

## Be Transparent

At long last we come to know of the drought-induced food deficit totalling 5.72 metric tonnes and forcing us to import rice worth 9.32 MT, the extra 3.36 lakh tonnes being as provision for the annual population increase.

A drought does not hit all of a sudden like a cyclone or a flush flood. It builds up gradually and spreads its tentacles over months. Enough time is allowed to pour food into the affected areas, distribute these to the afflicted people, import food for the country, release them to the open market and hold down the prices. There was no planning on each count, so that government godowns remained empty, prices of cereals soared breaking previous records — much to the ire of the people and embarrassment of the government.

The updating of food figures came forth only the other day and who knows how costly the contingency imports could be as the process is hurried through. Most debilitating would be the jam of things — storing, preserving and open market sale with an eye to price control.

The situation in the northern region continued to be grossly understated in a race with media reports portraying famine conditions prevailing there. If famine takes place in a part of the country, why hide it? It did not occur because of you! And then routinely issue disclaimers as to its aggravating impact on the overall food situation in the country. We were fed with information about food reserves being pretty large all the time, a lot more in the pipeline and that the price would remain stable; but in the end all we see are the price-line bursting.

When the bell rang sweetly into the ear of the hoarders that there would not be any peal procurement by the government, they simply mopped all rice and hoarded them wistfully. And with real truths about the food situation going un-conveyed and the market got rife with speculations. Hoarding and black marketing were fuelled even further.

Now the agricultural ministry comes out with food facts because it had to. Whether it is the food ministry or any other ministry, we say, please improve on your information dissemination; else you may be in the unenviable position of stating the truth and still being disbelieved. Openness and transparency are the best anti-dote to speculations that erodes governmental credence and destabilise the market.

## Hospitals in Confusion

The class IV employees and nurses of the government hospitals observed a 48-hour strike ending yesterday. Their strike was in protest against the introduction of the Centre for Management Excellence and Quality Assurance programme (CMEQA). Introduced on January 15 on a trial basis in the Dhaka Medical College Hospital, the CMEQA has been planned for introduction in other hospitals and health centers managed by the government. The move is opposed by the striking employees and nurses because they consider it a decisive step towards handing the management of the hospitals over to private hands.

However, the government sources, report says, have flatly denied this contention. The government has no immediate plan to reduce its health-care system — and certainly not through the introduction of CMEQA. Yet the authority is contemplating to bring about the hospitals' autonomy through some other means. Evidently there is a lot of confusion. Has the message been put across? Maybe, the government is in a state of dual mind. Otherwise there is no point leaving room for several interpretations of its intention and plan.

Either it has succeeded in giving the wrong signal or it wants to see the reaction from the hospital staff. Whatever it is, there is no doubt that the hospitals need to be run better, and if the private management does that job satisfactorily, none has the right to oppose the move. There is no point for the government to mince words. It can say in clear terms what it wants to do. The hospital employees certainly have the democratic right to go on strikes but they must do so only after they have exhausted all other means. This time they seem to have gone overboard. After all theirs is a service whose dislocation affected the running of hospitals very badly. Taking into account both the humanitarian and indispensability aspects involved, their grievances have to be addressed as much as our resources allow.

## For Safer Roads

The already high incidence of road accidents seems to have gone further up over the past weeks. On Monday in two separate fatal accidents 16 people were killed and 41 injured. The accident on the Chittagong-Hathazari road involved an auto-tempo and a bus and the other road mishap occurred when a night coach skidded off the road at Jaypara in Dhamrai. There is no point passing judgement on one or two cases of accident unless someone authoritative has a thorough grasp over the causes behind road mishaps. The important thing is to comprehend the overall messy situation responsible for such frequent accidents.

Like human health a smooth transport system demands effective safety measures and curative steps. In this case the preventive part concerns an uncompromising attitude to the specification and quality of vehicles, training for the drivers and other employees and above all respect for law. Unfortunately, on the implementation side there is a whole lot of complaints against both the law enforcers and the transport workers. So chaotic has the system become that people have almost become accustomed to the fatal accidents. Yet they live with the fear of an accidental death inside of them.

WORDS are now being crossed within the four walls of the highest judicial institution and not in the streets. Legal battles have ensued in a special bench of the High Court Division over the validity of the opposition's en masse resignation from parliament and the speaker's purported delay in taking action on the same. This is a qualitative change from what was quantitative informality.

Now an institutional solution to the politico-constitutional tangle is awaited with bated breath but some more patience is needed and promises to be golden. Settling down to the very nature of things is good omen and can be rewarding.

We are catapulted into a judicial course through a miscarriage of collective political will, and a failure of a bi-partisan negotiatory process and that of legislative decision-making. Nevertheless, in real terms, on these very counts, we had harvested home a neat-looking list of gains that can and must be fallen back on for a final political settlement.

We are in safe and right hands at the moment. The highest judiciary has unquestionable interpretational authority in matters constitutional. It has demonstrably exercised independence through some landmark judgements, something which a political report of the US state department has not failed lately to

# Not Quite Ready for Election

By-elections would be fraught with dangers for de-stabilisation and snap polls look most unlikely in summer and rainy seasons combined. So, it is the General Election that seems on the cards. If that be so, we have a scenario where the present government will most likely have either completed its tenure or have very nearly done it.

mention and above all its abiding influence on society is very much there.

We are hopeful of a benign and far-reaching decision on issues it is adjudicating at the moment.

The Speaker's latest position is elaborated thus. Pending the disposal of the writs he is putting off his decision regarding 147 honourable MPs for the time being. In other words, he is zealously guarding his exclusive constitutional jurisdiction and the principle of the sovereignty of parliament by qualifying his suspension of decision on the resignation letters of the opposition members with the phrase 'for the time being'. However, the Speaker is duly alive to the matter being 'complicated, involving national and constitutional questions' so that he remains positively anxious waiting to hear the highest court's interpretation on the constitutional points arising out of the writs filed.

So, basically the question is not to be regarded as potentially one of a tussle; furthermore because, our democratic

institutions are nascent and we are all aware of the need to consolidate these. From this point of view also, the judicial process that is now on commends itself for the sterling possibility it holds to set a precedent in equations between the organs of government in a somewhat test-case



## Time and Tide

Shah Husain Imam

situation and thereby contribute to governance and national polity combined.

Within the purview of the writs, in the event of the en masse resignation of the opposition members are declared unconstitutional they would be required to return to parliament. Incidentally, the Supreme Court appellate division has before it an appeal preferred by the opposition against a High Court ruling to

the effect that their boycott of the parliament itself was unconstitutional.

Since collective resignation was far from being envisaged, far less provided for, in the Constitution or the Rules of Procedure, the Speaker thought he had flexibility in the application of the available

dict of the highest court of the land, the nation seems headed for elections and, most probably general elections, almost in due time, that is in the winter of 1996. As the court does its job the politicians are left — this instant — with their own agenda to pursue. If, to them, getting ready for the elections means just an advanced plunge into electioneering activities glossing over the fundamental task of formalising an arrangement for free and fair polls that their bipartisan negotiatory process has all been about, and very nearly clinched it, then they are sure to come to grief.

By-elections would be fraught with dangers for de-stabilisation and snap polls look most unlikely in summer and rainy seasons combined. So, it is the General Election that seems on the cards. If that be so, we have a scenario where the present government will most likely have either completed its tenure or have very nearly done it.

What are required to fall in place now is the official formalisation of the points of

accord in principle that were reached by the government and the opposition parties. Since the end-result is going to be elections, regardless of the progression of events otherwise, it is advisable to take the above vital step and then proceed to have the comprehensively right set-up for the polls, as perceived in its two integral parts: first, on the neutral caretaker level and then on the level of the Election Commission.

It is a piece of good news that under pressure from the Treasury Bench members the Law Minister has meaningfully refrained from moving the bill that was to keep in abeyance the issuance of ID cards for the polls. Nevertheless as far as we know, decision is yet to be taken on the core issue of preparing a new voters' list. Updating the old one may be more difficult than making an entirely new one which is specially well-advised for accessing reliable information to the computer. Anyhow, work along these lines brooks no delay.

The impelling necessity to get these over with, in good time, should weigh with the political leaders. They better have an all-party national convention under the present circumstances to be able to achieve a collective political will to steer clear of the crisis they find themselves in and forge steadily towards the next elections.

A new force has emerged in Afghanistan. Taliban, or religious students. But the turbaned, bearded Taliban act more like commandos than theologians.

Within the space of a few days of fierce fighting with local warlords, Taliban have captured four southern provinces, covering some 15 to 20 per cent of the country.

Areas seized include Kandahar, the second largest city and main support base of the former King, Zahir Shah. Mulla Dawood, a Taliban leader, says about 7,000 Taliban took part in the uprising against the Mujahideen — the Islamic guerrillas who fought off the Soviet invasion — in the four provinces.

"Our ultimate plan," he says, "is to cleanse Afghanistan of those who have become killers, thieves and robbers in the name of Islam. We want to restore peace and ensure an end to looting, dishonouring of women and lawlessness." Women in areas under Taliban control stay indoors.

Taliban intend to open all roads to allow commercial activities in this country," he adds. They intend to capture all Mujahideen commanders who control the highways and extort money, and kill innocent people.

Successes in the region have been relatively easy to achieve because the Mujahideen, who fought the Soviet intervention and then started struggling for power among themselves, have never had a strong position there.

The victorious fighters are being reinforced by students from madaras (religious schools) in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province bordering Afghanistan. About 1,000 Taliban left the province for Kandahar in mid-January. Most are Afghan refugees who have lived in Pakistan for the last 15

## Religious Students Take to Their Guns

Tariq Butt writes from Islamabad

As the civil war in Afghanistan drags on, thousands of religious students have swapped their pens for guns and tipped the balance of power in parts of the country. Gemini News Service reports on the emergence of a new force.

### Afghanistan



Says Sardar Ahmad, spokesperson for the new batch of student fighters: "About 12,000 Taliban are undergoing a two-month military training course in Kandahar to learn the use of tanks, mortars and other heavy arms."

The rise of the Taliban has been welcomed by many ordinary Afghans who have grown weary of the constant fighting. The way sacrifices rendered by the people of Afghanistan, mostly religious men, are being frittered away by continued fighting between Afghan factions has forced

Taliban to act," says Hafiz Hussain Ahmad, information secretary of Pakistan's religion-based political party, Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), which runs most of the madaras.

JUI is headed by Maulana Fazalur Rehman, an ally of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's ruling coalition in Islamabad. But a senior Pakistani official, on condition of anonymity, was careful to distance the government from this new development. "What Taliban are doing in Afghanistan is an internal affair of Afghanistan and we have nothing to do with it. We

are not concerned where Afghan refugees living in Pakistan go after leaving our country.

But Taliban are a fact of life. Their reaction is a natural outcome of the frustration among Afghans over the continuing civil war. The belligerents must read the writing on the wall and agree to a negotiated settlement.

Afghanistan is traditionally strongly religious and tribal. Even before the 1979 Soviet invasion hundreds of Afghans received religious education in madaras. Taliban made little impact during and after the invasion.

The spark for their current intervention was the hi-jacking last year of the first Pakistani trade convoy which was on its way to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

The Taliban beat the warrior militia responsible for the hi-jacking and secured the release of the trucks. But complaints have been made to the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Abuses in Afghanistan that the Taliban were responsible for several deaths by torture and assassination and in one case left the body of a local commander hanging from a tank turret for several days.

The fighters have captured considerable quantities of weapons and ammunition, reportedly including helicopters, but they realise that they are not strong enough to take on the more powerful Mujahideen commanders, such as Gulbenedin Hekmatyar.

Neither Rabbani nor Hekmatyar has opposed Taliban because neither wants to open another front.

Qutabuddin Hail, a leader of Hekmatyar's Hizbe Islam, admits that a majority of Afghans are disheartened by the negative attitude of Mujahideen commanders. That's why people welcomed the actions of Taliban against commanders.

While the commanders show no signs of making peace, however, 250 Afghan Ulama (religious leaders) in the North West Frontier Province have risen above their affiliations with different Afghan parties and come out in support of Taliban actions.

They resolved to send a delegation to inspect the system of Islamic administration set up by Taliban in the four provinces under their control and to set up a Shura (consultative council) of Afghan Ulama in the Frontier Province to channel support to Taliban and propagate their cause in the camps in Pakistan, which are still home to most of the 1.2 million Afghan refugees in the country.

Taliban do not want to fight the commanders who have restored peace in their areas and they are both interested in capturing power," says Dawood. "We have two objectives — to keep the roads open and restore peace in Kabul and other areas where there is still fighting."

But on January 18 some 600 Taliban entered Ghazni province to help its Governor, Qari Baba of the Ittehad-e-Islami party, which opposes Hekmatyar.

Reinforcements have been promised, raising the possibility of action against Hekmatyar's forces which are camped outside Ghazni city and are threatening to take the city as punishment for Qari Baba's support for Hekmatyar's rival, Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani, whose legal tenure as President of Afghanistan ended on December 28.

A clash would be significant. Defeat for the Taliban would end their winning streak.

TARIQ BUTT is on the staff of 'The News', Islamabad.

## OPINION Drawing Attention of DCC

M Asheque

That our city father, honourable Mayor of Dhaka City Corporation (DCC), is now becoming or has already become a subject of criticism and simmering resentment needs no mention. He has perhaps failed to measure up to his assigned role. We, the city dwellers, are now fed up with certain intractable civic problems which more or less belong to the domain of DCC.

First of all, mosquito menace has reached such an unbearable proportion that once the dark sets in it becomes quite impossible to concentrate on any productive work. Entire spell of time after evening becomes not only barren but also tormenting one. No effective steps have yet been taken up by DCC. Occasional scattering spraying of insecticides didn't bring the expected relief. In fact, what DCC has done so far is just some cosmetic changes or whitewashing the rough surface.

Next consider the condition of footpaths of busy and important roads of the city. It is once again a traumatic experience. Hawkers of different stock have captured the footpaths and established their own empire. There is virtually none to discipline them nor restore their civic sense. Pedestrians, failing to take comfortable walk, are forced to sue the main roads that invariably increase the possibility of meeting accidents with the moving vehicles.

As regards conditions of several important and unimportant roads of both new and old parts of the city it can be said that these are not safe and suitable for public use. They need to be carpeted fresh.

Another disturbing issue that confronts the city dwellers relates to the environment pollution, more specifically it refers to garbage cleaning operation. In many parts of the city garbage keep piling up days after days causing serious environmental hazards. Particularly the timing of garbage collection is really very oppressive.

Two other areas that are causing serious problems to the city dwellers are traffic jams and emission of black smoke by the vehicles.

Although apparently DCC may not have any direct responsibility but it cannot be altogether left out of the picture. One of the major causes of traffic jam in Dhaka Metropolitan area is the abnormally increased number of rickshaws and pushers. It is claimed that many of these rickshaws plying on the city roads are not licensed ones. DCC can do its part in streamlining the traffic jam and if necessary can initiate the matter with Traffic Police Department. About stopping the movement of the vehicles emitting black smoke DCC can also initiate necessary steps with other concerned government ministries and departments.

Last but not at the least is the controlling of crimes in different parts of the city. These days crimes of different sorts have become an inseparable part of our daily life. Entire city dwellers are now captive to the free-style activities of mastans, toll collectors, armed goons, hijackers etc. On this particular area our honourable Mayor of DCC unfolded some really very reassuring and novel ideas. But all these ideas and schemes have now been thrown into the mist of time.

So, our newly-elected Mayor of DCC is failing to deliver the kind of services he is expected to do or he promised to do. We reposed a lot of trust and confidence on him but now feeling really frustrated. He must ensure normal civic amenities to the people of this expanding city. If he faces any problem in discharging his responsibility, in other words, if he doesn't get corporation from the ruling government he should be vocal enough to make it public. Let the people know the real story. But people cannot suffer while paying their taxes for the aforesaid services. We don't want false promises and wild utterances. We want genuine actions. Already the people of this country are digesting the pinch of irrational and ill-conceived moves of both the opposition and the ruling parties. We want to see a fittest person as the Mayor of DCC — no matter whether he represents ruling or opposition camps.

## 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.

### Is DCC blind?

Sir, Illegal occupation and worsening condition of city roads and streets are continuing and the situation is getting bad to worse but there seem to be no efforts to contain it. Out of the many loopholes, like potholes, dugged up roads, dumping of waste etc, I would like to focus on stange conversion of roads into few self-made bazars or open green grocery markets in the very heart of the busy Motijheel commercial area. One just near to Pubali Bank head office and the other two at Amin Court and Bangladesh Bank corners, respectively, of which the latter is a converted bazar since quite long. This obviously causes great pain to the passersby and also traffic jam. I wonder, if the City Corporation is aware of all this, I see no reasons as to how they should miss, will the City Corporation keep ignoring the matter? If there is no action taken against these trespassers, we apprehend the busy Motijheel commercial area may soon convert to a 'great bazar'.

Viqar Moinuddin, Dhaka.

### Old and dilapidated houses

Sir, It is heartening to know that the Ministry of Works has taken a massive development work in hand for construction of residential

quarters and flats for the government officers and staff but it is very disappointing that the government has taken no plan and programme as yet for the construction of new houses in place of old and dilapidated houses in old Dhaka.

On the one hand, there are many high-rises, well planned, beautifully designed and luxurious buildings in new Dhaka and on the other hand, there are innumerable old and dilapidated houses in the old part of our metropolitan city.

The owners of new buildings in Dhaka are usually rich, resourceful, influential and well-to-do persons. Most of them are industrialists, businessmen, high-ranked government officers, top executives, doctors, lawyers and business contractors. The old and dilapidated houses, however, belong mostly to the helpless middle class and poor people.

Most of the owners of the old and dilapidated houses are either old or sick people having no resources, contact or liaison with the higher ups. They are either ignorant, tired or scared of going through various formalities, systems and procedures, rules and regulations for submitting plans to Rajuk for approval and applying for loans to House Building Finance Corporation for construction of new houses.

Therefore strongly feel that instead the owners of those houses contact the different authorities concerned for necessary help and assistance, it is in the moral duty and responsibility of the government to contact them and rescue them from the quicksand before it is too late.

We suggest that the Ministry of Works in coordination with DCC, Rajuk and HBFC may form a committee, visit different localities in old Dhaka, identify old and dilapidated houses and help the owners to build new houses with a maximum loans of Taka five lakh from HBFC per house after making an agreement signed with the owner of the house on easy terms and conditions. If the owner is capable of investing additional money from his own source, he may be encouraged to do so. Side by side, the owners of other old and dilapidated houses who may approach the said committee for building new houses, may also be provided with necessary help and assistance by the committee.

We also suggest that our government may negotiate with the World Bank, Islamic Bank, Asian Development Bank and many others for grant of house building loan to Bangladesh for construction of houses.

We wonder if Israel can get loans amounting to billions and

billions of dollars from the USA and other sources for construction of houses why can't we?

Due to acute accommodation problem in the city, severe shortage of land, sky-high price of land, the necessity of building new houses in place of old and dilapidated ones it is imperative that our government may kindly come forward with concrete plans and programmes to help solve the problems and difficulties of the people without further loss of time.

O H Kabir, Dhaka.

### Right to choose

Sir, Our main political leaders are seen by many as battling each other to capture power. But, we need an efficient leadership for the development of our country. The role of a leader in the current situation of the country for its sustainable developments is very hard and challenging.

How much confidence our leaders have in this context, and whether they would be able to bring about any 'renaissance' are yet to be known.

Let's suppose we have three candidates from three different parties for an election.

Which candidate should be chosen by the people? Ofcourse, the most eligible one. We, people should consider the personality, not party. Then our respective parties would look for the most qualified person as a candidate, and they have to perform a real job in this respect. And show as well as convince the people of a 'renaissance'.

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