

Harsh Words from a Softspoken Envoy

Japanese are by nature reticent and soft-spoken to a fault. It is very seldom, if ever, they speak either in terms of warning or threat. But when they do, whoever it is being addressed to, better listen. The Japanese envoy to our country, Shigeo Takenaka, while addressing the JICA Alumni Association on Thursday warned that future Japanese assistance to Bangladesh may become uncertain. Why? Because of massive mismanagement in project implementation. He was not merely giving his personal opinion, but was conveying a rising sentiment of the Japanese electorate, which will no doubt influence the actions of policy makers.

What the Japanese envoy was referring to had to do with our failure to make proper and timely use of aid which friendly countries offer to us. The word "mismanagement", in diplomatic parlance, could also mean corruption. Has our project implementation process become so corrupt that donors are threatening to withdraw?

In a world where demand for aid is on a steep climb and the assistance kitty is shrinking, why should we be creating a situation that is jeopardising our chances of getting a share of that scarce commodity? Complaints against our cumbersome and time-consuming bureaucratic procedures are not new. This is one of the first things that this government promised to streamline. To hear the Japanese envoy talk about a thing that we promised to fix up years ago, is totally unacceptable. The 'one-step implementation procedure' that the LGED chief engineer suggested is the obvious answer. But how long are we going to take to implement something which is so very obvious, and so much to our own interest?

Do not take the Japanese envoy's words amiss. What he said is the truth, and the quicker we do something about the things he has warned us about, the better we will be.

Danger Signal No. 8

The government does not miss a chance to pat itself on the back for increasing the budget allocation for education radically to a level above all other sectors. No one should grudge genuinely complimenting the government for this although the wary ones would at once want to know if the nation was getting back its money's worth.

There is a feeling shared universally by our citizens that, in spite of the big spending, the standard of education was falling fast and unremittingly. Some reasons for this are also common knowledge: a big chunk virtually goes into non-education from which the society can expect no return by way of increased scientific and technological capability and capacity for knowledge. Another chunk goes to constructing things and maintaining them. Then the biggest part goes to salaries — mainly for teachers whose performance is at best substandard.

The Education Secretary has come up with something that beats all this. Making a farce of the government's unceasing talk — championing of education and cultivation of science, last year only 7,800 appeared from all science groups for the degree exams. This was out of a 1.83 lakh total. And again of these 7.8 thousand, less than 10 per cent had mathematics. If this is the yearly output of scientific manpower of a 110-million nation, placed so very critically in a develop or die situation, the whole of our educational juggernaut should be thrown to the Padma. What are we spending hundreds of billions for?

Without substantial scientific and technical capability no nation will survive the challenges of the new millennium. And without a sound mathematical base, no science education will be able to pull the nation out of morass of backwardness. Now the question is who is responsible for such a situation? The billions government has been spending on education are in fact acting as no more than doles given without the thought of any return or benefit to the nation.

There is a signal in 90 per cent of science graduates shunning mathematics. In meteorological terms, this could be signal number eight to be hoisted at all universities and ministry headquarters.

Karachi Continues to Bleed

The reprisal killing of 26 people in the Orangi neighbourhood of Pakistan's biggest port city is a most reprehensible act. In retaliation for the police killing of Farooq Dada of MQM, party activists went on a murderous rampage. We condemn this killing of the innocent people, and hope that peace and sanity returns soon to Karachi. But having expressed our condemnation for this dastardly act, we must hasten to add that both the Federal and the Provincial governments seem to be acting more out of an "us" versus "them" mentality, rather than one of trying to work out a peaceful solution with the MQM. We think that instead of looking at it as a political problem, the Pakistani Prime Minister is seeing it as a personal challenge. So the problem appears to have turned into a personality clash. As we know in politics, whenever a problem is personalised, the actors lose flexibility and maneuverability.

Pakistani people and leaders will have to face the fact that the MQM members are Pakistani citizens who are clamouring for their share of justice and fairplay. We condemn the means the MQM has adopted to realise their demands. But the question must be asked as to why these migrant Muslims feel the necessity to call themselves "Muhajirs" 45 years after the birth of Pakistan? The very justification for the birth of Pakistan was to provide homeland for the Muslims of India. So why should these people, having migrated from their original homes more than four decades ago, still feel themselves to be outsiders? Regardless of the justification of their demands, the very fact of the existence of a movement on ethnic lines, as MQM is, raises serious questions about how successful Pakistan has been in keeping to the promise of its birth.

While Pakistan's leaders use human lives as cannon fodder to play their ego-games, Karachi bleeds and innocent people die. We pray that sanity returns to those who are causing this harm to Pakistan.

WHILE bad news usually gripe us all, spark of good news often tends to console us amidst a realm of despair. It is reported that Bangladesh Bank (BB) in its rare attempts to tighten ropes on bank loan defaulters, instructed all private banks to recoup the outstanding loans lying with their respective directors. It has been brought to the notice of the BB that defaulting loans of the directors of private banks have been bulging over time and a failure to take timely action might cause the hitherto fragile financial sector to faint. Available statistics point to a worsening of situations with respect to credit in private banks while directors of the banks themselves are allegedly involved in unlawful credit business. However, in response to the BB instructions, three directors of the Arab-Bangladesh Bank are reported to have already tendered their resignations, some more are in the offing and about twenty-five directors of different private banks are reported to likely face the firing squad. It may be mentioned here that, of late, there have been some revisions incorporated in the Banking Company Act (the revision awaits approval from parliament) in which it is stipulated that defaulting directors would be forced to vacate their seats as directors if they fail to return the bank money on time; the outstanding loans would be recouped from the share they hold with the bank and if that fails

If the policy makers like to move with a deterministic attitude to wipe out loan defaults, there is no reason as to why we would witness a failure. In this connection, we would like to argue that bank defaulters should be barred from participating in national elections and necessary laws should be enacted in this regard.

to fetch the total loan amount, necessary arrangements would follow, under the existing rules of the country, to chase the defaulters.

Complaints about private commercial banks in Bangladesh are not new either. It has long been alleged that many of the banks derive their blood from the wreckage of the nationalised commercial banks (NCBs) in Bangladesh. In other words, many of the large defaulters of NCBs are now observed to be directors and shareholders of newly established private banks. And once they are in the cockpit of the banks, so runs the allegation, they tend to use their influence to direct depositors' money to their favour and thus showing no respect to the banking laws of the country. As a result, private banks fail to capture an edge over NCBs. If this trend tends to continue, the consequences could be fatal as far as our financial sector is concerned.

We, therefore, would like to record our appreciations for the BB for its move, be it lauded although, to mop up the outstanding loans due to be paid by the directors but accruing to the public. In an earlier note in this column, we deliberated on the importance of elevating the moni-

toring and supervisory capacity of the BB. Throughout the world, the central banks usually enjoy status of whipping scheduled banks on a regular basis to follow financial norms as enshrined in Banking and Company Rules. But to materialize those wills, a central bank is generally entrusted with relatively more autonomy in policy formulations and implemen-

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port that heavy pressures are being thrown to postpone the digging also concerns and scares us. It is known to us that loan defaulters, by hook or by crook, assume top seats in the society and any attempt to subvert their interests (no matter what it does for the nation), quite obviously, might arouse strong resistance. In this connection, it may be mentioned

wipe out loan defaults, there is no reason as to why we would witness a failure. In this connection, we would like to argue that bank defaulters should be barred from participating in national elections and necessary laws should be enacted in this regard. We are informed that loan defaulters are not eligible to participate in local level elections. If that is so, why not the same principle be applied in the case of parliamentary elections? This would obviously need a consensus from both the government and the opposition side. We hope that our learned politicians, who claim themselves as patriots and friends of the people, would agree to disagree on the eligibility of loan defaulters for their participation in general elections. That would, possibly, free our politics to some extent, from the bondage of black money and arms chase.

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



At the same time, the re-

here that few months after stepping into power, the present regime seemingly vowed to initiate a crack down on bank loan defaulters. For whatever reasons, however, the government stopped going further. We do not know yet how far can BB or any other agency of the government can proceed further with loan defaulting directors and the associated syndromes in the banking sector.

It is, at the end of the day, the political will that would matter most in this tough journey. If the policy makers like to move with a deterministic attitude to

For an Interference-free Independent Election Commission

by Muhammad Quamrul Islam

IN spite of various amendments made in the Constitution, Article 118(4) remains intact, since its enforcement in 1972, which reads as follows: "The Election Commission shall be independent in the exercise of its functions and subject only to this Constitution and any other law."

It is correctly said that Election Commission has ample powers, which, if effectively used, without fear and favour, can greatly contribute to ensure a free and fair election. Of course, everything do not depend on Election Commission alone for the simple reason that election is a political process, not merely an administrative one. The new Chief Election Commissioner has emphatically said to apply powers according to law and assured his 'neutrality to all concerned, who have submitted memoranda to him on electoral matters.'

The current activities at the Election Commission, as reported in the press, corroborate his good intentions. It is now the collective responsibility of all political parties, particularly the party-in-power and mainstream opposition, to cooperate with the Election Commission, to create a congenial atmosphere for the election to the 6th parliament. We expect the Ministry of Law to remain alert, to move swiftly to enact laws conducive to democratic values and stop malpractices in election whatsoever.

Continuously eight sessions of the 5th Parliament, from end of 13th to 20th, have been held, without opposition members in the House. From voters' point of view, we have been earnestly waiting to see an end to the prolonged political stalemate, inside and outside the

parliament, in any way deemed fit, by the Leader of the Opposition. But to no effect and the nation has lost almost an year and a half in a suffocating situation, rampant corruption and sluggish investment. It is reported that Bangladesh is lagging far behind its neighbouring countries in the field of direct foreign investment. During 1994, the total direct foreign investment in Bangladesh was only 17 million dollars; whereas for the said year it was 1700 million dollar in Vietnam and 1500 million dollar in Cambodia. We have mentioned these two countries, whose low per capita income is comparable to ours, if 235 dollar as stated in the Govt 'Economic Reviews 1995' is taken into account. Otherwise, the position will be worse if the per capita income of Bangladesh is taken to be 117 dollar or less, as estimated by some responsible quarters. It is needless to mention Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia where inflows of FDI were 4000 million dollar, 2100 million dollar and 3500 million dollar respectively, not to speak of China. We wonder if such dismal statistics at all worry our policy makers, political leaders, local consultants and intelligentsia!

To recall, Coordinating Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh (CCHRB), an NGO, took an initiative to break the deadlock in Parliament through dialogue and declared a negotiating team for that purpose. But the members of the negotiating team expressed their inability to move the matter, in one way or the other. Earlier, the Commonwealth formula, though acceptable to the BNP Government, was not acceptable to the opposition, and,

as such, failed to reach a settlement. Other NGOs working in the Human Rights sector also made efforts on their own, on the issue of caretaker government, to ensure a free and fair election. But the political parties did not heed to it. There are seemingly valid reasons for that. Although NGOs are supposed to be voluntary and non-political, the office-bearers mostly have connections with politics and government, overtly or covertly. So they can not generate confidence among the 'competing' political parties about their 'neutrality'.

It is the constitutional responsibility of Election Commission to direct, control and monitor the elections; to make it free and fair. No body else can encroach upon it.

Meanwhile, Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA), a consortium of few NGOs, declared their programme formally on 24th July. It was stated before that this initiative was for observing election. FEMA took a plan to appoint 30 thousand workers to observe the next election, with the fund of a USA-based NGO, NDI. It is learnt that the Director of UN Election Assistance Division did not recommend their request. Instead, he advised FEMA to change their plan and assist to train the electoral workers of the political parties. It is undoubtedly a good piece of advice from the Director, which, we are afraid, FEMA can hardly materialize. From 1993, concerned NGOs have arranged a lot of seminars/talks pertaining to election matters with no tangible result so far. In 1991 election to the 5th parliament, there was no FEMA. Election was free and fair, widely acclaimed. We don't require

any stage. It is the constitutional responsibility of Election Commission to direct, control and monitor the elections; to make it free and fair. No body else can encroach upon it. In our country, where two-thirds of voters are illiterate, NGOs can launch civic education campaign and also train the workers of the political parties. That is a priority task, which the Election Commission cannot perform singlehandedly, in view of time constraint and heavy electoral workload at Headquarters, with District Election Officers and Thana Election Officers.

NGO leadership is well aware of the prevailing disenchantment of people with political parties. People and analysts are totally fed up with the activities of the political leaders, so much so that one elderly analyst has suggested sarcastically that

political parties should issue shares in the stock exchange, as politics has turned into 'businessmen's activity'. Millionaires, industrialists and black money holders are already in the arena of politics and are vying to please the leaders to get party nomination for the next election. It may be recalled that after the last election to the 5th parliament, it was revealed that a sizable number of MPs are millionaires and industrialists, having no background in politics. But, that fact could not stir the mind of the leaders to rectify the unwanted situation and make room for the genuine politicians to participate in political activities and elections. So, it is felt that non-political moneyed men may gain more seats in the next election! Those days are gone when politics meant sacrifice and dedication, to change the lot of the people and uplift the country. But negation of age-old definition of politics, and commercialisation of it, is continuously pushing our country backwards perhaps at the behest of unscrupulous few — in comparison with our neighbouring countries in South East Asia, not to speak of Europe or America.

To obviate the above impasse the NGOs can use their skill and expertise to devise something effective to motivate the politicians and workers; assist the Govt electoral officers and liaise with the Election Commission. Over here, law may be enacted providing for registration of political parties with the Chief Election Commissioner, a constitutional person, and not the Government. Such precedence is available in other countries. In that case, the Chief Election Commissioner would be able to apply Article 152 of the Constitution as to the interpretation of 'political party'; seek registered political party's commitment to free and fair election; take such measures as to revive our political heritage of cleanliness and growth. The Political Parties Regulation, 1976, and amendments thereto, should be repealed forthwith, and a fresh Electoral Law enacted immediately. Can we expect response in this regard from those who matter in the interest of our poverty ridden country, aspiring for growth and democracy!

The writer is an economist and Advocate, Bangladesh Supreme Court.

To the Editor...

Save Dhaka — BRTA clarifies

Sir, I congratulate you and The Daily Star for organising an "Open discussion on streets of Dhaka" under your campaign "Save Dhaka" and thank you very much for inviting me as a speaker in the first session of the discussion. I have gone through the report on the discussion in The Daily Star of August 1, 1995. The coverage of the discussion has been very extensive and I feel that your efforts will go a long way to create awareness among the citizens of Dhaka to make the city a better place to live in.

However, I would like to point out that while rendering my speech more or less correctly, the reference to the 50 million dollar DITS Project has not been properly reflected. I mentioned categorically that this World Bank project had been submitted recently to the Government by the World Bank as a concept and no details had been worked out. But it has been mentioned in the report that the Project "has been approved by the Govt". This may create confusion and I would request you to kindly clarify the position by issuing a corrigendum immediately.

the traffic and the transport sectors of the country.

Mr Ismail Husain, Chairman, BRTA

Barrister Ishtiaq's formula

Sir, Barrister Ishtiaq's formula for a caretaker government under the present Constitution appears undemocratic as according to the formula the political parties shall decide on who should be the members of the parliament. In a democracy, it is the people who must exercise their right to elect members to the parliament and not the political parties. Indeed, this is no way to stop independent candidates to contest seats in those selected constituencies. Neither the political parties nor the Election Commission has the right to stop people contesting for the seats of the parliament.

I am sure, Barrister Ishtiaq has advanced this formula with all sincerity in order to get over the present political crisis, but his proposal has apparently not fully taken into account people's democratic rights. If the political parties agree on the principle of a non-partisan caretaker government, it would be simpler if they agree on the persons who would form the caretaker

government to hold the election in an impartial and totally democratic manner. These persons need not be the members of the parliament. Indeed, some or may be all of such nominated members would never like to go for such election. It would be advisable to incorporate such provision in the Constitution, if necessary, after the general election for accommodating the present needs than to resort to such an election.

The formula also suggests tinkering with the election process in a way that as per formula the parliament is supposed to be convened immediately after candidates for those ten seats are elected uncontested and consequently election to other seats are abandoned. This process may look like interfering with the work of the Election Commission. Thus the whole formula, if I have understood it correctly, may undermine the work of the Election Commission and indeed, go against the normal democratic practices.

Misheuddin Ahmad Gulshan, Dhaka. The writer earlier wrote two articles on the "Caretaker Government" issue.

Wimbledon: An appreciation

Sir, Please allow me to congratulate The Daily Star

for setting new trends in English language journalism in this country. I would also like to compliment your distinguished staff members for their efforts to improve the standard of the paper.

From its very inception I am a regular subscriber of The Daily Star and I am very much interested in your sports pages, which I believe are the best in Dhaka. The Daily Star deserves special thanks for covering the Wimbledon as it did this year. I am sure, like me, many of the readers of The Daily Star have thoroughly enjoyed the social reports sent by the renowned sports journalist and commentator Mr Tawfiq Aziz Khan from Wimbledon. It is interesting to note that he has also taken photographs which are being published along with his reports.

As far as I remember, no newspaper of our country had sent special correspondents before like The Daily Star to cover the Wimbledon Tennis Championships. In that respect, The Daily Star has set an example and Mr Khan can claim to have the honour to be the first reporter to have done so.

I hope The Daily Star will continue to innovate and serve its readers better.

M N Alam, 323/1 Bara Maghbazar, Dhaka

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

Come Fly with Me

I am not one of those taxpayers who is constantly asking if I'm getting the biggest bang for my buck. A perfect example of my 'who cares what my military hardware costs' attitude concerns a story I read in the New York Times by Tim Weiner.

In his article he wrote about a new report that revealed the \$2.2 billion B-2 bomber, pride of the US Air Force, is equipped with radar that cannot distinguish between a rain cloud and a mountain.

Although it has failed many of its tests, 20 of the planes are being built at a cost of \$44 billion.

Like every piece of military equipment there are other sides to the story.

I spoke to Victor Altek, on contract to the Air Force as a biased consultant.

"It doesn't matter if the B-2's equipment works or not — as long as everyone stays inside the budget."

Victor held up a model that looked like a bat. "Despite what the critics say, let me give you the plus side: This plane can fly faster and higher than any bomber in the world."

"What's the minus?"

"It can't fly low because the electronic equipment doesn't work when the plane hugs the ground."

"Can it be fixed?" I asked Victor.

"We're working on it. There's talk of building another plane that would fly above the B-2 and tell the bomber its exact location. This second plane would be plugged in to a third AWAC aircraft that could direct traffic from 60,000 feet, taking its orders from a control center in Jackson Hole, Wyo."

"It sounds complicated," I said. "If it doesn't do what it's supposed to do, why doesn't the Pentagon just call a halt to the program?"

"Nobody knows how to do (it) (that) (until). The people behind the B-2 argue that, although it really is a lemon, it would cost more to cancel the planes than to build them."

What is the bomber's manufacturer doing to correct the problems?

"The company has launched a million-dollar advertising campaign to warn the American public that it can't live without this plane. The TV ads are so good that people keep calling in wanting to know where they can buy one."

I said, "Politicians who are against welfare prefer to eliminate the system on the grounds that it no longer works. Why don't they want to do the same with the B-2?"

"Because this country can afford to finance a bomber that doesn't work, but a welfare program has to be perfect."

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