

Not Again

While the bitter and painful memory of the preceding fertilizer crisis is still fresh, the market appears to be bracing for yet another round of a crunch.

The meeting has not yielded a solution to the problem largely because it has not addressed the main demand of the BFA. The latter wants the membership of the BFA to be mandatory for all the fertilizer traders.

The minister apparently pins his hope on this indirect method to catch hold of the culprits. The genuine traders will do the policing on their erring colleagues at a considerable risk, no doubt.

Devaluation

Three reasons have been ascribed to the devaluation of Taka by 15 paisha in relation to the US dollar which came into effect since Sunday by a decision of the Bangladesh Bank.

The key argument for the move has come from the central bank and, quite frankly, we find this far too convincing to leave any room for surmise on the subject.

This is for the second time that the BB has gone for devaluation within a matter of one and a half years. In all that time, Taka has lost 30 paishas to a dollar which is not very much by subcontinental standards.

The first instalment of downward revision of the value of our currency succeeded in boosting exports which it had aimed at. It enhanced the competitiveness of our export prices on the one hand and added value to our export earnings on the other.

Import is sought to be discouraged by pointing the finger at the higher payment obligations in dollar now. Understandably, there could thus be a squeeze on further imports but the point here is that we have already committed an enormous amount of foreign exchange to the import of foodgrains.

One more argument advanced in favour of devaluation is its potential to contain the inflationary pressure being exerted on the economy by the credit expansion.

Foreign exchange is such a precious thing to us that its expenditure has to be judicious, accountable and transparent at all costs. It is of some consolation though that the strength of Taka has appreciated vis-a-vis the subcontinental currencies.

Nepal Proves a Point

With all the limitations of a hung parliament and the nascent of her democratic institutions, Nepal has demonstrated a remarkable degree of resilience to preserve liberal political traditions.

It is the highest judiciary of the country — the Supreme Court — which, in a landmark judgement, revived the parliament that was dissolved earlier by King Birendra at the request of the then Prime Minister Man Mohan Adhikari.

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Adhikari's controversial recommendations to the King that he dissolve parliament were obviously designed to precipitate a snap poll. By a single powerful stroke of judicial assertion what we now have is a continuity of the parliamentary process and of democratic governance, based on the results of the polls held last November.

Reviewing the Second World War: Fifty Years Later

HALF a century later, scholars and analysts are revisiting the battlefields and death camps to seek a fresh interpretation, if any, of the events past, in the light of the enormous developments of the last fifty years after the end of the war in Europe and destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by atomic bombs.

The review has produced a remarkably dull reiteration of the victory of democracy over dictatorship, of light against darkness and, above all, of what knocked down the evil of Nazism along with its national aberration of the most heinous kind to liquidate an entire race from the face of the earth.

Nazi Germany collapsed. Japanese imperialism annihilated by nuclear bombs and the victors glorified themselves. 'Never in the history of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.'

Was that true? What about the millions who starved to death due to famine as direct instrument of the Allied war strategy against Japan? They were not so few. Who owes what to them? Yet the monumental sacrifice for which Bangladesh still suffers, went totally unrecognized.

After the meeting, intense diplomatic efforts were made for an early meeting of the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission. India proposed the JRC meeting on August 29 and 30 in New Delhi. The date was not convenient for Bangladesh and it was proposed that the meeting be held in September at Dhaka.

The flood season will be over by September/October and then the water will start receding which takes place much quicker. The dry season will start from October.

Rule of law

Sir, The state is in conflict with its citizens. A girl was raped and killed in police custody in Dinajpur. It is natural that culprits would be punished under usual process. Neither uniform nor royal cloak can protect them from punishment.

It is a matter of great pity that not only the local administration but also the Ministry of Home Affairs of the democratically elected government sided with the criminals (police) and made an unholy attempt to cover up the crime. During the tumultuous period, the law enforcing agencies went to barracks and people maintained law and order in the town and other areas! The entire social fabric was liquified dangerously.

In a nearby thana (Biro), in such a situation, two alleged cattle lifters were beaten to death and many more were mercilessly beaten, who are now languishing in Sadar Hospital. Criminals usually wait for the opportune moment to settle their old score. It is equally disheartening to note that these two people were allegedly allowed to be killed rather than protected and handed over to the police, by the concerned UP chairman.

Nobody should go unpunished. The criminal may be a uniformed policeman or an elected UP chairman, it makes no difference. Everybody should have regard for law and confidence in the legal system for enforcement of law and order vis-a-vis the rule of law. Mere utterance in a formal gathering or in the public place about maintenance of the rule of law will not cut much edge. The inci-

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even a year perhaps, before Japan, facing practically the entire might of the world against her, would have collapsed anyway. The theory that every inch of territory would have to be won by blood was like branding the Japanese to be stupid enough not to see through the impending peril of inevitable defeat, once war had stopped in Europe. Japan's defeat was a foregone conclusion. Yet, the atom bombs — why?

I was born the year the war began. I belong to the first post war generation. My first impression of the Second World War came from my father, particularly his direct confrontation with the nuclear annihilation of Hiroshima-Nagasaki. The concentration camps in Europe or the slaughter in the snow fields of Ukraine were rather remote to us in Dhaka. War meant the imminent Japanese invasion of British India through Assam-Bengal, the bombing of Calcutta, Comilla and Chittagong; but above all, the famine and the nuclear attack, adding an immensely large instant capacity to death and destruction.

Centrepiece of Memory

If famine and nuclear bombs were the centrepiece of war time memories, then the war itself assumed a completely new dimension. Fifty years later, it therefore appears as the last great war of colonialism. It may be reminded that in 1941 or 1945, we did not enjoy the luxury of either democracy or freedom. We were bonded by



Window on Asia Shahed Latif

the shackles of colonialism. We were the ruled and the leading Allied power was the ruler and the master. Hence we were not in a position to appreciate the laudable objectives of the Allied war efforts. Our immediate agony was the famine and the imminent prospects of a brutal war right within our own door-steps. The latter was avoided no doubt, but famine made us equally worse off. The brutality was no less. What the Germans did in the concentration camps, the Britishers did it so effort-

lessly all throughout former Bengal. It has remained a tragedy unrecognized. The Eichman of Bengal famine received his knighthood and never the hangman's rope. Early in the 20th century, Germany first and then Japan emerged as industrialized countries without substantial colonies from where they could draw required material resources and, at the same time, find captive markets to

sell their manufactured products. Hence the war by Axis powers was thought by them to be a necessity, in order to carve out their own colonial empires — so essential for continuing growth of the prevailing patterns of industrialization. The United States was different since its own vast internal markets and its traditional isolationist policies were conducive to continuing economic expansion. In addition, new waves of immigrants fueled the American engine of growth on a continual basis. The

German-Japan plan was to virtually conquer the world and their armies were planned to meet in India — the pride of the biggest empire that the world had ever seen. It may also be recognized that it was still a working class Europe. The so-called labour-intensive manufacturing for example, required large number of workers as well as expanding markets to sell the products. Otherwise, unhindered economic expansion of metropolitan powers would have never happened.

Colonialism Therefore it was the last great war of colonialism. The world last is very important, since the war also brought an end to the colonial era. Although Sir Winston Churchill announced that he was not prepared to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire, unfortunately, the war was won but the sun also started to set on the far eastern horizon of the empire. France and the Netherlands even tried to reassert their authorities over the old colonies. But the time had changed for good. While the decade of 1940s was brutalized by the last

great war of colonialism, the following decade of 1950s was characterized by collapse of the colonies. They all gained their independence — starting with the South Asian subcontinent first. The economic compulsions of colonialism was also dramatically altered. The age of consumer durables arrived in Europe and North America where vast majority of the population also graduated from a working class status to middle class, motor cars and suburban living. The new age of mass markets within the industrialized world dispensed with the need of colonial markets, while at the same time, the cold war brought about new configurations in politics. The world became divided into east and west. Thereafter, the emergence of Group of 77 and the North-South divide followed after the collapse of colonialism was almost complete. Fifty years later today, autocracy, fundamentalism, ethnic cleansing, intensified regional wars and conflicts — all these have not yet been banished in spite of the fifty years of the United Nations and what the peoples (not nation-states) of the world aspired in the Charter thereof. That, however, does not mean that the last world war was a total loss. It was a great war when at least colonialism was lost.

Permanent Sharing of the Ganges and the Teesta Waters Needed

by Amjad Hossain Khan

While the JRC is going to meet soon, it is necessary that required political directives should be given to JRC for recommending permanent sharing of the waters of the Ganges and the Teesta.

THE third meeting of the foreign secretaries between Bangladesh and India was held in the last week of June, 1995 in Dhaka. The meeting decided to refer the water sharing issue to the ministerial level Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission to suggest specific recommendation for permanent sharing of the Ganges water.

After the meeting, intense diplomatic efforts were made for an early meeting of the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission. India proposed the JRC meeting on August 29 and 30 in New Delhi. The date was not convenient for Bangladesh and it was proposed that the meeting be held in September at Dhaka. Sources indicate that there may not be any JRC meeting in September and it may go to October. But so far these are speculations and no firm date has been decided as yet.

The problem of water sharing is much more important than any pressing domestic issue of Bangladesh. India has no such pressing needs.

The flood season will be over by September/October and then the water will start receding which takes place much quicker. The dry season will start from October.

receding which takes place much quicker. The dry season will start from October. In the Ganges Water Agreement both sides agreed to share water for five months from January to May. Bangladesh wanted sharing it from October but India did not agree. A compromise was arrived at for sharing water for five months from January to May.

Considering the critical situation that will occur in the next dry season, it was necessary for Bangladesh to sit for the Indo-Bangladesh Joint River Commission meeting as early as possible.

While the JRC is going to meet soon, it is necessary that required political directives should be given to JRC for recommending permanent sharing of the waters of the Ganges and the Teesta.

The question of sharing of other rivers will come up and JRC has all the necessary data and information to handle these matters in subsequent meetings without wast-

ing time. Bangladesh must press for permanent sharing of the Ganges and the Teesta in their next meeting.

The Ganges sharing issue is straining the relation between the two countries. For long 20 years or so, the discussion was limited to the permanent sharing of the Ganges and the Teesta waters. The augmentation issue came in 1974 and because of different perspective on the issue got complicated. It is encouraging to know that at last both the countries have decided to delink sharing from augmentation.

On the issue of permanent sharing of the Teesta, both the sides had a clear understanding. The Bangladesh Teesta Barrage was started on specific understanding with India for an early sharing agreement. The Ganges water sharing is well documented and does not need any further clarification.

The Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission will meet soon to discuss the permanent sharing of the Ganges water. In arriving at the Ganges Water Agreement in 1977, the shares of Bangladesh and India were decided after a lot of discussions based on the flow data of the Ganges at Farakka from 1948 to 1973. The 1977 Ganges water agreement and the respective shares of Bangladesh and India can be made as permanent share of the Ganges water between Bangladesh and India with a guarantee clause that the share of Bangladesh under the agreement shall not be reduced and duly released at Farakka by India. There was no formal agreement of sharing of the Teesta water. But there was an understanding on sharing of Teesta water: 39 per cent for India, 36 per cent for Bangladesh and 25 per cent unallocated. The discussion

may resume for permanent sharing of the Teesta water. The unallocated 25 per cent may be shared equally between the two countries making the share of India as 51.5 per cent and of Bangladesh as 48.5 per cent. India has constructed Barrages on the Teesta, Mahananda and diverting water for irrigation. Bangladesh Teesta Barrage was completed in 1989 but cannot operate fully because of absence of sharing agreement and release of water in the dry season.

The agreement on permanent sharing of the Ganges and the Teesta will go a long way in improving the relation between the two countries. If both the countries have to live together, the primary requirements are to build trust, confidence and goodwill. Here India must come forward to rebuild the trust.

Bangladesh has suffered a lot in the absence of any permanent sharing arrangement of the Ganges, the Teesta and all the other major, medium and minor rivers where India is withdrawing water unilaterally.

The economy of Bangladesh is in critical situation due to the uncertainty of availability of water which is vitally needed for agriculture, navigation, checking salinity intrusion and for helping the ecology in balance, particularly of the Sundarbans mangrove forest.

The responsibility of the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission is enormous. Past failures need not guide in this matter. Let us look forward to the future. Given the goodwill and understanding, it may be possible for the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission to recommend a permanent sharing agreement of the Ganges and the Teesta before the next dry season.

The writer is a former Chairman, Bangladesh Water Development Board.

OPINION

Save Democracy: Time is Running Out

While describing his experience in Hong Kong and the Far East in a Rotary Club meeting in Dhaka about a couple of years ago, late Mr S M Ali, the founder-editor of The Daily Star, remarked that politicians in that region had always resorted to a consensus when facing controversial national issues. But he regretted that this scenario was absent in our own country.

In Bangladesh democracy in the real sense ushered after the fall of Ershad regime through sincere united efforts of the main political parties. Yet, it was not nourished and allowed to function smoothly from the very beginning, nor could democratic culture develop, because of unhealthy in-fighting between the same political parties who brought it into being. A free and fair election was no doubt held under the newly inducted democratic system, but the parties who lost the election could not accept defeat in good grace and refrained from greeting the party which was voted to power. The leader of the opposition boycotted the swearing-in ceremony of the new cabinet. And within the House itself, there were ominous signs of distrust and extreme intemperance, which at one stage (March '94) manifested in seemingly temporary walk-out in protest of unkind remarks, uttered in jest (as it was so explained), by one of the ruling party member of the House. Apologies were quickly offered, but this gesture did not satisfy the opposition stalwarts. Ultimately, the walkout took the shape of a boycott of the House sessions, which on the plea of a new issue following the Magura by-election — a bill to be introduced by the Treasury Bench providing for a 'care taker' government to run the next few general elections — turned into a continuous one, leading finally to en masse resignation of most of the main opposition MPs. This is what the first parliament freely elected for a five-year term under the new democratic system turned into, and it happened barely three years

after the birth of the new parliament in the wake of, such circumstance as could perhaps be avoided to allow democracy to function properly and normally in the country.

A series of efforts were made thereafter, including one undertaken through the initiative of Commonwealth Secretary General, to resolve the controversy by a consensus. But all such efforts were abortive and the opposition were not in a mood to return to the House until and unless their demand for a 'care-taker' government was acceded to. Evidently, there was no mandate from the people to go for such a fundamental change to be brought about in the constitution adopted unanimously just three year back. The built-in provisions in the constitution for having a constitutional amendment wouldn't suit the boycotting opposition MPs, simply because they lacked the two-thirds majority to pass the desired amendment. So, perhaps they preferred remaining outside the House and achieve their objective through agitations in the street. In the process, democratic practices were given a complete go-by, which by implication was an admission on the part of the opposition that democracy was not for us as a dependable political system and it could be bypassed to achieve our political objectives. In other words, the long-cherished democracy which we achieved through many sacrifices, is about to be given a premature burial.

But democracy must survive. It must be saved from the imminent danger. The general election is around the corner and all political parties seem to be poised for participation in the polls. Yet, there is no solution in sight of the controversy of so-called 'caretaker' government. Meanwhile the Prime Minister has agreed to step down with his entire cabinet 30 days ahead of the date of the next general election. In fact, this is major concession

offered by the leader of the House, which actually means that the essence and spirit of the opposition demand has been conceded. She has further agreed to the formation of an interim government, which may be of the kind of a national government with representatives from all political parties or a government formed with equal number of ministers divided between the ruling party and main opposition parties. True, the opposition parties want the ministers of the interim government to be chosen from amongst non-partisan neutral individuals acceptable to all sides. It seems, given the situation as it is, the gap between the contentions of the ruling party and the main opposition parties is now the narrowest ever. There is no season why, with a strong and determined political will on all sides, this narrow gap should not be bridged. The ruling party has invited the opposition for a dialogue. Any patriotic citizen of the country will believe that the narrow differences that now exist can be solved only through well-meant dialogue, and nothing else than dialogue. At this crucial time, "when not too much time is left.... there should now be sobering effect on both (sides)" (The Daily Star, August 21, 95) We join hands with the same view in emphasizing that "A lot has already been achieved. The opposition's main contention that Begum Zia will not be in power during the next election has been resolved with the PM's declaration that she would resign 30 days ahead of the polls. Frankly, this was the opposition's main goal which has been achieved..... The possibility of the President's running the ship, with the help of bureaucracy, seems to be the only solution which may be acceptable to all". Finally, we repeat that an understanding is the only way to hold the next national poll peacefully which is the desire of all contending parties. So, let the general election be held peacefully through national consensus. This is the only way to save our hard-earned democracy. Time is running out.

dent in Dinajpur has taken place at such a time when leaders of the world united in Beijing for the world conference on women.

It will take a long time to regain for the government and the people what had been lost during the past weeks. However, we hope the government would take immediate corrective steps to restore confidence in the minds of the people.

Ahsan Habib 74, Shantibagh, Dhaka

Beijing Conference and women

Sir, Only a few decades ago Pearl S Buck's "The Good Earth" was covered with mist and mystery. Many people in China were opium addicted and slothful. But today it is thrilling to see flowers burgeon in Beijing, Shanghai, Canton and the country is humming with economic activities everywhere. China has woke up.

In the swiftly changing socio-economic, political and international order, China has spent US\$ 48 million to organise the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. The former garrison town of Huairou whose name means "Be kind to barbarians" is losing the world's biggest women's conference. Addressing the World Conference on Women, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia rightly underlined the need for upholding the religious, cultural and social values to strengthen family ties, social peace and stability. And US First Lady Hillary Clinton said, "Human rights are women's right." She called upon the conference to move beyond rhetoric and ensure action to guarantee women's right to good health care. "The voices of this conference and of the women at Huairou must be heard loud and clear," Hillary asserted.

Half of the world's six billion people are women. Out of 185 UNO members only five countries are governed either by the women head of the state or by the women head of the government.

For last several centuries the world has been ruled by men. Should not the world leadership pass hand from men to women by the year 2000 AD for a better life and a better future?

Much is needed to be done for the welfare of mankind and women's rights.

We would request five women world leaders President Chandrika Kumaratunga of Sri Lanka, Iceland President Mrs Vigdis, Prime Minister of Bangladesh Begum Khaleda Zia, Prime Minister of Turkey Tansu Cillar and Prime Minister of Pakistan Benazir Bhutto to kindly cooperate and coordinate with each other and hold a half yearly summit to discuss, find out ways and means and to help solve the following real problems being faced by women world wide: i) Care of children following death or divorce of husband; ii) Rape and prostitution of women and iii) Payment of dowry for marriage.

O H Kabir Dhaka

Solar energy

Sir, We had an opportunity to read a letter written by Mr Serajul Islam titled "Application of solar energy in Bangladesh" on the 6th instant, in your esteemed daily. Mr Islam has rightly pointed out the economy in the use of solar power like other countries.

The use of gas and electricity is costly in our country. Moreover, wood, bamboo and other materials of forests are very rare particularly in rural areas. As a result, there is a great crisis of fuel in our villages. Shrinkage of average forest areas is a glaring example.

Therefore, we should develop solar and bio-gas plants in a great number to meet our demand for fuel. Public and private enterprises should be encouraged to establish more bio-gas plants in rural areas to save our environment falling which, we will lose our green environment within a short time.

M Ali Rajshahi