

by Firdous Murshid

A Question of Sincerity

When all hopes of a solution to the country's political crisis seemed to have vanished, there was at least an occasion on Friday for leaders of both the ruling party and the opposition to talk across the table with each other.

Their participation in the round-table shows that they have the interest in and concern for resolving the crisis even after the flowing of so much water down the Buriganga River.

On this score, both sides leave enough scope for vagueness. The issue here is a political understanding or consensus for resolving the crisis.

UN Initiative in Kabul

Even such good news that the UN special envoy Mahmud Mestiri has flown into Kabul to oversee transfer of power there, has to be taken with a pinch of salt.

It is against the backdrop that the UN envoy is setting his foot in Kabul in line with an earlier understanding with Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani that he was ready to transfer power to a new governing council under the world body's supervision.

On the plus side though is the fact that the Taliban militants have not yet raised any objections to the UN peace plan.

Lending a hand to the latest UN peace initiative, the OIC's Secretary General Hamid Algabid has made a few points that deserve immediate attention of all concerned — on the ground.

Basically the UN has to get the factions to agree to a truly representative transitional council so that the ceasefire and the disengagement of forces followed automatically.

Not Just Ctg's Worry

Our Chittagong correspondent's report on fake driving licence hit a bottomline that made both amusing and serious reading.

This is one case in which their superior authorities must now put their feet down and fix the responsibility for this glaring lack of transparency at the operational levels where truths cannot be hidden indefinitely.

What gives rise to a peevish contention between the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority and the Chittagong traffic police is this: BRTA is claiming that since its inception in 1990 there have been no irregularities in the issuance of traffic licence while the police feel they are handicapped in going for a massive drive without BRTA's cooperation.

We are once again witnessing very unusual goings-on in the rice market. This time the concern is not with low prices, as was the case in 1992-93, but with high prices — and that too following on the heels of the largest rice harvest of the year — the Aman harvest — a period which invariably exhibits a price dip.

The Public Food Distribution System

The Bangladesh government has all but dismantled the Public Food Distribution System (PFDS) actually prodded into it by a donor-inspired lobby and has therefore closed off a number of potential channels of intervention in the rice market.

Despite the emasculation of the PFDS, it was supposed to have retained sufficient clout to effectively intervene in grain markets should this be necessary.

The Aman crop, unlike the Boro, is primarily retained for home consumption and to pay for wages and meals of hired labour. The quantity sold in the market is thus a residual, which is far more volatile than total production. Even a relatively small fall in yields could lead to a sharp fall in marketed quantities, and generate pressure on prices.

to meet most contingencies. In reality, actual public reserves were significantly below this level — a problem compounded by the poor Aman harvest and fears of another poor crop in Boro, due to very low ground water levels this year, which will make irrigation uncertain and costly.

Naive Arithmetic

It would be wrong to say we had no advance warning of poor yields — the signs were there for all to see. In part the failure to recognize the seriousness of the shortage lay in what I call naive arithmetic.

plans of a trigger mechanism to set off OMS as soon as the price breached a critical level — or was it the case that the critical level itself was set too high?

Complacency

The government is paying the price of complacency. It was just gearing up to take credit for achieving food self-sufficiency (which no doubt would be paraded as a major achievement of the ruling party during the forthcoming election campaign), when it is having to cope with the unkindest cut of all — a food crisis of sorts.

'Hoarders': The Traditional Scapgoat

Let us stop, for once and for all, the archaic (although convenient) practice of blaming 'hoarders and speculators' for rising prices.

the very important task of spatial and inter-temporal arbitrage (buy cheap now in the expectation that prices will rise in the future, or buy from a low price market and sell where prices are higher).

Corruption in High Places (and Low)

Corruption, as everyone agrees, is worrying. My worry has to do with its economic impact rather than the impact on morals — although the two are quite closely related.

An entrepreneurial class is a pre-requisite for capitalist development. According to all appearances, such a class has now emerged in Bangladesh, albeit in embryonic form.

Our capitalist class, however, has primarily arisen from a trading-indenting class of rent-seekers, bank defaulters and beneficiaries of political patronage, through a familiar process that has come to be only too well-known. In other words, the history of basic cap-

ital accumulation (what Marxists call primitive accumulation) is somewhat tainted! The important point to note is that without such accumulation, there would have been no entrepreneurial class today.

It needs to be pointed out that for the nascent capitalist class to gain in strength and stature the traditional avenues of (unproductive) profits through rent-seeking must be choked off, so that entrepreneurial energy can be channelled to more legitimate and productive forms of activity.

I can think of some other forms of corruption that actually increase welfare: smuggled Indian cows; Indian rice when our prices sky-rocket etc.

Let me end with a quote from James Stewart Mill. He said that the role of the government is to save its citizens from excessive selfishness.

corruption. The main problem with the former is in its demonstration effect. It also engenders lack of respect for authority and weakness the moral position of the offenders — usually people in leadership roles — which threatens us with social anarchy.

The problem with low-level but widespread corruption is that it causes the 'rules of the game' to blur or be destroyed, leading to arbitrariness, uncertainty and high cost in our day to day transactions.

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Will there be a Coalition Government in India?

by Nikhil Chakravarty

A crisis unprecedented in its dimension has descended upon India today which has never been faced since independence of the country.

At this critical juncture has come the resignation from the government of the senior-most Minister in the Cabinet; next to the Prime Minister.

This is the grim scenario which faces not only Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and his government and party but the nation as a whole.

The idea of a coalition government at the Centre to avert a constitutional breakdown has, interestingly, been suggested also by an area specialist of the Davos-based World Business Forum, who has underlined the fact that political stability is imperative if India has to attract large-scale foreign investment and a coalition government alone can ensure that political stability.

can claim to be as strong as the Congress today. Next in strength and political importance is the BJP which apart from having been unable to spread all over the country, is facing tensions within its own ranks.

Next in importance within the Opposition count is the Janata Dal, which in the last five years has fragmented into many splinter groups while the core could hold its own in only three States.

This means that the break-up of the Congress which seems imminent envisages a period of uncertainty, if not anarchy, in the political set-up of this country.

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derlined the fact that political stability is imperative if India has to attract large-scale foreign investment and a coalition government alone can ensure that political stability.

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derlined the fact that political stability is imperative if India has to attract large-scale foreign investment and a coalition government alone can ensure that political stability.

For one thing, the success of the presidential system in France was largely due to the personality of General De Gaulle: To manage a country so vast and with such complexity of diversities demands an outstanding leader and it needs to be conceded the country has no such leader at the moment.

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derlined the fact that political stability is imperative if India has to attract large-scale foreign investment and a coalition government alone can ensure that political stability.

Meanwhile, it may be necessary to think over the possibility of a coalition government at the Centre. Such a coalition needs to be worked out from beforehand instead of waiting for further setback at the next general election, and after that to knock together such a coalition so that the majority in Parliament could be re-

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gained. Such an agenda is often based on the opportunistic consideration of somehow pulling off a majority for the sake of retaining power and power alone. Besides, experience shows that such a coalition does not last long, but it splits at the first onset of differences.

In fact, in the case of our country facing grave challenges from outside and within, a wider coalition of major parties at the all-India level, may lead to the formation of a National government.

The author is Editor of 'Mainstream'.

OPINION

Indecisive Administration

M M Ahmad

All sane citizens of Dhaka should strongly support in principle the points raised by Mahfuz Anam in his write-up (Star Feb 12) on the traffic chaos in the metropolis.

The traffic problems have been created (indirectly) by the Government, and not by the residents or drivers of the vehicles, because the administration can provide a solution easily, quickly, and without fear or favour.

The Dhaka Mayor's DCC is operating in the same fashion — without any sense of duty and responsibility. Let us look at the non-problems more closely.

To control the traffic madhouse, the administration can call a series of meetings with the various vehicle unions and exchange views, before clamping down stringent new measures to control and regulate the traffic.

The government will not be liked for lacking the traffic problem (saubab, no bribery). Sometimes it is in public interest to lose popularity for the greater good of the greatest number.

Now that the computerized voters' card has been approved and sanctioned, the same hi-tech may be applied to driving licence and vehicle number plates (old and new), to pre-

vent faking/duplication. Of course the Opposition will not support the move and shout zulum on the poor drivers (the populist politics in this country).

The Opposition is not running the country; so, for the solutions the people look towards the administration.

'No Parking', 'No Waiting', and 'No Halting' signs are all right, but where to park? The alternatives must be practically available before enforcing the restrictions. Later, the fines should be mercilessly heavy, as a deterrent measure.

If a person feels he could get away by breaking the rule, he would go ahead and break the law with impunity. One could cite hundreds of examples from daily life.

The proof of the pudding lies in the action, firmly and quickly. This administration is governing on the philosophy of non-action and wait-and-see policy. There is no point in being nice to culprits, and to those who do not carry out their duties and responsibilities.

As for the Mayor's problems, these are not new, but traditional, now made more rich due to non-action. For example: keeping the drains clean and clear. In our area

(Mohammadpur), my guess is that the mosquito menace is largely due to the large number of clogged drains, specially in and around the market.

Why the drains cannot be cleared daily is not at all clear. Even for the old drains with a budget provision, the drains or the budget are clogged! Why the DCC do not try some pilot projects to transfer some of the conservancy work to the private contractors on a trial basis? Let there be visible and transparent circulation of money.

As for the pavement shops and hawkers, why there is no official reaction or comment on this nuisance — a clear example of misplaced kindness? There are very low level and basic control jobs, but, like the mosquitoes, there is absolutely no control over the situation.

Liberty is not licence, the licence may be a faked one, and the licence is likely to be misused in this country. What is the name of the all-powerful agency which is capable of ruling Dhaka? Even small problems bog us down. What are we capable of doing or delivering? The Opposition is asking a lot from the citizens, and that too free of charge, when people are not inclined to work even on payment!

Can we hear directly from the Prime Minister on drains, mosquitoes, and traffic lawlessness? The higher issues we leave to her judgement to work on silently

To the Editor...

Parliament and accountability

Sir, What would have followed and what was expected in this republic after the 1991 general election with a transition from the authoritarian to a parliamentary type of government was a 'true' accountability of the parliament.

Now, should it sound too deceptive if one calls this parliament, an abode of ruling party members, accountable to the government, or to itself only? If that be true, then the picture is not much different from what it used to be before 1990. This is deplorable.

Champak Barua, Deptt of Botany, DU

Unemployment or employment?

Sir, With the appearance of increasing number of 'No Vacancy' signboards in the Govt offices, public sector corporations and private firms more and more unemployed youths who cannot afford to pay a fee of Taka 60,000 to 80,000 to manpower agents to make their way to Middle East, Korea or Malaysia or are unable to arrange a capital of Taka ten to fifteen lakh to run a shop are growing foot-paths to earn their living as hawkers and vendors without any prejudice and hesitation.

There is alarming increase in unemployment all over our country. What is the solution? Except raising the age of retirement of the aged Govt

servants and providing most of them with reemployment facilities on contract basis our government has so far taken no step to create job opportunities for the youth of our country.

We strongly feel that like 'health for all', 'housing for all', 'food for all', 'education for all' by the year 2000 A D it is the moral responsibility of our government to ensure 'employment for all youths' before the dawn of the next century.

O H Kabir Dhaka