

## 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 Jatiyatobadi 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 many 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 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.

**I**MPORTANCE of the role of Parliament, as one of the three pillars of a parliamentary democracy, the others being the Executive and the Judiciary, can hardly be over-emphasised. As no structure can be built on less than three pillars, it is evident that any crack or weakness in any one of the three will threaten the entire edifice with collapse.

Can the absence of the opposition in the last Parliament session from the 10th ultimo be compared to a similar situation? The answer, as one can surmise at present, is in the negative. The reasons are not far to seek. The opposition has described the act as abstention in contrast to using the term, boycott. Secondly, political observers would tend to believe that a formula synthesising positions of the two sides that may be acceptable to both will not be difficult to arrive at, given the minimal political will on both sides. Finally, it behoves the government to deliberate at least once with the opposition on the most vital Treaty on water-sharing of the Ganges with India. This has been rendered imperative due to the fact that the government, an ardent advocate of the widely misunderstood concept of the government of consensus, deliberately decided not to evolve a consensus on this treaty with the opposition before it was concluded — sealed, signed and delivered. There can, therefore, be no place more appropriate than on the floors of the Parliament to do so in line with what is in vogue in democratic countries.

Despite all that was said, one should not remain complacent

## Parliament to be Effective Must Have an Active Opposition

**B**oth 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 gullible 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, especially 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.

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.

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 unduly to pressure or suggestion of government leaders. It devolves on the Speaker himself to reassure the opposition that the conduct of the House will be done impartially and to due sat-

### 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 parley without any precondition. 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 malevolent, benefits. A list of 54 BNP supporters killed had been submitted sometime ago to the government and to the Hon'ble President, and a much longer list of deaheads 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

infaction of all members.

Finally, there is much to be said about TV coverage of national events. The one-sided projection of news and views at present is merely reminiscent of the same during all the past governments. Events of embarrassment to the government are now projected little. Killings in Jessor jail are the latest case in point. The Awami League categorically pledged in its pre-election manifesto to make government media, the TV and the Radio autonomous. In practice, unfortunately, pending the report of the Commission set up for this purpose, the opposite is widely perceived. Partisan coverage of parliamentary proceedings prompted BNP's suggestion to cover it fully or not at all. If fair coverage cannot be ensured, this suggestion would deserve consideration.

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. In the process, the efforts to reestablish democracy and promoting a tradition are receiving severe jolts. Both sides have a responsibility to the nation. The government side almost always has an edge over the other to come forward with an initiative. The nation expects not to throw the people into the vortex of another crisis. After all, the people are not altogether naive and must be treated with what they are worth.

## Press Fears Another Turn of the Screw

**R**EMARKS by Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen have sparked new fears in Hong Kong that Beijing is preparing to clamp down on freedoms it promised to uphold.

Qian indicated that after China regains sovereignty of the British colony next July, Hong Kong would not be allowed to commemorate the 1989 suppression of democracy protests in Beijing, as this would be an interference in the mainland's affairs.

In an interview with *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, he also appeared to lay down guidelines for the Hong Kong media, which, he said, would not be allowed to attack China's leaders personally.

The comments heightened nervousness in media and political circles that the Joint Declaration between Britain and China on the future of Hong Kong, and the Basic Law, which will be Hong Kong's new constitution, will not offer sufficient protection against the whitening away of freedom of expression.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Shen Guoliang leapt to his minister's defence at a Beijing press conference. But what was not clear from media reports was his statement that Qian had been "misinterpreted". Was he misinterpreted by the newspaper? Apparently not. A Foreign Ministry interpreter translated Qian's remarks into English during that interview. Had the *Journal* been responsible, the Chinese authorities would have acted quickly to clarify the situation.

Was Shen then blaming those in the Hong Kong media who extrapolated some of Qian's replies to the newspaper, giving them, in Beijing's perception, an emphasis which suggested

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**

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 subdivision.

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

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.

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### "Sports news on BTV"

Sir, This has a reference to the letter of Mr Zamal 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 quantity.

**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

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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, 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 Bhutto Ghali 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.

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.