

Well-earned Thanks

People have once again, as they ought to, come out on top as a result of the mass uprising of '96. Our democratic instincts can be said to have triumphed once again. As we bask in the glory of a successful political movement which has strengthened the assertive role of the people, we would like to pay tribute to our armed forces who, by upholding democratic norms and strictly adhering to the principle of non-interference in political affairs, have helped to strengthen our democratic institutions and gave the constitutional process a renewed vigour.

Frankly, after '71 there have not been too many occasions when we could really feel proud of our armed forces. On the credit side, over the last 25 years, we felt grateful when they came to help us out during floods and cyclones and found them useful in retrieving illegal arms and catching criminals. In the Hill Tracts their record has been somewhat mixed, but on the whole restrained and matured.

But on the debit side, there remains the public outrage at a section of them murdering Bangabandhu and his family, and the four national leaders inside the jail. There is also the incidence of killing President Zia, and the accompanying murky deals of murder and cover up at the highest levels of our army. Interspersing these events in late '70s were numerous coup attempts and the consequent secret trials and deaths. Then came a comparatively peaceful period of Gen. Ershad, during which corruption permeated through the highest echelons of the armed forces causing havoc to its professionalism and fundamental mission. By the time the autocratic regime of Ershad was torn to pieces by an outraged public, the reputation and image of the army had plunged to its lowest depth.

By all indications, it is to a remarkably transformed armed forces — and to its matured, highly professional and patriotic leadership — that we express our thanks today. We praise them for their unswerving and unquestioned support for the constitutional process. We praise them for putting the cause of democracy above everything else, and for holding on to the belief (by controlling temptation for power and glory which must have been there) that only elected representatives have the right to rule the country. As desired by the people, our armed forces have given a demonstration of their pledge to democracy, a pledge they will no doubt also uphold in the future. Let all the political forces of the country now work together for a universally participated, and free and fair election so that we do not, ever again, need to batter our economy to better our democracy.

A Half-minded Hijacker

Is it a sign that we are coming of age as a nation? Bengalees are well acquainted with aeroplanes, both as pilots and passengers, from as far back as the introduction of commercial flight. Indranath Banerjee distinguished himself as a radiant aerial warrior on his British fighter in World War I. Begum Rokeya was one of the earliest of women taking a sight seeing flight. But Bengalees never before could boast of a plane hijacker. That gap was filled on Thursday when Zamir Ali of Chandpur attempted to commandeer an Aero-Bengal STOL plane on its way to Barisal.

But Zamir Ali was only half a hijacker. Inside the cabin of the airborne Chinese carrier, Ali started as a determined mugger — snatching a watch from a maulana and a chain from a lady passenger. Thwarted he had to use fisticuffs on the maulana and the two ladies. By that time all the passengers had wakened up to his nuisance and Zamir switched on to act number two. Dangling a handbag he said was filled with explosives, he asked to be taken to near the Hazratbal mosque in Kashmir. Was act 2 predetermined or came as an improvisation? Zamir subsequently proved quite an improviser — under the weight of police interrogation. Is it possible not even one of the passengers was impressed by Zamir's knowledge of geography and of the plane they were flying as also his flourish of Islamic josh? Had they been travelling overground, at least half of the passengers would have burst into a laughter. What a comedy it could be.

But, indeed, what a tragedy it could be as well. If only Zamir's bag did contain weapons or explosives and not his breakfast of bread and banana and the man were a hardened criminal, things could have been bad. The Babuganj police who nabbed Zamir were no match for a true hijacker with true guns. Zamir being only what he is, did not fail to beat up a policeman. The whole episode could well be worse and it is a near miracle that it ended up the happy way.

Fast Towards a Desert

Trees worth Tk 450 crore pilfered from one single forest — would not readily sound convincing. But if it is the Bhawalgarh forest we are talking about and the time span is twentyfive years of independence then the estimate would look very very conservative indeed. For within this time the part of Bhawal forest falling within Gazipur district has been reduced to a paltry 44 square kilometres from a sizeable 144 square kilometres — in a matter of ten years only.

Independent Bangladesh had three great challenges to its evolution into a worthy polity, namely, the population boom, the drying up river system and the receding forest line. Of the three some progress has been made in the population sector. The scale of the water management problem is not wholly within Bangladesh's power to handle. While no meaningful progress has been made in this area, society is highly aware of both its urgency and importance. And, hopefully, it should be only a matter of time that Bangladesh and India start seeing eye to eye about the worthlessness of Farakka.

We are hopelessly lost in the third sector — forest. Forests are fast being lost to land hunger and urbanisation, industrial and fuel needs, building and furniture luxuries. And all concerned in those variegated fields are defoliating the land with a hardly suppressed sense of satisfaction.

A nation's environment is best served with a 25 per cent forest cover of its area. We are said to have at present 8 per cent or thereabout. If things do not begin to change for good very soon, we shall be left with no environment. Or one that will no more sustain life.

Caretaker Government: Issues of Immediate Attention

A neutral, caretaker government is now at the helm of affairs of Bangladesh administration. We would like to share others in extending our heartfelt felicitations to the government. The nation is committed to lend all sorts of cooperation to the caretaker government so that a peaceful transfer of power inevitably takes place between the caretaker government and the government that is likely to emerge from the free and fair election in May or June 1996.

The limitations of a caretaker government is well known: a small government with a very little empowerment to tinker with socio-economic policy variables. However, by virtue of its very caretaker nature, such a government generally tends to command wider acceptability and, unless otherwise, appears to be less subjected to criticism from the public in general.

What are the immediate issues to be resolved by the present government? Quite obviously, as Chief Advisor Justice Habibur Rahman and some of his advisors rightly pointed out, it is the deteriorating law and order situation in the country. A crackdown on the possessors of illegal arms should signal the crack of dawn for a free and fair election. It is also just not for the smoothness of the upcoming general election but also for the sake of congenial environment for business and trade in the country that the issue of law and order situation should merit prime attention. Over the years in Bangladesh two of the most important constraints to the world of business are political stalemate

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and hoodlums' and *mastani*. We strongly feel that the political stalemate only exacerbated an already existing uncongenial business environment created by the so-called arms cadres. And unfortunately, most of these arms possessors were the so-called students in different university halls.

The nation, however, witnesses with great satisfaction and relief that the present caretaker government has already waged its war against the possessors of illegal arms. The recent raid on different pockets of suspicion are clear pointer to this exercise. Sordidly though, many of the culprits could find good escape in the wake of the news of the chase being leaked out. The government should realize that most of the illegal arms possessors have 'friends' allegedly among those who are deployed to drive them out or drive them into the custody. So, unless necessary arrangements are about to clear the fog inside law enforcing agencies, the hopes of arms recovery drive might turn into mere hopes.

The arms recovery drive has already started to clear the air for smooth functioning of normal business life. It is expected that within a month or so, the government would be able to make a dent in this state of affair. But does that end all of our agonies or should that assure people of a arms-free society in future? The caretaker government should see that the upcoming government can also follow the

tune set by the present government. On this score alone, we would like to see that the present government places some recommendations based on their experiences with respect to arms recovery: sources of funds, strength and stations. These recommendations should be made public and be placed for consideration by the future parliament. As the government is considered neutral, its recommendations could also be considered from a neutral point of view.

The second immediate issue relates to the question of re-

the sake of a free and fair general election. The world would seckon as to how a poverty-ridden country values its freedom of expression and democratic norms. The representativeness of a government is a sine qua non for the establishment and promotion of stable and transparent economic policies.

The third issue relates to the economy. Needless to mention, the caretaker government inherits an economy already ravaged by political unrest. On the external front, the adverse impact on the gar-

gency basis. The finance ministry should embark on a 'life-jacket' approach to solve these shelved issues. An interim budget for the nation should be prepared immediately.

Another important aspect is the liquidity crisis that the banks are likely to face from a surge in economic activities following normalcy. The central bank should come up with its windows open for refinancing of the scheduled banks. A liberal attitude towards credit expansion might be the need of the hour.

More importantly, the Finance Ministry should set up a small task force to take a stock of the economic losses in different sectors. The current figures, as estimated by different sources, seem to arise mostly from guess works and hence could be termed as 'guesstimates'. After taking stock of things and presenting relatively more accurate figures the task force should also make few recommendations.

A correct estimate of the probable food deficit that the country might face in the near future needs to be made soon. The task force report, in the wake of a short time-span, should embrace only the following issues: foodgrain, textiles and industry.

The Election Commission (EC) needs to be revitalized through a massive overhauling. As most of the political parties do not seem to have faith in the current EC, any steps taken by it might face un-

dered criticisms from different corners. We would also like to see that a full-time secretary is posted for the EC. Steps to address problems regarding voters' list, constituency alignments, etc. should start forthwith. The news media, owned by the public sector, should be asked to follow strict neutrality. It is being alleged that the TV and Radio and also the government owned newspapers are being run and managed by the people very close to the earlier regime. Many of the news items, allegedly, favour the party that was in power earlier. The caretaker government should take necessary steps in this regard.

The nation as a whole eulogised on the formation of a caretaker government. At least for three months in each five years could the nation be able to witness a 'rule of law' in the country applied irrespective of political colours. It is, at the same time, unfortunate to see that people in general have been forced to opt for a caretaker government and reject their elected representatives. We hope that the politicians of the country would learn from their past mistakes — the mistakes that distanced them from the public — and make due arrangements to arrest the deterioration of confidence in a representative government.

A fair election and for that matter a caretaker government is just one of the many pillars for a democratic governance. We would expect that the future government could help strengthen democratic institution-building rather than merely banking on a free and fair election. Establishment of democratic institutions is the permanent solution to the wounds of our political unrest.

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



gaining the lost image outside. There is very little doubt to the notion that the image of the country has been dashed by a three-year-running political stalemate and the use of the tools that accompanied the turmoil. The Bangladeshi embassies abroad should be instructed to take necessary steps to reverse the gear. After all, there have been a lot of positive developments within the society that need to be publicized to the foreigners. The nation faced an insurmountable socio-economic cost over the years but it is for

ments sector should be immediately assessed and stabilizing actions taken thereof. The sector should be freed from any dues that the sector had to swallow due to political deadlock. An independent enquiry is needed to evaluate the costs imposed on the major export subsectors. In this respect, the extent of currency overvaluation needs to be assessed and steps taken to remove currency misalignments. The issue of aid flow that remained blocked so long would necessitate initiation of a dialogue with the donors on an emer-

No More Rhetorics, We Need Clear Plans of Action

by Nurul Kabir

WITH the general elections around the corner, the major political parties of the country have already started showing their traditional inclination to rhetorics to win the polls.

The recent speeches made by leaders of mainstream parties indicate that the BNP is to use the age-old India-factor against the Awami League. The Awami League will stress on allegation of corruption against the Khaleda Zia administration. Jatiya Party will try to cash-in on 'sympathy' for its imprisoned leader Ershad, and Jamaat-e-Islami will play its card of religion to win the hearts of the electorate in the forthcoming national polls.

Since her stepping down from power in the last week of March, BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia has been 'urging' the 'nationalist forces' to unite against the 'agents of foreign interests' who want to turn Bangladesh into an Indian protectorate like Sikkim.

For different reasons, some are valid too, a significant section of our population nurse an anti-Indian feeling at the core of their hearts. The BNP intends to, once again, exploit the situation in the upcoming elections. But without explaining why the country has turned into almost an all pervasive market of Indian commodities during the Khaleda regime, she will have a hard time winning supporters from that camp. Khaleda has to explain to the electorate how

her future government would prove to be stronger than the previous one when allegations are rife that the country had made maximum trade concessions to India, during her rule. Without answering these and other questions, her anti-India election campaign may prove to be empty rhetorics.

Early indications are that BNP intends to attack its main political rival, the Awami League, as the agent of Indian interests. Already in her two speeches made on 30 and 31 March, immediately after

With the political parties developing tendencies to trade on rhetorics and slogans, how can the people exercise their judgement in the coming polls? In our judgement, people's bodies representing different classes and professions in the country should immediately mount pressure on the political parties to offer concrete agenda—social, political and economic—which they want to implement after winning the polls.

handing over power, Begum Zia has attacked Awami League as being serving the interest of a foreign power. But the question remains, how does a responsible political party question the fundamental loyalty to the national interests, without in any way substantiating the allegation? Without presenting to the public even a shred of evidence, BNP's continued attack on AL concerning its Indian 'connection' amounts to irresponsible and dangerous politics.

In terms of showing fondness for rhetorics, the Awami League has not shown any in-

tention of lagging behind. Its leader Sheikh Hasina has started accusing the government of Khaleda Zia of 'massive corruption' without producing any evidence to substantiate the allegations. Such practice of raising wholesale allegations against political rivals is neither ethical, nor does it help the electorate to make a right decision while voting for or against a party.

As a party-in-waiting for power, AL is big enough and resourceful enough to gather

charges against the minister, chances were that the committee could have discovered some irregularities in that instance. At least a precedence of a parliamentary investigation into alleged corruption of a minister would have been set.

But the probe body ceased to function due to the AL's obstinacy that the SPECIAL body must conduct a GENERAL investigation into the entire affairs of the ministry con-

science in 1971, has cast a shadow on its pro-liberation credentials. How much damage the alliance with Jamaat has done to AL's image is yet too early to judge.

The recent speeches of Sheikh Hasina indicate that she would play a 'national consensus' as a platform on which to be voted to power. The slogan unquestionably sounds attractive but it would be a mere rhetoric unless the party presents before the voters a concrete outline of what it intends to do. How can we forget so soon that the Fifth

by the court of law, following trials of specific allegations of corruption. Failed to defend their corrupt leader in the court, the JP leaders are now out to exploit sentiments of the innocent people.

The Jamaat-e-Islami is once again poised to play its traditional card of religion in polls. The party frequently talks about 'Islamic economy' although 'such a system does not exist in any country of the world. However, the party's slogan for democracy is the biggest rhetoric, as it opposes the idea of sovereignty of people.

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One can argue that what is the use of compelling the parties to make commitments, especially when the parties love to forget them after the polls. Well, with the electoral pledges unmet, we at least would be in a position to identify those breaking their commitments, and that will eventually help us to become better judges as to who to vote for, and who to not.

To the Editor...

Prof A W Mahmood

Sir, When I saw and read the obituary of Professor Abdul Wadud Mahmood published on page 2 of The Daily Star on 15th March 1996, I got a thud in my heart. I thought it could be my Professor Abdul Wahab Mahmood who taught me Roman History during the years 1938 to 1940. I checked with his niece and my suspicion came true.

Prof A W Mahmood (alias Bachchu), son of late Mr Abdullah, deputy magistrate from Brahmanbaria, was a brilliant student although, who got 1st Class and stood 1st in History from the Dacca University in mid-1930s. While teaching in Chittagong College, Prof Mahmood got a state scholarship and went to England for higher studies, returned after two years and continued in the same college till 1941, after which he was transferred to Krishnanagar Government College. It was around this time, Prof Mahmood joined short commission in the Army as a Captain. After cessation of World War II, he joined Presidency College, Calcutta, where he worked as a colleague of Dr Shushobhon Sarkar, the head of the History Department. Later, he worked as principal, Moulanabazar College (formerly Islamia College), D P I (Assistant Director of Public Instructions) and later Member, Public Service Commission. After independence of Bangladesh, he set his feet on the soil of Bangladesh where he refused to come earlier when it was known as East Pakistan. He also became a visiting Professor to Dhaka University.

As a professor he was one who would keep his students spellbound. He would tell us how the Etruscans were thrown out of Rome by two sections, Patricians and the Plebeians; how the Romans played three big wars with the Carthage. While delivering his lectures emotionally, he would tell us how the Carthage were finally crushed and destroyed and how Augustus established

himself as the 1st Roman Emperor. From him we learnt how much the Greeks influenced Rome in art, literature and architecture.

He treated his students as his friends. That was the reason why he was so much loved and liked by them. He was a very good sportsman, representing his college (Chittagong College) team in football. He used to play tennis and table tennis equally well.

Last I met Prof Mahmood was at the Gulshan residence of his relation where National Professor Dr A Razaque and eminent Prof Dr S Mursheed were also present. Prof Mahmood is no longer alive but in the hearts of his students he will live forever.

May his soul rest in peace.

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Glorious uncertain cricket

Sir, I am no Aussie lover but my hats off to the descendants of the not so genteel Englishmen for their performance against the West Indies cricketers. They played a fantastic game and humbled the rejuvenated Windies. From 14/4 they recovered to 207/8, a no mean achievement. Then applied the pressure, 11/2 (two batsmen against eleven fielders), in a most professional manner. Their middle-order clicked very well and their fielding was a treat to watch. There was no let up, or rather, let down. Their professionalism and never say die attitude really impressed me and the love of cricket in this part of the world. The next going to Sri Lanka betrayed a rather lily-livered disposition. But they have made amends by their performance at Mohali. I wish our own cricketers had shown some of the above when they played Kenya in the last ICC Trophy.

The other match at Eden Garden was ... a dream-like beginning and a nightmare

ending. The crowd behaviour was disgusting with a capital D. I remember an MCC vs Pakistan match at Dhaka in the early sixties when Hanif Mohammad was at his peak. I was in school then myself threw a tangerine (not a bottle) at a boundary line fieldsmen (Barrington, I think), but not to hurt him I had hoped he would pick up and peel it and we'd have some fun. He didn't.

Sri Lanka showed great courage and again, professionalism, when they recovered from such a disastrous start — 2 wickets down in the very first over — and reached 251 in their allotted overs. The total certainly wasn't beyond India's reach. But the Indians crumbled against the spinners like the crumbling cricket on which they had chosen to bat second. They had beaten Pakistan earlier quite convincingly and were on top of the world and couldn't even contemplate a loss against the fast maturing Lankans. Lost they did and badly at that!

The crowd behaviour was abominable. No one expected that from the usually sporting Calcutta crowd. I wonder if the crowd felt that an outright defeat would cause a greater hurt to their psyche and 'CHOSE' defeat by default. They couldn't beat us. They won by default. This is a sorry thing. The biggest losers are the cricket lovers all over the world.

As I said earlier, I am no Aussie lover. I hoped the Lankans to win the final in style at Lahore and that was what they did, indeed!

Javed Hela

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Cricket vs baseball: A moron's view

Sir, The Daily Star recently carried, an article entitled 'Cricket in the Land of Morons.' Having been born and brought up in the land of morons (the United States), I was naturally intrigued. The ar-

gumented, although it was not unknown to the AL representatives in the probe body that all-party standing committees were there to regularly monitor the activities of different ministries. The AL's campaign strategy will definitely include making use of the 'pro-independence sentiments' of the people in the general elections. The fact that this year is the 25th anniversary of our independence, makes such a strategy more attractive. However, AL's political alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami, the party which opposed our war of indepen-

Parliament, constituted through the fairest elections the nation has ever seen, failed to function effectively due to lack of even minimum understanding between the major parties. The AL Chief must explain what magic would she work to avoid a possible repetition of that experience.

By all indications so far, the Jatiya Party is likely to bank on 'people's sympathy' for its imprisoned leader Ershad to win the heart of the voters.

Hussain Muhammad Ershad is not a political prisoner. He has been sent to jail

Laura Jean Badra

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Air safety

Sir, Mr M Zahidul Haque in his letter (DS 12 March) has expressed concern that journey by air is becoming risky day by day. No, it is not true; his argument is based on warped appreciation of the issue. He has also argued that the main cause of it is mechanical faults in aircraft during flight. This is also not wholly correct.

The safety of air travel is determined not by the number of accidents or being 'walked' i.e. if the pitcher has failed to place the pitch within the required range four times, the batter gets a 'free' base. Also, once the batter is on first base, then the decision whether to run or not as each succeeding batter hits becomes relevant. The batter on base can even 'steal' and extra one — i.e. take a base without another batter hitting. All of this adds to the strategy — and the excitement. The purpose of this is not to argue that baseball is better than cricket or cricket is better than baseball. Both of them are great games in their own way. One barrier to understanding cricket is expecting it to be 'like' baseball — one barrier to understanding baseball is to expect it to be 'like' cricket. Besides the superfi-

cialities — bowling, hitting a ball with a bat, having a certain number of 'outs' — there are surprisingly few similarities between cricket and baseball, especially in terms of strategies, the most fascinating part of any game. To thoroughly enjoy either one without confusing comparisons, I recommend starting with an entirely fresh mind. As a reformed 'moron' who has watched this World Cup with great enjoyment, I will certainly never again criticise cricket as a 'boring' game.

It is equally naive to assume that most of the accidents are caused by mechanical failures. Yes, it is one of the causes but not the major one. Many other factors of which human elements are no less important contribute to major accidents. Research and Development (R&D) plays an important role in the production of modern commercial aircraft; and consequently, there is constant improvement in safety and performance. Aged fleet is regularly updated through acquisition of most modern aircraft with the state-of-the-art technology (for example, Singapore Airlines) or through mandatory modifications (smaller carriers) of on-going fleet.

One should also bear in mind that new generation of aircraft constantly improve safety standards. In other words, all the major stakeholders — i.e. manufacturers, regulatory bodies, operators and inter-governmental/international organisations attach the highest priority to passenger safety. There is hardly any need for any other body, not even the unheard-of 'International Air Traffic Association' to take any initiative in this regard.

Air safety is a highly sophisticated subject and let us leave it to the specialists who know what it is all about to deal with it. Why should we indulge in this fancy?

Hedayat Ahmed

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