Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

Dhaka, Friday, March 29, 1996

Expenditure Control

The ten per cent cut, demanded by the finance ministry in the ancillary spendings of the government, will not be enough to balance the revenue budget in view of the crunch it faces. A deeper cut is necessitated for some cogent reasons, not least of which is the continuing failure since September on the part of different ministries to keep within their respective budget allecations.

Now let's have a national idea of the deficit stored up by the long drawn-out political unrest. When the rug over the wound will have been pulled away following a political settlement, and the measurement made of it, we shall doubtlessly be shocked by it.

Revenue collection has been going down under all heads - taxes, departmental receipts, customs duties. VAT and export earnings. Internal resource-mobilisation as a back-up for development work has received quite a setback. If a large food bill had put a strain on the foreign currency reserve earlier on, a greater depletion of it lies in store for us because: (a) there have been productivity losses; and (b) a stoppage of the US food aid under PL-480 seems rather imminent.

Unless the increased government borrowing from the banking system is curbed as a matter of policy now, financial discipline would be hard to enforce down the line. This is going to be a year with two general elections in a row. Another series of hustings-related expenditure is in the offing — to add to a huge amount already entailed in the one-party election of February the 15th.

The finance ministry can only issue directives on expenditure control; it is for the other ministries to abide by these with a sense of urgency. Since the latest instructions are the product of a desperate situation, there is no way these can be treated lightly with any customary indifference by the government offices. Our request to the various ministries, divisions, corporations and departments will be for a wider identification of the avoidable items of expenditure: extra bits of petrol, stationeries, soft-ware etc, in addition to a drastic cutback on tours, seminars and entertainment. Then they go on to practise austerity with a competitive flair.

The revenue-earning departments are required to redouble their efforts, after the political stand-off ends, to brighten the collection picture.

Rebuilding the Image

Now that there is a hope for an amtcable solution to the country's long-running and terribly sapping political crisis, it is the need of the hour to recast and, where necessary, reemphasise our priority areas. One such area is economy in general and foreign investment in particular. Political instability that has shown no sign of improvement for a long time must have sent a very bad signal to foreigners. We cannot exactly say how much the country's reputation as a potential place for foreign investment has suffered, but there is little doubt it has received quite a setback during the past couple of months.

The officials at the foreign ministry should get a plan of action ready for the caretaker government that will hopefully be inducted soon to supervise the country's affairs till a new elected government takes over after a representative election is held in three to four months' time. If possible, exchanges of ideas between various ministries should take place on how we can start working - double speed - on damage control on our severely dented international image.

The job of attracting foreign investors may not be easy for a caretaker government. But leaving it unattended till the elected government is in place, will make it even harder for the latter. A sort of political consensus on the country's promotional strategy in the interim will be quite useful in attracting foreign investment subsequently.

Let's, therefore, put our heads together to launch a comprehensive and concerted imagebuilding campaign abroad.

How Long this Descent into Dark Valley?

HE effect of the noncooperation that has almost taken the shape of hartal since 25th February has been very much unsettling. But the administration appears to be least perturbed by the orgy of clashes and destruction that have erupted in all parts of the country. True, the stoppage, dislocation and disruption of offices, businesses and transportation seem to have left the administration's grip on power undisturbed. But the economic ruination of the country since 25th February is only getting more apparent.

Ominous reports are coming from all parts of the country and abroad. For instance, the report published in the national dailies of March 18 indicates that the US government has already conveyed its decision to suspend food aid programme under PL-480. Against the backdrop of huge crop-losses due to drought and flood to the extent of 30 lakh tons, the decision of suspending food aid may push the rural populace to the brink of star-

Aggravated by fertilizer crisis. Boro cultivation in the country has been seriously affected and the expected yield of crops will not be achieved. These two factors will compound the crisis in the days to come. Reports from the Washington based UNDP and World Bank offices circulated in the country have indicated about the suspension of economic aid to Bangladesh in the event of the government and opposition parties failing to reach a consensus about holding a meaningful election in the country within the shortest possible time.

In the meantime, the economic base of the country is in

doldrums. The country has lost a substantial international market in the garments sector, leather goods and shrimp The loss in the frozen food export, it is learnt, is likely to be 2000 crore Taka. The foreign exchange reserve in the country has squeezed down to 8224 crore from \$340 crore last April. The inflationary trend in the country at the moment has shot up from its previous mark of 9 per cent to almost 20 per

In the absence of any aid flow in the country, the economic situation will be adversely affected triggering unemployment and unrest The President of the Republic and the Prime Minister in whom people looked for guidance and direction, failed the nation miserably. Now there is consensus at least on one point everybody is fed up with the chaos and disruption for which general public are not to blame

The thinking that was get-

ting uppermost in the ruling party circle perhaps was "It is possible to conduct offices. business and industrial production only if there is strong executive power." The ruling party's desperation almost exploded into the open when they formed a new cabinet on the morning of 19th March and convened the one party Parliament that immediately went into session ignoring a barrage of criticisms mounted from all quarters regardless of party affiliations and party affinity. The opposition block mounted its attack most vigorously and it seems after 15th February polls, people who were so long sitting on the fence, have expressed their support and solidarity with opposition block's demand for

by Md Asadullah Khan

cancelling the 15th February polls and its result and an immediate arrangement of a free and fair polls by a neutral caretaker government.

The fact is, many people

now are not supporting the ruling party move. It is not that they liked the other party and were bearing hatred and grudge against BNP from the beginning but one single event i.e. 15th February election has pushed them poles apart from the ruling party's stand and they are now convinced that this was a messy, unfair election maneuvered to partisan ends. The party bosses, however shrewd, powerful and clever they might consider themselves, must have no illusion that there are people outside in the nook and corner of the country who are pursuing and analyzing the truth and never let up their search for truth. In a fair election race. the party and the candidate's eligibility and background are subjected to crucial test and scrutiny. People, before going to the polling booth, need and deserve a thorough picture of each candidate's history and chafacter in order to make an appropriate decision. The country is quite small and it would be hardly possible for any party hierarchy to manipulate people's views, simply by rhetoric. Political arena in the country has already become very dirty where politicians' effort to push in "nothing but the facts' stance may only inject a breath of fresh air.

Despite the fact that the national dailies, the intelligentsia and the country's various professional groups have issued a clarion call to the political parties for reconcilia-

tion, reason has not ruled the politics of the country. Instead of working for a clear common good, the ruling party tore apart the tenuous link that was looming up. Even after agreeing that the February election was not fair and accepting the view point of holding the elections under a neutral caretaker government in future. the insistence of the party stalwarts in legitimising the polls result and convening the parliament did not bode well for the country. Legitimising an unfair and rigged polls by overt means seemed to be counter-productive and only exacerbated tensions and pro-

voked backlash. The administration at this crucial hour of the nation's history cannot go away from facts rather it has to address the grievances of the fuming public throughout the country. Ironically true, what is still lacking is the political will to resolve the crisis. Understandably, the mood of people in the country is very glum and they remain defiant despite their reverses and the costs they are paying. and the fact that surfaces is "when brother faces brother. fights rarely end soon".

The happenings over the last two years and especially after the February election never bode well for a successful democratic transition There is nothing abstract about the country's soaring crime rate or the cost of living that risen by at least 30%. Small wonder, the country gives the impression of an already impoverished nation limping down a dark path toward a future of endemic labour strikes, hartals, disloca-

opinion is so strong against

Congress chief minister

Hiteshwar Saikia that the AGP

looks like sweeping the state

Muslims, who were on the side

of Congress in the last elec-

tion, have also decided to sup-

port the AGP, they alone influ-

ence half of the seats in the

ing tough in getting back the

land. Congress chief minister S

C Jamir is not getting the

same backing from even the

underground Nagas as he was

able to manage in the last

election. This time the church

which plays an important role

in the state, wants a more vo-

cal person to represent the

irritants will remain even after

the understanding the various

groups are trying to hammer

out. What will string them to-

gether is the anti-Congress

and the anti-BJP sentiment.

Political life has got so dis-

torted that even the disparate

elements will be compelled by

This is the time for the

NGOs to play some role be-

cause they may be able to in-

ject some values into the sys-

tem that is devoid of them

They may find it hard to make

themselves heard against the

noise of a multitude of differ-

ent squabbles. But they must

bring around the various al-

liances to accept an agenda

which includes secularism

national unity, non-violence,

anti-corruption and social jus-

the circumstances

straighten its deformities.

Some differences and some

state in the Lok Sabha.

only Lok Sabha seat in Naga

Congress is finding the go-

120-member assembly.

tion of transport movement and food shortage.

Demoralised by the country's dim prospects for economic growth. Bangladeshis are voting with their feet in a nation of 120 million, thousands of people are rather fleeing the country each month. Many who stay behind blame the economic shambles, corruption, authoritarian rule of the government ignoring people's feelings.

True, administration's ex-

periment with democracy dur-

ing the last five years has bred

disenchantment for the people

with the very institution which held out so much promise at the beginning of the term. "Democracy benefits the few who are in power: but it does not do anything for others." says a factory worker, who has just been laid off in his mid 40's Democracy is for the rich. They wash their dogs with shampoo, but we don't even have a packet of detergent to wash our clothes: we have been abandoned," he continues. Other than impoverishment that has eaten into the vitals of the nation, a climate of reckless activities has begun to pervade large por-

tions of the society. True, the previous governments that ruled this country

did not satisfy the people but what people see is that even democracy now seems to be faltering. The situation in the country typifies a state where political differences have led to bloody clashes and catastrophe. May be, this is a reminder for all of us that we are finding democracy so elusive because of some diehard leaders in both the ruling and the opposition camps. Small wonder, the country's democracy now faces such a situation due mainly to the leaders harbouring petty interests. Let not the situation be such that "if you don't have anything nice to say about the state of affairs going on, you have to keep your mouth shut." The county's agony is only

increasing. Death toll on different accounts soars with each passing day. But shortage of food stuff, and soaring prices are only symptoms of a deeper crisis. The societal norms and order have almost broken down. The traditional values, the code of right and wrong have almost disintegrated. Non-functioning of schools, colleges and universities for such a long time has pushed the younger generation to criminal activities - a very lamentable consequence that must be deplored by all.

OPINION

Five Points for Consideration by the Opposition

Viquar I Choudhury

parties now should reconsider their strategy towards the proposed amendment of the Constitution by the BNP government for the following rea-1. The objective of the po-

litical movement lead by the Opposition parties starting with boycott and eventual quitting of the Parliament (which I think was misconceived) was for introduction of an amendment in the Constitution to provide for a neutral caretaker government during the period of elections of the Parliament. Once the amendment in a form substantially acceptable to the Opposition is given effect the rationale of the movement will be lost. Further continuation of the movement may reflect on the bonafideness of its objective. In such case it may be thought that the real object of the movement is to dislodge a particular political party or an individual from the seat of power rather than establishing a criterion for holding proper elections for

the Parliament. 2. Although there is a widely-held belief that the February election was heavily rigged and flawed, in fact no legal action was ever instituted ers have voiced their protests to annul the election nor any judicial pronouncement was made by any competent court of law in this regard. Any violation of the constitutional provision for not holding election in all the constituencies in the country within the prescribed period has not been confirmed by any court. In the premises. the constitutional amendment, as proposed by the present Parliament will not be considered as legally flawed, although the Parliament may be lacking in moral authority in enacting

such legislation.

In my view the Opposition sult of the present political crisis. The industrial and commercial life is almost at the point of halt. More than 500 garment factories have closed their doors and the international market for their products is being irreparably lost. The Opposition will be blamed for their share in leading the economy of the country to such disaster. The citizens are increasingly being frustrated at the situation and a part of them have begun to blame the entire political circle in the country for their

predicament.

4. A section of the country may realise that BNP could have avoided the present situation if they had agreed to the concept of the neutral caretaker government two years back. However, the public at large are not concerned with the cause as much as the anguish of their present plight for which they blame both the parties. If the movement is prolonged and their condition of life further deteriorates. both the parties will be object of their wrath which may manifest in a form destroying our cherished institutions. Already various interested groups, industrialists, traders and work-

5. Absence of any effective governance resulting in destruction of the fabrics of the society, will have a long-term effect. Acts of violence and vandalism is being reported everyday. Mastans sponsored by political parties and individuals are increasingly controlling areas in the cities and towns in the country. The Opposition, aspiring someday to hold the seat of the government in the country, cannot 3. The economic life of the remain indifferent to such de-

and have demanded normalisa-

tion of the situation.

Havala's Fallout on Elections

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

FTER serving as British High Commissioner to India for six years. Nic holas Fenn said at a farewell lunch that he would give his right arm to know who would win at the polls. He was commenting on uncertain prospects. He is right. Nobody can say with authority how the electorate will react when time comes to cast their vote.

There is a sharp decline in the stock of most political parties. Havala has rocked them all. The two main parties, the ruling Congress and the BJP in the opposition, have been mauled the most. Their credentials - and eligibility have come to be questioned. They fancied themselves as winners. But they are now outscored by the various for 1 mations, whose core constituents are in the ascendant.

The BJP looked like winning nearly 150 seats in the Lok Sabha. But as of today, it will be hard put to retain its present strength of 122. The party's mask of cleanliness has come off to the disillusionment of the middle class, its support in the urban and semi-urban areas. The BJP's hold in the country-side has always been peripheral and tenuous despite BJP president L K Advani's rath yatras. He has temporarily incited people but once the din and dust he raises settles down, they return to their secular and neighbourly atti-

On the other side, Congress continues to lose in prestige. True, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao has brought the BJP many notches down. But neither he nor his party has gained much. One, the credit for bringing the havala beneficiaries to light is going to the Supreme Court, which has been pushing the CBI. Two, Rao's own tainted image is proving to be a drawback. Whatever Congress spokesman V N Gadgil may say, the muck that has got stuck to Rao cannot be washed off easily.

No doubt, the morale of Congress cadres is higher than before. But they are conscious that their president, Rao, has the feet of clay. The spate of resignations by Congress ministers has not given the party

any moral boost because they had dubious reputations even when they were appointed. Yet some fallout of havala may give Congress an advantage. Its tally, which has hovered around 100, may go up to 120. With the combined strength of Congress and the BJP not crossing a figure of 250 in a

house of 546. it is not surprising that a hung parliament is taken for granted. This does not, however, mean that the like-minded parties and groups in the opposition will not join hands to present a working majority. The arrangement may be dubbed as a jumble of squabbling interests but it looks like coming about - the Janata Dal, the communists, the Samajwadi party, the Telugu Desam, the Akali Dal the AGP or even the BSP supporting a common government from inside or outside. This may not be ideal but this is what may emerge after the

Some may wish or fear the combination of Congress and the BJP. But this is out of the question. The two are ideologically so apart that no alliance is possible. Yet the rumour persists that Rao may woo the BJP after the elections so as to be prime minister once again. This is not possible. Were he to try to have an alliance with the BJP, Congress would split

Even otherwise, the BJP support to Rao is unthinkable in the face of what he has done to humiliate the party through Havala cases. Strange, both Congress and the BJP should still be fighting for supremacy as if the loss of one is the gain of the other. They do not seem to realise that regional parties are beginning to occupy the territory they are, perforce.

vacating The intelligentsia may scoff at the idea of a national front. referred to as a 'notional front' or a third force, called a 'third

farce. Yet there is no going away from it. There can be a demand for the national government, which former President R Venkatraman vainly tried when the V P Singh rule ended in 1990. But it is a premature point to raise at this time. Fears that a government, which keeps out both Congress and the BJP, may not last long are justified. It is on the cards that the different groups collected may fall apart sooner than expected. But the people have to face the reality that no single party will have a majority in the Lok Sabha for many years to come. Whatever name one may give to the combination that emerges, it

will be a coalition of sorts. In fact, already an understanding among different groups in the different parts of the country is in the making. UP, with 85 seats in the Lok Sabha, is settling to an adjustment of seats that has been reached between Janata Dal leader Laloo Prasad Yadav and Samajwadi party chief Mulayam Singh Yadav. They expect even the BSP to come round ultimately and they have left some seats for it. Their affable earthiness and confident wit spanned the distance between the two

Apart from UP, Andhra Pradesh has been a problem for the National-Left fronts. The Telugu Desam has split. If it stays that way, it will benefit Congress, which has 38 out of 42 seats. But the communists have been able to save the situation. They have stayed with Lakshmi Parvathi, the widow of N T Rama Rao. She is trying to ride on the sympathy wave. They are the ones who persuaded V P Singh and Laloo Yadav, the two key leaders of the Janata Dal, not to go to the rally which Parvathi held the other day to show her strength. The rally was indeed massive. The Dal as such supports the Telugu Desam faction led by chief minister Chan-

drababu Naidu. The two groups are still far from reconciled. But some understanding is apparent. The Naidu faction transferred some of its votes to Parvathi's nominee. Venkateshwara Rao, to get him returned to the Rajya Sabha. It means the relationship between the two has begun to thaw. Despite their quarrel who should inherit NTR's mantle - and the property — they are bound to come to some adjustment before the Lok Sabha polls as both groups are totally opposed to Congress and the BJP. The communists are pressurising Parvathi and the Dal leaders, Naidu.

The Akali Dal is also keen on being part of the anti-Congress front. Its president, Prakash Singh Badal, has sewn an agreement with BSP on one hand, giving it three Lok Sabha seats, and with BJP on the other, leaving two seats for it. The Akali Dal has kept with itself eight seats. Badal's understanding with the BJP has not been to the liking of Gurcharan Singh Tohra and J S Talwandi, the two Akali stalwarts. But they are beginning to see 'a bigger enemy' in Congress which bagged all the 13 Lok Sabha seats in the last election when the Akali Dal boycotted

Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) is strong against Congress and the BJP, although it is tormented by the estrangement between Mohanta and Phukan two leading lights of the party. If the two continue to stay apart, the AGP will suffer. Otherwise, the groundswell of

country is being ruined as a re- velopment. Dhaka Day by Day

Learning to Live with Non-cooperation

by Shamsad Mortuza

How many times we will have to liberate ourselves? How many wars we will have to fight for freedom?

We have fought the British to gain India, fought with ourselves to gain Pakistan, fought with the West Pakistanis to gain Bangladesh. Nine months are too short a period to gain independence.

This reaction to the present political crises came from the least expected corner of our society. This was expressed by a rickshawpuller. Or is he really

rickshawpuller? "This is not my profession. I am a bus driver. My vehicle (Dhaka Metro ...) runs on the Dhaka-Kaliganj route," Salim Mia introduces himself.

Knowing that the present political crisis is going to prolong, he came from his village with his savings of Tk 4,000. He bought an old rickshaw for Tk 2,900, which he drives to support his fivemember family.

"I am not like others who will paddle as per schedule. This is my rickshaw, and I will drive it according to my will." Salim, a tough-

built young man of 30, is full of self-pride. He lost his father when he was only 18. His

kins, well established, offered their helping hands "How many hands do you have? I asked my uncle. Two, was the answer. Do I have less? My reply ended our relationship," Salim recalled.

From then on Salim is on his own. He has brought up his younger brother and sister and has

taken care of his mother. "I am doing alright by the grace of the Almighty. Just hope that Allah will give 'Iman' to these two ladies, and the whole country will be relieved

How long can one withstand wars! Salim has lost his uncle and cousin in 1971. "My cousin was thrown into the boiler of a jute mill in Khulna. We never saw the body of our uncle. I was young then Too young to understand the purpose of the war, Salim's handling of the wheel appeared irregular and out of rhythm. He almost knocked head-on with another tricycle coming from the opposite

He didn't indulge in filthy exchange of words, as

is the practice among these men. Rather, he kept on saying: "History will not get lost. History will interpret the real cause and effect of our iberation war.

"Just this morning one political leader has said that they would take up the caretaker issue to people. I am sure you have heard it on

Salim continued to surprise me with his sense and sensibility. It has become a habit of mine to converse with what we call common people. I try to feel their pulse and share their views. But Salim

was

"What do you think the people will tell them? Do they really have the guts to tell?" Salim's voice rose a

exceptional.

"My freedom fighter cousin shouted at a Pakistani camp after hearing the news of freedom, saying. This is not independence. Nine months cannot give independence of a nation." Salim Mia sounds more like a rebel than a bus driver When I reached my destination and told my friend about the experience, he remarked briefly is politician

The impending starvation

Sir, Much water has since flown on the current political impasse which has indeed runed the country's economy to a point of no return, and the collapse is now a matter of time. Meanwhile, millions of salary/wage earners in the private and informal sectors are facing non-payment of salaries and wages at the end of the month. Is it not incumbent upon the leaders of the country to come forward, when they claim to have been representing the people, to set up booths at every corner of the country for payment of salaries and wages to save the vast rural and urban salary/wage earners from impending starvation?

M S Alam Mia 46. Dilu Road New Eskaton, Dhaka

Bombing buses in Bangladesh

Sir. The charred bodies of the hapless passengers on a bus that was set ablaze by a petrol bomb looked like statues in different postures as if carved on a block of charcoal by Death himself. The bizarre

months ago. For a civilized society it would have been enough to fall in a limbo. Of course such incidents do not torment us: we are valiant people, we take it to be cowardice to be taken aback by this. So we brave for similar

havoc on humanity.

Recently in a week's time iwo more buses have been the victims of petrol bomb. In one case a passenger caught fire and he was running on the street as a burning cinder. In the other case, the victim was a 'bus-helper', he was not lucky to run, he was hit right on his head by a petrol bomb. He died instantaneously. In both the incidents many more passengers, who had no option but to travel on urgent errands of life, were seriously injured. Vehicles and property that cannot be looted have already been burnt to ashes beyond measure lonly a poor man knows how much he has! When we are in rage, we feel richer than our

riches!) And all these go in the name of 'peaceful, democratic and spontaneous display of anger'. One group calls them arsonists while the other group gives them a hero's welcome, and if possible and thought advantageous, the body of the dead is raised high on the shoulders with a 'stigma' or 'insignia' of martyrdom. This is a land of lie;" the

is perenna'ly

The misery of the Palestinians outweigh any misery humanity has ever witnessed, and even now they are the targets of state sponsored terrorism hit-list. When they hit back in their naive way, we do not fall short of deploring their action. Recently both east and west, north and south coalesced in Egypt to condemn and decide upon a concerted effort to terminate terrorism from the

face of the earth. But what an anachronism! Bombing a bus in Bangladesh is heroism while in other parts of the world it is terrorism — a heinous act of villainy. What an articulation: democracy is bombed into stability, humanity is torched into bestiafity here in Bangladesh!

Mohamed Abdul Mutalib 74 Dhanmondi R/A, Rd No-14.

Juggleries and laymen -

Sir, We have seen fierce exchange of words among the Chamber leaders in the Federation meeting and read juggleries of words in the press from the legal experts and constitutional stalwarts on the overall crisis faced by the nation, without sign of immedi-

of the commonmen and relief to the devastated commerce and industry of the country. As I now observe, some leaders (both in trade and poli-

ate resolution of the suffering

tics) are simply emotional and partisan while experts are divided in their interpretation of the Constitution, though the Constitution is very clear according to (some of them) their views that "the caretaker government issue and the election by it will require an amendment to the Constitution and an amendment can be tabled by the Parliament (only)." And the hon'ble "President though have power to promulgate ordinance, has apparently no provision under his authority to introduce an ordinance to amend the constitutional provisions" - perhaps specially where there is no 'void.

Under the circumstances, do not know how long this stalemate can be allowed to continue and the commonmen made to suffer from the juggleries of the partisan politicians and futile exercise of the legal experts - and the leaders would be honest and sincere to solve the crisis by sacrificing their trivial vanity or interest for the greater interest of the whole nation.

A F Rahman Dhaka