The Baily Star Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

CEC and EC's Credibility

Justice Sadeq assumed his office as the Chief Election Commissioner(CEC) amidst a storm of controversy. First sign of his political naiveté became apparent when he decided to accept the offer to become CEC without proper consultation with the opposition. There was no legal or official requirement to do so. But given the tense atmosphere, especially after the Magura by-election Justice Sadeq should have known better than to take upon himself the most delicate and suspicion-prone task in the country without at least talking with the opposition.

His next controversial move was the Act of God postponement of the by-elections to the seats falling vacant after the en masse resignation by the opposition. If his decision was questionable, his handling of it was disastrous, making him look, however unjustifiably, like a pawn in the hands of the government. His on-again and off-again ID card project did not do much to boost his image. Till the very end we did not get a clear picture whether it was a viable project or

To his credit, we think the voters' registration went smoothly. Here again the claims of inaccuracy and false registration were not forcefully rebutted by the EC as it should have been.

Totally overshadowing his all other mistakes was his decision to go ahead with the one-party election. Once he saw that all negotiations had failed and that there was no option but to hold, at best, a highly questionable election or at worst, one that would lead to violence and possible killing, he should have either stopped holding it, or resigned, saying that he could not knowingly lead the country to civil unrest in the name of election. Here again his political naiveté got the better of him.

The election that he has held is universally believed to have been rigged, and as such does not command any respectability, either at home or abroad. What Justice Sadeq can do now is to make a clean breast of everything and tell the people exactly what has happened in the elections. Questions have been raised about the validity of the whole process because elections to all 300 seats could not be held within the 90 days' mandatory period. We want a sort of white paper on the elections from no less a person than the CEC himself. Remembering his own prestige and that of the institution he now represents and also that of the fraternity to which he formerly belonged, let him speak out.

This Must Stop

This must stop. This shooting down people as if they were game birds or clay pigeons at the shooting range. Whatever the provocation — police or other law-enforcing elements shall not shoot people engaged in any form of political demonstration, that is the instruction we, and believably the whole of this nation, seek of the BNP government. They haven't proved over the five years of their tenure particularly given to heeding counsel. But this present one is not so much a counsel. It is a demand. And they can ignore it only at their own peril.

About 70 persons have been shot dead by police or BDR personnel since the election-day eruption. The nation doesn't want anymore of it.

Ice has at last been broken and the national dialogue, the absence of which had pushed the nation to virtual ruination - materially and more importantly, in its society-sustaining socio-cultural sinews - is now on. Should the dialogue continue while the nation burns? Or could not the dialogue be made more meaningful and positively advancing towards a grand national reconciliation with the appropriate setting of a softened and helpful climate - with the cessation of a recourse to shooting and mass lathi-charge and teargassing?

But for this to have any significantly beneficent effect will necessarily take two sides - just as it takes two hands to clap. The opposition must call a respite to their continued asahajog. It is their men who are being killed and it is state property - the people's very own property that their activists are destroying. They must contribute to the expectations from this dialogue by calling a halt to violent demonstrations.

The opposition has come to the ultimate in its arsenal — and which is also its last shot indeed. Why spend it foolishly? Keep it for the time when you may need it more - and we all join you in praying that such a time never comes.

Ludicrous Business

There was a strange piece of news in yesterday's press. More strange than incredible. All buses venturing to ply during the asahajog will be given 20 litres of fuel a day — free that is from government coffers. Under what account the government will place the hefty bills and who among the auditors and comptrollers will accept these spendings? Who is going to monitor what the buses are going to do with the free fuel? If one bus tries to be honest to its less than 300 taka worth dole by way of fuel and is broken by agitators, no doubt that damage would also be made good by the government. So who is there to stop a regular business of ramshackle buses reporting as being broken by agitation and getting fat compensation? The idea is to break the continued spell of a metropolis without a single motorised vehicle plying its streets - for days on end. The one crore taka in compensation and the 20 litres in advance everyday will all fail to do the trick. But we assure the government that both the compensation fund and the tonnes of fuel would be evaporating without leaving a trace of effect.

Politics and National Interest

by Professor M Maniruzzaman Miah

E. the Bengalees, are a very proud people. We take pride in our thousand-year old language, our cultural heritage, our refined taste and above all our intellect. Gokhale, the venerable Indian leader of the time of rise of Indian nationalism eulogised the Bengalees. saying "What Bengal thinks today, India thinks to-morrow." That was a feather in the cap of the Bengalee intelligentsia.

To-day, many people are wondering whether we really deserve the epithet which the Indian leader ascribed to us. No doubt, we, in this part of Bengal, were able to attain nationhood, after centuries of colonial domination following a sanguinary war of liberation so valiantly fought by our people in 1971. This, perhaps, is a unique case in the history of this sub-continent. Things haven't shown up brightly, however, since independence much to the chagrin of the general mass of the population. Our hopes for a better and a fuller life have been belied. While this is so, to-day the society itself rests divided into two opposite camps. It is not our intention to enter into a debate as to why such a painful state of affairs plaguing our national life has arisen but the fact remains that this poor nation of ours does not seem to be agreeing on anything. This is not only sapping the energy of the people but is striking also at the very root of our existence. Politics is there, and will continue to be there. It is there elsewhere too. But ours seem to be a unique kind of situation, in that it has hardly any parallel in other countries. From the scores and scores of examples of political bickerings, we may take the case of Nepal, one of our neighbours, to understand the qualitative difference in political be-

Nepal, like us, took to a democratic polity, in 1990, Since then the political parties there have also been at loggerheads, for most of the time. Pulling down a government by a vote of no-confidence, disso-

lution of the parliament by a royal decree on the advice of the defeated prime minister. restoration of the dissolved parliament by a verdict of the supreme court, formation of a new government and the like have kept the politicians of the Himalayan Kingdom, equally a poverty-stricken country, like Bangladesh, busy all the time. They have been at daggers drawn, as it were, one with the other. But when the need arose to arrive at a consensus on a vital national issue they sank all their petty differences and rose like one man. Let us elaborate.

For a long time, Nepal had differences with India on a number of bi-lateral issues, one of which was water-sharing. According to the Nepalese constitution a treaty signed with another country irrespective of its nature is to be ratified by the parliament. After a long and tortuous course of discussion the Nepalese and the Indians agreed to come to terms in regard to the integrated development of the Mahakhali River-Basin, The Nepalese government however were not sure whether they would be able to get the proposed water sharing treaty with India ratified by the parliament riddled as it was with political factionalism of the extreme kind. The government therefore held out an olive branch to the opposition. which in its turn showed laudably responsible behaviour. The parties represented in the parliament in fact, agreed to give a 'go-ahead' to the government on the water issue. And the Indo-Nepalese treaty on the integrated development of the Mahakhali River, in respect of water, power, and irrigation, among others was signed in January last. The Nepalese have thus shown where politics and narrowpoliticking should stop and national interest should take precedence over everything

True, the situation here is not identical with that of Nepal. But at the same time is it not true that the uncertainty

which has enveloped the entire political environment for more than two years now has been causing irreparable damage to the country's interest? For one thing, how many deaths have occurred due to violence in recent months? In a civilized society even one death of an innocent citizen is regarded as one too many. Can we, at the tragic end of scores of lives, call ourselves civilized? How many thousands of people have been maimed and incapacitated for life? Who will look after their families? How much national property has been damaged or destroyed? How many industrial units have been closed down and how many working-hands have been thrown out of employment? Finally how to retrieve the economy from ruination and put it on the wheel again? And if one would like to know the situation on the waterfront, may we say that the present state is many times more dangerous than in Nepal. In the absence of an agreement with our neighbour since 1988, the amount of water released down the Ganges at Farakka is unimaginably low during the dry season. On the otherhand, it appears from various sources that now there is a better understanding of our just cause in at least Indian unofficial circles. But how could we go for serious negotiations with another country

own house is not in order? What we are trying to say is simply this. That there will be differences of opinion is accepted. Honest differences of opinion can actually act as lubricant to the wheel of social progress. But always acting at cross-purposes may harm the country's interests. We should therefore agree on some fundamentals so that the whole nation can work unitedly? Perhaps time has come where one may think of that rather than contributing to further chaos and confusion. Unless we can do so, all our priggish: ness of being a great nation will only amount to self-deception and nothing more.

and get a fair deal when our

The regular column ENCHIRIDION will be published tomorrow

What is the future of Bangladesh?

Sir, Sixth parliamentary election was held on 15th February, 1996. The headlines in newspapers were: "Voters' turnout extremely low", and the like. But what can one expect with life-threat hanging. bombs exploding, bullets flying and people subjected to all sorts of harassment. I am surprised that even a few dared to go to the polling centres to cast their votes! They must be

uncommonly courageous. What a mess our politicians have made! We, the common people, are the most affected by it. People are blaming both the parties. They think Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia should have agreed to hold the election under a neutral caretaker government and it must have been possible if she really wanted to.

But if one thinks deeply it would seem futile. The present government came into power under such arrangements yet the opposition political parties are agitating for the last two

If this election had been held under a caretaker government and the ruling party won it, would not the same thing happen again? The op-. position blaming it has been rigged the vicious cycle will start to operate again.

I hope our politicians will regain their senses in time and thus avoid falling in to abysmal Nur Jahan

East Nisrabad, Chittagong

Cuba's crime

Sir, the downing of two civilian planes is a crime committed by Cuba, which can hardly be condoned. However, Cuba is not the first country to have introduced this barbarous and macabre act against humanity. Two similar dastardly acts of enormous violence have previously been committed by both the USA and the now-defunct USSR. Many lives have gone down deep into the abyssal bottom of the sea as being a prey to their misanthropic missions. The West have shown us the way not only to democracy, but also to destruction, and innovations of double-standard morality.

Of course, a crime committed in the past by one cannot be used as a licence for a new crime of the same nature. But unfortunately, as the statepower is more or less controlled by lesser human beings. looking for a precedence to justify a crime becomes a ready-made bulwark against any moral onslaught triggered by our conscience.

We may not be good friends of Fidel Castro, but we can't help acknowledging Cuba's unique spirit that keeps its head erect amidst so many odds, and buoyant for so many years. It has become a symbol of 'survival'. All kinds of embargo and enmity have failed to drown the country in the Atlantic.

Due to foreign exchange constraints Cuba has brought in changes in its mode of living, production and transportation, and thus has beome a global model of how

life can be lived better in an environment-friendly way. Environmentalists have already shown a great interest in the air of Cuba. Whatever world's impression about Cuba is, one can breathe in the most wholesome air only in Cuba.

Mohamed Abdul Mutalib Onnesha College, Dhanmondi

An appeal to the opposition leaders

Sir, As a conscious citizen of this country. I have been keeping a close eye on the political situation here. It is disputable whether the demand for a neutral caretaker government to conduct the next general election is justifiable or not. Every citizen of this country has the right to support or oppose this issue. But we should bear in mind that none has the right to infringe upon others right.

To institutionalise democracy, democratic mentality is the first thing to achieve. But, nowadays the people who are demanding a neutral caretaker government are becoming more violent day-by-day. Few days back they even torched many banks and financial institutions, let alone damaging cars and other private proper-

Moreover, the most shameful and disgraceful act they are doing these days is stripping innocent people. This kind of act is degrading for the whole nation. This shameful act has not been confined in the political arena only. Few days back ! saw some teenage boys, trying to strip another teenager for trifling matter. It seems that stripping somebody in public for pretty reasons is becoming quite a phenomenon.

So, I earnestly request the opposition leaders especially the leader of the opposition, to condemn this kind of barbaric act and ask their partymen to refrain from doing it. If they fail to do so immediately, this trend will continue to grow and undermine our nation before the international community.

Mohammad Zia Chishty 74, East Rayabazar Dhaka

Saidpur bypass road

Sir, For solving the heavy traffic jam at Saidpur town as soon as possible, we are proposing to construct the "Saidpur bypass road" through Dhelapeer alignment. This alignment is suggested to be as follows: a) From Saidpur terminal, it will go through Sutkamor, "C-and-B" road, the bridge beside Abbas Ali House, b) After this, going through the existing road beside the canal behind WAPDA, join with the vast open government acquired fields at Dhelapeer which is the abandoned housing project lands. c) Going through this vast lands, the bypass will cross the railway

There shall be following advantages if the bypass is made through Dhelapeer alignment: (1) No residential areas, religious places, praying fields, graveyards, etc, will be affected, (2) There will be no need to acquire new lands, (3)

Saidpur town area will be broadened. (4) There shall be availability of lots of lands for new residential areas in the future. (5) By this, there shall be very easy traffic communications with Chilahatt Domar. Dimla, Debiganj, Nilphamari, Panchagarh, Jaldhaka etc. And the heavy traffic jam problems will be solved once and for all in this area, (6) By this human rights, of any person will not be violated. (7) There shall be no deterioration of environ-

Dr Abul Hasan (Bulu) Post Box : 0430 Singapore 9008

Politics and session jam

Sir, The present political impasse is terribly deteriorating the country's educational system. Already there are prevailing session jams in almost all the universities and educational institutions of the country. Now it takes more than one year, in some cases two to three years, to complete one academic year by a student.

Would our esteemed politicians please take a note of the above and do the needful for reducing session jam and removing campus violence?

M Zahidul Haque Asstt Prof. BAI, Dhaka

Cadet Colleges

Sir, In the article published under the above heading in the Focus page of your esteemed daily dated 28th February 1996, it has been mentioned that the cadet colleges are kept operating under defence

But actually these institutions run only with financial provisions from the Ministry of Education, while the management is under the Defence Ministry

Readers should be served

with correct information. Ataur Rahman Malibag, Dhaka

Silver Lining Around Dark Clouds!

by M M Rezaul Karim

HE violent storm that raged during the election, bringing in its trail death, destruction and loss, has since lessened to some extent. This, however, has not averted the danger of further distress of the people and damage to the national economy, specially in the wake of the call for continuous hartal and non-cooperation by the

The significant developments that ensued were the statements of the leaders of the ruling party and the opposition declaring their latest policy and plans of action. The Prime Minister urged the opposition leader, formally through a letter, to enter into a dialogue for the specific purpose of agreeing to the nature and framework of an interim (caretaker) non-partisan government to conduct parliamentary election and also to decide upon the timing to hold the next election. She also went a step further by suggesting to conduct all future elections under such governments in contrast to the opposition demand for doing so only for the next three. The erstwhile leader of the

opposition parties.

the letter formally. But she made clear the opposition stand that the February 15 election is illegal, formation of the resultant parliament and the government is, therefore, invalid and the Prime Minister must quit office immediately. She demanded cancellation of the 15 February election and agreed to the President to form a neutral, non-partisan caretaker government to hold the next general election. She. incorporated these and other demands, such as resignation of the Prime Minister, release of political detenus, establishment of law and order and compensation for death and loss during the election, into a five-point charter of demands. for the government to agree.

opposition is yet to reply to

An objective analysis of the propositions and demands of the two sides suggests existence of a number of common elements as well as wide differences on certain other issues. The principal point of agreement was on the issue of an interim,-neutral, non-partisan caretaker government under the President to supervise holding of the next and at least some subsequent elections. The difference, however, lies in the matter of implementa-

tion of this agreement. The BNP has all along held that the manner to go about this issue is to pass an enabling legislation to appropriately amend the constitution in the 6th parliament. It has agreed to hold another election as soon as possible, stipulating that the advancement of the date of election will depend upon the force of opposition's arguments during negotiations. In other words, the BNP has conceded that the purpose of the 6th parliament is limited and its existence short-lived.

The opposition has now claimed that the President, as Head of State, has the power and prerogative to form an interim caretaker government to conduct elections which he should do promptly after securing resignation of the Prime Minister and cancellation of the 15th February election. In support, they, however, did not or could not quote any relevant provision of the constitution or legislation. but based their claim primarily on political grounds of low turnout of voters, theseby claiming negation of a popular mandate for the ruling party to rule fufther.

This is the principal bone of contention. The BNP asserts that the government has no lawful authority to caricel the election and also the institutions that are to be set up subsequently under its umbrella. The Election Commission is the appropriate authority empowered to do so, but it has not found any legally justifiable grounds to declare the election null and void. President is clearly devoid of any explicit authority in this respect under the constitution. The only other body which enjoys relevance to this issue is the Supreme Court acting in its capacity as the guardian, protector and interpreter of the basic laws, the constitution. But no political party, private the country in this regard. The BNP's proposal of hold-

institution nor even an individual has so far approached this highest judicial body of

two sides has since met with the opposition counter proposal to hold consultations among principal political parties under the aegis of the President as 'Head of State. The reluctance of the opposition leaders to negotiate directly with the Prime Minister or her colleagues appears incomprehensible, as the latter has not yet been elected as Prime Minister by the new parliament, which the opposition does not wish to recognise as such. On the contrary, the Prime Minister has been functioning as an interim or caretaker Prime Minister as per specific provisions of the constitution since the dissolution of the last parliament and with whom or whose representatives the opposition has been directly negotiating

since. Anyway, irrespective of the motivation, the very fact of the willingness of the opposition to negotiate in order to reach an amicable settlement testifies to the political sagacity of their leader and the impact of profuse friendly advice from nome and abroad. The positive response of the ruling party to the suggestion of conducting negotiations under the auspices of the President also indicates political acumen and sincere desire of the government leader to reach a pacific and honourable settlement.

The general mass of people, whose distress is accelerating at a fast pace and almost reaching unbearable limit. meanwhile, is gasping alternatively with hopes and apprehensions at the sight of a flickering light at the end of the tunnel. Let the Hon'ble President of the Republic as well as our respected political leaders rise to the occasion and devise ways and means to rescue the nation from the quagmire of despair and misery. A suspension of the current non-cooperation movement would no doubt be welcome by all, establish a congenial atmosphere and facilitate the process immensely. Let the dark clouds hovering overhead threatening devastating storms turn into blissful rain and shower those underneath to establish peace. restore stability and promote common good of the people.

Who is Digging Whose Grave?

ing direct talks between the

by A M M Shahabuddin ISH always stinks from head downwards, so goes the saying. But what about the big "political fishes" of our country? They seem to stink from head to foot at a time when they are out to grab or retain power at any cost. This reckless "greed" for power is, unfortunately, the bottomline of our national politics. H G Wells once said "Private greed is not and never can be a sound basis for economic policy, but some of the dangers of the twenties were due to purely political follies." With a little variation, does it not apply perfectly to the present political turmoil in Bangladesh because of the

"purely political follies" on the part of our learned politicians? The intransigence on the part of our leaders, belonging to both the 'camps' has not only shaken the economic foundation of our country but also threatened the foundation of democracy here. When the champions of our democracy, are guided (or misguided?) by sheer "hatred" of each other. then love for democracy and fight for democracy become a

painful joke, and a hollow slo-

gan to befool the people.

When the people were anxiously waiting to see light at the end of the tunnel as the Prime Minister Khaleda Zia addressing the nation on 3rd March evening, was there a silver lining in her speech? She made several proposals to defuse the current political crisis. She announced that "non-party government" would be formed to conduct all future general elections and for this an Amendment Bill would be moved in the first session of the sixth parliament. But the "olive branch" offered by the PM has already been "munched" by those for whom it was meant for. The three 'major' political parties (Awami League and its two associates strange bed-fellows, indeed!); have "exploded" the offer by expressing "deep disappoint-

ment" at the speech and as a "befitting" reply to the offer, they called a dawn-to-dusk hartal on 6 March. Basically. they have challenged the "legitimacy" of the sixth parliament and the government itself. Besides the 6th March hartal, there is a renewed and vigorous non-cooperation movement, beginning 9 March, to be continued, perhaps ad infinitum, till the ouster of Khaleda Zia as Prime Minister. Perhaps the leaders of the two warring camps would be busy in counting the "dead bodies" of their activists to settle their scores! (It may be mentioned here that the father of Non-Cooperation Movement against the British that architect of Indian independence struggle, Mr. M K Gandhi once called off his movement when the movement took a violent shape, and Gandhi's movement was against a colonial power — Great Britain, not a national government.)

What Mr Mahfuz Anam said in his commentary on the political situation (DS 27 Feb. 96), can be recalled here. "Does anybody care about public opinion". was the heart-felt cry, echoed through the headline, the feelings of the bewildered people of this country. He boldly said: "In their attempt to hurt the government, the opposition parties seem to have embarked on a reckless and self-destructive policy of hurting the very people and the country whose welfare they profess to represent..... opposition must come to its senses and realise in its total, uncontrolled and unthinking hatred of the government, it is taking actions and adopting policies that are destroying the very foundation of our country. This is undoubtedly a par excellence statement of an outspoken Editor.

In Bangla there is a proverb which says: Nijer Nak Kete Aporer Jatra Bhanga, a literal English translation may be

something like this: "To cut one's nose to stop somebody else's journey". Is there any equivalent English proverb like this? I don't think so. The English are perhaps not so mean as to stoop so low to take resort to such a foolish action. But we can do that very boldly Whom do we want to harm by cutting our nose? We are really self-deluded fools. This wretched country achieved independence some 25 years ago literally through blood, sweat and tears and now after a quarter century our 'leaders' have no capacity to come to an understanding to find a solution to solve the political crisis created by their follies. And are not ashamed to exhibit our incompetence to the outside world. We don't even hesitate to seek "foreign aid" to solve our internal political affairs. What a political bankruptcy!

During the last several weeks we have witnessed enough of horrible scenes of destruction, anarchy, vandalism, looting, killing, and arson. Are these all scenes of a neodemocracy in action? Let us stop this nuisance.

The fate of the nation seems to be hanging in suspense in the hands of the "two ladies" who can make it or mar it. Certainly, they won't like to go down in history as "forces" that brought nothing but misfortune and calamities to the nation. So they have two alternatives before them. Either they should take a bold initiative to balance their conflicting views to came to an honorable agreement to run the country. For that they should opt for face to face "private chat", sacrificing egoism, to pour out their "woes and weals" of the and exchange experiences of their "best of times" and "worst of times" they faced during last two decades. Or, they should make room for others having broader vision and greater feelings for the country. Let us not dig any more grave for each other.

OPINION

Outdated, Dreamy Politicians

A Husnain

The bitter and pessimistic commentary by a young businessman (Land of Dreams. Star, March 2) should be compulsory reading by all our political leaders; and then by the bureaucrats. This type of frustration and discouragement is prevalent today in almost all the sectors of the society. More feedbacks of this nature should be published by the editors to publicise the sort of disgust and frustration experienced by the educated younger generation trying to establish themselves in entrepreneurial

The elected government of 1991 was able to introduce some fresh air in the export, trade, production, and fiscal sectors; and to introduce basic development projects to en-

activities in this fast moving

courage the private sector. The Bengalees had never been famous for big, modern, business activities; and the young, educated young men (and women) had opted for more traditional sources of earning their livelihood. The earlier regimes were never seriously interested in developing the business sector, having left it for slow, self-evolution through paths of least resistance, in an environment teeming with bureaucratic webs and political intrigues for self-survival of the small/ budding leaders, who had their own axe to grind. An insecure group cannot provide

security to others. First, the new politics has to evolve and establish itself into a stable foundation, to of-

fer the political services required by an emerging nation. after the trauma of the creation of Pakistan (one generation wasted), and the slow rehabilitation of the Muslim community after 200 years of exploitation by the British divide-and-rule policy (suppression of the majority community in each province).

Since the politicians also came from the same have not society, naturally the priority went to the governors (the politicians, who else) than to the governed. This vicious exercise has been going on since 1947, and reformed since 1971, with autocratic breaks. Unstable and inept political leadership is still staggering to

lead the suffering and exploited masses, the vast majority of whom are living below the poverty line. Our standard of politics is also below the poverty line. Today the political leaders

are fighting among themselves. and the state of the nation is as unstable as ever. The gloomy scenario is not at all inspiring for those who would like to get into the business world professionally. The world has witnessed a bottomiess basket for a quarter of a century. The future does not look bright with the seemingly topless brains of our political brass hats, who can neither help themselves. not others. A silly question crops up: Bangladesh is for whom? Do the silent majority sweat to earn the bread for others?