

DMP's New Thrust

For understandable reasons expectations from the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) are high. But so far there remains a huge gap between the expectations of the city populace and the service rendered by the law enforcing agency. Perhaps the DMP itself is not too complacent to claim that it has proved equal to the task. Rather it seems to be well aware of its limitations. So it envisages a reorganisation plan for itself whose salient features appeared in our newspaper recently. By doing so, the DMP is taking cognizance of its deficiencies and trying to do something about these. Thus the citizenry may take heart.

However, many people are not likely to take notice of this new move to reorganise the DMP if it does not get a wider focus. So, the authorities need to go far beyond the expression of an intent for reform. The measures it has thought of should be placed for public scrutiny and endorsement. We are not questioning the merits of the plan, nor the wisdom of those responsible for devising it.

What however, we can reasonably ask for is informed public debate on the details of the plan. Since the plan has not come through the Jatiya Sangsad and 25 of the targets set for improvement will require government approval, let the whole thing be placed for thorough public discussion before it is implemented. Even assuming that the authority concerned did the required homework before formulating the scheme. It would still be better if the DMP met citizens' groups to have first-hand reports on the problems facing the public. We are not suggesting endless discussions but a workable interaction based on mutual respect for a reflection of the civic viewpoints.

After all, the measures aimed at improving the law enforcers' service, are meant for the citizens of the metropolis. Naturally, they should have a big say in this matter. The DMP's emphasis seems to be on strengthening the thanas and control rooms with senior officers along with the creation of a few more police stations. Consultations with people may help bring out the right choice: whether Dhaka needs a close street vigilance by the police like the one in Japanese cities or a police force of the order of London.

Exit from BiHac

The United Nations' peacekeeping mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina is in disarray. Bangladeshi troops deployed in some pockets were the worst sufferers, even though the news comes now that they are being evacuated. As the Serb forces have been violating one after another UN resolutions and agreements with the Bosnian government and the international body, it is the UN that is yielding to the pressure. Much as we may wonder at the Serbian brow-beating that has been too strong for the UN, we naturally felt concerned about the safety of our troops there.

At last the UN has started withdrawing the trapped Bangladeshi troops from besieged Bihać. An agreement has been struck with the Serbs for their safe passage through Serb-held territories. But there is confusion about the number of troops being withdrawn. One source put the number at 400. There is no mention about the fate of the rest 800 troops. We are sure this would be sorted out. It is particularly important to know the answer to this question though, at a time, when most of the Western powers are keen to pull their contingents out of Bosnia.

The unenviable location of Bangladeshi troops' deployment — and that too almost unarmed — was something that could not help raise a few questions. About 1200 of our troops were put at risk in the face of Serbian offensive towards Bihać. Their supply lines cut off, the Bangladeshi troops had to make do with whatever they had and could manage in such a trying situation. The death of a Bangladeshi soldier was reportedly caused by illness. We do not know if the man's death could be averted with better medicare or not. These experiences should serve us well in other peace-keeping operations of which we are parts.

Given all kinds of contingencies that the UN peace-keeping operations in the hot-spots of the globe have faced today it should be possible to improve upon the preparedness status of the troops ahead. What is needed for this is a perfected forward planning, if necessary in prior consultation with the warring or bellicose parties.

Van Gogh Discovery

The artist who was able to sell just one of his paintings in his lifetime, is having his revenge exacted on the whole world. Indeed a dead Van Gogh is proving irresistibly stronger than Van Gogh alive. In life he had known almost all kinds of disappointments and agonies — both personal and creative. Apart from his abiding love for art and the continual inspiration and support he received from his brother Theo, the whole world was against him. An intensely passionate man and a non-pareil artist, Van Gogh could easily be misunderstood by all around him. Not surprisingly, he had to demonstrate the sincerity of his love for the prostitute-beloved by severing his own ear.

Irony of ironies, the artist apparently is/ no more misunderstood. It is his works that are most sought after in the world now. Collectors the world over are ready to part with quite a handsome fortune for the possession of any painting done by Vincent. And in the process Van Gogh's records have of late been broken by Van Gogh himself. First it was Sunflower, then Iris; both beat all-time prices for a single work of art. The first went on auction for about 40 million dollar and the second for anything in the region of 53 million dollar. Still more staggering a sum — 82.5 million dollar to be precise — was the selling price of 'Portrait of Dr Gachet' at art dealer, Christie's auction in 1990.

Now comes the news of a chance discovery of a Van Gogh work in a French flea market. Any find of an artist enjoying so much demand is bound to open the floodgates of both commercial and artistic interests. The new find, an oil, called 'Still Life (Vase with Flowers)' is without varnish and a frame. This, instead of lessening its value, is likely to add commercial lustre to the painting. After all it's a crazy world of art and the money paid for a piece is hardly a measure of the art value. The payment of huge sums for art works is more of an ego satisfaction than a judgement on their intrinsic values. So we won't be surprised if the latest discovery of Van Gogh also becomes a record breaker.

DEAD men tell no tales. They need not if they leave behind vast unaccountable wealth. Assets of some Rs 300 crore in the shape of houses, jewellery and cash have been traced to the late Punjab governor Surennder Nath, once a police officer. The public is horrified over the disclosure. And an editor of a leading Hindi daily from Jalindhar has dared the government by publishing the details in a signed piece.

But since corruption does not bother or embarrass Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, there is not even a cursory curiosity in the Government of India. Punjab chief minister Beant Singh is far less concerned because his own government is already an object for a degree of contempt and ridicule. Instances of ministerial corruption are strewn all over the state. He probably fears that they might become public if any probe into the late governor's assets is conducted.

It was a cover of sorts when Beant Singh constituted overnight a trust under his chairmanship to oversee the assets. Is there a trust deed? What is its purpose? These questions remain unanswered. But they are not so inconvenient as are the ones on the source of the late governor's wealth. Different people have different versions.

One version is that part of the wealth was accumulated by pilfering money the Centre gave Surennder Nath to purchase informers from among the militants. Another is that the cash of nearly Rs 30 crore, recovered from his room, belonged to RAW. Yet another is that he was a downright dishonest officer, who was not discovered during his lifetime.

PLATO'S Greece was not democratic in the context of today but the democracy of Greek city states of the time was perhaps the best that the civilized society could think of. His philosopher-king was the ideal ruler with the wisdom of the thinking man and munificence of the sceptre. The democratic leader of today has to assure 'people's right to choose'. The leader has power, therefore he/she has to exercise restraint; the leader has authority, therefore he has to be accountable to the electorate; the leader carries the burden of ensuring maximum good to the maximum people, therefore, he has to be transparent. When Magna Carta fumbled to restrain royal prerogative to tax the subjects, the people's representatives rose in a body to ensure their rights. The Westminster democracy struck roots. People's Majesty is meaningful only if the governance is buttressed by an underpinning of something called moral. Didn't Santayana say 'being an American is, of itself, almost a moral condition'. And this awareness in the ruler's mind is an 'a priori' condition for creating the culture of tolerance and mutual respect.

The flush of democratic resurgence following the 91 election, largely based on the tripartite accord, soon degenerated into a partisan clan which witnessed bureaucratic politicisation in the governance of the country. Even senior bureaucrats were expected to toe a particular line. Any independent thought or idea was an anathema. The result is obvious. Along with the political ossification came the administrative arteriosclerosis. Creativity and innovativeness was the first victim. Any independent thinking even in the government party itself invites sharp retribution.

The near total failure of the government to run the country is the result. There are many must thinking people in the government. But do they have any role? We must remember that dissenting voice is the heart of democracy. Look at the functioning of committee 1922 in the House of Commons and the franchitator in Italian Montecitorio or American Congress. They are noisome and irritating but they make a functioning democracy stronger — not weaker.

Student cadre of the ruling party is obviously an additional force in the context of BNP sephology. The Prime Minister in her address at Shapla Chattar on November 28 made the classical mistake of asking the students to put politics before education in their order of priority. Are we surprised therefore that about 100,000 Bangladesh students go to India for higher education? Ayub Khan threatened 'language of weapons' to combat the autonomy movement in the sixties! But I'm confident that the PM did not mean that in her exhortation.

Not long ago it was said, 'what Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow; alas it is history. It is a very sad day indeed for the student community of this land. The students, the leaders of tomorrow, would do well to listen to the footsteps of history through study, through inculcation of their soul and spirit in learning.

I am nevertheless disturbed. It is not a flash in the pan. There is a pattern in the

Private banks

Sir, It has come to light in the media that the government has accorded approval to the functioning of seven more banks in the private sector. This obviously goes to show that in view of increasing range of economic activities in the country, the authorities have found it necessary to encourage more banks to be floated. Owing to the debacle of the BCCI in Bangladesh in July 1991 the government had taken commendable steps to restore the said bank although in a new nomenclature viz. Eastern Bank Limited, from August, 92.

But before the closure of BCCI, the Islamic Cooperative Commercial Bank Limited also stopped functioning. Another bank by the name Bangladesh Commerce and Investment Limited ceased functioning almost the same time. Thousands of depositors of these two banks are suffering a lot due to non-functioning of these and are eagerly awaiting government steps for the reopening of these banks. These two banks are, however, national banks and would require not so much efforts as was required for the reopening of the BCCI which was an international bank. When the depositors of these two banks are eagerly awaiting reopening of these banks, government decision came for the opening of new banks in the private sector. The opening of these

new banks, however, will be of little help to solve the problems of depositors of these two banks.

It is known to all concerned that government grants permission to the establishment of new banks, insurance companies and other financial institutions after a substantial amount is kept as security deposit in the Bangladesh Bank by the sponsors of such institutions. Therefore, it seems easy for the government to catch hold of the management of such institutions to account for their action when they render the institutions into bankruptcy.

It is a matter of great misfortune that instead of taking stringent steps against the management of these banks and compelling them to restore functioning, the government has preferred to remain silent for years together and then thought it wise to grant fresh permission for opening new banks.

The democratic government now in office cannot shirk its duty and responsibility for the defaulting management of these banks. They have not taken necessary steps worth the while although the Ministry of Finance and the Bangladesh Bank have specific roles to play and compel the management of these banks so that they may reopen without any more delay.
Abdur Rahman
Motijheel C/A, Dhaka

Corruption by Yards

The reason why there is no protest except the mute one is the nightmare through which people have gone for more than a decade. They suffered militancy out of fear of the gun. They are suffering the Beant Singh government out of fear of old days returning.

Presuming all these stories are wrong, then what is the truth? The surprising part is that the government has not cared to say anything. There has been no inquiry, formal or informal, either by the Centre or the state. The way the whole thing is sought to be hushed up gives credence to the belief that what has come to light is only a tip of the iceberg.

Since the Beant Singh government does not enjoy good reputation, its explanation will carry no conviction. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), despite its battered image, is still the only body which can be trusted to find the source of Surennder Nath's assets and how he went about building them up. As the law is, the CBI cannot inquire suo moto, nor on orders of the home ministry. The request has to come from the Beant Singh government.

As of today, there is no likelihood that Beant Singh will do so because the state administration reeks with corruption. Many people at high places are amassing wealth openly. Small wonder, a new phrase has been coined to describe their graft: 'Corruption by yards'. In fact, people have begun to compare the militants' extortions with the corruption of ministers and others. Police is coming for special mention because most in the force have become conspicuously rich.

And it is an open secret that superintendent of police has greater pull in a district than deputy commissioner. It is the force that counts, not the law or rules and regulations. There is something in the jokemaking rounds in Punjab that Director General of Police K P S Gill is in-charge of law and order, while the chief minister looks after public relations. It appears as if police or those who are using rough and ready methods to administer have developed a vested

old chaotic self. Houses built upon houses continue to reflect the kinship the Hindus and Sikhs have. Old bazaars are full of people with money to burn and shops, selling a bewildering array of goods. The Golden Temple stands high, peering benevolently down on the historic city.

Most of the credit for normalcy goes to farmers, labourers and the landless, who ultimately raised their voice — and sticks — against militants and their misdeeds. The police

force has done a tremendous job. But the people in the countryside are the ones who took the risk in informing the authorities the whereabouts of militants, who were found committing heinous crimes. The ideological content of militancy, which deluded the Sikh community for some time, was tossed out when the first bus was stopped near Amritsar to kill the Hindu passengers after segregating them from their Sikh co-travellers.

Gill's observation that the state is not fully out of militancy is correct to the extent that the government seems unwilling to end it completely. The purpose of the Congress-led Centre is to encash the fear of Hindu voters, who constitute 40 per cent of Punjab's population. Militants want to surrender en bloc before a human rights organisation. Someone on their behalf met me nearly six months ago. I personally conveyed the offer to Home Minister S B Chavan, Minister of State for Home Affairs Rajesh Pilot and Beant Singh. I had the message conveyed to Gill also. But there has been no response.

Is there light at the end of the tunnel? Akali leader Prakash Singh Badal is beginning to evoke hope. He is attracting attention among the Sikhs. The Hindus, by and large, are still wary. They have not yet got over the feeling that he had let them down. They welcome his new role, a harbinger of Hindu-Sikh unity. But the memory that he did not criticise the militants and that he even attended the bhog (last rites) of the dead among them has not been erased yet. They want to wait for some more time before they support him wholeheartedly, as they did some years back. Badal is on the right track.

The growing support to Badal should be an eye-opener for the Akali Dal that Gurcharan Singh Tohra leads. The thesis of separation has no support in the country, not even among the majority of the Sikhs. The Tohra people should have known it by this

time from their own experience. Still they adopted at Amritsar earlier this year a resolution that smacks of separatism. The group will make no headway if it follows the same line.

In fact, the Akalis have made a fetish of Sikh identity. It is there and nobody can take it from the community. In a pluralistic society, all communities have an identity of their own and together they constitute what is known as Indian culture. The contribution by Guru Nanak Dev and the ten gurus is substantial. Of the 1,300 people massacred at Jallianwala Bagh, 799 were Sikhs. The British sent 2,600 to the Andaman jail, of them 2,400 were Sikhs. And out of the 2,648 Indians sentenced to life imprisonment, 2,147 were Sikhs.

Their contribution before and after independence has been immense. But they have reasons to feel aggrieved when they find that those who killed nearly 4,000 Sikhs in Delhi and elsewhere in 1984 have remained still unpunished. Many committees and commissions have named some perpetrators of the crime without any result.

A few officials mentioned in the reports have even got promotion. For example, Brijendra, then district magistrate of Kanpur, who was indicted by the Ranganath Mishra Commission, now occupies in Lucknow a position equivalent to the chief secretary. Such instances, unfortunately, indicate how politicians have got the better of justice. They rightly irritate the Sikhs. But the fault is that of the government, not the country. The Sikhs confuse that both are the same.

TRIVIALIZATION

Some where Along the Way, the Nation Seems to have Lost its Direction

by Waliur Rahman

The Prime Minister in her address at Shapla Chattar on November 28 made the classical mistake of asking the students to put politics before education in their order of priority. Are we surprised therefore that about 100,000 Bangladesh students go to India for higher education?

happening of the trivia. The Prime Minister's address in New York in October 1993, for example, it was a diplomatic disaster of Himalayan proportion. This nation looked smaller. While, the issue of Farakka was not even put on the agenda, we were told through controlled media that Bangladesh had dared India to sit with us for ensuring equitable share of the Ganges water. The entire nation is behind the Government for getting the legitimate share of the water. We got it once and with proper diplomacy and commitment we can do it again. But this was trite even as a propaganda! She would have done better if she had raised the water issue during her visit to Delhi in 1992. The Prime Minister goes to Maldives in November 22 and she asks her host, President Gayoom, to intercede with India for appointment of the Ganges waters! Diplomacy is now standing on its head! The host president must have been terribly embarrassed. Bangladesh receives two votes for its much touted candidacy for DG, FAO. By obtaining two votes Bangladesh went down in the Guinness Book of Records. In the ITU (International Telecommunications Union) election in Tokyo, Bangladesh repeats FAO performance by obtaining 2 votes, for the post of ADG! Most recently another record was created by Bangladesh in the ECOSOC election in New York.

What has happened today? Are we reaping in international fora, the bitter harvest of political misfeasance and bureaucratic malfeasance at home? Somewhere along the way, the nation seems to have lost its direction: political and

Bangladesh received 13 votes — the lowest in the tally — even the micro state of Fiji, we are told, polled higher votes than Bangladesh. Bangladesh which had never lost any major election is almost marginalized in the international fora. Bangladesh created history by getting elected to all UN agencies in Geneva, Rome and Vienna against the stiff opposition of powerful countries from 1972-74. We successfully took on friendly Japan in 1978 for election to the Security Council. We were chairman of G-77, President of CPC, Chairman of CFA. As late as 1991 we defeated brotherly Malaysia through straight fight in the FAO council in Rome.

What has happened today? Are we reaping in international fora, the bitter harvest of political misfeasance and bureaucratic malfeasance at home? Somewhere along the way, the nation seems to have lost its direction: political and

moral. The bloodletting of 1975 perhaps left the country in thrall. The misfeasance was in place. The spirit of the glorious struggle of liberation was evanescent. The politics of convenience thus replaced the politics of commitment. The referendum of 1978 left a deep scar on nation's psyche. Bureaucratic resilience showed extraordinary creativity. In the yes/no referendum carefully staged in 1978, votes in favour of the President was 98.9% out of votes cast 88.5%; democracy suffered — the spirit of DEMOS was pushed backward. Then comes Magura where the chief election commissioner literally beat a retreat to allow 'democracy' to play itself out! This is followed by Rowshan Ali's Jessore. The executive fiat was so unconscionable that the 'respected' but embattled judiciary had to declare it null and void! And the High Court de-

clared Government decision on mass promotion of Joint Secretaries in 1992 as illegal. Never in the history of any self-respecting country has the administration suffered such humiliation and disgrace. Macroeconomic stability notwithstanding, the economy is in a state of asphyxiation. The impressive building up of foreign exchange reserve has become almost an economic albatross rather than a vehicle in infusing economic dynamism as investment capital. Our export is declining. And foreign investment is paltry. Unless the senior ruling party ministers strike the tent of medicine show, they will risk being permanently labelled as BNP's snake-oil salesmen.

But some government leaders have earned nation's gratitude by showing vision and courage. House speaker Honorable Sheikh Razaque Ali is one. In his article in the Parliamentarian, he said, "Feudal and somewhat autocratic mentality of the executive and persons in power do not want Parliament secretary to work independently."

Political bankruptcy at home and diplomatic inertia abroad have together caused the quagmire of Bangladesh political persona. The agenda of our national priority stands trivialized... The time for serious dialogue is here.

The writer till recently was Bangladesh Ambassador to Italy.

OPINION

The Government: Democratic Contradictions

Aref Choudhury

In the 20th century, a nation can be defined as a healthy democratic state if it satisfies some fundamental criteria which are to name a few, the following: respect for individual rights, established representative institutions, responsible and limited government and, most importantly, the art of compromise and gradual change. The present government has been unable to satisfy these criteria and on citing some incidents of the past three and a half years, I am confident that most people will agree with my views.

The citizen has certain inalienable rights and among these is the right to liberty. The most important liberty, however, is the freedom of thought. Unfortunately, this freedom is of little value when the common man has little knowledge to base his thoughts on. This is the case in Bangladesh where the standard of living is low and a good education can only be obtained by the wealthy. The present government boasts that it is providing education to more people than any other government of the past. Providing education to more people is not necessarily an indication of development when the quality of education is so inferior that the recipients cannot make adequate use of the little knowledge given to them. Freedom of thought is, therefore, not a very valuable principle for those who have not learned to think. The government is thus divesting the majority of their most important liberty.

Another fundamental right of a citizen is the right of franchise. The government or the ruling party has been alleged to have considerably ignored this right in the by-elections of Magura, Mirpur and Bhola. The opposition blame it of wide

scale vote rigging. Well assuming this one may ask can a government which denies the people to vote freely claim that it is a truly representative institution? By-election results are important indicators of the popularity of a government because they reveal the drift of opinion among voters.

Nowadays whenever one opens the newspaper, he or she notices the increased number of crimes throughout the country, ghastly stories of how innocent students are being killed in educational institutions, strikes by various organizations and professional groups such as the recent doctors' strike, and rising prices of essential commodities. It amounts to the government's irresponsibility — not maintaining law and order, not ensuring medical care when a patient goes to the hospital, and not taking measures to control prices of essential goods that are required for the survival of most people in Bangladesh.

The BNP government is in no way 'limited'. It has shown its unlimited power by making over 600 government promotions which have recently been declared as illegal (unconstitutional). Further, on November 28, last, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia stated at a rally of Jatiyatabad Chhatra Dal (JCD) that JCD students were capable of taking care of the destructive forces of society, in reference to the Opposition. What did the PM mean by this statement? Did she mean that JCD students should resort to violence so as to subdue the demands of the Opposition? An issue which has been at the centre of national politics for the past nine months is the boycotting of the Parliament by the Opposition. This has occurred because of the govern-

ment's refusal to accept the demand for a neutral caretaker government. Demand is not an unreasonable one, rather it's one that may be of benefit to the nation as a whole, especially in light of the alleged vote-rigging in the recent by-elections. In the recent dialogue, the government gave many proposals but all with a common feature that Khaleda Zia will be the Prime Minister of the interim government. One can then logically ask, why does she want to hang on to that chair so desperately?

The government's argument is that it wants to settle its differences with the Opposition within the framework of the constitution. But the fundamentals of the constitution change with the changes in human society — its purpose is to serve and safeguard the interest of the people. If late president Ziaur Rahman could incorporate the Fifth Amendment into the constitution which grants immunity to the killers of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family, and the killers of the four leaders in jail why cannot Prime Minister Khaleda Zia amend the constitution to incorporate a neutral caretaker government for the overall benefit of the people. The Fifth Amendment is a black spot in the constitutional history of Bangladesh — there is no constitutional provision anywhere else in the world which legalises killing.

We can see that the BNP government has not learnt the art of accommodation and compromise which are essential for a democratic government. However, the ruling party should try to recollect how the autocratic regime of Ershad was overthrown for, as Santayana warned us, "those who do not remember the past are doomed to repeat it."