

## A Welcome Action

The Prime Minister yesterday announced a seven-member task force to report on ways for strengthening the support services of the parliament. We heartily welcome it.

Is it enough for a government to be adequately responsive to articulated needs of the society or sections thereof? Most governments fail to address many issues that have long been a matter of *an-dolans* and demands and sacrifices. But there can be needs of society and of governance — very urgent and important ones — that the masses at large do not know of much or care about. And most governments ignore such unfelt and undemanded necessities of governance. The present governmental leadership, it seems, is proving that they are not of that ilk. We are happy to notice that the Chief Whip and other senior members of the opposition have joined this Task Force. It is a very encouraging example of constructive cooperation in the midst of several examples to the contrary. The magnitude of the supportive mechanism for Parliament can be more ponderous than the massive and immortal creation of Louis Kahn itself.

To get a correct picture of the logistics that the parliament must be supported with and of how to muster that, the task force was a decision of a most enlightened kind.

To say it off the cuff, the Parliament must have a modern printing plant, a specialised as well as a general library of the first order, a modern communications centre, batteries upon batteries of computers with trained programmers and other required operators and mechanics and a full complement of secretarial staff catering to all the needs of the MPs.

We again congratulate the action with an anticipation of many more of such to come as also of an early report of the task force as well as its expeditious implementation.

## Bedevilling BTV

Authorities' recent removal of Shykh Seraj, an outstanding compere of a weekly TV programme on agriculture has once again underlined the murky and motivated mode of operation of the state-owned electronic media. Even after taking into consideration the limitations and restrictions all government agencies are plagued with, one finds it abominably difficult to accept the extent of toadyism Bangladesh Television indulges into any party or individual in the navel of state power.

There are very strong reasons to believe that this vital government agency brought its character of characterlessness into play by removing a popular presenter on very flimsy pretexts and in the most unacceptable manner.

The ultimate test of a TV compere is his ability and success in making a programme popular to the viewers and no one would deny the claim that Shykh Seraj who must still be wondering what hit him after this 'reward' from the authorities, had few peers on that count. He was solely instrumental for popularising a programme that has got more to do with country's economy with agriculture as its basis than the instinct for popular entertainment. Millions of TV viewers would readily vouchsafe that it was through his untiring efforts including the soft, simple and inspiring presentation that Seraj did a world of good to the prospect of an otherwise dull and drab programme. BTV officials' mindless and irrelevant comment tinged with a touch of Aeschylean wisdom that no one is indispensable made an unconvincing and unsavoury attempt at the denial of what Seraj has achieved over the years for and through the programme.

The excuse that agriculturists have been complaining against Seraj's running of the programme Mati O Manush does not quite hold water. If those unattributed agriculturists are so convinced about Seraj's alleged mishandling why did they remain silent for so long? Certainly, Mati O Manush was not born yesterday. And why the BTV officials have become so attentive to these overnight invisible grumblers?

Something is rotten at the core of the decision to remove Seraj as it has been in the case of almost every previous move within the four walls of BTV in all likelihood, it is the nasty influence of partisan politics which has led to Shykh Seraj's fall from grace. Let politics not play the role of a judge in performance. We have backpedalled long enough as a nation on account of petty partisanship. BTV, the worst centre for all shows of unscrupulous partisanship and government propaganda must immediately be shaken up for a semblance of transparency in its operation.

## Arduous Assignment

Uncertainty at the administrative acme of Dhaka University caused by the resignation of the former VC Emajuddin Ahmed has been resolved with Azad Chowdhury assuming the rather dicey mantle of the Vice Chancellor. While facilitating him for getting elected to a post most university teachers dream of as a highlight in a rather static career of an academician, we would like to stress on the necessity of his remaining focused unfailingly to a particular aspect throughout his tenure. That feature of his operation as the chief executive of the university which calls for relentless vigilance is his neutrality. From the present atmosphere of Dhaka University prevailing for quite some time now, it can be observed without reservation that pursuing his professed goals with neutrality behaving the head of a university will be an extremely tough job. More so, because his political identity is probably more publicised than any of his successor.

The state of affairs in the educational arena across the country is not at all conducive to optimism. Yet we hope. We hope because quite a few developments, hitherto unwitnessed have taken place with a view to restoring normalcy in the fouled atmosphere of Dhaka University. We believe, the appointment of the new VC will be anabolic additive to that process of normalisation and amelioration.

**T**HERE are people from different backgrounds who perform "great tasks". Some never make to the newspaper headlines, some do. This write-up is to focus some of them.

### Good luck President-elect Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed

President-elect Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, a name that carries lot of respect, faces a daunting task ahead as he brings back honour and the spirit of the independence war to the seat of the head of state in about a week's time. He will succeed controversial President Abdur Rahman Biswas.

The nomination and election, unopposed, of Justice Shahabuddin was welcomed both at home and abroad. It is because of the man he is. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina deserves praise for the choice and our gratefulness to the president-elect for accepting the offer.

Mr Biswas' role during the 1971 independence war has been a major itch during his tenure. The President has made his point on the issue and it is only for the posterity to judge those.

Just days before firing two senior army officers, both freedom fighters, and at a time when all politicians had accepted him as a "neutral" person, he told a meeting of Rotary Club in May that he would sue those who had accused him of collaborating with the Pakistani army as such charges were false.

Let us leave that episode behind and begin anew with Justice Shahabuddin as our new president. I am sure there is none who would not cooperate with him as the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) won the elections that he organised in 1991.

My respected colleague Mr Haroon Habib was one of the two reporters from the official Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS) news agency who were posted with Justice Shahabuddin during his tenure as the country's acting president. His book entitled "Democratic Transition and Justice Shahabuddin" gives one a close view of the man president-elect is.

"Today I am happy, extremely happy," the press-shy president-elect told his colleagues when he finally returned to his post of

# Great People, Great Tasks

**Mr Biswas' role during the 1971 independence war has been a major itch during his tenure. The President has made his point on the issue and it is only for the posterity to judge those.**

Bangladesh's Chief Justice after delays that irritated him.

That was an expression of a man who guided the nation out of autocracy in good faith but was not spared of criticism by both the major political parties.

Besides restoring democracy, Justice Shahabuddin spikied the controversial Health Policy and Educational Institutional Ordinance of the Jatiya Party regime. Above all he repealed the press section of the hated (but loved by all politicians) Special Powers Act of 1974.

Haroon Bhui writes Justice Shahabuddin did not intervene in the running of the government by Begum Khaleda Zia despite being the head of state and government until the Constitution was amended for a return to the parliamentary system of government from a presidential one in August, 1991.

He remained patient when at one point the BNP and right-wing groups like the Freedom Party questioned his neutrality. He appealed in his speech to the Fifth Parliament's maiden session to quickly ensure his return to his old post. "The value of national commitment is no less than that of Constitution as it is an expression of people's wishes," he said in desperation.

After remaining out of the limelight for a long time he met the press on July 23 after he was elected Bangladesh's new president at his modest Dhanmandi house in his usual carefree way. Justice Shahabuddin offered sweets to us and to his friends who came to congratulate him.

Of course, he was alert to the fact that there would be attempts to make him controversial or to strain relations with the Awami League government.

He was repeatedly asked on Sheikh Hasina's "government of national consensus." Justice Shahabuddin carefully worded his reply: "It is not in the Constitution. There can be consensus on broad national issues, but I do not yet know what the government means by this concept."

His most striking remark made it clear that the man had no lust for power: "I accepted the job without any condition and

if there is a conflict between my conscience and (government) policies, then I will walk out," he said. "I gave my consent to become president as there is a parliamentary system of government, where my role will be titular and [also] to help continuation of the democratic process."

Justice Shahabuddin continued, "I have great faith in the people of Bangladesh... if they can be correctly led they can help build a strong and effective democratic system" which could flourish with the "sincerity, tolerance and cooperation" of all political parties.

The nation looks forward to his "coronation day" with the hope that he will be able to unite Bangladesh by bringing together all political parties and a very divided press, who will use the might of their pen

bered the horrible scene of two trains colliding there in January this year and rushed to his home, some 200 yards away, in Toragarh village.

He picked up his paternal aunt's red petticoat and started waving it after returning to the track to alert the driver. He was successful. Many lives were saved. "I am very happy that my son could save so many lives. I do not want anything, just prayers that Allah help him earn more knowledge," said the hero's proud mother Rokeya Begum.

His father Abdul Matin works in a local saw mill and times have not been easy. His son's deed has also helped change his fortune after the Railway and many individuals or organisations presented him money. "Allah sent an angel to change our fate. Now we will

train near Dhaka's Uttara Model Town and human instinct to help people facing imminent death. Of course, there were deafening screams for help by the train passengers.

My mother slowly murmured in a puzzled voice, "Did the train go off the tracks? What has happened to the carriages at the back?" I looked and found to my horror that five carriages were off the tracks and into a canal.

I informed my office of the tragedy. But in the meantime I was moved to see hundreds of people from nearby areas had converged there and doing their best to rescue those trapped in the derailed carriages. Some came with boats. Please telephone the fire service as some are trapped under water that has entered the carriages," said one volunteer rescue worker.

I looked on wondering what has happened as men, women and children, some bleeding, made their way out of the carriages. Several pairs of hands stretched out from one window with screams for help. I am sure without the help of these volunteer rescuers the death toll would have exceeded eight.

The usual messages of sympathy from national leaders for the families of the dead poured in, but we always fail to acknowledge the role of these volunteers. Let us pray the Railway authorities would be alert in avoiding such a tragedy in the future, but God forbid if there is one let everyone remember the volunteers who help save more lives than the government agencies.

**A Few Words about a Traffic Constable**

Traffic Constable Mohammad Mujibur Rahman (Co. No. 4465) is a well-known face to all those who pass through Uttara Model Town's Azampur crossing, not because he is a heavy-built mustached man, but because of his sense of responsibility. He stands out among many of his colleagues.

In the force since 1974, Mujibur is always strict in ensuring proper vehicle crossing and often seen helping children, women and old people to cross the busy highway that leads to Tongi.

My joy is when I succeed in

keeping the traffic in control with rickshaws properly parked," he told this writer as he arrived to take over from his colleague at the start of his duty recently. The constable with five children also thinks about increasing road safety.

He blamed rash driving, untrained drivers and narrow roads, compared to increasing traffic on the streets, as the major causes for road accidents. He said rickshaws should be slowly withdrawn — not suddenly — to ease the situation.

"They (rickshaw pullers) are poor people and so unless they have an alternative way to earn their living, they should be spared," Mujibur added.

I spoke with several other traffic constables and they all wanted more manpower, six-hour work time instead of eight and adequate health backup from the government for their arduous job. They suffer from weakness and dizziness because of smoke inhalation, jaundice, gastric ulcer and gout.

"I have nothing to ask for because residents of the area all are very kind to me, how many people get that ... but maybe it will be good to get support for my children's education," Mujibur said.

Communications Minister Anwar Hossain told a seminar on road safety September 23 that road fatality rate in Bangladesh is 58 people per 10,000 vehicles, which is 25 times higher than other developing countries. At least 3,000 people die annually in road accidents in Bangladesh.

Maybe, awarding men like Constable Mujibur and taking their opinion in such seminars would be more meaningful than steps taken from research works only.

We have to live despite frustrations and sorrows, but some people by their action are called great, and they give us reasons to be proud as Bangladeshis as well as to live on.

Justice Shahabuddin, Abul Khaire, Constable Mujibur and the volunteer rescuers are "great people" in their own right. They are the people who have accomplished great tasks and some have more to do for Bangladesh in the coming days. Let us unite in one thought today: "honour those who deserve it, whoever they are and whatever their background may be."

The writer is the Special Correspondent with Agence France-Presse (AFP), Dhaka.

## IN FOOL'S PARADISE?

by Nadeem Qadir

for national, not party interest. May Allah be with Justice Shahabuddin, a "great man" in the eyes of Bangladeshis, as he embarks on this difficult task.

### Abul Khaire — the Boy Who Helped Save Thousands Lives

Several weeks back I had said that I will write about someone who was largely ignored by the press here and of course our leadership. He is nine-year-old Abul Khaire who made to world newspapers, The Times and the Reader's Digest magazines.

It was his humane nature and instinct that helped save the lives of some 1,000 passengers travelling on a Bangladesh Railway express train on July 13 this year in Chandpur district's Hajiganj area. He repeatedly explained that he did what anyone else would have done "otherwise so many people would have been killed."

The young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered

that the young boy was responding to call of nature near railway bridge No. 33 that morning. As he collected snails for his ducks, he noticed a part of the rail track missing with the express train coming. He remembered