

Bangabazaar Afterthought

Our follow-up news item yesterday on Bangabazaar shed some new light on the disaster that befell the market-place twice in a row within a stunningly short period of time.

Then came the looting phase as people with gunny-bags, masquerading as relatives of shopowners, spirited away whatever they could lay their hands on.

That the whole episode could have been a product of sabotage has been underlined not by the victims alone but, quite significantly, by some experts who suspected that gun-powder or an explosive was used to trigger a fire on that scale.

The allegations by the leaders of shopowners' union, accounts of witnesses and the corroboration by some fire fighters all give sufficient ground to make a thorough inquiry into the matter and ferret out the culprits behind it.

Leave the Hotel Alone

The country's only five-star hotel, Hotel Sonargaon, witnessed on Tuesday the worst management-employee bickering to date. Reportedly, two officials were stabbed, a few others beaten up and even the general manager had to flee through a broken window.

What is missing in the reports is if there was any kind of provocation from the management side. Follow-up reports, however, revealed that a state minister was busy trying to free the 28 employees arrested in connection with the incident.

Our politics thrives on mutual support — the leaders are keen on proving their popularity through lobby groups and the supporters are overzealous to prove their allegiance in return for the patronage.

In the case of Sonargaon Hotel we come to see display of politics relating to an establishment that can thrive only on international goodwill and reputation. Hopefully the hotel has not suffered any setback to its image because of the incident.

Weather Sense

The early morning bus-plunge into a canal on Friday, three kilometres off Demra police station, brought a death tally of nine persons. It is not very clear as to what exactly caused the accident when this is being ascribed to three reasons: fogging, over-loading and speeding.

Odds against the bus mounted with the early morning fog thickening to block vision of things even a few feet away. But even without that blinding mist the mishap could have occurred due to the sheer speeding of an overloaded vehicle.

So, what are the precautionary priorities for the bus owners and operators? Surely in the winter season, early morning trips should not be undertaken without paying attention to weather forecast for the day in broad terms.

Fogs can be unpredictable. Hence, the long-distance bus and coach drivers need to scrupulously avoid speeding and sardine-packing.

Engine or tyre troubles are said to go down during the winter. Even that should not induce them to take chances with their vehicles, many of which are basically in a poor shape and should have been off the road.

Coup in Niger: The Background

by Prof M Maniruzzaman Miah

Since military rule is not being supported now by the major donors it may not last long. So there will be perhaps another interim government, a fresh election, another newly elected government, and another series of bickerings perhaps over sharing the "cake" resulting in people's sufferings.

colonial occupation. In the wake of the war, nationalist movement surged across the length and breadth of this vast landmass. Excluding the special case of Libya, Sudan (1.1.56), Morocco (3.3.56), and Ghana (6.3.57) got their independence earlier than others.

During the three decades that followed, African countries experienced a variety of government. Many of them were under military rule, some passing through several coups and counter-coups. But there was also one-man rule (Malawi, Zambia, Cote-d'Ivoire, Tunisia, etc.) or one party rule (Senegal, Botswana, Kenya, etc.)

on the strength of a medical certificate by a team of doctors. Thus in a general way most African countries were being governed by autocratic rule of one variety or the other.

Things began changing in 1989 when the Berlin Wall was crumbling. Now was the time for multi-party democratic governments. Democracy had to come not only because the political climate everywhere was changing but also because western donors notified their African clients that aid could be channelled only if the political system changed.

Niger provides a typical example of how the new democracies are functioning in the third world. This country became independent in August, 1960. Later the army took over in April 1974 and remained in control of state power till the end of 1991.

1991. This government was charged with framing the constitution to pave the way for an elected government by popular vote. Election to the parliament was held in February 1992. This was followed by Mahamane Ousman's election to presidency directly by adult suffrage.

So far so good. But things began changing later. The President appointed Mahamadou Issouliou as prime minister in April 1993. The opposition parties in the parliament began conspiring from the very start to unseat the government. Finally they were successful in enticing to their side one of the factions which earlier supported the president in his presidential election.

three names given to him by the opposition-dominated parliament. However the new cabinet did not last long.

According to reliable reports one of the factions of the combined opposition which was earlier promised the office of speaker withdrew its support from the new prime minister when the promise was not fulfilled. The prime minister consequently lost a vote of confidence only 19 days later.

The controversy came to a head on July 6th, 1995 when the president refused to convene the cabinet meeting.

Reportedly the meeting was to decide on some important administrative appointments which could influence future elections.

Right now we have no precise information as to what exactly happened just on the eve of the army takeover. But the intelligent guess is that administrative authority must have collapsed due to the wrangle and political bickerings, which resulted in a stand-off between the president and the parliament for almost three years now.

What will happen next is difficult to predict. But since military rule is not being supported now by the major donors it may not last long. So there will be perhaps another interim government, a fresh election, another newly elected government, and another series of bickerings perhaps over sharing the "cake" resulting in people's sufferings.

Eating and Drinking on Duty

In social events hosted by us, the sole emphasis is on food, and that too not typical Bangladeshi food. What we serve in the name of Bangladeshi food is Mughlai dishes which the foreigners have perhaps already tasted in Delhi and Islamabad.

THERE are two main types of occasions when a government functionary is obliged to eat and drink as a part of duty, namely when invited to social events such as receptions, lunches, dinners, etc in an official capacity by foreign diplomats and visitors and international agency personnel; and when he/she is officially inviting distinguished foreigners to similar events.

Let us first discuss the social events to which our functionaries are invited by foreigners. If sufficiently ob-

servant, one can easily notice a number of things going wrong on our side. Firstly, attendance in these events is hardly made with any one of the deeper motives outlined above. The aim is basically to spend a nice evening, and that is about all. So it is simply pleasure and no business at all.

Thirdly, instead of spending more time with the hosts and foreign guests, the usual tendency of some of these functionaries is to form their exclusive cluster and start loudly conversing in Bangla. Such "social incest" is no doubt counterproductive

since it prevents us from gaining something positive out of these social events. It is also outright rudeness, which creates a negative impression about the country as a whole. Then there are others who after showing their faces to the host vanish without a trace so that their brief presence is of no use for business and does not give them any pleasure either.

Making Government Work

by Analyst

Fourthly, some of our functionaries are generally blissfully oblivious of the "level" of the host and the principle of reciprocity when accepting invitations from foreigners. Would a functionary of the level of a Minister or Secretary in country X usually attend a reception hosted by the Ambassador in that country?

have perhaps made ourselves rather cheap. In fact, even in National Day receptions, it does not appear proper to have more than one Minister from our side. Finally, there are no firm ground rules on attendance at these social events, including any rule on who should permit whom to attend, and on what criteria.

Indeed, there have been so many changes in whatever

ness encounters, and would, therefore, be looking forward to meeting interesting people from independent professions, such as teachers, writers, scientists, journalists, actors, politicians, singers, sportsmen, etc.

Secondly, in social events hosted by us, the sole emphasis is on food, and that too not typical Bangladeshi food. What we serve in the name of Bangladeshi food is Mughlai dishes which the foreigners have perhaps already tasted in Delhi and Islamabad. And there is always wastage of food. The practice of combining eating with cultural shows is still rather limited, although with a little more patronage, the latter can be more frequently organized through not only the Shilpakala Academy but also private cultural organizations.

Fourthly, we are still weak on punctuality. But the more unfortunate aspect is that we do not allow the number two host to start off the event in case the number one host is held up for reasons beyond

his control. Consequently, foreign guests sometimes have to wait long for the host to arrive, which hardly creates the right kind of impression. Finally, we are still unable to control the anarchic traffic that builds up when guests are departing after a large banquet or reception given by our side.

During the last twenty-four years of our nationhood, our officials through trial and error must have gathered a great deal of experience in handling both the types of social events discussed above. It is high time that we now try to distill these into detailed instructions and guidelines to be followed by officials in future. These may also be used as training materials. Perhaps a small committee consisting of the Cabinet Secretary, the Principal Secretary, the Foreign Secretary and the Chief of Protocol should be entrusted with this task. Through wide-ranging discussion with relevant officials and other knowledgeable persons, they could come up with a set of recommendations which could then be sent up for the approval of the relevant authorities.

Time not Ripe for Polls in J&K

Rajinder Sachar writes from New Delhi

If J&K election is sought to be used by the Prime Minister, there is no doubt that the parties like BJP would make it a furious election item.

IN electoral politics, the mundane and self-serving considerations/policies though morally reprehensible are nevertheless broadly accepted by the public as an inevitable compulsion for political parties. But even making all allowances there are certain parameters which cannot be allowed to be crossed.

The most urgent and non-arguable parameter is that no action should in any way jeopardise the security of the country or encourage dissipation trends in the country.

These parameters are being crossed by Prime Minister Mr Rao in stubbornly still insisting on holding elections Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) in March, in spite of all impartial signals from J&K that holding elections earlier to Parliamentary elections would be disastrous.

The sole consideration for the above step is the supposed advantage which the Prime Minister feels he can

derive in the next Parliamentary election. A barrage of planted leaks by the Government in the newspapers has become a regular feature, suggesting that conditions are ripe for elections in J&K.

In my view such an assessment is politically unacceptable. In last December, National Conference and Mr Farooq Abdullah were half inclined to participate, of course, on certain conditions being satisfied. But now even they are vehemently opposed to holding elections and accuse Central Government of working against the interest of J&K.

Distrust against Government of India has sharpened amongst moderate militants, with whom some talks had taken place. But as usual this

exercise was not done in a genuine manner by the political leadership, rather in a cloak and dagger manner by the intelligence agencies.

Such is the reckless manner of conducting these talks (according to some of the militants they were even shown a draft of the political package, if they were agreeable not to oppose holding of the election). But to their disgust they find themselves left out in cold by the unexplained silence from the Government quarters putting some of those militants and intermediaries in a compromised position with the result that bitterness has increased further. In such circumstances any attempt to hold election would accentuate

the complex and serious situation. The question is not whether the Government could initiate election notwithstanding the opposition of the Election Commission — my own view is that if could (of course the final word has still to be said by the Supreme Court).

The question is not of legality, but of practicability and of ground reality. Even if now the Election Commission agrees with the Government (though there is no changed circumstances on which it could legitimately do so), the holding of election would result in various parties, groups in J&K to sink their differences and join up together to form one front against this blatantly provocative action of the

Government of India. Inevitably, situation favourable or against the militants and the pain and suffering borne by the average person in J&K may be forgotten against their fight to oppose determinately an election which no one in J&K supports. This will halt the process of disillusionment with the militants and all the gains expected from the suffering and change of mood of the average person will be dissipated. This will negate any possibility of a peaceful solution of J&K in near future.

If J&K election is sought to be used by the Prime Minister, there is no doubt that the parties like BJP would make it a furious election item. Necessarily the temper.

fury and propaganda that will be built on this issue would create communal tension in the country.

Even the supposed advantage which the Prime Minister believes in, if he holds elections (when not even the most optimist envisage a vote turnout of beyond seven to ten per cent in Kashmir valley), will also show the futility of the exercise. The Prime Minister in those circumstances will not appear to be a strong administrator and a peace maker but as a bungler who would try to act in his own self-interest under any circumstances.

A satisfactory solution can only take place after the Parliamentary elections when the parties are free from the uncertainties of political repercussions Mr Rao's lame duck Government has no such mandate.

— Mandira RAJINDER SACHAR is a former Chief Justice of High Court, Delhi.

To the Editor

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.

Book is the best gift

Sir, Every year our friend circles greet and wish their respective friends and relatives, kith and kin through different kinds of cards on the occasions of Eid, New Year, Durga Puja and other domestic, social and national festivals. To my opinion it is a mere wastage of money and thus unnecessary. Generally, no one preserves the card though valuable and costly enough apart from its aesthetic sense. After a momentary enjoyment, it is left carelessly and even thrown

into the waste paper bag. It will be a noble and wise deed if a book is gifted instead of a card. Anyone can easily present a book to his beloved at a minimum cost but with an inner and intrinsic value. Moreover, an ordinary card also costs no lesser money.

A book's value is everlasting and imperishable. Indeed, books are the best gifts for all. I think everybody welcomes this gift whole heartedly.

Some also advocate for flowers. Undoubtedly, a flower has its own flavour,

glamour, dignity and value. Its holiness and beauty is beyond description. But can we save its dignity, significance, purity and goodness for long? Ultimately its haven and fate is the dustbin. So, the result is the same. We cannot maintain its material value and ethical importance. But a good book is, as it were, the sun. It washes all sorts of mental limitations and boundaries. It brightens our heart and broadens our mental horizon and lightens up our intellectual corridors. Leo Tolstoy said, "Three things are essential for a man's life and these are Books, Books and Books".

As good books are the source of knowledge for both here and hereafter, we can be benefitted reciprocally through book-media on different occasions. This everlasting message, I do think and believe, will save the nation as a whole from all sorts

of vices prevailing around us, of course, if we follow and practise the teachings contained in the books.

I like to urge all to present books, of course good books, to their near and dear ones on the occasion of the ensuing Eid-ul-Fitre instead of presenting Eid cards and the like that create insignificant impressions on our hardened souls.

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US foreign policy

Sir, Before 1914 the American people, like many others on planet Earth, were abysmally ignorant about international affairs.

US President Monroe's Doctrine of December 02, 1823 warning the Europeans to keep "hands off" of the

western hemisphere had more or less "cut off" the USA from the rest of the world for about a century.

This "isolationism" of the USA, however, has vanished long ago.

The USA applied successfully Monroe Doctrine as justification for the overthrow of the Guatemalan government in 1954, Bay of Pigs adventure in 1961 and the Dominican Republic invasion in 1965.

Not only that the USA also began poking her nose in the internal affairs of Latin American, Asian, African and European countries but many of the countries as well willingly started inviting and seeking USA's intervention. A view to mitigating their various sufferings in domestic, regional and international fields.

What are the aims and objectives of US foreign policy today?

Where there is money there is USA, where there is comedy there is USA, where there is tragedy there is USA.

US policy on Palestine and Bosnia is commendable.

Today the USA claims herself to be the greatest civilisation on earth.

We would request the USA to pursue a foreign policy based on Universal Declaration of Human Rights in letter and spirit and thus help solve problems like Chechnya, Kashmir, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, as well as UN economic embargo against Iraq, India's unilateral withdrawal of the Ganges river water, poverty, hunger and disease, for the sake of world peace.

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