

A Contemptible Attack

The Seventh March observance of the Awami League was attacked by gunfire from a microbus. The shooting was towards the podium and it occurred as soon as Sheikh Hasina had given her speech and the microphone. One person was hit by bullet. The shooting was accompanied by bombing in which dozens were injured.

The contemptible attack did not end there. Police came up to teargas the whole area and in the name of containing rampage resulting from the attack on the AL meeting, resorted to lathi charge and shooting rubber bullets. Unidentified assailants and police combined to do a nice job of doubly punishing those who had come to join a historic and patriotic commemoration. Police has never been found to be able to stop a particular microbus, full up with gunmen with their guns jutting out at the ready. But they never miss a chance to pulverise the victims of the shooting and bombing.

The Bangabandhu Avenue shooting is not going to improve the situation in a fashion the Prime Minister is saying it should. And letting things escalate to such levels as when a leader of Sheikh Hasina's order can be made the target of random shooting is not at all going to help the political culture of the nation. While roundly condemning the whole nightmarish episode caused by assailants and police, we charge in advance the police with preventing any repetition of any such shooting and bombing on leaders and meetings on pain of losing further face.

What if police again fail in this? After all they have been failing everywhere to do the right thing and succeeding in subjecting themselves to open criticism by the people in so many areas and towns in the interior. Police failure in stopping these protected gunmen and bombers is certain to pass on a message to the people — a message very unflattering for the government, very unhelpful to those that are trying to pull the nation back from the precipice, very harmful to the whole nation.

If it is in the interest of the present government that the Thursday incident is looked into seriously, persons responsible identified, nabbed and punished — and a statement or more is made by the police or their controlling ministry on their performance and findings in the matter.

Women's Rights Day

There is far more to the women's rights issues than we would have thought of a few years back. Obviously, we have grown wiser. But the tragedy is that we have not acted on our newly acquired wisdom. In our view, women's issues lie at the very root of the development debate. Time is far gone when women's issues used to be understood from the point of view of an aggrieved section getting its rights. While women remain critically disadvantaged, and much remains to be done about giving them equal opportunity, the debate now is far wider and much more comprehensive. Today we must understand the women's issues as the ones which lie at the very heart of poverty, illiteracy, social and cultural backwardness, child health, population planning, etc.

In the last one year women's movement in Bangladesh can be said to have made some significant strides. The murder of Yasmin and the national outrage expressed against it marks a watershed in the coming out into the open what has hitherto been kept hidden — the issue of rape and the oppression of women in police custody. The countrywide movement that her killing gave birth to, helped to highlight the legal and systemic flaws that contribute to such a state of affairs.

The UN Women's Conference held in Beijing also had its own impact on Bangladesh. The countrywide preparatory process helped to build coalition and network that brought in many new organisations and individuals into the national scene. Because of the world conference there has also been a far greater linkage between national and international bodies active in this struggle. The public and official recognition of Taramon as a national heroine gave a new status to the women's movement in Bangladesh, especially her image as a freedom fighter.

What we now need to do is to consolidate these gains. The most important task before all the women's organisation today is to unite behind some common goals. While some progress has been made in this direction, there are still too many divisions within the ranks which are preventing the movement from realising its true potential. Now that we have a clear agenda — implementing the Beijing Declaration and our national priorities — why not forge the strongest of unity behind it, and do more to establish equality of women than has ever been done before?

Vegetable Glut

Till only the other day a water pumpkin of the medium size could not be had for less than Tk 25. Then, to the relief of the average householder, it dropped to the Tk 10-15 range. But in Sirajganj the prices of vegetables have gone down to the rock bottom. Over-production has been cited in newspaper reports as the main reason. This must have created an appalling situation for the growers who are mostly small peasants without much land holding and practically very little holding power. Sirajganj has been particularly restive over the election fracas for the last whole month. Now add to that this new problem. As the phrase goes in Bengali — a peasant gets his peace only after death.

How much low can the prices go? Four sizeable pumpkins for Taka 2 — 50 paise for each weighing possibly more than two kg. Are we approaching Shaista Khan's times? What will the peasants now do with these? The first option is to feed these to the cattle. After a time the cattle will start to refuse. Then? If transportation was at its normal level these could be sent to towns. But often times transport cost gets far beyond production cost.

This is no freak development. Every year such situations develop in many areas. Goods mobility has yet to attain a level of economic viability. And the middlemen must start keeping to some ethical code. And stability must return to this land. This is a tall order for an answer to the vegetable glut. But there is no shorter route to a fairer price for the pumpkin.

A very serious fertilizer crisis (better call it a fertilizer famine) is reported to cripple the current HYV boro plantation all over the country. Especially in the northern districts of the country where the ill-fated farmers failed to reap home a good amount harvest, the cries out of the crisis seem to sound louder. Already news related to road blocks, stopping of trucks carrying fertilizers, gheraos of offices of concerned ministries by farmers are capturing newspaper headlines. The desperation of farmers in getting fertilizers appears no less biting than the preceding one of the last boro season when about a dozen farmers were killed in police firing. What water is to anybody's life, fertilizer is just that to farmers at least when the livelihood hinges on the availability of fertilizer for increased boro production.

The objectives of presenting this brief note are: (i) to provide an account of the current crisis and (ii) to argue that only the establishment of a truly democratic government and an application of the rule of law can minimize the risks arising out of such crisis.

The government is reported to have set the price of urea fertilizer at Tk 186 (approx) per 50 kg bag or Tk 3.70/kg. It is, however, alleged that a 50 kg bag of urea fertilizer is now being sold at Tk 340-370 in some places and Tk 400 in some other areas. Again, the prices of SSP and TSP are also alleged to be skyrocketing. The apprehension is

that if the current surge in the rise of prices tends to continue, fertilizer prices might knock a level of Tk 400-500. Why is the crisis again? It is only in the last year that the spectre of fertilizer famine visited Bangladesh farmers. After that holocaust the general expectation was that after the sacrifices of a dozen lives, new lessons learnt from there would reduce the probability of its repetition. Unfortunately, we do not have enough statistical evidence to support a knee-deep analysis but, nevertheless, would aim to place some impressionistic observations.

The government, of course, has been continuing with the contentions that (a) the supply of the home made urea fertilizer is ahead of the demand for it, and that there is very little scope of a fertilizer shortage (and the consequent price hike); (b) the on-going political crisis that gave way to harkals might have affected the transportation of fertilizer at different points and hence could have fueled the price spiral and (c) the prices of urea has been set at a low level to benefit farmers. To the critics, however, all those contentions are flawed on many counts.

Let us take up the question of demand and supply. It could be learnt from concerned quarters that the total fertilizer demand projected by the respective ministries

might appear inaccurate on the following grounds. First, about 20 per cent of the total fertilizer demand nowadays is said to spring from non-agricultural and 'non-boro' sources. If this excess demand falls to be taken due account of (and possibly it is) then the said estimate can deceive us all. Second, over the years farmers have been demanding more fertilizers per unit of land to maintain land productivity. This could have injected some pressures on the de-

mand side of the tunnel. Third when the price of an essential input like fertilizer is set at such a low level, excess demand tends to crop up to take advantage of the scarcity in the market and thus to reap a scarcity premium. The degrees of new entries of demand in this case would hinge, inter alia, on the actual distance between the government-fixed price and the market clearing, equilibrium price. Intuitive judgement would, perhaps, suggest that at the current low level of the fixed price, there is ample scope to divert a part of the demand and thus to

gamble in the fertilizer market. Fourth, there are lot of complaints against the dealers. Of late, the government is reported to have appointed some 2000 dealers for the 16 northern districts to deal with fertilizers so that the price spiral, as it did last time, does not ignite a violent peasant protest across the country.

According to the available various sources, about two-thirds of the appointments were made under political pressure. The dealers got

shelved to protect party men. Some of the contributors to the last fertilizer scandal are also reported to have managed berths in the so-called sixth parliament.

It, therefore, seems that transport deadlock is one of the many reasons to cause the price hike. The government sources seem to blame the opposition for the supply constraint caused by frequent hartal calls. Even it did happen, there is little ground to believe that the rate of price increase should be so high. What about the other factors in which the opposition had no say but the government had many ways to tinker with? For example, about the projection of demand, politicisation of dealerships etc.

It is most unfortunate to see that the government miserably failed as before, to protect the interest of the farmers, especially of the poor ones. It is more disconcerting to watch that farmers have to shed blood to get an input at a fair price made unfair by unfair-political means. Any government worth accountable to the public could hardly afford to allow such devastations to take place in two consecutive seasons.

Preserving the interests of farmers by arresting such grave crisis warrants the establishment of a truly democratic government — a government that has to approach farmers during election. Had

there been any scope to ventilate farmers' grievances through a representative, free and fair election on the 15th February 1996 the present regime might have got a good lesson this time. Unfortunately, no scope was given to that end and a government claims to be elected again this time with allegedly massive riggings.

Eminent Economist Amartya Sen's illuminating observation needs mention here. According to him, the presence of a democratic government drastically reduces the chance of the occurrence of a famine in a particular country while an authoritarian one enhances that chance. It is simply because a government under the former set up has to seek votes from the people and thus account for its deeds and misdeeds after a stipulated time frame. Given this accountability, the same government can hardly afford to allow such nation-wide crisis to flare up and rock the boat of the party in power. Precautions to this effect come into effect much earlier and with much earnestness. To minimize the chances of a famine (either of food or of fertilizer) Bangladesh also needs to uphold the spirit of a government elected through a free and fair election. The country also needs to uphold the spirit of the rule of law where criminals are taken to proper tasks and not rewarded and emboldened for vote rigging. Let the fertilizer crisis give a clarion call to this effect.

The Crisis that Cripples Farmers

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Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



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their jobs, by showing false documents and papers while some of them were patronized by upperhand lobbies. Many of those dealers are also reported to have no godowns and as such have to 'black market' the total allotment. It may be mentioned here that during the last boro season also, these politically patronized dealers emerged as actors behind the havoc. An Enquiry Commission, it may be noted, here, on the last fertilizer scandal was set up by the government and it is alleged that many of the recommendations from that Commission were

mount to the total economic destruction. Unless people in the country live in peace with at least a square meal a day, whom the politicians will govern? The stakes are too high to leave the contentious issues unresolved. None in the country would be immune to the pain in the event of an all out conflict. None holds sufficient cards to prevent any titanic clash. Worse, aggravated by self-appointment and party interest, and hardening extremist lines, party feuding could wreak havoc far beyond party interests. And with recession gripping the donor countries, generosity comes hard, especially when donors fear that this country's political and economic chaos would swallow up limitless funds.

The sequel to all these disturbing signals: Many third world countries have been abandoned to face collapsing economies. Hundreds and

Can We Not Place the Country Above Self, Above Party?

by Md Asadullah Khan

Notwithstanding everything that can be said in favour of the just concluded election, the hard fact is that many people did not turn up for casting votes as there was hardly any opportunity to choose between the right and the wrong.

WITH the stage-managed controversial parliamentary election over, the country's political fever has heated up again. Tensions have mounted in the whole of the country. The streets of Dhaka and other cities are again turning to be theatre of violent outbreaks. Apprehension, despondency and despair hang over the country as people ponder the difficulties and hardship in the days to come because of the crippling state of business, transportation and non-functioning industrial sector.

The parliamentary election just held has, in the words of the ruling party bosses, helped meet the constitutional obligations but it has hardly healed the festering malaise, the psychic wounds and resentment flowing over the country. Bangladeshis are once again braced for another bruising power struggle. It is now quite evident that the polls result has further widened confidence gap between the government and the opposition. Liberal minded people are wondering if the stalwarts that won the battle for democracy are going to give in to the battle for its survival. It is a harsh reality that the election of the '90 has already given way to sombre spirit. Without any shadow of doubt, if the conflicting issues are not resolved quickly, democracy may be at risk in a country where politics often appear to be too tempting for many. The British High Commissioner, a report goes, has called on the CEC and has sought to know how the vote-casting could be so high when all indications were available that the voter turnout would not be more than 10 per cent in such an uneasy situation. The country has burst into protest rallies demanding cancellation of the polls result and a fresh poll with all the political parties participating in it. Before the protest note degenerates into a vicious game of further damage of property and incidents of killing, good sense must prevail. There is no denying the fact that people's protest

against the vote-game has put a further dent on the already battered reputation of the administration.

With an attitude of ignoring people's feelings the administration stands as the country's most unyielding democratic regime. In a democratic atmosphere political leaders running the statecraft most often treated as repositories of trust and hope, as reformers in the society, must have the backbone to convey brutal facts like inflation, deficit, etc unflinchingly to the nation. They must not also refuse to inhale the unpleasant truth about so many ills like corruption creeping in the system.

During the last few years, people in the driving seat have squandered a unique opportunity of salvaging the politics and economy of the country. There were ample evidences that people were ready, even eager to hear some of the hard truths that intimate a yearning for change. But for such a change to take roots, the country needs leadership with bold and persistent experimentation. And the best way a populist government can do it is to treat people's mandate as a tool for governing rather than as an asset to be hoarded for all time.

But with the election just concluded and the type of government to be formed, will it be possible to regenerate the nation's confidence? The leadership must be able to produce the kind of jolt that will cause people in the country, even in the remote tea-shops, to talk once again about the future with hope, not fear.

Three major parties have been feuding for more than two years. How much they have won, people do not know. But people know it for certain that the country has lost a lot and will lose a lot more unless

there is any reconciliation. With all the hopes and trusts that the country has invested in the President and the Prime Minister, they can scarcely afford to prove unequal to the task. Those in the administration must be knowing it better that the country's economy may be heading towards an inexorable decline. It may deal a further blow to multiparty democracy extinguishing the halo and glimmer of hope.

With all that has happened in and the problems that have gripped the country, the ruling party should not consider it just an opportunity but an awesome obligation to make people believe that they are masters of their destiny and none has snatched their right to participate in the national reconstruction with zeal and fervour. The country now needs leaders armed with more will than anything else to stimulate the economy that is sinking, before delivering such heavy promises like poverty elimination, education for all and job creation.

Pragmatic leadership could possibly put the country on the right track and pave the way for political and economic stability that the country so direly needs at this critical juncture. It is worth recalling what Abraham Lincoln said about the leaders of the society. Interestingly, Abraham Lincoln relieved General John Fremont of his Missouri Command during the civil war. "His cardinal mistake is that he isolated himself and allows nobody to see him. The key to being an effective political leader is getting around". Lincoln was always out and about picking up information. He was not a prisoner in the White House, Lincoln said, "You have got to find the facts for yourself, and many of the good ones come from outside your inner circle."

There's too much you miss if you don't forage around yourself. Could there be anything more revealing that should be brought home to the leaders fighting and squabbling on contentious issues? Can't they place the country above self, above party?

With programme of non-cooperation by the opposition parties from 25th February, people were holding their breath and may have to brace the brunt again. So they are always pleading for a discussion to restart among the leaders to enable the country steer out of the crisis in the midst of an increasingly serious recession. Let not the innocent and vulnerable players become victims in a clash of the titans. True, there was hardly a determined effort from the stronger side to cool tempers. Obtuse as each side has been in the lingering dispute, both are aware that the continuance of the conflict would be tantamount to the total economic destruction. Unless people in the country live in peace with at least a square meal a day, whom the politicians will govern?

The stakes are too high to leave the contentious issues unresolved. None in the country would be immune to the pain in the event of an all out conflict. None holds sufficient cards to prevent any titanic clash. Worse, aggravated by self-appointment and party interest, and hardening extremist lines, party feuding could wreak havoc far beyond party interests. And with recession gripping the donor countries, generosity comes hard, especially when donors fear that this country's political and economic chaos would swallow up limitless funds.

The sequel to all these disturbing signals: Many third world countries have been abandoned to face collapsing economies. Hundreds and

thousands of our people migrate in search of work and food, aggravating fears at their destinations that cheap labour would take over scarce jobs. More ominous, frustrated developing countries in a democratic attire often tend to revert to authoritarianism — a sinister move most dreaded by all. Notwithstanding everything that can be said in favour of the just concluded election, the hard fact is that many people did not turn up for casting votes as there was hardly any opportunity to choose between the right and the wrong. And in such a frustrating situation when the polling booths were empty and party activists reportedly were stuffing the ballot boxes in absence of presiding officers and polling officers, the Election Commission vested with the onerous and sacred task of conducting the election played second fiddle. Nothing could be more ominous and unfortunate for a country making a steady march towards a viable democracy. With consequences so dire, the burden that the administration must carry is too heavy for them. If they should falter again, the consequences will only reverberate.

OPINION

Let Them See the Light...

Sinha M A Sayeed

Plato, widely known as the master of those who know, while talking about the very implementation of the theory of his 'Ideal State' conceived in his book Republic said that ideal was more real than real itself.

Aristotle in his Epoch-making book Politics — a basic document in politics and political science — held that the best practicable state should have its own model and means to survive. Machiavelli, the political thinker, whose thoughts on politics and statecraft was considered as one of the best weapons ever by the democrats, opined that people should always be taken into account while a leader/statestman feels inclination to embark upon any plan or decision.

Rousseau, the exponent of social contract theory as a source of the birth of state defined his well known 'General Will' in three different ways: a) General Will is the will of the majority aimed, of course, at the welfare of the people at large; b) General Will is the will of the minority aimed, of course, at the welfare of the people at large; c) General Will is the will of a few or even an individual aimed, of course, at the welfare of the people at large.

Miller, a political scientist of repute, pointed out: Politics means Disagreement; Disagreements leading to conflicts; Conflicts based on value-rooted ends of actions.

Yes, in all such cases and issues as well as instances the leading issue or focal point is — MAN AND HIS WELFARE. Family, society and state were born or rather were created for a better, wheel their development of an individual in the rapidly unfolding, swelling society with all the opportunities and amenities.

Survival and development of a political society like ours cannot be allowed to go on unattended any more. We must go beyond the limit of the age and hence, the 23-month standing impasse arising out of differences of stands, policies and formulas of BNP and AL backed by the opposition needs to be resolved without any further delay.

People have virtually lost confidence in both political and political parties in general and politicians in particular as they miserably failed to prove 'politics' as a set of values, goals and targets and political parties as a possible problem-solving agency. People are be-

ing haunted for people's interests but, in fact, they are not considered when they deserve it. What surprising irony!

We should at this very moment, not be swayed by a sweeping conclusion that there is no light to go ahead for. One has to agree with the proposition that Hasina's THREE THANKS TO KHALEDA were not a mere applause rather a victory for the two and for the nation as a whole. The thanks came: One immediately after the passing of the 12th amendment to the constitution that introduced the parliamentary system of government, secondly, after the dissolution of the 5th parliament and thirdly, after Khaleda's acceptance of the concept of a caretaker government to conduct elections to Sangsad.

Out of the basic stands of AL now, the most important two are: Cancellation of the elections of February 15 through which the 6th Sangsad has come out and resignation of BNP cabinet followed by dialogue to be initiated by the President of the Republic. In response to Khaleda Zia's written offer for dialogue Sheikh Hasina insisted that it should be initiated by the President with BNP joining as a political party.

We remember Sheikh Hasina's serious pre-condition or say, a specific sacred promise she made publicly before elections, that if Khaleda Zia resigned, she would be spared from 'Allegations of corruptions'. What a fantastic pre-condition or historic promise!

If Sheikh Hasina appears to be so friendly with and generous to Khaleda Zia, should not she again be more diplomatic or go to say, softer in her approach to the dialogue-war?

The Daily Star in its editorial on March 5 implied a hint of a possible dialogue initiated by the President either with reference from Supreme Court or at his own as the head of the state and the custodian of the constitution.

FBCCI president urged the President of the Republic to give thought to coming up with a selected group of citizens with integrity and maturity might be chosen to initiate the dialogue. In fact, if we want to get rid of the crisis, a compromise formula of course, very close to the stands, policies and formulas of BNP and AL backed

by the opposition, may be devised, provided no party concerned shall consider it an evasion from the basic stand. The possible compromise formula may be as follow:

a) Let the Prime Minister announce a specific date of election under the proposal non-party caretaker government.

b) Let Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina be flexible, magnanimous and beyond the time while dealing with the fate of the nation.

c) Let the Prime Minister herself take a historic step to put forward a request to the President of the Republic formally or informally to open dialogue or let the President of the Republic initiate a dialogue at his own or with a reference from Supreme Court.

d) Let all political parties attend the dialogue to find out ways and means of a possible structure of a caretaker government comprising personalities of such national stature as have enough integrity and maturity.

e) Let BNP join the dialogue as a political party only and even being in power not using flag-carrier car to go to and come from the venue of dialogue.

f) Let BNP resign from power immediately after the formation of caretaker governments followed by its announcement of the cabinet headed either by a chief adviser or prime minister.

g) Let the great debate of getting the consensus amendment bill passed by which Sangsad be settled through dialogue and if there is any difference on the question of its passing — by 6th or coming Sangsad — then that's the only problem remains to be handled and if the political parties can solve the problems phase wise, should we feel that this very issue shall be left undecided?

This very formula is also in consonance with the spirit of requests, initiatives, and formulas, national and international, taken over the last 23-month of the crisis. May Allah bless and help both Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina so that they can apply their good senses and thus ensure their due place in the political and constitutional history of Bangladesh. Let the people have a feeling that during the time of crisis their ancestors proved their excellence like anything being above time, space and dimension.

Lighting candles by day

Sir, This letter is about a great tragedy in the city of Dhaka. It is about our ridiculous indifference towards the shameful waste of water. Everyday, wherever I go, I often hear the apparently pleasant sound of water falling from a fountain — but alas, the sound doesn't come from a fountain! It's always the sound of water falling from water tanks at roof-tops of residential houses. As I'm writing this letter, I can hear the same sound of water being wasted from a nearby house, and I've been hearing this sound for the last twenty minutes!

Let us face the facts: Although the surface of the earth is mostly covered by water, almost all of it is saline and thus is not very useful in our daily life. The supply of fresh water in every country is at best limited, if not scarce. In case of Bangladesh, the latter fact is reality. It costs the people of Bangladesh crores of taka to ensure the supply of fresh water in the capital city. Even then, in every summer we experience an unbearable shortage of water. In this respect, throwing away water because of sheer negligence by our educated and cultured people in the city of Dhaka is not only painful and shameful, but also punishable. We should not be indifferent to this anymore, because if we do, we should remember what the poet said about "The ones who light candle by day in daylight..."

Enam Ahmed Chowdhury 6/F Central Road, Dhaka-1205

Of a road divider

Sir, Recently Dhaka City Corporation has built a new road divider from Jai Kali Mandir Road to old railway crossing at Nawabpur/BB Avenue junction. It is a part of Dhaka-Chittagang Highway, Dhaka-Narayanganj route, a very busy and crowded city road and also the entry point between the old and new Dhaka.

We fail to understand the necessity of the said road divider when innumerable motor workshops, whether Municipal licence holders or not, have sprang up on this important road, doing all sorts of repair works like voicing, welding, body manufacturing, body painting and overhauling of the engines of the buses blocking the road itself for hours, days and months together at a stretch at the cost of untold sufferings of the people. We are also surprised that not a single DMC official or road inspector or Dhaka Traffic Police sergeant is available there to look after the matter, or problems and sufferings of the people.

We would once again request the DMC and Dhaka Traffic Police to cleanse the road from Balda Garden, Folder Street, Wari point to old railway crossing at Nawabpur/BB Avenue point which will considerably cut down unauthorised parking of buses and traffic jam. Only then this may imply the economic civic and road traffic justification for the construction of the said road divider at the cost of huge amount of public money.

O H Kabir Dhaka

BAI staff quarters

Sir, One of the major problems of Bangladesh Agricultural Institute (BAI), Dhaka is the accommodation for teachers and staff. BAI is a cent per cent residential educational institution, still it has only a few teachers and staff quarters inside the campus. Quite a good number of teachers and staff members are residing in dilapidated godowns turned into dormitories.

It is of course a fact that the government cannot afford to sanction the required amount of money to construct teachers' and staff quarters, and to develop classroom, lab and library facilities. So it is strongly felt that the government may incorporate BAI in the development scheme financed by donor agencies like JICA, USAID, WB etc.

M Zahidul Haque General Secretary BAI Teachers' Association

Sheikh Hasina's call

Sir, Sheikh Hasina has recently called for making a strong move on the day when the first session of the new parliament sits in the House. She has asked — all to strongly protest and resist it, perhaps at the cost of blood. Now the question is: who are going to sacrifice blood? Are they our donors? Students? Or Takats? Why should we be so cry to be bloodshed?

Mottus Samad Chowdhury ABC House, Baranai, Dhaka