

Thank You Both

Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed has helped the nation's nerves to relax by agreeing to become the President of the Republic. We thank him for the sense of relief he has so kindly consented to give us. Just when we were teetering on the edge in search of a right man for the job, he has come forward with his characteristic courage to serve the nation once again, this time for five long years. Other men at his age would have, in all probability, preferred the comfort of benign anonymity to the stress of Presidency. More so, when he has had the personal satisfaction of successfully holding a free and fair election in 1991 as the acting president of the first-ever caretaker government in the country with an international accolade to go with it. Accepting the onerous responsibility in a high expectancy setting was in the essence a matter for personal decision-making of the hardest kind, regardless of the request and approach made to him for his consent.

Our congratulations to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on her visionary and far-sighted initiative to nominate Justice Shahabuddin for the position of the Head of State. Although in a parliamentary system of government, the presidency conjures up the image of a largely passive, ceremonious and figurehead role, his powers and functions are nonetheless considerable: assenting to the bills, PM's appraising the president of outcomes of foreign visits and promulgating ordinances and even emergency, subject, of course, to ratifications by parliament. And what has latterly become a matter of loaded significance is the new expectation that the President will play the role of a trouble-shooter in crisis situations. Justice Shahabuddin brings to bear his judicial sagacity, knowledge of the Constitution, probity, honesty and sense of mission — in one word, his stature, both national and international — on the high office of presidency.

The PM has acted in the realisation that because Justice Shahabuddin had been chosen to be the acting president of the caretaker government in 1991 by a consensus he would be naturally acceptable to all quarters for the presidency now.

She has been proved right also: BNP Vice-chairman and Deputy leader of the opposition in parliament Prof AQM Badruddoza has welcomed the nomination. But he has a point when he says the BNP expected to be informed of it in advance. We think it is an opportunity missed by the Awami League to associate the BNP in forging a demonstrable consensus in a matter over which unanimity potentially existed. It is happily noted though that the end-result has found a bipartisan support.

Where's Kalpana?

The abduction of Kalpana Chakma about one and a half months ago from her house in a sleepy village of Baghaichhari has posed a serious question before the country's civil and the local military administration. Kalpana has been a vocal and politically conscious leader of the Hill Women's Federation. According to a top leader of the Pahari Chhatra Parishad, the home minister has stated that the matter was not under the jurisdiction of his ministry; it was under the defence ministry.

We do not intend to enter into a debate over jurisdiction. But we do refuse to accept the position that a citizen, an unmarried college-going girl in this case, should be left at the mercy of kidnappers for so long. The mystery surrounding her abduction must not be allowed to linger any more. For long 42 days people have been hardly informed of the government attempts at rescuing the girl. Now there is a press release from Chittagong Cantonment on the incident. Let this help clear some of the confusions created in the meantime.

Whichever is the ministry dealing with the case, the responsibility rests with the government and it cannot sit idle on a sensitive issue like this. The failure to trace the unfortunate girl's whereabouts will have an undesirable reflection on the new government. If the defence ministry is in charge of the area, there are even more reasons and a greater compulsion to settle the potentially volatile matter. An issue such as this can be politically inflammatory. The challenge of rescuing Kalpana is a test case for the government to take the hill people into confidence. So there is no scope whatsoever for any failure to initiate appropriate actions against anyone suspected of wrong-doing irrespective of his position. We hope the government will do everything in its power to get to the truth of the matter and find Kalpana out.

Unwelcome Visitors

Some visitors to parliament have been violating the code of conduct meant for them. The rules printed on the back of the visitors' gallery passes specify do's and don'ts for witnessing the proceedings of parliament. When the Speaker's attention was drawn to some instances of unmannerly behaviour, he advised the visitors to go by convention and rules. But to no effect. The violations were repeated.

Now we could suggest if the visitors failed to respect the norms, they should be barred from entering into the House. But the problem is that not all visitors are at fault. So there cannot obviously be a sweeping prohibition. But those recommending issuance of passes to parliament secretariat should brief the recipients of these adequately to behave inside the House.

What we are pointing at is maximum discretion should be applied by the MPs at the time of sending requests to the parliament for issuing visitors' passes. They must beware of those likely to overstep limits and who are too enthusiastic or whose emotions get the better of their best judgement. Responsible choice of visitors holds the answer.

Conscience and Honour

The "Honour" system in the Pakistan Military Academy (PMA) is devoted to inculcating the concept of self-accountability and bolstering the character thereof, must requirements in the leadership traits of the officers of the Army. The basic premise of "The Code" remains the building up of the conscience of the individual.

THE menace of corruption will not be scared away by the volume of rhetoric being blasted in its general direction. Given cancerous growth along with its deadly twin "nepotism", society seems to have adjusted itself against their elimination. If the recent correspondence between the President and the Leader of the Opposition is to be believed we may yet see some high-profile moves in that direction, albeit we cannot shrug off the frustration that this initiative will most probably die a natural death in some Parliamentary Committee or the other as have many other initiatives attempted earlier.

Skepticism aside, one lives in hope and why should mere mortals question the integrity of the President's wisdom in consigning the responsibility of eradicating corruption to the National Assembly, an institution that seldom does anything substantive contrary to the wishes of vested interest, mainly its own?

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This same system is in vogue during examinations where invigilators are seldom in evidence, it being left to the honour of the cadet not to cheat and to hand in his answer sheets at the correct time. Black traits such as lying, cheating or committing other criminal acts that bring the institution or the individual into disrepute pale before your being held as much accountable as the one perpetrating the act if you should fail to report it.

For those brought up in the "public school" code of not bearing any witness against one's compatriots (at the risk of being labelled a sneak), a very fine line divides duty and disloyalty. A cadet with "black" traits could conceivably go on to become a leader of men (and possibly of the Army itself as nearly happened to our detriment very recently) while you risk severe punishment if you failed to report your observations. In many ways this

evoking of conscience "even to the peril of one's friends and colleagues" is the acid test of character, pitting the concept of loyalty to an individual and a group against the higher loyalty due by an individual to society and to the nation.

Of course there are those who use this excuse for their own ulterior purposes. The years of martial law and party-less democracy irrevocably damaged the cohesiveness that comes with democracy's binding people of disparate origins and views into the melting pot of one society and nation. The divisive phenomena of loyalty to an individual or a clan (or a sect) and subsequently toleration (and even condonation) of his/her misconduct, now has preponderance over the general good of society and the nation, another important feature of the "Honour" system is exemplary punishment for those who bear "false witness". In a society where merit has been

things now seem to be changing, a Corps Commander is being sent home eight months early because of a misdemeanour very slight by our normal standards of nepotism, corruption and misuse of authority. Maybe justice is not entirely extinct after all, excellent for the Army but can this institution remain insulated in self-accountability from the rest of the country?

One of the major reasons for the institution of the "honour" system is that the Army relies on its leaders through the broad spectrum to fulfill their obligations without supervision, e.g. a young officer leading a fighting patrol to gain information about the enemy is supposed to physically confirm his findings about the enemy's strength, his disposition and weapon placement, not to sit in a safe place and make up a story, the consequences of which can be tragic.

The scope of responsibility increases with rank on a proportional basis, it becomes crucial at the level of two star rank and above as one cannot remain immune from what is happening in the nation. As much as any common citizen concerned with the destiny of the country, responsibility towards the State cannot be absolved by the veneer of not being in the "chain of command". What good is it to ask the newly incepted cadets of the Academy to adhere to an "honour code" when one proceeds to ignore the present realities of nepotism and corruption on a much larger scale as one reaches near the pinnacle of rank possible? What is greater, loyalty to the individual, to a Party or to the State? Indeed that is a question for all who give their leaders (or superiors) unstinted support in the face of naked evidence of their blatant nepotism and corruption, to answer.

One of my personal heroes since 1985 is a serving Corps Commander who will retire next year because of age rather than service. A "Gibraltar Force" veteran, not only is the man courageous he has impeccable integrity and a humble, simple nature that belies both his rank and gruff exterior. Within his domain, what to talk about anyone doing any wrong, he will come down like a ton of bricks on anyone who shows any such inclination, the words "tolerate" or "condone" not being in his lexicon. But even this gentleman, whom I will always hold in the highest esteem and respect, sulked when I put into print the machinations and intrigues of one of his ex-colleagues, even though he accepted that it was the truth and that he was also a victim.

In contrast to that officer's spreading of falsehood and disinformation at will about his colleagues, particularly about the present COAS who was in direct competition for the post, my putting the truth about this man's lies and his lying self was not appreciated, "after all maligning a senior officer puts the Army into disrepute".

How information can be kept away from the masses in this global village escapes "logic". This "conspiracy of silence" reflects the myopic attitude that has put us into an unwholy mess, the tendency of good men to shy away from prosecuting evil because of a misplaced sense of duty or loyalty or honour or comradeship to the individual or to the institution or whatever, even though it may be reciprocated with a kick in the teeth as is the want of all rascals. One acknowledges that

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AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

come suspect, in fact a disqualifier, the spreading of falsehood about an individual or a group assumes supreme importance over all other wrongdoings.

The only means of advancement for those who have no merit is to vilify those with merit and thus knock them out of contention. This attribute is particularly synonymous with those having "intelligence" background where making up stories about one's "enemies" or those in direct competition proliferates. The stakes being high individuals with merit are fair game for being targeted by the unscrupulous who may be in contention for higher rank. Such is their vicious foresight in "planning" that the present COAS almost became a victim of such ruse. Such people still exist in the pipeline, they must never be spared, because their "black" character ensures that they will try again. Those with "intelligence" background having two star rank and upwardly mobile need to be particularly screened.

Nowhere is accountability more important than among the public servants. Public sector employees have a duty on behalf of the masses to ensure that the elected representatives do not defraud the people by misuse of office and appointment and vice versa in a mutual exercise of accountability. Unfortunately in Pakistan, as in many other developing countries, the elected representatives are looting the till in active connivance and support of the civil servants. That the men in uniform do not come directly into the "chain of cog-

To the Editor

A rare example of honesty

Sir, A few weeks ago, on a journey back to Dhaka from Baisal, my father was unfortunately to lose his briefcase containing important papers, when we were hurrying to our launch. On reaching Dhaka the next morning, he had to make numerous phone calls to trace the lost briefcase. By 9 o'clock that morning we were informed that it had been found. The porters at the flat had found and submitted it to their main office.

A few days ago the briefcase was returned to my father with all the papers and other things intact.

This, indeed is a very unusual thing to happen. On behalf of my family I would sincerely like to thank the person who helped us. He should certainly be rewarded.

Farzeen Saleh  
843 Ring Road, Shyamoli,  
Dhaka-1207.

Saving a train

Sir, May I draw your kind attention to the news item published in your esteemed daily on 14 July 1996 regarding the efforts of Abul Khair to save the inter-city Meghna Express train. The boy is only a year-old villager of Chandpur district. Through his work he has set a rare example of sincerity and responsibility of a citizen. We farther came to know from your 15 July issue that the railway authorities have decided to despatch a letter of appreciation along with reward for Abul Khair. But to my mind, it seems that the matter is not given its due credit. The boy has saved the lives of about 1000 passengers as well as the train. Both would have cost the country a lot. Moreover, the rail communication through the same line would have remained disrupted for quite some time. All these fatal consequences were avoided due to sincere and dedicated effort of the boy. So, merely a "letter of appreciation" along with reward is too small a recognition for what he did. Rather, I feel, the boy should be given a proper reception at the local district

headquarters, and be projected through the national TV via an appropriate programme and way be given a small "hand-shake" by the minister of the ministry concerned.

We waste so much of our valuable time and energy on events which at times, prove to be fruitless. Why not make another minor mistake (if to some people it may seem), to broaden the heart of our young generation and their love for their country.

Tahmina Islam  
Utara, Dhaka.

II

Sir, Is it at all befitting that a boy (of 9 years of age) who by his unique and novel arrangement has managed to avert a major railway accident and thereby has become, by the grace of the Almighty Allah, the saviour of a huge number of people, has been awarded by the Railway authority with only Taka 2500?

It is rather an insult to him who, in my opinion, is a pride of our nation. Had the accident, God forbid, really happened it would have cost the Railway department beyond imagination? Does the Railway authority think or calculate it? Our state authority is also completely mum on it — and so this is the sort of our evaluation of the potentiality of our children and the sort of gratefulness we show even to a single one of our own boys who can be a potential asset to our country.

We (from Mohammad Kinu Mondol Foundation of Faridpur) want, if the guardians of the boy want to accept without any prejudice, to reward this boy for his brilliant act with a considerable financial grant to meet his education expenditure.

Dr Jalal Uddin Ahmed  
Mohammad Kinu Mondol  
Foundation  
2/18 Block B, Lalmitia, Dhaka-1207.

III

Sir, A nine-year-old boy saved the lives of 100 passengers of Meghna Express recently by signalling the train to stop. It is disgusting and a shame

that he has been awarded a prize of a measly sum of Tk 2500. Its like telling him to go eat some ice-cream. I would request the authorities to please arrange for free education of this hero up to graduation, and please do not give this crap, about financial constraints. Our amazing country is one of the "richest" in the world. Our MPs get duty-free Paleros and Nissan Patrols, our ministers go to Singapore for heart problems we have one of the world's largest video rental stores here, we sell the world's best ice-creams etc — the list goes on and on!!

Saleem Rahman  
99 Azimpur Road  
Dhaka-1205.

Terrorism grips the nation

Sir, Following are some headlines of a vernacular Daily published on the July 09, 1996.

- a. Child shot dead in front of the parents for not giving toll.
- b. Fight between rival groups at port area: Bombing, arson; Injured 95.
- c. Question paper tough: students on the rampage.
- d. Dacoity in night coach: 4 murdered including police.
- e. Jubo Dal leader stabbed to death in Naganj.
- f. Two persons who got beaten earlier died in hospital.
- g. Two murdered in the capital.

In short, terrorism has gripped the entire nation. And this government has come to power with a pledge to curb terrorism! Was that pledge a bluff? We wonder.

Saikat Hossain  
Geon Road  
Dhaka-1205

Jatiya Sangsad members

Sir, All the members of Jatiya Sangsad belonging to major opposition parties resigned during the BNP government and it could not be decided for two years regarding the acceptability of the resignation. The same Jatiya Sangsad passed a bill unanimously providing pension for Jatiya

Sangsad members though they may serve a term maximum of five years as JS members. The Jatiya Party government passed a bill providing tax-free import of 4-wheel automobiles for JS members alone. Under the above facts it is time to pass bills in the first JS session regarding procedures of resignation and subsequent acceptance of resignation of JS members so that any body or the whole group may resign and their places are filled up as per the existing laws.

A human rights commission comprising of retired chief justices and judges needs to be set up so that JS members cannot enact laws for their self-interest alone as cited above. Again in the context of democracy there, is no fun in appointing women JS members as it is done now. Instead, women JS member should be elected like all the others.

Ahmedul Alam  
14, Eskaton Garden  
Dhaka-1000.

Get-a-word

Sir, I am a regular reader and admirer of The Daily Star. I find the Whizz Kid and the Crossword sections very interesting. I am requesting you to start one more such interesting section in your daily.

During the Pakistan period there used to be a small section named GET-A-WORD in the then Morning News. It was very popular among the readers. A lot of people were benefited by participating in that competition.

I think your daily is more popular than Morning News was, and I hope The Daily Star can easily start a section like GET-A-WORD.

If you can do so, the readers will be able to learn a lot of new words. Besides, those who will win the competition will receive prizes, and, naturally, will be more inclined towards The Daily Star.

This sort of games are very popular in our neighbouring India and Pakistan. So, I would request you to kindly consider my proposal.

Mahfuzul Haque  
29, Shahid Jahangear Road  
Dhaka, Dhaka

Tribute to Shahabuddin

This editorial was published on 11 October 1991, on the occasion of President-nominee Shahabuddin Ahmed relinquishing power. We reproduce it today to remind our readers what Shahabuddin did for the nation during those days.

It was perhaps his finest hour. As Justice Shahabuddin bade farewell to the country's highest office, he had the rare satisfaction of any Chief Executive to be carrying along with him the grateful appreciation of the nation for a job well done. He took charge of the State's affairs when the edifice of power lay in ruins. Today he leaves behind a sovereign parliament, a popularly elected leadership, a unanimously adopted form of government and, most importantly, a Constitution that has been shorn of its undemocratic features. Any one of the above could suffice to be a lifetime's achievement for a statesman or a politician.

The 306 days Presidency of Justice Shahabuddin was low on profile and high on performance. Ribbon cutting here and pontificating there were neither his style nor a part of his agenda. His single-minded attention to the task for which he was called upon to assume the office of the President was all that he cared for and all that he did. We must remember that he was not an actor in any of the events that propelled him on to the centre-stage. However, he was a superb manager of the consequences of those events — starting from organising and running the interim government, to steering the nation's transition to a democratic system, to the final step of electing his own replacement.

In a remarkable display of courage, leadership, clarity of vision, impartiality, unwavering faith in democratic norms and unflinching commitment to national interest, the former Acting President gave us, what was till then an impossible dream — a free, fair and peaceful election. Through the skilful management of that one single event, he: a) restored our faith in elections, which through repeated riggings and shameless manipulations was reduced to nothing; b) made the parliament what it was meant to be, the supreme representative body and the highest legislature, and not a gathering place for goons and lackeys; c) gave dignity and honour to the representatives of the people; d) sent sky high the prestige of our system of government, a prestige which is of immense importance for a country in desperate search for positive image. On a more practical plane, Justice Shahabuddin showed us that however archaic and corruption-ridden our administrative system is, it still can be made to deliver if the leadership is honest and determined. It was the same district administration, the same police and the same official bodies that Ershad used to cheat the people of their votes which the venerable Judge used to do the exact opposite.

This journal pays tribute to Justice Shahabuddin — and in so doing echoes the sentiment of the nation — for his contribution in strengthening the foundation of democracy in the country. It was his expert and meticulous handling of volatile political issues, timely initiatives and courageous moves that have helped us in attaining in nine months what we had mostly lost, and in some cases, ourselves destroyed in the last 16 years.

We have had leaders of many kinds; charismatic, visionary, intellectual and, of course, corrupt. But never one as unassuming, low-key, committed and so thoroughly devoid of any inclination to cling to power. Justice Shahabuddin, through his single-minded dedication to serve the nation has given us a new confidence and pride. As he left the office of the President, he stood tall. And for his accomplishments, the nation stood taller.

OPINION

Hoping Against Hope

by Anam A Choudhury

THERE is little doubt that most people believe Bangladesh is in severe moral decline, some regard the situation as hopeless. The majority feel quite uneasy.

People are worried about issues of religion, political morality, honesty and willingness to make sacrifice for others. Institutions are under attack, respect is in decline, behaviour appalling and the outlook bleak.

Optimists believe Sheikh Hasina can make the weather and she has the necessary political acumen to make the country ready for change. People are bored and fed up with conventional politics and an era of change is needed.

Sometimes I wonder, why Begum Zia's BNP failed to frighten the electorate about Awami League on two key and touchy issues. First, national sovereignty and second, economic prosperity. After 25 years of independence, people rightly realise that one cannot fight with crocodiles while living in water.

India shall never be a security threat to Bangladesh, as India has its own serious problem of national integrity. In order to ensure a fair share of the Ganges water and save North Bengal from desertification, we shall perhaps have no choice but to trade transit for water. Cooperation with India is sine qua non for the economic development of this country. River management, flood control, generation of cheap hydro-electric power — all depend on the goodwill of India to a large extent.

Bangladesh can benefit enormously by providing port facilities to India and other neighboring countries. Rotterdam in Netherlands and Le Harve in France are cases in point. Free access of all European countries and modern containerized shipping arrangements in both the ports have changed the European trade dramatically. Most of the European goods are trucking into the largest freight fleets of these ports. Chittagong port on the coast of Bay of Bengal is uniquely placed to take such advantages. Chittagong port can become a Rotterdam of South Asia and the whole region will transform from a "battle zone" to a trade zone, if our government sensibly realize and accept the geographical realities and allow the transit facilities to India and establish road and rail links with Nepal.

Cost conscious Japanese and Koreans will rush to set up their low tech labour intensive manufacturing industries, thereby bringing more employment and prosperity to the region.

Appointment of Shah AMS Kibria as a finance minister, instead of appointing a political demagogue, seems to have reassured the donor nations. Mr Kibria is understandably a goal-oriented professional.

He is perhaps the right man in the right job at the right time. Although I ponder his potent mixture of social welfareism and support for free market monetarist principles.

My concerns also lie in setting up the Pay Commission in such a haste. Increase of pay without necessary increase in productivity may fuel price inflation. After a long period of stagnation, economy is gradually coming back to its health, foreign investors are slowly returning and our stock market is booming. At this point of time, any hefty pay rise means inflation. We must not forget that one man's wage increase is another man's price increase and such wage and price spiral will damage the image of the new government.

A social contract or a package deal can be worked out with the trade unions and any increase in their wages must be linked to the productivity.

Privatisation of state-owned industries is another political minefield involving hostile trade unions and thousands of ghost workers. Mr Kibria will have to swallow their objections and pursue the policy ruthlessly.

Multinational banks are merging to survive and fight competition. Taking into consideration the bad loans and bad debts of the three large nationalised banks, I think, it will be a prudent idea to merge Sonali, Agrani, Janata banks into a single national bank to reduce malpractice, overheads and red-tape and increase efficiency, productivity and profitability. Such restructuring and streamlining will be politically costly, but it will be glorious and skilful retreat from the misguided attempt to mix banking with political charity.

Mr Rafiqul Islam, a veteran freedom fighter and an articulate fixer in the helm of home ministry, seems an excellent choice. Violence has become a recreational activity for our younger generation. Campus violence has literally paralyzed our universities.

Mr Rafiqul Islam must fight terrorism and campus violence even handily. Bipartisan cooperation is required to eradicate the cancerous growth of violence from our society or we will degenerate into gangsterism.

I think, Sheikh Hasina can act as an political catalyst. The speed and surprise of her political initiatives to share power and work together will keep catching her opponents off-balance.

So far, it has been a text book example of good leadership, in a country which is traditionally known to the world as a natural hunting ground for the dictators. People want to look forward.

The writer is an investment banker and project consultant in a French bank in Paris.