the fall of the Ershad regime was two-fold — the relentless demand for the restoration of democracy by replacing an autocratic regime and the accumulated charges of corruption against it. The first does not apply to the present government which is a democratically elected one with a popular mandate to govern for five years.

The second allegation of

corruption however has been made and made forcefully which is, as expected, disputed by the government.

Corruption has no doubt been as widespread as one could conceive in many developing countries. It has been so in the past and will remain so in the future. It is endemic in our body politics. Still, there can be no question of condoning it. Can anyone justifiably claim to eliminate it altogether in the future? No one can. One can

only seek to curb it. Ironically, whichever government comes to power pledges to wage a war against corruption but factually retreats by inaction, often miserably.

The crying need of the day is to establish a dialogue between the parties concerned. To be meaningful, the dialogue should be without pre-conditions, for pre-conditions tend to limit the scope of negotiations. The premises on which to base the negotiations should be, as logic and fairness dictate, the search for appropriate measures evolved through consensus to ensure a free and fair election under the existing political system. The proposal for a caretaker government, no doubt, can be discussed but one should also allow discussion on other possible measures purported to achieve the same goal and to prevent rigging of elections. Talks may not necessarily lead to an agreement, but chances exist, given political will on the part of our leaders. Then why not try it? It would be in the interest of peace, democracy, freedom and, above all, development for our impoverished people. If we fail, our present experiment with democracy may be short-lived. And we, the unfortunate people with our forlorn hopes, would be destined to fall again into an abyss of despair and despondency.

The author is a former diplomat and presently as member of the Advisory Council of BNP

Gulf States Move towards Self-reliance in Defence

Prakash Chandra writes from Dubai

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait appears to have strengthened efforts by Gulf states for a joint defence force

THE Gulf states seem determined to create an effective Gulf Standing Defence Force that could counter threats to member states.

In line with this, the six Arab countries in the area expect to spend some US\$10 billion in the next few years for the purchase of arms and the training of people.

The invasion of Kuwait by Iraq and the claim of Iran to islands of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have triggered a new awareness among members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

These countries seem more aware now, as never before, that they must learn to defend themselves, procure foreign defence supplies and train their own force.

Political analysts say internal tensions have hampered plans on defence and security cooperation.

One commentator notes: "There are disputes — potential and actual — which make the six states wary of pursuing defence integration of any kind. Qatar and Bahrain have a long-running territorial dispute. They note that if the six members of GCC are really

keen on implementing an integrated community of nations in the Gulf, the top priority must be defence, apart from economic cooperation.

Arab experts now reluctantly concede the fact that they were totally ill-equipped to cope with the Iraqi attack on Kuwait. It was the Saudi Arabian National Guard and not the brigade-sized GCC Peninsula Shield Force that had rushed to the Saudi-Kuwait border.

Thus, the Arabs suddenly realized that they have not even attempted to set up a real combat-ready regional security force that could counter threats to member nations.

The situation is something like that in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) where members may

refuse to take orders from each other in creating a defence force. There have always been rivalries between Malaysia and Singapore, on one hand, and Indonesia, on the other hand, for example.

Thailand is too dependent

on the United States to start a regional security organization.

Thus, ASEAN remains a regional trade organization.

In the case of the GCC, some Western diplomats believe that cooperation is possible in some areas as military aircraft training activities. For example, most GCC air forces now use the British Hawk trainer, and overheads could be cut if a unified training facility were to be set up.

Another area of cooperation is in the use of American military helicopters.

The British, French and Americans are all competing for the sale of missile systems, fighter jets and battle tanks, to Gulf states.

India

India has an arms export plan, modestly valued at about US\$100 million, which is

fulfilled," Yossi Beilin said. "I am very proud to be here today because those of us who believed for many years that Peace Now was a reality were right." He expressed regret for the "wasted years" of conflict during which "generations after generations paid an unneeded price," but spoke optimistically about the "not warm, but much better than expected" peace with Egypt.

Beilin also said that a condition of "understanding" now exists between Israel and Jordan and expressed hopes for successful treaty negotiations with the Palestinians. "I hope that within a few months we will be in a position to sign a formal peace agreement with the Palestinians," he said.

In his view, "there is no way back" from the progress already made between Israel and the PLO. He predicted that by May 4, 1995, a permanent

agreement between Palestinians and Israelis would be in place.

As for Syria, the Deputy Foreign Minister said: "The ingredients of the solution more or less known. If Syria is ready to make peace, if Israel is ready to make territorial concessions, and if both of us are ready, then the United States will be involved in achieving that target of peace."

Beilin stressed that the peace process between Syria and Israel must begin within the next 10 to 12 months, prior to the beginning of

of Israeli and US national elections in mid-1995. "In such an election year it is very difficult to take bold decisions," he said.

But he warned that peace-making is not a situation in which one has all the time in the world. Peace is important both for the Syrians and for

the Israelis.

Nabil Sha'ath spoke by satellite from Oslo, Norway, where he is currently attending meetings to resolve issues concerning international aid for Palestinian self-rule projects.

He admitted that disagreement has arisen between Israel and the Palestinians over development funding for East Jerusalem but expressed optimism in the ongoing peace negotiations saying, "Problems are solved by people getting together and negotiating. More often than not, solutions are found and are used to develop the process further."

Sha'ath cited the progress that has been made this year in the Occupied Territories in particular: increased feeling of security, the beginning of school under Palestinian authority, the return of Palestinian refugees, and the

process further."

Sha'ath cited the progress that has been made this year in the Occupied Territories in particular: increased feeling of security, the beginning of school under Palestinian authority, the return of Palestinian refugees, and the

process further."

Sha'ath called for elections in the West Bank "as fast as possible" to solidify the

progress that has already been made. "We need to have a full empowerment in the West Bank," he said.

He expressed confidence that the process of peace would continue to unfold "stage by stage, step by step, leading not only to a Palestinian peace but eventually to a full Arab-Israeli peace. The pieces of this big peace are falling into place — Jordan, and now I have great hope that Syria and Israel will conclude their peace, immediately followed by Lebanon."

Americans for Peace Now was founded in 1981 to support the Peace Now movement is Israel and build bipartisan support for US policies that promote Israeli-Palestinian peace. The Arab American Institute was formed in 1989 to encourage Arab American participation in electoral politics, to promote access to US political parties and to shape Middle East policy debate in the United States.

horns as far as possible while driving your vehicles and ask your driver not to abuse horn.

Let us all work together to make our environment free of horn and other noise pollutants.

M Zahidul Haque
Press and Publicity Secy.
BSCE, Dhaka

Hartal

Sir, Mere issuing of statements by trade organisations against hartal would never deter the hartal callers from calling hartal in future. These trade organisations should better stand up at once against hartal and must sue the hartal callers for the loss they have to incur due to this misappropriated democratic tool of protest.

To be true, the common citizens are virtually fed up with this sort of political extremism. And the hartal callers must recognize this fact if they believe in political pragmatism which is essential for sustaining our democratic process. The street violence in the name of picketing can never be accepted as a peaceful means of demonstration.

Md Jalaluddin Iqbal
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

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.

Siege and hartals

Sir, Following the collapse of autocracy, the commonman heaved a sigh of relief after the formation of a democratic government. In the initial session of JS in April 1991, the first move by the MPs was to fix their salaries, house allowance and other monetary benefits; get a red passport, duty free car, free medical facilities, free use of telephones, etc. In fact, they seemed more interested to fix their own welfare first, than those of the people. First, however, condoned it, hoping that they would now take up public-oriented programmes through congenial debates and dialogues in the JS.

But to our utter dismay and concern, we noted that the ruling and opposition parties have taken recourse to confrontation often on petty and trivial matters and the opposition took recourse to frequent

walk