The Baily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali Dhaka, Wednesday, January 10, 1996

The Missing Ship

A Bangladeshi owned cargo ship with 24 Bengali crew has been missing in the China sea for 45 days and all that our government could say is that some faxes and telexes have been sent and that we are awaiting reply. Director General of shipping told this newspaper that governments of Taiwan, China and Japan have been asked to provide information about the ship Al-Kashem which sailed from Singapore on 27 October '95 for the Japanese port of Onahama. The ship is reported missing from 21 November '95. There are obvious rules that guide worldwide cargo shipping. In this age of revolutions in communication we cannot accept the fact that a ship would be missing for 45 days and that nothing about its whereabouts could be known — given the current level of global shipping norm up to the minute record is kept, and constant communication is maintained with some ground station. Even if this ship failed to strictly adhere to the communication rules, definitely a far better job could be done of locating it by examining the route Al-Kashem was supposed to take.

We would like to clearly state that sending a few faxes and telexes is far from adequate. Government must take a far more active role. There are reasons to suspect that there could be an attempt to hush up the whole affair so that families of the crew cannot claim adequate compensation, in case the ship has been drowned. It is also possible that insurance money will be collected for the lost ship by the owning company and the whole set-up will disappear before the family members even get to know what happened. Though owned by Captain Rabiul Islam, the company was based in Singapore and was flying Belizean flag. It is clear that the family members of the Bangladeshi crew are at a disadvantage as neither the company, nor the registration of the ship, is in Bangladesh.

The nationality of the owner, and of 24 members of the crew imposes, however, a special responsibility on our government. We support the suggestion of the family members of the missing crew that an inquiry committee should be set up immediately to investigate the matter. We urge upon the government to act on this suggestion without any delay.

Regional Free Trade

At the two-day meeting of the SAARC commerce ministers four member states have made a strong case for removal of all forms of tariff barriers. After the ratification of the South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA) by the member countries, this is a very reasonable call the less equal of the South Asian members could make. Although the Maldives delegation has not joined its voices, it does not necessarily mean that country is averse to the idea.

The SAPTA was worked out with the intention of increasing trade co-operation and coordination among the SAARC members on a rational basis. It did not right away envisage a free trade area but it could surely be a step towards that direction. So far the SAPTA has hardly done anything to reverse the trend of regional trade favouring the developed economies in the region. A case in point is the trade imbalance between India and Bangladesh. Import from India faces a tariff level no more than 25 per cent at our end, whereas commodities from Bangladesh have to struggle against a tariff limit of more than

60 per cent in Indian market.

In a situation like this, export from countries like Bangladesh to India can hardly be competitive. The purpose of a preferential trade agreement was to give the member states some sort of relief from the high tariff as applicable for international goods of import. Smaller economies are already in a disadvantageous position against the larger and developed market. The disadvantage should not be taken to the extreme by creating obstacles to export of goods from smaller countries to the bigger ones through the imposition of a whole range of trade barriers such as tariffs. The SAPTA will be meaningless if the bigger countries in the region fail to abandon the policy the developed North has so long been accused of. If the more equal of the regional members can practise the theory of even-term economic and trade relations with their neighbours, they earn the right to ask for similar treatment when they deal with the rich partners in the developed North.

Death of a Visionary

France's longest-serving president had a quiet exit from power. Equally quietly did he take his leave from the world. The man who came to power after 23 years of unbroken conservative rule had that special French elegance about him which enabled him to bridge the gap between the socialists and the conservatives over the last decade. His erudition and love for literature and art lent him both firmness and grace of character so rare in modern day politics.

The stark contrast with his successor, Jacques Chirac, whom he beat twice, is also indicative of the difference in the styles of governance. Mitterrand's sober and sedate profile acted as a calming influence during the turbulent global politics culminating in the dismantling of communism in the Soviet Union and other East European countries. That he brought together the left forces and reconciled them with the market economy is a strong proof of the socialist president's

keen awareness of reality and also his vision. The president had long been fighting with the deadly disease with that quiet courage he was known to possess abundantly. His end seems to have come so suddenly — more because he had left office only a few months before — that few were prepared to accept the truth. But those who knew how valiantly he fought were not altogether surprised at the news. What is important, however, is that at 79 he was still very active and he could leave a more lasting mark on French presidency compared to any other leader, save perhaps Charles de Gaulle.

Passing Thoughts Invited by the Impasse

by M Asafuddowlah (First of a two part article on the current political situation)

INCE the resignation of all the members from the fifth national parliament except those belonging to BNP, the nation has been watching the turn of events with a set of interest that ranged from concern to despair. The impasse is not breathtaking, it is bordering the ridiculous.

The stalemate is triggering public discussions that are primarily a rewinding of the memory tape. Why are we doing this to ourselves? Have we had a horoscopic mutation of the scorpios?

Since independence of Bangladesh, those who governed the country with or without public consent had non-conventional exits. The founder was assassinated and the recourse to justice was denied by an amendment in the constitution. A murder was thus constitutionally enshrined - providing impetus to a dissatisfied section of serving army officers to commit murders and occupy the Presidential palace. And that is what followed exactly. Another President was assas sinated by the same constituents. A new government was elected and again an unconstitutional intervention came from a military adventurist. This time the martial law came almost by public tender. Everybody knew even its date of announcement. This hero ruled for nine years and was overthrown by the people, helped by the refusal of the then army command to be used to suppress the wishes of the people. Where the Bonapartist should have faced the charge of sedition against the state. he was convicted for possessing a revolver without license. The tyrant who was forced out of office by unprecedented surge of public hatred, was elected from all five constituencies. Then we spoke about holding a fair election in which one of the major political parties was not allowed to campaign. A postfacto amendment to the constitution was agreed to. and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court was called upon to take care of an interim government. He conducted the affairs in a manner which illustrated fairplay and simplicity. The nation had perhaps never been governed so honestly. He

do the right things if one could free himself from the paranoia of ambition, selfperpetuation and amassing of corrupt fortune. He could be fair because he had no stake. He could shore up consensus because he did not have to continue

Has the past ever served

to teach us any lesson? When the present government came into power it was blessed with great public empathy as it followed a regime which was forced on the people. The new parliamentary democracy passed two bills in a speed worthy of the Guinness book of records. One related to increased remuneration of the parliament members alongwith provision of pension, and the other entitled the MPs to duty free import of cars and jeeps. The undertaking was that the transports so imported shall be non-transferable. A large number of these transports

ternational isolation of the nation, the total uprooting of the local government bodies, the conversion of the country into a warehouse of Indian goods, the masterly non-governance -- have all brought about a situation in which even Ershadis efficiency to govern is being talked about.

We should rewind our minds and identify why there is so much stake in the power politics of this unfortunate nation. There is no better time to do this than now - sitting in the afterglow of the liberation day and in the prelude of the 21st February.

It was only the Muslim league government of the erstwhile East Pakistan which held a free and fair election, lost completely and handed over power to the electoral adversaries with dignity. This was possible by our peers. But this seems to be an impossibility today.

government becomes the condem- nation and persecution of the supporters of the previous regime. Ironically, after an initial pause, the successors also commit corruption as if with a vengeance and almost without exception surpass the account recorded by the predecessor. Having persecuted sans mercy and expecting a comparable reprisal by those who might succeed, the party in power finds itself in desperation and it multiplies its own record of guilt. It ordinarily goes on building a perpetual base of power through accumulation of funds collected through dispensation of business favours and building up of a youth force who are armed illegally to promote intimidation. Parallelly, an alliance with civil and military bureaucracy is maintained. These alliances are maintained through unholy in-

struments. Then is opened a

holy conjunction form the basis of an enduring entent(. The corporate character of the state gets lost and an outlook, completely proprietorial, emerges.

The above pictures have been drawn empirically. But it has been sequenced to underscore the high stakes involved in any power transfer. Those in power realize this only too well and thus the nation never witnessed a peaceful or constitutional transition of power. Because the dangers of relinquishing power are too critical, the principal actors invest their shrewdest strategies to win at the polls. Being in power gives them a direct access to public funds, public sector employments and contracts. Public funds virtually becomes private funds of the party in power. Public money becomes handily available in the name of development. Construction of roads, cul-

and supporting agencies. They are very successfully used also for extending threats to political opponents or for negotiating political/ financial deals. Next comes under the plea of reorganization and strengthening the setting up of the Election Commission |aside: someone asked me iwhy there is no officer of the stature of Mr. Seshan, (the Chairman of Indian EC) in Bangladesh? He would have been removed twenty times in Bangladesh in one year: I had replied]. Having set the stage with the impresarios in position

of state persecution. Finally

comes the arrests of political

supporters of the opposition

parties and arming of the government party supporters.

The state security and intel-

ligence organizations are

made to function as govern-

ment partyis reconnaissance

the curtain is lifted for enactment of the final drama the holding of the national election. The backstage rehearsals were tried out during the bye-elections.

At the outset of this article

I have raised a number of

questions that were closely interrelated. In continuation of those queries one more question needs to be answered. Why should opposition political parties be keen to contest polls against the party in power when the field is uneven and the outcome so clearly predictable? One of the many contradictions of democracy lies in the fact that the party chief ordinarily becomes also the head of the government promising a fair and impartial governance. When elected to office and a cabinet formed, an oath of office is administered which, among many other promises. also includes the pledge to make dispensations without fear, favour and discrimination. A palpable act of hypocrisy is thus ritualized. Before the ink of that promise was dry that pledge was violated. How can it ever be expected that the chief of a party or its members would be impartial? Impartiality was publicly renounced the day they joined a party. Then why this oath? And if there be such an oath taken then why are the punishments not provided for its violation?

(To be concluded tomor-

We should rewind our minds and identify why there is so much stake in the power politics of this unfortunate nation. There is no better time to do this than now — sitting in the afterglow of the liberation day and in the prelude of the 21st February.

were sold in open showrooms in Dhaka and a lot more were privately sold at high profit. Some car dealers bought the import permits from the countryis law makers. In the matter of sharing of this unprecedented privilege the treasury bench and the opposition had no dispute, no debate, no difference. Whenever principles were challenged by privilege. it was principle that suffered the casualty. Election mandates were clearly misinterpreted and extended to cover issues never mandated by people. MPs assumed entire authority of the Thana administration without assuming any responsibility. This was totally extra-constitutional. The executive powers were taken over by the ministers in contemptuous violation of the printed rules. Officers of the republic have to be servile and sycophant to survive. The farmers bled for fertilizer, the diabolic rape by the custodians of law in Dinajpur, the armed invasion on-

Ansars, the regional and in-

thing out of the bag.

Syria's President Assad: The sphirx of Damascus

that talks should be only on a

military level, and that Syria

should accept Israel's de-

mand for ground-based early-

warning stations in the Golan

Heights after withdrawal, Is-

After months of insistence

Today, politics has lost its few more reinforcing fronts. verts, bridges, schools, colselfless dimension. Politics is an investment now. And, necessarily therefore, there is a calculation of return. Money comes to play the prime moveris function. As Laxmi moves on its ibahani owl, so does politics on the ibahani of Mastaans, the nonemployed youth who become the agents of terror in favour of their pay masters. That is why these ibahansi are the only people who do not change parties. Parties change but they do not. They basically belong to government party forever. That guarantees them protection from law. Money is provided by Money Maastans. Their concert with each other make the music of politics. Another interesting leature is that these are pointed out by political parties only when they are in the opposition. Once in power, they practice the same game that they themselves had held in con-

Once in power the prime objective of the incumbent

One is the front of intellectuals - teachers, lawyers. literateures, artists, etc. Another is a forum of journalists and yet others are the labour unions, professional associations, etc. The entire society is then divided into iAmader loki and others. The difference between state and government is deliberately blurred and issues directed against the government are interpreted as issues raised against the state. In our system, characterized by intolerance and mistrust, this is how governments monopolize the right to state loyalty. While the parliament is supposed to enact good laws and review or rescind bad laws, it makes sure that at least a few strong legislations are made that could be misused against their political opponents. These laws are made in the name of public safety. But just take the list of those detained under this law and the true intention of the enactment will be revealed. All

these factions working in un-

power come from. The criteria laid down for selection or prioritization of a project are peremptorily ignored. These investments, made out of tax payersi money are cited as monu-

leges, mosques, embank-

ments are done almost en-

tirely in the areas ministers

and members of Parliament

belonging to the party in

ments of personal glory during the polls, as if these were the outcome of their ancestral fortune. Relief materials are distributed under a solemn ritual as if the distribution were an act of private charity. Long before polls the civil administration is organized through postings and promises, in a manner which is conducive to pressure and manipulation. Big Business houses are called in, mostly under duress and in some cases with promises of future look after, to fund the party

campaign. Those refusing or funding the opposing parties are handed over awesome threats

Look-ahead to 1996

Political Illusionists Conjure Up Peace

Michael Jansen writes from Amman

To pursue peace in the Middle East, governments are engaging in what diplomats call

"constructive ambiguity" — evasions, half-truths, concealment. Gemini News Service ex-

amines the manoeuvrings and reports that sleight of hand might be about to pull some-

Samaria.

New Year's greeting going round the Middle East - a rumour that may yet become reality.

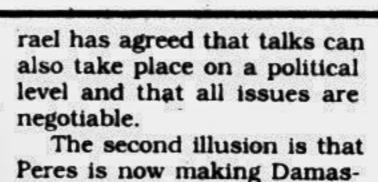
showed that it is possible to

Until recently, Israel was unwilling to pay the price for peace with the Arabs, set by the United Nations Security Council, which called for Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied in the 1967 war. The offer now on the negotiating table, set out by President Hafez al-Assad of Syria, is "full peace for full withdrawal."

New Israeli Premier Shimon Peres seems determined to take up that offer in the first half of 1996. He aims to achieve substantial progress in an all-Arab peace well before a November general election that will also be a referendum on the peace process.

However, Peres will have to conceal any Israeli concessions to placate uneasy electors. To that end, he has become a master illusionist, helped in this by Washington.

The first illusion they have created is that there is a "new tone" or a "new atmosphere" in traditionally hostile relations between Israel and Syria. This is to camouflage the big Israeli concession of agreeing to restart negotiations.



cus an offer it cannot refuse - "full withdrawal for full peace". The slogan is simply a reversal of the deal Syria has offered Israel. However, Peres has injected new meaning into "full

peace", demanding comprehensive peace with all the Arabs as the price for full withdrawal from the Golan and southern Lebanon. The Arabs, though, insist the final status of the occu-

pied Palestinian territories must also be settled. There is suspicion that Peres' full peace could be used to preempt the final disposition of Gaza and the West Bank and leave the Palestinians at the mercy of an Israel determined to hang on to terri-

Peres has admitted as much. While making clear to

Golan settlers that they may have to leave, he says that in exchange for a withdrawal from the Heights, Israel will retain large portions of the West Bank, the Biblical Jewish heartland of Judea and

And Yossi Beilin, Peres' deputy, tells Israeli settlers that most of the 140,000 colonists in the West Bank will remain after a final settlement with the Palestini-

"There is no problem of settlers," Peres says, "only problems between people". which can be resolved in a neighbourly fashion. The Palestinians do not agree. They demand an independent state in virtually all of the Gaza Strip and West Bank.

Promoting the notion of paying Syria's price at the expense of the Palestinians creates a third illusion. For it is Palestine, and the dispute over that territory, not the Golan or southern Lebanon, that is at the heart of the

Arab-Israeli conflict.

Meanwhile, Assad, the "Sphinx of Damascus", has created an illusion of his own by remaining silent on the sensitive issue of what full peace would entail. This is because most Syrians are likely to oppose a settlement that would involve having an Israeli embassy in the Syrian capital, bilateral trade, open borders and Israeli; tourists flooding in. It is an illusion to believe full peace could mean

Despite this necessity for illusion - or "constructive ambiguity" in diplomatic parlance - peace would seem to be on the way. Its proponents say the provisions have been agreed in principle and a time-frame set down.

Senior Palestinian Ambassador Samir Abu Ghazallah told Gemini News Service that a text would be signed in May in Washington. The deal would involve meeting the Syrian demand for withdrawal from the Golan and

Lebanon and recognition by Israel and the West of a Syrian "special role" in Lebanon.

Israeli sources give three years as the period required to negotiate details and for full implementation. The Syrians remain mum on this, but have previously demanded full Israeli withdrawal within six months of signing.

Peres says the signing

ceremony will involve not only Israel, Syria and Lebanon, but also Gulf and North African Arabs states. which have so far refrained from forging peace with Israel. If so, the signing will not amount to a detailed treaty but another "declaration of intent". For the Arabs do not trust Israel to implement troop withdrawals until they actually happen.

Illusionists and optimists believe the sight of Israeli leaders standing among Arab kings and presidents will create irresistible momentum for peace. This, they say, will propel the process forward — sweeping aside opponents of a comprehensive settlement.

MICHAEL JANSEN was born in the US, lives in Cyprus, and has covered the Middle East for many years.

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Unfortunate northern part

Sir, The Northern part of Bangladesh is an underdeveloped region. Almost all the government establishments have been set up in Dhaka and Chittagong. Gano Bhaban at Natore virtually remained defunct since its inception. Development activities are centred mainly around Dhaka and Chittagong. Implementation of cement factory at Joypurhat and Dharla Barrage at Kurigram have been shelved. Whither utilization of Saudi fund for Joypurhat and Islamic Development fund for Dharla Barrage? Pabna Irrigation and Rural Development Project and Teesta Project have been curtailed. Teesta Project is delayed for lack of fund. Water crisis and environmental problems created by Farakka have remained unresolved.

As a result, there is colossal economic loss. Besides. desertification process is continuing unchecked. The Brahmaputra and Jamuna are shifting westward causing bank erosion and displacing a large number of people. On the other hand, the recommendations of China-Bangladesh expert team on river training of the Brahmaputra in March, 1991 have been shelved. The Baral-Hurasagar river and outfall of Teesta have silted up causing drainage and navigation problem. Scarcity of fuel and LPG are continuing with untold sufferings of the people. World Bank fund for distribution of LPG remain unutilised for years.

Communication between Dhaka and northern part is hazardous, expensive and time consuming. Miseries of crossing the Jamuna at Aricha, Nagarbari, Daulatdia, Bahadurabad and also Teestamukh are continuing for years unresolved. There is no improvement in railway co-

mmunication since independence. Saidpur and Parbatipur railway workshops capable of manufacturing wagon and coach are underutilized. There are loadshedding every day. On the other hand, setting of atomic power station at Ruppur is delayed, installation of power station at Ranipukur is yet to be finalized and provision of Mini Hydropower in canal falls have been dropped from Teesta Project.

Industry cannot grow with load shedding, fuel scarcity and communication problem. Hosiery industry of Pabna has died down due to faulty policy of the government and the handloom industry is struggling for survival. Problem of Newsprint mill at Khulna and Paper mill at Paksey have remained unresolved. Mining of coal and use of methane gas at Jamalgonj and extraction of iron ore at Pirganj have remained unattended. Proper use of molasses, manufacture of light weight aggregate from burnt coal at Ranipukur and Ginger factory at Bhushirbandar have

The people of northern part has to pay more for all

remained unexplored. Fish-

eries development is limping.

Transit amenities at Hili and

Chapai Nawabganj are lack-

imported and locally produced goods. But they are not getting the adequate price for their agricultural produces viz paddy, sugarcane, jute, potato, ginger, mango, lichi, watermelon, tobacco, cotton, etc. Because of the above issues and others a feeling among the people of the area is growing that they are neglected and deprived of their legitimate share of public expenditure. It is hoped that early actions will be taken to resolve the issues for the greater interest of the country.

Serajul Islam Gulshan, Dhaka-1212

General elections

Sir, We are proud and feel greatly honoured that we fought our liberation war and won our independence in a record time of nine months after a stretch of 190'years of British colonial rule followed by 24 years of neo-colonialism of Pakistan. It is also a matter of satisfaction that we have overthrown autocratic rule and have been successful to establish democracy in our

country. We are however now at a loss to think where we are. Are we not simply en-

grossed in a controversy over 'caretaker government' or 'no caretaker government at the cost of untold sufferings of the people and wastage of time and energy of the na-

We are constitutionally bound to hold general elections between 4th January and 4th April 1996. Are we going to defend and respect our sacred constitution?

Without the formation of a 'caretaker government', the main opposition parties Awami League (AL), Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and Jatiya Party (JP) are determined to oppose and foil the scheduled

general elections. Is it not a discredit on the part of a democratically elected government to fail to hold by-elections to the 145 vacant seats of the members of the parliament and now trying to hold general elections without the participation of the main opposition parties? Is it also not a discredit for the main opposition parties to demand something beyond the purview of the Constitution of the Peo-

ple's Republic of Bangladesh? We wonder what matters most? 'Caretaker government' or 'no caretaker government', 'constitution' or the welfare of the people? Of course, the welfare of the

Let us look into our mistakes, lapses and sufferings. When the peoples of the different countries of the world are looking forward to enter into the 21st century with hope and inspiration for a bright future why an ominous threat of political catastrophe is hovering over our heads like a dark cloud?

people is above all.

In the face of main opposition parties' demand what is the harm if we agree to hold general elections 1996 under a 'caretaker government', make post factor amendment to our constitution and save our democracy and the country in the greatest interest of the nation?

We are confident that whichever the political party emerges victorious in the general elections under a 'caretaker government' would be able to serve the cause of the people, democracy and the country more smoothly. efficiently and effectively.

Let us step into the next century with foresight, wisdom and patriotism and march forward with hope. determination and inspiration and build up a happy and prosperous Bangladesh without fail.

O H Kabir Wari, Dhaka-1203