

## Disorder-prone

In an hour-long clash between the police and the taxi and auto-rickshaw drivers 10 people were injured, including two policemen, around the parking lot near the entrance of Zia International Airport. All because the additional deputy commissioner of the metropolitan police (Uttara) tried to enforce discipline and order against all kinds of harassment to the passengers on arrival. The measures he took to streamline traffic at that point was of tremendous help to the passengers at ZIA but they were not obviously to the liking of the drivers.

The immediate question that strikes us is: can't we make things better anywhere in this land? The police official attempted a commendable break-through on his own initiative. On Wednesday the whole lot of drivers returned to their old way after complying with the new instructions only for a few days and started parking their vehicles chaotically as before and tugging at the baggage of passengers to get on board. The police intervened and the clash ensued. The enforcement of rules and discipline could give an evenly distributed share of the arriving passengers to each one of the drivers.

One can see that disciplining them takes away their bargaining power which thrives on a confusing and chaotic situation. This is a very dangerous mentality which is perhaps ingrained in our psyche. This, explains the chaos manifest in different spheres of our life. There are many people who deliberately create an unusual situation somewhere because it suits their purpose and serves their interests better. Little do they realise that it causes inconvenience and suffering to others.

We believe that the good work started at the ZIA must be brought to its logical conclusion and then replicated where indiscipline in public life is demonstrably irritating. Whatever may be the nature of national politics, honest and efficient officials can, with the help of local people, take care of many a public nuisance.

## Flare-up in CHT

The CHT is in the throes of fresh trouble adding an inauspicious note to the new year. Shantibahini's sniper attacks on the positions and patrol parties of our security forces have reportedly put the latter on alert.

The flare-up is in violation of the ceasefire lately extended up to February 15. That the Parbatty Chittagong Janasanghati Samity (PCJSS), of which Shantibahini is the armed wing, did not agree to the government proposal for a ceasefire extension up to March 31 and, settled instead for February 15, was indicative enough of a certain hardening of their position. What is also worth noticing is the fact that the extended date of ceasefire agreed upon by both sides is February 15, on which the elections are due.

This has happened at the insistence of the PCJSS which seemingly is adopting a wait-and-see policy about the fate of the upcoming elections in the country. This is a significant clue to reading their mind which is obviously possessed by the idea of getting more political concessions about their persistent demand for greater autonomy.

Nevertheless, it goes to the credit of the liaison committee and also of the PCJSS that they have mutually agreed to a ceasefire extension after all — even when the government here is in a transition. The all-party parliamentary committee is no more and yet this has happened.

We would like to latch on to this expression of peaceable intention on the part of the PCJSS and hope that ceasefire would hold for fresh talks to begin towards a negotiated political settlement of the tribal question.

Meanwhile, the gains already achieved in terms of an agreement for the repatriation of tribal refugees from the Indian state of Tripura to the CHT in Bangladesh should by no means be squandered away.

## Missing Substance

Even in a gloomy political situation one gets an occasional peek at the lighter side of things. Whether that will brighten up the mood is another matter. The talk of the town is the record number of ruling party candidates who have been declared elected — unopposed — due to various technical flaws detected by the Election Commission authorities. As many as forty-five were lucky winners and more names might get into the list.

Although some BNP members have vented their embarrassment over such walk-overs which put a question-mark on the participatory nature and credibility of an election before it has even gone into actual motion the prestige of being declared elected in advance seems to be holding sway.

Former Minister Nazmul Huda and Prime Minister's Special Envoy Moshed Khan do not apparently savour the validation by the EC of the nomination papers of their rivals cancelled earlier or by the returning officers. The high-profile BNP candidates have appealed to the CEC for a review of their cases. What is the charm of going through the mill of an election which hardly promises any real test of their popularity? In that particular setting, the second best thing would be to get elected unopposed saving the botheration of an election campaign.

The whole phenomenon is reflective of the lack of substance to the polls.

# Is there Still Time to Step Back from the Abyss?

By now the disastrous consequences of staging a one-party election are clear to the whole nation. Beyond a shadow of doubt we are heading towards confrontation and conflict. The recent events in Sylhet are just a glimpse of the mine fields lying ahead. Is there any section of the population which has welcomed the election to be held on 15 February?

LAST week I wrote about the circumstances under which the BNP government decided to go ahead with its plan for a 1988-style one-party election. In doing so, the BNP leadership gave the impression that the talks had failed due to Awami League's unwillingness to reach a settlement on the basis of a compromise. This is a totally erroneous impression.

It was the BNP which called off the talks on the plea that 16 January, the last date for withdrawal of nomination, was somehow the cut off date for the talks and that there was no scope to negotiate for a settlement after that magic date. Why was that so? Is it because they thought that a settlement on that day would have resulted in the Opposition's taking part in the election on 15 February? If that was what they believed, then they were sadly mistaken. The opposition had made it abundantly clear that it was impossible for them to take part in the election unless the date was shifted to late March or early April. They had also made it crystal clear, over the last two years, that in the larger interest of the country, a solution outside the constitution will have to be sought and accepted. If neither a solution outside the strict letters of the constitution nor a shifting of the date to March or April was acceptable to the BNP then there was no basis for any negotiation.

Obviously the BNP negotiators knew all this and accepted the reality of the situation. They agreed to talk because they accepted these assumptions. They certainly knew that the opposition could not accept the proposal to vest the president with executive powers because it ran counter to the concept of a neutral government but even if the idea was accepted, it would have violated the constitution. In other words, the BNP negotiators themselves proposed a solution which was unconstitutional. They also knew that shifting the date to March or April was the only feasible

way to enable the opposition parties to participate in the election. However, both sides accepted the underlying assumption that after the prime minister's resignation, the president will have to make a reference to the Supreme Court to get a legal cover for all his actions. Yet the government called off the talks when the meeting at 6 pm on 16 January had to be postponed to accommodate the ambassadors who wanted to call on Sheikh Hasina in the evening. I myself arranged this meeting, at the request of an European ambassador, first at 6-30 but later it was shifted to 8 pm. Since the time proposed for the meeting with the government representatives was clashing with the meeting with the ambassadors, it was postponed. The BNP blew up this postponement to launch a propaganda blitz to prove that the opposition did not want a negotiated settlement. My impression is that the BNP leadership had decided at that point that the diplomats and especially the donor community have been sufficiently impressed by the appearance of their earnestness and that there was no further need for the pretense of negotiation. The prime minister neither wanted to resign and surrender power to anybody nor to have the Awami League contest her party in the election. The fond hope of many of them to return "uncontested" has actually been fulfilled! According to the latest information, 45 have returned "uncontested." Indeed the scramble among the ministers to return "uncontested" has not escaped the attention of neutral observers. Obviously these BNP stalwarts are much relieved that they don't have to go through the rigging exercise to get elected.

My dear friend Rezaul Karim has tried, hesitantly, but loyally, to defend the stand of his party. While I

would certainly join his appeal for "compassion and understanding," it seems that he was not aware of exactly what happened during the negotiation. He does not seem to realize that regardless of the outcome of the meeting on 16 January, the opposition parties could not have submitted their nomination papers on 17 January. As regards a reference to the Supreme Court, the question could have arisen only when a political vacuum was caused by the prime minister's resignation. The Supreme Court could not be drawn into a hypothetical question. Ambassador Karim did less than justice to me in saying that aspersions were cast on the

him as the country's envoy to Senegal. However, some of his comments betrayed not only extreme partisan mentality but also a lack of understanding of the current political crisis. One must have been astonished to read his comment when he said, "Thank God, they (the BNP) were rigid otherwise the country was being led to the brink of a precipice." Here is a man who is happy that there was no agreement between the government and the opposition! His unfortunate remark is reminiscent of the much-quoted exclamation by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto when he said, upon arrival at Karachi on 17 March, 1971, "Thank God Pakistan has

they not neutral persons? For the practical needs of a neutral caretaker government, we have defined a neutral person as one who is not a member of a political party and who will not seek election to the parliament. Is this too tough a test of neutrality? The mediation (Shalish) of a neutral person is an essential part of Bengal culture. Thousands of disputes in the rural communities are resolved every day through the intermediation of distinguished neutral persons. Has Mr Miah forgotten all this in a few years of residence in Africa?

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## ON THE RECORD

by Shah A M S Kibria



Hon'ble President. Far from it. By vesting him with executive power, as proposed by BNP, the Hon'ble President would be drawn into the vortex of party politics and become a target of partisan criticism. In my view, such a development would be a disservice to the exalted office of the President of the Republic. As regards his membership of BNP and his election as a BNP MP and nomination by BNP for the office of president and election with the vote of mainly BNP MPs, all these are matters of record. Can anyone deny these facts?

The Daily Star published on January 24 a reaction from Mr M Maniruzzaman Miah who claims to be a non-party individual. The BNP government must have found some special non-partisan qualities in him to appoint

been saved." Well, we all know how Pakistan was saved. Mr Miah deludes himself that Begum Zia has saved the nation by refusing to reach a compromise with the opposition. Common people, irrespective of party affiliation, know that it is the prime minister's decision to stage a one-party election which is pushing the nation into the precipice.

After spending only three years in Senegal Mr Miah seems to have lost touch with the nation's sentiments and aspirations. Unlike him, the vast majority of the people of this country did not believe that the talks were "doomed to fail". Unlike him, no one considers a neutral person to be a red herring. What about the five distinguished sons of this country who attempted to bring the two sides together for negotiation? Were

they not very clearly in his article in The Daily Star on 26 January. When it suited her she had broken the law without batting an eye lid. Did she not propose to vest the president with executive powers knowing fully well that it would be an unconstitutional arrangement? Did she object when Speaker disgraced his high office by violating the law most blatantly in refusing to accept

the resignation of opposition members?

Reprimandations, regrettably, will not serve the nation's interests at this critical juncture. A farcical election will not solve the nation's political crisis; it will compound it. Under these circumstances, not only must the government step back from the abyss, the opposition must also fulfil its duty to the nation in seeking a peaceful solution. Is it too late to avert the disaster? Is it too late to negotiate and hold a free and fair election on the basis of national consensus? My answer is an emphatic no. It is never too late to take bold and imaginative steps to save the nation from the dangers that lie ahead.

The opposition parties have always wanted a negotiated settlement. As a result of the flexibility shown by the opposition, the differences have been narrowed to a stage where it should not be too difficult to reach a settlement quickly. Meanwhile, the government has seen the unattractiveness of the option that they had chosen. If the one-party election is held on 15 February the regime will lose its legal mandate and will become a target of nation-wide agitation for its ouster. Indeed it will be a very lonely journey for the BNP if they continue till the bitter end. The nation will suffer and will hold the BNP responsible for the situation that will prevail following the fake election. The dangerous slide to conflict and anarchy can be averted if the BNP leadership decides to cancel the election on 15 February. The nation will not blame them for weakness; on the contrary, it will thank them for foresight and wisdom. As for the Opposition parties, a settlement will mean the end of a long period of struggle and uncertainty. It will be a feather in their cap to reach the brink of disaster. Barrister A Hasib has explained this point very clearly in his article in The Daily Star on 26 January. When it suited her she had broken the law without batting an eye lid. Did she not propose to vest the president with executive powers knowing fully well that it would be an unconstitutional arrangement? Did she object when Speaker disgraced his high office by violating the law most blatantly in refusing to accept

# SAFTA Comes into Force: What Next?

by Munim Kumar Barai

WHEN the political climate of mainland South Asian countries is passing through an uncertain phase, then there are some good news in the economic front. The economies of SAARC countries registered a GDP growth over 5 per cent in the year 1994. The ADB forecast for 1995 is more promising and the rate of growth is likely to continue to do better in the coming years, provided no unforeseen contingency disrupts the growth process in this region. The heartening factor of this growth is that the manufacturing and service sectors are growing above than the expected levels.

India is on the lead in 1994 and 1995 growth, followed by Pakistan and Bangladesh. Nepal's growth showed an erratic behaviour, while Maldives and Bhutan performed very well but the weight of their economies are too less to influence the overall growth rate of the region. Considering Sri Lanka's persisting internal strife, its show of GDP growth about 5 per cent is not bad altogether. And now comes the news of the implementation of SAARC Preferential Trade Arrangement (SAFTA), exactly on the first day of eleventh year of SAARC's existence.

So South Asia has ultimately come to age to realise the benefit of regional economic co-operation starting with preferential trade with listed items.

### SAFTA's Promise

As of now, 226 items have been identified for exchange of tariff concessions ranging from 10 per cent to 100 per cent among the seven SAARC members under the SAFTA arrangement. Undoubtedly,

the list of items does not look impressive when compared with the basket of import and export items they have. But this comparison would be misleading in the sense that the existing trade scenario among the SAARC countries is extremely unsatisfactory by any international standard. SAFTA promises to break the state level barriers to trade that are prevailing in this region.

Actually, SAFTA could be termed as a modest effort to normalise the trade flows in South Asia. The countries of the region are still having higher tariff rates than most of the Southeast Asian newly industrialising countries have. There are justifications for higher tariff on some commodities, but experience shows that barriers to trade do not augur well towards the price and quality development of the products. Under SAFTA, the quality aspect of traded commodities might not be benefited that much as long as the TNCs do not jump in the fray with the local producers (through joint ventures) to avail a big South Asian market. Definitely that has to be done with the listed commodities and also has to satisfy the obligation of the rules of origin.

But the immediate promise of SAFTA is that the trade volume between the member countries will experience a surge as the tariff concessions become available on cross-commodities. That means, an expectation of 10 to 20 per cent rise in intra-regional trade value might not be irrational. The intra-SAARC trade stands only a paltry figure of US\$ 3 billion at present, which is equivalent to only 3 per cent of their total trade. The menace of smuggling might also be curbed to some extent as concession on tariffs actually

addresses the very basic cause of it. Trade imbalances of the member countries particularly with India are also expected to marginally decline over a period of time. Economist Arif A Waqif at the Administrative Staff College, Hyderabad in a study showed that the absence of regional co-operation in south Asia could lower the potential GDP growth rate of Bangladesh over the next 10-25 years by 4 to 5 per cent, of India and Pakistan by nearly 1 per cent, of Sri Lanka by about 0.5 per cent and of Nepal by 0.2 per cent. He put emphasis on the transport sector development, as lack of it alone could result in a 20 per cent lower volume in intra-regional trade by the year 2015. So a meaningful trade creation among the SAFTA members will require infrastructural push also.

### What Next?

Change is the inherent aspect of any system. Anything which has a beginning must go through changes over the time. If SAFTA proves to be a smooth run then what next? Will SAFTA give way to a South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) or a South Asian Customs Union (SACU)? How much time will be needed for that? These are few questions which the regional strategic experts will definitely try to answer. Again the political atmosphere of this subcontinent takes little time to be charged and sources of igniting tension are many. Prediction about SAFTA or SACU must not overlook this aspect of contingency.

Before addressing the prospect of SAFTA being turned into SAFTA or SACU, let us have a look on the international trade scenario in the recent past. The success of Uruguay Round and the transformation of GATT into WTO is no doubt a big leap for multilateralism in trade. But this has not put an end to regionalism in trade. Rather, more and more countries are banding together in free trade areas. According to WTO, 109 regional deals were notified to the GATT between 1948. Nearly one-third (exactly 33) of those were signed between 1990 and 1994. More regional arrangements are on the way to be formed. So regionalism in trade is here to stay.

In this context, what are the options, except SAFTA or SAFTA the South Asian countries can explore? Till now, it seems not many. The hope of any country of this region joining ASEAN looks remote — applications for its membership by India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have been ignored for a long time. Vietnam has, on the other hand, been accepted as the seventh member of the Association. The Economic Co-operation Organisation (ECO) is a non-starter from the very beginning and Pakistan's hope to nurture a central Asian identity through ECO has been dashed. The concept of Indian Ocean Economic Community is yet to get any concrete shape and it will take time.

Thus, SAFTA seems to be a viable option for the countries of the region at this moment. Pushing SAFTA to a more cohesive plane of regional arrangement called SAFTA is not impossible with the beginning of 21st century and a timeframe to complete the free trade area within another 10 to 15 years is an achievable goal. Incorporation of Iran, Afghanistan and

Myanmar in SAFTA will be a welcome step towards a better South Asia.

SAFTA is not anything new in South Asian context. Because these countries were closely knitted for centuries. They have a long list of shared communities. But at a stage when they could have been benefited most through their collective effort, they got divided on different issues. Their divisions were skillfully exploited by the external powers. But time has changed. No country can anymore claim full economic sovereignty. Cooperation and interdependence have been developing and flourishing in different regions of the world.

The process of liberalisation and integration with the external economies seem to have started paying economic dividend to the South Asian economies. Developing a meaningful cooperation among the regional economies will further enhance their standing to the international investors who want a bigger market with stable political system for investing their capital. SAFTA opens and broadens the way towards that direction.

### Conclusion

The pace of development of SAFTA needs to be watched very carefully. Political desire to expand the co-operation level is also important in this regard. The SAFTA members can have a glaring lesson to learn from the ASEAN nations. Only in July 1994, the Association expanded into its fold. Now, the leaders of the Seven-ASEAN nations have decided to create an ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) by the year 2003 — nearly half a decade ahead than the earlier timeframe. Moreover, SAARC members should not forget that the much needed foreign investments will not wait long for their delayed decision or stabilising their own houses. So it is a time to act.

## Art Buchwald's COLUMN

### The Hostages

THE decision to hold the country hostage unless they got what they wanted was made by the Congressional Gang that couldn't shoot straight.

Their ransom demands included a balanced budget in seven years. "Unless President Clinton gives in to us, we will bulldoze every government agency in Washington," said Lucky Devonshire. "It's time for fiscal conservatives to play hardball."

When people realized that they weren't kidding, negotiations with the hostage-takers began in earnest.

"What would it take for you to release the government?" Sam Dempster asked.

"We fully intend to wreck every program established since the Roosevelt days and ensure that welfare, Medicare and Medicaid are taken out on the Mall and shot."

Sam said, "You're holding 300,000 workers hostage to make a point. Does that bother you?"

"Not as much as you might think. If that's what it takes to get a balanced budget, so be it. The hostages are bureaucrats and are familiar with pain and suffering."

"Do you think that this will have any effect on the outcome of the elections?"

"I doubt it. The American people are used to holding hostages as long as it's no one in their immediate family. We're not going to kill them or anything like that."

"Isn't there some way of balancing the budget without using such drastic methods?"

"Probably, but using reason is not our style. We promised the voters back home that we would get a deal even if it meant closing everything down, including the Army, Navy and Coast Guard. This time the anti-government people are going to the mattresses."

"Isn't it a crime to hold so many people hostage with no pay?"

"We're members of Congress, and we can do anything we like. We warned the President that if he didn't play ball we would take prisoners."

"If I worked for a government agency, I wouldn't like to be taken captive by a bunch of freshmen legislators without any experience. It's very undignified even if they are stucking up to me with a tax cut."