

Thus Far, No Further

The Jatiya Sangsad yesterday began discussing the High Court ruling on the Speaker to judge whether it breached the members' privileges and infringed on the sovereignty of the House. Noticeably, the motion has been taken up on the expiry of the ten-day period for which the Speaker was to restrain himself from delivering his decision on the *en masse* resignation of the opposition.

Needless to labour the point that the discussants are well aware of the fact that the country is smarting under a very grave political crisis. At a time like this what should be far from the people's mind would be any dangerous drift into a constitutional quagmire which is bound to happen if the parliament engages itself in a tug of war over a sensitive but peripheral issue. It is obvious that if the Speaker had acted promptly the HC ruling would have been automatically averted. We are not questioning his intent but merely pointing at the fortuitous nature of things that once complicated the matter and can compound it further if discretion is thrown to the winds. To be on a sentimental ego trip over a judicial embargo and bring two major organs of the state into confrontation will be a fresh blow dealt to our already troubled democratic institutions. It is neither healthy nor desirable.

To our understanding, which is strongly premised on the country's Constitution, the Parliament is the sovereign legislative authority while the judiciary is an independent entity with full authority to interpret the Constitution, as and when required. They derive their respective authorities from the Constitution of the country. All this is a matter of substance and not of form so that it is hardly subject to the whims and caprice of individuals. Personalities do not matter here; only the system, as envisaged in the Constitution. We are all for the parliament's sovereignty in law-making which even includes its all-encompassing power to bring statutory amendments in the Constitution itself with the required two-thirds majority, as a mark of people's sovereignty vesting in it. We are urging the avoidance of any deterioration in the harmonious relationship between two vital organs of the Republic.

Therefore, the current debate in the parliament should be a brief and not a sour affair, and by no stretch of imagination should it be judiciary-bashing.

Something Horrific

In a state where there is penal provision for stoning so-called recalcitrant women and flogging errant men for what is supposed to be sexually deviant behavior, incredible figures have come to light. There a woman is raped every three hours and half of these victims are children.

In that nation three girls were kidnapped everyday and only one of them was recovered. Girls were being bought and sold at a price ranging from Rs. 4000 to 25000. This horror picture has been painted by a Pakistani human rights group — of the situation there. So, very obviously obsession with religion understandably to improve man and society in their inner bearings as well as in outer social conduct, has failed to influence the quality of the human condition and the quality of individuals there. There is unmistakable irony in the fact that the fundamentalists have almost a fixation about gender crimes and the mission of most of their lives is to exorcise from society what they think as gender-related sin — and in that society 1500 children should be sexually molested every year.

Bangladesh, where the state and the society suffer from far less religious pretension, hasn't proved an angel on the score. Gender-related violent crimes are ever on the increase. How then should we claim that our political and socio-cultural preference for not invoking and involving religion in everything under the sun is a superior way — socially and morally?

Crime against women and its growing incidence are a complex phenomenon originating mostly from norms, values and laws and a socio-economic system weighted grossly against women. Things could improve remarkably if the state were a little more effective and governance more efficient.

Loss of a Friend

In the passing away of James P Grant, Bangladesh has lost a friend and the UNICEF a living role model for inspiration and guidance. As he retired only a few days ago, was it that he had premonition of the imminent demise that only a few get as a God-given reward for their life-long services for the cause of humanity? It is indeed the humanity that today feels so empty in its very soul for the man who engrossed himself in the unique task of faking the children to the centre-stage of global attention and national planning concerns.

With the child came the mother, and with the child and the mother in tow, the whole gamut of socio-economic environment and the question of women's empowerment emerged on the frontline of UNICEF's work, which in turn, got translated into national agenda of many Third World countries. All this because of James P Grant's role. Such a deep and all-out approach to children's welfare gave the UNICEF not only a fresh sense of direction and, with that, the right motivation but endowed it also with a life-like image.

Bangladesh's suffering children and mothers were nearest to his heart. It was at his behest that we received unrelenting international support and recognition for our own work in combating iodine deficiency, and in immunizing our children against deadly diseases.

The greatest tribute that we can pay to his memory is by intensifying the implementation of — Grant's greatest achievement — the Charter of Children's Rights which was adopted at the World Summit for Children in 1990.

A certain new found efficacy of SAARC is wafting the senses. The number and frequency of the highest-level bilateral visits in the region which would have kept low without the promptings of SAARC have markedly increased lately. Swathed in an organised regional spirit, these are being colourful, popular in the host countries and pleasantly un-stressful as to who might read what into these.

What was regarded in certain circles at the SAARC's pre-dawn time as the supposed ganging up of smaller nations in South Asia against the big neighbour India has sobered down into a new realisation: The regional spirit has practical values of the last resort, for the big and the small both. Whether this is openly spoken of or not, SAARC is serving as something of a lifeline of communication between its member states, all ways there to be banked upon should normal bilateral channels choke up as it occasionally happens between India and Pakistan in particular. On a wider scale, after the Ayodhya incident had triggered a terrible backlash across the region rocking the continuity of the SAARC's annual summitry cycles, two things happened as blessings in disguise. First, the regional forum's informal bilateral retreats away from the conference hall proved remarkably opportune for the

unwinding and explaining exercises. Two, the annual summitry was spaced as a two-yearly event in a blended recognition of the domestic preoccupations of the heads of government and state and the need for maturation at other levels before going for a meet at the summit.

To make up for any loss in meaningful contacts during the intervening period it was decided to have as many bilateral visits in South Asia as could be arranged at the mutual convenience of each other.

India stands to gain by weather-taking of the regional mood, as do perhaps the others, not having the bilateral visits themselves at a particular point in time, through all the person-to-person meets at the heads of government or state levels between the remaining SAARC partners. There may be a reference on such an occasion to an issue strictly falling outside the agreed purview of the SAARC but this would deserve to be noted, nonetheless for its

strong topical nature. Each set of bilateral ties in the South Asia region is distinct from the rest. Concurrently, the new feature to the SAARC seems to be the gradual evaporation of differences between the bilateral and the regional resulting from a realisation that the former can affect the latter if it gets mired in irritation. This may be accepted as part of SAARC's maturation.

Begum Zia's Colombo visit at the invitation of Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga, however, fell in a category of its own: for (a) she was making a farewell trip to that country as the SAARC Chairperson before passing the gavel to the Indian Prime Minister in April this year; and (b) Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are magic names to each other by virtue of common historical antecedents and close affinities in the man-scapes and the life styles of the two peoples.

The SAARC part of the outcome of the visit is summed up

LEADERS of the political parties as well as all communities should recognise the limits of going too far. An acknowledgment of the limits may be an asset itself if the parties caught in the brawl are to succeed in the power struggle. Not since 1991 had this country been so gripped by hartals and protests. The spectacle of train stations, market places and Govt. offices, industrial plants and also streets piled high with uncollected garbage belies the expectation of the people. Indeed the heady optimism of just a year ago has been dampened by plummeting exports, rising inflation and the threat of a return of political instability of the past.

Over the past ten months the country has experienced a bitter struggle between the two major political parties that ultimately bred pessimism and total frustration in its people. Indeed, the spectre of a return to the "bad old days" now looms large. The ruling party's intransigence to accept the proposal of the caretaker gov't and the opposition's uncompromising attitude only signals that an inevitable political crisis was already waiting in the wings.

We are yet to realise the critical situation the country will be facing in about a few months for the long spell of drought in the northern region which cut down the Aman production of rice by 30%. What the country can boast of is an import oriented and rather smuggling-fed economy. From salt to sugar including onion, potato, pulse — all these food materials have to be imported to put people on survival level. However, the country can boast some undeniable successes. The productivity increases of Bangladeshi workers, for instance, now rival that of those Japanese, Chinese or Taiwanese.

But unsurprisingly, there are signs of disenchantment, even weariness, among the public at large. Even more distressing, people in the country have awakened from the euphoria of their much talked of economic miracle to discover that many things are as bad as ever, particularly corruption and inefficiency. One is led to conclude that the country is coming apart at the seams, not because of the financial constraints and lack of initiative of people, as was

To the Editor...

For the sake of fairplay, at least

Sir, Some years back when the Link Road connecting Agargaon and Mirpur (Sec 10 Golchakkar) was under construction, the then President paid a visit to the site and asked the relevant authority to complete the work on emergency basis. A news item then published in the media stated that the road when completed will enable people to travel between Mirpur and Farm Gate in a short time and at a lesser expense.

No doubt a short time is now consumed to cover the distance and at relatively small fuel consumption, but the transport people (BRTC, BIKALPA, private minibuses etc) are charging the same fare as was in vogue earlier for the journey from Farm Gate to Sec. 10 via Asad Gate and Technical. It is a matter of dismay that the expectation as expressed in the Press Note about lesser expense, was lost sight of and no authorities bothered on the question thereafter.

It is, therefore, necessary that a reasonable fare based upon distance should be fixed not only for this route, but also elsewhere, where such anomalies exist on this account. And that transport people are made to follow the same with all rigidity. This is also very much necessary for the sake of equity, justice and fairplay.

More than a SAARC Visit

by Shah Husain Imam

There is a fund of goodwill in Bangladesh for the people of Sri Lanka for their remarkable capacity to live with extreme political turbulence. The country, once the picture of tranquility, literacy, high international profile for erudition and expertise, great tourist attraction and reasonably good per capita income had made its bemoan its image turned upside down through protracted ethnic violence.

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through the expression of satisfaction over the emphasis placed on the core areas of poverty alleviation and trade liberalisation since the last summit in Dhaka. As for SAPTA, the process of decision-making on the merchandise lists needs to be expedited. On poverty eradication, let there be exchanges of NGO experiences between our two countries in the knowledge that the Janasawitiya programmes in Sri Lanka have met with a great success like some of our own.

For a spurt in economic co-operation between the two countries which are geographically far apart, the steps envisaged in the Jt. Communiqué need to be synchronised for the totality of the desired effect.

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ing the People's Alliance Party (originally left-leaning but now reformist) through the crest of historic electoral victories over the 17-year long invincible-looking UNP (centrist party) has spread an olive branch to the LTTE. She won a mandate for the peace initiative with the Tamil Tigers both at the parliamentary and the presidential polls. In the last one she having won hands down with 63 per cent popular support against the assassinated Sissenayake's widow. Another significant feature of the well-rounded electoral verdict is the mandate she has got to invest the Presidency of all its executive powers and transfer these to the Prime Minister as in a revived Parliamentary system of government.

Ethnically we are luckier than Chandrika for the homogeneous society we broadly have. But that her great agenda for national reconciliation are indicative of her statesmanship qualities is evident in the fact that although there are seven hundred thousand rebels among a two and a half million Tamil population, she is not committing her predecessors' folly of ignoring them. The majority Sinhalese fatigued by an internal war, are solidly behind her. Her persevering with the LTTE and the latter's quick grasp of her sincerity in resolving the differences with them are lessons in political science.

A Cataclysmic Future Awaits the Land that Once Burst with Promise?

by Md Asadullah Khan

Over the past ten months the country has experienced a bitter struggle between the two major political parties that ultimately bred pessimism and total frustration in its people. Indeed, the spectre of a return to the "bad old days" now looms large.

projected without reservation. At the same time, both Govt agencies and NGOs who are working relentlessly to alleviate poverty and spread education should mount an aggressive attack on these problems.

As it appears, of the total 120 million population, about 50 million work as a labour force of which 70% on agriculture, 14% on industries and 21% on other jobs and about 3% never-working. Half of the work force in the country are victims of malnutrition. They have ceased to contribute anything worthwhile in the national perspective. Hunger and malnutrition have sapped them of their vitality, talent and productivity. Foodgrain production which has soared to 1 crore 85 lakh tons from 97 lakh tons in the late sixties can't keep pace with population pressure. The result has been extremely frustrating. Availability of food to rural population has come down to 48% from the mark of 57% in the late 1988-89. Levels of poverty both in the villages and cities have registered a sharp rise. Compounding with this is the grim scenario that availability of food to female population is about 20% less than that to the male population. In the health sector, percentage expenditure on the male population stands at 50 while for the female population it is a staggering low of 10. Precisely told, about 70% of the population do not get any health care services. They have just thrown themselves firstly in the hands of the quacks and then to the mercy of Allah, as much as it is borne out by a recent report in a vernacular daily that a patient with complaints of severe stomach pain in some areas of Barisal was operated upon by a village quack and the fate of the patient has been that one can expect in such circumstances.

The industries sector unfolds a much more grim and bleak scenario. Almost as many as 5500 industrial plants and factories have been closed down since now. The production of jute, once the golden fibre of Bangladesh, has dropped alarmingly throwing a vast chunk of workers into total joblessness. Against such a backdrop of frustrating scenario, there is one silver lining that the female population, about 80% of the assumed female workforce, has joined the "Ready-made garment" industries. But reports of exploitation and violation of women's rights and honour in this sector also fill the pages of newspapers with a searing image. GDP growth which is hovering over 4% can't be claimed as anything spectacular as, according to the economic indicator, any growth factor less than 7% can't spur national development.

Much of the foreign exchange reserve that has landed in state's coffers and that has given us a sense of complacency will, in the short run, be needed to finance national spending programmes. Much of it will be going in subsidies to the farmers who had fallen victim to the wrath of the nature last year and to prop up

flattering state enterprises. Now with warning lights flashing in the form of large foreign debt and the highest unemployment rate, the government must be mending its ways.

Situation as it stands today calls for pragmatism and sensibility that must prevail in all of us concerned with the welfare of the country. Is it that by our frivolous activities the saner world will be lost to insanity? Do we have time to realise that the misery and suffering of the people living in the far northern region of the country are the worst in this winter? They have hardly any winter clothing and comfortable houses to protect them from the biting cold. These people have only death to look forward to.

Despite all possible efforts from all pressible quarters to resolve the political impasse, the country seems to be poised for an institutional breakdown. It is worth recalling that long ago the great Bengali Poet Tagore called this land "Sonar Bangla". In those days this country would have qualified for Tagore's exuberant characterisation. The optimism of this country's poets, littera-

teurs and leaders seemed boundless. Because this country had vast mellow paddy fields, lush green forests and water bodies abound with fish. Its economic future appeared assured. It was believed that the new generation of leadership would engender benevolent national policies, elicit enthusiastic public participation in nation building and convince the industrialised countries of the west to provide aid, technology and technical expertise to a country yearning to develop itself. The dreams have largely been disintegrated. The visions of hope and glory are clouded with widespread despair and disillusionment. The epithet "Sonar Bangla" has dissolved into tears of misery. This country has now turned into a sad, bitter region marked by hatred, bloodshed, rivalry and also religious bigotry. The present leaders must contend with a terrible truth: social and economic signals point to a cataclysmic future for a land that once fairly burst with promise.

Unsurprisingly, during the last one year, things have taken a pretty bad shape and the return to crisis management in recent times after a season of somewhat stability has touched off questions of confidence about the nation's leadership. But people at large in the country are still hopeful that they will find a way out of the current malaise. We, however, must not forget that this country brings out its best at times of uncertainty and difficulty. But seemingly frustration is also lurking in. People have grown weary of the political parties.

OPINION

Ganges Waterflow, the Tailender's Woes

Hubert Francis Sarkar

is logical that the people of Bangladesh should consider Farakka as nothing other than a pressing anathema. Ecological degradation thus resulted is enormous.

Mentionably, until recently, Bangladesh had been pursuing a completely bilateral approach in negotiating the legitimate rights of Ganges waterflow and the outcome had been almost invariably a resounding naught. Hence, a realisation has dawned that a multilateral approach is needed urgently to address the squeezing crises from that barrage-system.

So far, Bangladesh's protests were very mild in terms of the harms committed against her vital interests. Even then, the cynics and skeptics argue that Bangladesh's exposure to the international authorities is too loud and too bold.

The skeptics and the cynics seem to argue that Bangladesh must appease the political machinists of India and must never raise protests even if she steals or robs, the motive behind these outpourings is not holy or hidden: after all the economic and political benefits that are to be gained if this deltaic region's allegiance can be commanded, predictably, are not that negligible as are being projected.

Hence, multilateralism is the only option open for Bangladesh. Yes, Bangladesh needs help from the mighty countries of the world in excess of her relationship with her mighty neighbour. Hopefully it will prove to be the genuine sleeper in bringing a redemptive outcome. The green activists around the world also may be asked to look into this grave environmental devastation.

In the meantime, the farce of leading the avidly ostentatious long marches to Farakka should come to a definite end, the urgencies and the current

situation demand no more misstepping. While Bangladesh should not be in any way submissive, Bangladesh's friendly gestures to Indian people must stay put. We should also seek divine mandate so that good senses prevail on the machinists and they refrain from this unconscionable deed. The approach should not be that of a deaf-mute when anti-dumping tactics are applied in trade relations, not be that of a purblind when criminal networks are being thrust into the geo-political boundaries.

Multilateral approach would be the starting-point for setting out into socio-economically rewarding journeys in versatile ways, in addition of the possible vindication of the Farakka related crisis. Before that, all-out efforts should be made so that hostile propaganda do not succeed in denigrating the country-portrait, the narrow-mindedness must be spurned and the unruly must be stopped. Redress must be sought from the international authorities and the friends amongst the ASEAN and the West must be requested to lend helping hands in the nation building activities.

It is a sad thing that the champions of Third Worldism must not feel any remorse in putting their third world brethren into dire straits and also must practise nothing beyond spouting out all a clamouring anti West, anti rich pontifications. However, it is no time for lamentation: a sovereign country should be sovereign in all possible ways — in cultural, social, economic ways apart from meeting the geo-political ends. And the offspring of the soil should strive to liberate themselves from all subjugations and should never keep away from making friends in all possible ways rather than sacrificing self dignity and looking pitifully to the next door neighbours.

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