

Is anybody Looking after Dhaka?

We have a caretaker government to 'take care' of the country. Is there anybody to take care of our beloved Dhaka city? From the looks of it, no. Take any aspect of our capital city and one would realise the truth of our frustration. Safety of our lives and security of our property are something that we have long handed over to fate. For things like electricity, water, sewage — for all of which the rates are high and the municipal tax is ever on the rise — we have nothing to write home about. In many areas of Dhaka water crisis has reached the most acute stage. Electricity is now in severe short supply leading to disruption in production and of office work, not to mention discomfort in our day to day living.

Perhaps nowhere is the orphaned state of the city more apparent than in city traffic. Nothing is certain about traffic any more. Any time of the day or evening one can be stuck for hours in almost all principal parts of the city. To put it bluntly there is no governance of the city anymore. Who, or which body, is in charge of the city is the question that everyone would like to see answered.

While not a priority concern, yet we feel compelled to ask the caretaker government to focus its attention on the city's rotting state. We feel that since it does not have to seek votes for itself, it may be able to take some harsh decisions about clearing up roads of illegal occupants or of mass encroachments that have occurred in areas such as Bangabandhu Avenue, Karwan Bazar, New Market and Nilkhet area, many parts of the old town, to name just a few.

We would like to remind Mayor Hanif about his election pledge to make Dhaka a better city to live in. He had assured us about clearing the roads of all sorts of encroachments, pledges that he has seemingly forgotten now. We recall that he used to complain about non-cooperation by the BNP government in carrying out his work. What is stopping him from doing his work now? In fact, as the only elected city leader his standing today is far higher than in normal times. This is his chance to show us how effective a city father can he really be.

We appeal to the caretaker government, and also to Mayor Hanif to take a serious look into the affairs of our capital city before these really, and perhaps irrevocably, go out of hand.

Fire in Forest

Two square kilometres of deep forest has been burnt down in the Sundarbans in a bushfire that started on April 19 noon. It is a national disaster. But it would hardly appear to be so from the media coverage it has so far received. There is a suspicion that the administration's response to it has not been any closer to the desirable than the media's.

Forest is the most neglected living thing in Bangladesh — after man, of course. It is being relentlessly cut and plundered with perhaps no one to even stand up against it. The forest department has its field-level manning so poor as to shame even the scandalous understaffing of the judiciary. The few that are supposed to tend and protect these, have to strike up arrangements with the pressuring powerful people on the jungle-fringes, under pain of harassments not infrequently amounting to murder. No one other than a fool would expect our forest bosses to have, as things are, meaningful fire-fighting arrangement and in time, to use them effectively.

Even so, the forestwalls and the government in its all-embracing entity and the media — electronic as well as print — could very well project the disaster for what it means to the nation. The necessity of this is missing in every quarter. Why? Because it is forests and not something closer to home like mastans and elections and police aberrations?

In fact, the forests, all of what there is in Bangladesh, are burning for decades without respite. This present fire near the Katakhal forest office is minuscule compared to what is consuming all of Bangladesh's forests.

Bush fires are one of man's most unyielding enemies — the Chinese forest fire continuing untamed for years could even be seen from the moon. But those that profit from a systematic scuttling of the nation's destiny are far more formidable.

A Virtual Hell

Did Dante in his mortal coils visit purgatory? Yudhishtira, however, had some taste of hell before entering for eternity into paradise. Muslims have the intimations of hell only and soon after death, the experience being called *gore ajab*. On Saturday hundreds of inmates of the Mohsin Hall, a Dhaka University residence, were thrown into hell alive. Three hundred of them were vomiting and, yes, defecating non-stop — respite coming only when one lost consciousness. These 300 were hospitalised.

The knowledgeable ones wonder why every other day there isn't an outbreak of massive food poisoning in one or the other of the 14 residential halls. The food is substandard to unconsumable the year-round and the quantity and kind are not such that would sustain an adolescent in health. If the pittance that is charged for food cannot materialise a proper meal even after hefty subsidy, the price should be raised to more realistic levels and the portions be guaranteed to constitute a truly full and wholesome meal.

Hygiene and control are items that do not cost as much as rice and fish and meat. Teachers and other university officials in charge of hall messing have long given up doing their part.

The matter should closely be gone into and the culprit and the negligent punished.

Politicians, Civil Society and Democratic Governance

LET me start with a provocative, and deliberately polemical, proposition. Governance in Bangladesh is seriously flawed in large measure because it has been usurped by two major political parties that are not natural allies of democracy. (With some honourable exceptions. I regard the smaller parties as variants of the same problem.) Both the Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) are attached, like an uncut umbilical cord, to a bitter and divisive past. They represent a generation of politicians who have a latent propensity to rule for ever and thus an enduring reluctance to accept defeat with grace. The political system thus needs to be tempered by a watchful and vigorous civil society and buttressed by a wide range of constitutional safeguards. The issue of constitutional safeguards deserves a separate paper, but I will focus on the topic of civil society in order to establish my premise, let me make an uncomfortable digression — a potted review of our ignoble past based on the work of Anthony Mascarenhas.

During the heady days of Joy Bangla and post-liberation Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was everybody's *Bangabandhu*. Today, he still is such a phenomenon to very many, but probably not to all. Any dispassionate analysis of history must, of course, confirm his status as the Founder of the state of Bangladesh. Nevertheless, as a self-confessed *Bangalee* and *Bangladeshi-Australian*, I have always struggled with the acutely painful fact that *Bangabandhu*, managed to make the dreadful transition from a dedicated democrat to the controversial creator of a one party state.

BNP loyalists do not have much to cheer about. As we all know, BNP came into being through the efforts of the late President Ziaur Rahman. Widely respected and remembered as a hero of the Liberation War, President Zia — as eclectic mix and the instinctive distrust of extremism represent, in my view, the fundamental bases on which democratic norms and values can be nourished. That it has not occurred as a natural phenomenon is, to a significant degree, a reflection of a system dominated by political parties still wrestling with demons from a dark past.

Someone once told me that he has seen an opinion survey which shows that the world is not divided into BNP *walshs* and Awami *leaguers*. Apparently, 70% are uncommitted voters, and do not reflect entrenched party loyalties. I have not been able to verify the existence of such a survey, but there is an element of plausibility in this piece of unconfirmed statistic. Electoral preferences in Bangladesh do not reflect historical patterns of voting behaviour simply because the country is not a mature democracy and does not, as yet, have a long and regular tradition of elections. Bangladesh, in

by Iyanatul Islam

demographic terms is also a young and growing society. In such a state of flux, particular ideas and ideology may not have the opportunity to establish firm roots.

If, as I have argued, there are some facilitating conditions that suggest the existence of a large, or at least significant, constituency who are not driven by party loyalties, then it permits me to argue that this is the *middle ground* that could breed an assertive civil society. Inevitably, this process will take time to happen. Currently, members of the *middle ground* appear to be committing an implicit conspiracy of silence by refraining from political discourse in a public forum. I sometimes think that it reflects

I wish the major political parties would realise that we are both *Bangalees* and *Bangladeshis*. We represent the inimitable combination of a wonderful set of values that enable us to be privately pious and publicly secular, to embrace *Pahela Baishakh* and *Shab-e-Barat* with equal exuberance and earnestness.

an exaggerated apprehension of attracting dirty labels (one is either a BNP stooge or an AL sycophant). While an implicit conspiracy of silence is a safe option at an individual level, from a collective perspective it has a deleterious effect on the democratic process. Thus, civil society surrenders the terrain to self-seeking politicians and their disreputable band of slogan-chanting followers (or, even worse, gun-toting storm-troopers).

While the growth of a watchful civil society is a long-run phenomenon, certain mechanisms may be put into place that could speed up the process. The core idea is that concerned citizens and committed professionals should build up a forum where every facet of public policy is subject to a regular process of rigorous scrutiny. An eminent Bangladeshi economist, Professor Rehman Sobhan, is an eloquent advocate of this view. Here is a lucid summary of his position:

economic information and analyses within a transparent and accountable framework.

I have another inspiring story to tell — this time from South Korea. The latter, as we all know, has attracted worldwide attention as a highly successful newly industrialised economy (NIE). Since 1987, it has also become a model of a newly democratised polity (NDP). In one of my several visits to the country, I got in touch with the CCEJ — Citizen's Coalition for Economic Justice. It is an encompassing forum of concerned citizens and professionals. In an extensive interview held in July 1992, the Secretary of the CCEJ told me that the organisation represented the first systemic social movement in South Korea that tried to combine the strategy of

'street politics' with a dispassionate and careful scrutiny of every facet of public policy by an independent team of social scientists and economists. The results of this process of inherent scrutiny were, in turn, disseminated through a high-profile strategy of publications, discussions and debates.

I believe that the CCEJ played an important role in nurturing a viable and vibrant civil society in South Korea. Issues that were hidden in the arcane world of academia and government-sponsored *think-tanks* and suppressed in the pages of professional journals suddenly sprang to life and became an inherent part of the domain of public discourse.

What are the prospects for replicating a CCEJ pro-type in Bangladesh? I believe that a conducive environment exists for such an exercise in emulation. There is, of course, the initiative and enterprise demonstrated by Professor Sobhan. In addition,

Bangladesh has diverse clusters of committed professionals and concerned citizens who (through their respective organisations) seek — in a firm, forthright manner — to raise public awareness of topical social issues (human rights, environmental crime, gender discrimination etc). Such diverse clusters represent a durable basis for the emergence of a Bangladeshi-equivalent of a CCEJ.

Let me end with another message of hope. We can easily be misled into thinking that Bangladesh is unique, as a new democracy, in suffering from a crisis of governability. This is by no means the case. Atul Kohli of Princeton University has identified a similar problem of governability in all developing country democracies. As he observed: 'they tend to be volatile because of poorly formed political institutions.' It

must also be noted that even mature democracies have realised that they cannot take their political system for granted. Jonathan Rauch has recently issued a damning indictment of the US political system. He calls it a case of *democlerosis* — a system of organised and self-seeking lobby groups that has driven the country into a state of *gridlock*. Thus, all democracies — both new and old — have to be engaged in the difficult task of finding ways of nurturing and nourishing good governance. If Bangladesh can make some contribution in responding to such a challenge, it can feel justifiably proud of making a lasting contribution to the global quest for a secure, humane and prosperous future.

The author, a Cambridge PhD teaches at an Australian University. He is currently visiting Dhaka in connection with a book that he is co-authoring on South-Asian Economies (to be published by Routledge, UK).

Our regular column 'ENCHIRIDION' will be published tomorrow.

International Labour Standard

Impact on Textile and Apparel Industry in Developing Countries

THE World's richest economies — recently proposed the sensitive issue of making a potted review of our ignoble past based on the work of Anthony Mascarenhas. During the heady days of Joy Bangla and post-liberation Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was everybody's *Bangabandhu*. Today, he still is such a phenomenon to very many, but probably not to all. Any dispassionate analysis of history must, of course, confirm his status as the Founder of the state of Bangladesh. Nevertheless, as a self-confessed *Bangalee* and *Bangladeshi-Australian*, I have always struggled with the acutely painful fact that *Bangabandhu*, managed to make the dreadful transition from a dedicated democrat to the controversial creator of a one party state.

The Group suggested trade sanctions on countries which exploited children and prisoners. Developing countries have protested the proposal that by linking trade to working conditions it had been done to protect the interest of the labour of the industrialised countries where the wage is extremely high compared to that in developing countries. European officials welcomed the proposal because the core standards would serve the interest of their entrepreneurs in keeping their products pre-competitive compared to that of the rising economic tigers of the developing countries.

Exports of apparel products from the Caribbeans to the US have been increasing and they are now cited as the largest buyers of US manufactured textiles, accounting for nearly 40 per cent of these products, according to a report published in *Asian Textile Clothing* (ATN). Caribbean countries have expressed their deep concern that US manufacturers, fearing the dumping of cheap apparel imports, would pressurize their government to impose further restrictions. Apparel was not included to the list of the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI) which permits duty-free import of a range of products from the Caribbean into the US. According to available information on the Caribbean Textile and Apparel Institute, the apparel industry has been able to generate some 500,000 jobs in the region, the beneficiaries of which are mainly women, who otherwise suffer from acute unemployment.

A report in a recent issue of *deadeus*, the magazine of the American Academy of Art and Sciences quoted to have said that 'globalisation of labour was more advanced in earlier generations than today.' It has been described as an unrestricted pattern of world employment was from the final decades of the last century

by Imtiaz Ahmed Rumez

up to the outbreak of the First World War. In every year, from 1880 to 1913, between 600,000 and 1.5 million Europeans crossed the Atlantic in search of new life to the countries of the North and South America. That was a much greater proportion of the population of the host or originating countries than the volume of migration the people of the modern world are witnessing during the 1990s, from poor to rich countries. Moreover, both China and India who were large manpower exporters in the past are no longer so today.

In New York city alone, the US general accounting office estimates there are more than 4500 sweatshops, employing some 50,000 workers. In Los Angeles there are even more, according to recent available data. Often most workers are women in apparel manufacturing and restaurant work. There are many others from the vulnerable groups who recent by emigrated from China or Latin America and speak little English. New York's Chinatown is a telling example of how new immigrants are exploited in sweatshops.

A report published in a newspaper described the worst case scenario when gov-

a third of the total for the developing countries. But the fastest growth over the period will be elsewhere in Asia, especially the Indian sub-continent (up 41 per cent) and in East and South East Asia (up 57 per cent). The textile industry tends to shift eastward and by 2004 the developing countries will account for 65 per cent of global consumption.

In apparel business, the price, quality, shipment in time, etc play the prime role in the international market. The wage of labour in the apparel sector in Bangladesh is the lowest compared to other competing countries like India, Pakistan, China, Thailand, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, East European countries, Nepal, Indonesia and Hong Kong, though the 'labour' in the garment sector in Bangladesh is not so efficient as that in other countries like Hong Kong, South Korea, Sri Lanka while manufacturing in terms of fastest time. The developed countries use high technology, the labour wage is extremely high compared to Bangladesh's. According to *Warner International* the hourly wage rate in the apparel industry in Germany, USA, South Korea, Hong Kong, Turkey, Mexico and Poland are

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Recovery of illegal arms

Sir, I had a discussion with Major General Dr A R Khan regarding 'Recovery of Illegal Arms' and had given him a number of suggestions, out of which only one suggestion has been implemented and that also partially. I would like to suggest the following:

Cash Reward: Cash reward should be given to any one surrendering any arms. If the police recovers arms then the individual/all those who participated should be given a cash reward immediately. This would act as a great incentive.

Police Medal: Any police officer recovering one hundred arms should be given a Police Medal.

Accelerated Promotion: Any police officer recovering one thousand arms should be given accelerated promotion.

Punishment: Any OC/Police Officer failing to perform his duties in the recovery of arms should be given punishment — reprimand, demotion, or posted out to Hill Tracts District.

I am certain the above will go a long way in the recovery of illegal weapons.

I would also suggest to the Chief Advisor of the Caretaker Government to visit BDR HQ at Peelkhana, Police HQ at Rajar Bagh Lines, and Ansar HQ as Minister in Charge of Home Department.

Major General Quazi Golam, Major K.A. Hossain, Dharmendra R/A, Dhaka

is one of the largest democracies in the world, having worst political record but surprisingly they managed to virtually ban student politics at college and university levels. There are news of bribes and scam but no session jam in India at all. Our four-year university education takes eight years to complete. Wealthy students are moving out towards USA and India for higher studies. According to HC sources at New Delhi, more than 100,000 students are studying in India. They are spending on average, \$150 per month. More is spent for studying in the USA.

Due to continuous strikes called by the political parties, our export sector sustained loss which amounts \$3 billion per annum, and our reputation around the world was tarnished. At present, our people are divided and frustrated. It is high time to impose complete ban on 'student politics' all over the country. After resignation of each government, all ministers concerned should be accountable to the people's court of justice. Their net assets at home and abroad should be evaluated. Rampant and widespread corruption must be rooted out from top to bottom. We, the new generation, expect better economic prospect for the nation.

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About 65 per cent of our population remain illiterate, almost 70 per cent live below the poverty line. Ours is one of the poorest per capita income in the world. Unemployment is hovering around 50 per cent of total employable population. During 25 years of politics, three different parties have ruled the country. Many of the cabinet ministers allegedly accumulated millions. This money came from foreign donor countries in terms of aid, loan and natural disaster allowances. Student wings of four major parties indulged in negative politics of violence. Many students known as extortionist unfortunately happened to be trouble makers.

Neighboring country, India,

people as hostage to implement their political aim by generating fear through violence committed by hired thugs.

In the article 'This Time, without Mayhem', I would like to congratulate Miss Mahjabeen Hasan, a student of Class IX for courageously advising both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia to retire from the leadership of their respective parties and put an end to their personal feud which had almost destroyed the country's economy and brought about terrible miseries to 120 million people.

M Rahman, Khulshi, Chittagong

Let there be a judicial probe

Sir, An unprecedented situation occurred due to participation of some senior government officials and making speeches from the dais of a political party a few days back. One of them tried to justify the action in an interview with the BBC. The reasons given by him are unacceptable and do not stand to reason.

The BNP has raised the issue with the Chief of the caretaker government and expressed concern that with such people in the administration election cannot be held in a neutral atmosphere.

Paranoid politics

Sir, My attention has been drawn to two articles on page 5 of your esteemed newspaper published on April 6, 1996.

Under 'People's Rights' written by Mr Hafeez Biswas, I would like to further add that no politician or political party has a right to keep majority

judicial enquiry committee to probe into the matter with such terms of reference as to whether the officials of the Republic can publicly participate in political rallies and express solidarity with political views under existing government rules. If not, what action should be taken against them and what measures to be taken to prevent recurrence of such events in the future? This is very important not only for holding the upcoming election in a neutral manner but also to uphold the image of the employees of the Republic in the public mind.

A former government officer, Dhaka

Save the beggars

Sir, It is a scorching noon, people are enjoying recess. Suddenly, the calling bell strikes perturbing your nap. You rush to the door with frowning somebody stretches his arms towards you; he wants something — he is a beggar. Similarly, we are accosted by the beggars on footpaths, traffic signals, markets and everywhere. Actually, country is infected with beggar-menace.

Everyday, beggars are roaming about from door to door, soliciting alms in different ways. Besides one-man system, a group of entourage rattles a trolley with a disabled man inside crosses city's lanes and requests for alms chanting religious chorus. Sometimes, paralysed fellows are left on the overbridges or in the crowded places of city's main intersections. Passers by get sympathised and donate money.

Today's beggars have the choices. They refuse *pana bhat*, stiff bread, even fifty

Reclamation is not possible overnight. Elimination of beggars and its subsequent restoration through pragmatic steps are quite a task. Concerted drive, in course of time, will reduce beggars from liabilities to asset.

Nasruddin Ahmed, C/O. Mairuddin Ahmed, (Beng. Dept), Dhaka City College, Dhaka 1205.

Sound pollution

Sir, Out of the numerous sources of sound pollution in Dhaka, a serious one is created by the helicopters belonging to the Air Force. Must they carry out their flying manoeuvres over the capital city? It seems that they are not aware of the disturbing noise their flying machines make.

May be if the authorities concerned try a little, they can find some other site for their flying practices.

R Adhikari, Mirpur-10, Dhaka