

## 'War' Drums?

War drums are beating all around. The 'hartalists' and 'counter-hartalists' are preparing for a show-down in the coming days. The peaceful or non-interfering attitude of the government to the opposition's hartal calls appears to have ended. Now the ruling party has taken a policy to counter the opposition's agitational programmes. For that purpose the BNP has decided to use its youth (JJD) and student (JCD) groups. Government received both praise and criticism for its earlier restraint. The critics called the government weak and back-boneless, and said 'if it can't govern, then it should quit'. But, by and large, most people appreciated the sobriety and non-interfering attitude of the government. However, all that is about to change, judging by the mass rallies being organised by the youth and student fronts of BNP, greenlight has been switched on for street wars, and the drumbeat for it can be heard all around.

To the extent that opposition has been monopolising street demonstration and public rallies, the ruling party needs to make its presence felt. In an effort to gain public support, the ruling party has every right, and one may say, political duty, to counter the propaganda of the opposition. What however worries us is the tone of it all. The contest is not one of winning the heart and the mind of the public, but that of a show of strength. The purpose, as it appears to us, is to prove who has more power in the streets.

We would like to express our extreme concern at this turn of events. We deplore this slide towards violence and warn that in the process of defeating each other, the political parties may end up defeating democracy itself. The next few days are likely to see greater and greater number of street demonstrations from both sides. The likelihood of a stray skirmish resulting into a major clash cannot be ruled out. In a volatile political atmosphere that now exists, releasing trigger-happy 'mastans' into the streets, who the so-called student and youth wings of both sides have, and in plenty, is in effect asking for street clashes to occur. We are convinced that it will not benefit the cause of democracy, and only help to bring more prominence and power to the criminal elements of both sides.

We express our deep disappointment at the failure of our leaders to see the dark future that they are leading us towards. We conclude by saying, "if you can't give us prosperity and better future, then at least don't take away our peace, and whatever we now have."

## Matter of Method

The Save Dhaka, Clean Dhaka Campaign launched combinedly some six weeks ago by Bangladesh Scouts, BUET, DCC, Youth Ministry and The Daily Star is still having teething problems.

What seems to be in short supply is not enthusiasm but organised support from Dhaka City Corporation—the pivotal agency for the campaign's success. Even the once-in-a-week Friday cleaning drive giving a sufficient leeway to the DCC to organise itself and fall in rhythm with the volunteers is running into problems. The scouts did not receive the promised brooms from the Youth Directorate. They made do with whatever they could lay their hands on, collected the garbage in bamboo-cane baskets and put these away to enclosures or safe corners. Alas, these were not picked up by the municipality, not at least with any instantly visible promptitude!

The initiators of the special drive including the city Mayor himself did not plan it as one-off operation for sure. They had resolved to sustain it in full awareness of what it would take to do it. The municipal authorities will have to realise that logistical shortcomings can be significantly overcome by effective supervision which seems lacking in this campaign.

They must be wise now to recognise the need for opting out of the traditional methods of keeping Dhaka city clean. Trucks cannot ply through narrow roads or lanes which are the ones mostly littered with garbage. Let them use rickshaw vans with plastic bins in them to collect the filth and then carry these off to far-out places. While the numbers of sweepers and scavengers need to be raised, the terms and conditions of their services are also to be improved upon with an eye to instilling a degree of self-importance in them.

## Ferryaches

Last week's frightful vehicular bulges at Aricha, Nagarbari and Daulatdia ferry ghats are said to be tapering off. But the horrendous statistics generated by the congestion caused in the wake of a marathon hartal from 16-19 October, diesel squeeze, decommissioning and slowing down of some ferry boats and shoaling in the Padma better not be regarded as one-time aberrations.

The Bangladesh Island Water Transport Corporation can at best ferry 2400 vehicles out of 3,000 that collect on the ghats daily with its unsteady fleet of 22 crafts. As many as 600 transports are thus left unferryed everyday conjuring up an impossible beeline of a few thousand inside of a week alone.

Our suggestions are: increase the number of big-size ferries and do some river bed-dredging to allow them unimpeded passage. After all, the Jamuna bridge is a way off. Even when the grandiose project is commissioned, the ferries could still be put to use somewhere and the increased navigability will be an asset as ever.

# Farakka in the UN: Has it Served the Country's Interests?

THE Prime Minister has done it again. In her speech at the special session of the UN General Assembly in New York she requested the assembled world leaders to solve the Farakka problem created by India's unilateral withdrawal of the Ganges waters.

Her decision to raise the issue in the UN General Assembly has several significant implications which must not escape notice. First, the Prime Minister made a similar statement in the UN General Assembly in 1993. It may be recalled that when she returned home after delivering that speech she was hailed by throngs of BNP leaders and supporters.

Indeed, a well-orchestrated publicity blitz was launched throughout the length and breadth of the country to convince the people that the bold action taken by the Prime Minister was bound to bring the Ganges water cascading down the Farakka barrage and put an end to the sufferings of the people of Bangladesh.

Regrettably, apart from fouting up bilateral relation with India, nothing else happened. Not a drop more water was received as a result of the New York speech. The outcome of that much-publicized speech was just a big zero. What is even worse, not a single country came forward to lend support to the Bangladesh Prime Minister's complaints against India. In other words, her appeal to the international community failed to evoke a positive or even a sympathetic response.

Why, one may wonder, did the Prime Minister make a futile speech which did not serve the interests of

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Bangladesh? In hindsight, one can see that it was done entirely for the sake of domestic politics. The speech was intended to be a political stunt to be used to persuade the people of Bangladesh that she was indeed a fearless champion of the interests of the country and that she stood up to the big neighbour in the world forum. In reality, however, she has done much harm to the interests of the nation by injecting bitterness and antagonism in the process of negotiation. It provided an excuse to those Indian leaders who take a tough line vis-a-vis Bangladesh on the Ganges water question. The complaint in an international forum, they argued, did not reflect the goodwill and good-neighbourly spirit which should exist between two friendly neighbouring countries.

The second point to note is that the speech in the UN General Assembly this year, the last year of BNP government's five year rule, is an admission of failure. Nearly five long years have passed with the BNP government in the saddle without achieving any success in resolving the problem. It may be recalled that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman got India's agreement for 44 thousand cusecs of water during the lean period. Gen Zia got only 34.5 thousand cusecs but now, under Begum Zia, there is no agreement for the guaranteed flow of any quantity of water. During her nearly five-year rule she has failed to negotiate firmly and effectively.

Instead, she is administering pinpricks by making ineffectual speeches which have had no impact whatsoever on Indian policy or the actual supply of water down the river.

There are, of course, instances in which bilateral problems are aired in international forums. A country takes recourse to such a step only as a measure of last resort. When bilateral efforts fail due to the intransigence of the stronger party, the relatively weaker party appeals

nately, is ignored. In other words, one must have friends in the forum who will speak up in favour of the cause which one is espousing. If a significant number of countries is not prepared to support the cause, one will only expose one's isolation and helplessness by raising the issue.

This is the reality of international political life. One may feel aggrieved about the unfairness of life but that is the reality. It is not enough to feel that one's cause is just.

countries including one or two big powers.

Since no one picked up the issue, it failed to get any attention from any quarter. (Support from a country such as Pakistan which has a well-known dispute with India will not count for much). Then why did the Prime Minister choose to repeat her 1993 performance? Why repeat a failed move? Has the government given up all hopes of a settlement by bilateral negotiations? If so, why she not try to get the item inscribed on the agenda of the General Assembly and mount a lobbying campaign before making the speech?

The nation is entitled to an answer to these questions. If a satisfactory explanation is not forthcoming, we will be obliged to conclude that it was a most cynical use of a critical national problem for promoting partisan interests.

It does not require a great deal of political sagacity to realize that the Prime Minister referred to the Farakka issue in her UN speech for purely domestic political gains. She believed that it would give her party a propaganda handle at the forthcoming elections. If she had a genuine interest in getting a fair share of the Ganges water on the basis of a negotiated settlement, this was not the way. After the 1993 experience, she should have realized the futility of such an empty gesture. It hardly put any political pressure on India. No one in India was impressed by the move because

it lacked seriousness. If there is now a hardening of Indian attitude in the negotiations, we will have to thank Begum Zia's partisan policy for this development.

Before the last general elections the BNP campaign platform had two main issues. The first one was essentially a 'Anti India' campaign. The strategy was to make use of the Farakka issue and the Friendship Treaty to generate fear and apprehension in public mind about our big neighbour. The Awami League was cleverly linked with this campaign.

The second issue was a distorted view of Awami League's policy on the question of religious tolerance. Awami League's non-communal policy was presented as anti-Islam policy. Quite a number of well-meaning people were misled by such cynical propaganda. It appears the Prime Minister is preparing the ground for a similar campaign of distortion and misrepresentation.

Prejudice and hatred are the mainstay of such propaganda campaigns. Was the United Nations speech the opening shot for the election campaign? This time it may be difficult for her to convince the voters that the nation's independence and interests are less secure in Awami League's hands. The people have seen her record during the last five years which cannot be erased by making a speech in the General Assembly. In fact, resort to such cynical campaign or misuse of religious sentiment may prove to be counter-productive. One hopes that in the larger interests of the nation the government will refrain from such a destructive and disruptive path.

## ON THE RECORD

by Shah A M S Kibria



to the international community for assistance. The UN General Assembly is certainly an excellent forum to mobilize world support in favour of a just cause. Indeed if the cause is just and right, other countries may come forward to support it. The purpose behind such an initiative is to generate international pressure on the country which is refusing to accept a reasonable solution of the problem. But in order to achieve the desired result, one must do a lot of home work. A country must first lobby all the friendly countries to seek their support. If such support is not forthcoming, even a good cause, unfortunately, one must have support from other countries to derive any benefit from the multilateral forum. Support is vital. I cannot believe that Begum Zia was not aware of the basic characteristics of a multilateral forum such as the general assembly. The Foreign Office must have briefed her on this point. Bangladesh diplomats serving in Dhaka and New York are experienced enough to know that a paragraph in a speech by one of the more than hundred visiting heads of government on a matter of domestic concern will not cause the slightest ripple in the General Assembly. Unless, of course, it is picked up by a dozen or more member

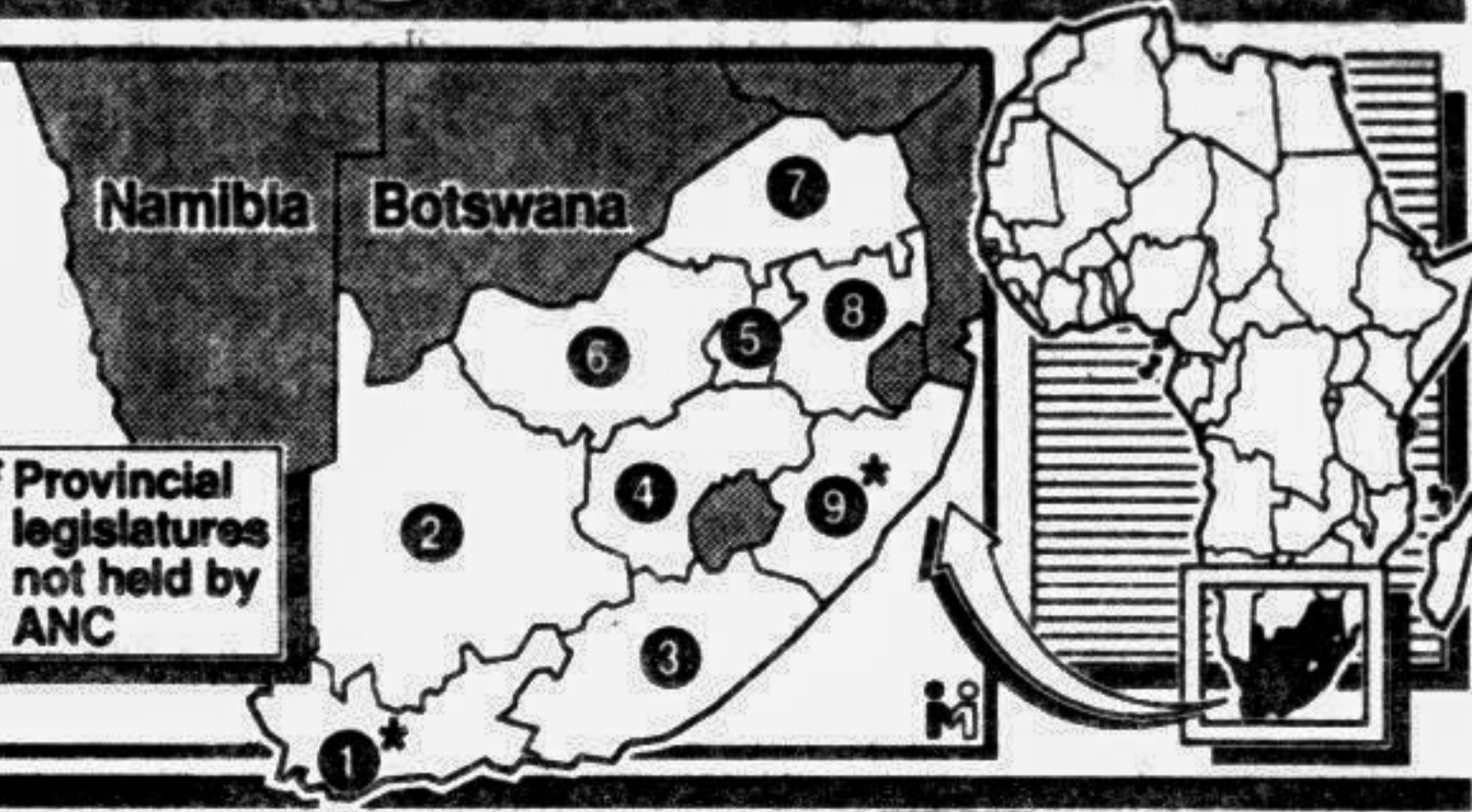
# Polls Mark the End of Race-based Government

Arlene Getz writes from Cape Town

*Although President Nelson Mandela's ANC is confident of success as South Africa prepares to return to the polls, the local government elections (1 November) pose problems for the ruling party. One of the headaches, is overcoming public apathy and confusion.*

## South Africa votes again

Local elections: 1 November 1995  
 In April 1994 national poll, ANC won 62.6% of votes, National Party 20.4%, Inkatha 10.5%, others 5.6%



several issues. One problem is whether areas controlled by conservative tribal chiefs should be incorporated within the metropolitan boundaries. The ANC wants the power of these traditional Inkatha allies weakened by including them inside the more cosmopolitan cities; Inkatha would like them to shore up their strongholds in the rural areas. Other disputes include disagreement over representation of the chiefs on regional councils and boundary demarcation of the province's biggest city, Durban. The KwaZulu/Natal conflict is not just regional, but has profound national implications for a government trying to prevent the province's festering violence from destabilising the rest of the country. Although the number of people killed in political clashes has dropped from the average of 250 a month in the immediate pre-election period, almost 500 died in the first seven months of this year. The middle of the year also saw an increase in

other barometers of violence, such as the burning of houses. Poll tensions, fuelled by acrimony between the ANC and Inkatha over the latter's continued boycott of Parliament because of its demands for stronger regional powers, could further aggravate the situation. "Obviously with the looming local government election, there is going to be a fight for allegiance," says Karen MacGregor, editor of the University of Natal journal, *Indicator South Africa*. "In the end, the issue of KwaZulu/Natal versus the rest of the country is going to have an impact on the whole nation." Outside the two renegade provinces, Mandela's biggest challenge may be getting people to go to the polls. Voter registration is low, with the vote still considered a privilege in a country where white domination forced so bitter a battle for the black franchise. More than eight million — some 35 per cent — of the country's estimated 23.4 million eligible voters failed to register by the June

closing date and the government has since decided to re-open registration later this year. Although these figures mirror the international trend towards a low turnout in all local elections, the situation here may stem less from apathy than from confusion. Saatchi and Saatchi, the British advertising company hired to raise voter consciousness, found many people bewildered both about the need to vote again and by a registration requirement which did not exist for last year's more historic poll. "The interest in these elections is about one-tenth that for April '94," says University of Cape Town politics professor David Walsh. "I suspect the turnout is going to be very low." Adding to the uncertainty is the fact that most voters do not know the exact powers of the bodies for which they will be voting. The Constitutional Assembly responsible for writing the country's first democratic constitution — which could spell out the responsibilities of local and regional governments — is bogged down by such issues as the debate over federalism and is months from completing its task. The result is a combination of voter ignorance and government ambiguity about which structures should be taking responsibility for electoral organisation. "Doubt, indecision and mystification have reigned supreme in places of power, so it is not surprising that potential voters have been insecure and irresolute," Graeme Getz, an analyst for the non-partisan Election Information and Research Consortium, wrote recently in *Indicator South Africa*. The party most likely to suffer from a low turnout is the ANC, still struggling to complete the infrastructural conversion from an exiled liberation movement to a ruling political party with 62.6 per cent of the country's support. Although the ANC's dominance as the majority party is probably unassailable, the superior organisational abilities of Inkatha and the National Party in mobilising their supporters may tilt the balance

in some marginal areas. Mandela also needs proper local governments in place so he can use their resources to implement social upliftment plans for the black majority. Black and white local authorities have been merged and black mayors appointed in many towns, but the often haphazard integration left numerous structural problems. In August, the government admitted it could not allocate half of the two billion Rands set aside for its Reconstruction and Development Programme because it lacked the infrastructure to implement its initiatives. Another advantage of a successful election will be an important psychological boost to a nation feeling deflated in the aftermath of last year's epochal events. While life for middle-class blacks has improved since Mandela took office, conditions for poor blacks have changed little in the last 17 months and there is growing pressure for the new government to deliver on election promises to improve their circumstances. Analysts like Getz believe a successful election with a high voter turnout also is particularly important for the attempts to establish a culture of democracy. "Any failure in the upcoming elections because of weaknesses in the edifice of government will not augur well for future national projects and endeavours," he wrote. "Political parties understandably turn away from sections of the population who fail to register, instead addressing groups who can deliver votes. Alienated groups looking on at the re-orientation of the public sphere begin to convince themselves that they would derive nothing from voting, exacerbating their tendency to abstain." "This vicious cycle must be avoided at all costs in South Africa."

— GEMINI NEWS

## To the Editor...

**Basic education**  
 Sir, Nearly quarter of a century has elapsed since we achieved our independence at the cost of blood, tears and toil. Twenty-five years is a sufficiently long period to attain a reasonable literacy rate. But that was not to be. According to official version, our literacy rate is around thirty-five percent. But in the neighbouring Indian state of West Bengal literacy rate is about seventy per cent. Education is the basic element to propel the wheel of progress. We should cut down unproductive expenditure, withdraw subsidy from losing sector corporations, economize in other fields and launch a crash programme to provide basic education to all and sundry. Obviously this is

an uphill task but given political commitment, courage and determination, it is not impossible to achieve it within the next five years. Instead of constructing skyscrapers and launching showy projects our priority should be 'basic education'. In this connection it is worth recalling the wise words of Francis Bacon. The monuments of wit and learning are more durable than the monuments of power or of the hands. For have not the verses of Homer continued twenty-five hundred years or more, without the loss of a syllable or letter during which time infinite palaces, temples, castles, cities, have been decayed and demolished?"  
 Saleh Ahmed Choudhury  
 Dhaka Cantonment

**One-child philosophy**  
 Sir, A recent news report from China commented on the adverse effects of one-child families. A human being is a social animal, hence even a child needs companion of the right age-group at home. Therefore the presence of brother or sister has a balancing effect sociologically and psychologically. Even in the Western world with high standard of living, the home is breaking up, as too much time is spent away from home by the adults, and the children are starved of direct affection and attention and parents. The daily life is centred at the place of work. The children do not get enough of the leisure hours for family gathering. The

home is becoming a place to sleep — only to rush out the next morning. Life is measured by the minute hand of the wrist watch (no time to look at the wall clock). Why nature does not need man-made time-keepers? The obsession with the present is the hallmark of the western society. This terminal absorption with trivialities has taken the toll of the generations — the home and the society are breaking up. It is a non-reversible trend in tune with the time capsules hidden within the cult of materialism. Now (21st century) is the testing ground for Asia to rise once again. The collapse this time will be quicker, as we are contaminated with the tested ills of the west. Some

new or dormant -ism has to be tried.  
 A Husnain  
 Dhaka

**Yet another way of cheating**  
 Sir, Regrettably and rather shamefully, it is noticed that crimes of all sorts have seriously gripped and taken a firm footing all over the country. And that most crimes are committed for procuring heroine and other drugs. Snatching of ornaments, money and other valuables at gun-point have become a toy play for most addicted goons. Unfortunately, like some people, I too feel victim to yet another way of outright cheating. This new kind of cheating is cunningly committed to attract

K Vigar  
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