

Vigilance Needed

The September by-polls have already given birth to early sparks. Reportedly, an Awami League (AL) candidate escaped the bullets targeted at him though an activist of the same party could not, and a Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader, more significantly a woman, experienced considerable inconvenience caused by an enraged group of people in Bagerhat. They are a spate of incidents at one place and hardly helps in forming an opinion about the general atmosphere leading upto the remaining rites of the surprisingly and heart-warmingly trouble-free June 12 general elections but the heat seems on all the same. Quite naturally, we like all other sentient citizens of the country feel somewhat alarmed.

Despite the government accent on anti-terrorism and the recent powerful arms recovery drive, criminal activities are not waning if not exactly waxing. They carry the potential of being interpreted in a different light prior to a political phenomenon like election more than in any other circumstances because of the divisive streak of politics in this part of the world. If our politicians were sincere and cooperative enough to match their words with actions on the agenda of consensus over issues of national interest and development, these early sparks, so to speak, could have been allowed to take a back seat as something of a routine worry and a job of the law enforcers.

In a chaotic political environment so emblematic of democracy in its infancy, chances are there that an attempt on AL candidate Sheikh Helal, the death of political activist Nasir and assault on former BNP MP Nargis Ali will not be interpreted merely as expressions of political rivalry at its nadir, but as parts of heinous designs against one party by another. Few lack the wisdom to understand the implications of such interpretations; the advantages those who fish in troubled waters, would get. It is far more important for the authorities concerned to engage themselves in an act of vigilance in the context of the whole electoral zone than to focus on a particular spot or two. Chittagong may be a boiling pot of tension and it may be all happening in Bagerhat but the law and order should be revived up everywhere and now to round off the otherwise highly successful tale of public opinion.

Stop This Vandalism

For years the entire mankind's first preoccupation has been environment. Humanity has been told about the consequences of environmental degeneration, the many kinds of pollution and the dangerously shrinking diversity of species in doomsday terms. In Bangladesh too, for its own urgent reasons, environment has come to the fore — both in governmental thinking and in public awareness. So much so that one thought felling a tree now involved a sense of guilt on the part of the man doing it. A report in a national daily on Sunday means to say that the situation is not half as hopeful.

A 60-kilometre road is to be built connecting Khulna and Satkhira — something that should have been done decades ago. Using the 76-crore Taka project as an excuse lakhs of quite grown-up mature trees are being felled on both sides of the projected 11-metre wide road. Some government agency seems to have authorised lumbering agents to cut down trees to make way for the road in exchange of Taka 27 lakh. The felling right was then sold by this agents in a matter days to other people at a price of one crore and ten lakh taka.

Even at Taka 50 crore that would be a bargain. For a casual enumeration by the reporter says that this operation on the trees would finish off several lakhs of them. Five lakh trees at 10,000 Tk apiece would fetch 500 crore taka. But we are not interested in the silly monetary loss the government has foisted on itself. At a time when cutting down a single tree invokes wrath of the people, how could an organisation like government let happen such a massacre of the shrinking green cover of this nation? All the good motivational work done by the government and other agencies for protection of environment is being set at naught by one fell stroke. The massacre is sure to send out a signal for tree-felling with impunity.

To add more criminality to the infernal operation, the executioner's axe is felling trees 25 to 30 metres away from the far side of the road whereas the most width that the 11-metre road will need with its pucca and kutcha shoulders will be 15 metres.

Stop it, if you can. Cut the extremely needed ones and spare the rest. No corruption here involving trees, please. We have enough of that in the forest ranges.

Diminishing Royals

The Jatiya Sangsad was told on Sunday Bangladesh had 360 Royal Bengals, according to a figure arrived at in 1993 by a foreign wildlife expert. In the subsequent three years the Royals should have increased in number — given the more congenial times for their survival brought about by an increasingly environment conscious society and government. Today even the high and mighty one wouldn't think of going on a tiger hunt and at the end of a very unequal confrontation stand over the body of the killed big cat as if the whole world was under his feet.

There are, however, other factors which could offset that and reduce the size of the important canine population, such as, the receding forest line, pushing the Royals into a stuffy life of diminishing individual territory and of hunger caused by depletion of the standard quarry of deer forcing them into eating even the lowly earth worms. The Royals could, for all one knows, be steadily on the way out in spite of the heartening and most gratifying news of the sanctuary area for tigers being raised this year more than four-fold to 139 thousand hectares or 24 per cent of our part of the Sundarbans.

The Sundarbans straddle over the low offshore lands of both Bangladesh and West Bengal. Across the border, the conservationists have been pursuing an eminently successful programme of preserving and propagating this species of the canines.

The outlook is, however, a little encouraging for the Royals in our part of the Sundarbans. We are gratified that the JS talked about them and a happier future for them was hinted at. The last time we got a figure, it was 900. And now it is 360. Let us hope the number would travel back to the earlier figure in the coming years.

Thought of Death — a Silent Teacher of Morality

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

PRIME Minister Dr Mahathir Muhammad, the charismatic leader of Malaysia has been reported, in a newspaper, to have said that "whatever he does or wants to do he remembers death" invariably. This mental exercise, he claims, shows him the right path to follow, forbids him spiritually to keep away from moral vices and provides him the vision to act righteously. Such a candid and remarkable expression of his inner mind can be instantly thought-provoking. It can also rock the black citadels of the people built on quick sand and thriving on immoral material gains. He does not say that he hates corruption, rather metaphorically expresses he dreads it. Elucidating his point Dr Mahathir places his religious faith above all and says that, when he knows and firmly believes none takes with him his/her worldly wealth and belongings to the grave after death, one should remain satisfied with the minimum he needs and which he earns by honest endeavour. Indeed, such a plain and simple appreciation of honest life and living has been in accordance with the Quranic principles and commands of Almighty Allah.

A former medic by profession having been qualified as such as far back as in 1954, Dr Mahathir Muhammad turned a politician in 1974. He gave up medicine in the same year being appointed Education Minister of the Government of Malaysia. Alluding to the oft quoted aspersion on the politicians Dr Mahathir says "Lots of people of course believe that as a politician I must be corrupt. Why? (Because) if they are in my place they would be corrupt." Evidently, he seeks to rebuff the frequent suggestions in the Western press on the alleged corruption in his government. It is to be noted here that the Malaysian media, being tightly controlled by the government, does not make such allegations.

Dr Mahathir Muhammad also states that he has been able to see death very close and claims that awareness of his own mortality like all human beings has helped him stay scrupulously honest as a politician. Turning to material gains and pleasures in his earthly abode the Prime Minister expresses his reactions: "I have always felt that the temporary pleasures of this world are not really worth the opprobrium and detestation of the people of the future after I am dead and buried." Clearly, such an expression bears eloquent testimony of his God-fearing bent of mind and impeccable religious fervour. Such qualities of head and heart can instantly create a salutary effect on any one's mental upheaving and spiritual attachments. The most dazzling and vibrant exposure of such a state of mind can again be traced in the statement, where he says: "... I can assure

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you that mortality, the temporariness of life in this world, the absolute awareness that you cannot take (wealth) with you act as a great deterrent, at least for me. I would rather keep my name clean."

It is over a decade now since 1981 that Dr Mahathir Muhammad is occupying the highest seat of the government, that is, the coveted position of the Prime Minister. It is easily discernible that the religious point of view that the Prime Minister indirectly professes in the observations above has been of vital importance to draw strength and courage for building the nation. His dynamic leadership, though an eyesore to many of his Western counterparts, belies all their reservations. For now, Malaysia is marching ahead to economic progress and development faster than ever before showing a big thumb to the adversaries in the Western world: Welfare of the people and not personal

aggrandisement, being discreetly on top of everything, the socio-economic development of the country has been able to assume galloping strides. The achievements so far have been simply startling. It can be cited as a reward of the honest and sincere efforts put in by the Malaysian leader in a most pragmatic manner.

From the unique revelations above, it transpires that politics and corruption are not always synonymous. There are exceptions as well where awareness of death standing by can remove the vicious stings of dishonesty and corrupt practices from the human instincts of a politician. Such a desirable scenario can emerge from a genuine urge to serve the people selflessly. The urge itself emanates from one's firm determination to remain incorruptible and from the

of the bureaucrats are also a party to such gamble. The intriguing line of corruption cutting down to the lowest echelons of the public administration. With such people nothing moves without the traditional 'bakhshish'.

In fact, the malaise of corruption has been deep-rooted in all the three countries in the subcontinent. The infamous "Hawala case" in India can be cited as a bewildering specimen of how the largest democracy of the world lingers with it. It also tells us that their system of governance, similar to ours, or to Pakistan, guarantees absolute freedom to the CBI to pursue investigation even against the President of India. And even though the magistracy there is the part of the administration, the judiciary wields a formidable power to play its role that

rather cleverly side-tracked by the ruling party. To avoid a row in the opposition benches of the allegations brought by Mr Tofael Ahmed (now Industry and Commerce Minister), the matter was assigned to a parliamentary committee and eventually it was killed. The committee had only 7/3 inconclusive meetings. The concerned minister (Maj Gen Retd Majidul Haq) heaved sighs of relief deriving benefits from the dispensation.

Indeed our ethical values have gone down to the lowest point. Corruption, nepotism and favouritism have infiltrated into the marrow of our bones. Our administrative structure has been practically rendered totally ineffective by the sordid patronage of those in power. Consequently, the much desired accountability and transparency are conspicuously absent in our political system of governance. Nevertheless, it is not the system that is to be blamed. Rather, it is that set-

tion of our politicians, more so, those in power, are to bear the responsibility. To be rich overnight apparently has been the common strategy while the welfare of the people living in sub-human state, is of secondary importance.

It is heartening to observe that the present Government, has expressed its total commitment to have a corruption free, transparent and accountable administration. Some steps have though been taken already in this direction, I and believably most of the citizens, consider it imperative on the part of the Government to re-cast the Bureau of Anti-Corruption following, say, the Indian model, to make it directly responsible to the highest court of the land. Hopefully, such a reorganisation ensures correct handling of the incidences of corruption at any level without least vindictiveness. Parallel to the firm unequivocal declaration of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina that she would not spare even a minister in the cabinet found indulging in corrupt practices, I hope the ministers would also remain ever prepared to relinquish their position on the moment they would be implicated. In this they should be bold enough to follow the unique and most commendable example of their Indian counterparts.

The desired boldness presupposes a clarity of mind and total resignation unto Allah and cultivation of moral values, fear of death and unwavering adherence to ethical principles. In such an exercise they may draw inspiration from the candid version of Dr Mahathir Muhammad. The massive economic development of Malaysia can be considered as the direct outcome of the integrity of the leader. We have a remarkable lesson on the table. Let us take it and show to the world that we too are capable of building and developing our country all by our own. We have the potentiality to do it and be a self-reliant nation. Echoing the Malaysian Premier let us also keep our 'names clean' before death takes us over.

A Challenge for Justice Shahabuddin

by Sinha M A Sayeed

THE basic difference between the neutral, non-party caretaker government of Justice Shahabuddin in 1990 and that of Justice Habibur Rahman in 1996 was the locus standi of the power base. Justice Shahabuddin was simultaneously the head of the state and the head of the government under the then presidential form of government and was not accountable to anybody for any policy matter. Justice Habibur Rahman as head of the government was answerable to the President as per provisions made in the 13th amendment to the Constitution and he even could not take any decision on any policy matter. From this point of view, Justice Shahabuddin then enjoyed the office of the head of the state in true sense of the term.

But going back to the office of the Chief Justice of Bangladesh through the historic arrangement of 11th amendment to the Constitution Justice Shahabuddin, in his address to the Supreme Court Bar Association on 9 October, 1991 made a very valuable, weighted and calculated comment about the powers and functions of the President of the country as contained in the 12th amendment to the Constitution. The then Chief Justice with a sense of dissatisfaction pointed out that the powers and functions of the President under the newly introduced parliamentary system of government had been reduced to such an extent that head of the state had nothing to do substantially

but to place wreaths and offer prayer at graveyards. The leading point is how the same personality after a lapse of five years now be satisfied with the same chair having the same powers and functions? Shall he be in a position finally to maintain his hard-earned widely accepted reputation as a man of enough integrity, maturity and sophistication in the overall new perspectives? We wish he does.

It is great victory for AL in general and Prime Minister Hasina in particular that Justice Shahabuddin has been elected as ruling party's nominee to honour the exalted office of the head of the state. In an instant reaction deputy leader of the Opposition in the 7th Sangsad Professor B Chowdhury told on the floor: that this very selection could have been made after having talks with BNP as Justice Shahabuddin was an equally respectable personality to BNP. In fact AL has created a commendable instance in our national politics first by placing Justice Badrul Haider Chowdhury as its presidential candidate in 1991 and secondly by choosing Justice Shahabuddin for the same in 1996. Bangabandhu chose Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury in 1972 as the first head of state of independent Bangladesh not only with a logic of recognition to the personality's outstanding contribution to the birth of Bangladesh but also paying due importance and attention to his integrity,

maturity and sophistication as well. Therefore, it is historically on record that AL all the time excepting perhaps the case of Mohammadullah who became president after the resignation of Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, showed good intention to maintain the overall dignity and sophistication of the office of the head of the state by choosing nationally acceptable non-party candidate in the right perspective for the post.

The nation cannot produce another Shahabuddin overnight and history is also of the same view that a man, whatever potentialities he may be possessed of, may not show the same excellence and be equally befitting for all the time having the conditionalities, same or otherwise. Justice Shahabuddin is not far away from this universally recognised reality. But the challenge and risk he has thus taken, truly speaking, is Herculean in nature and content, and with this he has again set his widely acclaimed image as a man of integrity and transparency in motion. Morning shows the day. If due weight is attached to this maxim, in this case the beginning of President-elect Justice Shahabuddin is noticeable and commendable as in his maiden talks with the Press and media he unambiguously and specifically made it clear that the Constitution did not contain anything like the concept 'government by consensus', a highly publicised

slogan of the ruling AL. It is known that even after a series of repeated requests and persuasions from different corners and lobbies Shahabuddin remained rigid not to get involved in the affairs of the state any more. But it also seems good that his rigidity apparently transformed into flexibility at the request of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The nation and the people of various shades of opinion have no idea whether Justice Shahabuddin has set any precondition to the Prime Minister to give thought on president's constitutional role in time of a national crisis, political or otherwise, or whether the ruling party has anything in mind to go for an amendment to empower the president, of course, having talks with the Opposition in the 7th Sangsad. If the 13th amendment to the Constitution provides enough powers and functions to the office of the head/president of the state, including the power even to dissolve the cabinet of the neutral, non-party caretaker government, then why should he not be now trusted with such powers and functions which shall constitutionally be workable in time of a national crisis, political or otherwise? Justice Shahabuddin has complied with the request of the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and now it is the Prime Minister's

turn to exalt the position of President with what he requires to be there and continue with the head high in pride. Whatever it is, let me repeat a few suggestions envisaged in my write-up 'For a President Who Can Take Initiative' published in The Daily Star on 20 March 1996: a) Let there be a constitutional provision that as the head of the state, as the custodian of the Constitution and as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces President of the Republic shall enjoy a definite set of powers to deal with any national crisis, political or otherwise, provided the party-in-power has failed to settle or cope with the same positively within the time frame of, say, 60-90 days.

b) Let there be a constitutional provision that if the set of powers so decided and detailed prove to be insufficient in the time of a grave national crisis, political or otherwise, the President shall enjoy a constitutional option to seek advice of the appellate division of the Supreme Court with or without prior consent of the Prime Minister. We are however, not oblivious of the fact that Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury as the head of the state had to stand by the towering personality of the then Prime Minister Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. But this is perhaps for first time in the history of independent Bangladesh that a President under the parli-

mentary system of government is going to enter the Bangabhaban whose overall integrity, maturity and sophistication shall be felt and realised by the Prime Minister. The nation has seen President Mohammadullah for a short time and President Abdur Rahman Biswas for the last five years. The latter shall also be remembered for his "historic helplessness" at the time of peak political crisis in the country partly due to his constitutional limitations, partly due to his lack of boldness and also partly due to his dependence on BNP and its chairperson then the prime minister Begum Khaleda Zia, now leader of the Opposition in the 7th Sangsad.

Justice Shahabuddin, as a human being, was also not above all errors and mistakes. During his earlier short tenure of office as the President he could not satisfy all. For instance Jatiya Party blamed him for doing injustice to it and its leaders including its chairman H M Ershad for which 11th amendment to the Constitution had been marked with a note of dissent by the then acting leader of JP parliamentary party Barrister Moudud Ahmed, now a BNP leader. But let his achievements override the lapses, if any. Let Justice Shahabuddin again stand by the nation and the country as the 7th President — as a loadstar in our political firmament. The writer is joint secretary for international affairs of Jatiya Party.

To the Editor...

All about vehicles

Sir, Checking of vehicles' documents by the traffic police is a frequent event which we have to face on the roads. I respect this exercise and am fully conscious of its need. But it becomes very annoying and painful when it takes place on demand: (a) almost daily or with a high frequency — sometimes more than once in a single day, and (b) ignoring the pleading of occupants (specially ladies, elderly, children, etc — who are least susceptible to be terrorists, mas-tans (carriers of arms) for being present for time or any reason and not being in a position to stop for the check. These pleadings are never honoured, due to perhaps lack of training and orientation of the members of the traffic police.

Can we then request the authorities to consider allowing the police to stamp/initial the documents with date and time (with a reasonable validity of, say, 2 weeks or 10 days) to cover the normal periodic duration of such inspections? This will, on one hand, avoid the unnecessary frequency of checking the same documents over and over again and, on the other, spare the occupants from the agony of this exercise. May I expect that the authorities concerned would please respond to my request? I was very amused to read in the newspapers the order of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police to owners of vehicles (jeeps, microbuses and buses — in some newspapers these 3 types have not been specified making it open for general application) to remove extra bumpers fitted to their vehi-

Mushtaq Ahmed, FCA 128 New Eskaton Road Dhaka.

Unauthorised bus stops

Sir, The number of unauthorised bus stops in the metropolitan city of Dhaka is increasing day by day. Bus drivers/conductors stop their buses here and there, mostly at crowded places, road junctions and corners of the roads to pick up passengers. They also move the buses at a dead slow speed at their sweet will which creates traffic jams and the movement of the road traffic comes to a standstill. Many a times we have observed that the traffic police sergeants/constables simply remain standing as silent spectators. They neither order the bus drivers/conductors to

move fast nor they take any legal action.

It may also be mentioned here that a large number of staff buses of different public sector corporations and banks are unnecessarily and idly parked at Motijheel Commercial Area for hours together from morning to evening adding fuel to the fire of haphazard and disorderly traffic system in the area. Further we would like to add that repair, vulcanizing, welding, painting and body building works of the buses are done for days together blocking the Folder Street—Jai Kali Mandir—Toynbee Circular Road—Old railway crossing at Nawabpur Road—BB Avenue at the cost of untold sufferings of the people.

Would the DCC and DMP whose headquarters are situated not far off from the above mentioned traffic affected areas kindly pay their attention to solve the serious problems and help alleviate the hardships and sufferings of the city dwellers?

OH Kabir 6, Hare Street, Wari, Dhaka-1203

Bumpers of vehicles

Sir, The Dhaka Metropolitan Police has recently ordered to remove all extra bumpers from all cars, microbuses, jeeps and trucks as these bumpers create obstructions in looking at the number-plates of the vehicles concerned and this fixing of extra bumpers is also against the Motor Vehicles Act 1983. As an owner of a car, I would request the authority to re-

consider their order for the following reasons:

For the safety of the body and the headlights of their cars from the hitting by rash drivers of the rickshaws, vans, push-carts and other vehicles with faulty brakes, the owners of some vehicles fix an extra bumper outside the body of their vehicles at a cost of the 3000 to 4000 Taka. This minimises their cost of repair, maintenance and repeated fixing of all lights at a very high cost. These bumpers, in a way, also save foreign currency of national exchequer which would have been required to import car-lights and other parts of the vehicles; whereas the removal of bumpers would only help flourish the business of car-parts and workshops and none else.

The extra bumpers also help the owners of vehicles to avoid quarrelling with the rickshaw-pullers and others for hitting their vehicles and thus demanding compensation for the damage done to their vehicles which in most cases appear to end in enraged fighting or bitter pardoning. This type of unpleasant occurrence is now easily checked by the vehicle-owners themselves by fixing protective bumpers outside their own vehicles. Keeping these bumpers intact, the number plates of the cars can be refixed to make them visible to the police.

Therefore, in consideration of the immense utility of the extra bumpers for the car and other vehicle owners, I would request the authority concerned to reconsider their recent order and also to modify the Motor Vehicles Act 1983, so that the number plates of the vehicles are displayed

most distinctly even after retaining their extra bumpers. This will save the owners' the cost of repair to their cars, and police will also be able to clearly identify the number plates and registration number of the vehicles.

Prof Nurul Hoque Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Tribute to Bangabandhu

Sir, I thank the government of Sheikh Hasina for declaring August 15 a National Mourning Day on which Bangabandhu, the father of the nation, was assassinated most brutally by some disgruntled Army men in 1975. By doing so Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has translated the long-cherished dreams and hopes of the people, who believe in the independence of Bangladesh and the ideals of Bangabandhu, into reality.

The two words, 'Bangabandhu' and 'Bangladesh' are interrelated. We cannot separate one from the other. Bangabandhu's contribution to the independence of Bangladesh is undeniable and unparalleled. The independence of Bangladesh was the culmination of the long-drawn struggle against Pakistani occupation under the leadership of Sheikh Mujib. Thousands of lakhs of patriots of our country took part in the War of Liberation at the call of the father of the nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

It is rather a pity that the name of the leader who never hesitated to lay down his own life for the cause of the holy

motherland has been shamelessly let out from the history of Bangladesh by vested quarters. Even the trial of the killers of this lamented leader was blocked through the enactment of a black law in the Constitution. We are a really very ungrateful people.

Prof Nurul Hoque Dhanmondi, Dhaka

The Paribagh mess

Sir, Thousands of people including hundreds of school and college-going students are facing hardship due to the closure of Elephant Road crossing at Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue near Paribagh area in the city. This important thoroughfare was closed by the previous government for no tangible reason.

As a result, hundreds of rickshaw passengers, who include parents of school-going boys and girls, are to face traffic jam at Bangla Motor and Shahbagh areas. Rickshaw passengers are to pay more money for covering additional distance. We appeal to the authorities to reopen this rickshaw crossing to save our time and money and unnecessary harassment.

Baker Chowdhury 17, Paribagh Dhaka-1000