

Press Freedom

Hindrance in the free flow of information has been a typical Third World syndrome. For all the lip service of the authorities concerned in the twenty five years old history of the country, public access to untainted information remains elusive.

One of the refreshing sides of the quest for democracy proper, however, has been a sharp and general awareness of people's right to information. Quite in keeping with the spirit of the time, Sheikh Hasina's Awami League has kept free flow of information as a priority on its agenda. Unfortunately though its pre-election announcement of giving autonomy to the electronic media as a first step towards ensuring the whole process of genuine and fair dissemination of information on all matters of public interest is yet to find vindication. Nevertheless, Prime Minister's commitment to the freedom of press at the National Press Club has been reassuring. One only hopes her avowal was made before the united body of journalists she having met with all.

Her appraisal in the BFUJ conference and her maiden address at the Jatiya Press Club were definitely aimed at the welfare of the journalist community in general. As the conscience as well as the intellectual and ethical feeding source of the nation, journalists do need the guarantee for conditions conducive to their smooth, unhindered functioning particularly in a country where newspaper is yet to go grow as an industry.

To ensure the welfare of the journalists, the government has to ensure the healthy growth of the industry itself. We hope the policy to be formulated soon according to the PM will review the present advertisement policy. It should be decentralised and rationalised so that it cannot be used as an arm-twisting ploy by any party in power to throttle press freedom. Inclusion of the newspaper owners in the quest for an improvement in a holistic manner is also necessary. Because matters like the implementation of the fifth wage board and newsprint allocation have got more to do with the capacity of the newspaper to the cause of journalism industry.

Mere announcement of the wage board will not bring about any wholesome effect on the journalistic profession unless the government comes up with a policy to strengthen the industry's sustainability. One hopes the policy will herald the advent of the elusive desirables and winnow husks that choke journalism's growth as an industry.

The Stake of Campus Terror

There is no reason to disbelieve what a national daily has reported about the terror situation at the Dhaka University. In fact our respected contemporary has only quoted at length a police report in detailing the present state of terror down there. All the figures are intriguingly small — BCL in their two groups has at the most 85 and JCD 60 known cadre members. Not all of them carry arms all the time — the 140 and odd terrorists mainly use 70 pieces of assorted hardware collectively to keep the halls under control and the campus terrorised.

The police can, empowered by right instructions, blow it all into thin air as a single day's work. However, the fact is that not only the university administration but the successive governments have not been able to touch this concentrate of waywardness that compromises every norm of civilised existence and grossly undermines not only moral authority of the governments but cuts dangerously at the very base of government's power.

Hasina's has been a public commitment out of government and from within it that the society shall be rid of terrorism — beginning the good work at the universities. Why is Hasina finding it difficult to exorcise the jinn, say, from the Dhaka University? Bereft of politics — terror at DU can be snuffed out in a day. What is her political difficulty?

There are very good chances of the present government's succeeding in grappling with the great challenges before the nation. But this it cannot achieve with terrorism constantly gnawing at it and nothing would blister more dangerously than a failure at the DU. Conversely, a success there would allow the government to restore in the other universities a proper academic ambience and in a short time make campus violence a thing of the past.

It devolves on the Prime Minister, as it is primarily the government's duty, to go for the thugs that go in the BCL garb. This and only this will empower her to eliminate the rest of the terrorists in the campuses as also out in the society at large.

Hopefully a Helpful Step-in

Professor Shahiduddin Ahmed has been confirmed as the Vice-Chancellor in charge of the Dhaka University. He has been so appointed by the Chancellor of the university, namely, President Abdur Rahman Biswas. And he comes only as a stop-gap before someone is found to occupy the chair with full power and tenure. Even after all that two things warrant our attention. Professor Ahmed is going to hold charge at a particularly volatile time of transition. Much will depend on his sagacity as well as tenacity. The fact that he is only an in-charge man adds to his burden.

This has also to be noted that the government has not apparently involved itself in this appointment business at this point of the unhealthy development there. It has allowed norms to take their course. It is universal knowledge that sections of teachers have played no mean role in fashioning the DU into the impossible hell that it is now. And that the VC as the leader of the whole team down there had, for term after term, the most dirtied hand of them all. There are so many parties to the DU's unrelenting slide into degeneration and there hasn't been any more sinister than who eats from the hands of a party in power and caters to all the demands made by political interests of that party.

Professor Ahmed's tenure should hopefully be a time of respite from all that. The government has been judicious in letting him step in and help in not adding to the untenability of the situation there.

RUNNING a statecraft is in many ways like steering a ship across a stormy sea. This is particularly so in a developing country. You need a ballast to steady the ship; you need balance in life in as much as in the business of state. Like in many other areas of human existence, the Holy Quran also has touched on the question of balance in Surah Al-Mizan: 'It is the merciful who has taught you the Quran. He raised the Heaven on high and set the balance of all things, that you might not transgress it. Give just weight and full measure.'

Democracy like the army, crawls on its stomach. The leaders of a democratic country must agree on an irreducible minimum, their party philosophies notwithstanding, to ensure two square meals a day to its citizens. That is why tolerance and understanding are so important in the running of a democratic society.

Appeal of democracy is universal because it allows the people to exercise their right to choose. June 12 was one such day when the people so exercised their right of franchise. It seems to any observer that the Leader of the Opposition, Begum Khaleda Zia, has not yet reconciled with this reality. The more she denounces the outcome and puts the blame on a red herring, the more she loses the respect due to a democratic leader. After all she also served as the Chief Executive of Bangladesh for good five years after being elected as the majority leader in 1991 caretaker election. Our democratic institutions are indeed very fragile, so much so that several foreign leaders had to plead with Begum Zia to accept the electoral verdict! Even some US Congressmen had to give her the same message. Democracy by its very definition means that there is a winner and a loser. Without the acceptance of this fact democracy cannot function, nor can institutions strike roots.

We were happy when Begum Zia stated that the Opposition would work with the Treasury Bench to promote democracy. That is statesmanship. If Begum Zia had moved to strike off the Indemnity Act from the Constitution, as agreed to, in the tripartite negotiation, it would have put her in the Hall of Fame of good political leadership.

The happenings at Bogra are very painful indeed. An accidental death was seized by interested groups for making capital out of it. We must remember that throwing stones at others while living in a glass house

and 'democratic institutions. Unfortunately the first walk-out, with Sheik Razzak Ali, her own party-nominated speaker in the Chair, stunned everybody. With subsequent walk-outs, two exasperated senior ambassadors in Dhaka stated — it is disgraceful, it is unconscionable.'

The remarks of two honourable MPs against the Speaker were even more reprehensible. What these two MPs of the Opposition said on the floor of the House made us all hang our heads in shame. Someone wryly commented 'parliament is not a shooting range. Old habits die hard! Tolerance is necessary for the Opposition as much as for the Treasury bench. We ought to take lessons from the House of Commons, or even the neighbouring Indian Parliament. Tony Blair accompanied John Major to meet the people after the Dunblane tragedy. The Opposition in India irrespective of their political spectrum, have weighed in supporting the government of Deve Gowda on all major issues including economic reforms and the CTBT negotiations in Geneva. That is political maturity *pro bono publico*.

Rule of Law must be upheld by everybody. This means no body is above law. Two former presidents of South Korea are suffering imprisonment for corruption and abuse of power. The most noteworthy example of accountability is to be seen in the action of the former Japanese Prime Minister Hosokawa. A sniff of wrongdoing made him resign the post. What an example he set for the Japanese democracy!

Like charity, accountability begins at home. Nelson Mandela's example is to be emulated by both the Leader of the House as well as the Leader of the Opposition. He invited his jailors to his inauguration ceremony. That is statesmanship. If Begum Zia had shown much wisdom. Prime minister's instant visit to the place of occurrence was not matched by the utterances of the Leader of the Opposition. The wrongdoers of Bogra must be brought to book swiftly and demonstrably. Justice Sulaimanuddin's appointment as head of the investigative team is good news for law abiding citizens.

Prime Minister's decision not to campaign for September 5 by-elections is unique. There is little instance in history when the Chief Executive did not go to the hustings for her own camp followers; it is a magnanimous as well as courageous act. She has put an embargo on her ministers even in going to the by-elections. Her decision itself is a litmus test of her sincerity of purpose and integrity of action in the cause of democracy!

Mostans and terrorists are nobody's friends. We appreciated the arrests of some well-known terrorists in spite of their claim that they belonged to the student wing of the ruling

party. We want to see more of such actions. The Home Minister must act fast and swift. He may make mistakes but he must err on the side of caution. And for that he must avoid giving an impression of flip-flopping. We are receiving foreign assistance for development programmes; we must not hesitate to seek expertise from Italian carabinieri or Scotland Yard, or FBI, in curbing terrorism in the country.

the people and to the nation to work towards a better future of the country. One of the earliest law-givers, Spartan Lycurgus, said it well — legislator's work should be *pro aris et focis* — for alters and firesides, for faith and home; and this can be achieved only through stern self-discipline.

Former prime minister's press conference of Tuesday was very painful. She was poorly advised — she was kind of hoist on her own petard. The Daily Star's second leader of August 29 said it all. This reminds one of her disastrous press briefing of Feb 18, 1996 when she had blamed everything on the Opposition! She didn't recover from the events that followed.

The Budget debate that ended on Thursday night was a significant exercise in more than one way. 202 MPs took part in the debate — one of the highest in our history. The interactions of the last day were marked by considerable degree of bonhomie from both the Treasury and the Opposition benches. Certain incipient consensus is discernible at least on major issues. This is most praiseworthy.

In about seventy days the government of Sheikh Hasina is moving ahead with certainty on a defined agenda. Ganges water sharing is getting the full attention of the Prime Minister.

Indian Foreign Minister Gujral's visit is the pointer. Prime Minister will visit China from the 12th September to be followed by other important world capitals. She has earlier had friendly tête-à-tête with the Saudi Monarch. Foreign Minister's visits to Kuwait and Iran will strengthen existing bilateral relations. In Kuwait we have a security contingent. Foreign Secretary Farooq Sabir's Washington visit will help our American friends get a better picture of the government.

On the home front, *Mashtan* is on the wane. Serious efforts are being made to root out terrorism; with time and support from the opposition it is achievable. Administrative reforms are being seriously propelled with transparency and accountability in place.

American Hyatt cooperation has already signed agreement with Beximco for a hefty \$250 million investment in a commercial-complex-cum-hotel thus setting the governmental direction towards private investment and FDI in the country. EPZs are also being given to private parties for quick investment and employment. Cellular phone monopoly has been broken for better and cheaper service to consumers. VAT network will be expanded for improved internal revenue collection with the simplification of income tax payment facilities. Banks are being depoliticised with other financial institutions streamlined. Upazila and local self-government will be restored for better governance of the country. Energy sector will be revamped, system loss rationalized, BOI and Foreign Office will coordinate to invite more investment. War against corruption has been declared. Privatisation will be done in full coordination with IMF and WB. In effect the stage is set for moving ahead to lend sufficient vibrancy to the economy so that the real effective income of the people will go up. In such a short time it is no small achievement.

In this context the BNP chairperson can play a historic role. In performing her destined role she would do better in remembering Cicero who said, 'One should not listen to those who maintain that political enemies merit boundless hatred.' She has the opportunity, she has the backing of the largest ever opposition in our parliament to do exactly that. If she can rise above petty political considerations and make effective contribution in the parliament, she can still make a permanent place for herself in our country's history.

An Appeal to Begum Zia

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ENCHIRIDION

Walidur Rahman



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Vice-Chancellor Emajuddin's resignation needs to be seen in perspective. A resignation by him when the students of Jagannath Hall, mostly minorities, were brutalised by the police and some student elements on the night of January 31 and February 1, would have been more meaningful. It would have shown his courage because then he would have resigned in protest of action by his own appointing authority. That would have been genuinely a protest against the brutalising of his students!

Milton presented his Areopagita to the House of Commons with a plea to free the prints and printing press. Isocrates, over 2000 years ago, asked for restoring the freedom of the highest court in Athens — Areopagus. Only a free court could sustain civilised society. Areopagita is full of history and lessons of the past. It may be introduced as an essential primer along with Kaul and Baghch for the honourable members of the parliament. As elected legislators they owe it to

Growing Political In-fighting in Kremlin

by A M M Shahabuddin

In fact, Yeltsin has drifted far away from the prevailing political scenario in Kremlin. He has left the field to the Generals to fight out their case. This struggle among the Generals for power is not a new development. It has been brewing underneath since the disintegration of Soviet Union, under the leadership of Gorbachev.

he tried to win over a losing Presidential candidate, Gen. Alexander Lebed who had been trying for a long time to get into the presidency. But came third in the run-up, just behind the communist candidate. But it is still not clear whether it was Yeltsin's own 'choice', or some 'invisible hand' was pushing to accept him to serve as a 'bully boy' during any unpleasant situation, particularly because of the 'rising red star' threatening just behind Yeltsin. Or, perhaps, Yeltsin, as a good strategy, wanted to 'pacify' at least one enemy by bringing him over to his side, following the golden dictum: 'Pay attention to your enemies because they would discover your mistakes'. So he paid attention to Lebed and made him the Russian Security Chief. This served double purpose. He was in a much comfortable winning positions in the second round by gaining a substantial portion of voters that supported Lebed. Thus it also put another nail in the coffin of the communists who were dreaming a come-back.

A Turf-war?
In fact, Yeltsin has drifted far away from the prevailing political scenario in Kremlin. He has left the field to the Generals to fight out their case. This struggle among the Generals for power is not a new development. It has been brewing underneath since the disintegration of Soviet Union, under the leadership of Gorbachev.

Yeltsin himself has created a sense of uncertainty and a sort of 'voidness' in Kremlin through his mysterious movements and a hide-and-seek game with his own people. The Russians are eager to know his whereabouts. The most pertinent questions they raise are: 'Is he still in charge?', 'Who is in control?', 'Is he capable of running the country?' — so on and so forth. Since the days of his first round of election in June, followed by the second round in July and lastly the oath-taking ceremony in the first week of August, he has proved practically to be an 'immobile' person. This has created a lot of confusion and misgivings in the minds of the Kremlin-watchers, both at home and abroad.

Yeltsin Finds a New Friend?

After the first round of elec-

tions, he tried to win over a losing Presidential candidate, Gen. Alexander Lebed who had been trying for a long time to get into the presidency. But came third in the run-up, just behind the communist candidate. But it is still not clear whether it was Yeltsin's own 'choice', or some 'invisible hand' was pushing to accept him to serve as a 'bully boy' during any unpleasant situation, particularly because of the 'rising red star' threatening just behind Yeltsin. Or, perhaps, Yeltsin, as a good strategy, wanted to 'pacify' at least one enemy by bringing him over to his side, following the golden dictum: 'Pay attention to your enemies because they would discover your mistakes'. So he paid attention to Lebed and made him the Russian Security Chief. This served double purpose. He was in a much comfortable winning positions in the second round by gaining a substantial portion of voters that supported Lebed. Thus it also put another nail in the coffin of the communists who were dreaming a come-back.

Lebed — A Two-faced General
Among the Kremlin Generals involved in 'in-fighting' Lebed has undoubtedly turned to be a 'colourful' character, rather a chameleon who can change colour conveniently. He had shown his most hostile and fascist face in Moldova, another break-away republic, where he was sent to command the 14th Division to put down the rebellion there. In July 1992, Lebed, like a typical colonialist, suggested that the 'fascists' like the Molodovian President who led his people to secede from Russia should be 'put to the gallows'. He never hesitated to show his contempt and disobedience to president Yeltsin. He had the courage to issue the statement suggesting that the Moldavian President should be 'hanged', just one day after Yeltsin had signed a peace agreement with the same person. But did this 'loose-tongued' man lose his job for this? Could Yeltsin take any disciplinary action against the General for this rebellion? No. Because he had the support from other Generals who were opposed to Yeltsin's policy. Among them was Yeltsin's Vice-President, Gen. Rutsikov who later joined hands with another hardliner Khasbulatov, Parliament Speaker, to bring about a 'parliamentary rebellion' to oust Yeltsin. But Rutsikov and Khasbulatov lost ground because Yeltsin had to 'bombard' the Parliament House to 'save democracy', with blessings from his western allies. Even two years ago, Lebed had asked for Yeltsin's resignation as, according to him, he was incapable to run the country, when there was a rumour, like the current one, that Yeltsin was

'seriously ill' and has gone out for 'rest' outside Moscow. Asking Yeltsin to resign, Lebed said, in an interview with a German newspaper, 'The control of the State is lost... and Russia looks like a boat without rudders'. The same Lebed has now reached the nearest point of power as Russia's Security Chief. Now he might ask, like Rutsikov, to give him the assignment of Vice-President which would help him to take over presidential powers, in case something happens to Yeltsin. That's why he is showing too much of a 'humane' face in Chechnya. A benevolent despot!

US Stake in Yeltsin
America has a big stake in Russia, rather in Yeltsin, as they had injected billions of dollars there, banking on Yeltsin as their 'trusted' fellow in Kremlin, able to carry on the 'reforms' operation to help flourish the open-market system. Naturally, they felt nervous when they heard that Yeltsin was 'seriously ill' and had gone for 'rest'. It would be a big set-back if they lose Yeltsin before a 'suitable alternate leader' is groomed properly to take over. It is all the more shocking because during the June and July election campaign, western media projected Yeltsin as a 'jolly good robust fellow', making him much larger than his size in an orchestrated media-hype. The West banked heavily on him to keep the 'reformed' Russian economy on track against the up-coming onslaughts from the re-emerging communist forces, led by Gennady Zyuganov, who

came second in the recent presidential run. So it was not surprising at all that US Vice-President Al Gore had to rush to Moscow to make an on-the-spot 'check-up' on Yeltsin's health condition, as he had done it last time when there was a similar rumour about his 'illness'. But this time Al Gore didn't issue any clean 'health certificate' as he did last time. A bad sign.

A New Coup d'état?
Undoubtedly, Yeltsin is gradually losing his grip over things. He has practically been kept in 'coroutine'. It is difficult to say who now is holding the reigns and who is running the country? The recent statement of Yeltsin hints at the gathering storm although he is hopeful that it wouldn't do much harm. In a recent interview, Yeltsin has said that 'a new coup d'état was still possible in Russia', but hastened to add that it has 'no more chance of success than the hardline (communist) putsch five years ago that helped propel him to power'. But only history will show what shape of things comes next in Russia. Yeltsin can't wait history. If the 1991 putsch could throw up a hitherto unknown man like Yeltsin, then the next putsch could also do something more dazzling or less lustre. Who knows?

A good number of Generals, foremost being Gen. Lebed who is practically posing as next to Yeltsin, are waiting in the aisle. It all depends on Lebed's power of outwitting and out-maneuvering his rivals and muster strong support of the generals on his side. If he fails to emerge as the next Russian 'blue-boy' of the West, then the West, led by US, would have to 'groom' some alternate leader to take over the mantle from Yeltsin. Till then, the would, particularly the Kremlin-watchers would have to sit cross-fingered.

Traffic problems
Sir, The three-cornered roads adjacent to the daily *Ittefaq* office/Hatkola Post office is one of the most important, busiest and traffic-jammed public thoroughfares situated in the middle of the old and the new Dhaka Metropolitan City.

There already exists a bus stop at the point of Motijheel Commercial Area, and RK Mission Road. But there is no authorised bus stop adjacent to Hatkola Post Office and *Ittefaq* Office. This has created hell of a traffic problem, obstructed the movement of motor vehicles, rickshaws, push-carts and also the crossing of the road by the pedestrians.