

Hold a National Conference

Fifty-five per cent of Dhaka City's inhabitants live below the poverty line — 32 per cent of them below the hard-core poverty line. This is slightly less than the national average of 60 or 65 per cent. Clearly the centre of opportunity — which capitals of different countries usually are — proves more to be a myth than a reality in our case. Or the other explanation may be that in a small country with an over-size population the capital draws more people than it can reasonably provide for. Creation of jobs in the informal sector has been far outstripped by the supply of labour as a result of a steady stream of rural migration to the city.

Urban poverty is both a consequence and an extension of rural poverty not the vice versa. For the past one and a half decades we have concentrated all our efforts in tackling rural poverty at the expense of the urban issues. The Non-Governmental Organisations in particular have concentrated their attention, and justifiably so, to poverty alleviation in the rural areas. Neither the government nor private agencies made any worthwhile attempt to tackle urban poverty in any meaningful way. It has grown almost unnoticed and now we are facing a huge problem involving more than half the city's population.

The city's absolute poor are worse off than their counterparts in villages. Both their living condition and access to pure drinking water, sanitation, etc are acutely limited. It is time that this situation changed for the better. The change is necessary both for the sufferers and also for the well-to-do here. The inhuman living condition they are subjected to has its deleterious influences on the overall city life. If the situation worsens further, Dhaka will no longer be livable at all. Therefore, we feel that a comprehensive poverty alleviation programme for the country — with specially suitable schemes for the city's poor — should be taken up on priority basis. Given the enormity and complexity of the problem, and the need for an urgent, comprehensive and multi-faceted programme we suggest that a national conference on poverty alleviation be held with representation from different government agencies, NGOs, donors, national experts and field level workers, to prepare a priority national action plan.

How Bad is 36 Per Cent

At long last a kind of admission has come from the DG of DOE — Department of Environment. From long before his disclosure yesterday to the effect that some 36 per cent vehicles of this city emit black smoke and other exhausts that are indubitably injurious to health, we have been crying hoarse over this growing danger that certainly causes bronchial and lung problem, not to say of other side effects. We have time and again pointed to the ludicrous futility of holding special police weeks to catch the smoking culprits and ending up with prosecuting and fining a few hundred vehicles. But all our frenzied alarms have been rewarded with no more than such ineffectual gimmicks.

Publication of a survey on vehicles in four cities jointly by police and the DOE and also the DG's interview with the BSS, however can be hopefully taken as a sign of the government at last, taking notice of the looming disaster. What is the DOE going to do about this problem of air pollution of all kinds of internal combustion machines, mostly employed by the overland transport system?

It is heartening to know government would not allow anymore two-stroke engines to take to the road. But there is already a report that this happy piece of news is being circumvented by ingenious methods and adding newer vehicles to the already existing 80,000.

The government is going for disallowing license for reconditioned cars and other vehicles. This is a good move for phasing out these pollution machines. It could be still better to force out the vehicles of this nature as soon as their book value has run out to nil. It has also been wise that the government has thought about the fuel's extra polluting power. Leaded gasoline should straightway be banned for import and use.

Now to that delicate point of proving government's bona fide of intention in the matter. More than any private vehicles, it is the police-carrying lorries that belch out the blackest smoke. If government is serious about de-smoking the vehicles, it should start at home and ground all of its tens of thousands of smoking transports. They should come back on roads only after repairs had been sufficiently carried out on them. Only after that government would be morally armed to take on all the vehicles of the land.

We do not subscribe to the government view that modern testing facilities would be needed to identify the culprit vehicle. Catch the ones visibly emitting black smoke, deal with them and the Dhaka atmosphere will become as pure and un-nauseating as it was decades ago.

Police Showing Result

Pedestrian killed as muggers and police trade fire in city — was the headline of a news printed yesterday in all national newspapers. This was not quite a new occurrence in Dhaka. But, of course, this is a recent development. We are pained by the fact of innocent passersby being caught in crossfire and suffering and dying as a result. This has to be prevented at all cost.

Have the *mastans* become more desperate? Are they on the rise and up more and more mischief? No, the increasing police-terrorist encounters speak of exactly the opposite. The *mastans* have been holding an unchallenged sway in the city for long. Now they are being challenged more and more by police as well as by ordinary citizens. Why this change? Because, the political quarters on which the terrorist could fall back upon and drew their inviolability from are being thinning into air. And with that the pockets inside the police service itself that were two obliging to bigwigs on telephone even directly to the *mastans* who very helpfully lined their pockets, also responding to the new air of having no track with the terrorist no matter to whose wings they were under.

We wish this happy change to continue — sans of course, the killing of the innocent ones? There was a talk of ridding the society of private arms. Mr Interior Minister, what has happened to that? Once the Dhaka University scene comes to sanity, will you able to take on the rest of the universities weeding them out of arms and armed bullies? If organised violent crime in the universities cannot be healed, isolated criminal groups would be hard to disarm and punish.

Partisanship in Government: Call a Spade a Spade

Bangladesh, being an independent nation, exercises its sovereign right to pursue the policy which it deems fit. But, what is good for the government and a party is not necessarily so for the country and people.

THE term partisanship is often misconstrued. It is generally used in some what denigrating manner, attributing it mostly to some unfair changes effected in top echelons of administration following a changeover in government. This usually corresponds to the *spoils* system originating in the United States where a massive substitution of political appointees takes place with the advent of a new government. In Britain, the practice is followed less rigorously, less extensively and certainly with least impatience.

Bangladesh, being an independent nation, exercises its sovereign right to pursue the policy which it deems fit. But, what is good for the government and a party is not necessarily so for the country and people. Unfortunately, we have no uniform policy in this regard. Ironically, very little changes were seen to have been effected immediately in administration by an incoming military or autocratic ruler on its assumption of power. This is so, because it did not have a political party to back it publicly and consequently could not bestow patronage on it. Intake of serving and retired Armed Forces officers indeed took place in civil administration, but gradually and over a wide span of time.

The scenario after the 12 June election this year appeared quite different. Most of those senior officers whose services had been extended by the BNP government found their contracts arbitrarily cancelled. So many public officials, almost at all levels and in most sectors, have been moved from one place to another within much a short period that, to many, it

With a political government the scenario was somewhat different — 1972 witnessed an unprecedented reshuffling, almost a metamorphosis in the system. Party stalwarts swiftly occupied high posts available for political appointees. Government officials were rewarded for their participation in the War of Liberation and many were promoted, mainly due to dire necessity, thrice over instantaneously. This period also witnessed many appointments to senior posts by the government without going through the normal procedure of competitive examinations. To the victor belonged the spoils. This was a classic example.

Following election in 1991, there had indeed been political appointments. It took the government quite some time to fill up the posts after those fell vacant. The cases of terminating services for political purposes in order to substitute them by party members were relatively few. Even a well-known Awami Leaguer was retained by the BNP government as the Attorney General till the end of his tenure.

The appointment of an advocate, who had so long been pilot-

ing legal cases on Awami League's behalf, as the Attorney General within a week or two of the new government's assumption of power was an eye opener to real government policy to many. Public Prosecutors and Government Pleaders at district levels are being substituted by Awami League officials and supporters in great gusto. The

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An incredible situation emerged in educational institutions during the past couple of months. A well-devised plan enabled the Awami-backed Student League to forcibly occupy most of the Students Halls or dormitories in the Dhaka University. The BNP alleges tacit support or at least negligence of duty by the law enforcement authorities in furthering these nefarious activities. Several medical colleges and other educational institutions have already come under the control of the students wing of the ruling party. Even during the height of the non-cooperation movement organised by the then opposition during the last political government, the campus of the Dhaka University was peaceful and did not turn into an armed battle ground between student groups as we witnessed in the recent weeks. The process is continuing in other educational institutions outside the metropolis.

The above has been narrated to suggest that partisanship in government per se is not objectionable, rather it is inevitable. The undesirable part comes into play when it is practiced in excess. In the absence of an agreed and acceptable standard, it is no doubt difficult to measure an optimum standard. However, one may compare with similar situations in the past and make an assessment.

It is, therefore, natural to practice an acceptable degree of partisanship. It is bad to make excesses. It is even worse to claim no partnership when, on the contrary, excesses have been committed. It does not cost anyone to call a spade a spade.

Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

broke records in Bangladesh's history. Government Banks, insurance Companies and other financial institutions were first bereft not only of all BNP elements but also of some unsuspecting non-party BNP appointees, even if they were generally regarded as competent. Then followed selection and installation of Awami Leaguers and their sympathisers in their places.

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process is almost complete. The political Ambassadors were recalled, which was understandable. What was not understandable was the indecent haste in which they were recalled. This did not help improve the dignity and image of the new government, to say the least, in the host countries. Even the government of Khondaker Moshtaque and Justice Sayem did not dismiss all the Ambassadors, who had been originally appointed by Banga-

Doing the Minimum for Motherland

by M Arshad Ali

If law is allowed free play, only the dedicated, honest and cherished ones will return and the self-seekers will retreat making the stage clear for good governance, transparent administration and accountability which are remedy to the ills plaguing our national life.

THE poet's glowing tribute — "Full of riches, virtues and beauties is our land. Your search for a better country will baffle you. My motherland is the queen of all the lands on the globe" — still holds good if it is left to itself without being impeded by our untoward activities. The government of the day having been entrusted by the people with the sacred duty of running state affairs is, therefore, requested to keep it to itself without allowing anyone to disturb the normal course. Please do this only and only once. When state emerged into being, its (the latter) functions were confined only to maintaining law and order and protecting it from external aggressions. To our representatives, both in position and opposition, is our fervent appeal to do that primary duty alone in its true sense. If you do only this, it will do much more to you and us of inestimable value of its own accord.

Please allow law to take its own course in the political front, and you will find the country less of unpatriotic elements — traitors saboteurs, provocateurs etc — and more of well-wishers, patriots and connoisseurs because honest, crass will appear in their true colours to government on the one hand, and criticism by the opposition will not degenerate into licence on the other, with the exercise of the rights to freedom of expression and association that our Constitution provides for. Social peace will remain untrammelled as there will be less demonstrations and agitations for release of political prisoners and detenu as there will be lesser number of them because of the practice of confinement on the part of either parties.

Despite the existence of adequate laws providing for free, fair and impartial elections, the indiscriminate use of official power, black money, hooliganism and terrorism have belied people's expectations in many past elections with the discomfiture of the really chosen ones. These have assumed such gigantic proportions that the honest and less propertied are beginning to find the race of election a competition of inequity. If law is allowed free play, only the dedicated, honest and cherished ones will return and the self-seekers will retreat making the stage clear for good governance, transparent administration and accountability which are remedy to the ills plaguing our national life.

Peace which is the most sought-after in all civilised communities is a casualty to law not deterring the hoodlums. The obdurate goons resist the judicious elders from playing their traditional role in mitigating petty feuds preventing

them from aggravating into litigation at courts. The village life is so littered by the thugs and ruffians that their obnoxiousness has driven the saner people indoors and tragic incidents are taking place involving huge loss of life and property. Gresham's law is gradually gaining ground. The unauthorised arms take a heavy toll of human life day in and day out. In the district Jhendah alone it is alleged the one person is murdered every day by the armed terrorists. The cliques drive families out of village to migrate to cities and towns to add to the floating population and *bustees*.

Worsening law and order have made society dumb witness to hellish incidents of even minor girls being raped and murdered, the houses looted, ransacked and burnt, the inmates assaulted, tortured and violated, sometimes law enforcing agents conniving and conniving. Under the garb of trade unionism terrorist action unmoves the wheel of production, the country losses outputs, the import bill rises and the foreign exchange decreases. The factories sicken, go out of production, the banks suffer from loan default, and the people, from unemployment. The country is flooded with foreign goods and people's sense of patriotism and pride in the independent nationhood eroded. Neutral enforcement of the law is answer to such situations.

Our transport and communication system is a hostage to arson, gangsterism, vandalism, hi-jack and high-waymanship which patrol our roads and highways. Extortion, road blockades and strikes have been shocking the system of communication beyond absorption limit and the poor country's shoulder seems to be breaking down. The daily *Ittefaq* on 31.8.96 carried on its front page an appeal of the Ghatali Dhaka Cattle Merchants' Multipurpose Cooperative Society urging upon the PM to save them from the clutches of the extortions so that they may sell each cow at least Tk. 2000 less. Collection of illegal tolls by *mastans* and police meets the eye on almost

all roads and streets in this all-tolerant land of ours. Our development works are fattening the anti-social elements instead of developing social utilities. Corruption and misappropriation have carried the day. Lion's shares of the development funds are being eaten away by unscrupulous political sneaks and dishonest officials concerned with the execution of the schemes.

Corruption has bred contention to the amazing extent of affecting the people at the helm of affairs steering the ship of the state. Murders result from row over distribution of construction booty. Very few tenders are free from monetary bidding. Failure to gratify the extortions suspends development works beyond time limit escalating cost and detracting qualities. People undertaking house-building work and taking possession of newly-purchased land hardly escape the paws of the extortions in the name of social welfare and cultural organisations. The hoodlums propped up by the partitions have stooped so low

that their lust has not spared even the wheat doled out among the vulnerable mothers and widows and the food for education distributed among the poorest primary school-going children.

The financial laws of accountability guiding the functioning of different sector corporations and SOEs have been thrown to the air so much, so that the PDB alone incurred a loss of Tk 420.75 crores in the fiscal 1995-96 alone. What an astounding squandering of people's money! The amount of loss suffered by the public sector corporations (Tk. 1144.62 crores in 1995-96) alone is sufficient enough to bring in the desired industrialisation, and this is possible if rules of discipline and accountability are enforced in the strict sense untinged by any ulterior motive.

It is amazing to note that capacity utilisation is a proposition foreign to our state-run organisations and enterprises. As laws are made ineffective, chaos and confusion prevail in every sphere of our national life. The student cannot reverse

all his teachers, the teacher cannot love all his students, the employer deceives the employee, the employee distrusts the employer, the police attempt on life and property, the *mastans* dominate, the honest withdraw, public servants assume mastery, the army purifies invades the seat of power within, and laws are adhered to more in breach than in observance.

Proper enforcement of law ensures peace and stability which bless the country with less price-hike, more production, more mills and factories, more literacy and education, more quality construction and development, and above all, a higher standard of living which all our efforts are aimed at.

The country is groaning under the paradox of lawlessness, prodigal though it has been to deliver all the laws necessary to arrest all these. It calls upon its fortunate children in position and opposition to arrive at a consensus at least on one point and to do the minimum to it i.e. to allow the country's laws function normally and then it will shower its bounty on them and say: "Sweet my children, I live for thee."

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OPINION

Small Steps towards a Long Leap

AKM A Quader

A government exists through its governance. The governance is exercised through decision making and implementations of the decisions made. The people have a lot of expectations from a government. So, the government has to appreciate these and act correctly. The present government of Bangladesh shall obviously be busy in implementing its election manifesto and programmes to establish the credibility. There are certain issues and problem areas which do not make good election issues or manifesto, but they are politically damaging and may lead to public annoyance when not rightly managed.

These issues are not to be settled only on the basis of conventional technoeconomic yard stick; but political consideration, public emotion and consequential damages shall guide the final decision. In some instances, not much time is also available to make a decision and implement the same. It is expected that the following problem areas shall be dealt by the Government expeditiously to avoid things stated above.

Aricha-Nagarbari-Daulatdia Ferry Services: The ferry services between Aricha-Nagarbari and between Aricha-Daulatdia should be maintained uninterruptedly in all weathers all the year round. No excuse is acceptable to the public for the disruption of the services. Causes such as closure of channel, silting of the channel, shifting of the ghat or breakdown of the vessels are not acceptable. These are engineering problems. Some of them can be predicted long before they appear before you. What is needed is dynamic management to keep the ferry services operational.

Whatever manpower, materials, services and funds required are to be mobilised to keep the services on. These ferry services make headlines in the newspapers. The public dislike it. It causes suffering to the public using these routes. The economy and the consumers have to pay for the disruption. Even after the completion of the Jamuna bridge, the ferry service of Aricha-Daulatdia shall have to be maintained to have the southern Bangladesh connected with Dhaka.

Natural Gas Fertilizer Factory, Fenchuganj: The decision to close down the first fertilizer factory of the country located at Fenchuganj under Sylhet division by the previous government in 1993 caused emotional outburst and local unrest. The decision was reversed later on. The plant is expected to run a few years after the completion of the planned overhauling. A new urea-ammonia complex named "Shahjalal Fer-

tilizer Factory" is planned to be built for the future of the existing plant is decided. It appears that the proposed project had not been pursued hotly enough for arranging funds and finalization of the contract during the past three years. This government must find funds to implement the project. The government does not require economic justification to build this plant; the issue is a booby-trap and it cannot be diffused without building the proposed plant. However finding a thousand crore taka is not a big deal and the investment cost can be definitely reduced by at least twenty five per cent if the government is not interested in it.

Electric Power and Natural Gas Supply Short-Fall: There now exists a gap between demand and supply of both electric power and natural gas. The problem has become complicated because of dependence of power generation and urea fertilizer production on natural gas. In the past few years, no new power plant was built or planned and older units were not rehabilitated adequately. As a result, the gap between demand and supply of power has increased and it will continue to widen further coupled with the interruption of generation because of technical failures. In order to keep the existing power plants using natural gas on full load and the urea production uninterrupted, the supply of natural gas has to be ensured. The present shortfall is estimated to be about 100MMSCFD. It is possible to ensure the supply of this additional quantity of gas by having three production wells along with surface facilities in six months time. It is estimated that the cost would be around Tk 120 crore and the job can be implemented without external assistance. The government may consider the existing production fields plus those discovered at Belabo near Narshingdi and Begumganj for new production wells. The existing production wells and facilities deserve a better operational and maintenance programme for achieving their production capacities per design. Since power and urea both affect our economy, these should be ensured what come. As a matter of national policy, industries are to be encouraged to produce their own power and lucrative incentives to be provided in industries.

We believe, the Government shall rather read those seminar papers, congratulatory messages and statements of some of our experts to understand their motives and purposes but shun their company and friendly gestures. These people are morally bankrupt. They are self-seekers at the expense of the country and its people and they may jeopardise the negotiation. The Government shall have to move forward to resolve this issue with an attitude and vision of a statesman.

We believe, the Government shall act promptly and fulfill the people's expectation with courage and tenacity.

The writer is Professor of Chemical Engineering, BUET, Dhaka.

To the Editor...

We want a clean city, not fountains

Sir, We have learned through newspaper that under the supervision of Chittagong City Corporation, different private organizations are going to install fountains at the important junctions in city to improve its beauty.

But I don't understand how the fountains would help to beautify the city when over-flowing dustbins, littered streets, blocked drains are the common phenomenon.

Both sides of the streets in many places are lined with buildings which are badly in need of paint and repairment, which are not pleasant to the eyes. Should not Chittagong City Corporation pay attention to these problems first?