

Happy Turn-around

Yesterday morning the screaming headlines of the newspapers concerning the failure of the Commonwealth-brokered dialogue between the ruling party and the opposition stunned us but at the end of the day a dramatic development has reassured us about the current political reconciliation process. The development was that the two deputy leaders of the ruling party and the opposition have agreed to meet today "in furtherance of the dialogue process". Optimism has also been expressed by Commonwealth emissary Sir Ninian Stephen that he might not leave Dhaka before political settlement has been reached.

Thanks God, the development has not proved our worst fear we expressed through this column at the beginning of the dialogue. The impression was that neither of the two sides went into the dialogue with an open mind. What was on top on their mind was a political game in which they could beat each other against the run of play. How else does one explain the two sides' reluctance to make good use of an opportunity thrown their way, thanks to the Commonwealth Secretary General Emeka Anyaoku's initiative.

Both the ruling party and the opposition have just reiterated their respective positions during the past five sessions. Nothing wrong with it. Because it could very well be viewed as an opening of the dialogue — a plenary round to be precise. Whether the demise of the talks should have been announced this early is a question we put before our political leaders. To our mind it can by no means be a lost case yet. The parties can resume the talks where they left off. But they must do it with a sense of purpose.

It is terribly disturbing to know that the contending parties accused each other for the failure of the talks instead of acknowledging their reluctance to make a serious effort in narrowing down their differences. It seemed that they were interested more in sticking to their positions than in analysing the merits of the contentious issues. There is no place for intransigence in politics. Everybody has to make some concessions in the long run if the best and acceptable results are on their mind. What is bewildering is that before even exhausting the pros and cons of the on-going process, the two sides hastily decided to call it a day. We won't go so far as to call it a political naivety but if the talks could not be revived anyway, the move might look worse still.

If the opposition feels that enough progress is not being made at the talks, the ruling party can very well note that point and match their desire with its own effort. We are worried that things have not moved the way the people here and outside of the country have wanted them to. The stake for everyone is great. Once again we focus on the agenda set, with opinion from the two sides, by the Commonwealth secretary general for discussion. A thorough discourse on the three points — strengthening the election commission, election under a caretaker government and the code of conduct for the politicians — could indeed be the basis of an agreement acceptable to both.

Now that the contending parties have decided to return to the negotiating table, they must do so with seriousness of purpose. There is hardly any scope for backing out of something they have both committed themselves to. No petty interests or narrow politics should be allowed to intervene in the forward-looking political reconciliation process. The challenge is before our political leaders and they have to be equal to the task.

Unmitigated Hell Inside City Buses

Abdur Razzaq, a teacher, was allegedly pushed down from a moving bus' footboard on Monday afternoon in front of the Grindlays Bank at Narayanganj. The bus then ran over the 28-year old man from Patuakhali. Razzaq succumbed to his injuries at midnight. Although the police is in the know of the number of the bus, they haven't, till Tuesday evening, been able to catch the helper.

Whether the busman was in fact responsible for this death is for the court to decide. Nevertheless, we have here a fit occasion to go into the question of the manning of our buses. Whoever has for even once taken a ride on any of the city buses or those that run between the capital and its satellite town, would surely know what has been the regular passengers' realisation over thousands of trips on these traps — that the whole exercise is more humiliating and degrading than merely risky. Only crowd in, however intolerable, does not make it so. A relentless stream of abusive language and utterly impolite behaviour including shoving and pushing from the conductor and the helper combine with the suffocating congestion to make the interior of a moving bus an unmitigated hell.

We do not say that all of our bus conductors and helpers are unredeemable rogues. They may come in as many kinds as there are human types. But barring a handful of very rare exceptions, all-plying buses feature as a matter of universal and unfailing practice an awfully indecent behaviour of the bus employees. No regular bus passenger of this city can claim to have done his moving about without his or her sense of dignity and self-respect denied. Two main factors contribute to the horrendous situation. The bus owners' consistent policy of hiring young people for not more than a pittance and from among those that are little better than worthless scum, illiterate and having the least by way of breeding, is the predominant factor. Then there is the other, no less overriding. From early morning till late at night the conductor jostles among sardine-packed pressing bodies, incessantly at his fight to remain on top of the alterations that continue for 16 long hours each day while the helper keeps shouting, touting for the bus on top of his voice, for the best part of the livelong day. And no provision of rest or holiday or vacation or working hours fixed in accordance with ILO requirements, reduce the two to a condition that can turn them insane or into robots of the most inadequate and unhealthy mental capacity.

There is no denying that the helpers standing on the footboard push all passengers in or out of the bus. It is quite possible that Abdur Razzaq was pushed with some force down the footboard. If that is the case, the helper deserves the punishment that should be lawfully his. But that would hardly help the solution of the problem. Mass awareness of the bus-riding people and resulting resistance and stringent measures controlling recruitment and condition of the service of the busmen can combine with the curbing of crowding to make the buses fit for trips one would look forward to.

The Daily Star (DS): What are your views on the set back to the talks? What do you think will be its implication on the future political development?

Sheikh Hasina (SH): We are extremely worried about the future of the country. What we had tried to do through our movement is to restore to the people their voting rights, and the right to choose their government, and to change it whenever they want to. The collapse of the dialogue, that occurred last Tuesday, is due to the government's uncompromising position. We have put forward our demands, and we have placed sufficient arguments in favour of our position. However it is the ruling party which has not responded. They have not put forward any argument as to why they are opposed to our demands. All they say, and have been saying so from the beginning, is that the 'caretaker government' is not provided for in the Constitution. We are fully aware of that fact. That is exactly why we have been trying to persuade the ruling party to join hands with us, and move a Bill in the Parliament to include such a provision in the Constitution.

DS: Can we focus on Tuesday's incident. Why did the talks collapse?

SH: You see we had given a proposal to the ruling party. Whether this proposal will be accepted or not is up to them. If they accept it, how much of it they accept, and how much they do not. If they reject our proposal totally then what are the grounds on which they are rejecting it — all this needs to be spelt out. We expected a full discussion on our proposal, and an explanation as to why they are rejecting our suggestion. We want a logical explanation about their position. The truth is that the government did not want to go in this direction at all. In fact they revealed their position at the end of the talks on Tuesday by saying that there is no question of any caretaker government. The attitude with which they did so was also extremely unfortunate. We did not expect such attitude, after all this government itself came to power through a caretaker government. The recent election in Pakistan was under a similar system. In fact the 1970 election in the then Pakistan, in which Yahya came to power ousting Ayub, also held an election under a caretaker arrangement.

DS: The positions of the opposition group and that of the ruling party are well known. What, if anything, emerged new from the talks. Was there any new idea floated either by your side or by the ruling party?

SH: None whatsoever. That is our fundamental point. The ruling party did not respond to our idea, except by saying that was not in the Constitution. As for us, the question does not arise of coming up with new ideas because the ruling party did not respond to our original proposal, to which we could

'BNP is Not Sincere about Resolving the Crisis'

STAR SPECIAL

Leader of the Opposition and Awami League Chief, Sheikh Hasina, in an exclusive interview with The Daily Star, explains as to why the dialogue broke down last Tuesday. The AL Chief accuses the ruling BNP for not being sincere about resolving the political crisis and of deliberately moving away from the agreed agenda as worked out by Chief Emeka, the Secretary General of the Commonwealth. In the interview Sheikh Hasina also expresses her views on the overall performances of the government and concludes that the BNP is pushing the country towards uncertainty.

respond. DS: Yesterday there were some reports that the second phase of the discussion, between two smaller groups than the existing ones, was to start. Why didn't you go into that phase of the discussion?

SH: When they denied the very agenda of the discussion, and said that there was no question of discussing the caretaker issue, then what use there was of continuing the discussion. The ruling party came to the discussion knowing full well the agenda. As we all know the agenda set by the Commonwealth, Chief Emeka including 'caretaker government' as an item. He had talked to both the sides before setting the agenda. So BNP was fully aware about the agenda item. The Prime Minister knew fully that the 'caretaker government' was included in Emeka agenda. Knowing that, she agreed to participate in the talks. So why should they now say that there is no question of discussing the 'caretaker government' issue. And if they say so, what reason is there for the continuation of the talks. So far the discussions did not touch the main issue. On Tuesday, one minister who was participating in the talks categorically denied any possibility of 'caretaker government' issue being a part of the talks. So it is the ruling party which is subverting the talks.

DS: If, as you say the main agenda item was not being discussed, then would it not have been better for the Opposition to have given an ultimatum about withdrawing rather than withdrawing from the talks?

SH: This is what has been going on for the last five days. Whosoever spoke from our side said so.

DS: Frankly we were caught by surprise at the move to discontinue the talks, and to declare it as a failure?

SH: Well, we did not express our disappointment at the talks earlier because we were sticking to the agreement not to speak to the press.

DS: How do you visualize the immediate future of our politics?

SH: The government is pushing the country towards an uncertain future. Not only in politics, in every sphere of life, this government is pushing us towards disaster. Everyday there is murder, robbery, lawlessness, students unrest. So many groups are on strike. No work is being done in the secretariat. Third and fourth class employees are desisting from work. What is interesting about these strikes is they are being

carried out to force the government to implement the agreements that the government has already signed. There is rising unemployment, more and more industries are closing down. So there is uncertainty in every field, not only in politics. This government is leading the country towards a total uncertain future. Nothing seems to touch this government. It appears to me that this government is not capable of even understanding the problems facing the country, let alone solving them.

Recently the Prime Minister has threatened that she is also present in the streets. As a Prime Minister she should be running the country. She should not be in the streets. When the Prime Minister says she is in the streets, instead of being in the Parliament or in the government, it means she wants political confrontation.

DS: You have said on various occasions that if this dialogue fails then you will intensify your movement. Are you now going to make that happen?

SH: What else can we do. Please mark my words. We want to ensure safety of our voters, we want to restore the rights of the voters to elect the government they chose, and also to reject the government that they do not want. We want to bring a long term political stability in our country. It was for that reason that we wanted the three following general elections to be held under a 'caretaker system'. Not just the next election. This is what we want. On the other hand the BNP wants to perpetuate the chance to win election through vote rigging. They want the right to steal ballot boxes and rig elections.

DS: Is it right to make such an extreme comment?

SH: Yes, I say so because it is the reality. They know that they can rig the elections much better if they are in power. Without being in power they cannot win in the elections. And that is why they do not want elections under a caretaker government. Take the Jessore election for instance. People are so disgusted with this government that nobody even submitted any nomination paper to contest in that election. But of course to the ruling party this is not proof of disgust but a sign of their own popularity. In a democratic set up, nobody files any nomination paper in a by-election; isn't it terribly insulting to the existing government? The tragedy is that this government does have the sense to feel this shame. The difference between them and us is that we want to give the people



their right to vote, and BNP wants to retain the power to manipulate people's right to vote. That is the difference between our two parties.

DS: How do you see the future of our politics?

SH: What I wanted, was to ensure a very peaceful and secure election system. In 1991 election, there was no loss of life. It was by and large a very peaceful election. I wanted to put a system, into place, through a caretaker government for the next three elections. People were killed in every by-election held under BNP. Remember the Lalbagh killings. During Dhanmandi elections shots were fired at my car. People caught the culprit and handed him over to the police. The person was released through intervention from the highest authority. He is now a big BNP leader. The other day the train I was traveling in was fired upon. There was so many police, security staff, members of the public, all witnessed the incident, and yet the government press note denied it all. Those who can say such lies, where will they

election is guaranteed through that system, and not through any stop-gap arrangement. Thus our proposal is meant to bring long term political stability in the country, and solve the issue of free and fair election for the future. I think for the interest of the country, the government and the ruling party should have accepted this demand. It would have been better for us all.

DS: Is there any chance for the resumption of serious negotiations?

SH: Yes, if they follow the accepted agenda, and agree to discuss the 'caretaker government' issue. But I seriously doubt if they really want to have a meaningful dialogue. Because if they did, then a very important minister would not have spoken in the discussion of Tuesday as he did. If their interest in the dialogue is only to waste time and to divert the attention of the people by giving the impression that a dialogue is going on, then it is a very dangerous game that they are playing.

DS: Well, the BNP accuses you of using the dialogue to waste time and divert public attention?

SH: Why should we use the dialogue to waste time? What interest do we have? I would like to make one last point. BNP is steeped in corruption today. In every sphere of business activity BNP is involved in corrupt practices. The ruling party has used its elected office to amass huge wealth. Therefore it now needs the governmental powers to protect themselves. That is why they will have to cling to power at any cost. This is the fundamental reason why BNP does not want an election under a caretaker government.

DS: If I accept your argument that BNP is corrupt, and it wants to cling to power, can it not be argued that there are examples in the world where corrupt governments were ousted by elections held by them. For example the election of Corazon Aquino is a election that was held by Marcos? In Sri Lanka, a party in power for 17 years was ousted through an election held by that same government. In both instances there were no caretaker system.

SH: What did Marcos do? He cheated in the elections and declared himself elected. It was the peoples' movement that ousted him.

DS: But he could not make the people accept that verdict, because there were independent poll watchers. These people protected the ballot boxes, and helped the Election Commission in holding the count in public. Through public monitoring and vigilance they spelt Marcos design to manipulate the results.

SH: Marcos did not go because of the elections. He was removed through the struggle of the people. And about Sri Lanka, their election system is totally different from ours. So you cannot give that example.

DS: Thank you for your time.

South-South Educational Research Information Sharing

by Dr Abu Hamid Latif

EDUCATION should be regarded as a serious business and conducted as efficiently as possible as it not only takes a substantial portion of the national budget in most countries, it holds the key as well to the progress of the countries concerned. But unfortunately it is a wasteful enterprise in terms of money, manpower, time, and the quality of the products because of lack of policy directions, proper management and accountability in many developing countries. It is now well established that the situation can be improved through utilization of problem-centred and action-oriented research studies. Recognizing the need to improve educational policy, practice and quality through research, an international organization titled the Southern

Educational Research Initiative (SERI) was established in November 1992 for South-South Cooperation.

SERI is a natural follow-up of the efforts made in 1970s and 80s to promote educational research in most of the regions of the developing world through sponsoring educational research networks by leading donor agencies like SAREC, SIDA, IDRC and USAID. We, in South Asia, were, however, left out apparently for lack of interest in educational research in policy formulation and quality improvement through relevant practice.

SERI has now nine sub-regional networks including SAFER (South Asian Forum

Educational Researchers) which was established only last year at the initiative of SERI and BAFED (Bangladesh Forum for Educational Development) with its headquarters in Dhaka.

The broad objective of SERI is sharing of educational information and experiences within the southern hemisphere. SERI plans to achieve this objective by facilitating and promoting South-South linkages, helping to strengthen educational research capacity in the South, promoting effective utilisation of educational research and improving the dissemination process so as to reach educational research to select target audiences in the South.

As a step towards articulat-

ing the SERI mission, in each of the regions that are SERI's concern — Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbeans — case studies and background reports were prepared during the preparatory phase. These reports provided in-depth studies of the contexts within which educational research is conducted. They have revealed that: (a) the policy makers and other practitioners do not utilize effectively all available research; (b) there is an inadequate mix of research skills that are relevant and needed to conduct quality research; (c) the modes of dissemination do not include users of research such as policy makers, practitioners, communities, parents and other stake holders; (d)

the research environment in many countries is not conducive and supportive to the generation of quality research; and (f) educational research is underfunded and not priority agendas for most governments in the South.

SERI in its second Steering Committee meeting held in the University of Hong Kong Campus 7-11 August 1994, noted that the basic concern of SERI remains South-South collaboration towards improvement of research environment, research capacity building and research utilization in education. For this purpose, the meeting identified two major areas of SERI activities for the next three years. These are (i)

South-South research information sharing (at national, sub-regional and regional levels),

(ii) research capacity building and utilization. In this context, SAFER prepared a South Asian sub-regional project proposal for carrying out the activities identified by SERI within and across the regions and submitted it to SERI. A consolidated project proposal developed by SERI will be presented to the donor agencies for funding. When funds are available, SAFER based in BAFED office in Dhaka will start educational research network activities which will establish linkage of South Asia, for the first time, with other existing networks of the Southern hemisphere.

The writer is Professor, IER, Dhaka University

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.

We are distressed

Sir, By capturing the killer of the college teacher and her daughter, and the miscreants involved in the murder of a school student, which were committed recently in Dhaka, our police force have done a laudable job. We are heartened by their prompt action and hope that they will keep it up.

But we are distraught and deeply shocked by these inhuman activities, deterioration of our society to the extent where youngsters do not hesitate to kill coldbloodedly. We notice with concern that day by day these sorts of ruthless

incidents are increasing in our country. We wonder what sort of social condition is responsible for these cruel acts and if it will ever stop!

Nur Jahan East Nasirabad, Chittagong

NEMAP issues

Sir, I have read Dr Zahir Sadeque's interesting article on the subject (DS, Sept. 27), and subsequently came across Dr Saleemul Haq's rejoinder on NEMAP. As a person deeply interested in environment and development I was shocked to learn that the important NEMAP process was under-

taken in such a callous manner by GOB and the concerned donor agency. Our government's inability to prepare high quality plans and documents for a variety of reasons are well known. But UN agencies are known for their technical and managerial expertise. How could they as a public international body accountable to the global citizens allow an important documentation process to be guided by no clear understanding about the root cause of environmental degradation and their remediation?

Before any consultancy is offered, a rigorous Scope of Work or Terms of Reference are developed by the sponsoring agency, where, background/conceptual issues, rationale of study and deliverables/outputs are discussed in a comprehensive manner. That remains the guiding philosophy of the consultants to produce the outputs they are engaged for. Obviously, the sponsors of NEMAP did not do a good job in

preparing a good SOW/TOR.

The process, it seems to me, did a commendable job in holding grassroots workshops. But I wonder, did they result in truly participatory dialogue or were they stage-managed. Participation must be separated from populism and emotion. Otherwise, they degenerate easily into useless and sentimental outpourings of little or no substance. Jamal Ahmed, Eskaton Dhaka

'Civilization'

Sir, The short article 'Civilization' by Nico den Tuinder (DS 2.10.94) and two letters one by Zaki Wahaj (DS 6.10.94) and another by Nurul Huq (DS 12.10.94) were very interesting. The young shows his hot blood whereas the matured shows his tolerance.

Nurul Huq more or less supported Nico den Tuinder's comments about Bangladeshis. Let me tell Mr Huq, first, that

unfortunately, the Whites will and can tolerate criticism from Whites only, if any coloured person criticises them, instantly they may be replied back "if you do not like it here, go home". I am all for criticism but it should be constructive.

I am astonished by Nico's criticism of chewing betel leaf; do not they chew gum? Nose picking? Don't tell me Nico, that in the West they do not at all pick nose. One of my colleagues, in England, not only picked her nose but she did more of it.

It is pure personal hygiene to use water in the toilet. Of late, in the West, the idea has been picked up from the East. In France and in Germany people started using 'Bidet', lately England has also followed suit. Not everything is bad here!

As regards scratching the private parts, what Nico has to say about girls waiting at the windows exposed in certain streets of Amsterdam and

some other European cities! Yes, Bangladeshis do have bad habits, not one or two but many; they are just personal habits, nothing to do with civilization or culture of Bangladesh.

The evening scenes in the pubs of Europe are not that pleasant. People become most 'uncivilized' after their drinks and that is a daily occurrence.

My dear Nico, whatever you wrote in your article, I take it you did so without any malice.

As to eating with fingers — you do not eat chips and hot dogs with fork and spoon, — at least we clean our hands before and after using the fingers.

It is a pity Nico visited Dhaka when it became overpopulated, food became scarce and adulterated which affected the health, in general, which created 'gaok' and spitting all over the place.

Iftikhar Rasul Nawab Street, Wari, Dhaka