

No Sense of the Market

Between mounting export and import gluts, the predicament that faces us is made up of production losses, drying out of essential supplies and sky-rocketing prices. Politics can be interpreted or justified one way or the other depending upon which side of the fence one is sitting; but the working of the economy is either stifled or invigorated solely by the dictates of its own dynamics.

Judging by this, even the staunchest ally of the opposition or the ruling party cannot fail to see that the political rigidity of which the non-cooperation programme is a reactive part is playing havoc with the market forces. The stealthy night-time movement of trucks can account for only a fraction of the normal supplies especially in view of the disruption in the railway freight and the congestion at the inland and maritime ports.

What is fundamentally relevant here is the acute shortage of cash in the hands of traders who are missing out on banking or other forms of day-to-day monetary transactions. Although the opposition have allowed the banks to operate for limited hours, reports speak of encashment of cheques for very small amounts, if at all. The financial sector is badly paralysed.

The wholesalers and retailers have run out of their stocks. The kutchra markets have scantier supplies by each passing day while the shelves in department stores and other shops give empty looks. Supplies and sales are down in the small markets that cater for the low and middle income groups. Prices of all varieties of rice, pulse, vegetable and meat are going up by leaps, not to speak of those of sugar and soybean oil. Our photograph in the Metropolitan page yesterday of a normal-size Pangash fish selling at Tk 4000 amply illustrated it all.

Unless the shutdown induced by the opposition's non-cooperation programme comes to a speedy end, commodity stocks would soon evaporate forcing the people into an abyss of unbearable hardship. If it were a war-time crunch, or an unavoidable civil disorder causing the scarcities, there would have been some rationale to put up with the same. The supreme irony is that so much remains in our hands to turn the situation around quite radically.

Easy Target

The death of seven Bangladeshi nationals at a village restaurant in Bahrain should raise the issue of our migrant workers' security abroad. Recent incidents relating to harsh treatment meted out to them in Malaysia and Saudi Arabia have been a clear indication that our expatriate workers often become easy targets either of a government's campaign against illegal workers or of internal conflicts. It is not yet clear whether the seven Bangladeshi nationals killed in the arson in Bahrain were the prime target. Similar attacks on power stations, banks and hotels have recently been attributed to Shiite opposition groups known to be demanding political reforms in the Gulf island.

Whatever may be the case, the lives of foreign nationals are inviolable. The impression some of the employing countries give us is that employees from Bangladesh do not deserve much of the respect due to foreigners, much less their rights as employees. We surely need the remittances from our migrant workers. But that is no reason for the recruiting side to come so heavily on our people working for them. These workers contribute immensely to the country's development through their hard labour.

So the contracts should be basically honourable. The very fundamental issue of their security and rights is being ignored through some undesirable and injudicious acts in the host countries. We urge our government to take up the issue of our expatriate workers' security with its counterparts abroad. Certainly the safety and security level needs to be raised a few steps up to ensure that our workers overseas can give their best in a congenial working atmosphere and that our country's image is not undermined default.

The EPI Stake

Some 20 million children are to be vaccinated against polio on April 4 and May 7. We are being robustly helped in this by the Japanese government, Rotary International, CDC-Atlanta, UNICEF, WHO and USAID.

The sponsors and organisers of this massive vaccination programme have implored the opposition to let them have 15 days free from any shutdown by way of making preparations for it. Of course, they very much want April 4 and May 7, the dates on which the countrywide immunisation is to take place to be trouble-free as well.

We don't see any reason why the opposition cannot be sensitive to such requests when these signify a very high stake for us. The good health and survival of millions of children are involved in the programme which hardly deserves to be hindered by political programmes in any country of the world. The national time-table needs to be scrupulously adhered to.

Hopefully, the political situation will have improved by April 4 when the children are due to be vaccinated followed by a conclusive round of immunisation, for this year, on May 7.

The time for registration of children, training of volunteers and advocacy is obviously running out. The opposition is, therefore, advised to give definitive assurances in a day or two to the organisers of the EPI to the effect that they would indeed have the time and opportunity required by them to finish their job by due dates.

Attacking Corruption: Can Bangladesh Emulate its Asian Neighbours?

How does one begin the fight against corruption? Write a code of conduct and establish a mechanism to enforce the code? Make the administration more transparent? Strengthen the investigating machineries of the government? Ensure a free and vigorous press? Sensitize and mobilize citizen's groups?

THE sight of two former presidents of the Republic of Korea being tried in a court of law on charges of corruption is certainly a startling one. These were powerful men who ruled the country ruthlessly. The country made great progress in the economic field during the regimes of presidents Chun Doo Hwan (1979-88) and Roh Tae Woo (1988-93). But for the Korean people that is not a good enough reason to condone corruption. They are not prepared to have two sets of laws — one for ordinary citizens and the other for the high and mighty. The television pictures of the two men being taken to the court for trial must have reassured Koreans that they are winning the struggle to establish the rule of law. Other Asians, having seen the satellite pictures, are perhaps reflecting on the status of their own fight against this menace. Singapore, a country with an excellent track record in fighting corruption, recently faced a scandal involving some public officials fortunately the crime was detected and the guilty persons were punished after trial. Elsewhere in Asia the struggle against this scourge is just beginning.

India took a giant step in the crusade against corruption when the Indian Supreme Court ordered the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) not to take instructions from prime minister PV Narasimha Rao while investigating the 21 million dollar Hawala bribery scandal. The Hawala scandal has hit virtually all the political parties in India and many well-known politicians are fighting to save their political careers. The three learned judges, while hearing a petition on the scandal, freed the CBI from overall administrative control of the prime minister who holds this department among

other portfolios. In issuing the order the judges noted that "This step is to eliminate any impression of bias and avoid erosion of credibility of the investigations by the CBI, and also any reasonable impression of lack of fairness and objectivity on the part of the CBI." Corruption is believed to be widespread in India and the politicians in particular have a somewhat unsavoury reputation. The Hawala scam is believed to be the tip of the iceberg and the problem will not disappear even if the guilty ones involved in this case are punished. However, the manner in which the investigation is being conducted and the bold initiative taken by the Supreme Court will go a long way towards restoring public confidence in the institutions of the state. The people have seen that the investigating agency of the government has the guts to move against the most powerful politicians in the country and that the Supreme Court has the boldness and the independence to move to curtail the power of the Prime Minister in the interest of justice and fairness. In Japan, the LDP broke up and lost power after ruling the country for forty years due to allegations of corruption by its top leaders. Just the other day, a former Japanese Minister, Mr Toshio Yamaguchi was arrested on charges of breach of trust after the parliament waived his immunity.

These cases in other countries of Asia stand in sharp contrast to the situation in Bangladesh. Here a curtain of

silence has descended on the whole subject. The government has succeeded, it seems, in diverting public attention away from the allegations of corruption against it. The Awami League raised the issue repeatedly in the parliament but the BNP ministers went all-out in their efforts to block the investigation. Partly as a protest against the stonewalling methods of the BNP government on all enquiries against corruption and partly on account of the abusive behaviour and other forms of non-cooperation of the mem-

bers of the ruling party, the opposition members decided to quit the parliament. Since then there is hardly any talk of corruption in the government. Even the media has been skillfully steered away from the subject. Of course, it is an open secret that the BNP ministers, MPs and other party functionaries including the Jubodal and Chattral leaders have amassed vast wealth during the last five years. Will the government publish a list of the BNP leaders who have been appointed Directors of the nationalized banks? Did they have the requisite qualifica-

tions or experience? What was their worth before they joined the Board of Directors of these banks and what is their current worth? The people got a glimpse of the BNP government's moral standards when fertilizer dealerships were used to reward the party faithfuls. There was much public anger at this unconscionable exploitation of a poor and especially vulnerable section of the society, but Begum Zia and her ministers were ruthless in their response. She neither stopped the killing of protesting peasants nor expressed a

truly accounting government. The BNP government is believed to have indulged in large-scale corruption with impunity because of the absence of accountability. The ministers did not have to answer to anybody for their actions. Most people believe that the BNP opted for the one-party sham election on 15 February because they did not want to face the people in a genuinely free and fair election. They did not want anybody to look into the enormous amount of money stashed away by them or to talk about it. A far cry indeed from the situation in Korea or India or Japan.

Corrupt Practices Act which makes it a criminal offence for US companies to pay bribes abroad. The OECD, which includes the nations of Western Europe, North America and Japan, is reportedly moving towards adoption of a policy of barring tax deductibility of overseas bribes. However, this will not stop the rot unless we ourselves take matching steps to respond to the initiatives being taken by the affluent countries. As the Washington Post rightly noted in an editorial, the goal of US efforts "is to persuade developing countries to adopt fair rules for government procurement contracts in telecommunications, energy and other dollar-rich sectors. The more open such processes are, the less opportunity is provided for bribery." Widespread corruption usually enriches a small elite while discouraging foreign investment and impoverishing the economy as a whole. "Experience in the developed Western world has proved that corruption creeps in everywhere if the society is not alert and vigilant."

Transparency International does not propose to go into individual cases of corruption. Rather, it seeks to create awareness about the problem and builds public opinion for policy changes and other initiatives to promote transparency, accountability and honesty in public transactions. We badly need such a watchdog body in Bangladesh today to stimulate public interest in the fight against corruption. All those who care for the country and who wish to uphold the rule of law should join this fight. As we move towards the transition period and prepare for the general election, the public will demand that combatting corruption should be at the top of the nation's agenda in the coming years.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah A M S Kibria



bers of the ruling party, the opposition members decided to quit the parliament. Since then there is hardly any talk of corruption in the government. Even the media has been skillfully steered away from the subject. Of course, it is an open secret that the BNP ministers, MPs and other party functionaries including the Jubodal and Chattral leaders have amassed vast wealth during the last five years. Will the government publish a list of the BNP leaders who have been appointed Directors of the nationalized banks? Did they have the requisite qualifica-

word of sympathy for those poor farmers. Eighteen of them lost their lives only because they wanted the much-needed fertilizer for their lands. How does one begin the fight against corruption? Write a code of conduct and establish a mechanism to enforce the code? Make the administration more transparent? Strengthen the investigating machineries of the government? Ensure a free and vigorous press? Sensitize and mobilize citizen's groups? All these are certainly necessary but the most important and perhaps decisive fac-

Heed the Voice

by Qazi Kholiqzaman Ahmad

The 15 February 1996 election complicated an already highly charged political atmosphere and further sharpened political conflicts engulfing the whole country. Political deaths have since been mounting.

MILLIONS of people belonging to the geographical area that now constitutes Bangladesh hid down their lives in their struggles to free it from the shackles of foreign rule and domination during British and Pakistan periods. With the goal of independence achieved in 1971, the people of Bangladesh acquired state power for the first time in centuries. The supreme sacrifices of millions of sons and daughters of the soil did not go in vain. Free at last, their posterity would not have to go through similar experiences again. But that promise evaporated as greed for power and wealth took hold, with the army take-over giving the coup de grace to the process. The all-too-familiar political killings and sufferings returned to the forefront. In the independent Bangladesh with a uniquely homogeneous people, the turn of events has indeed been a misfortune of monumental proportions. Autocracy dug in and human rights were relegated to the background. Another opportunity for the nation to launch itself on a path based on civilized political behaviour presented itself following the overthrow of the Ershad autocracy in December 1990. The process started with a fair parliamentary election in February 1991. But the old ghost reappeared soon in the form of politics once again falling prey to muscle power, money and corruption. Many lives have since been cut short by the political upheavals and conflicts. Of late, everyday people are dying violent deaths in political conflicts in different parts of the country; many more are sustaining injuries. Open newspaper and you are horrified by the reports of political deaths and injuries. Severe wounds are also being inflicted on the economy.

When the fight had been against foreign rule and domi-

nation, it was not unexpected that the powers-that-be would use whatever force it could command to crush the liberation forces and, hence, there would be deaths, injuries and loss of property. But how unfortunate it is that independent Bangladesh is afflicted with violent political conflicts revolving around political power and control, particularly when the nation is completing a quarter of a century of independence. It is of even greater consternation that this is happening five years after the reintroduction of the democratic process following so much of struggle and bloodletting. Is it not a travesty of civilized behaviour? The establishment of superiority through physical terrorization and subjugation is the law of the jungle, while in civilized conditions the rule of law should prevail and the political fights should be fought through ballot boxes with appropriate arrangements for the casting and counting of votes in a fair manner. When the rule of law actually rules, misdeeds such as violation of human rights, gross failure in carrying out responsibilities, corruption, malfeasance, and actions inimical to national interests, lead to the resignation of the concerned ministers. Also, in the case of a state, elections are called so that people can give their verdict.

In Bangladesh, the parliament elected in February 1991 and the BNP government that came to power started off well. But soon parliamentarianism under the ruling party started to undermine both the parliamentary proceedings and governmental fairplay. The partisanship eventually became so unbridled that neither the scandalous

Magura-by-election (March 1994) nor the bungled 15 February 1996 parliamentary election have led to any resignation by those responsible. It is even more unfortunate that the Prime Minister herself defended the 15 February election not only in a press conference but also in her address to the nation on 3 March 1996. Such blind partisanship does not befit a political leader who has been Prime Minister for five years having come to power through an exemplary fair election. Regardless of the bungling, the parliament created by the 15 February 1996 election is, as the constitutional expert have been pointing out, no parliament in the eye of law as the election of all 300 members has not been completed within the specified time period (90 days from the date dissolution of the fifth parliament, i.e. 21 February). Clearly, democratic values, norms and practices remain grossly undervalued in this country. It is in the interest of all the political parties as well as to the nation as a whole that democratic values, norms and practices and the rule of law are properly established and adhered to. Otherwise politics will remain a violent game played out by politicians and political parties given to promoting their own interests, no matter what happens to the nation.

The 15 February 1996 election complicated an already highly charged political atmosphere and further sharpened political conflicts engulfing the whole country. Political deaths have since been mounting. Civil administration has been breaking down. The imposition of section 141 has become a familiar government response

to the widening and deepening opposition movements in different parts of the country.

One comes to know about the views of the political parties concerning the raging political impasse through the speeches and statements made by their leaders. But very little is known about the views of the people at large, who are the silent majority, and have the power, in a true democracy, to make or break a political party on the basis of its track record. To generate some information on the opinions of the members of the public and its aftermath, a survey was conducted by Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad (BUP) in the first week of March 1996. The survey was conducted for picking the respondents from among voting age men and women. The sample included people from all walks of life. The survey reveals that: in the opinion of 68 per cent of the respondents, 15 February 1996 election was a farce with another 12 per cent expressing no opinion on the issue; in the opinion of 80 per cent, the election accentuated the political impasse in the country with another 7 per cent not expressing an opinion; in the opinion of 61 per cent, a government formed on the basis of that election would have no political acceptability with another 18 per cent refraining from giving an opinion; in the opinion of 71 per cent there cannot be a fair election in this country except under a neutral caretaker government with another 10 per cent not giving an opinion; 87 per cent would not support a military intervention for resolving the present political impasse with 10 per cent not

giving an opinion. The view that the political impasse has been having serious adverse impacts on the economy has been expressed by almost all the respondents (98 per cent) and 92 per cent suggested that if the political parties were really interested in the welfare of the people, they should leave it to the people to decide which party should govern, i.e. they should make the necessary arrangement for holding a neutral and fair election. To that end, the ruling party and the opposition parties should come to a settlement. Also, it is the opinion of 69 per cent of the respondents that, if the stalemate continues, the President may send a reference to the Supreme Court concerning 15 February election and formation of neutral caretaker government.

Two days after the above mentioned survey was completed, the President of the Republic initiated a process of dialogue with the major political parties to resolve the impasse. It appears from newspaper reports that the 15 February election remains the

sticking issue. There are various suggestions made by constitutional experts and others as to how a constitutional continuity can be preserved if the 15 February election is annulled. One hopes that the initiative of the President will succeed and the spectre of looking disaster hanging over the nation will be averted. The whole nation is now looking up to the President. As an optimist, I am hopeful that he will succeed. He has written in another of which I have written in an earlier article published in the daily on 8 March 1996. Let the horrors that the people of those countries face be avoided in Bangladesh. Let lessons be learnt from those examples as well as from our own painful experiences while time still remains. Let the voice of the people at large, the traditionally neglected and ignored majority, be heeded. Time is running out.

There are several examples of national catastrophe, even of disintegration of the state structure in the contemporary world, as a consequence of political conflicts leading to armed conflicts and civil wars, such as Angola and Somalia of which I have written in another article published in the daily on 8 March 1996. Let the horrors that the people of those countries face be avoided in Bangladesh. Let lessons be learnt from those examples as well as from our own painful experiences while time still remains. Let the voice of the people at large, the traditionally neglected and ignored majority, be heeded. Time is running out.

OPINION

The President Has Failed

An Outraged Citizen

President Abdur Rahman Biswas has squandered away his only chance to prove that he is worthy of the charge. Whether it is the inadequacy of his office or other compulsions, there are differing views. The fact, however, remains that the country is now in a great political turmoil than it was before the matter was referred to him. We do not have the benefit of what advice he received from the two former Chief Justices. But we know that he got ten different views, as expected, from the ten or twelve constitutional and legal experts he openly consulted. This President Biswas knew all along. We can also visualize that during his 5 year tenure as President, he must have gone through the Constitution umpteenth time to memorise by heart what his powers were. What was expected of him was that through consultation and negotiation, he would find a way out of this political impasse and not compound it.

What he did during the one week or so the matter rested with him was not 'consultation'. He had one session with each of the political parties and then obtained their views in writing. He took these as sacrosanct and went ahead with his crisp pronouncement which has taken everybody, and more so the contending political parties, by complete surprise.

As a former politician, although a minor one, he should have known that consensus on differing views of the warring political parties can be reached by hard negotiation in closed doors and not through directing the proceedings from a throne under the glare of TV camera. That would have been the style of Mughal emperors giving their pronouncements and judgements on delicate national issues where their words were as good as the law of the country. President

Biswas knew more than anybody else that he had no such authority and that the success of his delicate mission depended entirely on the goodwill that he, as the President, could bring to bear on the leaders of the opposition parties & the party in power.

He even did not give a try to this. Instead, he openly came out in favour of changing the Constitution through the Parliament, knowing full well this will re-ignite the controversy and further deepen the political crisis which he is expected to resolve. We are further outraged by his statement that there is scope for reference to the Supreme Court if there is consensus. Like everybody else, the President knew very well that the he was brought into the picture only because there was no consensus among the political parties on the modality to settle the crises. The two ladies even could not meet to discuss the issue. Does he expect that the opposition parties and the party in power would now meet and agree on a reference to the Supreme Court? Why didn't he try to bring in this consensus through intense negotiation with the parties that the matter be referred to the Supreme Court whose 'advisory' should be binding on both sides?

To sum up, the President has failed. He has behaved like a politician who could not see beyond next election and failed to act like a statesman who cared for the next generation. It is the misfortune of Bangladesh that the country has stopped producing statesmen.

But what next? Would Begum Zia take the initiative to initiate dialogue with the opposition parties on the question of referring the matter to the Supreme Court on a condition that its views would be binding on all and would end the political deadlock once for all?

To the Editor

Oh, Bangladesh

Sir, Wherever we browse we find only questions. There is a big question-mark on Bangladesh's face today. Does any one have any answers to these questions? Even after twenty-five years of independence there is instability, non-cooperation movement — in one word, insolvency prevailing in the country. No one cares about anyone any more. We are the crowd around where cock-fight is going on. In a cock-fight the crowd does not get hurt, but unfortunately, in this fight the crowd around is getting hurt. The cocks are fine, they are reluctant to win the game at any cost. We the crowd (most of the crowd) do not support any specific side but just go on pushing the defeated side. The soft-hearted Bangladeshis do not like to see the defeated faces.

We have set examples before of how we can also be strong and bold. There is a proverb in Bangla which can be translated as: you can stop the invaders but you cannot stop the mice in your house. My request to the crowd is to wake up and watch out for the mice, know your rights and keep a good account of your belongings. When a group ransacks a bank, railway stations, a public transport, it is our property. It has been built with our money. When a factory's wheel is stopped, the source of our bread-earning money is

stopped. Don't just allow yourselves to fall prey. When the fight is over (if ever) the cocks won't remain unfeared because we will be there for them. But who will be there for us?

Let the light of awareness reach us so that we don't hit ourselves with our own axe. The Parliament is there to fight. Don't make the streets a battlefield.

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Let politicians act lawfully

Sir, The experience of over last two years shows that our politicians are not law abiding citizens. They are not disciplined. They are a different class of persons with the seal of 'Politicians of Bangladesh'. They do not care for the law, and seemingly, encourage people to break law. How can these politicians set up lawful civilized society when they themselves talk and act in a reverse way?

Whatever may be the dispute, solutions are achieved through a set of rules and that is a universal practice in lawful societies. To find out solution of a dispute beyond the per-view of law is an uncivilized approach. The present political impasse would perhaps

have long been settled if the politicians acted lawfully.

Let us call a spade a spade. It is history that democracy was not safe in the hands of Awami League leadership. Awami League framed the excellent constitution upholding democracy but soon lost patience to go by the system of one-party rule. That part of the past is known to everyone. The caretaker government concept actually originated from Jamaat whom AL always considered as the most dangerous anti-liberation force and it is, of course, true. How Awami League could go ahead with Jamaat and Jatiya Party? May be unethical practices are a norm with Awami League.

In the present context, it appears that the demand for caretaker government to conduct elections is not the main issue. Awami League believably wants to oust the BNP government and in its pursuit has taken Jamaat and JP along with. Lawfully it may not be easy to unseat the present government. So as last resort, attempt to humiliate and oust the government is continuing. Shutting of hartal date between 6th and 7th March aiming to obstruct BNP's meeting was a nefarious act played nakedly by the opposition.

I would request the AL as well as the opposition please sit with the government and settle the dispute. The avenue is now open. Please save the

country and let the people live in peace. People are really disgusted now. They just cannot bear the brunt any more. So act in conformity of situation before it is too late.

M R R Khan  
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Politics? It's unhealthy

Sir, While hectic political activities are currently going on to decide a legal framework for installing an interim neutral caretaker government to ensure future free and fair parliamentary election, it seems desirable in this context to keep in view the desirability of outlawing the armed cadres of the student and labour fronts of all political parties intending to take part in such elections. It has been our unhappy experience that the role of such elements in our political life has been questionable. Accordingly, it is felt that such a prohibitory step may be conducive to the creation of healthy political life in our country.

A neutral citizen  
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