The Baily Star Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

Voters' Nightmare

The Constitution obliges us to go for the election. The mainstream opposition parties urge us to foil it. What should we, the voters, do? The second 'democratic' election after the fall of autocracy would have marked a more secured stride towards accountable government, a maturing of our representative institutions, a growing up process for our members of parliament, a more assertive voice of the public at large. On the contrary, what we face is uncertainty, prospect of violence and further division between the political parties, whose consequences are likely to go far beyond the next election.

The challenge of the moment is how to navigate out of this mess without harming the nation and the political process too much. While we can blame the Election Commission for many shortcomings, we cannot, in all fairness, blame it for going ahead with the elections. We urge the opposition to examine as to what will happen if no election is held. With the expiry of 90 days, if no new elected government is ready to assume power, there will be a serious constitutional vacuum in which the country will be without a legitimate government, a consequence which is desired by no one, including, we believe, the opposition.

We believe that as a legal requirement elections must be held. We also believe that the opposition has the right to boycott the elections as a show of protest and to express its no-confidence in it. However, we do not believe that anybody or party has any right to prevent any voter from participating in the elections, if he or she should chose to do so. Therefore while the opposition should, and must, devote its total energy to convince the people to boycott this election, it should in no way intimidate, coerce or force people to follow its wish. In fact a voluntary boycott will go much further in undermining the outcome of this largely one party affair, than if the boycott is imposed. Opposition would do well to remember this point.

Manpower Export

At the outset Malaysia was very open about recruiting manpower from Bangladesh. Then our own corrupt practices and inept handling of the process led to refusal by Malaysia to take any more of our labour force. Diplomatic fence mending, and the assurance that our government will handle things on our end led to an agreement that Malaysia will take an additional 70,000 workers. Requisition of 2,980 workers is already with us: But the government body responsible for processing this Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Ltd (BOESL) — is not moving fast enough.

Just as we cannot allow unscrupulous businessmen to play with the destiny of our poor people and malign the image of the country by sending out illegal workers, so also we cannot allow bureaucratic bungling to force us to lose this lucrative earning opportunity for our people. Something needs to be done immediately.

In a recent review meeting of the concerned ministry, it was observed that as a government body BOESL had some inherent disadvantage. While this observation may be true to some extent, it can be immediately remedied through a closer cooperation between the government and the private manpower export agencies. We also feel that BOESL's role and terms of reference has not. been clearly spelt out by the ministry. This is causing a lot of confusion. What is needed is seriousness on the part of Labour and Manpower Ministry to solve this problem. It should immediately clarify its TOR and also give proper leadership in bringing about greater cooperation between BOESL and the private manpower agencies.

Endless Queue at JNC

Jagannath College is selling forms for students intending to enrol for the honours first year classes. We say college advisedly for these students would take the National University courses there and also take their final examinations with that university and not Jagannath University. The degree they would or would not get is National University's. The Jagannath College, one of our major institutions of the kind with enviable traditions and legacies has not at all been helped by its dubious upgrading into a university.

There are now 5,175 seats at the college in that category. News reports say already 80,000 admission forms have been sold against that accommodation, and this figure would go up to 150 thousand and beyond. This is altogether a silly situation. And Jagannath is not the only college offering honours courses. Why should so many come here and not go to other places? All these degree aspirants hope to get their thing of desire rather easily, depending on the reputation of the college. Now that the college would be awarding its own degrees as a university, things should

be easier still. That's why the crowding? It is an easy guess that when there is such a demand for a chance, 1:30 for a seat, some clever people would extend helping hands in exchange of cash. Forms have reportedly become a roaring business. This is no new business but J. N. has beaten Vigarunnissa and other such form-business places by miles.

In the academic businesses of all kinds, students have lately been proving their mettle. If you can get hold of a form at three times its price, you don't expect to submit it all by yourself. The student leaders would condescend to take it and submit the same after you have been able to soften them by another generous helping.

When the Other Half Makes it Full

economic growth and development is widely recognised but seems hardly recorded by official statistics. Especially, in agricultural productivity gains that swept countries over the past 30 years, rarely the role of women was properly appreciated. This negligence, allegedly, sprang from the ignorance of agricultural research scientists and programme implementors who apparently seemed to turn a deaf ear to the potential contributions of women in raising farmer productivity. However, time now is ripe enough, perhaps, to give due cognisance to the contribution of women to agricultural development, their capabilities and constraints so that

HE role of women in

thus to augment agricultural production. The degree of the contributions of women would. nevertheless, vary across countries, regions and agroecological zones. Variations could also be caused in response to economic, demographic, political and other changes that seemingly influence the pattern of female participation in agricultural activities. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, a gender division of labour is reported to take place between cash and food crops. Women are said to be primarily engaged in and responsible for food or

file in our govern-

ment system con-

sists of two parts.

namely correspondence and

notes. When sent to higher

levels, it is generally pre-

the one hand, it is the prin-

memory. It is, therefore, of

In this piece, I would like to

focus on some important

aspects of file disposal and

lifes, it is imperative that in

the note sheet portion, and

finally in the self-contained

summary, essential facts and

figures are stated accurately

and all practicable options

are spelled out precisely,

with specific recommenda-

tions and their rationale. In

order to make the task of the

decision maker easy, refer-

ences to the correspondence

and the highlighting of the

most relevant portions are

also required. However, in

practice, several inadequa-

cies are frequently encoun-

tered. Firstly, in general a

large number of queries have

to be made from above before

all facts and options can be

brought together. Among other problems, this causes

considerable delay in deci-

sion making through several

up and down movements of

dency, deliberate or habitual.

to be wishy-washy and am-

biguous in the notes, so that

buck passing becomes the

name of the game. An ex-

treme example is to write

nothing in the file except

putting one's signature there.

Avoidance of responsibility or

inability/refusal to apply one's

mind, or both, are perhaps

responsible for this kind of

file disposal. Thirdly, some

senior officers dictate to ju-

niors what they should write

in the note sheet. In other

worlds, the seniors can ab-

solve themselves of any pri-

mary responsibility should

some decision be challenged

subsequently. Such dictation

also smells fishy particularly

if corruption or nepotism is

the prime motive behind a

particular line of decision

making. Obviously, such dic-

tation should be resisted, and

junior officers should be en-

couraged to state what they

feel is the correct position.

After all, the seniors will al-

ways have the last say and the

right to overrule the recom-

mendation of the junior offi-

cer. Of course, there should

be constant communication

among officers during the

various stages of file disposal.

but in no situation should

Secondly, there is a ten-

the file.

For adequate disposal of

preservation.

necessary polices and pro-

grammes could be orches-

trated to assist them and

It needs to be recognised that women are not only home producers but also farmers engaged in economic production in their own rights. The recognition calls for policy packages "that would minimise undermining their role and maximise their service and technology delivery."

subsistence crops while men are found involved in cash crops with a share of labour drawing from women. In many parts of Africa, according to available evidences. there are "female crops" (e.g. cassava, swamp rice, roots and tubers) and "male crops" (e.g. maize, cotton). In the region of Africa, women are reported to operate independently in their own plots farmed and managed by themselves and if not, occasionally, with the help of their children. "They make their own decisions and have control over their own earnings. In addition, they also contribute labour on their

husbands' plots." The Conference of International Agricultural Economists, held in Harare in 1994, brought to the fore some of the issues above. The conference volume has one article on "Women and Agriculture" by Rekha Mehva that points to some important observations pertaining to the topic and the following deliberations are drawn from

Just look at the following statistics. According to estimates provided by some economists (e.g. Seager and Olson, Henn, Cloud etc), 46 per cent of the labour force in sub-Saharan Africa is constituted by women. "Women's actual participation in farm work is, however, considerably more than is reflected in region wide statistics. ... Surveys conducted in two villages representative of farming systems in Southern Cameroon, for example, showed that women, on average, contributed two-thirds of the weekly labour hours in agriculture." Another observa-

and unpaid) ranges from under 5 per cent in Jordan to nearly 50 per cent in Nepal. In Vantua, women constitute half of the total agricultural labour force.

Turning to the nature of works performed by women. one could note that, "in the rice field of India and Sri Lanka, women carry out 75 to

85 per cent of manual weed-

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

tion states "Women in Africa contribute, on average, 90 per cent of the labour force for food production, 100 per cent in food processing, 50 per cent in animal husbandry and 60 per cent in marketing." It may be mentioned here that official rates of female participation in the agricultural labour force in Asia posits a lower figure and for Latin America much lower. Empirical evidence showed that within Asia and Pacific region, estimates of women's participation in

agricultural activities (paid

ing and almost all the works in transplanting rice". In Maidhya Pradesh of India where researchers in the past saw no contribution of women in agriculture, half of the labour used in rice production is reported to come from women. However, unlike in Africa, women in Asia hardly go for independent works, rather, their contributions mostly originate in terms of unpaid family labour and hence tend to impart varying degrees of influence in overall decision making. Interestingly enough, in

Nepal for example, one economist found that in HYV growing areas. "women are making 81 per cent of the decisions pertaining to seed selection, 60 per cent of these concerning the use of improved seeds and 40 per cent of decisions about fertilizer use." In rural Thailand and Philippines. women manage household budgets and are often responsible for financial decision making. Simeen Mahmood and Wahiduddin Mahmood of Bangladesh observed that "21 to 56 per cent of all wage labourers in rural Bangladesh. for example, are women. They represent from one-half to two-thirds of women from landless households." "Women's participation in the wage labour force is, moreover, increasing in countries such as India, Pakistan and Indonesia, mostly as the result of male migration and increased landlessness, ob-

In the absence of largescale national and agricultural gender disaggregated come, production and consumption data, an accurate monetary valuation of the above contribution by women is hard to come by. On the otherhand, the pervasive presence of unpaid family

serves the conference vol-

hard-done estimates should. nevertheless, be cited. For example, in some countries, women's earnings are shown to constitute a third of the expenditure on purchased food and their output represented three-quarters of subsistence food-consumption. In Egypt, 40 per cent of yearly cash income for an average size farm came from women. Agarwal (India) and Mahmood and Mahmood (Bangladesh) found that 'women's earnings account for about half of household cash income in Bangladesh while in India, women farm wage labourers are often the main or even the sole income earners in landless or near landless households." It, therefore, follows that women — the "other" half of

contribution make it more

difficult. Few of the available

our total population - need to be increasingly favoured by incentives, as done for men. to gear up production, especially in agriculture. It needs to be recognised that women are not only home producers but also farmers engaged in economic production in their own rights. The recognition calls for policy packages "that would minimise undermining their role and maximise their service and technology delivery." Women's access to credit facilities should further be expanded so that they themselves, like their counterparts men, can go for independent productive activities.

On File Disposal

Red tape is endemic, and unless greased or an official is induced to act by tadbir or some other less innocuous method, sitting on a file is the norm. The joke goes that when an officer tells you that a file is a difficult one, it means that processing it will be made difficult, unless...

sented in the form of a selfcontained summary. A file serves two main purposes. On there be any imposition from above. In fact, before recommending anything in the file cipal instrument though which decisions are arrived an officer should seek inforat and on the other, it acts as mation, suggestion and advice from all relevant quara repository of institutional ters but at the end of the day, the highest importance that a he/she should apply himfile is disposed of both adeself/herself to the problem quately as well as speedily. and independently suggest and then preserved properly the solution. Finally, some officers have for future use and reference.

the habit of writing lengthy notes, often bordering on verbosity. The higher decision makers do not have the time to go through it all and hence these prove to be counterproductive. However, if in an exceptional case, a lengthy note or a summary has to be written, then at least the most relevant portions should be adequately highlighted through mark-

The most important challenge in dealing with files is to ensure their speedy disposal without being hasty. This is where the Bangladesh government record is rather poor. Red tape is endemic, and unless greased or an official is induced to act by tadbir or some other less innocuous method, sitting on a file is the norm. The joke goes that when an officer tells you that a file is a difficult one, it means that processing it will be made difficult, unless... The time limit imposed on file disposal is more flouted than complied with. Even if the decision making is complete and the signature of the boss has been obtained, the file may still not move because of the lethargy and non-operation of the miserable despatch section. Finally, follow-up actions on the file, for example, issuance of necessary orders, might also require a lot of external prodding and inducements. In the process, the common man is the worst sufferer.

Obviously, speedy disposal of files is not something which can be achieved overnight, because the whole issue hinges on the attitude, understanding, incentive and cultural level of the entire

bureaucracy. Unfortunately, changes in this regard will not come about so easily. Training can make some difference over a long period of time. The more important input in this respect is the on-the-job grooming that one receives from the superior officers. However, based on my own experience, I can offer the following ten tips to conscientious officers with the right attitude on how to dis-

pose of files speedily:

1. Make queries over the

telephone rather than send the file. Otherwise, the file may get misplaced or there will be delay in decision making through to-and-fro movement of the file. If the file has to be sent set a time limit for its return. Do not make one query after another. As a senior officer, you may ask any number of questions but to save time, you should ask these at one go.

2. Regularly inspect offices under you for undisposed

thoroughly prepared. Never hide facts stated in the file from your boss even if these are embarrassing, and explain all options and recommendations contained in it. Give your personal opinion politely and fearlessly, but only if asked for. Never try to impose your views on your boss, and do not arrogate all solutions to yourself, because in the final analysis, the boss has the political judgement

which you as a civil servant Making Government Work

files, and pull up the habitual defaulters. Instructions on file disposal will be followed only if there is regular inspection.

3. Give reminders over the telephone and in writing for speedingup file disposal even to your seniors whenever

4. For speedy disposal of files, chase the boss anywhere except the toilet and the bedroom. Remember, the boss is an extremely busy person, but he will be happy to sign files at odd times and odd places once he realizes your sincerity. Convince him that speedy file disposal will earn him a good name.

5. If you are in rapport with the final authority, give verbal approval in anticipation, but only on routine matters, and then obtain written postfacto approval on the file. This will save a lot of

Always use special messengers instead of the normal despatch for important file movement. In such cases, inform the recipient over the telephone and keep a photocopy of the file being sent. You should personally carry files even to you juniors, if these happen to be particularly sensitive.

7. Do not send files up if rules do not require that. This means, you have to be precisely aware of you level and the authority you have.

8. If you are the officer placing files to the boss, remember that while he has limited time and hence cannot be expected to read files from cover to cover, he would nevertheless like to know all the essential aspects. This means you should begin by introducing the subject briefly and precisely and then be prepared to answer all his queries. Failure to promptly answer his questions will mean delay in the file disposal, so come

do not possess. A wrong decision because of your wrong handling of the file will ultimately complicate and delay implementation if not decision-making itself. Try to prevent the placement of files before your boss by "unauthorized" persons without your knowledge before you have read them. This is necessary to protect him

from being pressurised into

taking rash and improper

9. Do not keep a file pending till tomorrow if it can be disposed of today. Tomorrow is another day with many unexpected events likely to crop up. Tomorrow you may not have time even to touch that file. 10. Do not hurry over

much with a file. Haste will not only affect the quality of your decision but may also ultimately force you to spending more time in disposing that file.

There were two aspects of file preservation that deserve to be particularly highlighted. Firstly, the present preservation procedure needs overhauling because it does not allow easy retrieval. In the Ministries, files are kept in the various sections, and one has to ultimately depend on one's memory to call for a certain file lying in a certain section. Perhaps, to begin with, updated computer read-outs of the headings of active and dormant files organized alphabetically and subject and section-wise should be regularly produced and distributed to all officers to serve as aide memories.

Since there is now a computer in most offices, this exercise should not be at all difficult to start and keep up.

Secondly, the implementation of rules regarding destruction of files has to be carefully monitored, and if necessary the rules themselves should be revised. There have been many instance when files have been deliberately destroyed ahead of time in order to bury some incriminating evidence for good. Also, many files carrying valuable documents of historical importance have been put to the torch in the past out of sheer ignorance.

It is high time that the relevant authorities in the government took a fresh look at all aspects of file disposal and came up with a new set of instructions, for both dayto-day use as well as to serve as training materials for officers. A few senior officers may be asked to prepare the first draft in this regard within a specified time frame. This could then be further refined in a workshop attended by more officers with relevant experience. Fig. nally, the new instructions should be issued after obtaining clearance from the proper authorities. The entire exercise should not take more than three months. This write-up is meant only

to set the ball rolling.

Mexico's Crisis Isn't Over Yet

The future of Mexico never has seemed so uncertain, and the crisis holds many lessons for other developing countries says Sergio Sarmiento in this Inter Press service commentary.

TEXICO has never been an easy country LV L to understand. Its economy and political system have always resisted traditional labels, but never before has there been so much uncertainty about the future of Mexico.

Part of the problem is that the country is changing -and in a rapid and disorderly manner.

The traditional Mexico of the authoritarian yet generous political system and the closed yet mixed economy in which the state and giant private monopolies constitute the market at the expense of the consumer is seeing its 'last days.

No one yet dares estimate what will be the total cost of this transition as, so far, the cost has been very high. Mexico is experiencing the deepest recession in its history. The Gross National Product (GNP) is down by six percent. Inflation soared from seven percent in 1994 to more than 50 per cent this year and the number of unemployed has doubled.

Complicating the process of change was the fact that the opening-up of the economy was accompanied by a weakening of government control over the political structures of the country.

Mexico is not the only country to have undergone this transformation. Spain and Portugal, as well as the socialist nations of Eastern Europe, similarly liberalised their economies and political systems in the last decades.

The liberalization of other countries came about largely as a result of popular pressure. In eastern Europe, for example, it was the citizens who rose up against socialist regimes in an attempt to reach the standard of living of the consumer societies that the Western European media broadcast continuously to them.

In Mexico there was no such popular pressure. Liberalisation was imposed from above, when a new generation of politicians educated aboard turned to trade opening as a way to resolve the economic problems of the preceding years. President

Miguel de la Madrid (1982-88) initiated this process. which his successor Carlos Salinas (1988-94) then consolidated, privatising state businesses and signing the North American Free Trade

Because economic liberalisation in Mexico did not have significant popular support, and aware of how governments in Eastern Europe had fallen, Mexico thought it best to delay political opening until economic liberalisation began to bear fruit. This did not happen.

Agreement (ANFTA).

The assassination of presidential candidate of the ruling party, Luis Donaldo Colosio, together with other criminal and political developments in 1994, triggered massive capital flight for most of the year. In the four weeks after the March assassination the country's reserve fund dropped by US\$ 10 bil-

The government of Ernesto Zedillo, who became president on January 1, 1994, decided to devalue the peso. But far from calming investors and depositors, this move only accelerated capital flight: on December 21 alone, the country lost almost US\$ 5 billion in reserves.

Recognising that the lack of political credibility was a liability for the country in 1994. President Zedillo pushed for radical reform in this area. The governing Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI) which had controlled the country since 1929, in part through electoral fraud, in 1995 lost three out of five elections for state governorships. Moreover, it lost almost every state capital and important city in that year's mayoral

elections. The government made no attempt to prevent this rout. On the contrary, it pushed for negotiations between the political parties for a thorough reform of the govern ment that would include significant changes in both electoral law and in the polit ical structure of the country. The Presidency that will result from these negotiations will inevitably be weaker that

These political changes, however, were not sufficient to calm the financial markets. Between the third week in September and mid-November, and despite a body of economic analysis that showed the peso was undervalued, forceful speculative attacks drove the Mexican currency ever lower against the dollar and raised interest rates to unprecedented levels

that suffocated businesses. In this period, the exchange rate rose from 6.5 to 8.5 pesos to the dollar. Interest rates, which had approached 30 per cent in mid-September, hit 60 per cent by early November.

For the government this speculation was the result of the shortsightedness of the market with regard to the correction of problems like the 1994 current accounts deficit.

The sharp devaluation of the peso in December last year, after numerous government assurances that it would not devalue, was seen as a betrayal by investors and depositors and they have not stopped withdrawing resources from the country without any concern for the real condition of the economy. Many market analysts warn that the scars from this rapid devaluation will remain

for many years. There is no doubt that liberalisation has made the Mexican economy more vulnerable. The government already lacks instruments to control financial and trade flows as it did in the past.

Political opening, on the other hand, has weakened the governing party and for the first time ever investors and Mexican citizens will have to calculate what an opposition victory would actu-

ally mean These changes have made Mexico a country more like the rest of the world.

The present financial and political turbulence should be seen as the inevitable price of changes that Mexico would have had to undergo sooner

SERGIO SARMIENTO is a columnist for 12 Mexican newspapers

or later

Risk of life on polling day?

Sir, It is most unfortunate that Madame Sheikh Hasina president of the Awami League and former leader of the combined opposition parties in the national parliament has advised the people not to go for voting in the ensuing general election because she apprehend the voters may even be killed under the BNP rule. This statement has been made by her while she was addressing a memorial meeting at Sonargaon Degree College ground on 19

I am at a loss to understand why the voters be killed and by whom? If the people go to vote this will be a gain for BNP, as such the question of killing them by the BNP does not arise. Then who may be the killers? I have had great respect

for her as, after all, she is the

January.

leader of the biggest opposition party, but in my opinion such statements are not expected by the people from any political leader worth the

K R Zakhmi

Monograms, trademarks — lack of ingenuity

Sir, Whenever you go round the city in a rickshaw. quite many a sign hoarding would be an eye-sore when you observe the producers/advertisers put anything anyway they like, ethical or

when I see some foreign popular monograms/trade marks are rampantly used by the local entrepreneurs/advertisers one would only pity

I get highly disappointed

their dearth of knowledge and know-how! They should strive to produce something original.

To cite some of the 'creations' without originality monogram of Prime Bank seems to be adopted from the 'ATN' India; monogram used by a B Alam Chowdhury group appears to be copied from 'Hewlett Packard' USA; A &A Autos Ltd projects almost the same insignia of 'Osaka Meter Co. Ltd'. Some types of monograms are even copied by more than one concerns. The monograms of 'Barnali Advertisers' by Pacific Associates Ltd, General Business Co are so similar in appearance. This list of such piracy can be made longer if

you have space. Won't you pity these 'ingeniousness'? I pray "let there be light" in our society.

The guardians