

The Junta's Good Sense

We heave a sigh of relief with the rest of the world that Myanmar's pro-democracy movement leader Aung San Suu Kyi has been released from her six years of military confinement.

What can please us more than to see that Burma once known as politically and economically a closed country is now opening up to the rest of the world, even showing a readiness to catch up to some global trends.

The junta's bonafides will be borne out one way or the other by what it does now after Suu Kyi picks up her political life from where she had left off.

If the junta puts restrictions on Suu Kyi's political activity down the road or otherwise fails to improve its human rights records then its newly-found image will be smeared back to its blighted past.

In the best of political traditions of this region, a people's leader has been released by a military regime by the force of circumstances. This makes for a moment of joy in that country reminiscent of what we had experienced when Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was freed from jail in the aborted Agartala conspiracy case.

Want Violence-free Exam

Widespread violence and assault on invigilators, including a principal, in different examination centres have marked the on-going Higher Secondary School Certificate (HSC) examinations.

Invigilation at the examination halls is growing risky in a direct proportion to the rising trend in the adoption of unfair means by the examinees. The number of examinees expelled from the examination halls has already reached a staggering figure.

No teacher has so died this year, but apart from physical death a teacher embraces a kind of moral death when he or she is subjected to humiliation of the worst type. The BCS (Education) Association has lamented that the teachers have no power to control their students; rather it is the students' unions and organisations in association with political parties, which hold the rein.

However, dissociation of politics from education is not likely to be the remedy. The teachers must play the role of a guide and help the students to inculcate ideals that can usher in healthy politics.

Population Day Angle

The observance of the World Population Day yesterday was not different from that of any other occasion on the United Nations' calendar. Usually the concept behind each such occasion's celebration is a culmination of the good work done or the high point of achievement.

Instead of dealing more with projection, we would have done better if we had taken an accurate account of our success rates in different areas of population statistics. After the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo last September, the focus has shifted on to the individual human beings as against the numerical values.

That brings up a whole lot of questions relating to resource distribution, gender equality and the environmental concerns. Education and empowerment have, therefore, been found to be the key factors in changing the fate of individuals.

The prime minister's not-so-common meeting with the Overseas Correspondents Association of Bangladesh (OCAB) on Saturday last can hardly be dismissed as a mere propaganda gambit.

By adroitly using an important platform like OCAB and by telecasting the event at prime time, the prime minister also sent another powerful message — both for home and abroad — that her party, if voted to power again, won't renew the 25-year Indo-Bangladesh Friendship Treaty.

For the time being, however, the most important issue is not the Indo-Bangladesh Friendship Treaty, but the first one — the prime minister's wholesale rejection of the opposition demand for holding the next general election under a caretaker government.

Hold National Referendum on the Issue of Caretaker Government

To ascertain people's demand, why not ask the people — through a referendum — whether they want general election under a caretaker government. Time has come to understand that the issue of caretaker government can no more be kept within the floors of parliament, in the corridors of judiciary or in the cloistered world of state power.

MPs refuse to join the parliament, the government, she believes, is left with the only one option 'to strictly follow the Constitution to uphold democracy and the constitutional process.'

As the prime minister hardens her stand and buys time by referring the issue of the en masse resignation of the opposition MPs from the parliament to the Supreme Court, the opposition seems to be equally adamant for holding the next general election under a neutral caretaker government.

Be that contrary to the Constitution or not, by agreeing to the Commonwealth-brokered negotiations the ruling party has, in principle, already agreed to the idea of holding the next general election under a caretaker government.

believed to be the composition of the caretaker government and how long before the date of the general election the prime minister should resign. The opposition has been demanding her resignation 90 days before the general election.

was she who agreed to step down before 30 days. The deadlock continues, intensifying its magnitude everyday and increasing the chances for eventual settling of the matter on the streets.

Why then, the ruling party will give in to the demands of the opposition? Why will it resign from power in the absence of any formidable threat or genuine, popularly supported demand? What guarantee is there that the demand for a caretaker government is a popularly supported one? Viewed from this perspective, it can

against the government. Although it led to deaths of more than a dozen of ordinary farmers — besides nationwide hue and cry against the alleged corruption by the ruling party — the opposition miserably failed to capitalize the issue for building up their rapport with the masses.

None should, however, consider the opposition demands absolutely irrational. There are plenty of examples in the developing world where ruling parties enjoy distinct advantages over the opposition in the elections.

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be argued that the ruling party has already shown enough sensitivity to the demand of the opposition by agreeing to the concept of caretaker government, and the opposition missed the boat by not accepting the Commonwealth-brokered negotiation that also called for resignation of the prime minister 30 days before the election.

Therefore, the position and the opposition must reach a common ground — both have to be compromising for consolidating democracy in the country. As the date for general election is drawing close, imperatives for settling up the issue of the caretaker government are receiving ever greater significance.

party becomes incredibly difficult because the opposition has to fight not only against the ruling party, but also against powerful state paraphernalia. Holding the elections under a neutral caretaker government will deny any party such monopoly access to state power and may pave the way for a neutral, free and fair election among all competing parties.

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If, however, no formula can be found within the Constitution, may be it is worth to amend it for the sake of the people's demand. After all, the people are not for the Constitution, the Constitution is for the people.

CROSSCURRENTS

by CAF Dowlah



Don't Tag Conscience with Payment of Bills

by Nilratan Halder

The defaulting culture has seeped into all areas of our life and the discriminatory provision for penalty only exposes the administrative incompetence. The rule of the game demands that all people are treated equally for the same privileges or offences.

Of the few ministers in Khaleda Zia's cabinet, who have been able to draw public attention, Tariqul Islam, in charge of the post and telecommunication portfolio, is certainly one. Once he made it a point to make surprise visits to telephone exchanges, this was to see for himself how the offices under his ministry worked.

Another of his famous — almost quotable — statements concerns his fear for press people and a section of the social elite. His latest claim that the Members of Parliament (MPs) who have failed to pay their telephone bills are conscientious, comes as no revelation.

The question of taking action in the future does not arise. What we want to know whether the normal procedures that follow in case of a subscriber failing to make payment

of bills, were at all followed. Evidently, no move was made against the 'honourable' — or should we say conscientious — subscribers. We have never heard of any drive to disconnect telephone connections of the MPs.

These questions are important but not more than the minister's contention that the defaulting members are conscientious people. So conscientious that the minister still harbours optimism that they will make their

bill-payment record up-to-date. What after all has conscience to do with payment of bills that are given to them as an allowance? Each MP receives as much as Tk 4,000 per month, which amount by any standard in this country should be enough.

So it is not the only case where the allotted resource is not used for what it was meant. Government departments do not pay each other's bills and dues. Newspaper reports have brought to the public what a staggering amount is thus payable to or by such departments. But why? Each such establishment makes its budget and with provision for some adjustments and readjustments. So the culture of defaulting payment is set at the top government level. It is a

violation of laws but no action ever follows. The various departments are not facing unforeseen financial crises like individual subscribers who may run into various troubles because of loss in business, unexpected expenditures etc. So there is no rationale for non-payment of bills by the government establishments.

We are talking about pure business deals. On that account both the government departments and MPs have set a bad precedent. If they are not penalised for their default, why should an individual feel obliged to make regular payment of his or her bills? In a country such double standards and dual treatment are bound to sour relations between the administration and the public.

In a situation like this, it is the vested interest groups who reap ill-gotten benefits as the government continues to undermine its own governance through setting damaging precedents for the whole country to join in the fray.

But in practice it is the small farmers whose properties are confiscated for non-repayment of loans, whereas the big industrial defaulters go scot-free. So the government actually sets the tone and pace of such transactions and the country only runs accordingly.

Chechnya: Uneasy Truce

by Arshad-uz Zaman

The latest hostage drama in Chechnya, when more than a thousand ethnic Russians were held by the Chechens, must have brought forcefully the truth that the Chechen situation is a tinder box for Russian President Boris Yeltsin.

SIX months ago Russian troops marched into Grozny, the dusty tiny capital of the Caucasian Republic Chechnya. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the largest state of the world and the second Superpower, this was the first time that Russian troops were marching out of her borders.

Dzokhar Dudayev, the self-styled President of Chechnya, proclaimed independence even before the Soviet Union broke up some four years ago. No state so far has recognised the independence of Chechnya. That has not prevented Dudayev from continuing his solo campaign against what can easily be compared as a contest between tiny David and mighty Goliath.

In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union 15 independent states were born. In a bid to hold them close to her, Russia has created the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), with headquarters in Moscow. Seven decades of Communism and centrally operated state — which was the Soviet Union — a new relationship is slowly emerging since the collapse of the giant state. It is too early to predict the ultimate outcome of this

experiment. Although it is called a Commonwealth, we who have long lived with this experiment must not confuse ours with the Russian experiment.

Chechnya falls into a totally different category from the CIS states. Juridically it is a part of Russia. It is due to this simple fact that no state has so far considered according recognition to the self proclaimed Republic of Chechnya. Furthermore although there is criticism of military action by Russia against tiny Chechnya, it is muted due to this fact that the events are taking place technically within Russian borders. Yet each passing day is bringing forcefully out the fact that there is no quick fix, no easy solution for Russia. Indeed sending of Russian troops was preceded by visible hesitation in Moscow. The memory of Soviet troops getting bogged down in Afghanistan for ten long years in the dying days of the Soviet Union, was not such a distant event. The Soviet Union was living then in the twilight of her Superpower status. Now shorn of that, without a Communist Party as her vehicle for her worldwide ambitions, for an average Russian there is far less justification in dying in the harsh Caucasian mountains. The latest hostage drama in

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heritor of Superpower Soviet Union, appears more and more as a near ally. What a transformation from the mighty competitor of the USA after the Second World War!

Tiny Chechnya presents large Russia with a cruel dilemma. The six month old war has not been able to snuff out the fire of independence lit by Dzokhar Dudayev and his men. Chechnya is a large enough area and there are many other Chechens ready to explode. Within Russia there are more than a dozen ethnic varieties. The Chechen fighters in the hills have many co-religionists and ethnic kins ready to provide everything from shelter to arms. Departure of Chechnya may lead to a similar situation like we witnessed in the Baltic Republics in the north, when the Soviet Union collapsed. An emboldened Russia, shorn of Superpower pretensions, can ill afford to be dragged into a prolonged fight. It will take enormous guts and risk taking to move away from military solution and work out a political one in Chechnya. Boris Yeltsin showed real courage when he faced army tanks from his White House in Moscow nearly three years ago. The world will watch if he can show the same leadership today in Chechnya.

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To the Editor...

Tax on house property income-II

Sir, We request our Finance Minister not to throw us at the mercy of his assessing officers. So let the existing rule on assessment (tax on house property income) continue. Or else we will be constrained to hold up our plan to build multi-story flats to ease the accommodation problem of the metropolises.

Our Finance Minister rather should continue his pressure to realise the several thousand crores of taka taken as loan by some so-called unscrupulous industrialists on the plea of projects/industries, which were found fake.

Fl. Li. (R) ABM Mohiuddin Dhaka

IPS officers

Sir, Probably the subject is becoming a little boring to some, but if we are remembering our bright boys — we should not forget two who were left out.

1) Mr Taslimuddin Ahmed — who joined IPS through competition. He got a first class in Economics from Presidency College, Calcutta.

2) Mr A M S Ahmed (Mussa Ahmed) — who also joined IPS through competition.

Both of them, served in various important positions and are now in retirement.

A Khair 52, Motijheel CA Dhaka

"Twenty gems" of DU

Sir, It is with great astonishment that we are watching what is happening in DU — the Oxford of the East. Recently, we came to know that DU authority is going to introduce integrated course system in order to improve the standard of education. We cordially welcomes this opportune step.

In sharp contrast to this measure, the present activities of DU VC (and all others involved) is extremely disheartening. In these days, when

students compete to get a place in any educational institutions through tough competition, who are these 'twenty gems' for whom the VC himself is resolved to get a place in the same even though they did not sit for an exam? We wonder, what quality made them so lucky? Can we not keep education system free from politics to ensure quality education?

I Ara, F Ara Boro Maghbaraz, Dhaka

The burden of the state

Sir, We had an opportunity to read an article of Mr. CAF Dowlah under the title 'The Burden of the State Sector on the Nation's Exchequer Must be Reduced' in your paper on the 14th June. It is an open secret that our power sector, jute sector, textile mills, steel and engineering and financial institutions etc nowadays are a burden for the state and day-by-day it is becoming unbearable. The international institutions like World Bank and IMF etc are creating pres-

sure to mitigate such problems for overall economic development by using economic reforms. But government is unable to implement such reforms due to political unrest. Unemployment is the origin of all unrest. So, we suggest the alternatives for reforms in such sectors as under:

(1) The unemployed persons should be absorbed in the agriculture sector where we found wide scope for employment to fulfill and substitute food import and other agri-based products like onions, pulses etc.

(2) Export-oriented industries like garment industries should be encouraged widely over the country.

(3) There are wide scope for joint venture projects with neighbouring countries.

(4) The last but not the least suggestion is to make agreements between the employees and the employers to share loss and profit of an enterprise where government will not pay any subsistence.

M Ali Rajshahi

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

Appointment Disappointment in Washington

DEAR Diary, I have just been nominated for Secretary of Jogging in the Clinton Administration. This is one of the most important positions, as everyone in the government who jogs — including the President — has to report to me.

The President had me and my family over to the White House for the announcement, where we took pictures and my children got to meet Chelsea and socks and Barbara Streisand, which they told me was the thrill of their lives.

To prove that my position really was important, the President and I jogged around the East Room while the photographers took photos.

Dear Diary, There seem to be few glitches in my confirmation. Rush Limbaugh found out that I burned a flag in 1978 to protest the slow delivery of my mail. I denied it and received a call from the President, who said he supported me 110 percent, which was even more than he supported Henry Foster for Surgeon General.

To make matters even worse, Bob Dole said on the floor of the Senate that he had it on authority that I had attended an R-rated film at a shopping mall in my youth, and I refused to say whether I would ever go to another Sharon Stone movie.

Dear Diary, Sen. Jesse Helms is on my case because I wrote an article advocating that runners give up tobacco as it would adversely affect their breathing. Helms said I was no more than a yellow, dirty, filthy dog who was interfering in the lives of those who wanted to smoke and jog at the same time.

They're really after me now. I said in a question-and-answer period at an Elks luncheon that Newt Gingrich's book was an abortion, and I didn't understand why anybody would buy it.

The Rupert Murdoch people, the book's publishers, are now attacking me in every one of Rupert's papers, saying that if I were made Secretary of Jogging, I would push for AIDS research and forbid runners to carry hidden handguns under their T-shirts. I never said this — but go fight Rupert Murdoch.

I called the White House to find out if the President still supported me. Hillary said he was in the shower, but the President still was behind me, and he never reneges on a promise.

Dear Diary, Bad news from the FBI. A report leaked to Robert Novak said that two students I went to public school with said I never prayed in class.

The White House is furious I never told them and said it's things like this that make their job so much harder. I asked if I still had the blessing of the big guy — and they assured me that I did, unless it turns out that I gave money to my local PBS station.

Dear Diary, The filibuster still continues as I write this. The Republicans have decided to use my nomination as a means to destroy all the environmental laws passed in the last 20 years. I intend to call the President tomorrow to find out why Chelsea won't take my kids' calls.

Dear Diary, The President invited me to his Oval Office to announce that (ital) I (unital) was withdrawing my name as secretary. This came as a surprise to me, as I had made no mention of pulling out and was prepared to fight. The President spoke with regret and emotion, saying he had never been so disappointed in his life and Congress better not try to block his next choice. Next to my being nominated as secretary, this was the most memorable moment of my life.

By arrangement with Los Angeles Times Syndicate and UNB.