The Baily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. All

Thank God for Iztema

'As expected, the combined opposition has given its ultimate programme. It will start its indefinite 'non-cooperation' movement till the fall of what it calls 'the illegal government.' This is the most direct challenge to the BNP government that the opposition has given so far. The programme, as announced, calls for a total paralysis of the government, and the coming to a halt of all sorts of administrative and economic activities. No government worth the paper its name is written on, can accept it. But far more important, no government with even an iota of responsibility for its people, can ignore it. There is no question that the programme is provocative and extreme. If actions of last week is any indication of its response, then the government will also come up with equally if not more extreme and provocative response. Caught between the two sets of extreme positions the country, its people and the fragile economy will suffer more and more.

The question is, why has it come to such a pass? Why is it that the two camps, both professing to adhere to democratic norms, have come to a state where one talks in the language of threat and ultimatum, and the other in that of political repression? Of the many reasons, the most important is our 'winner takes all' mentality, and as such our incapacity to see the merit of the opponents' position. If either side accepted, even for a minute, that it did not hold the monopoly on wisdom or on the answers to all our problems, then perhaps we could have found some solution to this crisis. Not only that each side did not pay the slightest of notice to their opponents' point of view, they did not also pay any heed to the numerous suggestions for solutions that were put forward by independent groups and intellectuals.

So what do we do now? Thank God for the Iztema of the Tabliq Jamaat. It has given us the much needed respite. Under no circumstances. should this opportunity be lost. We have one week to talk, negotiate and come to some sort of understanding. Channel of communication must be opened with the opposition immediately. For that to occur, repressive measures against the opposition leaders must be stopped immediately, and those so far detained must be released. We do not want to see the next seven days wasted in half clever maneuvers and insincere tactical moves. We want genuine progress in negotiations so that the opposition's programme does not have to be implemented. The onus lies with the ruling party especially with its leadership.

A Dangerous Crime

The BTV screen was an unbelievable sight at Ten on both Wednesday and Thursday night. What the characters were reading out was supposed to be news. And the number one national news of those two days was completely blacked out. Who gave the TV and the radio the right to do so? The government itself has no right to such suppression of information.

The rather fair record of this government's press freedom performance has been more than reversed and indeed blackened by its irresponsible abuse of the electronic media. Our nation is replete with constant blurring of the distinction between the state and the government. So could this also pass had it not impinged seriously on one of the most important rights of modern man the fundamental right to information. The concept of press freedom arises directly from this. Our radio-TV have traditionally been a faithful His Master's Voice. People are used to it and as such to discounting on much that it disseminates.

What radio and TV - mainly the latter, have been doing specially after the coming of the government versus the rest politics, has surpassed all past records of partisan bias. The TV has been reduced to be a super-agent of disinformation, which is a thousand times more harmful than misinformation.

But worse happened on Wednesday and Thursday. There was not a word on either the Chittagong or the Narayangonj situation. At a time all national dailies declared in front page screamers that Chittagong was burning and Narayanganj was a battlefield! The irony of it is that, by keeping news away from TV and Radio, the government only deceives itself. People came to know the news, only the government stays in isolation and blunders into action it may have otherwise avoided.

Fire at Mohammadpur

Once again a shanty town has been razed to the ground, making thousands of slum dwellers homeless. The recent spate of fires in the city slums point to the extreme vulnerability of the city's poor to such accidents. However it also shows how little notice the concerned authorities take of the plight of the poor, and how little they seem to learn when such incidents occur. For one thing, it is now known that many of these slums are not only the dwelling places of the poor but virtual factories or production centres for many items. That by itself may not be the cause of concern. What concerns us is that factories of highly combustible and inflammable items are being located in these over crowded places. Illegal electric connections and open lines and clustered connections all make for accidents waiting to happen.

Suspicion has also been expressed about possible arson for possession of the prime government property on which the Mohammadpur sluth was located. This calls for a thorough police investigation. May be time has come for the setting up of a Public Inquiry Commission to look into all the recent fires in the city slums and look into whether or not organised crime groups are behind any of them. They can perhaps also suggest ways as to how the living conditions in such areas can be brought under some sort of regulation and protection. We do not suggest the virtual legalisation of all such slums but at least of recognition of their existence and doing something to protect them from the types of dangers that we saw on Thursday

Politics and Economy: Drop the Catch, Lose the Match!

The government, seemingly, chose a confrontational route to ensure its 'peaceful existence' in power. Already, a number of political leaders and activists have been arrested and many more are reported to be in the list. These activities might result in a chain of reactions which could further sicken the economy.

kneeling on account of the prolonged political crisis. With severity of the crisis lurking large in the days to come, the fragile economy of Bangladesh Farmers in northern districts seems destined for a doom. expect a good go with boro Take the example of production this season to offreadymade garments (RMG) set the casualty incurred in the 'hero' of our export basket. last amon production. Prices of A number of RMG units, being urea, diesel and other inputs reportedly unable to feed are rising due partly to transforeign buyers, have been port setback, following consecutive hartals. Again, as it forced to face a closure. It is learnt that foreign buyers, rahappened during the time of tional as they are, started dithe "famous" fertilizer crisis. verting their purchase orders this time also the politically appointed fertilizer dealers are to other countries, especially to our neighbouring countries. up to suck farmers' blood. In a sense, the neighbouring countries are harvesting benefits when our political house is on fire! If more and more units are forced to lay off in future. needless to mention, employ-

VAILABLE reports on

the economic events

clearly point to the

sordid fact that the economy is

ment, especially of poor

women, would fall and part

passu local import substituting

industries (having linkages

with RMG) would be severely

hurt. Since this sector ac-

counts for more than half of

total foreign exchange earn-

ings, the impact on FOREX re-

serves needs no further elabo-

ration. Concerned quarters

also foresee that, if this politi-

cal crisis continues to move on

as it is now, other exportable

goods might also face the fate

RMG episode is just the tip of

the iceberg. In fact, all organ-

ised sectors of the country

have already started to pay

heavy tolls on account of the

current political impasse.

Business, trade, investments —

all have virtually come to a

standstill. At this hour of peak

demand, urea prices are, al-

legedly, skyrocketing in

northern part of the country.

T is what amongst us is

fast becoming a normal

conversation. A friend of

mine who has been back in the

country for the last five years

was talking about the hurdles

that faced him everyday of his

working life. Not the normal

day to day problems that one

would associate with running a

business but the extraordinary

ones. He had come back to

Bangladesh with the hope of

developing the business that

his father had left him. He

knew that with his intelligence

he could make it grow. And

unlike a generation a decade

ago, he decided to give up the good life" of the West and

come back to the country. He

was not alone in his decision.

He was but one of a growing

number of us who were

returning back to Bangladesh

with hopes and promises of

opportunities. Today he was

telling us how in a span of next

few years he wants to sell

everything in the country and

settle in Canada or the US. And

vou know what; he is not alone.

in Bangladesh is turning away

bright young talents that were

actually planning to come back

and settle here after being ed-

ucated in premiere institutes

of the West. These boys and

girls are intelligent and smart

humans who after being ex-

posed to the more advanced

thoughts, ideas and systems.

were seeing ways to replicate

them in the country. But with

each passing day their hopes

and desires are being tested

against the ground realities

about, have gone into business.

They with their fancy MBAs

and business degrees find that

they cannot use them here. All

right maybe Just-in-Time In-

ventory controls. Total Quality

Management theories are too

advanced an idea here. But

there are others that can be

used. Human Resource Devel-

opment. Productivity En-

hancement Exercises can be

successfully implemented

here. But when? We have been

closed from the 13th of Febru-

ary for 15 days 15 working

days!! Fahim now has to Air

Most of the set, I am talking

Frustration about life here

Not alone indeed!

Only the garments? The

of the RMG units.

The nature and depth of the on-going political crisis, reportedly, forced a shift of the date for aid consortium meet to be held in Paris. This time it is going to be in July as opposed to a conventional April meet. The shift has implications in terms of the formulation of our budget that depends, for 70 per cent of its Development Programmes, on aid. Last year's aid credit lines could not, possibly, be utilized properly and in due time. This performance might influence the upcoming decisions relating to aid commitment.

Hard hit are also the domestic resource mobilization efforts. The major source of revenue, customs duties, remained (and possibly would continue to be so during the last quarter of the fiscal year) sluggish on account of lower demand for imports. The domestic economic activities have been and continue to be hampered not only by political crisis but also seemingly affected by a deteriorating law and order situation all over the

The macro economic indi-

Freight the socks shipment to

Germany. A cost that was not

built into his pricing (which

has to be very competitive due

to the supply pressures from

Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Laos etc.)

Well that is if he can actually

get the socks produced in

midst of all the hartals. And if

he does not meet deadlines.

next time the Germans go to

China for their socks. A million

dollars of business lost because

we are now 'non-cooperating"

lieve that the politicians (all of

them) will soon screw back

their heads in the right direc-tion. Maybe, hope against all

hopes, they will understand

that closing down the country

for days at the end does not

actually help the nation. Then

will everything be splendid? I

am afraid not. I myself had

gone to a government indus-

trial venture to explore the

possibilities of selling some

electronic kits for them to re-

assemble later. The manager of

the project was really kind. He

sat me down and listened to

me say that I actually had not

sourced the equipment as yet.

but did hope to soon. And

therefore I did not know the

quality of the product as yet.

Well not to worry I was told.

All I needed to do is make the

manager a "partner" in my

project and my kits will be

sold. And not only sold, I could

dictate the price and the quan-

tity requirements. This was

the first time I met the man-

ager! Unluckily for my wallet,

my conscience stopped me

from taking him in as a part-

ner. But how am I sure that no

one else took up the lucrative

offer! I want to sell my goods

for the merit of the product it-

self and not the margins I can

give to some petty and some

not so petty) man down the

line. Well I am not the only

one. I can go on and on and on

about such stories. Some of my

acquaintances have done well

for themselves just finding

people like my manager

ing through a remarkable time

of their history. The giant was

awakening. The consumer

boom, the liberalisation of

witnessed the nasty political

scenario of this wretched

country after it achieved its

independence. I have seen the

baptising of BAKSAL, ushering

in of Jibon Bangladesh and

Moron Bangladesh, capitula-

tion of 'Nuton Bangladesh'

Like unity in diversity those

were autocratic governments

and they never allowed full

freedom of speech and the

press. But the present demo-

Studying in India, I was liv-

Some of us optimists be-

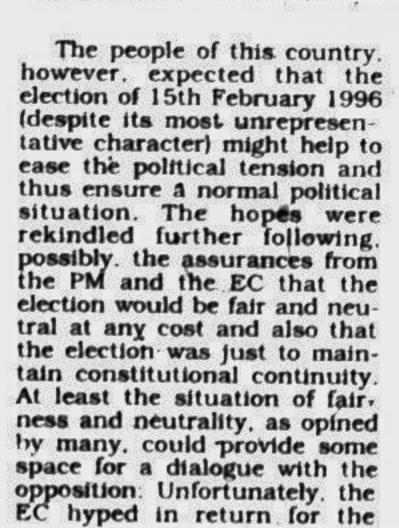
with each other!

cators, after few years of display of good shots, have started to pinch back on the economy. The import surge of the most recent period could hardly result in an export bust on account of the political mess: The inflationary spiral is being fuelled by supply interruptions. FOREX reserve now constitutes only four months' equivalent of imports. Economists consider this amount of reserve as dangerous!

hopes. The election, allegedly, turned out to be one of the "farcical", "unfair" and "unrepresentative" types in the history of this part of the world. The adjectives so adorned are not merely the blind blinks of the conventional opposition activists. More than that, this conclusion follows from valuable insights and judgements of foreign and domestic news media, election monitoring agen-

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



cies etc. - the agencies were made to rely to rely on for fair coverages of events in Bangladesh. The "underground" election "manufacturing" and election "manipulating" activities of the EC till today also adds thuth to the phenomenon. The government and the EC, thus, allegedly, miserably failed to seize the opportunity of the 15th February and thus help tune a dialogue to end in an impasse. In the jargon of the game of cricket, the ruling party dropped the most valuable catch that may cost them the

Unfortunately, the pains would not end here. With the

past cumulative economic hardships, we seem to await more pains in the days to come. The ruling party should earnestly realize that the strength of the years they ruled Bangladesh till 15th February originated from peopie's mandate — a mandate from the most widely acclaimed and neutrally proclaimed election in Bangladesh. Now its existence appears justified by itself alone and not by anybody else. In this fragile situation, the nation hoped a clarion call (by TV and Radio) from the ruling elite wherein the empirically tested

concept of a caretaker gov-

ernment would be echoed and

immediate steps would follow

the suit.

Again the hopes seem to produce hypes. The government, seemingly, chose a confrontational route to ensure its 'peaceful existence' in power. Already, a number of political leaders and activists have been arrested and many more are reported to be in the list. These activities might result in a chain of reactions which could further sicken the economy. The Chittagong episode is a clear pointer to this effect. After all, after what had happened on the 15th February. when the country's image outside is dashed to the ground (it appears from major donors including the US State Department's statements on the, election and from the concerns expressed by the US on political arrests), the government's actions might breed

more adverse reactions. The

policymakers should realize that even without major picketing, the non-cooperation call of the opposition was a major success. This success apparently came not from opposition's ingenuity per se but from the ruling party's mistakes of the 15th February.

It is, perhaps, possible for the government to stay in power by using force. But this time its political power may not inject any 'power' in the country's economic wheels. Itwould be very difficult on the part of the present regime to carry on with unfinished reform agenda/or to float any new reform measures. The representatives character of a government is one of the vital aspects that economic agents take into serious account while deploying resources. Available evidences suggest that an incredible government results in incredible policies and thus robs investors of their confidence.

We, therefore, urge upon the ruling party not to take a hard line. The 15th February election results do not seem to empower it to do so. Instead, the government should apologise to the nation for its failure to present a fair election and beg their cooperation to forestall the concept of the opposition. For whatever happens in the socio economic and political fronts in the coming days in consequence of 15th February episode. it is the government alone who might be held responsible. We hope that the ruling party would not drop another catch and lose the political game miserably. In the long run, we all are dead but politics is not. So let us not be carried away by short run elusive benefits at least in the arena of politics! This is, perhaps, the best time to take lessons from history.

Land of Dreams

by Nazim Farhan Chowdhury

their economy was setting in. They were dreaming visions which would make them the economic powerhouse that they knew they deserved. In those time I debated with the best student minds in the best institutes of that country that Bangladesh was not Mr Kissenger's basket any longer. Why, our macro economic indicators were the best in the region! We had overcome a dictatorial regime to taste the flavours of democracy. Multinational companies were doing studies after studies on feasibility of Bangladesh as a manufacturing base. We were going there. Yes, we had a slow start but we were going there.

Today the Indians seem to have been correct. They had told me that we could not hold

on to our success very long. Bangladeshis themselves would pull Bangladesh down. And you know I seem to believe them now. We are not letting ourselves progress. To us the love for power seems to be more important then the love for the

Well I can hear you think, "If these kids are so concerned about Bangladesh why are they leaving at the first sign of trouble? Well this has many an answer. Firstly these are not the first signs. The writing has been (quite literally) on the walls for years now. It does not show any signs of getting better. But more significant is that we do not see our elders telling us or even hinting to us of a better future. They are busy with their pseudo intel-

lectual battles about democracy. Bill Clinton said, it the best, "It's the Economy. stupid!" Our so called leaders need to realise this. The future of Bangladesh is not only the restoration of democracy in the Jatiya Sangsad but the restoration of the foreign investors belief in us. Its now a question about gearing ourselves for the one point demand that all Bangladeshis should have, "Let us work together to improve our stan-

dards of living." We do not need Dhaka University students majoring in gun battles and brickbatting. We need them to start building computers. They no longer need to study Pali and Sanskrit, they need to learn to speak English. We need more technically trained people in the labour force. We need our industries to be open thirty

hours a day and not a week! The sooner everyone believes this the sooner we will be on our way to thrashing Cambodia. Pakistan or Myanmar to the much needed investments that we deserve. Otherwise, "Bottom less" will be an understatement.

And to my friends who are planning to sample the greener pastures of the Lands of the Free. I ask you ... No! ... I beg you to be a little more patient. All is not bad. This nation has potential. If you leave, the hopes of the country will leave with you. I promise you that our leaders and elders will give us the opportunities to shine like the blinding lights of our visions. Otherwise I will personally drive all of you to the Visa section of the US Em-

The writer is a young busi-

OPINION

The Internet: Is Bangladesh Ready?

Kazi Obedul Haque

The Daily Star has been plugging computers (no pun intended) in for quite some time now. Of late, as is evidenced by the entire page you devote to the newsgroup that is so anomalously named Soc.Culture.Bangladesh, you have started promoting the Internet. I am a reader of your paper who is not as impressed by the marvels of the Internet as you are. While I agree that E-mail is a great and tremendously fast way to send letters but I am not as excited by the UseNet as the paper seems to

Have you ever noticed how much triviality, banality and frivolity there are in the newsgroups on the Internet? Near the top of the alphabetically arranged newsgroup list is the section that begins with "erotic", which is a euphemism for pornography. Nowhere but n America, which has eleven thousand varieties of theese and five thousand of corned beef, could there be so many varieties of pornography. There are newsgroups for all kinds of interests but 70 per cent of them are nothing but gossip and trivia. The reprints of portions of SCB that you have run a number of times. and which you have announced will become weekly features in the Star, demonstrate what I mean clearly. What is there of interest in these reprints that one does not hear in the local tea-stalls? Yes, the participants of these discussions may be separated by thousands of miles, but what really do they talk about? They talk about those perennial and earthshattering subjects Khaleda and Hasina, Jamaat-Shibir and Ershad, and who did what in

1971, '75, '86 and '90. Do these subjects become somehow' more important when they come to us through the cyberspace? Bangladeshis who stay in their own country and do not have the hallowed status of "immigrant" hear them every day on the buses. in restaurants, in offices and on the roadside where daylabourers congregate. And the intellectual level of the discussion is about the same too, no matter that the computer terminals where the former originate are situated in Princeton, New Jersey or Sydney, Australia or Tokyo. Japan. And the reason, I suppose, is that it is the same type of people who bother going on SCB. Bangladeshis abroad who are justly famous for their scientific and intellectual attain-

ments rarely log on to it. Quite

apparently, people with opinions of real value do not have the time for "adda" on SCB. II the chitchat on SCB deserves a whole page in a newspaper. then so does the conversation in Madhu's Canteen on the DU campus though so far I have not seen a transcript of it in

any publication.

The Internet, for all its advantages, 's' at the moment something of a toy, a fad, in the West where it will soon be replaced by multimedia TV Those of us who have heard about it, who know what it is are fascinated by it simply because it is a Western fad, like Blue Jeans and Denims and Nike shoes, that we too can enjoy. Here in Bangladesh. however, it is a very expensive toy which will probably never find its way into the majority of homes and its potentialities will never be fully exploited. The Internet, and especially the World Wide Web, is, of course, much more than just SCB, and does hold vast possibilities, but just think of the things that militate against it is Bangladesh.

First of all, there is the ex-

pense. The Internet is not

free, most people who use it have to pay for it and, in the backdrop of Bangladesh, it is costly. Add the cost of getting hooked up to the Net to the cost of getting a telephone and paying its bills. Think, furthermore of how the telephone (so essential to getting hooked up) has been deemed by all our governments an instrument of privilege. Successive Finance Ministers in almost all our governments have declared time and again, while raising phone charges in their budgets, that the telephone is something that only rich people have, suggesting thereby that it is something that only rich people deserve to have. The cost of a telephone line. 25000 taka or thereabout, is equivalent to about two month's income of even a wellemployed middle-class person. Instead of seeing to it that more and more of our people get telephone lines our governments have made sure that it remains in the hands of a privileged few.

Since even a mere telephone, the basic technology of which is more than a hundred years old now, is beyond the means of the majority of our people and is indeed a luxury for many who have it, it is difficult to imagine Bangladesh filling up with computers is a short time and Bangladeshis hannily coursing the Net. If the

computer and its potentialities do remain un-or under-utilised in Bangladesh they will only be the latest in a long line of technology that has passed us by. Witness, to mention only a iew, the neglect of two-way radio, though it is relatively cheap now; of aviation (small planes are no more expensive than trucks in advanced countries); and even, I dare say, of all forms of transportation and communication that are based upon the internal combustion engine. The bullock cart, the pushcart, and that surpassing Eastern invention, the rickshaw, have not as yet been replaced to any great extent on our roads by motorised vehicles. It would be no exaggeration to say that the age of the auto has passed us by while in the industrialised West it has run its full cycle with the motor car becoming an environmental curse where it was at first a transportational blessing. And all this neglect, this failure in the development and encouragement of technology. has been deliberate in our country — simply the result of government's fear of its own people. Two-way radio was particularly fearsome; it was, and still is, regarded by our officials as an instrument of political Subversion although (especially in the coastal areas during cyclone season) it could

be a saver of lives and expense. Even one-way broadcast radio (as well as television) is apparently so much a matter of "national" security that it has to be strictly controlled. The Internet (especially SCB) as a medium of free speech and source of natural, non-partisan Information in Bangladesh obviously has its limitations since, as I have already pointed out, it is merely a cacophony of individual opinion (often of crackpot opinion), little of which is trustworthy and truly informative.

SCB may be "adda", hanging out with the guys, tea-stall conversation. But, you may ask me to admit, SCB is not the whole Internet. The Internet is also the global Information Superhighway which we may zoom in on our battered second-hand IBMs (like the battered, second hand Toyotas on our roads) from entrances right here in our homes. However, it seems to me, the internet as an information highway also has its limitations (or shall we say "Lane Closed" signs?) in Bangladesh. And for a very simple reason. Most, if not all of the information avail-

able say on the World Wide

Web, is communicated through the medium of the English language. We in Bangladesh have, over a short period of the last ten years or so, made sure that the English language is a lost art. Even in the universities and in such professions as the Law, where one would have thought English is still needed, this indispensable language of international exchange is confined to a few small corners. (Have you noticed, incidentally, what awkward and fractured English our overseas brother and sisters use on SCB? Most of them, after all, are graduates of our own colleges and universities and therefore never learned the language adequately

If this foreign language had

been cultivated in Bangladesh

we would have had an information highway (or at least a bylane), without the establishment of the Net, in the shape of the ordinary, humble, lowtech library, even those dusty, neglected, ill-cared-for II braries that exist. for example, in our universities. These libraries are at present not so much the highways to information that they could and should have been as dead ends (even to university students) because most of the books they contain are in English. The British Council recently closed its small but excellently maintained library in the university city of Rajshahi because it was not much used by the population it was meant to serve Your promotion of the Internet in The Star is something of a lost cause: how can you possibly expect a people who do not use libraries to surf the Net in search for information in a language that they cannot read? At best you are promoting an elitist activity, not a popular one : the Internet, for the foreseeable future, will be the exclusive preserve of Bangladesh's professional and business upper crust, those who have the money to pay for it and its accessories, and those who have used their money to learn English, the language of the social elite par excellence (pardon my French) in our country.

I conclude by saying that I am not denigrating or belittling as such either the Net or your paper for idolising it. Every new instrument, be it a mousetrap or a computer network, that benefits large numbers of people is an advance in civilisation and the Internet is no exception. The failings of the newsgroups that I have pointed out here are not so much the failings of the Net as of its users. I have, however, also tried to point out that it is of little use promoting an expensive new technology in a country that has not developed the prerequisites for the use of that technology

As an humble voter, I have

Between democracy and the devils

Sir, While watching the BBC telecast on February 2 in the afternoon, I came across Mr Mahfuz Anam's short interview given to Mr R Galpin of the BBC. Mr Anam appeared to be very critical about the Prime Minister and described her as inept etc. To me he looked and sounded more like an opposition leader than an editor.

Since this 'worthless' government (in his opinion) has allowed total freedom of speech and press, mediamen are now able to make very good use of it. In this context my humble questions are: 1) How can a government

or any government in the world function properly and demonstrate its very best, if it is threatened by the jealous opposition with agitation and ouster just after its inaugura-2) If unabated arson and

vandalism are encouraged in the streets in the name of democratic rights for realising demands?

3) If peace-loving voters are threatened with dire consequences for participating in Answers to all the above

questions will definitely be

cratically elected government allowed that in full. As a result the print media, particularly those which are vernacular, made a hay day of this opportunity. They indulged in sensational journalism. Magnified the failures of the government and always tried to muffle its achievements. The tirade unleashed by the journalists and the self-seeking politicians against the government during its tenure was more than enough to confuse the poorly educated voters. The pseudo intellectuals and the politicians, perched on the ivory tower of metropolitan social comfort and opportunity, have now pushed the country to the brink of disaster. .

Now, against all hopes, let us hope that we will be able to resolve our differences through dialogue as it is done in all democratic societies,

Tasnima S Chowdhury East Islampur, Sylhet