

Tragic Quake

Japan's perennial killer quake has once again hit that country. Belying predictions that rather than Tokyo to be the likely target, the quake measured at 7.2 on the Richter scale, has wrought death and devastation of a holocaust proportion in central Japan.

With each passing hour, more and more deaths are being reported. By the time of writing this editorial more than 2,000 deaths have been reported and about 13,000 are missing.

On that count, the most efficient of the people to cope with the post-quake situation may be taking some outside help to give friends a share in the good work.

It has always been a one-way traffic from this friendly people of Japan who have stood by us through thick and thin. We will feel only happy to be of some help particularly in the area of medicare and engineering assistance.

What News Double-Murder?

Whatever has happened to Romena? Or the five teenagers confessing to the murder of an SSC examinee friend? On October 2 Professor Nilufar Choudhury and her daughter Mahjabeen Shoma were murdered.

But the nation would not leave the two as easily. The apparent police inaction — nothing has happened in three months about these nation-shaking crimes — has set the most reasonable of minds to think that something was wrong with the investigating and arraigning authority.

Honour at Seventy

Kalim Sharafi was felicitated for his services to our culture in a function held on Tuesday. It is a testament to his renown, based so well on achievements both in art and activism that his name does not need an appendage for precise identity.

But he has been a singer par excellence all his life to most of us and more than anything else. How many can recall him as a successful director of film music or maker of very fine short films or organiser of very pioneering cultural groups?

He is a living legend. Some may feel that his cringing from personal publicity and shying away of public performances have contributed helpfully to the legend making. Not so. He never had been a recluse and, contrarily, he always had been among the multitude — everyone's Kalim Bhai.

We are grateful to the organisers of the honour done to Kalim but for whose initiative celebration would have come to him only after his death — as is the rule in Bangladesh for cultural greats.

Brewing Constitutional Crisis: Political Decision Key to Solution

by Shah Husain Imam

There has to be a political decision at the earliest to ride out of what has already become a constitutional tangle on top of a political impasse we have so long described it to be.

THE man in focus, Speaker Shaikh Razaque Ali, is said to be keeping handy an ad interim text of a ruling on the resignation en masse of the Opposition members of Parliament. This is certain to be a techno-legal formulation he would only be compelled to deliver if the leeway he has given to the political parties to strike a compromise fails to be productive.

Meanwhile, as the Speaker takes his time, the atmosphere gets rife with speculations. The latest one is that he might be waiting for a verdict of the High Court Bench, which has just taken up hearing of a writ petition that challenges the validity of the opposition resignation to make up his mind.

Just for the records, the Supreme Court has stayed the operation of a verdict an HC Division Bench had delivered whereby the Parliamentary boycott of the Opposition members were declared 'unconstitutional' and they were required to attend an impending parliament session.

The fact of the matter is that the opposition have resigned their parliament mem-

berships in exercise of a Constitutional right. And the Speaker is fully empowered to dispose of the resignation letters based on their basically technical merit. So, the Speaker's ruling does not have to be dependent per se on court verdict, expect where a judicial review was specifically sought on a constitutional point.

Thus there has to be a political decision at the earliest to ride out of what has already become a constitutional tangle on top of a political impasse we have so long described it to be.

This is where the last hurdle really lies at this juncture.

The political decision we have in mind will have positive bearing on the following remaining points at issue. The first one obviously relates to the Speaker's much-awaited disposal of the resignation letters without further ado.

Secondly, the opposition wants the present parliament to pass the amendment needed to enable the President to assume the caretaker role in place of the Prime Minister while the ruling party being a stickler

for an unchanged constitution, takes the view that whatever arrangement they agree to now should have to be ratified by the next parliament. If the measure is passed through a resolution of the parliament, as it is most probably going to be, it could as well be deemed to be a final step taken. Why keep this hanging for the future when this can now be done in one go?

Thirdly, it is a question of making a fool-proof apolitical choice of the party nominees to the interim government who shall not take part in the elections.

For the opposition it is an en masse resignation alright, but for the Speaker, it is very much a case-by-case obligation he has to fulfil in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Constitution and the Rules of Procedure of the Jatiya Sangsad. He is learnt to have made his painstaking scrutiny.

Supposing he declares some resignation letters to be invalid on technical grounds this is likely to somewhat dilute the wholesale nature of the opposition resignation, although its en bloc character will not be entirely compromised.

The Speaker is likely to make such a declaration iron-clad, legally speaking, so that a fresh constitutional crisis does

not crop up to complicate matters. This is where our emphasis would consistently be for, an issue on which we had chosen from the very beginning not to go for eliciting public opinion nor seek a judicial review, better be resolved at the Speaker's level to avoid re-opening the entire question which is bound to be still more time-consuming.

The Speaker is widely expected to be duly respectful of the sensibilities the members of parliament, who have resigned, must have about being called upon even for the formality's sake, to withdraw their resignation letters. So, the Speaker's ruling has to be deferential to this aspect of the quitting members' prestige. This is a delicate balancing act, which Shaikh Abdur Razaque, we believe, has the right credentials to perform.

The Speaker's approach has been unmistakably to save the present Parliament, even at some personal risk of inviting criticism that he has dithered on the resignation issue. He has been emboldened to take this line, not quite unsurprisingly in the knowledge that a sizable under-current of support exists in favour of the continuity of the present House.

If the present Parliament is

allowed to run its full term, the whole series of time-bound constitutional steps that need to be hurried through in the alternative scenario can be averted. Besides, importantly, we shall be in a position to complete the tasks concerning the strengthening of the Election Commission, the issuance of the ID cards and the putting in place of an adequate arrangement for implementing a code of conduct after this is formulated as part of the deal. The aforementioned steps are vital to make the election process free and fair, beginning with the campaign phase through the polling to the tabulation and announcement of the results.

Even a well-structured caretaker government will be left high and dry without these operative underpinnings added to the electoral system.

As for the selection of nominees by each party to the interim government its apolitical nature will be naturally ensured if we pick up non-MPs having no electoral ambitions.

This is a point which is corollary to the main understanding that was forged for the top-most echelon of the neutral administration. We take it that non-partisan and interim elements would be one and the same thing after the broad consensus will have been

reached. Significantly, both sides are agreeable to the Prime Minister's relinquishment of her charge a month before the polls and that the person to head the interim government could be the President, going by AL chief Hasina's latest statement on the subject.

There has been some speculation lately that the parties might agree to nominate a mutually acceptable veteran member of parliament to head the caretaker government. For that matter, it could be any reputed senior citizen. Why we are not going for an interim stewardship of a judge, retired or in harness, we frankly do not know. Without giving instant credence to these speculations, we are well-advised to keep our fingers crossed on this million dollar question which is bound to tax all our political resources.

However, the fact of the matter is, so long as the Prime Minister resigns as the chief executive, well ahead of the polls, the neutrality of the administration which the opposition feels so passionate about is guaranteed for all practical purposes.

Let the Speaker's ruling over the opposition members' resignation be a mere formality following a political consensus.

At this stage of the revived negotiations, we want the tacticians to make room for less passionate negotiators to give the process a finishing touch.

CONSCIOUSLY or not, people generally associate political leadership with the fundamental question of stability of government of the political system, and indeed, of the society as a whole.

Examples abound when leadership with vision has brought more cohesion and purpose to the government, and made far reaching impact on the patterns of social and economic changes of a nation. Leaders like Nikrma, Serghor, Nyerere, Nehru, Kaunda, Sukarno, Unu were able to shape the destinies of their countries. Their personal traits and intellectual ability enabled them to establish a strong bond with the people, and develop a philosophy of governance.

In Bangladesh, political leadership has an added significance because people of this land love leaders and heroes and often rally in millions at times of crisis. Paradoxically the people of Bangladesh have also a tendency to oppose and denigrate their leaders. While a part of the responsibility goes to emotional nature of the people, failings of leadership and its inability to produce tangible results are the main reasons for such pattern of behaviour. Ziaur Rahman was an exceptional leader in this regard whom people endeared more after his death as his vision was equally matched by his performances. If Sheikh Mujib's charisma sparked the liberation of Bangladesh, Zia's statecraft gave meaning and substance to the nation-state.

Statesman and Nation-builder

Zia was not only a valiant freedom fighter, he was a skilful statesman. He wanted to make Bangladesh a cohesive modern state. The time and manner in which he had to assume power made a strong impact on his mind. He could identify sources of dissensions and threats to the new state. This enabled him to take appropriate steps in strengthening the institutional capacity of the state. His priorities were: (i) to create a strong and disciplined army, (ii) to make bureaucracy committed in order to implement his socio-economic programmes, and (iii)

to strengthen police and other auxiliary forces in order to enhance the state's capacity to bring order and discipline in the society. Zia's success in these spheres was achieved by his strong will, consummate skill and enormous vigour. Zia infused the military with new dignity by providing weapons, training, uniforms and other facilities previously lacking. He also streamlined the bureaucracy and took a number of measures to make them more responsive and effective.

Simultaneous with his programmes to build the edifice of a viable state, Zia evolved a concept of Bangladeshi nationalism. This was aimed at asserting rational identity of the people, achieving self-reliance in economic development, military preparedness against foreign aggression through total mobilization of people, and judicious use of nationalist symbols that could produce a sense of unity and political solidarity. Zia's efforts in this regard was directed towards the nation's survival as an independent and viable unit in South Asia by reducing dependence on any particular power bloc. Zia believed that mobilization of people behind nationalist slogan might act as a deterrent against potential external threat and motivate the people for nation-building tasks.

Precursor of Democratic Politics

Zia faced enormous dilemmas in making transition from military rule to democracy in Bangladesh. The first three years of his regime witnessed a military ruler's rather successful efforts of nation-building. His commitment for transition to democratic rule was unwavering, and he made it possible despite dissatisfaction and jostling for power within the military. Although Zia's style of leadership was not populist, he gave new substance to democracy by continually renewing his contacts with people at grassroots. Zia believed in hard work and power of positive

Enduring Legacy of Zia

by Prof Ataur Rahman



April 9, 1978: President Ziaur Rahman with Begum Khaleda Zia and then Foreign Minister Prof Shamsul Huq at Shanghai airport on way back from Japan.

Today (January 19) is late President Ziaur Rahman's anniversary of birth

thinking. He, in fact, made 'politics difficult' for Bangladesh's arm-chair politicians. Zia's untiring efforts in mobilizing the rural masses for success of development projects gave a new direction to politics. This earned him wider credibility to the people. As one western observer remarked, 'Zia probably saw more of Bangladesh in his travels than any previous leader including Fazlul Huq and Mujib'. Curiously enough, once he was back to the capital, he used to meet urban professional groups — teachers, journalists, lawyers — almost regularly to listen from them and exchange views and ideas on various national issues. He was less influenced by politicians in decision making, but kept them in touch and formalized decisions through party committees and the cabinet. His idea about democracy resembles more of a government for the people. Parties and elections were never treated as

'end in itself' but means' to achieve, effective governance and realization of national economic development.

For Economic Development and Social Uplift

Zia believed in the virtues of privatization and self-help. He was critical of the west for not providing adequate aid. He occasionally lashed out at what he called 'foreignism' but it never meant western aid donors who were very appreciative of Zia's open market system and privatization of industry and commerce. In fact, Zia invited the multinationals into Bangladesh on very favourable terms, gave written guarantees that there would be no new nationalization, and travelled widely through western and OPEC worlds in search of economic aid, and to establish trade links.

Zia's drive for economic development was also re-

flected in his enthusiasm for rural uplift. His extensive involvement in canal digging, earth-work for drainage of irrigation water, and in rural development projects showed his care and concern for rural populace. He gave a new sense of dynamism and direction in economic development and social uplift. Zia's purpose was to achieve long-term development gains in rural sector. The mobilization of rural people was, therefore, directed to create sound rural infrastructure for sustained agricultural development.

Zia made relentless efforts to remove illiteracy from the country by mass education programmes. He was an optimist of rare quality and worked with utmost devotion to implement his revolutionary literacy programme. He was the first leader who publicly exhorted the people to adopt family planning. He correctly identified the population explosion as the country's number one problem, and had he been alive, he would make a revolution against population boom.

Foreign Policy Strategist

One important arena where Ziaur Rahman made his most indelible mark was foreign and security policy. In order to offset Bangladesh's security weakness and technological backwardness Zia's strategy was aimed at: (i) projecting an international identity of the nation through the United Nations system, Non-aligned Movement, OIC and other international fora; and (ii) mobilization of people by taking a strong nationalist stand which included a great deal of internationalism. Zia had the vision of an economically self-sufficient Bangladesh which can safeguard its national sovereignty and independence. He could, however, realize that while a cutback of western aid would be economically disastrous, a confrontationist policy with neighbours would destroy stability of his government. He, therefore, evinced what he called a 'balanced foreign poli-

cy which is pursued by successive governments. Indeed, Zia had all along pursued a policy of balance and moderation. It is this policy that also led him to evolve mechanism of cooperation in inter-state relations in the region. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was the culmination of his vision of a peaceful regional order. Similarly, Zia's role in OIC and his untiring efforts for settling Iran-Iraq disputes exemplified his foresight as well as care and concern for the Muslim world.

Zia is no more with us, but his ideals and institutions stood the test of time. His most favourite institution was the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) which returned to power in 1991 headed by his illustrious wife. How far Zia's ideals and dreams have been materialized is yet to be comprehended, but Zia had clearly set the country's agenda by the twin desiderata of achieving economic development with effective governance, and engendering a sense of nationhood within a cooperative regional and international order. Zia's 19-point programme for socio-economic uplift, emphasis on the role of private sector, swanirvar project, canal-digging programme, concern for women's participation in the development process, and care for children — will continue to influence the country's political, economic and social agenda for many years to come.

Zia's world views, his efforts to balance the interests of national security and larger cause of regional and international peace gave him a unique stature. Zia's uncompromising stand on Bangladesh's vital security interests including the share of Ganges water from the powerful neighbour made him a symbol of patriotism. His deep commitment to the cause of modernization of the country, relentless efforts for social progress, remarkable strength of purpose, and his honest and simple life left an enduring legacy on which the present government could build a democratic nation vibrant with economic prosperity, social justice and a strong sense of nationhood. — PID Feature

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.

Quo vadis democracy?

Sir, The tragic train accident at Hill and the reaction of our democratic government are but one more sorry stone in our rocky road of democracy.

I recall a train accident sometimes in September-October 1963 near Yokohama when I was in Tokyo. Two fast trains travelling from opposite directions on their own track hit each other head on, because just when the two trains were within yards of each other, one derailed and lurched into the track of the other approaching train, resulting in over 200 deaths! It was a track accident as close to an act of God as one could see: yet the Transport Minister and the whole Railway Board members of JNR (the national state railway) resigned immediately! The news of the accident and resignation was reported together in the next day's paper.

Japanese colleague the reason for this total resignation at the highest level. His response, which is etched in my memory, was that the Japanese were then more civilised in the 60s. He said that had this happened in the 40s they would all have committed Harakiri to atone for their responsibility!

In a similar incident in India, not long back, the Civil Aviation Minister resigned owning responsibility for the crash of a chartered Ukrainian Airline aircraft operating in India during the Indian Airlines pilots strike.

But probably in our highly vocal democratic government the responsibility will be limited to the locomotive driver, the signalman and possibly the ASM on duty.

The moral responsibility of the Hon. Minister of Transport has been duly atoned by his statements of regret sitting in Dhaka! Possibly this is the latest norm of democratic responsibility.

Stop import of mini-buses

Sir, Travelling these days by mini-buses from Gullshan to Zia International Airport, Mirpur, Narayanganj or anywhere in the city is a very tedious, difficult and troublesome job.

Almost all the original seats of the re-conditioned imported mini-buses have been changed, altered, replaced and cut to size and made congested. The passengers are made to sit jam-packed and the roof of mini-buses being very low, all the standing passengers have to spend their time during journey bow-legged undergoing great physical hardships.

This is constantly happening over the years, but the government transport authorities concerned, bus owners, bus

conductors and the traffic police do not give any heed to people's grievances and complaints.

We strongly feel that time has come to make some important policy decisions on mini-buses for the convenience of the mini-bus passengers and also for the enforcement of traffic laws in the country.

First of all the import of re-conditioned mini-buses may be totally stopped in Bangladesh. If the re-conditioned mini-buses are at all imported, the height of these vehicles may be so raised and made at the time of re-conditioning that the passengers may keep standing easily and comfortably and lastly, in any case, the original seats of the imported mini-buses may not be altered or changed.

If the bus owners violate these rules and also the transport authorities and traffic police fail to discharge their duties and responsibilities diligently and faithfully then they may be brought to book, fine imposed on the owners and disciplinary action may be taken against concerned officials.

We hope our Ministry of Communication, Ministry of Commerce, Custom authorities and traffic police may kindly consider the matters and take

necessary steps for the welfare of the passengers.

Do our Communication Minister, MPs, Opposition leaders, Secretaries of the Ministries, high officials of road transport authorities and traffic police ever travel by mini-buses? Bangladesh is no more under foreign rule, no more there is autocracy in the country. We are now a free, independent and democratic country. Our public leaders and government officials must from time to time travel by mini-buses and also socialise with the common people to know and understand their different problems, difficulties and sufferings and help mitigate their problems and grievances.

O H Kabir Dhaka-1203

Shared passion

Sir, With congratulations, courteous Bangladesh has only shared the passion with the 1994 World Cup football champions Brazil.

Although this football loving nation failed to make it to the World Cup finals this time around, its rank — 126th in the world — is still above the South Asian champions.

Hopefully, like the low ranked US, Bangladesh will play host to the World Cup finals and will even win the

'dream cup' someday not too long from now.

What this nation will need most to standardise its football is to have its promising players trained at the world standard facilities and against world cuppers coupled with lessons on moral values when the world sports arena is trying hard to clean up its messed up image.

From the system of the games comes up the query: why must the only one player — goalkeeper — pay the price for his whole nation facing decider shootouts alone?

Besides, the team at the bottom of a group table after a round or two could still be better than the team at the top of another group table.

Refereeing controversy can be staid outed with video replay. Instead of so many teams at the finals, only continents' champions or about half a dozen top ranked teams representing the world can face each other in the league system (with replay over tie and/or shot-the-tie-off by position-against-position of all players on both sides and/or better points, sharing total responsibility equally) to be the undisputed champions.

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