

Reassuring Words

Begum Khaleda Zia has said possibly the most awaited but hardly expected words. The nation stands reassured by her pledge of desisting from agitations that can hurt both our economy and our people. Although she qualified her assurance by a clause — without valid reasons — the spirit is unmistakably clear. Ever since the creation of BNP her party has been strumming unremittingly on what Khaleda has herself come to accept as her catch-phrase — politics of production and development. Every time she denounces the programmes of the '95 non-cooperation she binds herself to not taking the same line of protest. This promises a healthy political development. Let the two parties so build their politics that this nation isn't anymore required to make non-cooperation-style sacrifices in order to right political wrongs. The nation should now outlive the practice of shutting off the nation as an instrument of political pressure. Whatever the need or the provocation, the utilities must go on without let-up as would the economically important operations like production — garments for one.

Begum Zia's party is dangerously close to the precipice of embracing the alleged police and political harassment of BNP elements as one and the first of the valid reasons she has spoken about. Dangerous we say for two reasons. If the contention is made without enough of substantiation BNP will be losing greatly in credibility. And if this is taken as sufficiently valid reason for launching agitations that will hurt economy of the nation and people's life in general.

In the case of true harassment and victimisation — duly substantiated — we stand pledge-bound to give the cause of its elimination the best of press focus. The government's feared slide into political harassment will boomerang on the ruling party sapping much of the confidence it has already built up in the public mind. Eliminate the terrorists, try the killers of both August 15 and November 3, punish the corrupt — but never should you use these to further petty political ends or you will be harming yourself irrecoverably, that is what the nation has to say to AL. If that bad thing at all comes off, Begum Zia can depend on a fair press giving her enough cushion in this issue.

For the moment, we shall take her words for a virtual truce — for cooperation, production and development as she loves to say.

Fine, But ...

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has reiterated her government's commitment to the cause of press freedom. Asseverated earlier it was echoed again yesterday in the second annual conference of the Dhaka Reporters' Unity in which she spoke as the chief guest.

It is quite encouraging to note that the executive head of the country despite all the pressure and obligation related to the position has been able to remain focused on the necessity of a national policy for the proper growth of newspaper industry as a whole. Whatever she said on that day on issues like her government's policy of not using the quota of newsprint and advertisements as tools for clipping the freedom of newspapers as well as her disclosure of the plan to equip the Press Institute of Bangladesh (PIB) in a manner so that it would always be a disseminating source of professionalism indicated a long-awaited shift to the right direction.

While it is too early and to some extent unjustified to make a value judgment of the present government's performance on its pledge for press freedom, it would not be too much to observe that accessibility to information leaves ample room for improvement. It appears that the sincerity and the professed political will of the party in power are yet to make inroads into our dated and static bureaucratic set-up. There can be so many explanations for this particular downer in an atmosphere virtually agog with expectations for dynamism and transparency in the industry.

The government functionaries must bear in mind that public right to information, barring of course of a very few classified areas, is *sine qua non* for press freedom. Once this is turned into a culture, words in favour of press freedom will no longer be mere words but real actions.

How Long?

Hers is not a case of voluntary escape from life to oblivion out of an overwhelming sense of grief over the untimely death of any favourite film star. Neetrakona's Monowara, a collage student has committed suicide out of shame, the shame of her failure to maintain the freedom of her mind and body.

Monowara had to pay the ultimate price in life because she did not allow two of her fellow villagers to satisfy their carnal desire on her. Unable to fulfil their lust they let loose a known terrorist of the area on her who raped her maybe just for the kick of it or for monetary obligation of a hired criminal.

No policemen or local social worker has revealed this. Monowara herself wrote three letters including one to the Union Parishad (UP) chairman in which she identified the men behind the ultimate insult of her womanhood and death. What Monowara did was not a sentimental scribbling before death by choice but give a slap right across the face of a society that so assiduously had taught her ethics, honour and so many ideas in the same vein without either possessing or instilling in anyone the strength to defend oneself.

Monowara's death shows that it is about time the government implemented punitive measures of exemplary effect and intensity in cases of violation of women. Death penalty in the conviction of acid throwing cases went a long way in curbing the rate of occurrence of a crime that once increased in a monstrous proportion. The confirmed believers in the relative physical weakness of women do need to see the hanging bodies of one or two of their 'peers' to feel the necessity of restraint.

In Lieu of an Apology : PM Faces People after 100 Days

A lot of the effectiveness of the programme was largely due to the ham-handed approach of the organizers. Some of the questions were long on flattery and short on substance.

It is not an apology, less so defence. I refer to the Prime Minister's talk-show of October 1. The extraordinary level of reactions from media — constructive, critical, warts and all — on the programme Shabnay Jiggayasha gave us one conclusion : Civil society in Bangladesh is gaining ground. So two cheers for democracy — one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism. But risking to err on the side of caution, I venture to suggest that some of us overreacted. We tended to exaggerate.

Television is an institution in the country like any other. It has grown and developed the way the past governments wanted it to be. President Zia's 98 per cent vote casting was happily telecast by BTV. There are many instances in the 80s when BTV was required to put on air programmes and news not commensurate with what exactly happened. People's experience between 1991-1996

for transparency and accountability, the very soul of democracy and democratic values.

But the appraisal and evaluation has to be genuine — not set-up or artificial. President Reagan in a breakfast meeting at the Washington Hilton amused us all with a story about democracy in the US and the then Soviet Union. The story was like this : The White House wanted President Reagan to quit because he failed to fulfil many of his election pledges; the heckler in front of the Kremlin loudly sang in praise of Communism and was another hundred years of the golden rule of Soviet Communism under Communist leader

visits to Saudi Arabia and PRC will further consolidate our friendly bilateral relations.

In an imperfect world democratic governments also are not perfect. Even the Greek city states could not claim perfection. But they left a golden tradition however imperfect it might have been.

For us in Bangladesh, therefore the TV meet-the-people programme of the Prime Minister was extraordinary. The Prime Minister's intellectual bent of mind was clearly discernible. She was spontaneous and natural. Eager to answer the questions. Statistics were on her fingertips. I was at a dinner with the visiting US Congressman Don Johnson and USIS Chief Donald Bishop. Don Johnson is in Dhaka in connection with the on going parliamentary workshop. They were both impressed with the spontaneity of the Prime Minister in answering the questions. The heart of the matter is trans-

ENCHIRIDION

Walid Rahman



February 15 is something that one would rather not reminisce. BTV merrily put out the Mirpur election, the Magura tragedy and February 15. Psycho-drama Jagannath Hall was attacked and innocent students were savaged by the police on January 30 night — BTV blithely ignored it.

The government has changed after June 12 election; the BTV behemoth has not. It has to be exorcised of the past ghost — the ghost of undemocratic culture. Lot more efforts will be necessary. I guess Rousseen in his Confessions tells us something very relevant — 'everything is radically connected with politics and however one proceeded, no people would be other than the nature of its government made it.' I am sure all such future efforts and truly reflecting the democratic spirit — and thus transparent and accountable.

To mark One Hundred Days of the assumption of the office, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina wanted to meet the people and answered questions directly from a cross-section of the audience/listeners. In itself it was a revolutionising step in the context of Bangladesh, of course.

In other democratic countries like the US, Japan, UK, Italy or France or neighboring India, facing the people by the Chief Executives is only a part of their routine — and nothing exceptional. Presidents and Prime Ministers must be evaluated, appraised or criticized — that is an 'a priori' condition

of the Rules of Business, tampering with terrorism and mastanism, against corruption and bureaucratic malfeasance (submissions of financial disclosure of Cabinet Ministers and Administrators, renewing agriculture, creating conditions for DFI (over 1 billion US dollars already pledged and more in pipeline), equitable sharing of Ganges waters, giving uninterrupted power to industry and the general consensus, politicising bureaucracy and administration (appointment to be made purely and essentially on merit, ability, efficiency and integrity. In the Defence Services the process has already started with salutary impact. The trial of the murderers of Bangabandhu will be held. And above all Prime Minister assured the court that the leader of the opposition would be invited to avail of an opportunity if she would desire. (The nation has not forgotten that the former Prime Minister withdrew from another TV programme prior to the June 12 election much to dismay of the electorates). She sincerely wishes that she accept the invitation for her and not for any ersatz leadership. She is the leader of her party and she must face the people.

The Prime Minister also formed the nation that Japan has renewed her offer of \$5 million for upgrading the Chittagong Airport. (Japan withdrew this offer in the last day of BNP). On foreign policy —

in particular, the US has given 500 million dollars to us.

They are mostly Buddhists by religion. Buddhists are not Hindus in respect of population. Many of them are highly educated. They were not included in the Cabinet by the erstwhile government. So, it is our suggestion that they should be included in the Cabinet. This will help enable to control tribal insurgents of CHT too. We hope our Prime Minister will look into the matter and take necessary steps in this regard.

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Importing electricity
Sir, We abhor statements and counter statements of BNP and Awami League in respect of importing electricity from India. This is a total wastage of time and energy which will further aggravate the sufferings of the people.

The newly elected Awami League government first blamed the BNP government for past ills of last five years in the country but now the former is accusing all the past governments of last 21 years for the same.

Criticism and counter criticism do not help mitigate the sufferings of the people but it definitely helps us to arrive at a right decision.

So what should be the right decision of ours? We should stop the system-loss, develop our own power generating capacity, build up plants in the private sector and meet our domestic requirements.

Would the Awami League government which claims to be a 'consensus government' kindly help all concerned to arrive at a consensus on the above decision/recommendation and move in the right direction in the national interest?

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The same old song
Sir, After our liberation the then Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman said that he would not be able to give anything to the nation for at least three years. He urged the nation to be patient. He further said that the

The Indian Power Scenario

by KZ Islam

My personal impression after talking to senior officials was that with proper approach at appropriate level it should not be too much of a problem for India to spare 2 to 3 hundred MW of power for Bangladesh.

I attended a 3-day seminar in New Delhi last week entitled: INDIA POWER 2000 AD and BEYOND. There was a galaxy of speakers and among the participants who were senior executives from major power generation, transmission and independent power promotion companies. The chief guest in the inaugural session was Dr. S. Venugopalachari, Minister for Power Senior government officials of the Ministry of Power were also present. Mr. D. V. Kapur, former Power Secretary in his keynote address highlighted the problems confronting the power sector in India. When the floor was given to the participants, I pointed out to the Minister that on that very day there was a high level government delegation from Bangladesh in New Delhi discussing the prospects of exporting power from India to Bangladesh. I enquired of the Minister whether it was possible for India to spare power in view of their own power problems. The Minister at the open forum clarified the position and stated that dialogue has been continuing in this regard for the last two years between the two governments. He further stated that although there was power shortage in some parts of India, there was surplus power in the northeast region due to the absence of transmission facilities to evacuate the available power. There is a 500 MW Thermal Power Station near Farakka and due to insufficient demand one of the turbines is kept idle. From further discussions with the government participants, I ascertained that India has offered power to Bangladesh at the off-peak hours. My personal impression after talking to senior officials was that with proper approach at appropriate level it should not be too much of a problem for India to spare 2 to 3 hundred MW of power for Bangladesh.

Bureaucratic Bottlenecks: Investor interest in the power sector and the list of MoU signed projects was steadily growing till the government decided to halt the MoU route and introduced competitive bidding. The reality is that the investment initiatives were frustrated by the bureaucratic process and the need for obtaining consents from myriad agencies. In fact there seems to be no road map available of all the clearances that are required. The general consensus was the need for one Regulatory body with statutory powers like the Supreme Court.

Fuel: Considerable confusion was created by first allowing Naptha as the fuel then suddenly withdrawing this facility when it was discovered about the insufficient availability of this fuel. Since coal is likely to be the main fuel for power plants, India will require a huge investment in mining and transportation of coal. This treads on the development of infrastructure on a colossal scale with environmental implications.

Multistate Power Project: The fuel being in one state and the power plant being in another creates a problem of coordination.

SEB (State Electricity Boards): On the issue of investor concerns, the gravest issue is the poor financial health of the SEBs that raises doubts about the ability of a majority of SEBs to pay for power purchased from private power projects.

Privatisation of Distribution: It was generally agreed that a very effective way to reorganise the power sector would be to grant licenses for power distribution. This would

enhance the financial capability of the SEBs to pay for power.

Because of a maze of obstacles to the 250 proposed projects that would provide an additional 100,000 MW of desperately needed power, only one has received permission to start operation. Players such as ENRON, AES and COGENERATION are entangled in India's political web.

The ORISSA Reforms

In the deliberations of the seminar the example of ORISSA came up repeatedly. Last April, it dissolved the State Electricity Board and replaced it with an independent regulatory commission. Under the new system, power project approvals formerly dependent on the capricious and bureaucratic SEBs are instead screened by the commission whose members are less vulnerable to political pressure. They set tariffs, grant licenses, conduct competitive procurement bids and monitor performance standards. Privatisation is a central part of the strategy. The old monopolies, generation, transmission and distribution functions have been broken up into separate corporate units. The Orissa reforms seem to be the talk of the town and other states are looking at it with a view to replicating it.

India Scraps 2-part Tariff

The Government of India has decided to do away with the two-part tariff system for independent Power Promoters (IPPs). The new tariff policy being finalised by the power ministry envisages competitive bidding based on the tariff for sale of electricity to SEBs. The present two-part tariff comprises recovery of : i) Annual fixed charges and ii) Variable charges. The government has decided to adopt a standard practice specifying a single rate at which private investors are asked to sell power.

It was an enlightening experience sitting through the 3-day Conference particularly hearing the Indian Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda at the valedictory session. His modest bearing impressed all the participants. I feel that Indian power experience is very relevant to Bangladesh and our authorities should closely monitor the developments. Our government would do well to look at the Orissa reforms. The fundamental lesson is that if any progress is to be made in the power sector politics must be insulated from electricity!

The writer is Managing Director, Nirmal International Limited.

OPINION

Who Buries Dead Dogs?

Nazim Farhan Choudhury

On the long drive from Chittagong the other day, I noticed innumerable dead dogs on the road. No doubt the victims of the rickshawala truck drivers. We have in 100 kmph/hour missiles. Throughout the otherwise uneventful journey, I wondered who actually buries these dogs? Is there someone assigned for the work or do we let mother Nature take her course? Thinking seriously, the repetitive answer that kept going through my mind is that we Bengalees are not used to burying things. What the respected readers may ask are the overflowing Azimpur and Banani sites been doing over the years?

Well, my answer to that is that though we bury our loved ones physically, there spirits are never let to rest. That is, what many would argue, makes us a humane society. But my argument is that if it stands in the way of progress, is it not to our interest that we let the past rest in peace? If the dead dogs were given the respect of a burial it would be to our common benefit. The dog would have peaceful eternal rest while we would have had an smoother journey to the past.

We are happy that present government has given special emphasis and top priority to the agricultural sector for national development. Keeping the agricultural engineers unemployed and giving them no opportunities, no progress can be achieved.

So, my earnest appeal to the government is to establish an independent BCS (Agricultural Engineering) Cadre as soon as possible.

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Inspiring!

Sir, On September 6, 1996 — in your Star Weekend Magazine's 'Women on the Move' section, there appeared a very interesting article on Ms. Aneela Haque. This was excellent to see such an enterprising and creative woman, and I was greatly inspired. Please let me know how I can get in touch with Ms. Haque. Thank you very much.

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Weekly holiday for garment workers
Sir, In most of the garment factories, workers work from 8am to 8pm which is quite a long duration. Moreover, they are not usually provided with the weekly holiday facilities. If they want to have a holiday they have to get it without pay. In this way they are being oppressed, and exploited by the owners. The owners are enriching the garment sector on the blood and sweat of the workers who have no alternative way of income.

Recently garment workers staged a demonstration demanding a weekly holiday. This demand is justified, legally supportable, and constitutionally valid, against inhuman exploitation. If the workers' demands are not met, observing May Day every year will be a ridiculous and absurd practice. The government should enact necessary laws to ensure weekly holiday and other types of holidays in the garment sector.

However, it's a matter of great regret that so far no steps have been taken to accommodate them with employment and for their professional recognition.

During the rule of past government a student movement was started to press home their demand for an independent BSC Cadre Service authorities concerned. The then government realised the importance of agricultural engineering BSC

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I was born during the War. My generation and the ones after mine are now asking the same questions. We would like to know the honest to God account of our history. We are intrigued with the essence of our being. Very unfortunate for us that our elders cannot see beyond their puffy differences to let us also learn the lessons of history. I would tend to believe

that they love will remember them only if they give it a reason to. Leave your own mark I tell them and I am sure 120 million people will echo my thoughts. It is indeed a future different from our past that we are moving towards. We need new ideas and new light. We do not need to hear the same speeches that my grandparents heard. And most of all we do not need to fight about the past. It is time now that Bangladesh starts building leaders of the future.