

Exempt the Schools

The relaxation in the continual asahajog is most welcome as it is wise. Economy is not all of the things that must be saved from deep injury.

For many reasons school days are lost interminably throughout the year. A good start has been made by certain schools not to close during Ramadan.

Non-cooperation as a political programme is not an everyday affair. There is no question of it doing regular harm to the young people who should be encouraged to consider going to school as a sacred duty.

There is a dangerous hangover from our glorious anti-colonial struggles. The movements used to start with activists getting the children out of the schools.

Megasthenes wrote of Chandragupta Maurya's India that war was never allowed to involve a peasant nor were his fields allowed to be touched by the warring armies.

Save it from Brink

Earlier on several occasions the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and-Exporters Association (BGMEA) had sent SOS calls to the politicians. Now the association feels desperate to issue an ultimatum for resolving the political crisis.

The garments industry was at the point of realising its potential to the full just before the political turmoil. Now we hear 500 factories have been closed down and the industry as a whole dares not count on the business it enjoyed before the set-back.

Politics should not be allowed to harm the brightest of our economic prospects that the garments industry represents. With a massive income generation for as many as 14 lakh people and a foreign exchange earning to the tune of two billion US dollars annually, the sector could be a guarantor of employment for people whose service hardly been recognised in our society.

Escapism of Sorts

Thanks to asahajog sine die, we never had such unpolled air for days on end ever since the Second World War concluded in the mid-forties. The constant din and bustle in disease-making decibels are all gone with the fugitive cars and buses and trucks.

Well, all this is an escape from so many bad things of a nasty and overcrowded and rowdy megalopolis. But this is too an escape from reality, which is hardly healthy for any man or woman or society.

Ignorance and foolishness in meeting the challenges of newer times and a bulging population have turned this reality awry. The task is to rescue and reshape the reality and not to escape it — through commitment and co-operation and far-seeing vision.

THE political crisis that started in March, 1994, was supposed to end with the election of February 15, 1996; but it looks like it has only entered into a more violent phase than the one people have just been through.

First Phase The period from March 1991 to March 1994 can be identified as the first phase of BNP administration which is marked by several important events.

What were the problems that the nascent parliamentary democracy faced during this period? The BNP government in its first three years was relatively clean, enthusiastic and forward-looking.

Later on the rumblings of ministerial corruption and politicisation of administration among the opposition members in the parliament. No parliamentary committee has ever met, let alone investigated these charges.

On the other hand, when interests of both sides coincided, the members of parliament acted in harmony and unity; the parliament approved unanimously the salary raise of the members, duty free import permits for private vehicles and other perks, etc.

It is important to remember some of the simple norms and conventions of parliamentary democracy. Once a party assumes power, it becomes the government of the entire nation and not of the ruling party alone.

There seem to be three main reasons for this failure. Firstly, BNP was a popularly elected majority party working within a parliamentary system unlike the Jatiya Party in the fourth parliament working under a presidential system.

Fateful Period The period from March, 1994 to January, 1996 was a fateful period for the country. It was marked by parliamentary boycott, mass resignations from the parliament, political turmoil on the streets, negotiations by foreigners and disorganised national for a peaceful settlement and finally the breakdown of all the negotiations followed by scheduling of February 15th election.

However, the most critical question that one has to ask is whether the continuous boycott of the parliament was constitutional and necessary? As far as 'constitutionality' is concerned, the Supreme Court did not give a verdict on this issue and hence remains unclear.

During the last few months, the country has set a dangerous precedent for the country's democratic future. If it is constitutional to boycott the parliament for a prolonged period, then any major parliamentary party can replicate this example in future and cripple the working of the parliament.

Coming to the 'necessity' aspect of the boycott by the three-party opposition in the

fifth parliament, it seems the opposition alliance could have done a better job of harrying and mauling the ruling party within the parliament than they have been able to do on the streets.

But it must be said categorically that it was a serious mistake on the part of the ruling party first to ignore the demand for a neutral caretaker government and then to dilly dally and finally to try to come to terms with the opposition alliance on this issue.

THE PM's last discourse to the nation was not much different than all the earlier ones despite her acceptance of a non-party caretaker government and her offer for a fruitful dialogue with the opposition parties.

Although the people had seemingly been getting tired of hearing the same rhetoric over and over again enough speculations this time around became visibly rife in their minds to expect something more than the PM has conceded. The people in their prevailing mood wanted to hear many other details and not just the acceptance alone.

The PM has shown courage and generosity in her approach, taking stock of the situation, however late it might appear to be. The one and only positive thing that is most urgent at this juncture is the mutual trust and faith needed to provide the right impetus to the ongoing dialogue in search of a common agreed ground for ending the crisis.

The scaling down from her earlier uncompromising stand, even if made at the peak of a crisis, could well be viewed as a sign of her sincerity, goodwill, grasp of the critical state of chaos visibly going out of the sufferings of the country and its people. This will of course go down well as a projection of her genuine and earnest desire to solve the present political impasse.

Should it be said that the PM has fallen from grace by this act? Far from it, although the

same people be in the position of offender and judge? In the third place, the polling officers who were appointed by the Election Commission could not go to the polling stations because their lives were reportedly threatened by the opposition activists.

Culmination of Crisis The period from February 1 to 15, 1996 brings the crisis to its culmination, all negotiations failed, only BNP and some nondescript parties and individuals participated while the three-party opposition alliance boycotted the election.

Even in this electoral outcome, there are at least three fundamental issues in the first place, the election ought to have been 'free and fair' for it to assure the legitimacy that the government was seeking, but it wasn't. Both national and international observers have confirmed it. Voter turnout was poor, and ballot boxes were stuffed with ballot papers which is an election offence.

Period of Rejection The period from February 16 to date is the period of rejection of the election results, which are claimed to be 'free and fair' by the Election Commission and the ruling party, and the escalation of violence by the opposition alliance which is euphemistically called 'non-cooperation'. The plan for 'non-cooperation' will continue until the BNP government falls. The mistake of

political parties seem to have reposed their full confidence and faith at this critical hour and he is left with no choice but to act real fast. He will surely go down in history as the only one who could bring for the first time all the warring parties at the negotiating table, at least set the process in motion, if successful in bringing about a solution to end the present political crisis he will be remembered with reverence for a long time to come.

The PM has now taken one more step forward by requesting the President to start the process of dialogue with all the political parties in the country to solve the ongoing political crisis and with the initiative of the President the process is already getting underway. All the opposition parties have now met with the President at his request and placed their demands before him. But at the same time they have announced the continuation of the ongoing non-cooperation movement until all their demands are met.

The onus is now on the President upon whom all the

because the changing situation compelled them to do so. But did they ask for something that was a great act of providence and a challenge to any leadership?

Obviously some legal compulsion have to be met for cancellation of 15 February election and the matter could very well be referred to the highest legal body, the country's Supreme Court, for the ruling. As it looks now, despite marked flexibility that both sides have so far shown the confrontation does not seem to be over yet and the fate of the country is still hanging by the thread and with it the destiny of the people whose sufferings have surpassed all limits. Could one disagree that the people and the people alone matter the most whether at the negotiating table or in the field?

The people obviously take precedence over the country that holds them. In line with the popular saying one could firmly state that the country survives only when its people survive. Surely it is not the country which takes the people with it but the people that take the country with them, for better or for worse.

The onus is now on the President upon whom all the

Time is the greatest factor now before we allow the situation to go out of hand again. The amount of distress and agony that we all have gone through for long two years speak volume on our ability, wisdom, foresight, judgement and sincerity in our words and deeds so far.

Could we rightly foresee the destiny we would be heading for if we fail to rise up to the challenge now? One should shudder to mention the only and inevitable end towards which the country is steadily approaching unless it is checked now with the firmness and power at the hands of all our leaders irrespective of their party affiliation. They must rise above the party interest and take the country as their prime concern. Only then they could salvage the nation from its present predicament.

It is in the interest of Bangladesh that President Biswas manages to resolve the political conflict within democratic parameters before irreparable damage is done to the economy. Before Bangladesh falls to a lowly depth

The Last Straw

by Hybat J Chowdhury

success of every action depends to a great extent on its exact timing and sensing that precise time is a great act of providence and a challenge to any leadership.

The PM has now taken one more step forward by requesting the President to start the process of dialogue with all the political parties in the country to solve the ongoing political crisis and with the initiative of the President the process is already getting underway. All the opposition parties have now met with the President at his request and placed their demands before him. But at the same time they have announced the continuation of the ongoing non-cooperation movement until all their demands are met.

The onus is now on the President upon whom all the

Whither Bangladesh?

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

URING the early 1990s, Bangladesh made an economic turnaround that made a mockery of Henry Kissinger's scornful dismissal of the country in the 70s as "an international basket-case".

Down the line, the masses have benefited from the economic upturn, a cumulative end-result of pragmatic policies by successive governments under late Gen Ziaur Rahman, Gen Ershad and lately Begum Khaleda Zia.

Khaleda Zia, leading the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Begum Hasina Wajed, Leader of the Opposition by virtue of heading the Awami League (AL), the largest among the coalition of the parties out of government, one of whose components is former President Gen Ershad's Jatiya Party (JP).

Just to get our history right, the Khaleda Zia-Hasina Wajed combine had united to bring down then President Ershad only five years ago, in the subsequent elections under a caretaker government, the most 'free and fair' in the nation's turbulent history.

During the subsequent legislative sessions no one seriously proposed that the fair mechanism that had hobbled the last elections (in which Gen Ershad won a number of seats by outright margins despite being in jail, winning such margins in each constituency that the security deposits of his opponents were confiscated) be made law by act of Parliament.

short-sighted and self-centred leadership.

For the record, the Opposition does not recognise the recently held general elections, wanting this exercise to be conducted under a genuinely neutral caretaker government. Khaleda Zia's answer is that there is no constitutional mechanism to effect this, mainly because Opposition members resigned in the last Parliament and as such the 2/3rd majority required was lacking.

The Bangladesh PM has offered to push through such an amendment with the overwhelming Parliamentary majority she now has (the less said about the modus operandi the better) and then resign and hold fresh polls. Partly because no time schedule was given but mainly because they do not trust her, the Opposition rejected this out of hand, asking the President to intervene, the constitutionality of which is not at all clear. A man of law devoted to technical precision of the written word rather than the spirit of the President has not yet obliged.

To give an example of the state of moral obduracy when Begum Khaleda Zia gave a call for a BNP public meeting on Mar 6 the Opposition declared a hartal (strike). Consequently when she shifted it to Mar 7 to

avoid a confrontation leading to loss of lives, the Opposition decided to observe their closure day on Mar 7, became a tragic comedy of sorts when Begum Zia fell back to the Mar 6 date and the Opposition followed her, a singular determination to enter into confrontation that bodes ill for the future of democracy in Bangladesh.

The Opposition has shown its street strength by repeated (and successful) calls for strikes, virtually closing down Bangladesh for days at an end. It actively tried to sabotage the election from being held by calling hartal on that day. Certainly there was rigging comparable to the outright coercion by the Opposition to stop them from voting, two wrongs hardly making one right. Given the insecure environment, even this low turnout can be counted as an achievement. Moreover a significant number of people turned out for Khaleda Zia's Mar 6 public meeting despite the Opposition effort in strength to stop it. Translation, while the Opposition has considerable strength Khaleda Zia is no pushover politically, still commanding considerable popularity. The net effect is deep polarisation with Ershad's JP sitting pretty as the possible 'Queen maker', indeed why not a dark horse possible 'King'?

On the other hand, unless the issues are resolved within the next few days, the same to whoever forms the government as is now being done to her administration?

To break the impasse Presi-

dent Biswas has written to the two political ladies, inviting them for talks to resolve the issues. Accepting the President's initiative, Sheikh Hasina has announced that nonetheless the complete shutdown from Mar 7 will continue till the overthrow of the Khaleda Zia government. Such pressure tactics have failed to dislodge the incumbents in the past and there is no real hope that it will succeed, but it has frozen economic activity to the detriment of the country.

Hopefully, the presidential dialogue will remain short and conclusive since the only requirement is a simple agreement on the composition of a possible caretaker government and (2) the schedule of elections. To assuage constitutional mores, present Assembly must pass the agreed amendment without further debate, which Assembly can then be dissolved by the President on the advice of the PM. Hopefully the agreed amendment will be a full blown mechanism that will avoid political deadlocks in the future. On the other hand if the present situation persists and (2) the schedule of elections to apocalypse continues then we have to fall back on 'the Doctrine of Necessity' that was announced by no less a person than US Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes in his concept of dealing with 'Clear and Present Danger' where the end justifies the means when society as a whole is put at risk.

It is in the interest of Bangladesh that President Biswas manages to resolve the political conflict within democratic parameters before irreparable damage is done to the economy. Before Bangladesh falls to a lowly depth