

Fiercely Competitive

In the hydrocarbon exploration world Bangladesh has shot into prominence and seems almost to be besought after successive gas strikes in the Bay of Bengal and in Bhola. The new finds extend the hydrocarbon reach from the eastern region to the south and west of the country.

Little wonder that the first announcement of discovery of hydrocarbon in the Bay at the London Stock Exchange led to an increase in share price of our exploration partner Cairn Energy PLC of Scotland from a meagre 22p to 219p in a single day.

We are preparing for the London bidding of our exploration blocs in July with an eye to attracting some 'big league' companies headquartered there. The Houston bidding of September 1993 was our first major international exposure. This had yielded five production-sharing contracts (PSCs) with agreements initialled on the sides.

The Euromoney Conference in Dhaka generated a tremendous interest for investment in our energy sector but then it stumbled against our broad generalisations of so-called policy guidelines.

Oil exploration is such a 'big money' affair that we cannot take chances with either policy vagueness or any want of logistic preparations. The customs clearance of heavy equipment must be at its efficient best, so that the companies bringing them in on lease are spared irritating losses.

The bottomline is: comparisons will be made with other host countries when we fail to come up to expectations.

Repolling Fallout

As the Election Commission (EC) is racing against time to complete polls to all 300 seats, violent confrontations between pro-election activists, security men and anti-election campaigners are leading to unmitigated tragedies.

So what is the meaning of going for repolling when there is every possibility of loss of life and property? Was that an atmosphere for holding the suspended polls? In the name of constitutional continuity an election has taken place with the attendant danger of destroying social stability.

The EC goes about its business as if nothing has happened anywhere in the country. If the security of people or of the polling officials, security personnel themselves and others involved cannot be ensured during polls, the onus lies with the EC and the government.

So far we have not come across any statement from the EC regretting loss of life due to violence. If the objective conditions are so incongenial to repolling why then go for it pell-mell? More lives will be lost and local rivalry will flare up.

The EC's performance has come under question. As an institute its demoralised position will take a long time to heal.

Exempt Garment Industry

An appeal has been made to the opposition on behalf of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters' Association (BGMEA) to exempt garments factories from hartals. It is worth considering for a number of reasons, not least of which is the sector's number one position as an export-oriented industry and the dependence — direct or indirect — of about 20 million people on this sector for their livelihood.

Accounting for as much as 60 per cent of our total export, the garments industry has been badly hit by the last few months' political strikes, and other agitational programmes. Fresh non-cooperation programme beginning tomorrow will simply deliver the last blow to this otherwise money-spinning sector.

The garments industry is therefore awaiting the worst fate possible. Can the country afford its collapse? Both the economic and social cost will be huge.

So, please keep the garments industry outside the hartal's purview much the same way that the fire service, ambulances, press, etc are exempted from it.

Let Patriotism Prevail over Partisanship

by Qazi Kholiqzaman Ahmad

Chairman, Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad (a centre for research and action on environment and development)

parties, which have maimed and mutilated hundreds of innocent people, will continue to haunt the nation for decades. If a good sense had prevailed and a solution had been found through political dialogue without getting locked into those armed conflicts initially, the nation certainly would have avoided the economic collapse and the unprecedented sufferings of the people.

I had the opportunity of spending about two weeks in that country on a joint Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)/World Food Programme (WFP) food situation assessment mission in April/May 1995. I was shocked to see the debilitating economic disaster that the ordinary people were undergoing and the kind of despair and hopelessness that their faces portrayed.

I also participated in a similar mission to Somalia in November 1994 where not only that the economy had collapsed but the state structure had completely disinte-

grated and guns were the only law. The United Nations Operations in Somalia (UNISOM) withdrew a few months later having failed in its mission to bring peace to the country.

Turning back to Bangladesh, it is indeed painful to note that the economy has begun to be afflicted with disastrous cracks in many respects. As a consequence of socio-political upheavals and the pursuit of reform policies without taking into account the country's socio-economic realities in the past, the economy was not in a very healthy state even without the on-going political conflicts.

The had been some expectation that the Prime Minister's broadcast to the nation on 3 March would provide a framework acceptable to all concerned for initiating a process of resolving the political impasse. But it turned out to be a pious hope. The message failed to provide a basis for the resolution of the impasse.

supreme. Basic democratic norms would demand that TV and radio immediately broadcast a response from the opposition. This obviously could not happen because TV and radio have continued to be used as mouthpieces of the government even after a democratically elected government took power in 1991.

There is no more time to lose. While, as I see it, the onus of taking a genuine initiative at this hour of deep national crisis, rising above political factionalism and partisanship, lies squarely with the Prime Minister and the BNP, the Opposition must accept the responsibility and come forward with commitment to negotiate for an appropriate resolution of the impasse should an opportunity arise.

A way out may be a conference of the major political parties within the shortest possible time to decide on the formation of a non-party caretaker government to supervise an all-party parliamentary election and set the time limit within which to hold it. A quick resolution of the impasse is called for to secure an agreeable future of the nation.

All Sinners, No Saints

If the process itself gets contaminated, a great opportunity would have been lost. The elected representatives use democracy to come to power but they do not remain democrats. They begin to use the authority for their own ends.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

the security aspect that they want to be explained. The government and political parties are concentrating on the accounting of the funds received. This is important and so are the demands that electioneering be funded by the state.

Why political parties or their leaders got money from doubtful sources abroad is the real question. None of the tainted persons or parties is giving any answer. It also turns out that they knew how S K Jain, who doled out money, was mixed up with the underworld and still they kept quiet. It is not a case of disproportionate wealth, the aspect on which the CBI is concentrating. It is a case of collusion with such elements as deride at national interests.

'We have our limitations,' says a top CBI official, who does not want his name to be disclosed. There can never be a comprehensive, independent inquiry until the CBI is freed from government control.

The Supreme Court has done a yeoman service by tearing the cover that hid the scandal. No case would have been filed if judges had not pushed or caajoled the CBI. But their entire work may go waste if everything is left to the agency. They must set up a supervisory body, comprising top retired police officers with unimpeachable integrity. An independent agency would have been ideal but it cannot be established quickly.

No doubt, judges have taken into account the pressures on

the CBI by declaring that each and every entry in the diaries must stand up to a final disposal. But, as they have known from their experience, the CBI is not its own master. It has itself admitted that there is interference from political and other high-ups. If the processing of a case is faulty, the end product is bound to be shoddy.

The recent example is that of the winding up of Sri Krishna's commission in Maharashtra. A State chief minister Manohar Joshi did not give extension to the commission when he found that the verdict might go against his party, Shiv Sena, which was allegedly involved in the killing of Muslims in Bombay in early 1993.

For once the circumstances have developed in a manner which can help the cleansing process in the country. If the process itself gets contaminated, as some are trying, a

great opportunity would have been lost. The elected representatives use democracy to come to power but they do not remain democrats. They begin to use the authority for their own ends.

What happened during the emergency was the subversion of a system. For the sake of staying in power, Indira Gandhi mutilated the constitution and subverted the rule of law. She destroyed the institutions and ever changed the bureaucrats' thinking.

It is necessary to emphasise that the moral component must take its legitimate and rightful place in every decision-making process by government, political parties or leaders. Those in high places are 'the custodians of a nation's ideals, of the belief it cherished, of its permanent hopes, of the faith which makes the nation out of a mere aggregation of individuals.'

Even now, after the havalas racket, there is no serious effort to set things right. More or less the same politicians — and definitely the same bureaucrats — are busy whitewashing things.

They should not be let off the hook, particularly now when we are preparing for a general election. As the first step, all those who figure directly and indirectly in the havalas racket, should voluntarily withdraw from elections till their names are cleared. However one may hate L K Advani's politics, he has at least made some gesture of sorts.

OPINION Feb 15 Polls: An Analysis

Abu Imran

The holding of election for election's sake on February 15, 1996, at least has made one thing clear that election under sitting government, at least in Bangladesh, can hardly be free and fair, since it was not done so according to impartial observers' views both from inside and outside the country. Besides the lowest turn-out, the possibility of massive rigging, since alleged, could also not be ruled out. The firsthand report on the election day by foreign observers, was of 2 per cent turn-out of voters. Later, the German radio estimated the turn-out figure to be around 15 per cent while the Indian radio said it to be 10 per cent.

Whether this is a victory or a defeat of greatest dimension depends on how the rulers and the ruled take it. The rulers no doubt subscribe to the former view (victory) as manifested by their jubilation, celebration, street march etc. The ruled, i.e. the mainstream opposition, and of course, the people, generally, term this as defeat since they did not want to accept this stage managed election. This was already boycotted by the opposition who had further put forward non-cooperation programme after the Eid holidays.

So, my utmost request to the political leaders is that please exempt all educational institutions, as they often do with rickshaws, from hartals. Please let the younger generation have normal and healthy environment. I also request the eminent educationists of our country to come forward and convince the politicians to exempt schools and colleges from their hartals.

I sincerely hope the above mentioned problem will not go unnoticed. Tunzid Farhat 12/A, Talmizhal Road, Mohammadpur, Dhaka

low rooms to sensible persons to take the nation through. Otherwise, we are left under the spell of strange brew.

A Citizen Dhaka

Is this my country?

Sir, Being a citizen of a democratic country, I pray earnestly to our so-called leaders (Government and Opposition) not to deprive us of our basic rights. As a citizen of a sovereign country, we should have freedom to move about freely, send our children to schools to acquire knowledge to become worthy citizens, if not educated politicians, at least, I doubt whether they are aware of such basic thing, as they do not send their children to schools in Bangladesh.

On March 6, early in the morning, as usual, my children left for the school and I left for my place of work. For various reasons I was not able to browse through the newspaper in the morning. Reaching my destination I came to know about the hartal. Also, despite teachers' requests that they are the custodians of the children while at schools, angry activists entered some schools and were creating horrid situations. I simply got panicked and somehow or the other I managed to get my children home safe. But what about thousands of other children of thousands of parents? Why should school children fall

and screaming, regardless of what is going on. What an idiotic manner of running a nation we are watching each day. Shamim Choudhury House 9F, Road 4, Banani, Dhaka

Why punish students?

Sir, Due to frequent hartals, schools and colleges remain closed most of the time. Last month, majority of the educational institutions were opened for only a week. As a result, the students are severely lagging behind their normal envisaged progress.

I don't think the present political crisis is going to end very soon and most probably we are going to meet a lot of hartals! The very future of our young generation is at stake now.

However, a poor and a near-literate nation like ours, in my opinion, does not deserve democracy. Here people do not have even that much of knowledge as to differentiate right from wrong. They are always with the crowd, yelling