

What are They Dredging There?

This is nothing if not corruption blown up to regular anarchy. And where is it happening? The locale — Munshiganj district, Bikrampur of the centuries-old fame, that is — is one of the most important regions of this country in more ways than one. It is an eminent grower of primary produces and is home to thousands of businessmen commanding trade not only in Dhaka but all over the country. There are even more important aspects to Munshiganj's claim to special attention. Some of the mightiest rivers of our land crisscross it as some of our most influential politicians come from the area and are found in every successive government's inner sanctum. Considerations hydrographical, political and economic, joining with the fact of the area's forming a physical adjunct to the capital, has raised it into the unwinking glare of national attention.

A water link very vital for the agriculture and communication of five thanas of this district has been drying up for years and this year has, even before the advent of Chaitra, bared open a sandy white bed. According to a Daily Star report two powerful dredgers had been despatched there to revive the 10 km water link from Gouraganj to Taltala. What are the dredgers doing there for long eight months? They have between them hardly cleared even 400 square yards of silt-sand. One crew member has testified that they haven't moved a pinch of earth in the last four months.

Instead, they are piling mounds of money on pledges to elevate individual plots on the banks of the canal. They have taken so much from many as not to be able to please all at a time and match conflicting claims. The dredgers are working at how to make most of the situation while thousands of tons of harvested potato lie rotting on the bank of the dried canal for transportation to market.

Is it credible? Is it possible? The area must be seething with anger. How can government functionaries be so callous and so greedy — so openly? There may be only one answer to all such questions. Because there is no control, and there is no monitoring and accountability. All emanating from the fact that the government doesn't care. Or perhaps all its cares are heaped on things far from food and fertilizer and farming. It is in the thick of how best to beat off challenges to its political hold.

The Malady Called Hospitals

The total nursing force of the nation, some 20,000-strong, are now on a non-stop strike. Some factions have come out to dissociate from the action — but without any material effect on the virtual collapse of all kinds of hospital administration in the country.

The action comes none too unexpectedly. Authorities have been notified well in advance. And the demand on which the nurses are striking work is also well-enunciated. Without going into the merit of their points, we would like to ask the people in charge to mind that the nation does not deserve a single day devoid of hospital services and as leaders of this vital area of national health care it is their responsibility — and not the nurses — to see that the hospitals run without let-up.

The emergency squads formed in some places are simply not enough to cope with the situation. The DMCH, for instance, needs for its running about 800 nurses. What can the emergency squad of 150 pressed into service there do to plug the gap. The need is to talk across the table without wasting a minute. No progress in that direction or even any sign of any intention to get to the table was there at the expiry of the first day of the strike. This would not do. This government has time and again shown a predilection for depending rather on dividing the activists for a solution to such crisis.

The first requirement for a satisfactory way out of the present crisis is a change in the attitude of the authorities towards the nurses and nursing as a whole. While physicians and surgeons must be occupied with their true care and only the business of healing the ailing ones, it is left to the nursing staff to run the hospitals. Their true place in the management of hospitals must first of all be recognised with a view to empowering them accordingly. The mental bar that keeps authorities from seeing the light also, very unfortunately, afflicts the physicians and surgeons making the malady called hospitals almost incurable.

Tamil Factor

It is naive to think that an eleven-year-long ethno-centric Tamil insurrection against the Sinhalese-dominated state authorities will be amenable to an overnight solution.

While there has ceased to be any hardening of positions on both sides since Chandrika came to power with a clarion call for peace, the cob-webs of distrust and prejudice are still taking time to be dissolved.

Both sides have had a few rounds of peace talks since October last when the process of negotiation was heralded by Chandrika government, duly mandated to do so through the last parliamentary and presidential elections. The next round of talks are stated between April 2 and 9 with no preconditions expected to be attached by the Tamil guerilla leadership.

But if a clandestine radio broadcast by the rebels is to be believed then their leader Prabhakaran has put a spanner on the wheel. He has put three conditions before taking part in the peace talks: government has to remove a strategic military base, lift an economic embargo on rebel — held areas and waive restrictions on fishing off the northern coast. Obviously for Chandrika to yield on these points would be tantamount to losing the leverage before the talks have produced any concrete results.

Eschewing their earlier assertion not to free any prisoners till such time as the government lifts a five-year-old embargo on rebel-held areas, the guerilla leaders have released 13 policemen, held in captive for half a decade, in an unexpected development.

The bottom-line seems to be that the LTTE are being conciliatory in tiny parcels but are refusing to be tied down to a comprehensive peace formula. However, the whole world is waiting for the day when the rebels will withdraw wholesale their demand for a homeland in favour of a full protection of their minority rights within the Sri Lankan Constitution.

An Issue of Human Rights

by Ashok Mitra

SUBHAS Chandra Bose's daughter, Anita Pfaff who was brought up in Austria and now lives in the United States, was recently on a short visit to India. She happened to be present at a function in Calcutta, at the ancestral home of the Boses, to commemorate her father's birthday. The prime minister dropped in on the occasion and stayed for exactly five minutes. Anita was amazed at the widespread disruption of civic life in the neighbourhood caused by the countless charades insisted upon by the special protection force in the name of ensuring the prime minister's security. Traffic was held up for hours, important roads were blocked, men and women going about their daily chores were harassed to no end of under the garb of body search. Metal detectors were installed here, there and everywhere, part of a boundary wall encircling Netaji Bhawan was unceremoniously pulled down supposedly to facilitate better surveillance by the security personnel. Anita Pfaff's daughter, that is, Subhas Bose's granddaughter, was roughed up by the security men when she tried to move up from one row in the auditorium to another. In a press interview she gave, Anita could not be more caustic bandobast to such an obscene extent, she was forced to conclude, was a manifestation of the authoritarianism that has crept into the psyche of the country's ruling establishment.

Perhaps it is a little more than that. The latent authoritarianism is also an aspect of the imperial hang-over, reinforced by a feudal ethos which is the heritage of this country's ruling classes from time immemorial. The threat of assassination — no doubt in many instances genuine — of important political personalities has provided a golden opportunity to the establishment to set up a new pecking order. The hierarchy of security arrangements has become the device for making the common citizenry aware not just who matter in the polity, but who matter how much. Hence, the innovation of such security gradations as Z-category and non-Z category, and entitlement to so-called Black Cats cover. It hardly bothers the authorities if, under the pretext of security enforcement for very important people, ordinary men and women are put to extraordi-

nary inconvenience. The point of the arrangements is actually to ensure such inconvenience — the more ordinary men and women are harassed the more important this politician is.

Despite the cliches of democracy and the socialistic pattern the common citizenry never mattered much in this land; they matter even less now that the free forces of the market have taken over. The principal objective of the security exercise is no longer to protect a politician, but to advance his or her political cause. A fair proportion of the budgetary allocation of the Union Ministry of Home Affairs and the Home Departments of the State governments — running into hundreds of crores of rupees — is now spent as outlay for providing security cover to politically important individuals and the members of their families. One can do endless exercises to find out how many thousands of new primary schools could have been established with this money, or the number of extra villages which could have been supplied with at least one source of potable water had this money been devoted to such a purpose.

Ours is not the only country where the cult of political assassination has spread. Sweden's then prime minister, Olof Palme, was shot dead one evening nine years ago on a Stockholm thoroughfare even as he and his wife emerged, without any security tail, from a cinema show. That incident, however, has not affected the standing Swedish security arrangement, which are minimal, for important people. The present prime minister of Sweden goes about riding a bicycle; any proposal to introduce for him the kind of security vigilance which is maintained for his Indian counterpart would be regarded as both grotesque and uncalled for. Other considerations apart, in these days of suicide killer squads, however supposedly foolproof the security provided, a politician can still be cut down or blown to pieces by a man or a woman who does not care for his or her own life. To refer in this connection to the assassinations of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, and therefore the purported need for extra vigilance to guard their families, is somewhat

meaningless. Both of these personalities were provided with as much protection as this poor nation could afford to provide commensurate with their social and political status. It is debatable whether arrangements on a grander scale could have saved their lives. Indira Gandhi, for example, was shot by her own security guard, much in the manner President Sadaat of Egypt, who fell to the bullets aimed at him by troops he was taking a guard of honour from.

Shri Biswanath Pratap Singh deserves plaudits for his initiative in appealing to the Supreme Court for permission to opt of the security arrangements he is entitled to under the law as a former prime minister. That this does not suit the family members of another former prime minister, who unfortunately met a gory end, is not very relevant. Important politicians, particu-

larly those under threat, are certainly entitled to official protection. But such protection must not be at the expense of the greater weal of the general public.

A final point is that the genre of rude treatment the hapless common man received day in and day out in this country in the hands of security personnel charged with the responsibility of protecting the lives of the rich and the famous deserves a referral to the National Human Rights Commission? No politician, however important, has the right to ride roughshod over the liberties which the nation's Constitution entitles each citizen to enjoy. Where the basic rights of a handful come in conflict with the basic rights of the masses, it is the latter which must prevail.

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Looking Back at

March towards Independence

March 21, 1971

While addressing a large crowd in front of his Dhanmondi residence at Road No. 2, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the chief of Awami League, boldly pronounced that there must not be any relaxation in the movement until the demands of 75 million people of Bangladesh were fulfilled. He added that the movement, however, should certainly be a non-cooperation one, but also non-violent so that the history "the people of Bangladesh had now created in the world" could not be stained.

Sheikh Mujib told those men, women and children who were shouting slogans that the entire people had now risen in an indissoluble concert, in an indivisible unity, and reiterated that this "awakened nation" could not be subjugated any longer. "We will not allow to keep Bangladesh as a colony and a market any more," Sheikh Mujib added.

A large number of processions proceeded towards the house of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and raised slogans in favour of a non-stop struggle for independence. They also expressed solidarity with people's movement, and confidence in the leadership of the Awami League leader.

Meanwhile, the Vice-Chancellor of the Agricultural University held a special meeting with the Farm Development Committee of the University and instructed all concerned to "follow rigidly" the directive of Sheikh Mujib about agricultural activities. He urged all concerned to invest utmost efforts in the agricultural field to ensure that the economic life of Bangladesh was not disturbed and that the supply of foodstuff was maintained.

(Compiled by Afreen Huda)

Untying the Gordian Knot of Our Politics

A SERIES OF INTERVIEWS AND ARTICLES ON THE CURRENT POLITICAL CRISIS

'The Crisis is Deep-rooted, and Only can be Resolved in the Streets'

An interview with Awami League leader Suranjit Sengupta

by Nazmul Ashraf

The Daily Star (DS): What, according to you, are the reasons for the present political stalemate? What is the way out? Please elaborate your personal views on what should be the next step.

Suranjit Sengupta (SS): The reasons can be assorted under two heads — (a) non-functioning of the parliament and (b) the ruling party's usual practice of abusing the election process, the state wealth and the administrative machinery. The crisis is deep-rooted. It has originated from the very fundamental differences between the two streams of the national politics — the mainstream non-communal force evolved through the mass movement in the 70s on the basis of Bengalee nationalism and the other emerged in the post-75 era by capturing state-power through unconstitutional means and remaining in power clamping Martial Law or ruling the country in an autocratic manner.

The elemental difference between the two types of politics can also be identified as: (a) the concept of democracy unfolded through a long struggle i.e. the politics of Awami League and (b) the politics of capturing state power through conspiracy. All the fascinating forces in the state mechanism and the political parties that appeared in the post-75 period belong to the second category.

The Opposition members raised in the House the joint declaration, adopted by the three mainstream political alliances that toppled the autocratic government of Ershad, demanding autonomy of the radio and the television, scrapping of the black laws including the Indemnity Act, independence of the judiciary and many other issues to help the nascent democracy get institutionalised. But all went in vain as the ruling party did not take into consideration any of the moves by the Opposition.

On the way out of the present political crisis, I must say, the issue must be left to the people who are source of all power in a democracy. As the conflict between the two political groups is with very fundamental and what may be called quite opposite issues, the final solution seemingly lies nowhere but in the streets. Resolution of this type of rudimentary political problem is only possible in the streets. In this context, I would like to mention that the question of our liberation could not be solved through negotiation. It had to be settled through a bloody war. However, that is not the situation now. But negotiations can only help chalking out the process of solution to the persisting crisis. Dialogue cannot expedite the purification of democracy and revival of the spirit of the great liberation war. Such practice of dialogue can simply abet the day-to-day affairs relating to the process of democracy, now held hostage in the hands of those who represent a coterie, both in the national and global politics.

DS: Everybody is talking about elections, but when should it be held — within the next few months, or later in the year, or at its scheduled time, early next year? Suggest measures to be taken for the timing of your choice.

SS: The elections should be held right at this moment. Following resignation of MPs representing the majority voters, the present government is suffering from legitimacy crisis. The parliament is now crippled and existence of the government is not felt. The people can only rid the nation from this disastrous situation. Therefore, election is inevitable to seek people's verdict on the current political circumstances.

DS: How to ensure an independent Election Commission (EC)? What are the pros and cons of the EC Bill passed?

SS: To ensure a free and fair national election we announced our outline of a neu-

tral, non-party and caretaker government on December 28 and discussed earlier at length the pros and cons of holding a free, fair and neutral election under a neutral caretaker government when Sir Ninian Stephen was mediating the government-opposition dialogue. Even, our party chief Sheikh Hasina, as a last concession, proposed an alternative formula of a caretaker government under the President on January 10. But that formula has now become invalid since the ruling party did not accept that. "You can take the horse to the pond but can't force it to drink".

The political crisis created by the governing party has now resulted into a serious constitutional crisis.

Under the new world order, we'll be deprived of the last chance for national development if the current deadlock in the national politics persists. The ball is now in the government's court and I am sure that the government knows it very well what we want.

The EC Bill unilaterally passed by the treasury bench was incomplete and inadequate. Such a Bill should have been formulated and passed on the basis of consensus by all concerned.

DS: How to formulate a code of conduct for the political parties to hold elections? How to ensure the implementation of such a code.

SS: The issues relating to a fair election are interdependent on each other. We can agree to all other related issues soon after the caretaker issue is settled.

DS: What are your views on the need for a computerised voters' list and identity cards? Can we ensure fair elections without them? If we want them, then what should be the time frame for elections?

SS: For ensuring fair election, computerised voters' list and identity cards are not enough. Appointment of presiding officers and transfers and promotions of the gov-



ernment servants involved with the elections are also important. Handling these matters should not be made with any ulterior motive. And obviously, to let everything go smoothly, a neutral government must supervise the polls.

DS: We hear a lot about black money being a factor in the election. What are your suggestions to make election funding transparent and accountable?

SS: It's a commitment to the people, to the democratic system we are now back in. Had the ruling party stuck to the commitment... But unfortunately, the ruling party had not maintained it.

DS: Do you think that there should be some sort of political understanding between the ruling party and the opposition to ensure a free and fair election? Is such an understanding possible? If yes, then what should be the next step? If not, why not?

SS: I think understanding has no substitute. It is needed not only on the caretaker government issue but also on other national issues such as poverty, underdevelopment, communalism, law and order situation etc. We all have to identify the national problems first and then work together to eliminate those. But the ruling party is considering the issues as its own.

An understanding is still possible if the ruling party agrees to the opposition demands — immediate dissolution of the parliament and announcement of fresh elections under a caretaker government outlined by the major opposition parties.

Chechnyan War: 'Just' or 'Unjust'?

by Rumi Noman

FORMER Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev once said, "There will be liberation wars as long as imperialism exists, as long as colonialism exists. Wars of this kind are revolutionary wars. Such wars are not only justified, but are inevitable, for the colonialists do not freely bestow independence on the people. The people win freedom and independence only through struggle, including armed struggle." (World Marxist Review, January 1961).

This general attitude towards war and struggle corresponded the former Soviet view in regard to the 'unjust' and 'just' wars. In this view, all wars that serve interests of imperialism and of the small minority of exploiters who profit from aggression against any country or people are unjust wars that cannot be supported and must be opposed. On the other hand, wars or armed uprisings for the liberation of an oppressed country or people are just wars, and should therefore be supported. Today it is essential to distinguish between the Russian previews on war and the war that has broke out in Chechnya.

According to the Chechens the war is a colonial war. Chechnya is not properly a part of Russia but an area conquered by Czarist Russia in the middle of the last century. The only logic by which Russia can contain Chechnya is the logic

of imperialism and other than that, in a post-colonial world, no nation can make legal claim on another on the ground of geopolitical needs. After the Bolshevik revolution Communist Russia too showed more or less the same tendencies to the expansionism. Russian interest in the Balkans, in Poland, in Manchuria and outer Mongolia, in the entire border land area, can be an example here.

As a result, ex-Soviet foreign policy was always criticised by the West as a continuation of the policies of Czarist Russia; like the Czars they have had to make adjustments to the existing structure of international relations. So, the Chechens say this is their liberation war because they are fighting for their self-determination. Moreover, from the Russian side it is still unclear why they have gone so deep into it and finally involved in a full-fledged war. As a result, they have created suspicions on their own credibility. According to the New York Times, "He (Yeltsin) is isolated in the Kremlin, is badly misinformed and is falling under the sway of a war party of military and security officials. Other critics go further, speculating that Yeltsin is scheming to declare a state of emergency, cancel the 1996 presidential elections and rule by decree..."

Against this above criticism the Russian explanation is that the events in Chechnya should be seen against the background of specific political history. According to Sergei V Velichkin, Russian minister and counsellor in Bangladesh, "Their (Chechens) immediate dynamics are rooted in the circumstances surrounding the fall of the last Soviet administration in that remote Caucasus area in 1991. Its attitude towards the failed coup in Moscow in August of that year gave the local openers of that administration a long needed pretext to make a direct and predominantly physical bid for power. They had been previously unable to claim due to narrowness of their power base." He also mentions, "Dudayev led armed crowds, ousted the local government on the 6th of September and forced the parliament of the then Chechen Ingush Republic, which during the Soviet times combined the Chechen and neighbouring Ingush nation's areas into an autonomous entity of the then Russian Federation... On October 6, the so-called Executive Committee of self-styled 'United Congress of the Chechen People' headed by Dudayev announced, that the Provincial Supreme Council is abolished and on November 1, Dudayev decreed Chechnya independent thus violating Russia's constitution. Indeed there were many laws which were violated by the re-

tired general and his armed groups at that heady time of forcible occupation of local government buildings."

But whether the Chechen leader can be accused or not the Russian voice could not catch the attention of the world press as US former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger says, "It is really difficult to think Chechnya as a Russian territory when we see the Russians bomb their own cities". And apart from the Russian reply on Chechnya, their press is always less heard than the West's because of their self imposed restrictions. As a result, there has been a common idea that on any event in the world Russian versions represent only the Russian views and not an impartial analysis.

So, to avoid any misjudgment in justifying the truth in Chechnya we may need to have a clear idea about the 'justness' of the war. We may recall the war against fascism from 1939-1945, which had the greatest worldwide proportions, was just on the part of those who fought for national liberation. And it is an example because the mass guerilla warfare employed in the then Russia against the Nazi armies was but a forecast of the type of warfare that imperialist armies could expect in any aggression against a socialist country or against a country that has already liberated itself from colonialism.

To the Editor...

'Telephone Tales'

Sir, The attention of the Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board has been drawn to the editorial under caption 'Telephone tales' published in The Daily Star on 6-3-95. In this connection Bangladesh T&T Board takes this opportunity to clarify its position on the editorial.

Telecommunication is a part of infrastructure for any investment and commercial activities to thrive. To this effect, even within its scanty resources and critical availability condition T&T Board, with the approval of the Ministry, has already provided all the long distance telephone connections to the investors in EPZ, Savar with normal telephone charge — the rate normally charged within Dhaka city area. The approach obviously was to encourage the investors at the cost of T&T revenue. To cater, to the dispersed demand in industrial belts, away from the city areas, digital Multi-excess Radio system has also recently been introduced in Dhaka, Chittagong and Moulvibazar.

The present programme envisages installation of Digital Telephones and phasing out of existing Analog system. In this direction, four projects are already under implementation to provide 12,70,000 lines in the country within the next 2-3 year, of which 40,000 in Chittagong, 1,67,500 in Dhaka, 15,000 in Khulna, 10,000 in Rajshahi, 15,000 in Sylhet and 22,500 lines in 10 district head-quarters.

The present installation charge for ISD telephone has been made free and normal Digital Telephone charges have been reduced from Tk 30,000 to Tk 20,000. The shifting charge has also been reduced from Tk 5,000 to Tk 2,500. The long distance telephones charges have also been reduced from Tk 3,00,000 to Tk 70,000 only. The overseas call charge has also been reduced for off pick hours. But call rates are not in any way higher compared to that in many countries of the world.

Above factual position will certainly help everybody to appreciate the steps taken by the government and avoid hypothetical analysis in this respect.

M A Khaleque Bhuiyan Director, P R and Publications T&T Board, Dhaka

Bangabandhu Museum

Sir, I am a student living in Rajshahi who seldom visits Dhaka. So, I didn't know that there is a museum in Bangabandhu's house. When I went to Dhaka on the 6th March last and came to know about the museum, I intended to visit it. I went there incidentally on the 7th March. The historic 7th March, 1971 was a significant day for the Bengali nations. On this very day Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman led the nation towards liberation through his historic speech at the Ramna Race Course. When I wanted to enter the museum I noticed that we had to buy tickets from the counter. But why should we buy tickets to visit our great leader Bangabandhu's museum?

He was the architect, founder and father of the nation of our country. His leadership gave us freedom. In the museum I saw instances of how simple life he used to lead and also the very place where he and his family members were brutally killed by the traitors of our nation. His death was a curse for our nation.

This museum bears the remembrance of Bangabandhu. One has the right to see and know where he was brutally killed, how simple his life style was and what a great man he was! But when one has to pay money to visit the museum, one may lose one's spontaneous interest. Though the ticket price is too little, it may hurt the sentiment of some enthusiasts.

I have had information that the amount of money collected from the ticket sale is being used for the maintenance of the museum. I think that the authority should manage it from other source of income.

I request to the concerned authority to withdraw the ticket system, so that an ordinary citizen, ever a low earning rickshawpuller or a day labourer can have a spontaneous feeling and get inspired to visit the museum.

Moreover, I extremely feel that this museum should have a wide publicity in the mass media specially in the newspaper so that youths and future generation could get inspired to visit the museum.

Ummul Khair Nazid Rajshahi University campus, Rajshahi