

PM and the Book Fair

Prime Minister can go anywhere she wants. She must go wherever she feels she needs to go. But the question is should she go everywhere she can? More specifically speaking should she open the Ekushey Book Fair tomorrow? As the Prime Minister, as the chief of a democratic political party, and most importantly, as a leader of the people, Begum Zia's foremost concern is the safety and security of her people.

On the contrary, for the sake of public peace and to avoid conflict she can choose to cancel her programme. We know many will say, it will appear to be a defeat for her. Her party supporters will say such an act will demoralise her JCD enthusiasts. Well, the real defeat of a political leader is when his or her act leads to avoidable violence, and loss of innocent lives, as we saw in the case of Khulna. Yes, her cancellation of tomorrow's programme may be gloated over by the opposition as a victory. But we assure the PM that such 'gloating' will be that of fools.

We urge Begum Zia to rethink her programme, as she did in the case of her district tours. If that change did not look like defeat, neither will this. Please remember that the Ekushey Book Fair has grown into the biggest and longest event in the country, and into a veritable festival for writers, publishers and book lovers. Imagine how all concerned will feel if this eagerly awaited and extremely cherished event is marred because it was more important to save our egos than this well-loved event, not to mention life and property that may come to harm.

Tinder-box

The devastating fire at Bangabazaar again has been hard to take. The compounded loss of national wealth has few parallels. We are cut to the quick by this galling fire which consumed 18 hundred newly-raised shops made of wood and tin and stuffed with materials containing highly inflammable petrochemical ingredients.

When the last fire broke out on November 27 we had warned of two things adding that these better not be glossed over when rebuilding the shops and re-starting the market. Our first suggestion was safety precautions should be in-built pertaining to accessibility through the rows of shops, installation and proper spacing of fire extinguishers, banning of night-time use of stoves and elimination of any possibility of electric short-circuit. Our second pointer was to the dire need for ensuring security vigil especially during the non-business hours to avert acts of sabotage.

It seems all those essentials were ignored in the hot haste to get it all repaired and resumed in double quick time under a publicity hype — well before the Eid — to score a point or two with the hawkers or shop-keepers and the buying public. Government grant was issued promptly and Mayor Hanif, too, was caught in the mood. On one level, all this provided an extra-ordinary example of how quickly the government can deliver when it wants to, and what the Mayor, with differing political affiliations, can do to cooperate with the ruling party and vice versa in fulfilment of a pressing task.

The recurrence of fire at Bangabazaar within two months and three days of the first one is a heavy price paid — one time too many — for our characteristic unconcern about safety in crowded and enclosed public places. Let this serve as a reinforced warning to get markets like Gausia and Chandnichowk free from fire hazards.

Thorny Repatriation

The Pakistani Home Minister, Lt General (Rtd) Nasrullah Babar, has reportedly expressed his country's unwillingness to take back the non-Bangalees (Biharees) stranded in Bangladesh. This marks departure from the policy Pakistan stands committed to pursue. This, through his assertion, the Pakistani home minister has created an avoidable misgiving.

The Pakistani home minister could not be comprehensive when he said that his country signed an agreement at the OIC summit only to accept a certain number of non-Bangalees from Bangladesh. He has side-stepped the joint declaration reached at a meeting between Begum Khaleda Zia and Nawaz Sharif. The home minister went so far as to advise the remaining non-Bangalees 'in Bangladesh who had opted for Pakistan a long time ago to get mixed up with the mainstream Bangalee society.

The Pakistan home minister says the Biharees are responsible for a sharp decline in the law and order situation in Karachi so that further repatriation could mean a greater trouble for that city. How many Biharees from Bangladesh have found shelter in Karachi? That question apart, it is an established fact that the Karachi situation has very deep roots in Pakistan and Sindh politics. The truth is that the Biharees opted to migrate to Pakistan and her previous government agreed to take them back. A solution to the problem lies in recognising these.

Political Stability and Economic Development

The ASEAN Example

by Munim Kumar Barai

Carrying over the past into present can only help to create 'Bosnia' and cause sufferings and destructions. Policy of economic engagement is the best way to come closer and make congenial atmosphere to address the problem over a period of time than trying to solve them overnight

THE recent developments in the South East Asian region have generated a lot of interest among the regional and global watchers and they must remain busy for some time to analyse and explain the ramifications of these developments. In July 1995, Vietnam was included as the seventh member of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). That has offered ASEAN not only a useful ally, but also a breadth vis-a-vis China about which the ASEAN nations are bit worried.

Now in the Bangkok Summit, the ASEAN leaders have decided to create the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) by 2003, much ahead than the proposed schedule of 2008. Apart from their economic vibrancy and dynamism, these moves definitely are matters of interest because if someone tries to go to the ASEAN history since its creation in August 1967, he would find that like most of the developing country-created regional organisations, ASEAN's doom was cast several times. But ASEAN not only survived, in 28 years of its existence, it has now flourished to become the centre of attraction and example of regional dynamism through collectivity.

Historical Disputes Like South Asian nations, the Southeast Asian countries have also inherited some disputed past because of the distrust and cleavages created by their colonial masters. The World War II saw a trail of devastation in Southeast Asian countries outside Europe. Somehow the War also accelerated the pace of freedom for these countries

from the outside imperial powers. Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia got freedom soon. Singapore had been curved out of Malaysia later. Brunei was the last country to get freedom in 1983. The road to freedom was a bloody one in Vietnam which had to fight both the French and American military might for over three decades and in 1975 the Vietnamese scored victory over the Americans. But the strains between the Southeast Asian countries are related to the unsettled territories and in the past few disputes reached to flash points. The long-standing dispute between the Philippines and Malaysia over Sabah's ownership remains unresolved. Thailand and Malaysia have yet to resolve their maritime boundaries. Indonesia and Malaysia both claim Sipadan Island in the Celebes sea. The last and major dispute has arisen over the ownership of Sparty Islands in the South China Sea. At least five countries, viz. Vietnam, China, the Philippines, Brunei and Malaysia claim the ownership of these islands and Vietnam and China already fought a battle over the issue.

Economic migration in the intra-ASEAN region has become a latest kind of dispute. Illegal migration of workers in search of jobs

from one country to another has risen to such extent that Singapore had to amend its immigration laws to expel some 10,000 illegal Thai workers. Malaysia has also hardened its attitude towards the migration issues.

Political Stability/Policy Continuity

Even with these disputes between and among themselves, how these countries have succeeded to come closer and economically prosper is a matter the South Asian countries need to observe carefully as they are also striving towards the goal of a meaningful economic co-operation in the South Asian region.

Actually, a lot of positive factors have been accumulated in favour of the Southeast Asian countries in their individual and collective effort to attain economic prosperity and development. In the 70's, it was the inflow of Japanese and US direct investments in these countries that spurred the growth of their manufacturing bases and thus reduced their dependence on exports of primary products like rice, rubber, palm oil, timber, wood, tin and petroleum. In 1984, Japanese investors invested a total of US \$12 billion in the ASEAN countries (excluding

Brunei), while it was \$10 billion from the US. Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore were the major beneficiaries of these investments. Over a period of time the three East Asian newly industrialised countries (NICs), viz. South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong emerged as significant players in the investment and Thailand benefited most from NICs' flows.

However, most of the ASEAN watchers contribute the second phase of growth in this region to the liberalisation measures they have undertaken to boost exports and draw foreign capital. The tariffs on imports and exports have been brought down to a greater extent, currencies have been fully floated, inflow or outflow of capital does not have to pass through stringent and delayed procedures.

Two factors that have played very important role in the economic development of the Southeast Asian nations but have not received due attention are the political stability and/or policy continuity they have been maintaining over a long period of time. Among the ASEAN members, the Philippines and Thailand remained unstable than the other partners. But a fact that must be noted that some of the longest serving rulers of

the world are either ruling or were ruling the countries of this region. Question of democracy and development of democratic institutions has not gained that much of an upper hand. So dictatorship reigned almost supreme in few countries. But a kind of benign dictatorship it was that has proved a boon to the economic betterment of the respective countries.

Mr Lee Kuan Succeeded to turn Singapore into a most modern country in the world. Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohammad has been doing the same job for Malaysia since 1981. Though General Suharto has joined the wagon earlier, Indonesia is following the path of economic progress since 1985. Small Brunei is a Sultanate since its independence in 1983. Of late, the Philippines has joined the growth plane.

The long rule of single party or single ruler has given stability and continuity to the economic policy measures these countries have adopted over a period of time. These policies are no doubt pro-market and export oriented. Thailand has prospered not because of political stability (which was not there as such) but because of policy continuity. Vietnam's inclusion in the ASEAN is a turn around of

the earlier policy of these countries. It was Vietnam's invasion in Cambodia that gave a lease of life to the ASEAN in the 80's. Now, as soon as the solution of the Cambodia threat perception in this region has radically changed and most of the countries here are looking at China with a sort of fear and suspicion. This has probably promoted the ASEAN members to forget Vietnam's misadventure and they have opened their mind to give membership to till-today-communist Vietnam. Vietnam has economic promise as well as potentials to work as a deterrent against a 'resurgent' China.

Conclusion

Carrying over the past into present can only help to create 'Bosnia' and cause sufferings and destructions. Policy of economic engagement is the best way to come closer and make congenial atmosphere to address the problem over a period of time than trying to solve them overnight. This might have been the philosophy of the South East Asian countries and they preferred regional economic engagement through ASEAN. The relative internal political stability has given the countries of the region necessary breathing to experiment with the organisation. This is a broader lesson ASEAN offers to other developing countries which aspire to benefit from regional organisation.

Well, political stability is a pre-condition for policy continuity, be it economic or social, particularly in the developing countries. This could be a message to SAPTA countries as well.

Why the Talks Failed

by T Hussain

WHY the talks failed? First of all, may I identify the fundamental questions centring the main issue? In my appreciation, the stand of the ruling party has always been clear and there was no lack of good faith in their negotiations with the opposition on the question of solution of the political crisis facing the country. They maintain that a 'caretaker government', as envisaged by the opposition is beyond the constitutional ambit. Any solution to achieve objective of the said caretaker government to conduct the national polls in a free and fair manner must be within the framework of the Constitution. The ruling party further maintains that the desired objective to have a free and fair election cannot be fulfilled by simply installing a 'caretaker government', if at all.

There are other requirements to achieve the desired objective, which are to take care of the 'mastans' and 'black money'. A duly empowered Election Commission is the appropriate authority to deal effectively with these elements. The government

point of view is that these is already an Election Commission, headed by a Chief Election Commissioner, fully empowered to tackle violence and indiscriminate election expenditure. They are also now in full control of the government set-up and the election machinery at all levels. The Prime Minister also offered to resign within the entire cabinet 30 days ahead of the election date. All this was not acceptable to the opposition parties, who wanted a 'caretaker government' to be set up in any case. The government wanted a dialogue and expressed their willingness to discuss all issues involved, including the 'caretaker government'. But the opposition wouldn't sit for a dialogue, except on a precondition for the ruling party to accept the so-called 'caretaker government' in principle. This position was ipso facto untenable and rejected by the ruling party. The trend of events that preceded the final breakdown of the talks points to

one inescapable conclusion that the opposition parties did not really want any solution. Apparently, they were apprehensive that they were destined to lose the elections. So, they preferred to be out of the contest on some pretext or the other and continue to remain in the street with their agitation. This contention is amply supported by what Mr S A M S Kibria stated in his article published in the column 'On The Record' on 21st January, 1996 in 'The Daily Star'. As summarised by me, he stated that in course of the latest talks, the solution that seemed to be emerging was in the following lines: (i) The President will appoint a Council of Ministers/Advisors headed by a non-partisan Prime Minister/Chief Advisor — who will not contest next election; (ii) re-organisation of Election Commission, revision of electoral rolls and 'de-politicising' the administration; (iii) a new date for the general election will be fixed

by the Election Commission beyond 22nd February, 1996 (opposition was wanting it in March or early April, 1996). The very nature of the points noted above suggests that these were all on the lines of the Awami League's demands. But they knew very well that some of them were beyond the purview of the constitutional framework. The appointment of a non-elected Prime Minister or Chief Advisor with all executive powers vested in him is beyond the constitutional requirements. Under Art 55(2) of the Constitution, a Prime Minister or Chief Advisor exercising all executive powers of the government must be an elected MP. But if he is not exercising all executive powers, he can function as Chief Advisor to the President or Prime Minister without being a member of Parliament or even being a non-partisan person. But the ruling party had always been insisting that an arrangement in which the President would run the government with the help of his Advisors must be

permitted by the Constitution. In any case, a reference to the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court to give a ruling or opinion on this issue could perhaps be made to settle the question. The second point referred to above was, inter alia, about the revision of electoral rolls, which evidently was a time-taking process and it was doubtful if it could be finished in time to take up the general polls in March or early April, '96. Thirdly, the opposition knew it very well that to shift the election date to March or early April, '96 would amount to a breach of the constitutional provision requiring holding of general elections within 90 days of the dissolution of Parliament. It is obvious that the opposition leaders were deliberately making a proposition which would lead to a breach of the Constitution; and naturally, the ruling party could not deviate from their original stand of not violating the Constitution. They (the opposition), however, knew that once they succeeded in doing so, they would immediately come forward with their demand for forming a 'caretaker government' of their own thinking on the plea that once a violation of the Constitution was committed, there was no point in refusing to form the so-called 'caretaker government' outside the limits of the constitutional provisions. Obviously, the ruling party understood the implications of the oppo-

sition game and refused to accept their demand for shifting the election date. Now, as to the contention whether the President could be treated as a non-partisan or a neutral person, we should not forget that the present incumbent, although elected to the Jatiya Sangsad on BNP ticket, was a Speaker of the Sangsad, duly elected by the MPs for quite some time. He was then elected to his present position. In both capacities, he performed a neutral role and according to democratic practices prevailing in UK and other democratic countries, a Speaker of the Parliament and a President of a democratic republic is always considered as a non-partisan person. In conclusion, we must admit that as the talks unfortunately failed, the ruling party is now left with no other alternative than to continue as an interim government, while the Election Commission, already vested with adequate powers of control on the administrative setup at all levels and the election machinery throughout the country, conducts the national polls freely and fairly to meet the constitutional compulsion for ensuring continuity of democratic process in the country. If the polls situation is not ideal, the responsibility of this condition lies squarely on the boycotting opposition parties, which shunned ventilation of their political grievances on the floor of the Parliament and preferred resorting to street agitations.

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.

Insufficient gas supply around WASA pump

Sir, We would like to inform you with great pain that we have been suffering from low pressure of gas supply since 1993 which we have communicated to the department concerned both verbally and in writing several times.

But it is a matter of great regret that the problem which we have been facing is increasing day by day and right now we are out of gas supply at peak hours.

But till now, no effective improving measures have yet been taken from the authority's end. It is pertinent to mention here that we think the reason of low pressure of gas supply are as follows: a) At the time of introducing gas in the subject area, it was only for a few people and as such the pipe line had been set-up as per their demand level. But now the existing line is quite unable to meet the increasing demand of gas supply for the people of this area.

b) A commercial connection has also been set-up without fulfilling the upriving domestic demand of gas supply. Therefore, the authority is requested to replace the existing thinner gas pipe and solve our jibon-moron problem. Md F R Chowdhury 317, Middle Pirerbagh Mirpur, Dhaka.

Camel race

Sir, After a break of about two years, the dreadful sport of camel-race in the UAE have again started. The latest competition namely 'Grand Zayed Race' was held in the desert areas of the UAE throughout the first week of January amidst fun and excitement. As usual, innumerable

Green field companies' shares

Sir, It is observed that many green field companies are floating their shares charging high rates of premium. These companies are appreciating the assets position in the balance sheet and alluring the small savers giving them a rosy picture to buy their shares at high premium rates. Some of the companies sold their shares at 200 to 800 times higher

than the face value of the same. The small savers being allured of high margin of profit have been deceived by these companies. Many of the shares floated earlier are not in original price now. The real invested money are already eroding. Many small savers have already lost a good portion of their initial money. Shares being an important tool of capitalisation, the confidence in share market should be protected. If the investors are not encouraged the share market will face adverse effects.

The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) should make it a point that the green field companies do not float shares at high premium rates. The small savers should not be allowed to lose money in buying such shares. If need be companies can arrange to buy shares from the floor to keep the prices normal. There are some new companies which have floated shares giving promises of profit are also facing problem in price. Not only that, these shares have also got no buyers to do business. This should also be stopped. Mahbulul Haque Chowdhury 153, Lake Circus Kalabagan Dhaka

Islamia Eye Hospital

Sir, When injustice and inhuman acts are carried out by a top government official or a group against a junior or a few junior officials, then there is no denying the fact that the rules and regulations in the government-run organisations have ample opportunities and allow the defaulters to go scot-free. Even the sufferer or sufferers cannot go to a court of law immediately without first placing an appeal to the same person who is guilty of some wrong-doings. If any punished officer or an employee makes the mistake of going to a court of law, then it goes against him or her and the person who is unjust gets the golden opportunity in dismissing him or her for breaking the government rules and regulations. Again, although normally a sudden transfer is usually

considered to be a kind of punishment, there are occasions when this transfer becomes a blessing for one who would surely be facing suspension or dismissal for negligence to one's duty. Transferring a guilty person who has all the sympathy of those who 'share' his or her own evil designs helps to flourish 'unjust cause' in a thousand-fold. As usual, the non-believers believe they shall win all through their lifetime.

What took place at the Islamia Eye Hospital in the city was most heinous. And equally shameful is the reported fact that the 'report' submitted by the 'one-man probe body' to the Director General of the Directorate of Health, Shamsuddin Ahmed in September 1995 was not taken into account and no action followed thereby.

The 'one-man' control, grouping and mismanagement created by the Director of Islamia Eye Hospital, Mustafizur Rahman destroyed the future of more than 14 patients and the hopes the nation could boast about from their deeds, however humble. Sheer negligence was not just the one and only reason behind the irregular 'fungus infection' followed by eye removal leading to total blindness. What a way to pretend to be a follower of the Almighty but be a friend of the Satan! The dilly-dally and harmful inaction of the Directorate of Health must end. Reza-ur-Karim 3/7-B Lalmitia, Dhaka

The name United Nations

Sir, It refers to the letter written by K R Zakhamy of Khulna which was published in your daily on the 15th January. He wanted to know about the source from which the name 'United Nations' has been derived. It was derived from a famous poem called Locksley Hall by Alfred Tennyson. In this poem, he visualises, in his language, the 'Parliament of Man and the Federation of the World'. Afterwards, the formation of the United Nations was Tennyson's dream-come-true. Zahidul Islam Shimul M A (English) Jahangirnagar University

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

Good News from the Mayor

EVERYBODY is proud of his or her mayor during the snowstorm. Those of us in Washington can't say enough nice things about Mayor Marion Barry who rushed out to personally shovel our snow in the District of Columbia. As soon as the first flake fell, the mayor said to the press, 'This is a job for Super Mayor.' He donned his blue cape and boots and took his shovel out of the garage. 'I've always kept this city squeaky clean, and I'm not going to stop now, no matter how much white stuff falls to the ground.'

By the time his press conference was finished there were six inches of snow covering the ground. A reporter said, 'Mr Mayor, where are you going to shovel first?' 'I'm going to shovel in the neighbourhoods that voted for me. If some residents didn't cast their ballots for me, I hope that they sink into a pothole.' 'But aren't you mayor of all the people?' 'No way. You can't expect a mayor to shovel snow off the sidewalks of people who never forgave him for some little legal difficulties.'

By this time the snow was a foot high. 'Mr Mayor, when are you going to start?' 'As soon as I do my television show to assure the citizens that I have the situation in hand. The job of a mayor during a snowstorm is to tell the population that no matter how hard it snows at night they will have perfectly clean streets in the morning.' 'Are you going to use snowplows?' 'We don't have snowplows available nor do we have salt.' 'What do you have?' 'Faith in the Almighty. As soon as I finish here I am going to church for a photo opportunity to show the shivering people that I am praying for them. That is much more important than clearing Pennsylvania Avenue.' By now there was two feet of snow in front of the mayor's house, and nobody on his staff had any idea how he could get out. So he went back inside and called 911, which didn't answer. So he phoned the local news stations and said, 'This is the mayor. I have good news for you. The snow has been cleared in the city, and all the Little League baseball games will be played on time.' By arrangement with Los Angeles Times Syndicate and UNB.