



CHOGM and Suspension of Nigeria A Rare Demonstration of Courage of Convictions

by M M Rezaul Karim

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Ken Saro-Wiwa

THE leaders of the Commonwealth of Nations met during their biennial ritual at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Auckland, New Zealand last week. The duration of the traditionally five-day long conference was cut down this time to the chagrin of officials of the Commonwealth Secretariat but much to the delight of many otherwise highly occupied leaders. The leaders of all the four member nations of South Asia were, however, conspicuous by their absence on somewhat justifiable plea of heavy pre-occupations at home but may also be partly due to the increasingly decreased importance some of the Commonwealth leaders have been attaching to the relative efficacy and usefulness of this international organisation.

Condemnation poured in from all over the globe. The Commonwealth leaders were dumbfounded. The heinous act took place at the very moment they were deliberating on this very subject — what effective measures could be taken to persuade the authorities in Nigeria to grant pardon or to reduce the sentence! A classic case of adding insult to injury.

While the Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Head and the symbol of free association of the members of the Commonwealth, along with the leaders of her erstwhile colonies were actually dining and toasting in a cosy atmosphere, a multiple gruesome murder took place in a far away land on the other side of the globe in a show trial ordered by the military dictator of a large but important member nation, Nigeria. The eminent playwright and political activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, along with his eight compatriots and co-defendants, were executed in blatant defiance of world opinion and ignominiously casting aside numerous appeals for clemency from friends and foes alike.

The world was shocked. What treason or grievous crimes were committed by Ken Saro-Wiwa and his fellow activists? As ardent advocates of democracy, they voiced their grievances against the immense pollution and severe environmental damages caused by heavy and indiscriminate exploitation for oil in their native province of Ogoniland.

and streamlined. Finally, the text of the declarations was adopted, imparting moral obligations on fellow members but without devising an effective mechanism for compliance by the recalcitrant.

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In addition, a plan of action has been set out by the Commonwealth leaders, in their retreat at Milbrook, to guard against infringement of the Harare Declaration. This includes positive Commonwealth actions, short of resorting to force, in the event of a unconstitutional overthrow of the democratically elected government of a member nation. The two other members, besides Nigeria, having military government, namely Sierra Leone and the Gambia, have been asked to restore democracy by holding elections by June next and their leaders agreed.

Some members were disappointed at this light measure of punishment, meted out to Nigeria which, in fact, is more of a chastisement. Its principal merit, however, rests with the possibility of the return of the prodigal son back into the arms of its mother after hav-

ing undergone the desired reforms. The Chairman of the conference, New Zealand Prime Minister Boige, on the other hand, made it absolutely clear that expulsion would be inevitable, if Nigeria failed to fulfil the desired conditions within the stipulated time.

Whether the military junta, who have tasted power and enjoyed it so long, would give it up easily and of its own volition is open to question. Unless the accompanying and consequential measures taken and to be taken by its members and non-members start to bite deeply in the power structure and the economy of Nigeria, the autocratic rulers there may not feel constrained to take the action asked for. The present suspension of Nigeria has been viewed as providing teeth to the Harare Declaration. But the teeth appear still blunt and need to be sharpened by others, if the roaring tiger is to effectively bite.

The principles embodied in the Harare Declarations, in general, constituted the core factors for consideration that prompted the CHOGM leaders to suspend Nigeria from Commonwealth membership until democracy was restored in that country. Nelson Mandela declared that the regime in Nigeria ceased to exist as a friend and brother. Bishop Desmond Tutu shared the deep resentment universally expressed about the utter disregard as well as will-

ful and unseemingly hasty defiance of world opinion exhibited by the Nigerian rulers.

The European Union has decided to recall their Ambassadors from Nigeria. So did America. Britain, a principal supplier of arms to that country, has imposed arms embargo. Others may follow suit. The EU has also decided to suspend its economic aid to the tune of \$100 million a year whose adverse impact on the economy would be difficult to ignore.

The most effective sanction, however, would have been a trade and oil embargo and withdrawal of operations by the Western oil companies, who are reluctant to impose it on the plea that it would hurt the poor of the country. The Shell group which holds about 50% of Nigeria's oil interests has even announced its determination to go ahead with its \$4 billion project to set up a gas plant there. Unless decisive measures like an effective trade and oil embargo are taken to block the exploration and export for black gold, which makes up for almost 95% of Nigeria's total exports, the military rulers are unlikely to yield and the Commonwealth action will remain a pious wish and at best have the force of an appeal for good behaviour and urging conformity with international moral code. Meanwhile, the fate of the country's elected President, Chief Abiola, and 40 others under detention in prison on charges of treason, is held in balance. The world may yet witness another gruesome act of multiple judicial murder as a helpless spectator, in the not too distant future.

Traumatizing a City

Life in Narayanganj was traumatised on Sunday following a two-and-a-half hours running gunfight between armed cadres of different political parties. At least a hundred, including policemen, women and passers-by, were injured in the battle featuring over a thousand rounds of shooting and blasting of hundreds of hand bombs.

Who has the right to subject a whole populace to such nightmare, such punishing suspension of civilised existence? Not police, not army, not government — no power on earth indeed unless in a time of war. Why should we then accept this? If it were a case of criminals making hay, police and the law courts and, as a last resort, society at large could take care of them. But, although police on Sunday tried to restrict the fray to less losses and violence and added to it showers of rubber bullets and rounds of gunshots that were meaningfully challenge the terrorists? No. For elements backed by the present, past and future governments of Bangladesh were settling some accounts on the streets.

On the same Sunday, students fought it out at the Mitford hostel of medical undergraduates resulting in wreckage of 70 rooms and injury to 10, two of them receiving bullet wounds. JU, the sleepest of all our university campuses, is now a prey to Jamaat gunmen who the other day hurled hand bombs at a bus carrying teachers. RU remains closed for the most part of the year, depriving Shibir mastans of holding the university and its constituent students in thrall for all of the 365 days. It has just opened after its umpteenth unscheduled closure. Opened to a show of terrorised silence and emptiness and prowling Shibir activists.

And for months the student and youth wings of the ruling party have been fighting within their folds, not without fatal casualties. The Narayanganj blitz started when a student league top brass went to buy a tender schedule at the LGED office. Perhaps LGED contracts are a preserve for Chhatra Dal cadres. Nazrul got a good hiding there. And hell was let loose.

With every incident of the Narayanganj or university campus or the party in-fighting type — our social fabric takes a fatal blow. And it is not in the power of any particular government or party to heal this. Society will have to look beyond these for recovery if things persist in their present aberrant ways.

Welcome Step

The Ministry of Labour and Manpower is giving some much-needed teeth to a 1982-vintage Emigration Ordinance that failed to stop fraudulence in the manpower export business and the attendant slur on our image. The loss of face already undergone by us through the racketeering of a few is not beyond repair. In fact, our belief is that a series of corrective measures starting on the home front would help us fix loose ends, if any, in the manpower importing country. As a result, we would not only bounce back in the sphere of manpower export but also establish our goodwill durably in the overseas market.

From this standpoint, the formulation of tough legal provisions on emigration and overseas employment has been a step in the right direction, but a very modest one to be sure. It is all very good that the term of imprisonment has been raised from five to 14 years, with increased fines running concurrently, the cases would henceforth be heard in a magistrate's court not in a labour court as before, and those collaborating with scheming recruiting agencies will also be deterrently punished.

However, there is a provision that is likely to make people balk at the idea of lodging formal complaints with the authorities. "False" complaints would be liable for "action", it has been stated. Now, the point here is that a perfectly cognisable offence may well be rejected out of hand on technical grounds such as a poor representation before the authorities. Even though there is a point in not opening the floodgate for an invasion of tiffs, the proviso is likely to be something of a damper on those otherwise eager to volunteer information about dubious elements.

If strong laws could by themselves bring about a change in the scenario, Bangladesh would have been an ideal place to live in by now, given the set of tough laws we already have in the book. So, the bottom-line should be keeping constant tab on the goings-on in the sector and enforcement of rules wherever and whenever it is required.

Terrorism Unbridled

The bomb blast at the Egyptian embassy in Islamabad on Sunday has been indicative of a no-holds-barred militancy. We are anguished over the snuffing out of personnel from a brotherly country which has set a brave, new example in defence of secularism by fighting off fundamentalist terrorism. Our sympathies to their bereaved families.

Most people know that extremists are not cut out for heroics. They are conditioned for acts of cowardice only; more so, if they are vanquished-turned-desperados.

The armed Islamic extremist group Jama'at Islamiyya which has owned up the incident has had a track-record of violent acts outside Egypt. While their external operations have been directed against Egyptian interests, they are clearly guilty of violating international norms, including, as in the case of Islamabad, endangering the security and immunity of a diplomatic enclave.

Such outbursts of extremist temper, regardless of where it comes from, should be met decisively with networked vigil and counter-action on a cross-country basis.

Neutral Caretaker Government and a Point to Ponder

by Nayeemul Islam Khan

I consider myself as a conscious citizen of the country. Therefore, with great concern I am witnessing the political events for the last two years. Being an optimist with positive outlook, I have so far withstood many frightening concepts about the possible consequences of the prevailing political impasse during the last few months, especially the past few weeks.

With upbeat hopes in my heart I still believe, we will be able to avert any disaster eventually. Our leaders will not keep us in uncertainty and stalemate any longer to risk the very future of the nation. They will definitely not frustrate us.

However difficult the whole political scenario may appear to each and everyone of us, I presume that even in the quagmire there lies a flicker of hope that we are converging towards an understanding. The developments that may lead towards the solution are likely to contain some or all of the following notions.

1. The parties in power and in opposition will agree to some sort of a 'neutral caretaker government' to conduct free and fair elections to the next Jatiya Sangsad.
2. It is likely that all the political parties will enjoy equal treatment by the administration itself and by the government-controlled media.
3. The administration will be completely free from party influence and conduct the

election independently and fearlessly.

4. It may also happen that all the parties agree to such an arrangement that 'neutral and caretaker governments' would conduct national elections for the next 3/4 terms.

5. In the given situation we expect that none of the political parties will be victimized and all sides would reach a sort of guarantee to ensure it.

Even with the above notions in mind some of us are still afraid that an election this time under a 'neutral and caretaker government' may not be held so peacefully and also freely and fairly as it happened in the year 1991 under Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed or as we expect it to be. Besides, the massive influx of 'black-money' that haunts the political arena may go a further notch above. But these tensions may be addressed and reduced largely by the leaders of our political parties and the anxieties contained, to a great extent, to make the general elections a success, at least to an acceptable level.

But I am perturbed much by a simple question in mind, if things move in the assumed direction and we elect the members of parliament through elections held under a 'non-partisan neutral and caretaker government', how are the by-elections going to be held, later during the tenure of an elected party government?

I am worried that many will tend to neglect this question to be too trivial a

problem compared to the grave situation existing now on the question of 'the government that will conduct the next general elections'. If neglected who can guarantee the question won't end in a disaster? I would fervently request serious scrutiny to this aspect of the issue so that we know for sure that we will not witness spurt of a new dispute from within the hard earned 'solution' to the present crisis. I have read many articles and reports of speeches on the various aspects of the present political situation and so far found this point missing. I thought it was my responsibility to raise the issue so that we can try and find a relatively long lasting solution to the present crisis. If we as a nation want to ensure a dignified future in the next century, the next five years may offer the last chance for a take off. We cannot afford missing this opportunity that results from any such quandary in the next ten/twenty years.

The question in my mind arises for the simple reason that after a general election held under a 'non-partisan, neutral and caretaker government' the parliament may have at least 40/45 seats falling vacant for various obvious reasons during its tenure that spreads over five years. How moral, rational and legal it would be to holding of by-elections for those vacant seats in the Jatiya Sangsad under a party government at

that time? Why should we expect that the contestants of those elections would not demand a neutral and caretaker government to ensure their election to be free and fair? Why should we even discern that the opposition political parties will not make any complaint and attack the party in power any more? Why shouldn't we also anticipate that someone will go to court and demand similar 'neutral caretaker government' to conduct the election too? How can those elections be held acceptably under a party government with all the machinery conducting that election under its influence? Why should somebody (may be the majority) enjoy privileges while others (even a single case) subjected to detriment? My point here is that if we do not address this problem it may prove the weaknesses of the very concept of a 'neutral caretaker government' conducting general elections. So this point should deserve active consideration during the course of negotiation on the 'neutral caretaker government' issue to make it legally, logically and morally stronger.

In the initial days of the current political crisis I had some reasons to be against the idea of a 'neutral and caretaker government' to hold general election. Later arrived the events and I found that there is a growing support among the general

people for such an arrangement. Thereafter, I started pondering over it again and accepted the idea as an innovative and potential one which can be tried and established as a model for even the other Third World democracies. That's how I also started thinking in favour of a 'caretaker government' until recently when the question of the later elections (by-elections) came into my mind. In that event the concept cannot and should not be considered in petty party interest but in much larger dimension of democratic mores.

I will take this opportunity humbly to caution everybody concerned and remind that the grave political situation prevailing today has developed from the 'dissatisfaction' of the political parties in the opposition about the conducting of some by-elections held under the ruling BNP government, elected to power through an

election conducted by a 'neutral caretaker government'. This problem, out of 'dissatisfaction' of the opposition political parties, was also considered to be so simple in the very inception. That's why we must be aware of the fact that we have wasted enough of our precious days and months. We shouldn't go for ad-hoc arrangements anymore only to facilitate a party to power. We should go for a comprehensive and long-term solution. Only then we can expect a stable government to further ensure effective governance. We cannot afford similar crisis to crop up again in the near future for the sake of democracy and above all the much needed economic momentum that has to be generated and geared up.

I am faithful to the belief that our leaders are patriots. They all wish a prosperous future for the nation. So it is desired that they act logically and act immediately.

To the Editor...

Yitzhak Rabin

Sir, The unfortunate death of Yitzhak Rabin shocked the entire civilised world. The brutal murder of the Israeli Prime Minister proves that those who have the courage to make peace negotiations with their enemies may face an unfortunate ending.

Mr Yitzhak Rabin was an advocate of peace. He wanted to put an end to the hostilities between the Muslims and the Jews. His sole intention was to establish peace in this world of constant warfare and destruction. Well, for this he had to give his life. I must say that it was an awful lot to pay for trying to do some good for humanity. But why do we forget that good deeds are not appreciated in this cruel and inhuman world. Acts of love, charity are frowned upon, peace-makers and advocates of peace are laughed at. This world belongs to the barbarians and the murderers. People like Yitzhak Rabin and Anwar Sadat can't afford to survive in a world like this. This is certainly not a place for the peace-lovers. Will the young deranged fellow who killed Rabin ever realise what he has done? Will he ever sit down to think about the repercussions his deed will

have on the peace negotiations? No, of course, not. Why should we be forgetting that he was ordered by God to perform this divine act. How long will people go on pointing to the heavens for their own inhuman acts. How long will they go on blaming God for their own acts of brutality?

The world has lost a great man. The void that has been created will not be filled up in a short time. The loss is immeasurable. The exponents of peace have lost a leader. If all the supporters of peace are assassinated like this, will there be any peace at all?

Towheed Feroze
New DOHS, Dhaka

Saidpur Bypass Road

Sir, The World Bank Mission is constructing a road in the northern part of the country which has caused a negative sensation among the people. This proposed 'Saidpur Bypass Road' will go through a very green, five hundred years old habitat, called Hazibabri/Botlagari. Thus, the inhabitants of these

areas namely Saidpur, Nilphamari, Rangpur and Dinajpur are very much unhappy over this almost aggressive and unplanned decision of World Bank.

They hoisted black flags at their houses in strong protest. At the nearest crossing of the road, there are banners/posters with words against the World Bank and against the construction of this bypass road violating national and international environmental laws.

The alternative proposals already published in national newspapers/magazines are: 1) Broadening the already existing narrow road, going through the vast open agricultural fields, beside the cantonment; 2) Evicting unlawfully set up establishments on Govt/Railway lands and broadening the Rangpur Road/Tulsiram Road which goes through Saidpur town; 3) For making Saidpur town a tourist attraction and expansion of tourism for national economic growth, a 'Flyover Highway' should be made through this town on Saidpur/Tulsiram Rd; 4) Making Saidpur a healthy city, which was declared a 'healthy railway city' during British period; 5) Carpeting the already existing brick-soling road

towards west of Dhapera, on Nilphamari Road, one kilometer from Saidpur; then it will automatically become a bypass road, saving millions of hard-earned taka.

Hence, I feel World Bank as well as the local authorities concerned should pay heed to the alternative proposals and reach a solution.

Dr Abul Hasan (Bulu)
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Ershad: An appeal to PM

Sir, I have come to know through newspaper reports that the condition of ex-president General Hossain Mohammad Ershad is very much critical and Begum Raushan Ershad has appealed for transferring him to a hospital so that she can serve him freely, of course under guard. So it is our earnest appeal to the honourable Prime Minister Begum Khaleida Zia to kindly transfer him to P G Hospital immediately, on humanitarian ground.

Prof Md Abdul Jalil
Hathazari College, Chittagong

Art
Buchwald's
COLUMN

Thank You for Smoking

THE tobacco companies are playing hardball with the media. After winning a zillion-dollar suit against ABC, the tobacco czars tried to bring CBS's '60 Minutes' to its knees. Brown and Williamson, a cigarette producer accused of one thing or another concerning ingredients that might affect smoking, forced the network to cancel a segment being prepared on its practices.

I want my readers to know that I am not going to be cowed by pressure from the cigarette lawyers. It has always been my policy to call them as I see them, and let the chips fall where they may, come hell or high water.

So here's what I think about smoking in the resent litigious atmosphere.

As far as I am concerned, smoking is a wonderful social pastime that can be enjoyed by everyone in the family, regardless of age or ideology.

The joy of inhaling is not only in the puff, but in the taste which comes as close to a chocolate fudge sundae as you can get. The aroma of a cigarette burning resembles the smell of new-mown hay and many people develop a desire to roll around in it and cover themselves with moist nicotine.

One of the things that makes smoking so mouth-watering is the anticipation. When I was 12 years old I couldn't wait until I saved up enough money to buy a pack of cigarettes. Those of us who found cigarettes to be the secret to adulthood would prepare to smoke behind the railroad tracks, savoring the moment when we could light up and blow smoke rings in the sky.

Occasionally, we might cough, but we were certain that the smokes had nothing to do with it, and blamed it on the steam locomotives that passed close by.

When I grew up I smoked cigars, which gave me a bigger bang for the buck. There were people in my social group who objected to smoking of any kind, but all of them came to a bad end.

What do I think of smoking today? I think that we should have a choice. The tobacco companies are providing a vital service and the media has no right to pick on them.

I am willing to appear on '60 Minutes' and repeat what I have said here. If the media doesn't tell it the way it is, there is no hope for Joe Camel, the Marlboro man or even the Virginia Slims.

This is a democracy and tobacco is as essential to life as oxygen. As Voltaire once said, 'I may not agree with a person smoking at the next table in a restaurant, but I will defend to the death his right to get sick.'

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