

No Provocations, Please

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) brought out a protest rally claiming that the case filed by the government against party chairperson Khaleda Zia was contrived. In proving their support for their leader the party cadres, including some former ministers, displayed a type of aggressiveness bordering on a virtual incitement to violence that, we believe, was quite uncalled for. Even if we accept their claim about false charges, breaking ordinary peoples' cars is no responsible way of showing dissent.

The case against the BNP chief has been lodged with the court and it would have been in the fitness of things that the largest opposition in our political history had confined itself to fighting the case in court and awaited its judgment. If the case is without a basis, the court will come up with a verdict exonerating her from the charges. In that case, it is the opposition that gets a political mileage and its leader rises in stature. The government on the other hand looks foolish and loses its face.

For all one knows, the BNP leadership had been speaking of fighting it out in court if the government were to level corruption charges against them. So, what was the rationale for the street violence of the kind we witnessed on Tuesday? The party cadres' attack on private cars and pedestrians and their clashes with the police bore an ominous sign that they could be getting ready for violence and unrest instead of taking the path of peaceful and democratically recognised protests.

In this connection, we refer to the statement made by Gayeshwar Roy, a former BNP minister and Jatiyatabadi Jubo Dal leader, in which he gave a call to resist anyone who wears a Mujib coat. Following this statement BNP cadres from the protest rally manhandled some men wearing the Mujib coat. This surely is an open invitation to trouble and street level violence.

While we reprimand the BNP for their provocative public outburst, we warn the ruling party not to fall into the trap of reacting, and start counter violence. We also urge a much more restrained use of police power in the future.

Holy Shab-e-Barat

Tonight — the Shaban fullmoon night — Muslims all over the world will be praying. Many will fast during the day and at night millions would also be visiting the graves of dear and near ones and tombs of savants depending upon local and denominational tradition. To sum it up all, this will be a night of intense religiosity. Apart from being replete with divine merit, times like these offer a dip into an ambience of otherworldliness and a very healthsome time-off from the usual rounds of one's daily routine. This way occasions like Shab-e-Barat have been proving very useful in this-worldly terms also.

Popularly called the Shab-e-Barat, this occasion of fasting and praying isn't mentioned in the Holy Quran as such. For shab is not Arabic and is Persian for night. And although this does not appear as one entity in the Quran as does Lailatul Qadar, the mid-Shaban night has been observed among Muslims ever since the advent of Islam as a particularly meritorious time for both cleansing oneself of whatever has soiled one's soul and making oneself worthy of special kindness from Allah Almighty.

Prophet Muhammad's (SM) many sayings forcefully extolling the many virtues of this night have elevated it into a very special time for craving the nearness of God. And as this has been assured to bring bounteous divine benefit to the devotees, the Quran refers to this night as Lailatul Mubarak.

Barat in Arabic connotes a kind of release. Tonight the faithful would prove true to the occasion if they indeed can release themselves from the perpetual covetousness that pervades life in this epoch. If one can get even a chink of this release, what will one pray of his God? This cannot be a list again of things one desires for personal satiation. Freed of such desires one must seek of Providence entities of common good — peace and security and prosperity for all in the land.

Message from Christmas

With the phenomenal spread of European culture and civilisation all over the globe culminating in the nineteenth century and still influencing all other cultures — Christmas has become a great festival for peoples. It has almost become a very secular good time of the year for may be billions of humans.

These festivities have grown over centuries in connection with the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ — or Isu the Anointed — or in the Islamic tradition, Isa Masih — the Saviour or Redeemer. How did Jesus, rising from a very humble Jewish Palestinian birth and dying on the eve of reaching thirty — on a cross — save man? By loving man, even his persecutors. If it is possible to put in a word the life's teachings of this unlettered nabi, that word would be compassion. Love can only be a way for lust if bereft of compassion — the karuna of Buddha.

The advances made by democracy in the post-World War II period have brought to man one best thing of all of his million-year development — the recognition of the inviolable individual. The wonderful gift of man's perpetual becoming has almost been set at naught by an interminably regular disappearance of compassion, thanks to competition and consumerism. The individual must be saved from the harm it is inflicting on itself. This can be done only through repairing back to Jesus' Compassion. It is compassion for man that multitudes have died for on stakes and in worse ways. And the heroes come as much from outside the religious pale as from inside. In compassion do all mankind meet, historically and across all barriers for the good of the mankind and all creation.

Parliament to be Effective Must Have an Active Opposition

Both the Awami League and the BNP have time and again asserted their position to uphold supremacy of the Parliament and to make it a focal point of deliberation for arriving at decisions on major national issues. Paradoxically, both the parties have abstained from the Parliament on account of what they themselves considered legitimate cause.

about the situation, which is, no doubt, fraught with danger. If not handled with a degree of political wisdom and far-sight. One should not be oblivious of the fact that in 1994 even a petty and glib reason prompted the then opposition to boycott the Parliament and this brought in its trail events that escalated to witness the end of the last regime, though on the expiry of its term.

Some members of the government bench might even be tempted to willfully deny an occasion to discuss the Treaty with India with the opposition at all before ratification by the Parliament. The reason might be to save the government embarrassment from answering opposition's questions and criticisms — threadbare, formally and precisely, and to avoid any possible dissension in the House. The logic of this argument is untenable, as the assertion is undemocratic, undesirable and short-sighted.

Another consideration may be of some relevance to project while dealing with the issue. One must take note of the fact that the principal opposition party the BNP, not taking into account the ruling party's pre-election allies of the Jatiya Party and the Jamaat, constitutes the strongest ever opposition since the creation of

Bangladesh. Never in the history of Bangladesh any opposition party fielded as many as 117 members, in contrast to Awami League's 147, in a directly elected Parliament of 300 seats. By judging the 3 per cent margin in popular votes, Awami League's 37 per cent and BNP's 34 per cent, the popular mandate of the ruling party is

BNP workers should be stopped and, as a measure of goodwill, some BNP detainees should be released. The government claimed that none was arrested without charge. The opposition feels that it is not difficult to put up trumped up charges, specially under the Special Powers Act, which the government party was committed to abolish

Speaker, and c) full or proportionate coverage of debate by the TV. Let us analyse these three points.

Firstly, the opposition allegation of not allowing their members adequate or proportionate time to speak can easily be ascertained from records maintained by the officials concerned. The deputy leader of opposition claimed that he had once stood on his feet for half-an-hour and failed to draw attention of the Chair to allow him to speak. If the general allegation is false, this can be justifiably dismissed by quoting official statistics. If not, the government cannot but pledge that the basic rights of the members to speak adequately in the Parliament will be vindicated.

Secondly, the allegation against the Speaker not being able to shun his partisanship has been made widely by BNP law-givers. There had been many instances wherein Ministers had been allowed to speak out of turn and on matters not related to their ministerial functions. The Chair had been seen, it was alleged, to yield under pressure or suggestion of government leaders. If it devolves on the Speaker himself to reassure the opposition that the conduct of the House will be done impartially and to due satisfaction of all members.



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

evidently thin, rendering even greater the need for a formal deliberation with all parties on a major issue.

Going into the substance of the issue, the so-called 10-point demand of the BNP has, in effect, boiled down to mere three. The ruling party promptly and creditably offered to sit down for a parity without any pre-condition. The BNP asserts that appropriate environment should be created congenial to the holding of talks. In their opinion, continuing harassment, arrests and repression of

and is now enjoying some of its dubious, rather maleficent, benefits. A list of 54 BNP supporters killed had been submitted sometime ago to the government and to the and to the Hon'ble President, and a much longer list of detainees on false charges will be furnished on formal asking. Hon'ble President may therefore play a catalytic role for solution.

The 3-point demands to state simply, are a) opposition members are to be given adequate time to speak in the Parliament, b) impartial conduct of the affairs of the House by the

Press Fears Another Turn of the Screw

As the date for the return of Hong Kong to China approaches, both Beijing and the British colonial governor are raising the temperature by making comments about what should happen after June 1997. While Governor Chris Patten has urged China to restrain Chinese interest groups which have been seeking to assert their influence in the territory, Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, has served warning about limits on press freedom, writes Neville De Silva from Hong Kong.

Hong Kong



© Hong Kong Island ceded to Britain 1842. Kowloon peninsula ceded 1860. New Territories (975 sq km) leased 1898 for 99 years. All returning to China 1997

Area: 1,075 sq km
Pop: 6.2m
GDP per head: \$26,709
July 1 1997: China takes over. Hong Kong to be autonomous (except foreign affairs and defence) for 50 years with capitalism and 'lifestyle' preserved



Governor Chris Patten: Critical of Beijing

gested that China had already decided on imposing curbs on the freedom of expression in post-handover Hong Kong? Shen, however, did not flinch the alphas. Nor did he state clearly what precisely had been misinterpreted.

By pleading misinterpretation, the spokesman appeared to take the burden off Qian's shoulders. In reality, his clarifications show no substantive difference. If anything, Shen's remarks gave Qian's statements a legal justification by focusing

attention on the law. Shen maintained that Hong Kong people would have full freedom of expression, adding that this freedom, like all others, must be within the limits of the law. At first glance, this seems

valid enough. Since both Britain and the Hong Kong colonial government have continuously underscored the importance of the rule of law, they surely could not quarrel with any future administration that insists on acting according to the law.

Even today, some of Hong Kong's freedoms are circumscribed by statutes and ordinances.

Moreover, even international human rights covenants do not permit absolute freedoms. Freedoms of speech and expression are subject to specific national legislation, although such laws are generally more liberal than those contemplated by China — such as the proposed measures against subversion.

Despite the claim of misinterpretation, on two matters, at least, the Foreign Minister and his spokesman seemed to agree.

"In the future, Hong Kong should not hold those political activities which directly interfere in the affairs of the mainland of China," Qian told the Journal.

"Hong Kong should not interfere in China's affairs by organising political activities to attack mainland internal affairs," Shen was quoted as saying. The minister said that Hong

Kong media "can put forward criticism, but not rumours and lies. Nor can they put forward personal attacks on the Chinese leaders." These remarks were also parroted by Shen.

This leaves unanswered a crucial question — who are "Chinese leaders"? There are, of course, the obvious names, such as President Jiang Zemin and Prime Minister Li Peng. But unless there is a published list of names of Chinese leaders who cannot be subject to personal attacks, it will be extremely difficult for the Hong Kong media to know who is and who is not a leader.

How many names of Chinese leaders would this list contain? Dozens, 100, 1,000, tens of thousands, a few million? Who knows? Certainly not the Hong Kong media, which will have to bear the brunt of the pressure, if Qian's remarks are to be taken seriously. Right now, there is no reason to believe that China does not intend to do what the Foreign Minister says Beijing will do.

Then there was Shen's crucial rider, that all these freedoms will be subject to the law. This, particularly, worries the Hong Kong media. It seems quite possible that the proposed provisional legislature, a hand-picked body which will replace the present elected Legislative Council until the next elections are held — might be called on to enact new laws that will sharply reduce today's freedoms. — GEMINI NEWS

NEVILLE DE SILVA, a former Deputy Editor of the Daily News and The Daily Sunday Observer in Sri Lanka, is Assistant Editor of the Hong Kong Standard.

To the Editor...

Seeking kind attention of the President

Sir, I am a Sunny Muslim and an expatriate housewife from the neighbouring country. I have been married to a Bangladeshi Muslim national some time back. My husband is an employee of a sector corporation. Now my marriage is at a stake because of the Public Servant (Marriage with Foreign Nationals) Ordinance 1976. None of us was aware of the said ordinance till the other day. Even the sector corporation employees of that particular organisation were also ignorant of such an Act. Willy-nilly my poor husband has become an innocent victim of the above ordinance which was put into effect from 7 July 1976 by the then President of the Republic.

After I myself have gone through the said ordinance, I was shocked to have known the contents. I could not reconcile within myself with the ideas and purpose of such an ordinance. In para 2 subsection d) it states that a 'public servant' includes an employee of even a nationalized commercial enterprise. Such definitions are unheard of. Public or civil servants have a definite role and authority. They are inducted directly into the services of the Republic. They enjoy a unique status. I refrain from making further elaboration of the above point. In para 3 subsection 3 it has been stated that the President himself will confer prior permission on applications seeking approval for such type of marriages. I fail to understand how the President of the Republic will discharge such social responsibilities leaving alone many other formidable state functions. In para 3 subsection 4 to my horror it clearly states that a public ser-

vant contravening the provisions of the above ordinance is liable to be removed from the services with no option for review or according a post facto approval.

The law is supposed to protect the innocent victims. Certainly here the law has lost its beauty and failed to take care of humane circumstances. No allowance has been made for the innocent defaulters to seek justice. After all, 'marriage' is a birth as well as a constitutional right of an individual citizen. This is a fundamental and a universal right. It is a question of exchanging hearts between two individuals of the opposite sex and starting life, the very basis of human society. In my opinion only a very special category of civil servants holding state secrecy and strategic positions may only be subjected to such sanctions. An ordinary employee of a sector corporation deserves to be outside the purview of such restrictions. The said ordinance has neither been made public nor widely circulated for general information. I was planning to adopt the nationality of my husband eventually. It is unthinkable that my husband who has served his organisation with utmost sincerity and dedication is now threatened to become jobless, just for marrying me. I do feel guilty and our marriage is on the verge of being wrecked. The authority must use the above to victimise me as and when they want to deprive him of his legitimate rights of privilege. We are passing our days in constant fear and anxiety. The peace of our home and life is gone.

In fine may I draw the kind attention of our honourable President, who is widely known at home and abroad for his acumen, straight forwardness and integrity, and is a great personality in the subcontinent, to

the above and humbly suggest the following:

a) The above ordinance may kindly be revoked and be replaced by a new ordinance drafted in its proper perspective, taking into consideration all the humane aspects including natural justice.

b) Affected employees who have unknowingly contravened the provisions of the above ordinance may please be condoned; and a general amnesty declared.

Hoping for an end of my agonies.
An expatriate housewife
Tejgaon, Dhaka

VAT on telephone

Sir, I refer to the letter of Mr S Z Panna in The Daily Star on 10-12-96. I fully support his argument about imposing VAT on line-rent. It appears that when the telephone is out of order then line-rent (150+22/50=172/50) is charged. It is quite illogical to charge VAT on line-rent. When the telephone is out of order line-rent should not be charged because the subscriber is deprived of the facility.

Adverse comments

Sir, The long-expected Ganges water-sharing treaty has been translated into reality by the efforts of our Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. It has been materialised not for "exchanging anything", as many are trying to establish. There is no denying the fact that it is a milestone in the country's history. But it is a matter of regret that some people with vested

interest are spreading adverse comments against the treaty. However, the superpower America has congratulated us for the agreement. The adverse comments are undoubtedly anti-people. They should come up with genuine comments keeping people's well-being in mind, not for the only reason that they are in the opposition.

Absana Chowdhury Enay
S S Road, Stragany

"Sports news on BTV"

Sir, This has a reference to the letter of Mr Zamil published in The Daily Star on December 9, 1996. We would like to add the following:

a) National news should not continue more than ten minutes.

b) Other news should be in separate timings.

c) The interesting sports, wrestling, should be introduced weekly in the evening like other games.

d) There should be change among the readers, like separate persons for news reader — weather reader, sports reader, political and economic etc., to bring about a change in the BTV like other interesting channels like BBC, CNN etc.

e) The names of the board of editors as shown on BTV are not necessary, as it is purely internal.

f) We want a change in quantity and not in quality.

M Ali
Rajshahi

The letter titled "Hazards of skipping meals" published on December 24 was written by Samina Rahman. The omission of the writer's name is regretted.

OPINION

"Powerlessness"

A Husnain

The commentary "Powerlessness" by Suroosh Irfani (Star, Dec 9) was powerfully written, and deserves serious consideration by all Muslim nations for forging greater unity and deeper opening of the communication links at the highest level, on the eve of the 21st century, when information technology is shrinking the globe.

Isolation, whether political, secular, religious, economic, or trade-wise is no longer possible. The interaction period has become shorter, therefore the reaction period has to be quicker, on short — and long-term foreign policies amongst the OIC member nations.

It is paradoxical that the presence and effectiveness of the OIC is rather lost on the common masses in the Muslim world. The word 'Islamic' is not being used, as the diversity in approach and thinking is not thrusting towards a single, unified goal on the collective role of these nations on making this world of ours a better place to live in (the West is trying to do the same in its own perspective).

The Christian world, the largest single community, on the other hand, have their long-range strategies working — and have made it very much visible as they rule the world today, starting with the downsizing of the role of the United Nations (the Bhuttos Ghalis syndrome), and making the WTO (World Trade Organisation) a sharp weapon of disparity — the subtle return of the role played by the historical East India Company, which led to the creation of the Indian empire and the British Commonwealth.

The picture we see in the Middle East (the nucleus of the

Islamic world) today is dismaying. The United States of America (thousands of miles away) is controlling both the Muslim oil-producing countries, and the Jewish world around Palestine and in the States; and at the same time, trying its best to ensure that Iran, Iraq and the Arabic world are kept apart. Pakistan is being isolated from the Muslim block of ME and CIS through indirect abatement of a state of civil war in Afghanistan.

The genocide in the Bosnia region is an open secret (the revenge against the Ottoman rule of Eastern Europe for several centuries). Now the good Samaritans are arming the Muslim Serbs to defend themselves!

With the US Presidential election over, the State Department's foreign initiative is getting into full gear. The US is very fond of Burma (Myanmar), our neighbour, judging from the recent winter visitors to this area. Soon Bangladesh may see some spurts of unusual activities for the greatest good of the lesser, but developed, numbers. It is all a part of international politics, where the stakes are humoured in the developing countries.

Muslims of the world, wake up and get together, and share the food from the same plate, in the best traditional manner. The memories are long, but the time is short. Bangladesh's powerlessness is at the very bottom — not a sign of humility by any means. Are we going to become the bottomless basket case for the second time? Our statesmen have to be alert to the implications of long term international strategies. Such planning starts deep at the foundation level.