## The Baily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

## 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 extends the hydrocarbon reach from the eastern region to the south and west of the country. That is the national angle of an even energy distribution pattern in prospect. Internationally, the auspicious signs are deemed to be high methane content of our gas, the off-shore nature of the find pointing to oil prospects, and the potentially high rate of strikes. As if to add to the global interest in the hydrocarbon, foreign private companies see lucrative complementarities between gas finds and their participation in power generation and supply.

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

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. Our credentials at the London bidding will be largely determined by (a) filling the information gaps in our energy policy and allied documents, such as may be pointed out by the interested parties; and (b) the quality of follow-up on the PSCs clinched and the agreements initialed through the Houston round of bidding.

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. These do not hold adequate answers to the searching questions of potential investors.

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. Then intrusions into the area under exploration have to be effectively cordoned off.

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. During Wednesday's polls to 26 seats at least seven persons were killed in BDR firing. Of the 84 seats where repolling was necessary, roughly half the number has so far been given a try. Almost without exception, large-scale violence has been reported from the centres.

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. If the atmosphere was not conducive to holding polls or re-polls, the EC should have had the courage and sincerity to say so.

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. Congestion at the maritime ports — mainly Chittagong Port — has had its crippling effect on garments export. Neither the readymade garments can be shipped out nor fabrics and other raw materials released from the port timely.

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

ANGLADESH was born into the promise of an exploitation free, participatory democratic society that would provide equitable opportunities for the capabilities of all individuals to find full expression in appropriate fields and in the best possible ways. But as the 25th anniversary of Independence approaches, not only that the promise has remained unfulfilled, but clearly it is no longer even an official national goal. What went wrong? Obviously, the human capability, of which there has always been an abundance in this country but, being mostly latent, could not be mobilized and marshalled into a concerted nation-building force. In fact, the leadership - political and that in other fields — has always failed to provide the nationbuilding framework to which all the citizens could relate in some positive and meaningful way and within which their capabilities could flourish and find appropriate uses.

On the contrary, the nation has passed through severe conflicts and jolts in all fields - social, political, economic almost without respite since independence. Indeed, there is yet to be a normal, peaceful transfer of national (political) power since independence. Assassinations, coup d'états and public people power were behind all power transfers that have so far taken place. How unfortunate these sad happenings have been for the nation that achieved its independence after centuries of foreign rule and domination! This sad story can be some kind of a record in contemporary international experience.

Periodic violent events put the country back each time in terms of economic chaos and reversal as well as loss of national image. Had we have po-

OME political leaders

returning from

litical stability not according to the terms concocted by the powers-that-be at different times but within a genuine democratic framework where the people not only remain the source of all power as the politicians often pronounce them to be but are actually capable of and facilitated to exercise that power, I see no reason why this nation could not have achieved a respectable level of economic and social development by now even though the country is not endowed with a great deal of natural resources. The most critical problem has been the confrontational politics and periodic autocratic rules that necessarily failed to provide the required socio-economicpolitical framework for the available resources and the capability of the mass of people to be mobilized to the fullest possible extent. Indeed, even a country that

possesses a lot of natural resources cannot achieve socioeconomic progress while passing through political turmoil and conflicts. One may, in this context, cite the example of Angola. A few days ago president Jose Eduard dos Santos of Angola and the opposition UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi agreed to put their armed conflicts behind and form a Unity Government and merge their armed forces into a new national army. An agreement between them was also reached in 1994 to work together but that did not materialize. One hopes that the present agreement will. But one should be painfully aware that the armed conflicts over the years have virtually destroyed the economy even though it is endowed with oil. diamonds and fertile lands. The millions of land-mines (estimated between 9 and 15 million) deployed by both the



## by Qazi Kholiquzzaman 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 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. Let me give just one example that would indicate the severity of the economic collapse. The day the mission arrived in Angola the value of Kwanza (Angolian currency) had already nose-dived to 1.7 million against US\$1.00, and by the day the mission left two weeks later the currency's free falling exchange value against US dollar was down to a mindboggling 2.2 million.

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. leaving the warring ethnic clans to their own devices. As a result of the continued arrogance and armed conflicts, no warring party has gained but a nation has been destroyed. There are similar other examples in different parts of the world but I have cited the above two because I had a chance to see for myself what had happened to these countries - collapse of the economies, free-for-all guns replacing the rule of law. unimaginable sufferings of the people, disintegration of the state structure - as a conse-

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. In fact, the economic growth rate never accelerated, the much trumpeted reform programme notwithstanding. The growth rate averaged at just over 4.0 per cent since 1990

quence of accentuating politi-

cal confrontations leading to

factional wars.

when the reform programme. initiated in 1987, began to be pursued as an orthodoxy. This rate is no better than the averages achieved in the previous two decades.

The on-going political conflicts are like a nail in the coffin inflicting work stoppages. restricting the movement of people and goods and jeopardising the external trade. For example, exports of garments and jute and jute goods, which together account for close to three-quarters of the country's total export earnings, have already been seriously affected and are threatened with catastrophic consequences unless the political impasse is resolved soon and the ability of the industries to produce and ship their goods restored. Also, as a result of the on-going untoward happenings, investment, particularly foreign but also domestic, and savings and hence the productive base of the economy are being eroded. Also, an already bleak foreign aid climate is likely to be bleaker. At the same time, the deteriorating law and order situation has already reached frightening proportions. If arrogance, an unyielding stand and a determination to go to any length to uphold the positions taken continue to hold sway, conflicts are bound to accentuate further that may lead to consequences similar to those experienced by the

countries cited above. There 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. Moreover, methodologically the old ways ruled

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. Does not the Prime Minister see that there is unfolding a very dangerous game and a cruel joke on the ordinary people of this country? Does not she understand that she has a historic responsibility to put the nation back on track for reconstruction. renewal and progress?

There is no more time to lose. While, as I see it, the on us 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. What the alternative might be if the conflicts continue to accentuate, I shudder to think, much less to speculate. The way it may go can be most unpalatable and disastrous for the nation. Let that not happen. Let self and party interests be made subservient to national interests and let patriotism be given a chance. Let sanity return and vanity be abandoned.

# 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

### tour of the countryside. India's 80 per cent, look worried. They find that the villages want to know more and more about the havala kand (racket). The immediate reaction of horror and disbelief has changed into suspicion and anxiety. World is spreading that the funds of havala recipients and Kashmiri militants came from the same source.

People are aghast that the leaders and the political parties they have held in high esteem have compromised with the country's security. The atmosphere is somewhat similar to the one that came to prevail after the scandal of Bofors gun kickbacks was known. At that time also, the graft part angered people first. But when they found that the kickbacks related to the army's guns, they felt let down. That was the reason why they turned off support to Rajiv Gandhi, then the prime minister, who had swept the polls two years before with 422 seats in the 546-member Lok Sabha.

In the same way, the import of the havala scandal regarding national security is beginning to seep through credulity. There is still the usual disbelief that those who bemoaned nexus between politicians and criminals could not themselves be part of a transaction which had the militants playing a recognisable role. The confidence is, however, wearing thin as additional information about the havala kand and the underworld activi-

ties is becoming public. Both Congress and the BJP. which are more closely involved in the scandal and Dawood Ibrahim's crimes than the other parties, are deluding themselves if they think that the dust will settle by the time the polls are held. The voters' judgment will be harsh and shattering this time. That political parties accept money from business houses and others is known to them, It is not so much the corruption part as is

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. But this

misses the point. 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 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 interestes. No government agency can find it out because the people involved are too influential.

"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." (Prime Minister Narasimha Rao is directly supervising the department, which is headed by an officer who is on extension.)

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 cajoled 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. The supervisory body can monitor the CBI work relating to havala scandal. No doubt, judges have taken

into account the pressures on

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

the CBI by declaring that each and every entry in the diaries must come to them for 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. Judges are taking upon themselves too much responsibility to go to the roots of every entry. The Shah Commission, which examined the excesses committed during the emergency. threw up its hands when it. found the records fabricated and the files doctored. The supervisory team, which knows the tricks of the trade, will be

of immense help. One wishes the nation had picked up the thread from where the judges left it off. But ernment tricks to hide — has NGOs are trying to get to the bottom of the whole things. But limited. In the meanwhile, some charlatans have jumped into the arena. They believe their own corruption is not the point at issue. Till yesterday crimes than the havala scandal. Today, they are holding seminars and forums for projecting an impression that the system is at fault, not persons like

the paucity of authentic information — thanks to the govcreated a lot of disbelief. Some their reach and resources are they were committing bigger them who exploited the system. There is nothing wrong with formed and disfigured by politicians on one hand and the bureaucrats on the other. Take for example Tamil Nadu chief minister Jayalalitha. She has appointed as the state law commission chairman former Supreme Court judge Ramaswamy against whom the impeachment motion for corruption was brought in parliament. How is the system to be blamed if a chief minister does not have the sensitivity to differentiate between clean and tainted persons?

The recent example is that of the winding up of Sri Krishira's commission in Maharashtra. 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. No system can work if those who occupy positions of authority are determined to derail it.

The same system begins to work when it comes to benefit the party, person or friend. The difference between the earlier times and now is that the institutions, which sustain the system, have become subservient to the party in power. And the rulers, who are the guardians, have no faith in the value-sys-

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 even changed the bureaucrats' thinking. Certain lessons should have been learnt. But they were not. Whatever little the Janata government did to stop the exploitation of the system was undone by Mrs Gandhi and her successor. Something like

navala scandal was inevitable 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 highplaces 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 havala racket, there is no serious ef fort to set things right. More or less the same politicians - and definitely the same bureaucrats - are busy whitewashing things. For once there is an opportunity — a faint one — of punishing those who have not only accepted money from abroad but have also played with national security. They are all sinners,

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 havala kand. 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

## OPINION

## Feb 15 Polls: An Analysis

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 The mean average of the votes really cast thus stands at around 9 per cent. Locally, even FEMA (Fair Election Monitoring Alliance) has said that the election was not free and fair. In brief, a apprehended and voiced by the mainstream opposition, perhaps the Magura-2 byelection situation had been replicated to make a land-slide victory for the BNP.

Whether this is a victory or a defeat of greatest dimension depends on how the rulers and Sir. Due to frequent hartals. | the ruled take it. The rulers no doubt subscribe to the former view (victory) as manifested by their jubilation, celebration, street march etc 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 noncooperation programme after the Eid holidays. That being so, destabilisation of political system, unrest, chaos, economic unstability can't be helped. And if these things are to continue, then what for the so-called election was held and what good would this exercise

> crore has been spent for the farcical election, which if this election was not held, could be saved and used for a meaningful election participated by all parties and people as was done in 1991. The PM says that after constitutional amendment has been made inserting

the concept of CTG (caretaker

govt), then maybe next election would be held according to people's will. Now if the Prime Minister was aware that nothing short of CTG system was acceptable to the people. then why she went for such an extensive exercise causing loss of money, life and further political impasse? She could have earlier agreed to hold election under caretaker government. even by referring the matter to the Supreme Court or broadly agreeing on the point that any party or parties (coalition) forming the government following national election would arrange incorporation of CTG system in the constitution. This would have saved time and money and paved way for institutionalisation of democracy and added credibility to the BNP government. But, regrettably reverse is the position now after elec-

Hardly any body is accepting the so-called landslide victory of BNP in the polls that was held on 15th February

in under-developed countries, the people in power do not like, normally, to leave power. So, for this it is necessary that election should be held under an impartial body i.e. caretaker government, a least for 3-4 terms, until democracy has taken a firm shape to stand on its own foot, else in the name or garb of democracy, autocracy will continue to prevail. For instance, here in most cases, when elections were held under the aegis of the ruling parties, in one way or the other, they won. Even in the latest farcical election, many socalled tail-piece parties had participated understandably with hopes and aspiration. But what was the result? All but two lost. This proved that for Bangladesh, there is no alternative to holding election (if Already around Taka 300 it's desired to be free and fair) under neutral caretaker gov-

> Now, possibly, the ball is in the court of the Hon'ble Presi dent. How he responds, the people here, and even abroad perhaps are very keenly observing. Let's hope, he takes correct decision so that the grave political impasse is over.

ernment.

### Strange days

Sir. Imagine, under normal circumstance, you are ready to start for office, and if suddenly if you were stopped by a group of goons or street urchins, interrupting your way and yelling out, "where are you going?" "don't go to office," "go back home etc." you would have definitely thought of them to be either drunken fools or lunatics and so you might have as well slapped across a few and walked away to work. But nay, disgracefully this absurd abnormalities are now really taking place in the name of protest and non-cooperation movement. Officers, businessmen, people of many other profession are manhandled. stripped of their clothes and what not to stop them from earning their livelihood by the activists of the opposition parties - not to speak of the huge damages caused to public and government property.

In my opinion, rise of such unthinkable abnormalities is mainly due to the weakness and incapability of the present administration and also due to the unreasonable demands of the other worthless lot, I mean the opposition political parties. And even if there be any compromise it will not help to erase the impact of the bad breeding set by them. We are only left in the hands of a savfor to come our way to rescue us of the present situation. We would invariably retire the present destructive lot, and allow rooms to sensible persons to take the nation through. Otherwise, we are left under the spell of strange brew. A Citizen

## 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 horrified situations. I simply got panickéd 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

prey of such situations? They are our children. They are neither the children of the ruling party leaders, nor the opposition leaders. It's really a shame for the nation if they (the politicians) have to play "hide and seek" at this age, stage and

the system, it has been de-

Is this the proper way to run a nation? Being the daughter of late Sheikh Mujibur Rahman one of them thinks that Bangladesh is her father's property: while at other hand, being the wife of late Ziaur Rahman the other one is taking it as her own property. By now it is crystal clear how antagonistic they are to each other. Sandwiched between their egos we exactly know how much price we are paying for it. Keeping apart other major problems, we would like to know that who will remain responsible for the future of our children - their education, security etc.? Why do our leaders have to play games with the lives of millions of people? The country's economy has been facing severe crisis, education system is at stake, and moreover it has now become a life and death issue - without any security in each and every

However, a poor and a near-illiterate 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

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,

## Why punish students?

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

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

I sincerely hope the above mentioned problem will not go unnoticed.

Tamzid Farhat 12/4 Tajmnhal Road, Mohammadpur, Dhaka

from their hartals.