

Matter of Staple Food

There is a basic difference between how we and the government look at the rice situation obtaining in the country. We regard this as a crisis and very largely a man-made one. By contrast, the food minister is averse to equating the situation with a crisis and places the blame on drought, and hoarding by the private traders, avoiding any mention of the series of governmental miscalculation and mismanagement that brought us to this pass on the food front.

We are not asking him to own up what had happened before him, but in the line of our duty we feel obliged to urge the minister to clear the deck of the vested interests which have grown to live off the people's miseries. In doing this, we can assure him, he will be tremendously aided by a change of style. We are expecting a transparent readiness to face facts and disseminate credible information about the staple food of the people.

The change of guard in the food ministry said it all, a couple of months ago. The cereals security reserve was allowed to plummet dangerously to 1.26 lakh metric tonnes, by cheaply selling off so-called 'rotten', but basically ill-stocked, rice, to the traders. Then we heard the drought-induced deficit being forecast at around 4 per cent of the normal yield of Aman but in reality it ran to as high as 12 per cent. Now this shortfall in Aman harvest from last year adds up to what is certain to be a reduced FRR-Boro output in the current financial year.

What has happened in the very structure and system of food management, over the last year or so, is that foodgrains business has passed into the hands of a manipulative coterie of influential people. The government has abdicated its food procurement role to the so-called godown-wallas. With cash credit support from the banks flowing into their hands to buy rice from the farmers and no grains licensing system to control them, they are having a field-day with hoarding and price-jacking.

It must be noted that the food ministry's open market sale is not from a position of strength. Internally it has not been a procurer nor is the food import in its hands. That is why its OMS can have only a very negligible effect on market prices. All the manipulative strings are held by the lucky traders.

It will be the government's highly testing duty now to ensure fair trading practices in this vital area.

We Condemn

The continuing carnage in Karachi has now added to its casualty list two Americans who worked for the US consulate. This is for the first time that Karachi's sectarian conflagration has made foreigners the target since troubles erupted late last year. Almost a ghost city, Karachi has become ungovernable. The long-drawn turmoil in Pakistan's port city and her main financial centre is badly hurting the nation. The heinous act by terrorists, accounting for the death of two consulate staff is further indication that terrorists are bent upon discrediting not only the government of Pakistan but also the entire nation.

Terrorism as a means to achieve anything is highly condemnable. If condemnation would make the terrorists mend their ways, we are ready to join others in decrying them in the strongest language we are capable of. But those are very hardened elements and convincing them out of the wrong course could be extremely difficult. Karachi's problems are political and it has to be solved politically. It has become Pakistan's Achilles' heel mostly because the political leadership in Pakistan is taking too much time to find the right political answer to the total lawlessness in that city.

Whether the aim of the attack on the Americans in Pakistan is to hamper the process of improvement in the US-Pakistan relations is not yet clear. But the government of Benazir Bhutto would like to believe that it was part of a sinister design to bring an end to her government's initiative to improve the bilateral ties. The fact that the US first lady's visit to Pakistan later this month will go ahead as planned shows that America has confidence in the host country. However Benazir's visit to the US next month with the aim of inviting American investors to her country may be given the cold shoulder.

To know that the US has offered FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) assistance to track down the assailants is encouraging. The involvement of the US intelligence might add sophistication to the process of investigation hopefully leading to an apprehension of the assailants.

We sympathise with the bereaved families of the US victims and express our outright condemnation of such an act of terrorism.

Happy Farewell to Anne

Princess Anne has just completed a four-day visit to Bangladesh. Her visit, the second of its kind, coincided with the 25th year of the operation of Britain's largest global humanitarian organisation, Save the Children Fund (SCF). During her stay in the country she had a busy schedule to keep. As the president of SCF, Princess Anne has been able to gather first-hand knowledge of the organisation's work here. Since the Fund is mainly engaged in ensuring the welfare of children, particularly from the lowest class of society, her visit held a special significance for the country.

There has been widespread malnutrition among the country's children. It was earlier revealed that only about eight per cent of our children get the right kind of nourishment, and the rest suffer from some form of malnutrition. If the comparatively well-off families fail to provide their children with balanced diets, it is anybody's guess how the slum people, among whom the SCF works, fare in feeding their children. Already we have been shocked to know that the population is recording, on an average, a stunted growth. That the slum-dwelling children are the worst victims needs no elaboration.

The princess must have been appalled by the abject poverty she saw among the slum people. Even though her organisation is doing a commendable job, it can hardly deal with the situation single-handedly. Others should join efforts. Community development is what SCF seeks to promote. In that task it ought to find others as co-travellers.

We hope the princess' visit will help improve the services being rendered to the poor children. We wish godspeed to this endearing member of the British royal family.

Narasimha Rao in Deep Waters

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

IF Prime Minister Narasimha Rao believes that he has been able to stall disaffection in Congress by turning out from the party Arjun Singh, once his No. 2, or by adding more ministers to his cabinet, he is mistaken. The party is seething with discontent and nervousness. And it has grown too effete from factions and fatigues to come out healthy from the condition it is in.

The detractors are sharpening their knives and awaiting only the result of elections in Bihar, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Orissa before they hurl the challenge. They want to requisition the All India Congress Committee (AICC), the party's apex body, which he has avoided to summon. By the time the AICC meets, the outcome of the polls will be known and the whistle blown.

Even if Congress wins half the states — not likely — it will not be able to avert open infighting. To more and more Congressmen, Rao does not look like the leader who can turn the tide against Congress in the 1996 parliamentary election. Arjun Singh may have been the first to throw down the gauntlet but there are many other stalwarts, including former UP chief minister N D Tewari and former cabinet minister A K Anthony from Kerala, looking for the right time to strike. They too, like Arjun Singh, are convinced that Congress cannot win.

In fact, the ranks of the disgruntled have swollen following the cabinet expansion. Too many have been disappointed. Rao had to say that he would expand his ministry soon. He has even kept important portfolios like Defence, Industry and Health unfilled. But the general feeling is that, as usual, he is playing politics or putting up one against another. Persons appointed ministers prove the point.

The reinduction of Madhavrao Scindia into the cabinet is not on merit. His plus point is that he belongs to the same state, Madhya Pradesh, from where Arjun Singh hails. To underscore the point, Rao has given him Arjun Singh's old portfolio, Human Resources Development. This may be good politics but bad mathematics because it is Arjun Singh, who has most Congress legislators behind him. Scindia is only a light weight.

When I visited Bhopal last month, I found that Arjun Singh's hold had not lessened after his expulsion. At least, 35 members of the state legislature are ready to bolt Congress at his behest. Madhya Pradesh chief minister Digvijay Singh, who enjoys a majority of only 11, realises the danger and he is doing an impossible task of keeping both Rao and Arjun Singh in good humour. The government will, however, fall the day Arjun Singh decides to pull it down.

It appears that he is not yet in the game of toppling governments. For that matter, he can also oust the Karunakaran ministry in Kerala where his supporter, A K Anthony, is holding the trump card. The reply to the party charge sheet, which Arjun Singh released the other day, indicates that he expects to win back his position in the party. Obviously, he is expecting the crisis in the party to deepen after the state elections.

And now there are firm indications that Sonia Gandhi, who has been playing her cards cleverly, will have her say when the storm against Rao gathers. Whether at that time she favours Tewari or Arjun Singh is a matter of conjecture (she does not want any office for herself). There is no doubt that she believes that Rao cannot fill the vacuum of leadership that Congress faces. This is despite the fact that the prime minister calls on her regularly and gets her 'clearance' on matters of importance.

P Chidambaram's return to the cabinet is not by a long shot realisation on the part of Rao that commerce needed Chidambaram. He is close to Sonia and that is it. Rao has conveniently forgotten that Chidambaram had to leave the government under cloud when the transaction of certain shares came to light during the joint parliamentary committee's investigation into the scam. But then how does the PM break the crust of distrust that has appeared in his relations with Sonia?

She is pleased because Chidambaram, with his legal acumen, is expected to take care of the Bofors gun scandal fallout. The names of those who received kickbacks will reach New Delhi from Geneva around March 10. Some Italian connection is bound to surface. Rao will make the names public to lessen Sonia's cloud.

Buta Singh, another Rajiv Gandhi's loyalist, may chip in his earthy wisdom. But he has been taken into the cabinet, not to whitewash the Bofors gun scandal but to cut Punjab chief minister Beant Singh to size. True, he has helped Rao in the Arjun Singh affair. Yet the way Beant Singh and his family have spread all over Punjab is an embarrassment for the PM. The French government is still vainly pursuing the case in which the chief minister's grandson is alleged to have molested a French tourist.

Rao has also been horrified over the intelligence report that Beant Singh is the most unpopular chief minister in the eyes of the Sikhs. Buta Singh is expected to retrieve part of the community, at least the 35 per cent Sikh scheduled caste, to which Buta Singh belongs. This is the reason why Buta Singh has treated the show cause notice by the Punjab Congress with contempt.

There was no such consideration when Ajit Singh was made minister. Rao has, in fact, redeemed a promise which he gave him when he, along with 20 PMs from the Janata Dal, defected to the Congress to convert the Rao minority government into a majority one. Ajit Singh has little base left in western UP, once preserve of his father, Charan Singh. Since Rao cannot bank on Tewari, he believes that Ajit Singh may come in handy. (Ajit Singh has already lessened his hostility towards UP chief minister, Mulayam Singh Yadav, who is important in PM's configurations for the 1996 elections).

The ministry for Mutang Singh does not come as a surprise to those who know how resourceful he is in amassing funds and in disarming foes. He belongs to Bihar but has been elected to the Rajya Sabha from Assam like Finance Minister Manmohan Singh. This is the only thing they have in common; otherwise, the two are poles apart in intelligence, deportment and cleanliness. As minister for parliamentary affairs, Mutang Singh will be Rao's CID over the Congress MPs, who are already a wandering flock. Mutanges senior, VC Shukla is sulking these days because he was expecting a better portfolio, if not the external affairs ministry.

Left to Rao, he would not have expanded the cabinet before the budget session, knowing that it pleases a few but alienates many. The party would not have faced split even if he had deferred the expansion. But he could not resist the pressure. His problem is not the Congress party but the

government which does not adequately deliver. It is incompetent at basics and offensive regarding matters that are none of its business.

If Rao does not give social content to his governance soon, he may face a revolt from within the party. Even if he rides the storm — he may lose the Congress presidency in the process — he will only prove that he has levers of power to manage the party. But that still does not improve the image of the government, which has cost the party dearly.

The question that Congressmen are asking them-

selves is how do they come back to power in 1996? Rao's announcement through a press interview that he will lead them to victory does not help. They can do so. They increasingly believe that neither he nor the party has the charisma to attract people.

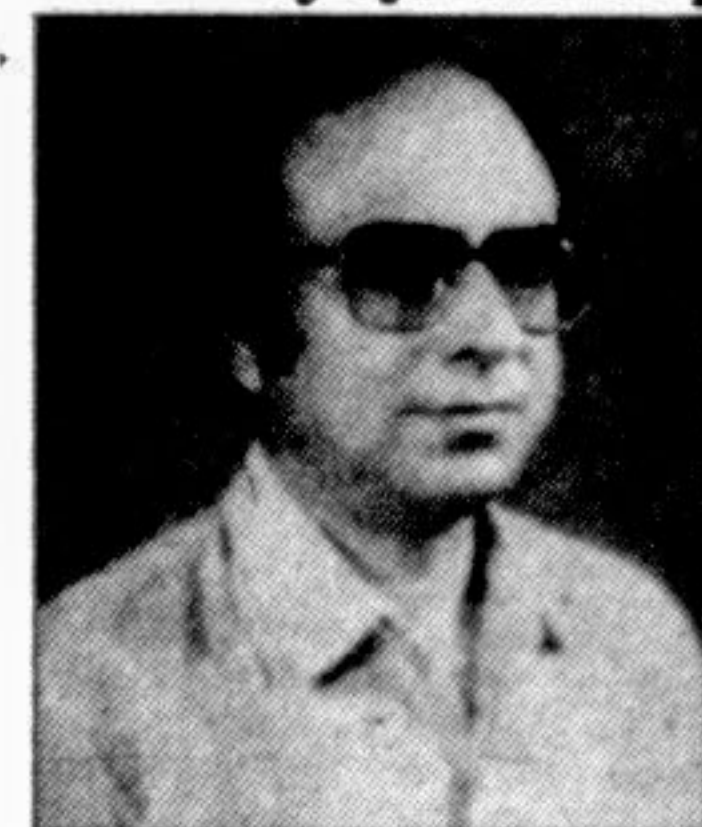
Rao may be matching the wits of his opponents in the party but he is not rewriting the poor and the minorities which were once the backbone of the Congress. Many papers have been prepared — with inputs from intelligence agencies — to chalk out programmes and policies to get back the electoral support. Rao has not yet decided which option to follow because he is still at a loss to know why the old Rao did well and why the new one is in deep waters. He very much wants his old image back if he only knew how.

Untying the Gordian Knot of Our Politics

A SERIES OF INTERVIEWS AND ARTICLES ON THE CURRENT POLITICAL CRISIS

Which Way is the Country Moving?

by Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad



WHATEVER might be the occasion — social, business, cultural, even religious — when some people get together, certain questions that tend to be asked of one another these days are: is the political gridlock going to be broken? what is actually happening? what prospects does the country face, politically, as well as from the economic point of view? I have been facing these questions over and over again — not only in Dhaka city but also in rural areas. Obviously, the deteriorating political environment has been agitating the minds of all who care to think about it. The country has been led or misled into a chaotic uncertainty.

But, why should we be facing such a situation after 24 years of liberation? It was expected that, at last, after the overthrow of the autocratic ruler in December 1990, there would be sustained progress in the country towards the establishment of a democratic political regime and a people-centred economic order. Needless to say that politics and economics are intricately entwined. The two processes feed upon each other and must therefore be consistent and vibrant in order to generate a momentum for progress. Economic weakness of a country makes it dependent on foreign aid. But, if the political process is people-centred and progressive, the country can succeed in achieving a breakthrough in the economic arena — there are examples of this in various parts of the world.

On the other hand, political chaos and divisiveness can push a poor country towards disintegration. Even an economically resourceful country can face serious consequences in relation to governance and future economic prospects if the political process is not right. In Bangladesh, poverty remains endemic, afflicting about 60 million people only on the basis of inadequacy of food intake. It is now well known that whatever economic growth has taken place in this country has largely benefited the political, economic, military, bureaucratic and other elites of the society. In a national seminar, Bangladesh Facing the 21st Century, the Prime Minister has recently said 'None of our policies and reforms will succeed until we are successful in alleviating poverty and empowering our people'. I fully endorse this statement. This clearly reflects the mutually reinforcing nature of the economic and political processes.

Indeed, two prerequisites for alleviating poverty are acceleration of economic growth and empowerment of the ordinary people so that they can actively participate in, and equitably benefit from national economic programmes, leading to a progressive reduction in the economic differentiation in the society. In fact, such an approach calls for a restructuring of the economy in a manner that ensures employment and income earning opportunities for the people at large. At the same time, their capability must be developed through basic education and trade training programmes. Side by side, a participatory democracy has to be established at all levels of the society so that no person or group of people can deprive others of their rightful share in the socio-economic and political fields. In the last week of January 1995 an international conference was held in Dhaka entitled The Bangladesh Investment Conference: The Emerging Tiger.

It is not clear from the title as to what it is that is the emerging tiger: the economy of Bangladesh or the investment conference? But I suppose the organizers have referred to the economy of Bangladesh as the emerging tiger. The conference was organized by the Bangladesh Board of Investment and the London based Euromoney Pub-

lications PLC. But let us remind ourselves that this is a country in which over half the population or about 60 million are below poverty line, per capita income is only US\$220, domestic savings rate is 6 — 7 per cent of the GDP, the investment rate runs at around 13 or 14 per cent of the GDP, and the economic growth rate is currently no better than what it was in the 1970s and 1980s, 4.5 to 5.0 per cent. To call this country an emerging economic tiger therefore cannot but be a travesty of truth, an act of making the country an international laughing stock.

Indeed, those who advised the Prime Minister to describe the country as an emerging economic tiger have behaved in a totally irresponsible and detestable way. In this context, it may be noted that Euromoney is organizing a conference in India in March 1995 entitled, India: A Global Investment Partner, and one in Sri Lanka in April 1995 entitled, Sri Lanka: Emerging Investment Opportunities.

It is possible to alleviate poverty and initiate and carry forward a process of sustainable development in this country. But for that it is crucially important that the creative energies of the people at large are developed.

The meaning of these titles are clear and consistent with the respective economic status and efforts of the countries concerned. On the other hand, the Bangladesh conference title and the reality in the country are grossly at variance with each other. Flippancy and fat-headedness often create embarrassing and ridiculous situations. Moreover, this also bedevils the process of identification of the true causes of the prevailing circumstances. Now, the political firmament of the country has become further clouded. The Speaker found the resignations of 144 Members of the Parliament constitutionally unacceptable. But it has been stated on behalf of those who resigned that the decision of the Speaker is incorrect and unacceptable and that the resignations stand. Why the impasse should have developed at all? The political parties together struggled and overthrew the autocratic rule in 1990. They suffered and sacrificed a lot in achieving that feat. If they had done that in the interest of the nation, the people and democracy, then it was their responsibility to ensure collectively that the democratic process was not hindered in any way. But it appears that the main goal of politics that they have since been pursuing is the chair. In this politics, expedience has taken precedence over justice and righteousness and corruption has come to rule supreme. In fact, constitutional obligations and provisions have been disregarded on occasions. If the Prime Minister of Israel and the President of Palestine could sit together to discuss peace for their peoples and if the white former President F.W. de Clerk could work as Deputy President under the black President Nelson Mandela (who were at loggerheads as the leaders of two confronting communities) in South Africa, I do not understand why the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in Bangladesh could not sit and work together to resolve the political impasse. They should have done that in

Looking Back at March towards Independence

March 10, 1995

Though a general feeling of agitation and excitement, triggered off by the historic Seventh March speech of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was prevalent at the time, the law and order situation all over Bangladesh improved, and the normal rhythm of life was restored in harmony with Sheikh Mujib's appeal for peace. No untoward events were reported from any quarter whatsoever. The army was already withdrawn from the Dhaka city to the barracks.

All means and networks of communications started functioning; for instance, PLA, railways and riverways resumed their services, and the vehicles started plying on the city roads.

The Awami League volunteers in groups were working for the maintenance of law and order. At night, they patrolled different parts of the city to protect property from vandals, miscreants and anti-social elements. No police personnel were depicted in the city area throughout the day.

(Compiled by Rashida Ahmad with Raheem Khaled)

the overall national interest, particularly as the country has been passing through a critical juncture in its political and economic evolution. The only reason why they should have failed to do so seems to me that they are not giving due emphasis to the interest of the nation and of the common people. Rather it is self and party interests that are the prime considerations behind their approaches and actions. If this assessment is correct, then, I suggest, they have forfeited the right to leadership of the nation. Let no one be under any illusion that it is possible to bring about socio-economic and political progress by loudmouthedness and beating one's own drum in total disregard of the prevailing realities in the country or other actors in the field. Somalia, a country in the Horn of Africa, has been big news once again over the past few weeks. The reason has been that US marines came there to facilitate and guarantee safe passage for the few remaining UNOSOM (United Nations Operation in Somalia) officials and UN peace keeping forces. In fact, the UN withdrawal from Somalia has been completed without any major incident and the US marines have also left. The country was big news in 1992 also, when US marines landed in that country to help establish law and order and the rule of law. But that mission failed quickly. When 18 US marines were killed by Aided's militia, the US government promptly decided to withdraw its forces from Somalia. The task was then left to

left by the long colonial rule and establish a national identity with all groups of people finding an equitable role and purpose in it. Hence, the interests of the common people and the nation as a whole has remained totally ignored. Instead the clan and sub-clan leaders have been vying with one another to capture the driving seat. Consequently, the country has been turned into a battle field, with clan and sub-clan leaders becoming warlords. Human life in Somalia has little value.

As mentioned earlier, there is no national government in Somalia. Hence, there is no law or justice. It is arms that are the source and controller of all power in Somalia. But this country, which at 738 sq. km., is about five times the size of Bangladesh, has a population of only 6 to 7 million. The country has huge range land, substantial areas of fertile land fit for grain cultivation, and thousands of miles of coast from where large quantities of fish can be caught.

On the whole, the country had great economic prospects. But, because of self and clan interest based leadership, an effective people-centred politics did not develop there and, consequently, the country is what it is today. This is an example that, I think, we in Bangladesh can and should learn a lot from. It is true that there is no serious division in our society along Somalian lines. Indeed, the people of Bangladesh are lucky to have a common language, heritage and culture. As a matter of fact, this homogeneity is a very important unifying factor that Bangladesh can boast of. Very few countries in the world are fortunate in this regard. Although Bangladesh is not endowed with vast economic and natural resources, it is my considered opinion that, if managed properly and purposefully, it is possible to alleviate poverty and initiate and carry forward a process of sustainable development in this country. But for that it is crucially important that the creative energies of the people at large are adequately developed and appropriately used. That would be possible only if the political process is people-centred, led by leaders, in government or in opposition, who are committed, above everything else, to enhancing and upholding national interests and the interests of the people. To be able to work to that end, they must first abandon the path of narrow self and party interest-based conflicts. Otherwise, it cannot be said for certain that a Somalia-like situation will not develop in Bangladesh. Some people are suggesting that there may be a third force waiting in the wings to take over hinting at another possible period of martial law rule. But one must understand that martial law cannot solve the basic problems facing the society. Rather another period of martial law will put the country years and years back as before, at the same time accentuating the divisiveness within the society pushing it further along for a Somalia-like situation to emerge sooner rather than later. The solution lies in an appropriate political process involving all sections of the population in an effective manner. The sooner that is understood by the present political leaders of all parties, particularly those of the ruling and the main opposition parties, and acted upon in a concerted manner towards establishing that kind of politics in the country, the saner it will be on their part and the better

it will be for the society as a whole and the people at large who have sacrificed and endured so much for so long in so many movements since 1947 for the ultimate purpose of establishing their rights and economic emancipation only to find their expectations dashed each time.