

Look through the Mist

Yesterday we observed the Democracy Day but today the political parties which made possible that day four years ago are in a state of confrontation. The democracy day could as well be called a unity day, going back to 1990 when the three political alliances of the country set aside their differences, just as the people wanted them to, and brought down an entrenched autocratic regime.

The people reaped home a handsome harvest: the covenant of understanding signed by the three erstwhile alliances, free and fair general elections and adoption of a parliamentary system of government.

Anyone could visualise though that after the elections and the germination of a whole range of new issues, the principled and unique unity that had forced the downfall of autocracy would crumble. So when the grand alliance actually fell apart it did not come as a surprise to most people nor have they been particularly intrigued by the different ways in which the political parties have this year observed the Democracy Day.

Even allowing for the variations in their style and approach to politics, the silent majority are perturbed by the latest turn of events and wonder whether the *Druba Tara* or the Pole Star of democracy is being lost sight of. There may not be a last word in politics but there certainly is a well-tested last word about democracy: If it is not played by the rules frequently and in the essence, it can be lost.

Who can blame the people for expecting that a consensus could still be struck to resolve the political crisis when inimical political forces had once unified against autocracy, saw through the general elections despite being fiercely competitive and reverted to a parliamentary form of government, all by consensus? The people need convincing on this point.

Where we were in 1990 and where we find ourselves today, must seriously concern the political parties and force an introspection in them because governance and the role of opposition are no one-time affairs, they repeat and yield places as well.

We have discerned an underlying concern on both sides to slam shut all options for a resolution of the crisis. Noticeably, the opposition has set a distant deadline for carrying out its threat of *en masse* resignation from the Parliament. The signal couldn't be lost on the ruling party. We are still hoping the political parties will defuse the tension and reach a practicable settlement.

Hope for the Disabled

The observance of the International Day of the Disabled this time, unlike the previous years, has shown a marked difference. Happily for the better. A number of seminars and symposia, held on the occasion, tried to see the problems from different points of view. One such seminar with representation from both developed and developing countries on conclusion on Monday suggested the setting up of a regional training centre for the disabled. The need for such a training centre cannot be overemphasised. Region-wise, the Asia-Pacific has as much as 10 per cent of its population in the disabled category. Quite a high proportion no doubt.

So the regional approach to the problem of childhood disability has hardly any alternative. A shared responsibility for both the preventive aspects of the problem and training facilities for the physically and mentally handicapped also goes to multiply the benefits for all. While endemic poverty is the root cause of childhood disability, the less than human treatment for those suffering from it is also an offshoot of the lack of social awareness and affluence. No rhetorics are going to change the situation unless society overcomes its economic hardship. A more affluent society can also end up without being enough caring. The important thing is to strike a balance between personal ambition and social duty.

As long as that remains an unattainable goal, there is no hope for reducing the mass poverty in societies like that of Bangladesh. Its simple implication is that on the preventive side noticeable improvements are yet to come about. So we have to accept the grim reality of a huge disabled population amongst us. In such a situation, the best chance for the disabled to lead as respectable a life as possible lies in the optimal use of the existing facilities. The facilities can run better and with a purpose if only they get integrated — even if loosely — with regional and international bodies and facilities of similar nature.

So the message is clear: make the most of the existing facilities and go for a regional approach to derive benefits through coordinated efforts.

Fate of One-Taka Note

Soiled one-taka note, according to a Bangladeshi Bank circular, has to be changed by December 31. The authority has not yet said as much about the fresh-looking notes of the same denomination. But indications are that the whole lot of the smallest of notes may soon fall out of favour. This presumption gets stronger by the fact that in exchange for such soiled notes either one-taka coin or other notes of equal value will be supplied by the banks.

But why has this particular note fallen out of favour? The coin of the same denomination was in fact a rarity until recently. Then the argument was that coins are very inconvenient to carry and their manufacturing cost outweigh their own value. Today almost the opposite arguments are put forward: notes get easily soiled and torn and their manufacturing costs are more than their real value. The coins — quite a number of them — as heavy as they are can invite troubles of the unforeseen sort. If someone presenting a 500-taka note for a payment is returned as many as 400 to 499 taka in coin after he has purchased something costing between one to 100 taka just imagine his dilemma. The inconvenience in carrying them is irrefutable.

Well, the apparently irreconcilable arguments may indeed have a meeting point. Considering the fast degradation of the notes, they no longer remain cheap in their production. The coins on the other hand, because of their durability, prove to be less costly in the ultimate analysis. So it might be a lesson that has been learnt the hard way.

One-taka denomination is however going to be less significant any way. Today that little money hardly buys anything of value, except perhaps match sticks. Soon it may lose even that purchasing capacity. It may have to face the same fate of now obsolete five poisa or 10 poisa coins. With the fast decline of our money value we may have to keep account of normal purchases in terms of thousands like the Indonesians.

THE murder of an 'uninvolved' businessman, the dastardly killing of a school boy by his friends and host of other such ghastly incidents in the city as well as elsewhere in the country trigger an alarming trend of violence stalking the nation. An inevitable crisis resulting from restlessness, frustration, devilish nature of politics, and also deteriorating moral standards of the parents at home and guardians of the society are throwing the younger generation to a catastrophic end. The question that agitates our mind is how all these alarming trends could come about and how the state, society and parents at home look at the whole problem. Youngsters, mostly in the city areas, are taking to the streets with guns. The fires that have been unleashed to the utter disregard of the state, society and guardians will consume the whole nation. Reports of looting, arson and mindless mayhem fill the pages of newspapers with searing images. The apathy of the society to this escalating crisis and failure of the state to address the problem is most appalling. The menacing trend of the social disorder, group feuds and killing of a friend on the flimsiest pretext, either for money or mastan type activities are the deadliest urban upheaval in the country. These trends are out to scar the city and the nation's soul and definitely underscore the importance of finding ways and means to root out the crime.

People, by and large, are aghast at the crime wave sweeping the country while the recent news of killing two children and wife by one in Chittagong because of abysmal poverty measure up the 'progress' and 'improvement' the country has achieved. The country is sinking in to a disastrous situation for this erosion of values, absence of morality, despair resulting into frustration *vis-a-vis* poverty of the majority.

Admittedly, the gradual decline of morality and rise of violence and shoot-out are the result partly of the increasing concentration of poverty in the cities and partly of an accelerating breakdown of the value structure that kept this country the least divisive, class ridden and most optimistic in the

Crimewave Sweeping the Country: Society Must Check the Slide

by Md Asadullah Khan

It should be an eye-opener for persons at the helm of affairs in our country to recall the warning that president Mitterand issued. President Mitterand said, "... a society that refuses to listen to its youth and fails to make room for them prepares its future badly."

earlier times. The problems, evidently stem from the spectacular lack of political leadership during the past two decades and the citizens, taxpayers and voters have rather indulgently supported and approved this sorry state of things without pointing a finger at any one often out of fear. We share the blame but sharing the blame does not tell us how to proceed and seek the remedy of the deep-seated malaise that has throttled up the nation.

What seems clear, if only because a lot of experts agree on it, is that poverty and crime are somehow associated with a breakdown of societal norms. As a result, it needs no further analysis or it needs to be hardly overemphasised that for a spectacular solution to materialise, the Government must teach the values of work, thrift, marriage and personal responsibility to millions of citizens suffering from this trauma of restlessness. Admittedly, most people in the urban areas are deeply ambivalent about these homely virtues. What has to be done right now, is that the kids must not get access to fast money that comes either by selling drugs or by offering services as mastans in different areas of the city. But to cure this malaise is so difficult in a situation where they are lured by the charm of life so much dazzling, so much tempting projected through different media. Sadly enough, we often crack down on street crime while most of the crooks who looted nation's savings go unpunished. Solving the enigma of urban poverty and maldistribution of wealth of the nation must get a high priority on the national agenda and the gospel of family values and personal responsibility is part of the solution. It will remain a dream never attainable unless we practice what we preach.

On the other hand, teachers hardly teach them in the class, and Seldom suggest any remedial measure to improve and enhance their knowledge and shortcomings. Children and kids of all classes and categories meritorious or deficient are encouraged and so to say enticed to accept the offer of private tuition in large numbers, sometimes unmanageable in the small precincts of the house of the tutor, at an alarming fee hardly affordable by the poor parents. In most cases, school boys and girls are not given any assignments to keep them busy at home and if they are at all given, those are hardly checked by the teachers. No periodical examinations are held in the classes in most of the institutions, to assess if the boys are capable of assimilating what are taught in the class. The kids, slowly and gradually are isolated from the mainstream of learning pro-

cess. Disenchanted students, and aggrieved citizens who are keeping watchful eye on the declining standard of education and poor quality of teaching have vented their frustration through media.

The rot stems from factors such as dilapidated buildings, overcrowded class rooms, growing teacher shortage, dearth of qualified and committed teachers, faulty and incongruous syllabus and last of all, in recent times, the spread of crime and drugs on school and college grounds. People have expressed their outrage at the way the school level teaching is heading towards a catastrophic end but hardly any effort has been made to improve the pitiable situation. But how all these ominous upheavals in the society could come about? Studies reveal some very disquieting results: Loosening of family ties, poverty, joblessness of parents and, in some cases, also affluence of parents. Parents' failure to meet the demands of the kids for a life more dazzling and enticing to then growth through association of friends who are rich enough to afford, have created a split in the family ties and erosion in command over the wards. The result has been disastrous. Kids are out to grab the means even by killing to satisfy their mores. The disaster is now perhaps at its peak. Parents can no longer afford to ignore the creeping rot at their core.

Like a medieval land gripped by plague, the country has been under siege from all possible directions. Hatred and vengeance have consumed the whole society so much so that rival parties have gone berserk and are gunning down opponents to establish their supremacy. The killing of two student leaders in the Chittagong Polytechnic Institute by the rival factions in a commando style attack on Novem-

ber 20 last, triggers an alarming trend of the student politics and the catastrophic and bleak prospect engulfing the educational arena in the whole country.

With political crisis rising to a crescendo and with people's patience wearing thin, the country will inevitably be on the brink of what may be a disaster making it difficult for it to sustain the present level of economic pressure. How can the peace loving citizens and people at large in the country keep quiet fully aware of the fact that the process will bring about debilitating effect with serious human, economic and political costs? Fully aware of the fact that the very survival of the nation is endangered, it would be a tragedy to permit further deterioration by allowing terrorism based on group feuds, party or religion-based politics. Student agitation and demonstration in protest of spiralling cost of education and rising prices of paper and other educational aids are acceptable, but the devilish nature of politics that holds sway in schools, colleges and universities will invite gloom for the society. High investment in education and keeping watchful eyes over the quality of education imparted in schools, colleges and universities and evaluation of the result by a team of committed experts are a part of the solution to this gigantic problem challenging the existence of the nation. It is worth recalling that most of the developed countries have attached high priorities to education for example France spends more on education than on defense and that represents 19% of the national budget. It should be an eye-opener for persons at the helm of affairs in our country to recall the warning that president Mitterand issued.

President Mitterand said, "... a society that refuses to listen to its youth and fails to make room for them prepares its future badly."

All explained, the broad source of discontent in the youth stems from rising unemployment and concerns for the future. Whatever little industrial plants and factories are in operation in the country, strikes and hartals have affected national progress very badly and the economy has started edging towards a recession. Middle class people either on work or without employment are worried about how much money they can afford to spend on festivals and, most importantly, whether they will ever be able to save enough to afford school and college tuition for their wards or a major medical catastrophe. A kind of free-floating anxiety has gripped the great middle class, even those holding well paying jobs and cars in the garage. And more people in the country now than ever are pessimistic about the future: they fear they will never live as well like their parents did and worry that their children may have it even worse.

Poised on the edge of conflict, this is a country moving in several directions, none of which encouraging, some infinitely sad, all of that frightening. There is no hiding the reality that the life for the Bangladeshis is changing irrevocably, for the worse. We have to realise it now, and rise to check this dangerous slide first.

human rights organisations have ignored the suffering of ordinary Iraqis whose basic rights are being violated by UN effectively. US sanctions which continue without any moral or legal justification.

More than 100,000 Iraqi children have died from lack of food and medication according to the UN Children Fund.

"It is outside our mandate," an Amnesty spokesperson said.

Elsewhere in the developing world, while the West claims to promote democracy and civil rights, governments are being forced to cut spending on health and education by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

Soyinka sees a contradiction in his own country. "Nigeria is a classic case. Democracy there can wait as long as Nigerian military rulers continue to buy British tanks and keep British people in jobs."

Human rights is a fast-growing industry in the West. In recent years, several new organisations have sprung up, prominent among them the US-based Human Rights Watch with its regional affiliates — Middle East Watch, Africa Watch and Asia Watch. Former US President Jimmy Carter has also established a centre to promote human rights and there is a Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative based in New Delhi.

Most continue to work within a narrow definition of human rights. Glenn Calderwood of the new, London-based International Society for Human Rights speaks for many who do not favour enlarging the mandate.

He warns against extending human rights campaigns to take in issues such as the right to development: "Tinkering with this will open up a Pandora's box."

— GEMINI NEWS
DAYA KISHAN THUSSU
Associate Editor of Gemini News service.

Struggling for a Square Meal as well as for a Voice

Daya Kishan Thussu writes from London

Increasingly, the West says it wants to link aid to developing countries' performance on human rights. But some Asian nations, reports Gemini News Service, want the debate widened to include the right to development.

US: hypocrisy and human rights

