

Step Back from the Cliff

In spite of a charged political atmosphere, we note with a sense of relief that political events over the last few days passed, by and large, peacefully. The Democracy Day rallies of the ruling BNP and the opposition Awami League, held in physical proximity of each other on Tuesday ended trouble-free. What a relief that was. We also read a positive sign into the relaxations made by the opposition political parties in their originally announced 48-hour strike call. With a four-hour evening break yesterday, the hartal is scaled down to end by noon today. And the first day passed off more or less peacefully.

However inadequate the relaxations may have been in addressing the basic public concern over any long-duration breakdown in life, we welcome these as a sign of growing consciousness within the opposition to be responsive to popular wishes and demands. If these are bettered in the future we will have evolved somewhat healthy practices in political agitation.

What is of immense significance at this political juncture is that the opposition political parties have set December 28 as the date for their MPs to resign en masse if the government failed to accept their demand for a caretaker government prior to that. So, we have a breather here of 19 days to set about cutting the Gordian Knot over holding the next elections, in some real earnest. We would like to highlight the dire need to utilise this respite to reach a common ground because after December 28 we will really be pushed to the twilight zone. Neither the opposition nor the government is clear about what steps either side will take or what will really happen after they reach a point of no-return following the 28th of December. So, whatever it takes to pull back from the precipice must be done by that date. Let's emphasize with all the force we can command that the ruling party and the opposition have the greatest stake, a shared one, for all practical purposes, in steering clear of the grave uncertainties that stare in the face of the nation.

The ruling party need not take it as an affront that it is being called upon to go by a deadline set by the opposition; because the opposition has pulled away from their earlier posture of an immediate wholesale resignation from Parliament. They have postponed it in the knowledge that it would mean crossing the critical threshold.

We make an impassioned call upon the government and the opposition to show that crucial bit of flexibility which can produce an agreement for the sake of the future of democracy, image of the country abroad and above all in deference to our abject poverty conditions.

Inaction Re-play in Bosnia

Has anything near the Bosnian outrage ever happened in living memory? Not after the Italian rape of Abyssinia or the fall of Spain to Franco fascists has any aggression been mounted so wantonly and yet gone unchallenged by the comity of nations. The Nazi over-run of Europe was more than amply met by world nations. The Bosnian hell with its genocide and systematic mass raping programmes has made a sham of all western protestations of security and justice and at the same time blasted the myth of the Muslim ummah. No pogrom against Jewish settlements in all history can match the unrelenting butchery the Bosnians are being subjected to for the only crime that they are Muslims. Is it believable that mankind on the threshold of the third millennium and riding high on the scientific-technological revolution has taken a barbarous medieval programme of ethnic cleansing lying down?

There must be something very wrong with western civilisation as a whole. What then has happened to the Muslim world, what has held the powerful Muslim nations to commit themselves meaningfully to the Bosnians' side, at least for the ummah's sake? With the US wholly sympathetic to the Bosnians, there could be little risk for them of provoking a desert shield?

These are all old questions. The latest escalation there of a Serbian offensive in the wake of guerrilla-style action yielding limited Bosnian successes and the unilateral lifting of arms embargo on Bosnia by the US have lent those self-same questions a renewed poignancy. President Izetbegovic has unambiguously laid it all on the moral bankruptcy of the western powers that every major one of them, barring the US, is on the way of withdrawing whatever little presence they had on the side of the savaged Bosnians. The NATO is split while the UN all but dysfunctional in its peace-keeping role.

President Clinton sent out a call to the Serbs in Bosnia through the 50-nation Budapest World Security Council Conference: "End your aggression, agree on a ceasefire and come to negotiating table".

The Serbs are bent on denying Sarajevo of reaping any benefit from possible shipments of armour reaching it. But can it indeed break Sarajevo? The Bosnian Muslims are learning all kinds of lessons about religion and civilisation, security and justice and international relations. They can count on none except themselves to repel the Serbs and teach them a lesson they are badly in need of.

Language Barrier

Why should it be necessary to be fluent in an extra language besides one's own? Not at all, if you keep from voyaging to countries not speaking your tongue. And then you have the all-consuming English language fast obviating the necessity to evolve a world language like Esperanto. The language of the cute little Fair Albion is becoming a world language. Why, wonder millions all over the globe! And at a time when sun has decidedly set over the Empire, never to rise again.

Be that as it may, it can be expected that natives of Australia should know English enough to say which side of the chest is hurting. Two years ago it happened that a surgeon got it wrong from a patient not articulate enough in English and removed one lung instead of the diseased other. When the incident was reported to government recently, it plainly came out that the patient was an Australian ethnic. And as such, possibly, it was not a necessity with him to be proficient in English.

Britain has for long come to terms with a pluralistic society. One thought Australia took a big step towards that at the time of the bicentennial of its founding recently. The incident shows that it would be the right course to follow and that the pace must be hastened. Australia better not remain an island, anymore.

OPEN university is now a new found way to quickly expand higher education for a very large number of high school graduates as well as for other categories of students who are late learners. If the economy is growing, demand for various categories of skilled workers are bound to be generated practically on a daily basis and the open university can be engaged in rapid skill development through degree and diploma courses on the semester system and make available to the expanding service and manufacturing sectors, the required trained manpower. The emphasis here is on quantity rather than quality — some of it would however be made up through gains from practical work experience as well as on the job hands-on training. It is good enough. After all, we do not require professors only. It is the shortage of medium range skilled professionals and technicians which is acutely felt — in spite of open unemployment of liberal arts graduates. The open university can be extremely useful in fulfilling the timely needs of skilled manpower.

This is happening in Vietnam today. The Ho Chi Minh Open University, although recently established, has already emerged as a bold new initiative in higher education — so far removed from all other institutions of higher learning in Vietnam. There is no entrance examination and anyone who wants to learn, improve his skills in any particular subject of his or her choice, should just enroll by paying the required fees and study at will and take his/her own time to complete the course requirements for award of the requisite degree/diploma.

The courses are very much work oriented. Obviously, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to find any course being offered in philosophy, literature or history. Instead, there is a rush for learning of English language — as against literature, business administration, accountancy, computer science, biotechnology, com-

Expanding Education on a Broadfront

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mercial art, mass communication, architecture, rural development, pharmacy, women studies, social psychology, tourism etc.. The subjects are all very modern — geared to the needs of the growing economy of Vietnam.

The Open University started in 1990 with only 400 English language students. Today, the total enrollment exceeds 38,000, served by more than 500 full or part time teachers who are paid much better than at the regular Government-run universities. Moreover, it is all a private venture and the fee is Taka 160 (equivalent) per credit hours for a graduate degree would therefore involve a total fee of less than 25,000 Taka, including other charges for examination etc., over the academic period of four years. Located in rented buildings and those given by the government, the capital investment has been very little. The fees collected from the students primarily pay for the salaries of the teachers and other recurrent costs.

Similar private sector initiatives have also been made in our country and I admire their courage and enthusiasm. However, compared to the success of the Ho Chi Minh Open University, our efforts and success have so far been rather limited. The aim has been quality education geared to high cost and therefore oriented towards the upscale market. In Vietnam, the strategy is to go for the volume and large total revenue, emphasis on skill development and technical training, rather than a general, well-rounded education. It may be noted that quality education is not feasible without external, particularly government, financial support. The large endowment funds significantly help the well-known private universities in

USA to maintain the high standards of their education over and above the substantial tuition fees charged from the students. In our situation, cost of education should be kept low or at least within the affordable limits of the majority of aspiring under-graduate students. At the same time, private universities need to be self-financing since possibilities of American style endowment funds would, if at all, be extremely rare.

Within the constraints of private education development, setting up of an open university, depending on very large enrollment, moderate fees within affordable limits, producing graduates to meet the labour market demand for

the third semester in each of the four years, all students would be encouraged to work and gain practical experience in the designated areas of specialisation. In fact, given the practical nature of education, job training should be a part of the requirements for a degree; it would give the desirable hands-on touch to the proposed curriculum.

The graduates coming out of this open university would not aspire to become a government employee. They would be technically qualified and reasonably well endowed with the skill and knowledge of such subjects which enable them to seek employment in the private sector or directly proceed to set up their own

or her age, would be enabled to complete the course work, appear in the examinations, fulfil all other requirements at his/her convenience and get the degree.

It would be an 'open' university — the word open is very significant meaning that education is being made abundantly available to each and every interested individual. Through television broadcast, it should be possible to develop a system of distant education — further widening the scope of the open university. This is what Ho Chi Minh University is trying to do now. Why can't we do it as well?

One may even conceive of an open university where 100,000 or even more students are simultaneously attending to hundreds of different lectures through televised distant education techniques. This would not only obviate the need for very many class rooms, convenience of students and teachers, particularly part-time lecturers, would be met; repeat lectures, for those who need will be possible and learning by doing simultaneously at home or in the laboratories set up for the purpose will impart the required practical orientation to the innovative tele-learning process. Thus the open university will also be the national centre for distant learning.

Best Part

The best part of the proposed system is the moderate cost of education. Suppose the fee is Tk 750 per semester course and an initial, once-for-all registration fee is charged, then an average of four courses per student and the total student population at 100,000 would yield an annual tuition income of around Taka one billion. This would be adequate for a self financing open uni-

versity and if financial assistance is available, particularly from the various chambers of commerce and industry as well as other internal sources then a fairly large scholarship programme can also be instituted for the deserving students. External assistance on the other hand may be sought as capital grant for acquisition of the essential hardware, computers and television equipment, in particular.

The Universities of the country have now become the battle grounds for gangland warfare. The political parties use the students for their own ends. The universities are now meant for everything other than studies. The standards have gone down and the degrees are hardly worth anything. No doubt there are few bright students, but the overall deterioration has utterly ruined the system of higher education in the country.

In the midst of this disaster, the open university will be a bold new beginning — an innovative departure from the path of decay being pursued by the established institutions. The projected number of 100,000 students at the proposed open university would also give rise to a vital influence in favour of learning and a growing aspiration for education which has now being effectively throttled by the interested quarters whose children can afford to fly abroad, secure an expensive education. Thereafter, few of them return home and the country is denied of the benefits from that expensive education.

This is the proposal for expanding education on a broad-front. The days of setting up of traditional universities do not exist any longer since they only add to the battlegrounds for gangland warfare. As a former student of Dhaka University, I can only shed tears at the cruel fate of a great institution of learning. I do not know if those old days of glory would ever return. But we cannot wait any longer for the rest of the world to pass by. The open university as the new initiative must not be delayed any longer.

Acting Now to Shake 'The New African Problem'

Jason Lothian writes from Accra

THE killing of street-children does not happen in Africa as it does in Latin America — yet. The grim warning comes from Patrick Shanahan, a priest working with street kids in Accra.

"This is the new African problem," he says. "It's not just here, it's everywhere. But I think that Ghana has the opportunity to say to West Africa and the rest of the continent: 'Look, we can take this thing by the throat and shake it.'"

Nat Nuno-Amarteifio, Metropolitan Chief Executive of Accra, agrees: "We have to come up with a solution before these kids become street gangs. They are not feral, yet. These kids will stand in the street selling a bag of peanuts. They still have fairly rural habits. They believe that they should earn their way. But what will happen if they become disillusioned?"

Accurate figures on street-children in Ghana are difficult to find, but Response, a Catholic Church organisation campaigning on the problem, estimates there might be 5,000 in Accra. It says that the figure might reach 20,000 within five years, as the provision of jobs and school places falls behind the growth of urban populations.

In the city of Kumasi, workers for the non-government

organisation Youth for Population Information and Communication will not hazard a guess about the number of youths on the city's streets. Eventually the figure of 5,000 wanders into their discussion. The

Living off the street



problem is not confined to the biggest cities; children in small towns can be found on the streets trying to make a living or supplementing their family income.

Both Nuno-Amarteifio and

Response coordinator Shanahan say that in Latin America the problem is far more serious. Shanahan points out that Ghana has an advantage — the children are not yet cynical: "Here there is still hope, these kids can still aspire to something. They might not ever come to work behind my desk but they believe 'I sell enough shirts on the street I might be able to get my own little store.' And that attitude is protecting us all."

In response to the growing problem of street children in Ghana the Accra office of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is for the first time undertaking activities in the cities. Previously it worked exclusively in the countryside.

According to a UNICEF survey, 75 per cent of the street children are merely "no" the street. That means in the evening they go home to their family where they contribute some or all of their daily earnings.

But as a group they are behind in school, and are at risk of dropping out and becoming children "in" the street, living, sleeping and working there. Many of those "in" the street are youngsters who have migrated from their village.

People dealing with the issue say that the biggest problem is Ghanaian's lack of experience in dealing with street-children.

Taking care of the children without a family, points out Nuno-Amarteifio, is an idea foreign to West Africa.

"Our families are still well extended, with grandfathers, grandmothers, fathers, mothers, cousins etcetera all looking out for one another. But the extension is creaking," he says. "We have to find a solution."

He and Shanahan are optimistic about the future of street-children in Ghana for two reasons. Firstly, because local administrators have paid attention to the lessons of Latin America and admit that

there is a problem. Secondly, the situation here is still manageable.

In Accra that means finding places for the children to stay and trying to help with their education. In Jamestown, a poor community near the Accra harbour, there is a shelter in which street kids can store their belongings, shower and take an occasional English or maths class.

It has been in operation only since November 1993. In February, a night refuge for girls was set up. But the problem is too big to be accommodated by one or two buildings, and the city is trying to find more.

Says Nuno-Amarteifio: "If these kids start establishing territory and fighting for it, drugs — I mean more drugs than we have now — will follow. Prostitution, again, more than we have now. Crime, of course. Then we'll have a problem. Now, it's still manageable."

JASON LOTHIAN is a Canadian journalist currently living in Ghana.

OPINION

Opposition Movement

We the common people and the ordinary citizens of the country want democratic governments, and democratic values and practices to institutionalise democracy as a way of life. We cherish transparency and accountability in the governance. We want judiciary to be above question, and that the credibility of Election Commission is not questioned. We also desire to have political stability and a country free from man-made chaos and confusion, indiscipline, frequent hartals and strikes paralysing normal functioning of life so that we may live in peace, work in peace, encourage domestic and foreign investment in order that we may achieve a faster economic growth and development and succeed in poverty alleviation through increase in uninterrupted production, employment generation, increase in income and social welfare services. We as a nation should be in a hurry and can hardly afford any chaos and instability which adversely affect our development efforts. When we see the progress of the neighbouring countries we feel ashamed of the slow growth of our own economy as well as of democratic institutions.

It is very sad that the opposition parties led by the Awami League have been engaged in disruptive activities seriously jeopardising development efforts, peace and order of the country. It appears that the major opposition party, the AL, is bent upon destabilising the government. The opposition parties perhaps think they can topple the government by creating crisis in the country and come to power. But their strategy is not fair. They are looking for issues, right or

Mahmudur Rahman wrong, to fight the government. Having failed in getting a genuine issue of national importance, the opposition in their desperate attempt at securing one, has finally chosen a non-issue, viz., caretaker government. It is ridiculous to ask for a caretaker government in order to ensure free and fair elections when there is already a duly elected national democratic government in the country with a mandate to run the country for the specified term in all its affairs, taking care of not only the management of elections through the Election Commission but also other vital affairs of the state including Defence, Foreign Affairs, Home Affairs and Judiciary.

As a conscious, impartial, ordinary citizen having no political affiliation whatsoever, it appears to me that the Awami League thinks that it is its 'sacred' responsibility to oppose the government, not agree or cooperate with it irrespective of whether or not the issue is right. This attitude is harmful for the people. It is unbecoming of a national leader, the Awami League chief, to view her role as one of opposing only. If she aspires to become the Head of the Government some day (in the distant future), she should give up her apparent habit of agitation and become used to thinking positive, constructive and cooperative. The people have had enough, rather more than their share, of agitation and they should now be given time to work for themselves and for the country.

It is ridiculous that the opposition MPs have chosen to boycott the Parliament and pre-

ferred to take to streets. We cannot understand why the political parties having their representation in the Parliament through their MPs should at all take resort to streets for protesting against or demanding something. Parties which do not have any representation in the Parliament may understandably go to streets. Is it so that there are some habitual agitators who do not feel at home in the Parliament and are more comfortable on the streets because they have been used to the streets for a long time?

We do not know exactly what happened in Magura in the bye-election. If there was any major irregularity committed by the ruling party, then this isolated incident cannot be construed as an instance of general ineffectiveness and lack of credibility of the Election Commission. It is unfair for the Awami League or other opposition parties to capitalise on the Magura event and try to create an unstable condition in the country which is extremely hungry for peace and order in all spheres of life for socio-economic development of the people. It will be an act of positive disservice to the common people to create crisis and convert small local problems into big national issues. However, if deemed necessary, appropriate legislative and administrative measures may be taken to further empower the Election Commission so that it can perform its functions smoothly and effectively, and withstand any undesirable pressure from the Executive organ of the Government. The Parliament may initiate proposal for legislative steps in this regard.

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.

Promotion scandal

Sir, Promotion scandal that was committed by the council committee reportedly by taking advantage of the innocence of the honourable Prime Minister in 1992 has been declared unlawful by the High Court. I would like to salute the High Court for their bold, fair and impartial judgement which has earned appreciation from all right thinking people.

Court is the last resort for people who are the victims of the tyranny of the executive branch of the government. From the judgement of the High Court it is clear that our national conscience is not yet dead completely. Truth has triumphed in the long run. This will go a long way in restoring public confidence in our judiciary.

Anwara Begum
Dhaka

Woe of a city dweller

Sir, I am so eager to express my sorrow and anxiety through your esteemed daily in order to get rid of a very pertinent problem — which I have been facing for a long time and may even last for ever if remains unresolved. I have now

decided, as a last resort, to convey my appeal through this medium to those authorities who are at the helm of affairs, to kindly look into the problem and solve it for the sake of justice.

There is a marked spree in building construction everywhere in the city. This is a good sign which may solve the growing housing problem to an extent. But it is also marked that seldom a constructor/owner leaves any breathing space around, rather covers the whole plot area under plinth area. This is not a healthy sign and is illegal as such — which only causes inconvenience instead of envisaged relief.

I am a victim of such irrational act. My next door neighbours have been engaged in construction of a multistoreyed building, for a pretty long time, on their plot of land covering the entire portion of the land, leaving no space even to pass air.

Whether the construction was made according to any approved plan from Rajuk, but it is surely in violation of other house building rules and regulations. It looks like, as if, there is no rule of law existing

Fatema Khatoun
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Pro-people politics needed

Sir, Thanks a lot for your 'Commentary' published in your esteemed daily on the 1st Dec '94. Both of our main leaders, of the opposition and the ruling party, have the effective weapon to achieve popularity by using their vulnerable statements and promises.

We, the helpless citizens, still don't understand their motive. They just want power, not development, and do not bother to go to any extreme for gaining that. We still don't realise why we are in the middle of a cross-fire initiated by our political leaders. So, this is the time to stage our protests against their wrongdoings.

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