

BNP, Caught in a Timeless Pattern

by Chandra Shekhar Das

ing pretty fast indicating the relapse of a chronic disease.

Nobel laureate and perhaps the most influential litterateur of modern times, T S Eliot has a line in one of his poems: 'History is a pattern of timeless moments'. The sublime atom of a great poetic perception has significance even in the unpoetic reality of Bangladesh politics albeit in a roundabout manner. Truly history, more precisely the political history of Bangladesh is a pattern of

in a not too distant past. Although history in the form timeless moments are very much there in the consciousness of conscientious people, the BNP chose the fate of being the latest casualty for ignoring it. What is doubly mortifying, the BNP though assuming the throne with popular mandate in 1991 doing in the process a world of good to its previous image of being a party based in the cantonment, failed to distinguish itself from

meeting after the fall from grace, the party in a flagrant violation of its commitment to the democratic norm declared crusade against the government employees who drove the last nail in the BNP government's coffin by abstaining from work.

Whether the bureaucracy and other government functionaries were justified in their action is an altogether different ethical debate but the ominous fact that a political party freshly out of power can sound so threatening is a very sad commentary on all that have been said about the deontological obligation for institutionalising democracy. Tolerance, one of the basic tenets of democracy, has been appallingly missed in the utterance of party that has enjoyed power for full five years. If the BNP can react at its first exposure of being on the road then, it is really mind boggling even to imagine what exactly the reaction of the parties awaiting their turns at the helm will be. Logic of illogicality would be galore to justify all transgressions.

Reports published in different newspapers say that not only the bureaucrats, other professionals and intelligentsia have come under the 'scare campaign' of the BNP. With the party leaders encouraging unrefined, indiscreet aggression and vengeance, the reports of death threats over telephone come as no wonder. There could be a tendency in different quarters to play down this trend as brinkmanship associated in all pre-election campaign, nevertheless the bellicose spirit prevailing in the air is highly debilitating for the democracy on a firm platform. Existential concern or electoral gimmick whatever may be the reason behind such martial oratory, all parties with BNP in particular would do well to remember what Coleridge once said: 'In politics what begins with fear usually ends in folly.'

What is doubly mortifying, the BNP though assuming the throne with popular mandate in 1991 doing in the process a world of good to its previous image of being a party based in the cantonment, failed to distinguish itself from the eventuality encountered by the deposed general Ershad's government which simply abused all institutions during a reign marked by all out efforts to stay in power at any cost.

timeless moments; like the mathematical phenomenon of recurring decimal it keeps on showing the same figure as far as the qualitative change in the generic behaviour of the political parties is concerned. The word change typifies a stifling continuity of changelessness in our political arena. Not that the coming a cropper of the BNP government which many are attributing to a bloodless public coup was an unprecedented happening.

Stepping too much on the gas for the 'power mileage' robbed the former president Ershad of complete control over the different law enforcing agencies. There came a time towards the flag end of his nine year regime of autocracy when the police, army and all other licensed gun wilders in uniform turned silent witnesses to the demonstrative as well as the destructive sides of public wrath. The concept of duty and devotion underwent transformation and waited patiently for the emergence of a new order. All these happened

the eventuality encountered by the deposed general Ershad's government which simply abused all institutions during a reign marked by all out efforts to stay in power at any cost. All that Khaleda and her party gained from the nine year old struggle, as the more uncompromising elements in opposition politics seemed to have gone down the drain.

Having failed to arrest the tide of public resentment while being in power, the BNP still smarting under the humiliation of unwelcome negation is literally crying for the blood of those opposed them. The public meetings and the hastily made daises, a rather late, and unimaginative response to that of the different opposition parties have been resonant with the minatory oration of the BNP leaders including the former prime minister. Throwing aside the sagacity of watching the next move of its political rivals, the BNP has launched a potentially dangerous campaign against its opponents. In its very first public

LETTER FROM HARVARD Bosnia, a Fractured Nation



REFLECTIONS

by Dr Omar Rahman

IN recent days there has been a lot of skepticism about whether Bosnia can survive. Although the American brokered Dayton peace accords are proceeding nominally on schedule, a just released report produced by the Pentagon raises real questions about the long term viability of the Dayton plan, once the American forces leave in December. The issue is whether a secular multi-ethnic Bosnia can endure in the face of brute Serbian and Croatian nationalism. Is this hard earned peace a new beginning or just an interregnum in an intractable civil war?

The events of the past month have hardly been encouraging. The Serbs in the outlying area of Sarajevo have left en-masse, rather than continue to live under the new Bosnian Croat Federation. This evacuation has been to a large part catalyzed by the propaganda of the Bosnian Serb administration in Pale who have never accepted the notion of a multi-ethnic Bosnia and see this evacuation as another step in the ethnic cleansing which they have engaged in with a vengeance over the last four years. The stage is now set for a division of the former Bosnia-Herzegovina into three ethnically pure states: one for the Bosnian Serbs, one for the Bosnian Croats and the residue for the Bosnian Muslims.

The Muslims have of course gotten the worst end of the deal. After suffering from the genocidal slaughter of the Bosnian Serbs and to some extent from the Croats, they are now faced with the prospect of a truncated state surrounded by enemies militarily much more powerful than them. The irony in all of this is that it is the Bosnian Muslim state that causes the most concern in Europe. The fact of the matter is that the Bosnian Muslims never had a chance. Their tragedy was that they hap-

pened to be Muslim, at a time when militant Islam has supplanted the Soviets as the intimate enemy in the consciousness of the west. The specter of a Muslim state in Europe was, to put it mildly, a most unpalatable prospect for the rest of Europe, particularly Britain and France. The Muslim card was played masterfully by the Serbs who capitalized on the historical antipathy of Christian Europe to the spread of Islam. The last time that the Muslims had a significant visible presence in Europe was when the Ottoman Turks nearly captured Vienna in the 16th century. Images of the crusades, the holy fight of Christendom against militant Islam were the unspoken rhetoric of this propaganda war by the Serbs.

In more recent times, a resurgent right wing in France has scapegoated the Muslim North African immigrant population as responsible for the economic woes of France in the 1990s. Immigrants are the new 'devil' for the European right, whether they be skinheads in Britain, the party of Le Pen in France, or the Neo Nazis in Germany. In an earlier era when European economies were booming, they welcomed compliant Turkish, North African, and South Asian immigrants (many of whom were Muslim) to do the low paying dirty jobs that was beneath the dignity of the native Europeans. In a new world economy, with Europe falling behind in the economic productivity race, these immigrants who were welcomed with open arms have suddenly become a problem.

Not only are these Muslim immigrants supposedly an economic drain on European society, they also pose a threat to the cultural fabric of Europe. Not a day goes by without some report about the barbarity of Islamic customs, the denigration of women, the 'fanaticism' or Islamic militants. Even the less sensationalist of the reports focus on the basic inherent difference between European culture and the so called Islamic culture.

Given this antipathy towards Islam and the sense of being besieged by a militant, expanding Islamic revivalist force, it is no wonder that most of Europe 'fiddled while Bosnia burned'—the Serbs were after all keeping Europe safe from the 'Muslim hordes'. It is curious that one of the few areas of ideological commonality between the Russians (the biggest supporter of the Serbs) and Western Europeans is their perception of an expansionist Islam being the common enemy.

Even now after being bonafide victims of a vicious programme of genocide, the Bosnians still have to make excuses for being Muslim. There is a sense that European help is predicted on the assurance that Bosnia is more European than Muslim. The Bosnians must disavow any show of solidarity or identification with rogue countries like Iran, lest the Europeans withdraw their troops and let the Serbs continue their slaughter.

What lies ahead for Bosnia? Once American troops leave in December, will the fighting resume? The recent Pentagon

report suggests that the indications for a lasting peace are not favourable. The protagonists in this Balkan misadventure appear to be just biding time, and with every passing day the attraction of Bosnia divided along ethnic lines increases. It is not at all clear that in a country where the Serbs and to some extent the Croats have engaged in a holy war to annihilate the Bosnian Muslims, that all three can live side by side in the future as if nothing happened. This is a fractured nation, perhaps broken beyond repair, with both its economy and its soul in pieces.

I think it is time to accept the reality that the dream of a multi-ethnic Bosnia is dead. It died in the face of an aggressive Serbian nationalism nurtured on a notion of ethnic purity and, historical, almost mystical persecution complex. It died in the face of an European passivity, which would allow a people to be slaughtered, because of ambivalence about their Europeaness.

If one is to be honest, the only really viable future is that of three different, ethnically predominant states in the former Bosnia Herzegovina. The greatest danger is that the Bosnian 'Muslim state', being the weakest militarily and lacking in strong sponsors because of its Islamic underpinnings, will be swallowed up by the expansionist Serbs and Croats. In view of the history of the Bosnian debacle, it is unlikely that the rest of Europe would intervene in any meaningful way to prevent this eventuality. To avert this very probable outcome, it is imperative that the Bosnian Muslims be able to defend themselves. Since Europeans are not in favour of this option, the only hope of deliverance from a future of tyranny under the Serbs/Croats for Bosnian Muslims, is to pray that the Americans will allow them arms to fight for their survival.

Pollution Invades Surma, Kushiara

Fateh Osmani writes from Sylhet

NOT long ago the Surma and its twin river Kushiara were the lifeblood of Sylhet. They are now becoming the woes of the people here. A monstrous pollution, originating from mindless disposal of industrial wastes, has invaded both the rivers, threatening the livelihood of a large section of population in this part of the country.

Hundreds of thousands of people, farmers and fishermen in particular, in greater Sylhet district have been dependent for generations on these twin rivers for their livelihood. They now anxiously and helplessly watch an all-pervasive pollution endangering the rivers they used to depend on such on. Once abundant fish resources are on the wane. Also, the rising toxicity of rivers threatened surface water irrigation in the region.

Investigation revealed that years of ceaseless disposal of toxic industrial wastes mostly from two paper mills, one of those situated on the other side of the border, was behind intoxication of the Surma and Kushiara.

A giant paper mill on the Indian territory close to frontier of Zakiganj was discharging huge volume of untreated wastes everyday into the river Barak, subsequently polluting both the Surma and Kushiara in the downstream. The Panchgram Paper Mills, said to be the biggest paper factory in Asia, is allegedly without modern treatment facility. It releases the wastes straight to the Barak which split into two streams, Surma and Kushiara, while entering Bangladesh territory through

Zakiganj.

Similarly responsible is Sylhet Pulp and Paper Mills at Chhatak and Sunamganj. This industry has been producing 75 tons of pulp everyday on an average since its inception in 1977. To remain on production, the mill requires 500 tons of water and 110 kilograms of caustic soda each day. Also, significant volume of bleaching powder and calcium hydrochloride are used to whiten the pulp. These toxic chemicals reach the Surma, half of fully untreated.

Many are now avoiding the catches from these rivers. They say fishes smell bad and so is the taste. Fisheries experts expressed concern that toxicity in water was obstructing natural fertilisation of eggs. Many species are even facing extinction. Fishermen in large numbers are leaving their age-old profession.

People using the waters of these rivers are increasingly facing health hazards. Polluted water is causing various diseases—diarrhoea and other intestinal disorders, skin dis-

continue to use river water for irrigation purposes.

Md Moinuddin of village Madarkhal in Zakiganj said many a villager had stopped taking fishes from rivers. They are also avoiding river water even for household uses. 'It irritates eyes, and is causing scabbies,' he said.

According to local Awami League leader Muhibur Rahman Manik, about 40,000 people in Chhatak and Doarabazar are the victims of river pollution. He was particularly worried at the decline in fish resources. 'Catches from Surma now smell bad even after cooking,' he said.

Dr Abdul Hai Minar at the Sylhet Medical College and Hospital warned that consumption of water, polluted by chemical wastes, might result in skin and respiratory diseases.

According to Abdul Majid, a former parliament member from Zakiganj, local people first raised complaint against river pollution in the early eighties. Amidst public uproar, the issue was then discussed in parliament. A Tk 10 crore project was also drawn up at that time to set up a modern waste treatment plant at the Sylhet Pulp Mill. 'But the proposal has been in the cold chamber,' Majid lamented. He said revival of the project immediately was crucial if to save Sylhet from an environmental disaster.

Local people said Indian authorities should simultaneously be pursued to take urgent measures against discharge of untreated wastes to the Barak from the paper mill at Panchgram.

— NEWS NETWORK

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Anwar Hossain, General Secretary of the mill workers union, admitted tons of wastes flow to the river everyday through a canal called Kumar Khal. Colour of the river water has turned black at Kumna where the canal meets the Surma. When the river flashes during floods, closed water bodies nearby get polluted too. Pollution of the Surma and Kushiara is about to trigger an environmental and economic disaster in Sylhet.

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Take the case of Zakiganj alone. River pollution has hit people of all levels here. Local peasant leader Faizur Rahman Khair expressed concern at the future of surface water irrigation in Zakiganj. There are 66,650 acres of farmland in the thana and majority farmers are traditionally dependent on river water for irrigation. Peasants are now wondering whether or not they should

No Excuse for No NIDs

by Rashida Ahmad

What Are NIDs?

NATIONAL IMMUNISATION DAYS (NIDs) are annual events which supplement routine immunisation by providing blanket coverage on a single day for young children irrespective of their previous vaccination status. Two rounds of NIDs, 4-6 weeks apart, are conducted each year.

This year's NIDs will be conducted on April 16 and May 16
NIDs are critical for the eradication of polio: such blanket coverage interrupts the circulation of wild polio virus. Routine vaccination coverage is not enough to eradicate polio. Though Bangladesh has a routine coverage rate of 80 per cent, even under ideal conditions such vaccination is less than 100 per cent effective—as many as 30 per cent of those vaccinated may not be adequately covered which is why it is crucial that such routine vaccination must be supplemented by blanket coverage with annual NIDs. Almost all children are infected by the highly contagious wild polio virus. Transmission usually occurs in children under five.

NID vaccinations are accompanied by Vitamin A supplements which limit the severity of diarrhoea and pneumonia in children. Government policy is to provide Vitamin A supplements to all children from one to five years of age, through campaigns every six months. The last Vitamin A campaign was conducted in October 1995.

has an immensely successful track record in the area of immunisation. The near-miracle of a national immunisation programme that over a period of five years resulted in 80 per cent coverage in 1990, from under 5 per cent in 1985, has been acclaimed worldwide.

Last year's NIDs, as Bangladesh began to intensify polio eradication efforts, were conducted under adverse circumstances with the help of 600,000 volunteers (one in every 200 Bangladeshis). Over 18 million (94 per cent) under-five children received at least one dose of oral vaccination, and 13 million (one to five-year-olds) received Vitamin A supplements.

Our expertise in planning and conducting NIDs, in mobilising the whole nation, has been recognised not only regionally but health officials throughout Asia have looked to us to learn—following our example India, Nepal, Myanmar and Indonesia have conducted NIDs in 1995 and 1996.

Failure to carry out this year's NIDs would be a counter-attack on ourselves as a

leader in immunisation efforts for Southeast Asia. But more importantly, it will have adverse effects not only in Bangladesh, but on the entire region with regards to polio eradication.

A highly contagious disease such as polio knows no geographical or political boundaries. Without immunisation, almost all people are infected, by the age of five. One to two per cent develop the disease which leads to lifelong disability or death.

Immunisation efforts have successfully eradicated the disease from the 'Western hemisphere'—no cases have been reported in the Americas since 1991.

There are many economic arguments (for those interested in reducing the issue to such terms) for the eradication of polio and continuing immunisation efforts in developing countries: an estimated \$2 billion has been saved worldwide since the eradication of small pox in the '70s; similarly, in the US alone an estimated \$200 million will be saved in immunisation costs

now that polio vaccination is no longer required—to say nothing of savings in the cost of disabilities as a result of polio.

To fail to conduct the 1996 NIDs, with regard to the economics of the situation in the short term, would mean recalling 25 million oral vaccination doses already distributed to the thana level in 41 out of 64 districts (for the vaccine to remain effective it should not be stored at this level for more than one month as continuous refrigeration is disrupted by unreliable power supply). Over \$7 million has already been committed by the Bangladesh Government with much help from other donors including the Government of Japan, SIDA, Rotary International, CDC-Atlanta, USAID, WHO and UNICEF.

Furthermore, for highest effectiveness of immunisation, NIDs must be carried out in the winter season. The vaccine is much less effective during the hot wet summer months when transmission of polio and other similarly transmitted enteroviruses is highest. Vaccination before the summer season also substantially reduces the number of polio cases occurring in this peak season was seen in 1995. The summer months, however, are very nearly upon us. April 16th/May 16th are the last opportunity to conduct NIDs in this crucial low transmission period.

Seventy per cent of polio cases worldwide presently occur in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. In the absence of vaccination 15,000 children a year in Bangladesh would be disabled or die each year. Even with present coverage 2000 children a year develop polio.

These figures alone, regardless of economic benefits, must persuade us to continue immunisation at all costs. There has been much talk about the immense economic costs of the recent political struggles. They cannot be ignored. But let us not forget our other priorities. Let us not throw away our babies with the bathwater.

Healthy Cities for Better Life

by S M Morshed

THE theme of the World Health Day 1996 observed yesterday, April 7 is 'Healthy Cities for Better Life'. This has been very appropriately decided at least in the context of the present day trend of increasing city pollution. The theme will undoubtedly generate increased awareness of the people on the problems and the effects of city pollution. 'Healthy cities' and 'better life' are co-related. None can think of better life without healthy city.

Better life means disease free health, financially well off, mentally sound and rich. On the other hand, the indicators of healthy cities are reasonable size of population with civic sense, cleanliness and structural facilities with necessary amenities of life. Now let us identify the factors of healthy cities that ensure better life: A healthy city should not be overpopulated. The cities like Delhi, Karachi and Dhaka are overpopulated. As a result, now Calcutta is the sixth polluted city in the

world. The floating population of Bombay is the main cause of health hazards. Eighty per cent of the sky above Bangkok always remains covered with smoke.

A Research report, published by the Urban Research Centre, Department of Geography, Dhaka University shows that there is no healthy environment in the slums of Dhaka city. Ninety-four per cent of the slum dwellers pass their excreta beside their so-called bed room or kitchen. Fifty-four per cent of the slum children pass excreta under open sky. Only 0.06 per cent dwellers have access to pure water. A hundred and fifty tanneries of Hajirabag are the shining example of industrial pollution. Poisonous waste of this industry mixes with water. The water of Dhanmondi lake is also polluted by indiscriminate waste disposal. Everyday 15000 cubic metric ton liquid waste pollute the environment. Khulna and Chittagong city are

also suffering from such pollution.

Black smoke released by transport in the cities is dangerous for us. Because the smoke consists harmful carbon monoxide and nitrogen oxide. A survey report of an international organization indicates that Dhaka has got the highest air pollution caused by transport, which can lead to such diseases as tuberculosis and cancer.

According to an ESCAP report, the rate of air pollution in Dhaka is higher than in Bangkok, Seoul and Calcutta. This polluted air make the heart and liver weak and affect purity of our blood. The effect of black smoke is more harmful for pregnant mothers and their babies.

It is informed by the Directorate of Environment that here the degree of sound has increased up to 65-75 decibel, which is a hazardous stage of sound pollution. Sound pollution is injurious to health. Ac-

cording to the environmentalists: (a) high sound hinders regular function of heart; (b) it is also responsible for peptic ulcer; (c) it decreases the hearing capacity; and (d) may make people mad.

There is a common trend among the ordinary people of the third world countries to raise low lands by any means. Raising the lowland with dust and waste near Jaitrabi of Dhaka can be an example of such activities. As a result, the inhabitants of this area and the passersby are the victims of environment pollution. The Annual Report of IUCN has suggested for immediate prevention of city pollution in Dhaka, Chittagong and Khulna.

No development can sustain if it is not friendly to environment. On the other hand, development cannot make any headway if the environment is not congenial environment development and urbanization are essential for a decent life. So, we should take proper decision and steps to ensure such a decent life.

The writer is Research Associate, Gono Unnayan Procheta (GUP).

James Bond

BY IAN FLEMING
DRAWING BY MORRIS



Tom and Jerry

BY ANA FEATURES



LABOUR RELATIONS, EH?

...ONE CAN SEE THAT YOUR UN-WORKING POSITION IS OF THE HIGHEST PROFESSIONAL CALIBRE!



Tom and Jerry

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