

Govt Must Clarify

A respected leading Bangla daily carried a story on Saturday, based on some sources, alleging serious economic irregularity and impropriety in the purchase and use of a helicopter. There cannot be any question about the seriousness of the issue. It cannot be made a short shrift of by any stretch of the imagination. Because it has pointed accusing fingers at the top executive office of the country, the government must come out clean on the issue — if not for anything else, at least for the sake of accountability.

Now that the question has been raised that one of the two helicopters originally on the list of purchase for relief work with the money donated by the International Committee of Red Cross/Red Crescent (ICRC), has been allegedly diverted for the prime minister's use, the government should feel obliged to make a clear public statement on the whole affair. And immediately at that.

The issue concerns the prestige not only of the prime minister's office but also of the nation as a whole. Clarifications as to what has really happened are necessary both for the highest executive office's accountability to the people and for a credible image before the donors who made the money available for the purchase of two helicopters meant for relief work. If the government keeps silent for a long period, people may start thinking that some wrong-doing had taken place which we believe can be avoided with the government clearing the air forthwith.

As the report points not only to misuse of the donor's fund but also gross financial irregularity in the procurement of the two helicopters, the implications and reactions both at home and abroad can be far-reaching. No government can be unresponsive to a matter so sensitive and delicate as this one. That is why, we repeat, the government must clarify its position at the earliest and set the records straight.

Admission Rush

Dhaka City is now in the grip of an admission fever. This seems to be a perennial problem. There are two key sources of this problem. One, the very much inadequate number of schools. Two, a widely-held belief of there being good and bad schools, of better and even best schools, backed by the fact of the unevenness of the quality of teaching and other educational practices and facilities of the various schools.

From a free-for-all at the first level to the somewhat controlled secondary stage — the transition creates both quantitative and qualitative aerobatics. The poor kids! Perhaps their parents are even more unfortunate — for it is they who do the shuttling between the schools and have to pose as if money was never a problem with them.

There are 24 government-run high schools in the city and about 31 private ones. If all of these enrol about a thousand apiece — that is more than a hundred for a class — that comes to meeting about a wee little part of the total need for seats in a city having a 80-lakh-plus population.

Schools would anyhow proliferate under sheer pressure of demand but this must not happen outside of a well-thought-out design. The design should aim at ensuring quality and, not any less importantly, equitable spatial distribution. With many schools catching up with the leaders in quality, rushing the few top schools would lessen. More effective would be the situation when school authorities would admit pupils only from the area these are located in — and not on a basis of donation power. Then also insisting on the merit of seven or eight-year olds for admission is a grotesque and anti-education. The top schools have been practising in Dhaka over the years.

Let us then have more schools, far more than we have now. And let them be spaced equitably throughout the city. And we want better schools with teachers teaching competently — and with love — in the classrooms and not asking for the lessons to be done at home.

Horrible End of Purnima

Purnima Rani was only 17. She was kidnapped a few days back from her village home in Nandapur, Dinajpur. Her body was later found dangling from a tree in a jungle close to the village. It bore marks of beating and other forms of torture. When police came to take the body for post-mortem to Dinajpur town, it is reported that the villagers pooled some 1300 taka and gave it to the police to arrange for her cremation.

That is part one of the remarkable story. Part two is even more remarkable. The Dinajpur morgue is a three-sided thing and for three days jackals, swines and dogs made a feast of her body. The sight was too much for the *tokais* who took out a protest procession and gheraoed the civil surgeon's office.

In the third part of the story we have two recommendations from the Dinajpur residents. One, there must be a regular morgue with four walls and dissections of all kinds made away from people's view and out of the reach of the necrophagous beasts.

Two, the RMO of the hospital has said there is no way Hindu bodies can be disposed of in the way Anjuman-e-Mufidul Islam does the Muslim bodies. A body should be formed by the Hindu citizens or whoever on the lines of the Anjuman.

In Search of Elysium

Although the success rate is modest, we are moving towards the right direction. In her inaugural speech, the Prime Minister has rightly focused on the supreme necessity of spread of knowledge, efflorescence of intellect and, above all, the need for universal literacy.

In his *Divine Comedy* Dante consigned both Cassius and Brutus to the lowest rung of Hell: they betrayed a friend Julius Caesar rather than their country Rome. A true friend is rare in this world: the nearest we can reach towards that goal is friendship with a good book — or a good piece of writing.

Learning is given premium in every known religion and philosophy. The word Bible is from the Greek word *Biblos* meaning book, and our sacred book, the Quran in Arabic means reading. In the whole process of achieving Nirvana, the State of Enlightenment, Gautama Buddha puts highest emphasis on learning. Prophet Muhammad (Peace be on Him) exhorted his disciples to go even to China to attain wisdom.

When the Roman Empire was demolished with attacks by the Barbarians — Goths and Huns — the monasteries took over the domain of scholarship and learning, including the preservation of the rarest manuscripts. They not only preserved learning, they transformed the monasteries through its rigour and discipline into seats of learning for six hundred years. When even Emperor Constantine and his successors had to flee Rome and seek the relative calm in the Eastern metropolis of Byzantium, the Abbeys and monasteries like the Abbey of Monte Cassino were working in preserving and spread of knowledge throughout the Middle Ages. Umberto Eco, the Semiotics guru, described in his classic: "The name of the Rose, how the monasteries in the Dark Ages were carrying forward, inter alia, the torch of civilisation. Monasteries dominated education and scholarship and naturally great universities began as colleges of theology and divinity."

In the 16th and 17th century England, great efforts were made to go beyond the Bible of King James I and enter the larger and liberal world of teaching: Renaissance was slow in coming to England. Francis Bacon and Milton both were working to bring knowledge, through books and printing, to the doorsteps of the masses. "Knowledge is a rich storehouse for the glory of the creator and the relief of man's estate" — thus Bacon exhorted the common readers, while Milton, dismayed at the power of the censors, stated: "Censorship means uniformity and monotony —

ENCHIRIDION

Walid Rahman

Ahmed Sukarno within days of Indonesian independence, spent a lion's share of the budget on education. Today, Indonesia can claim almost 100 per cent literacy. Malaysia is closely following. In South Asia, Sri Lanka has achieved phenomenal success in education. With a bloody civil war on hand, Sri Lanka's achievement, in socio-economic field, is amply reflected in the UNDP hand book on HRD 1994/95.

In Bangladesh, we are making considerable efforts to impart universal education to our population. Although the success rate is modest, we are moving towards the right direction. In her inaugural speech, the Prime Minister has rightly focused on the supreme necessity of spread of knowledge, efflorescence of intellect and, above all, the need for universal literacy. The Frankfurt

Turkey used fireworks to impress foreign ambassadors in the court of the magnificent sultans. The Chinese and/or the Indians could hardly make good use of the printing press. The Europeans took advantage of this knowledge and through the Oriental technology, they brought religious books, to begin with, within easy reach of the masses.

The colonial masters in India were more concerned with imparting education to suit their needs. The Persian introduced by the Moghuls, left widespread influence on both Hindus and Muslims. The British Raj used English, their court language, in place of Persian, very selectively. Whereas the Hindus, easily took to English, the erstwhile rulers of India, the Muslims cocooned themselves in a huff. In the new wave of learning fast, the South Asian countries are making moves for adult literacy at a breakneck speed with differing results. Whereas Kerala, the southern state of India, has attained almost 100 per cent literacy, the rest of India is making bold effort to attain that goal.

Literacy is essential in lifting a nation quickly to improve the quality of life.

Book Fair and that in Torino keeps the light on in Europe. The book fair, inspired by National Book Centre, with international participation, is a useful concourse of publishers and printers. Although English books and its attractions dominate the show, Bengali books are also showing good appearance. It is, of course, not as universal as the *Ekushey Boi Mela*, organised by the Bangla Academy, to commemorate the martyrdom of Bengalees who laid down their precious lives to secure recognition for our mother tongue, Bangla, a unique event in the history of nation-building. The *Ekushey Boi Mela* gave impetus to writers and readers, and printers of Bangladesh, and brought books at a discount price to the readers. The present book fair shows a way to larger participation of printers and publishers and allows readers of Bangladesh to come face to face with books they would otherwise not see.

The Bengali classics along with those in English including translations from other languages should be introduced at a more reasonable price. Years ago no library worth its name would be complete without the Greek and Latin classics, Samuel

Johnson, Gibbon and Jane Austen.

Today we should permit readers of our country to have, in addition, a Tagore, or Shamsur Rahman. Books, good books, are necessary to enrich our soul. As Carlyle said: "the good of a book is not the facts that can be got out of it, but the kind of resonance that it awakes in our own minds. . . . the resonance not only for the soul but also about the tradition of yourself and your country and its culture, its civilisation.

And a civilisation without tradition, as Sinclair Lewis puts beautifully in *Babbitt*, would degenerate into amusing itself only with rubbish. And *Ekushey Boi Mela* goes a long way to meet that desideratum: the Bangla Academy assemblage of publishers, printers and books quintessentially representing by and large, our national ethos evolved through the historic symbiosis of the blood of the martyrs of 1952 Language Movement and the memory of the three million dead during our glorious War of Liberation. It is a pride that you achieve only in a millennium, it is a tradition that is bequeathed only to the bravest. It is an enlightenment, incandescent with culture and tradition of a people with a thousand-year-history, in which men, women and children, irrespective of caste, creed and religion, so long as they are Bengalees, commingle with each other, transforming the *mela* into a great concourse of freedom-loving and language-loving humanity.

That's how books and book fairs are so important for us, particularly for those in 'salad days still in green judgement' so that one can decipher chaff from substance, illusion from reality. And the search for Elysium goes on...

CORRIGENDUM
In the last week's column (January 1) the words "part wings" in the second line of second para should be read "put wings"; the word "gravitatu" in the fourteenth line of sixth para should be read "qualitative" and the word "plimsoll" should be put between the words "the" and "line" in the thirteenth line of twelfth para.

The printing errors are regretted.

Shah A M S Kibria's column ON THE RECORD will appear tomorrow

The Ball is in Hasina's Court

by Muhammad Anisur Rahman

I had to summon some courage to write this, for the subject is so sensitive and I may be so easily misunderstood. But I felt I should still try to communicate whatever my thoughts are as a concerned citizen, in the nation's hour of great crisis.

The clock is ticking. The countdown may be said to have started, and somebody may have set a time bomb to explode at some hour in February. What should a sane leader of the opposition do?

Please have been made unsuccessfully to the Prime Minister to give the nation a gift — a decisive step toward healthy democracy in the form of a practice of general elections under non-party governments for succession of periods. The Prime Minister has refused, thereby admitting in effect that she cares more for the partisan interests of her party than for the nation, and that she sees the chances for herself and her party in the coming general elections uncomfortably uncertain under a non-partisan government. Whatever it may be, her response seems now to be final, and it appears that elections will be held under BNP premiership whether the major opposition parties participate or not.

The ball is now in Sheikh Hasina's court, with a provocation of the first order. This is a real test of her leadership, and she is expected to play the ball in the ultimate interest of the nation and of the cause of democracy.

What Sheikh Hasina has been saying, along with the other opposition parties, is that an election except under a non-party head of government will be resisted at all costs. This has the simple but dreadful implication that, if her professed resistance succeeds, the nation will be plunged into a breakdown of the constitutional order and hence into a frightful disorder.

A constitutional state will no longer exist. Nor do we immediately see any "revolutionary party" ready to seize power to give us a state of a different "breed" altogether. We should, therefore, expect to see a state of anarchy devoid of any legal reference whatsoever, or a seizure of "central" power by some organized anti-social or otherwise undesirable quarter imposing its own "law" on the society. One would hope that Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of a legendary leader who loved the country so much, would not herself disintegrate with such a ball in her court, and play it so recklessly as to become the immediate cause of such a havoc for the nation.

One is, indeed, reminded of the famous Cuban missile crisis when Krushchev decided to sacrifice the Soviet ego and withdraw his missiles to save mankind from a nuclear holocaust when Kennedy pushed him to face this choice. The whole world hailed this not as an act of defeat but of statesmanship of the highest quality. On a smaller plane the challenge

for Sheikh Hasina to prove her statesmanship qualities is similar. She may have the power to cause a collapse of the constitutional order, but she does not win anything by such a move, least of all promote the cause of democracy for which she has struggled and sacrificed so much.

Sheikh Hasina, therefore, may wish to reconsider her stand to resist the elections and agree to participate, even if elections are held under a government headed by a member of the ruling party, putting down the condition that every polling centre and its vote counting process be observed by institutional international observers such as representatives of the United Nations and or the Commonwealth Secretariat in addition to representatives of the nation's own civil organizations (e.g. NGOs, teachers' associations, educational institutions, women's bodies, Grameen Bank representatives, and the media). The Prime Minister might not want to agree even to such conditions, but the genuineness of such a position might evoke enough support nationally and internationally to bring out the statesman in her as well. And a decision on this may perhaps be taken by the Election Commissioner on his own authority. And whatever may be the outcome of the elections under such terms, Sheikh Hasina could emerge from out of this with a great plus to her credit as a statesman, and this could only enhance her standing as a leader of the nation whether immediately coming into power or not.

All eyes are now focussed on Sheikh Hasina. She has announced her resolve to resist the elections unless conducted under a non-party government, and has asked the nation to be behind her in this resistance. But she has not told the nation how it should face the consequent disorder, and what kind of leadership she herself would provide in this respect, should she succeed in her final confrontation with the state. One would hope that she would pause a little, and consider that the cause of democracy which she is championing may be best served at this stage, given the odd intransigence of the other party, by buying time for it rather than acting to blow it up to pieces just because victory is not immediate.

And Sheikh Hasina may have to decide to act alone now. Her main political allies in her struggle for a fair election, ironically, have little to lose, perhaps something to gain, if the time bomb explodes. If one had assessed that one needs to compromise even with anti-independent and communal forces to win people's voting rights, then a tactical withdrawal from a strategy of all-out confrontation when this might only destroy without any gains for the cause, could also be a compromise worthy of consideration by any responsible leadership.

Art
Buchwald's COLUMN

What a Cut

THE big tax cut that we are all waiting for may not be as big as everyone thinks. According to the Citizens for Tax Justice, nobody has any idea exactly what kind of deduction to expect. But we are becoming more cautious as Congress is more confused.

I conducted a survey on how people planned to spend their cut if the tax plan goes into effect.

William Byrd said, "I'm going to buy a bag of French fries at McDonald's. It's something I've been wanting to do for a long time, but my family budget couldn't handle it."

Edmond Gascoigne Thompson said, "I'm in the lower bracket so I don't expect mega bucks. Whatever I get I'm going to put into a shoeeshine. It's a safe investment, and I think the Republicans would approve of it."

Irving X. Burg told me that if he got a tax cut he would give it to the Republican Party in exchange for a George Bush bumper sticker.

Not all the tax benefits will go for luxuries such as plastic shopping bags and frozen yogurt.

Jeff Legum said, "My kid goes to college, and if I get my tax cut I'm going to treat him to a hot meal for lunch."

There is tremendous excitement over the new tax bill since so many people will be affected.

Lisa Farrell is undecided about whether to buy a bus token with it or a first-class stamp from the post office.

Brad Blank, on the other hand, plans to give his tax cut to a toll booth on the New Jersey Turnpike.

Everyone is in agreement that they can all use the money — somehow.

Hermin Rebhan confided, "I don't expect to get as much of a break as those in the top bracket because they really earned their money the hard way in stocks and bonds. But I still want my share because I would like to purchase a fly swatter with it. I believe that the more fly swatters you own, the better chance you have of keeping the government out of the fly-swatting business."

The new tax bill will provide allowances for schoolchildren although no one knows how much. So experts say that there will be enough to purchase a pair of sneakers, while others believe that it will provide every child with his or her own Frisbee.

The tax foundation reports that 68 million households will not be affected by the cut although wealthy investors can expect a needed break. This is as it should be.

At the same time 13 million middle-class households, or 10 percent of the work force, will have their taxes increased, but they deserve it.

Some computers predict that the tax cut for most people will amount to 69 cents a day which should change the economy by providing every man, woman and child in America with one roll of Scotch tape.

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Our fate

Sir, I am very much afraid to see the present condition of our country. What is going on in this country? Every morning when I see the newspaper, I become astonished to read the news of murders. Every day this is happening in the broad daylight. Are we living in a barbaric place? When the whole world is trying to maintain peace in this beautiful world, then we have started a chaos without any sensible reason.

Nowadays hartal is a common phenomenon in our country. It is a human right in a democratic country. But I want to pose a question to the leaders who call hartals, that how many of our people observe hartals from their heart. We are being forced to make hartal successful. It is dangerous to go out of the house during hartal time. Picketers are very active on the days of hartal. I am not blaming them. They get money from the political parties for picketing. They break the glasses of the cars, destroy the rickshaws etc. Is it also a human right?

Our political parties are

Sir, How Europe treats Turkey and how the Turkish people look at Europe is less important than how they look at themselves and their society, and the new world order in the next century. Turkey so long sought the more progressive European camp, may be for economic reasons. Man comes before any man-made -ism.

Zulfikar Mirzapur Cadet College Mirzapur

Whizzkid

Sir, I have taken part in almost all the WHIZZKID competitions. I regret to say that although all my answers were correct, I have not won prizes even once. I have also noticed that prizes are limited to a few schools. I am writing to bring the matter to your notice. I hope you will take effective action.

Md Khalid Mahfuz A reader, Dhaka

Prize winners are picked by lottery. Interested persons may be present every Friday at 9.00 pm to witness the draw.

Editor