

Declaration of Assets

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has taken the first definitive step to offer a clean administration. By a cabinet decision on Tuesday ministers and state ministers have been required to submit accounts of their wealth and property. The following day in a tenor-setting statement before the leaders and members of Sarkari Karmachari Sanghati Parishad she pointed out that she would not hesitate to take action against ministers if they were found indulging in corruption. A news item in a prominent Bangla daily had informed the other day that efforts were underway to strengthen the anti-corruption set-up and provide it with a greater freedom of action in matters of investigation.

Given our tradition of a pyramidal manifestation of corruption, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has rightly begun at the top to ensure a clean image of her government. The percolation effect is expected to be felt across the officialdom. Also, it is likely to impact positively on the minds of business people.

So the new PM's no-nonsense pre-emptive measures to rid her governance of corruption or any negative reputation, as she goes along, are highly appreciated by us.

In a front-page commentary less than a week ago we tried to make out a case for a three-tier public declaration of assets and liabilities by the ministers and state ministers in the first place followed by MPs of the Treasury Bench and by those in the opposition and from other political parties — in that order. Our point of emphasis was that declarations be repeated every year for comparison with the original figures submitted. It seems the process has just begun and we are thankful to the government for the same hoping that it will be taken to its logical conclusion.

Unshakable public confidence in a system is the best guarantee for its success. There are two ways of ensuring this: first, we build accountability and transparency into the hierarchies of the government; and second, the government remains answerable to the parliamentary committees.

By all sights and sounds, we are poised to have both in place to enrich and invigorate our democratic polity.

Protest with Life

Romana Afroz Tandra made a conscious choice for bringing an end to her life. She did it because she valued human dignity above everything else. The ill-fated student of Mirpur Ideal College, who went to spend a few days at her home in Mandalpara of Rangpur town before her tragic death, has indeed put the entire society to shame.

She was not only assaulted by three perverted youths of her locality when she went to purchase a match box but was also disrobed. Her cry for help went in vain as no one dared come forward to rescue her from the degenerated scions of influential men. In desperation Romana managed to get herself free and gave the three assaulters a chase with a *boti* (billhook). The mastans responded with a thorough beating of the girl at her home.

That was the second time Romana was humiliated. But it was not the end to her disgrace. A *shalish* (sort of local council) humiliated her for the third time over. It came up merely with the decision that the three offenders ask for Romania's forgiveness. The girl could not take it any more. Her sense of dignity compelled her to make the ultimate protest. She hanged herself.

Noorjahan (Lakshmi) of Chhatrakhar, Kamalganj had felt the same aversion to injustice and made her protest by giving up her life. A few other women in this insensitive and male-dominated society also in their Himalayan indignation over wrongs done to them put an end to their lives.

Society hardly learns from such tragedies. Laws too are often not enough or are made ineffective by an unholy alliance between their enforcers and influential groups. So much has to be done on both counts. But in the meantime, exemplary punitive measures can be taken against the perpetrators in the present case for a deterrent message to get through.

Ferry Headache

Aricha and the other two ferry terminals on the opposite side have once again become points of intractable vehicular mess. On earlier occasions, shoals and a drastic fall in the water level of the Jamuna were responsible for bringing the ferry service to a virtual halt; now there is a long list of problems — a couple of them being contrary to the previous ones. It is the sudden rise in the water level and the consequent erosion of the river banks that have snapped the service.

There has been a frequent shifting of the terminals hampering the movement of ferries and traffic. Very little can be done about it now. An advance plan would have helped though. A number of ferries otherwise capable of coping with the situation have been under repair. A few other smaller types of older vintage are inoperable now bringing about a drastic reduction in the fleet strength.

If the authorities had kept in mind the approaching monsoon season, they might well have staggered the repair work without crippling the ferry service. They have now reportedly taken away a few of them together for overhauling. We do not know if there is any plan to increase the number of the latest-model ferries. If not, such a plan is all the more necessary. It is always better to plan for the future rather than respond in haste to an emergency.

HUNDREDS of people have been robbed of their Maruti cars. The amount of ransom varies from Rs 2 lakh to Rs 75 lakh. Many people have been mercilessly tortured. Hundreds of traders have closed their shops and gone away to other parts of the country. Trade, commerce and industry have been hit hard. Senior executives of central public sector corporations are reluctant to stay. Some have already left. Some of the tea companies are also without supervisory staff, many of them having shifted to places outside the state.

This is what the Governor at Guwahati reported to New Delhi nearly six years ago. The situation is no better today. In fact, selective killings have increased. This Salika Congress government, which has been ousted at the polls, did little except to buy peace.

It distributed money and favours to the militants. It constituted a corps of surrendered militants from among the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) to fight militancy, a pattern followed first in Punjab and then in Kashmir. But the outfit, SULFA (S is for surrendered), has turned out to be another armed group to abduct people, to extort money and to settle personal scores. Some other formations have also come up due to the spread of guerilla culture.

The state's main worry is still ULFA, which is the largest armed group. It is an offshoot of the Asom Movement (1979-85). After the Rajiv Gandhi-All Assam Students Union (AASU) accord, a sizeable segment of the youth, which was involved in violence and sabotage during the movement, broke away and

formed ULFA. Its objective has been to "liberate" Assam from the Indian Union through an armed struggle.

ULFA is said to have a regular trained armed force of 5,000 men, equipped with AK-47s and AK-56s. In addition, they have a large number of persons who act as informers, intelligence collectors, couriers, camp followers, etc. Having imparted training to some cadres in Burma, ULFA is using them to train others. There are more than 50 camps where training is given in broad daylight, without fear from any authority.

The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) government, a few weeks old, faces the same problem of violence that it did during its earlier stint (1985-90). Some of the militants are colleagues from the movement days. Three ministers in the cabinet are the ULFA supporters. This embarrasses the government, which has even released some extremists to give the message of a new beginning.

Yet over the years, the government finds ULFA has acquired more guns, more following and more influence. It has also developed close understanding with the hostile Khaplan faction of National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and the Meitei extremists of Manipur.

Against such an array of militants, people in Assam are more afraid than before. They feel insecure. Editors and academics have been threatened not to criticise ULFA. A

few brave ones have refused to accept the fiat. "Anyone can be killed at any time," says an editor. Still, he has dared ULFA by writing: "A few more dead bodies can never make the voice of reason or the need for lasting peace irrelevant."

At a seminar in Nawgaon a few days ago, I found the AASU youth leaders confused. They defended the ULFA militants as their family members but, at the same time, they assailed them for their penchant for violence. In no shape does AASU support the ULFA

is functioning from Guwahati itself, right under the nose of the government. A monthly levy is collected from traders and businessmen. We have to pay to many other groups as well," an association of young Marwari traders complained. Significantly, the NSCN has spread its activities to Assam: north Cachar is one of the districts where it collects money openly.

Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mohanta does not belittle the situation. But he finds the pressures and problems multi-

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

demand for a sovereign state of Assam. But they do not like the army to be used against it. They favour talks between ULFA and the government.

I wonder if ULFA would come to the negotiating table. It runs practically a parallel government in 11 out of 29 districts in the state — three on the south bank of Brahmaputra and eight on the north bank. Tea associations, traders, small and big, and even petty government servants are summoned before ULFA functionaries at various places to negotiate the quantum of ransom. One state governor estimated in November 1990 that the collection was between Rs 400 and Rs 500 crore.

So pervasive is ULFA that it

plying even before his government has had time to settle down. No sooner did the debacle of Congress in elections in the state became apparent than the chief secretary, the director general of police and two key officers disappeared leaving the administration and police on their own. Ethnic killings, particularly in Kokrajhar district, began to take place. An anti-establishment journalist, Parag Das, was murdered at noon in Guwahati. ULFA, SULFA and others stepped up their violence. Police, partly tired, and partly demoralised, stood inactive.

Despite the earlier promise to send the army back to the barracks, the AGP government had to press the force into

service. Rough and ready methods of the army have resulted in some excesses which ULFA is exploiting on one hand and ordinary people are criticising on the other. There are allegations that the army has been operating in upper Assam without the consent or knowledge of the state government.

This may be so. The Salika government 'used' the army and the 'black laws' it legislated to suppress the legitimate aspirations of the Assamese. They do not want the new government, which they have elected with a vengeance, to follow the same path. Some do admit that the ULFA activities have left the government with no other option. Still there is strong opposition to the army reactivating Operation Rhino.

"I want the army to withdraw," says Mohanta. "What do I do if the Centre is not sending me any police force?" He has been asking for more paramilitary companies but New Delhi has not responded so far. Mohanta has met the prime minister since. However, the strength of forces, which were stationed during Salika regime, has been reduced to 75 per cent.

One of the sops that the 13-day-old BJP government at the Centre offered to AGP for support was the undertaking to send more paramilitary companies. But it said 'no' because of its ideological differences with the BJP. The BJP has also vainly tried to play the Hindu card with AASU which has stuck to its policy that a for-

eigner is a foreigner, whether Hindu or Muslim.

The Bangladeshi labour, however, plays an important role in Assam's daily life. It is cheap, hardworking and productive. There is hardly a middle-class family which does not employ a Bangladeshi servant. There are instances when the household has even withheld the identity of a Bangladeshi servant lest he should lose him. Many works come to a standstill whenever the Bangladeshis return home for Eid or other festivities.

The issue of foreigners, in any case, seems to have been pushed into the background because of serious law and order problem. People are worried over their safety. The government hands are full. AASU is fighting on this front. After an assurance by the central Election Commission, it expects a thorough revision of electoral rolls to determine foreigners.

Because of the eerie scene in Assam, there is also comparatively less attention paid to the state's economic development. The Assamese admit that many businessmen are trying to leave and no new investment is coming. They are convinced that the climate of peace is important. But they are helpless. With more and more young boys and girls passing from colleges into the market and with practically no prospect of employment, there is desperation in the air.

ULFA leaders say that they do not want violence. Nor do they consider themselves a problem, a word affixed to them. They have 'genuine' grievances, they contend. Probably true, but no grievance can be remedied at the point of gun. They should have known this by now.

Safe Water Crisis: City Burns 2.7 Million cft Gas Everyday

By A S M Oailullah

Extra gas consumption is thus heavily burdening Titas Gas which is already facing shortage of gas. Titas Gas is not getting the tariff for this extra consumption because it charges the customers fixed rates Tk 160 a month for single burner and Tk 250 for double burner.

Titas Gas Managing Director Maj (rtd) Md Muktar Ali who himself consumes boiled water expressed concern that such huge wastage of gas on water boiling and other purposes might invite severe gas crisis in near future. He pointed out a double burner oven in Dhaka city was consuming, on an average, 147 cft gas a month against an estimated requirement of 86.56 cft. "Wastage is enormous," he said.

WASA, however, claims the water they supply is hundred per cent pure. Md Anwarul Karim, Superintendent Engineer of WASA, said the water being pumped out from the under-ground aquifer was usually pure. In addition, he said, bleaching powder and

chlorine are periodically used in water tanks. Interestingly, Karim admitted he drinks boiled water at home.

According to Karim and his colleagues, water gets contaminated in supply lines and thereafter in underground reservoirs or in water tanks of the customers. "In many of the houses, tanks are not cleaned regularly, many of them remain unwashed for years together," said Kabiruddin Ahmed, Public Information Officer of WASA. Consequently, bacteria and various micro-organisms grow in the tanks and reservoirs that contaminate water with germs causing various contagious diseases like diarrhoea and dysentery.

According to experts in WASA, old water lines, in-

stalled 50 years ago, are mainly responsible for contamination of water as they developed cracks. Due to lack of modern equipment and fund constraints, WASA finds it difficult to detect the leaks and cracks.

Installation of water pipes beneath surface drains and in parallel with sewerage pipes augments the problem. In most cases, contaminated water from the surface drains enter into the WASA pipes through leaks.

However, WASA officials expect that the problem will be resolved as the authorities are likely to undertake a project with financial assistance from the World Bank to detect the leaks in water lines.

Some experts, however, said the system of centrally controlled water supply was not workable for a huge city like Dhaka. They said decentralisation of supply with area-wise distribution of grid was the answer. Detection of faults in lines and their correction will be far easier in a decentralised system.

Safety of water in university

areas, specially the Dhaka University and the BUET campuses, is an evidence how successful a decentralised water supply system can be. Water in these areas is considered safe as the university authorities pump out and distribute the water through their own network.

The history of water supply in the city dates back to August 1874, when a small surface water treatment plant was established at Chandighat by the then Nawab of Dhaka. Until 1940, the water supply was confined to a part of old Dhaka. When the city became provincial capital in 1947, demand for water supply and its consumption started growing sharply. To cope with the growing demand, the then government of East Pakistan established the Dhaka WASA in November, 1963.

After independence, there has been significant expansion both in production and distribution system, but the scarcity of water still remains the same what it was in early 1970s. While the gap between demand and supply in city's water supply continues to remain enormous, safety system also worsened over the years.

— News Network

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.

Survivor of the week

Sir, Neil Ray's sensitive essay on humans struggling to survive on the streets of Dhaka inspired me to add an extraordinary example to those he already cites ("All That Meets the Eye," *Daily Star*, June 24, 1996). Neil Ray describes a rickshaw puller, "just bones and skin — paddling for a pittance in this city's dangerous streets." He should see the rickshaw puller who recently taxed a friend and myself to where we needed to go, "paddling" us through Dhaka traffic with only one leg. The other one is mere stump! It might be a thought-provoking and soul-inspiring project for *The Daily Star* to run a "Survivor of the Week" picture. There is much to ponder over these sights.

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GB's solar power project

Sir, The Grameen Bank's two innovative projects namely, the rural cellular/wireless local loop telephony system, and the solar panel power units in villages (*Star Magazine*, June 28) deserve wider national and international publicity. In the write-up, there were some information gaps, which may be clarified by the authorities concerned for public appreciation.

The government's support and back-up towards the solar power project appears to be lukewarm vis-a-vis any policy indication in the PEP (People's Perspective Plan) formulated by the outgoing regime. In the SAARC region, according to press reports, India is going ahead with bigger projects to provide isolated electric power in the rural homes/area using solar panels (some compo-

nents are indigenous). Exchange of information might be useful.

India and China may be able to mass produce the panels/sets more economically for use in the developing countries in Asia and elsewhere, provided there is local official commitment to the idea. CKD import will reduce the cost. If the solar panels are not classified as luxury items in the national tariff — in other words, the import levies have to be reduced drastically.

GB's pilot projects are not being adequately publicised through the mass media, seminars and workshops. The contributions of the physics departments of the universities are also not covered by the press or the electronic media, although the students are actively engaged in experiments for possible local application. PDB is silent on the issue. What the REB is doing? Are GB and REB pooling the resources and know-how?

Like the GB banking philosophy, there might be an ultimate breakthrough here (as also in village cellular phones). What is the national priority: confrontational politics or development?

A Zahr
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The Daily Star roundtable on SAARC

Sir, It came to my notice in an article published in your daily on 25th June regarding countervailing duties imposed by the Indian customs on Bangladeshi products. This is outrageous and is slightly to the detriment of the SAARC. Furthermore, it is demeaning for our country. Numerous Indian goods are entering our market through legal channels. But as far as I know, no Bangladeshi products are being exported to India except raw jute. How-

ever, there are some Bangladeshi manufacturers who are planning to export some of their products to India. According to them the hindrance is not only this countervailing duty but also restrictive import regulations in India.

I am of the opinion that *The Daily Star* should have a roundtable conference on trade issue within SAARC countries to highlight the above issue further.

Zahed Rasul
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Objective history of Bangladesh

Sir, I felt compulsion to write this letter after reading Mr A M Mahmood's letter published in June 29, 1996 issue of *The Daily Star* under the title "Never underestimate...". I fail to understand why Awami League government's agenda to amend the school textbooks to stop distortion of the history of Bangladesh "sounds ominous" to Mr Mahmood. Do not the school students of Bangladesh have the right to know undisputed history of their country? Is it not the responsibility of a government committed to the spirit of our glorious Liberation War to put an end to the planned disinformation and misinformation campaign carried on by those in power for the last 21 years?

Mr Mahmood writes: The children must not be confused and should be presented with only those facts that are acceptable to everybody like the 1971 war of ours with Pakistan without exaggeration, but in the process we should not try to paint whole of Pakistan as a nation of villains, or for that matter, whole of India as a nation of angels for all times to come. Should not the school students be told the historic fact that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared the independence of Bangladesh and General (then Major) Ziaur Rahman announced it over radio on behalf of Bangabandhu simply because a good number of people don't feel comfortable with the fact?

Again, should not the school children be told that Pakistani

occupation forces committed genocide and raped our women during nine months of war in 1971 and that India helped us in our war against occupation forces? Which facts are "exaggeration" to Mr Mahmood — that Pakistani occupation forces and their collaborators killed 3 million Bangladeshis including intellectuals and raped thousands of women? Mr Mahmood mentions our liberation war as '1971 war of ours with Pakistan'.

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Iskander Mirza

Sir, Iskander Mirza of Murchidabad was the governor of East Pakistan and later president of Pakistan. Recently, I had the opportunity to read an article about Iskander Mirza as published in a premier daily of Dhaka. The writer has portrayed Iskander Mirza exposing his darkside as a politician.

However, the university of Dhaka conferred Honorary Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD) to this personality. I want to know through your columns what was the reason behind this PhD degree and what are the contents or citation prepared by learned educationists of Dhaka University while proposing such honour? I am sure that many of those educationists are still alive and they may like to throw some light on this topic this PhD offerings.

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Peace and prosperity

Sir, We are very happy to know that Begum Khaleda Zia had sent flowers to Sheikh Hasina with congratulations and best wishes on her success in the election. This gesture was gracious and implies her willingness to remain in good terms.

We hope that as the leader of the opposition political party Begum Khaleda Zia will act sensibly and will be able to erase the grim picture we have about opposition political parties. People should know that

opposition does not mean that it will oppose everything the government does, as we have seen in the last few years, but they will oppose those steps of the government which in their judgement may not be beneficial to the country. The opposition should give ideas and cooperate with the government where country's welfare is concerned.

We hope that present opposition political party will be able to erase the fears we have about opposition activities — hartals, blockades, ashahajog andol and destroying of government and public property. They may say that they had to do it to materialise their demand of a caretaker government to hold a free and fair election. But does the end always justify the means?

I wonder why people want to come to power. We see in the history of Bangladesh those who were in power had to suffer a very grim fate.

May the Almighty Allah be with the people of Bangladesh.

Nur Jahan
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Secularism and Bangladeshi nationalism

Sir, Every modern state harbours people of diverse beliefs. Therefore no modern state can morally be communal. Our motherland Bangladesh — harbours about 86 per cent Muslims and 14 per cent non-Muslims. The constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh had secularism as one of the four state principles. But through the 5th amendment our secular state has been made half-communal and through the 8th amendment we became a communal nation. The constitution builder AL is back to power. So we wish that our state policy will not discriminate against even a single citizen, let alone about 16 million non-Muslims. However, our majority Muslims will perform their religious rights faithfully and the minority non-Muslims will do their sincerity. In his final speech to the nation, the Chief Adviser of the outgoing

caretaker government had rightly urged the elected government to formulate some good words in the state language (Bangla) for starting and concluding speeches (He himself did his self-styled job well).

The original constitution of Bangladesh incorporated Bangalee nationalism as one of our state principles. However Bangladeshi nationalism replaced Bangalee nationalism later by the 5th amendment. The present government must think twice before changing our nationality. Because all of the Bangladeshis are not Bangalees, about 3 per cent of them are non-Bangalees, while many Bangladeshis live beyond our international border.

As secularism cannot snatch majority Muslim's Islam so cannot Bangladeshi nationality our age-old Bangalee culture. Both secularism and Bangladeshi nationalism are required to guard against racial discrimination.

M A S Molla
Member, BAAS, Dhaka

Is Iraq mightiest in the world?

Sir, Everytime UN Inspecting officials visiting Iraq and coming back with a statement, that they could not inspect all the arsenals and weapons, Iraq is still hiding something. I fail to understand the reason of hiding the weapons from the inspecting officials. Iraq has already destroyed many of its weapons and chemicals. It is not known how many more arsenals are there. Whether those stocks and weapons are sufficient enough to destroy one or two countries.

I know there are many countries in the world which are openly testing nuclear weapons. There are countries in the world which openly declined to sign the nuclear ban treaty. What UN could do for these countries. It is only in case of Iraq economic sanctions is going on the plea of hidden weapons.

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