Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

Dhaka, Thursday, March 23, 1995

Wanted Govt Statement

The fertiliser crisis is surely a created one. Not by journalists, to be sure, but by men, and situations created by them - out of greed and selfaggrandisement, inefficiency and may be sheer miscalculation. The big question that has been bedeviling this crisis of the lifeline of Bangladesh centres on how much of the greed has been politically driven. Drought is all too familiar a phenomenon for Bangladesh. The millions of victims of the yearly toll have never, as yet blamed their sufferings on the government. But fertilisers are another story. This is produced on monopoly basis by six BCIC plants and distributed by government through - for the present - the Deputy Commissioners. Bangladesh is a urea-surplus country by as much as 2 lakh tons a year. When in such a scenario farmers do not get their need of this all-important input, who will they blame? Who else is on the stage?

It is our considered opinion that government itself has contributed very substantially to this sliding into a regular panic of what was a temporary supply dislocation - of whatever size and caused by whatever reason. The situation has turned into a very grave national crisis - you cannot wish it away as you cannot as well diminish it by branding the agitators as looters. The overriding fact remains that government to date has not come up with a statement - clear and convincing and bereft of an eye on political benefit - on the whole fertiliser supply debacle. Vituperations and invectives against press or other agencies by Majid-ul Haq or all of the ministers cannot absolve the government of that responsibility. From production to distribution, through private dealers, fertiliser is exclusively a government game. It is they who must explain and clarify and guide. The statement — objective and satisfactory — is

The BCIC chief has been sacked. But he has confidently said there had been nothing wrong on BCIC front. And an eminent economist has said two much fertiliser has been exported, ostensibly to cash in on the lucrative international price, without taking into account the increased home demand resulting from the farmer's attempt to recoup the bad aman harvest. A higher price across the border may also have induced a lot of smuggling the stuff out.

But as long as the government doesn't itself say its say on whether the World Bank-imputed corruption channel or the generally suspected corruption at the mill to dealer level has any substance - and what is government doing about stopping that possible bottleneck - rumours and talk of politically-inspired downright theft will only be spreading like fire.

How many people have already been killed in the fertiliser agitations? Three died even on Tuesday. These are no terrorists or professional looters. The government must find ways other than firing to cope with farmers' agitation.

A Case for Jatra

It is indeed difficult to keep count of how many times this government has changed its decision on jatra, a traditional art and entertainment form. Once it so happened that immediately after holding a national jatra festival at the Shilpakala Academy, where the prime minister graced the awarding ceremony on conclusion of the gala event, the sword of Damocles came down on its performance in the shape of an official ban. Then it was lifted and again banned. Once for about nine months, including the peak jatra season in winter. Another jatra festival is on exactly at the same venue. We do not know if the prime minister will again distribute prizes at the concluding ceremony and pledge her patronage for the development of jatra.

However, State Minister for Cultural Affairs Jahanara Begum has had no reservation in praising this art-form and the need for protecting it from its decline. Let us hope the tone she has set will not be disturbed throughout the festival and ever after. Let also any fear of official sanction against jatra be removed once for all. This being the high summer and cultivation season, the performance of jatra in villages at this time does not at all arise. So the holding of its festival in the city is not quite out of tune. But still the hot and humid condition is hardly congenial for such an occasion.

Still the jatra groups will be delighted to get the recognition they truly deserve. The banning of jatra greatly disappointed the artistes and the audience alike. Clearly it was a body blow for them. Although the ban has gone, there are references that this art-form is surviving on indecent performance. Those who are campaigning against jatra have conveniently mixed up a highly serious artistic performance with the intervening dances. It is this dance that can be suggestive and at times even sleazy. But then, may we ask one humble question: if those dances are worse than what is passed in the name of Bangladeshi films or cinema. Jatra, we consider, is doing a good job by way of offering a healthy alternative to a large number of viewers.

Great Dhaka Delicacies

An uncorroborated press report said on Wednesday the US First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton on her visit to Bangladesh commencing April 2 would like to taste suti (sic) kabab, bakerkhani and bhapa. No doubt she had been advised on the culinary point by some old Dhaka gourmet. It is pleasing to see the greatness of Dhaka delicacies reaching the important ones of the world.

Now what is suti kabab? The reporter and his editor are less than connoisseurs of the stuff. It is suti kabab simply because of being held together by strands of thread while being turned on the spit for long hours in charcoal fire. And what is a bakerkhani, pray? The brittle and rusky and munchy round breads going by that name are nimsukha - a preservable variety of the bakerkhani which is more like a family of breads. Then what kind of a bakerkhani will be offered to Mrs Clinton? The rather greasy and sweetish bread made up of layers in the true paratha fashion? Or the tandoor baked ones featuring cheese and other goodies but made for immediate consumption?

Bhapa — the steam cake — also comes in a great many variety. Of course, if she can gorge down big lobsters done in coconut-milk — many will be the dishes she can relish now and cherish ever after.

A Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) for Dhaka

ssion that within next few years, either rickshaws would stay and cars must leave the streets of Dhaka, or rickshaws ought to be effectively banned from major arteries of public transportation as well as busy business districts, at least during working hours. However, we all know that -for any democratically elected government or the Mayor of Dhaka city, rickshaws cannot be banished from Motijheel Nawabpur-Sadarghat areas or even from near around the

Mouchak market, while,

certain parts of the Green road

give the clear impre-

would remain perpetually clogged - practically for no good reason at all. The brutal conclusion is that the sea of rickshaws would densely cover important public thoroughfares. There seems to be no alternative. Our fate is sealed: regardless of the transport mode, speed of traf-Tie would tend to be determined by the slowest moving rickshaws. We all would move. as we are all practically doing now, at the pace of a snail or the grand tortoise. Once a rickshawpuller told me that nobody wants to travel by rick shaw along Nawabpur road; everybody wants to move fast walking is therefore preferred I have even witnessed a big businessman quickly jogging towards Gulistan, while, his

Reflection of Stagnation

point near GPO.

driver followed with the car

and waited for him at the zero

Dhaka urban transportation is very fast emerging as the true reflection of the stagiration in social and political sphere of the nation. At the same time, economic growth which is showing . good promise as well as the recent bouyancy in the stock market would grind down to a halt due entirely to the utter chaos and lack of speed in moving people, goods and services from one place to the other within Dhaka metropolitan area. which itself is also growing by

leaps and bounds.

We should try to appreciate that rickshaws cannot survive as the primary means of public transport in any core metropolitan area of the world. There were rickshaws in the past in all the major Asian cities. Today. Dhaka is the only city of its size where rickshaws have not only survived but flourishing in the busiest streets and bylanes, except along one major road Therefore, it is popularly known as the VIP road

Dhaka city and its adjoining peri-urban areas contain 10 per cent of the population of the country; that means, around 12 million persons, at least 65 per cent or eight million of them use some form of public transport to move around on a regular basis (except during hartals - how can we forget?).

More important however is the growing number of people coming into the city every day as a part of the increasing flow of rural-urban migration. They must all find work but above everything is the need to move around, particularly to eke out a living - in the midst of massive flows of rickshaws as well as human beings. .

Employment Opportunity

In the midst of the miserable urban transport scenario, rickshaws are not only means of transport, they generate the essential employment opportunities for recent migrants to the city. For each rickshaw, two pullers are employed each day. Atleast 10 to 20 per cent of the pullers, being sick or ill, must abstain from work on any given day; so additional pullers are required. In addition, roadside maintenance and repair services create thousands of jobs and sources of incomes. Nobody knows how many rickshaws ply the streets of Dhaka; at least half a million, if not more. I was told that recent migrants to the city bring along their own rickshaws as

Therefore, how do we give up rickshaws? An effective ban on rickshaws is not only impossible, it is madness of the worst kind. And with rickshaws clogging the streets. how do we speed up the flow of traffic? Have we reached the

WINDOW ON ASIA **Shahed Latif** tem 25 days every month, for a

point of no return? In the world of rickshaws, do we have any other choice?

The huge dimension of daily needs of millions of people (which is likely to increase to one crore men and women by the turn of the century) to move around give rise to the inevitable solution through construction of mass rapid transit system or in short, MRT. This has happened in all other cities of comparable size. We however, never evert talked about such a possibility per haps because of poverty and destitution. The argument has been that only rickshaws are feasible when per capita income is only US\$200. For the MRT, investments are massive, involves long pay back periods and then the poverty factor would generate huge financial burdens which would be too much to bear for the government. Above all, where the rickshaws would go?

Mode of MRT

First of all, what is the MRT for Dhaka? I will define it as an elevated electric train system. through which millions of people can transit within a short time between the core city and the suburban or periurban areas at an expense which is affordable on a daily

Assume for example, an ele-

vated electric train line running from Kamalapur/Motijheel area through Hatkhola, Demra and then towards Shitalakbya river and upto Narshingdi town and beyond upto the highland areas, short of the beginning of the lowland towards Bhairab; a sister line branches off towards Narayanganj-Rupganj where a town is already being planned by RAJUK. Fast electric trains moving at an average speed of 80 to 100 kilometres per hour would mean that from several large suburban towns literally millions of passengers would be able to transit to core city areas within 25 to 40 minutes. Similar train lines can run northward upto Manikganj on one side and Mymensingh on the other. Another line can run across the river Buriganga; while, yet another route can proceed along the road towards Chittagong right upto Daudkandi. The existing roads can be followed for building elevated railway tracks on high pillars without blocking the road traffic or involving expensive land acquisition problems, except for railway stations. All the railway tracks can meet at a central point near Kamalapur railway station and the lines will be interconnected at suitable points so that an integrated mass rapid transit system is established.

The first consequence of such a MRT would be elevation of Dhaka into a mega city within a decade, if not less. the spreadout system covering practically the entire former greater Dhaka district (and may be beyond, at a later stage), would mean the possibility of developing not only one Rupganj satellite town, as planned now, but 25 to 40 such towns, each accommodating a population of 100,000 to a quarter million. Also such towns will not only be used for residential purposes, but corresponding industrial estates as well as commercial zones

can also be developed. Dynamic Context

MRT should be viewed in a highly dynamic context of the national industrial and urbanization programme. The transport system envisaged will speed up the process of economic growth in general and intensive growth of manufacturing/service sectors in particular. If all other conditions remained conducive to economic growth then a double digit growth can be sustained for the national economy as a whole through the mega city mass rapid transit system, as envisaged.

Can the existing per capita income sustain the massive investment? I have calculated that an investment of US\$ 500 million should be feasible, provided there are two million daily passengers, using the sys-

round-trip fare of Taka 10 only. The basis of the estimates are as follows: out of the total revenue of Tk 50 crore per month, if 40 per cent could be earmarked for capital repayment costs, then it would be feasible to borrow upto Tk 2.000 crore for the purpose, which is equal to half a billion .US dollars. Will the amount be sufficient for the purpose? No. state capital grant will be necessary, in addition to cheap credit from international financing sources.

Revenues Multiply

However, the most important issue is the resultant growth of the city economy through rapid expansion of residential, commercial and industrial investments - much more than the investment for

the MRT system itself. Hence both the national and the city government revenues should multiply manyfold, so much so that eventually the grant or the loan on capital account would more than pay for itself.

Dhaka would then become a leading metropolis of the region, if not of the world. And in the midst of such far reaching modernization, rickshaws are definitely going to be left far behind sleeping at the post The rickshaw pullers of today would find alternative employment or income earning opportunities in the emerging suburbs of the mega city of Dhaka. At the same time demand for rickshaws may diminish as well as spread out over a much wider area.

In reality, what would happen is less and less rickshaws would be visible out in the streets and the rate at which rickshaws vanish, would depend upon the critical rate of growth of the city economy which in itself should be accelerated by the expanding MRT system.

Looking Back at

March towards Independence March 23, 1971

The flag of Pakistan was hoisted nowhere else except in some cantonments. In fact, it was the flag of Bangladesh which was hoisted atop various government offices including the secretariat. At 7 o'clock in the morning, a large procession brought out by the Jatiya Sramik League proceeded towards the residence of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and it was at the initiative of a few leaders of this procession that the flag of Bangladesh was hoisted atop Sheikh Mujib's residence. Sheikh Mujib himself, with the same flag in hand, greeted and welcomed the procession, and delivered an emotionally charged speech before the procession.

It was apprehended earlier that the Pakistani army would patrol in the streets and also would adopt some suppressive measures. But as this did not happen till then, the confidence of the people visibly increased. A great number of processions in a head-long succession moved towards the residence of Sheikh Mujib who boldly pronounced: "We must liberate the country, using whatever means and measures we have at our disposal

In the afternoon. Sheikh Mujib, while at his residence, addressed as many as 150 journalists including the foreigners, and made the point clearly that there was no scope for retreat from the struggle for independence. Leaders like Abdul Wali Khan, Mian Mumtaz Daulatana, Air Vice-Marshall (retd) Asghar Khan, Maulana Shah Ahmad Nurani, Ghulam Muhammad Khan, among others, met Sheikh Mujib at his residence. Meanwhile, a group of singers chanting Amar Sonar Bangla and Joi Bangla Banglar Joi visited Sheikh Mu-

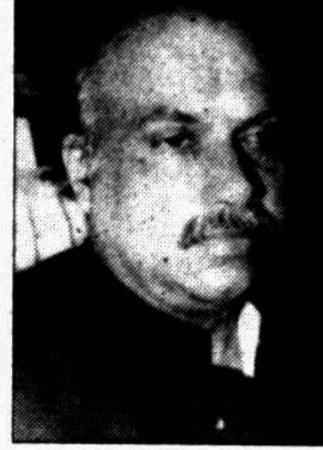
It also became known that a large number of coolies were. standing face-to-face with the Pakistani army at the Chittagong port and it was apprehended that a serious confrontation between them might occur any time at the slightest

(Compiled by Arzumand Banoo)

Untying the Gordian Knot of Our Politics

A SERIES OF INTERVIEWS AND ARTICLES ON THE CURRENT POLITICAL CRISIS

'The Present Parliament should be Dissolved and Date for Fresh Election Immediately Announced"



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

Mohammed Nasim (MN): People of Bangladesh are deeply concerned at the present political situation and the continuing stalemate. The main reason for this crisis is nothing but the failure of the government to ensure free and fair election, since their intention is to win the coming polls in whatever way possible. The ruling party got scared at the results of four City Corporation elections held in January last year and lost their confidence that they can come back to power if the next general elections are held in a free and fäir atmosphere. Due to this lack of confidence, the ruling party adopted unfair means and resorted to unprecedented rigging and vote dacoity in 'Ershad style' during the Magura by-election. The Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and the local administration as well became totally helpless and virtually 'surrendered to the ruling party as regards holding of that election. So, we think that the national elections cannot be fair if held under a party like the BNP which could not even take the risk of losing a single by-election. And this belief led the Opposition to raise the demand for holding future elections under a caretaker

government. We are always vocal against the misrule, corruption and politicisation of institutions by the BNP and we also demand removal of this government which has totally failed to run the administration. But, we want to change the government through elections - not in any other way. It is important to note that we wanted the election only after the expiry of five-year term of the BNP government. We feel that the BNP should get the opportunity to complete its term as it is an elected government. And it would be justified if the

Interview with Mohammed Nasim, Organising Secretary, Bangladesh Awami League

by Chapal Bashar

their verdict in a free and fair

To realise our demand, we have been boycotting the Parliament for a long time and also agitating in the streets. And, finally we had to go for a major decision like resignation since the government did not. change its stance.

The BNP leadership, especially Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. has been ignoring this demand from the very beginning. She has never shown her sincerity to solve the problem and failed to take a decision on the issue. While the country is now in the grip of a deep political crisis after the resignation of 147 members of Parliament representing majority of the voters and the House remains virtually ineffective, the BNP rulers are still firm on their position ignoring the impasse. The BNP rulers have also made the major institutions in a democratic order such as the judiciary, parliament and Speaker, controversial only to cling to power.

There is, only one way to overcome this crisis. That is: the present parliament should be dissolved and the date for a fresh election announced immediately. And that election should be held under a neutral non-partisan caretaker government.

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. MN: An immediate election

is the only solution to the ongoing crisis. But the Speaker has already wasted more than two months by keeping the question of MPs' resignation in limbo. So, holding of elections by March, as demanded by the Opposition earlier is not possible now. But, if the government is sincere to solve the present crisis, then it is still possible to hold the election in May. Otherwise, it will not be possible before November due to unfavourable climatic conditions. In that case crisis will persist until that time affecting the national economy heavily. which can never be desirable. Therefore, I think, election should be arranged under a caretaker government as soon

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

MN: I feel the necessity of an independent and strong Election Commission. The

relevant aspects of such an EC should be determined through discussion between the gov ernment and the Opposition. We can take decision, if necessary, on the basis of a consensus and it can be given effect through promulgation of an Ordinance by the President during the absence of Parliament. The essential features of the EC Bill can also be incorporated in our decisions

DS: How to formulate a Code of Conduct for political parties to hold elections? How to ensure implementation of such a Code?

- there is no problem in it.

MN: I hold the similar view on this issue. The government and the Opposition can formulate a Code of Conduct through discussion, for the political parties while necessary laws may be enacted to implement the Code.

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? MN: I believe that an up-

dated and corrected voters' list is essential since we now have a good number of new voters who are not in the list. We have no objection to introduce ID Cards, but the ID Cards alone cannot ensure fair election without a neutral government or administration. I have already stated that only a neutral and non-partisan government can ensure a fair election as was proved during the polls in 1991. There was no ID Card system that time. yet the elections were fair. It may not be possible to arrange ID Cards in the coming elections due to shortage of time. but it will go against interest of the people if the election is delayed on the plea of issuing ID Cards.

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

MN: There is no doubt that money has become a big factor in our election process. However, this competition of spending money will be reduced substantially if we can build a system for fair election and ensure peaceful handing over of power to an elected government every five years. A true political leadership will emerge through election if it is

DS: What are your views on the mechanism under which the next election should be held? What about constitutional amendments?

MN: The ruling party must accept the concept of a neutral caretaker government to make the next election free and fair. The government and the Opposition can prepare the framework for such a caretaker administration through discussion only, if the ruling party accepts the concept. Then we can fix the election schedule and find ways to provide legal validity to the caretaker government. I am confident that we can find out the best possible way through discussion to incorporate the provision of a caretaker government in our constitution.

DS: Do you think that there should be some sort of political understanding between the ruling party and the Opposiion 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? MN: I think there should be

an understanding between the government and the Opposition to ensure a free and fair election. It will not be possible for the government to hold a fair election without such understanding. In other words, the government cannot rule the country unless it takes the the country unless it takes the Opposition in confidence. Political stability in a poor and developing country like ours cannot be expected without an understanding between the government and the Opposition. The country is heading towards a disastrous situation due to lack of political stability. The people are keen to have a peaceful solution to the ongoing crisis they want a neutral and smooth electoral system in the country.

Therefore the government should immediately come forward to resolve the crisis. For this, the best possible step will be an announcement by Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia of accepting the concept of a neutral non-partisan caretaker government. And that announcement may be followed by discussion with the Opposition.

If this step is not taken immediately, the country will have to face a disaster which will bring in fatal consequence for the government. The country aiready had to suffer a lot due to indecision of this government. If such indecision continued I apprehend, the people may even lose their hard-earned democracy. And whether we want or not, an undemocratic and unconstitutional force may grab power for which we shall have to be answerable to the people.

people through ballot, give structure, power and all other OPINION

News Service Trends M M Ahmad

service creeded by the news agencies, specially the nationalised ones, is not according to the book, and initial professional training. The training and experience become distorted later, as far as the agencies in the public sector are concerned.

The catering tends towards publicity and propaganda, in the existing tradition of charismatic 'hero-worshipping' (add political heroine-worshipping'). The main story of the 'news" is relegated to a couple

In Baugladesh, the news The odds are that the story will be edited and made per sonality-oriented (my experience as a reader of nearly half a century)!

One example will suffice to illustrate the trend. Recently the new Rural Telephone Service (RTS) was inaugurated in a rural area by the Hon. Prime Minister, who talked to the President, as shown on the TV. heard on the radio, and read in the papers. Nothing wrong with that.

What was disappointing reader is new on the issue

of the item was devoted to the VIPs; that is, heavily personality-oriented; (c) any technical general information was avoided. The video clip showed no equipment. The human gathering is not the RTS!

The story should have been subject-oriented: telephones. not VIP (suppose the VIPs had not attended). The majority of been devoted to the RTS, as the telephone service in the country is simply awful, and public sensitivity is very high. and sharply critical.

It appears that the reporter was ordered to go to the site simply to cover the opening ceremony by a high profile personality and what was oldest citizen of the area, say,

The start of the story was

not from the service, system, equipment, or human angle. The story was not the opening ceremony, but the start of a new service, but it was not reported in that manner. The main story was downgraded to less than one-third of the space, hidden in the bottom

The question arises as to the time/space should have what is the definition of "news" Il ask as a reader)? Sermonizing (as we see daily on the BTV news) is news? Views may be news, but rarely. Action, occurrence, or policy decisions are news-worthy, depending on space and the editor's udgement

> How to switch over to a new and standard style of news service in the country for the mass media? We are under developed in news catering, but developing in another way - in now being able to criticise it! Perhaps the standard of the newspaper readers is such that they get the news treatment the story does not deserve!

were the shortcomings: (a) the opened was not the prime of lines at the end of the new RTS was not highlighted concèrn, namely, a new teledespatch (or edited in the (in the print media - the phone service. Had the renewsroom). background dope) with releporter gone there if there The newspaper readers, vant information for the casual were no opening ceremony, or namely the public, are not getreaders (always assume the the opening were done by the ting the service they deserve. and expect, from the the well known pyramid small businessman? Unlikely! "professionals" on assignment. treatment); (b) more than 90%

Lock-in als taking care of the concern Sir, This has reference to

your editorial of 13th March on the lock-in. While we do share your concern about foreign investment in the Bangladesh economy, we would have appreciated the editorial even more if you had focused on the concern of the local investors. Perhaps you had some confusion about the foreign investment through the secondary share market and the same through the Ini-

tial Public Offering (IPO). The SEC's rule was applicable only in the case of share placement through IPO. That was needed to bring equality in the share investment. You surely do not want to see the. local investors to be discriminated. In future local investors

would like to see your editori-

of the local investors. M Hossain National Bank Ltd, HO Dhaka

Aerial spray

Sir. In the context of Bangladesh, spraying of pesticides by aeroplane on the agricultural fields is rather hazardous because aerial spray causes serious pollution to the environment. Aerial spray, in addition to the 'target pests' destroys several other beneficial insects and also affects fishes, frogs, birds, livestocks and other living organisms.

strongly felt that the relevant authority discontinued the sys-M Zahidul Hague

Bangladesh Society for Conservation of Environment,

In view of the above, it is