

A Solid Opportunity

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has made her request to the President, who has already sent out letters of invitation for a dialogue between the two sides as demanded by the opposition. This is definitely a step in the right direction.

Well, the opposition parties have welcomed the PM's move but so far appears to have stuck to their demands for her immediate resignation and scrapping the election to the sixth parliament before any negotiations can start. Here we suggest that the PM's resignation and cancellation of the already-held polls be made the first items of agenda for deliberation at the negotiating table itself. Nobody — not even the government — can claim any more that the sixth parliamentary elections be regarded as having been held in a manner which is acceptable. So an informed and participatory dialogue at the expert level on these two rather complex and legal issues will definitely show a way out, satisfying both the parties. The ruling party has come a long way from its original position. Now this has to be reciprocated by the opposition for a conclusive solution of the crisis.

The talks should start immediately so that new elections can be held under a neutral caretaker government in the shortest possible time. To find a legally sound, comprehensive and satisfying solution to the long-running crisis, the former chief justices, eminent jurists and veterans of leading political parties can also be invited to the talks. It is not that the parties alone will benefit from such an enlightened participation but the entire nation will emerge as a beneficiary.

Any other option than a dialogue will be fraught with more strife and incalculable losses. At this moment the feuding political parties appear to be the closest to one another to produce an agreement for the nation to celebrate.

Once the dialogue process gets going, we will urge the opposition parties to postpone its 'non-cooperation' programme which is hurting the country beyond description.

Draw the Line

With the opposition launching a 'non-cooperation movement' to bring about the fall of the government, the prospect that looms large, however, is of severe damage of an already battered national economy. Our own people and the development partners of Bangladesh are terribly confused by an indefinite shutdown getting underway at a time when the opposition and the ruling party seem within a striking range of at least holding a dialogue under an initiative of the president, if not an immediate political settlement. Why labour with a confrontationist flair, when the other side is prepared to go the extra-mile. The political atmosphere has the substance now to avert an economic ruin.

The donor community representatives in Dhaka have voiced their gravest concern over the downhill journey of the economy. The situation is threatening to rob our people of their chances for development and greater welfare. Their warnings are valued come as these do from a deep professional understanding of a national economy they have had a development stake in.

Already there have been output losses, lowering of export orders, switches of buyers and investors to other countries and high internal market prices. When the balance sheet is drawn at the year-end gaping wounds in terms of foreign exchange earnings and investments lost, industries closed down, number of jobs shrinking and inflation rate galloping would be staring us in the face.

The opposition's 'non-cooperation' is the other name for endless hartal. The list of exemptions declared impels us to draw the analogy. We urge the opposition to spare the private sector economy as a whole, or for that matter, allow the ports to function, the industries to operate and the infrastructure to work. If they persist in their protestations against the government so be it but in a limited and peaceful way without interfering with the working of the private sector economy. Let the line be drawn in the here and now.

Dangerous Test of Will

The China-Taiwan row has exacerbated with the former test-firing three guided missiles to splash near the shores of two principal Taiwanese ports. China is clearly 'intimidating' the 'renegade province' for what she perceives to be Taiwan's antipathy towards reunification with the mainland. The testing of missiles comes about in the run-up to the first-ever direct presidential election in Taiwan signalling the Chinese message of likes and dislikes to the electorate.

China has been palpably averse to Taiwan's moves to raise its international profile heralded last summer by its leader's visit to the USA which chagrined the Chinese establishment very much.

Taiwan's economic status and defense capabilities are so formidable that China has grown suspicious about the island's eventual merger with the mainland. But if she persists in trying to force Taiwan into submission, the very objective of a reunification which she so much prizes might well be defeated.

The loss in fish catches, change of routes for commercial flights, withdrawal of money from banks and rush in the foreign currency market are not likely to be popular with the people of Taiwan.

Human Rights in Bangladesh

"Police torture is increasing day by day. People are continually being battered by the police and law enforcing agents. The police's role in maintaining people's security is very disheartening. The people's saviours have become a reason for terror in the minds of the people."

THE State of Human Rights 1995 was published on March 4 with a brief ceremony at the National Press Club but regrettably it received little attention from the press. Perhaps the news media as well as the ordinary people of this country are far too concerned and preoccupied with the immediate problem of survival in a situation in which the political, economic and administrative wheels of the country are coming to a grinding halt. Yet the issue of human rights is not irrelevant to the current political crisis; in fact it is at the heart of it.

The people are locked in a grim fight to retain one of their fundamental rights — the right to vote freely and elect a government of their choice. These rights are the cornerstone of a democratic society. One simply cannot ignore this basic issue. It was seen on 15 February that the people will be robbed of this right unless they are alert and vigilant. The report on human rights in Bangladesh in 1995, published by the Coordinating Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh, is virtually a gold mine of reliable information on a number of critical areas of human rights.

I would like to stress the word 'reliable' because the information disseminated from official sources is often not reliable. The Council deserves to be complimented for a job done well. It is a pity that the press did not focus greater attention on this excellent report. To my mind, it has set an example in terms of both objectivity and dedication to the cause that it champions.

The limited space of this column does not permit me to comment on all the 18 chapters of the report. In this short article I can only highlight some of the more pressing issues which cry out for public attention. The first and certainly among the most impor-

tant issues is freedom of expression and speech. In succinct and bold terms, the report has explained how the government has consistently violated this fundamental right.

The BNP has often claimed that newspapers in Bangladesh have enjoyed great freedom during its rule. The report exposes this myth. It does not mince words when noting that "though no newspaper was banned during 1995, yet government continued to exercise control through distribution and sales quotas of newspaper and government advertisements to newspapers and periodicals. Journalists were provided doles or favours to keep them in good humour, or were intimidated, harassed and even arrested."

On the subject of book banning and censorship, the BNP government has acted no differently. For example, it banned a book entitled *Nari* by a popular and reputable author for reasons which have never been explained. The censorship of postal letters is a clear violation of a fundamental right. The refusal of the Film Censor Board to provide a certificate to a film entitled *Nadir Nam Madhumati* has a different dimension. The film is based on our Liberation War but apparently that, according to some of the members of the Board, is a disqualification. Obviously the Home Ministry has placed a sufficient number of people in the Film Censor Board to ensure that nothing that will glorify the Liberation War will be certified by it. The episode throws much light on the character of the Film Censor Board, and the BNP government that formed it.

The abuse of the TV and

radio by the BNP government has been commented on so often that it is hardly necessary to dwell on it. However the report contains interesting information. For instance, after the Bangabazar fire, it was reported by the BTV that the Dhaka City Corporation had a fund of Taka 30 crore to build markets for garment traders. Promptly, the DCC refuted this and said that the total budget for markets was Taka 12.14 lakh. It is a shame that a government media can resort to such outright lies. According to the report, "BTV's independence on coverage of political

events was questioned by the Japanese government." In fact it turned down a Bangladesh government proposal to fund different BTV projects. The report provides a very useful and interesting chronological review of the violation of the freedom of the press in 1995.

The report highlighted, and I believe justly, the two black laws which should have been taken off the statute books long ago. Public opinion is already mobilized for the repeal of the Special Powers Act but the same awareness does not seem to exist about the Enemy (vested) Property Act. It has been characterised as a discriminatory black law against the religious minorities by

politicians, intellectuals and human rights activists. Yet when an Awami League member of the 5th parliament moved a bill for its repeal, the BNP refused to place it before the House for its consideration. In fact, the bill never saw the light of day despite the assurances given by the government. As a result, hundreds of people are still being evicted from their hearth and home, even as new names were being added to the list after 1974. It is still going on through corrupt officials or staff who involve themselves in various malicious and motivated litigations, both civil and criminal, with a view to disrupt the economic backbone of the country.

The ruling BNP party, during the course of the movement against the autocratic regime of Ershad, repeatedly de-

manded repeal of the Act, but after assuming power the party secretary-general and LGRD Minister Barrister Abdus Salam Malukdar asserted that it is a necessary law for the country. This act is constantly misapplied against political rivals of the ruling party.

The report rendered a timely service to the nation by drawing attention to the menace of Fatwa-based repression of women. Though it is a phenomenon of recent origin, its tentacles seem to have spread rapidly. The report correctly noted that 'fatwa is the symbol for a rear-guard action by these [obscurantist] elements to stem the tide of inevitable change. The case studies on fatwa throw much light on different aspects of the problem. Public opinion, fortunately, is becoming sensitised about this evil. The liberal and progressive elements of the society, even in rural areas, have started to resist these assaults on the women.'

However, there is less public awareness about the rising menace of trafficking in women and children. In 1995, the report says, 135 children and 93 women were rescued while they were being smuggled out of the country, while 75 traffickers were caught. However, the report candidly admitted that "These figures are just a fraction of the actual scenario. In reality, the numbers are much greater due to the many incidents that are not published in the newspapers." Information and data provided in the report on the problem including the method followed and the destination of trafficking should assist the authorities in putting an end to this vicious practice.

I will conclude this article by commenting on the chapter on torture and death under police and jail custody. While introducing the subject the report noted that, "Police torture is increasing day by day. People are continually being battered by the police and law enforcing agents. The police's role in maintaining people's security is very disheartening. The people's saviours have become a reason for terror in the minds of the people." This is a harsh indictment but every bit of it is fully justified.

The Dinajpur incident following the rape and murder of Yasmin was a vivid demonstration of the depth to which this agency of the government has descended. In a ten-month period in 1995 "a total of 22 persons have died in either police custody or in jail." According to the report during the period more than 40 women were raped by law enforcing agents. One could go on quoting from the report to depict a picture which can only increase frustration and despair. The photograph of Begum Motia Chowdhury, a former MP and a highly respected political leader, being manhandled and then being carried like a sack is the most disgraceful sight that viewers in Bangladesh and abroad have seen of police brutality and insensitivity. Indeed this incident has left an indelible imprint on public memory.

The transformation of the police under BNP from a national force into an armed wing of the BNP will perhaps be the greatest damage that this party has done to the nation and its institutions.

The report on human rights in Bangladesh in 1995 should stimulate thinking among the conscientious citizens of the country on this subject. Unless the national police is freed from the grip of the party in power, our human rights will not be safe.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah A M S Kibria



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The Speech, the Reality and the Destiny

by Hybat J Chowdhury

THE Prime Minister delivered her address to the nation on TV and Radio amidst some truly desperate expectations and speculations of the people in general while keeping them really tense under suspense from the moment it was announced. With the all-out programme of the opposition parties already on the heels the PM has seemingly succeeded in her bid to take one step ahead of those she considers as her adversaries. After passing through so much setbacks on their livelihood people obviously looked forward that their fate would at last change for better by this one single magnanimous act of the PM, one right speech, direct, bold and to the point that can change everything as was commented upon just prior to her speech.

They wanted to hear something new and definitive, something very positive that could throw some moral and fair challenge to the opposition. But they seemed to have been just prepared to hear what they have heard. The rhetoric that covered the major part of the speech dwelt on how all her earlier initiatives and efforts, bold and imaginative, as she thought they were, fell through and who were responsible for such failures. The speech was of course enriched by some sprinklings such as felicitation on the 25th anniversary of our independence; respect to the contributions of our late national leaders and martyrs of liberation war; Biswa Jtama and the welfare of the entire Muslim Ummah; the move to get rid of the autocratic rule; the achievement of over all economic development, the remarkable success in people-oriented development programmes and how those were hindered by the activities of the opposition parties; the compulsion of holding the 15 February election with gratitude to Almighty Allah, thanks to the voters for their participation! Be that as it may, the people have already heard such rhetoric many times over. Could they be expected to be keen and attentive to listen to what was apparently least attractive to them? They all are concerned of the crux of the

issue which calls for some tangible solution. However, the notable exception in the speech seem to be that neither the Chief Election Commissioner nor the Election Commission was singled out to have the pleasure of receiving some special thanks despite their visible hard work in conducting the election process.

It could be presumed they were included within the purview of the very mention of officials involved in the election process.

Upon listening to the speech people's hopes seem to have shattered and they appear to be wondering as to what is left for them to look forward to, especially when her offer for dialogue under present condition was immediately rejected by the opposition parties.

The 15 February election

was held as a necessity to uphold the constitutional obligation and maintain continuity. One might as well say "Thanks to Almighty Allah the constitution is saved" drawing some analogy to what had been said by Mr. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto upon arrival in Karachi after 25 March 1971.

Bhutto had been quoted making such utterance as "Thank God Pakistan is saved." Could any one needs to be told how Pakistan was saved? In the PM's speech there was a mention for the first time of a national referendum to get the views of the population on the question of a non-party caretaker government for conducting the future national elections. The question remains under whom such a referendum should be conducted. The demand was for a neutral non-party caretaker government which is now accepted in principle by the ruling party through the PM's announcement but such a thing has to get through a referendum after obtaining the needed legislative approval at the National Parliament. To a layman on this subject like myself this appears to be quite

puzzling. Something that is needed to conduct a free and fair election should be approved by the people through a referendum which itself needs some kind of wide-scale poll that is once again to be ensured as free and fair under a neutral caretaker government. But how? It is like the some old and funny puzzle of chicken before the egg or egg before the chicken. Would someone enlighten us how the whole process should be accomplished? I of course had the opportunity to witness a great many national referendums that the government of Switzerland conducted very smoothly on many vital national issues, but obviously none had any problem on the poll not being free and fair. The need did never arise to form any neutral caretaker ar-

hood and well-being and how these could be ensured and improved. The people have been subjected to digest all these off-repeated terms, as if those are forced down their throats. The never ending question as asked by many, remains whether the constitution is for the people or the people for the constitution. Both the government and opposition parties have placed the people as supreme and they claim to abide by the wish and expectation of the people. Why then punish the same very people whom they have placed on so high pedestal? What crime the people have committed to deserve such a battering? And all these apparently for the sake of establishing the democratic process and to save that document called constitution, however,

were arch enemies in political field, the former fighting for his people and suffered for long 27 years in prison, and the latter held the supreme power and led the other to suffer in jail. But now they have shown to the world how deeply they care for their people and the country and how much compatible they could make of themselves for the sake of their people.

It will surely go down in history and will remain so far many years to come as the most glorious chapter of their country and of themselves. Magnanimity is something very hard to come by but always proves as the most rewarding.

Finally, nothing is impossible to attain however much difficult it may look. For example, a free and fair election could be possible at the earliest opportunity under a neutral caretaker government as is

welcome such a thing to happen again? A coalition between two major parties is possible and has already been proved a success in the state of Israel with the post of Prime Minister taken by each party in turn for half the term. Similar arrangement is now being tried in Turkey. Why not try something like that in our country should the circumstances so demand?

Can we fairly and justly expect from our leaders on both sides to come out and show the way that they also can rise to the occasion if the situation demands? Is it too much to hope for such a thing from them? No one should have any doubt that the nation is presently caught in a state of severe convulsion where every day, every hour, every minute counts for its survival. Could such a stark reality be kept

for any longer? Don't we feel that the stake is much too high. Let the leaders judge for themselves now and at this moment and take stock of the situation, especially those who are presently in charge of running the country and are responsible in shaping its future. Because only the management is questioned first. If something goes wrong within the organization.

Let us join hands, all those who matter, to work for a better future. Let us leave behind our bitter past if we really care for the well-being of the coming generations and the country itself where each one of us is a part, however, much insignificant that might be. Let it not be said that our generation failed to rise up to the challenge and above petty interests and left the only country that we claim as ours in a disgraceful state where our future generations would be searching for their roots. Much as we would like to see a quick end of the present crisis we are bound by many constraints and impediments, mainly emerging from human factors that appear to have restrained all the efforts made so far, but we must overcome those constraints. It is now or never. Given the will and determination no task is unsurmountable.

The author is a former Senior UN Official on Humanitarian Affairs.

A free and fair election could be possible at the earliest opportunity under a neutral caretaker government as is now agreed upon by all, even by the party which has so far opposed it. Given the will, sincerity and commitment from all quarters the modalities in forming such a body to conduct the election is not altogether unattainable.

To the Editor

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Bangladesh needs leadership

Sir, Mr Mahfuz Anam, editor of The Daily Star was candid enough to tell the BBC-TV about the weak leadership of the BNP government.

After the 9-year autocratic regime and several political gaps since 1971, the political leaders did not have a playing field for enough practice of democratic governance.

Thus some allowance has to be made to the elected regime which took over in 1991, facing a very strong opposition. In fact, an Awami League victory was predicted by many. How and why AL lost has not been deeply probed by the local ex-

ponents. This exercise will be good for the nation.

BNP had to run the show without opposition consensus on common national issues. Secondly, the opposition MPs walked out after three years. Under the circumstances, BNP's lacklustre performance has to be assessed accordingly.

Khaleda Zia has learnt many harsh lessons, and should perform much better if she gets another chance.

The problem is that we are short of statesmen and above-the-average leadership. Where is the substitute? The substitute party is Awami League, fossilized for 20 years. Start from zero once again? What other options do we have?

Bangladesh is wallowing in the mud! We have had enough of mud-baths, but we do not look more attractive. Resign to fate or leadership tussle? Why fate? Where is our backbone? A Hussain Dhaka

Holidays in newspapers

Sir, In Bangladesh the people who work in the print media can enjoy holidays during various festivals. But the electronic media like BTV and Radio remain open during the same period! But electronic media fail to satisfy people with adequate information.

Naturally people prefer to read newspapers regularly. Recently long vacation newspapers kept the readers in dark about the country for consecutive three days. The rural people who could not watch television or listen to Radio could not get updated news of World Cup Cricket. I think it is possible to publish short editions of newspapers

the during holidays to keep the readers updated. Mahbubul Haque 153, Lakevicircus, Kalabagan, Dhaka

The joy of writing letters and BAI

Sir, Often I receive personal letters from esteemed readers appreciating/criticising the contents of my published letters. It always gives me a great pleasure to reply to all those letters personally. But I would like to request the readers not to forget writing their full addresses. Recently, a medical student sent me an interesting letter with a request to throw some light on a very important issue, but he, I am sorry, forgot to write his address.

Meanwhile, many readers have asked me what achievement I have so far made after writing volumes of letters on variety of issues in the newspapers? Well, the time has not yet come to evaluate the achievements. To me, however, the greatest achievement

is that, I have gained quite a good number of friends and well-wishers by writing these letters. How great I feel when I come across words of appreciation from someone not known!

A good number of readers have asked me why I write so much on the problems of my college. Well, the crude fact is, although everyone, including the esteemed politicians of this country, frequently speak about the importance of agriculture in the Bangladesh's economy, still the total agriculture sector has yet to receive the State's adequate attention. The Bangladesh Agricultural Institute (BAI), Dhaka wherefrom I had been graduated is besieged with a volume of academic and administrative problems.

Though BAI is the country's oldest higher agri educational institution, the pace of its development is too slow. It is true that the present government has taken some steps to solve some of the problems, still a lot has to be done. What we expect is that the govern-

ment appreciate our problems and share our suggestions in resolving those problems through adopting and implementing appropriate resolutions.

Here I, as the General Secretary of BAI Teachers' Association, would like to request the Planning Minister to kindly look into the matter of sanctioning some academic and administrative posts proposed in the PCP of BAI. It may be mentioned here that a month or two ago when we (from BAI) met the Planning Minister, he was very pleased to assure us that he would do the needful in the matter. Recently the Secretary of Agriculture also has sent another letter to the Planning Secretary requesting him to reconsider the matter of BAI. I sincerely hope that things will be materialised without any further delay.

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