The Baily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali Dhaka, Thursday, January 23, 1997

Health Policy

The committee responsible for shaping a draft national health policy has, in its first meeting on Tuesday delegated duties to five sub-committees it formed on the some day. Each of these sub-committees has been assigned to work in a specific area. The idea seems to be to make the best use of expert knowledge and experiences relevant to a particular area. We appreciate the rationale behind this division of responsibilities. There is, however, a feeling among some quarters that this government is going for too many committees and commissions and their proliferation might not be a healthy sign. We do not as yet subscribe to this view; rather we would wish the sceptics are proved totally wrong.

In this connection can we draw the health policy committee's attention to our existing network of thana health complexes, which is one of the best compared with what most other Third World countries have infrastructure-wise. We believe this network, if fully activated, can reasonably meet the primary healthcare needs of our rural people. So the emphasis ought to be on the health-care service system rather than on building any expensive additional infrastructure. Our views find support in the works done by some organisations like the Gonosyasthya and Dhaka Community Hospitals. In fact some NGOs too have been doing admirably in the area of health service. Apart from encouraging similar private initiatives, let the new health policy have provisions for adopting some of those virtues in the public healthcare system.

Clearly the objective of the health policy is to bring about a qualitative improvement in the country's medical service - both public and private. While the government hospitals must do away with top-heavy administration, corruption and wastage, the private health facilities have hardly any excuse for not giving quality service. Stringent health codes and severe penalty or punishment for breach of those codes for private clinics and hospitals seem to be the right answer to the oft-repeated complaints against the private health care practices. The new health policy should be very particular in dealing with the problem.

Private Mud Public Disaster

The only road connecting Dhaka to its international airport and its only air outlet to anywhere was clogged for all of the forenoon peak hour an Tuesday. As a result a number of domestic and international flights had to be cancelled and rescheduled. Dhaka stood cut off from other nations of the world as well as from Uttara and Baridhara satellite towns and the towns and districts to the north of it. The Airport Road, specially the Mahakhali to ZIA stretch is very literally a lifeline — and that ceased to function over the most crucial part of the day.

And why? Because the authority developing a housing project in the vicinity did not care to keep their earth dumpings within the project area and let these flow like a lava-spread after the Tuesday morning drizzle and eat up the most important part of that vital road. This cannot happen in any civilised nation. What prevented the men in charge of roads as well as the housing project to foresee this costly eventuality? And why even after the disaster had struck no meaningful effort was made to clean up the road? It seems all the king's men are happily unaware of the stake of such gigantic dereliction of duty.

Of course, the person responsible for the gooey spell of the road as well as for the inattention to the urgent problem should be punished. But more than that this must be kept as a reminder for all of what not to be allowed to be repeated on this road or for that matter any other highway.

Luckily for us all, not many vehicles skidded off the road or into other vehicles and structures and living things. This could happen and any next time the repetition may not be as free of toll in human lives.

Tuesday's blockage of the nation's most important road - this being the only way to a dozen northern district and to the world abroad — represents the measure of the pre-civilisation remnants in our society and governance.

A Deplorable Failure

A consignment of Saudi pushback victims have arrived at Chittagong port by an Egyptian ship. The 912 distressed ones stripped of every earthly thing and forcibly sent back to Bangladesh have been dubbed as deportees include many working in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia quite lawfully. Saudi police didn't care to go in to the merits of the cases of those being caught and sent simply for the fact that they were not natives. But this is unfair. One must be given a proper hearing by an appropriate authority before one is subjected to force detrimental to his well being and dignity.

Admittedly, there are many illegal entrants to KSA from this nation too — along with many other nations. But their entry did not materialise without Saudi collaboration. The manpower operators in Bangladesh act as only their agents. The people now being maltreated in KSA are no criminals and have bought their entry through good and hefty money and have been working there for keeps and not thieving around. For fairness's sake it should have been those manpower traders who had to be punished rather than these honest and toiling people. This could be done very easily if our two brotherly nations only sat together and consulted each other on ending this nefarious practice of exploiting and insulting the human shuttles come mostly from our villages and staking their all for landing a job abroad. If the Saudis have failed to appreciate that here was a problem to be solved, Bangladesh should have moved Riyadh in all earnestness for the two of them to sit over it. Riyadh has failed to keep its own traders in check while Dhaka has failed to talk effectively to the Saudis. As the problem involves Bangladesh citizens and not at all the Saudis, the Dhaka failure is the more deplorable.

The Promise of Future Parliamentary Cooperation

The ultimate credit goes to the leaders of the two principal parties, along with their chief negotiators, for

having taken the final decision, but the immediate laurel is worn by the Speaker.

ladesh Nationalist Party to return to the parliament after a five-week abstention constitutes an important breakthrough in resolving the first major political impasse that was being developed since the new government took over power. Political conflicts between rival parties on some issues are inevitable and must be accepted as such in all democracies. We call ourselves a democracy, hence this should be construed a normal phenomenon. But the danger lies in the fact that, in our country, we may scale from normal to abnormal rapidly. We have bitter experiences of the vestervears boycotting the Parliament by the opposition resulting in the untold suffering of the common masses and colossal loss to country's economy. The country has with great difficulties been trying to get over the situation

HE decision of the Bang-

welcome relief. The incident is more important than what it outwardly transpires to be. It is significant on three broad counts. Firstly, it has averted a very potential danger in the political arena of the country and saved the nation from another possible disaster. Secondly, this witnessed the signing of the first and only

but the restoration of interna-

tional confidence in our econ-

omy is yet to come by. That is

why resolution of this crisis

brings the people a deep sigh of

written agreement on any issue between the two principal political rivals of the land. And finally, it augurs well for the future of the parliamentary democracy in the country, provided our leaders exhibit the same degree of political insight and inculcate the same spirit of

cooperation. The ultimate credit goes to the leaders of the two principal parties, along with their chief negotiators, for having taken the final decision, but the immediate laurel is worn by the Speaker. It is paradoxical that the Speaker, who had been assailed heavily by the BNP for his partisan-like conduct of affairs in the House, would be trusted by the opposition and accepted as a successful mediator. This implies that the Speaker has reassured the opposition of his neutrality to the latter's satisfaction. And why not? The Speaker, having attained almost the highest positions a diplomat and a politician could attain, would do well for himself to be absolutely impartial. This would establish his credibility among people and his standing among politi-

After the '91 election, which was the best and the fairest election the country ever witnessed. people were happy that the days

Md Asadullah Khan.

nightmarish experience of get

ting robbed, kidnapped or mur-

dered even within the safe

boundary of their houses. But

the genesis of these malaises

must be traced back to those

days of BNP rule. Reference

made in the meeting of a ghoul-

ish incidence of rape in Chit-

tagong in the recent past puts a

deep scar on the national psy-

che and while deploring that

take place in a civil society peo-

ple in the country can still re-

call such clandestine acts and

terrorism, purported to have

been committed by the mastans

belonging to the ruling party

just a year ago in Chittagong.

Sadly true, Chittagong marches

ahead with an inglorious past

and law enforcement agencies

in that region vitually have re-

mained a hostage in the hands

of these terrorist elements as

usual. People want the present

government to put a halt to

these sorts of menacing crimes.

have taken wings and misad-

venture and chauvinism have

taken over the political fold. In

large part desperate situation

has been brought about by venal

politicians when they utter

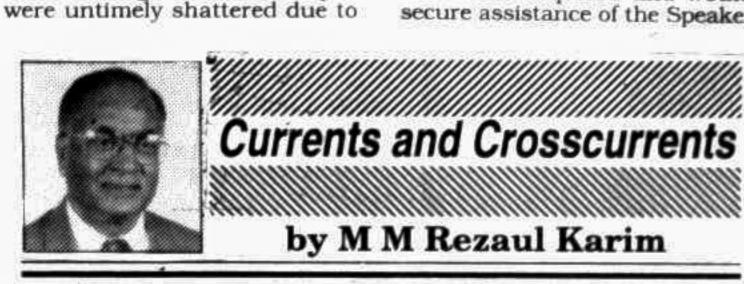
Sanity and prudence seem to

such savage incidents could

cal parties.

of autocracy and dictatorship were gone forever from the land. This was the outcome of a combined and spontaneous upsurge of almost the entire people and parties who wanted restoration of democracy. People hoped that democracy in its true form would flourish and perhaps a two-party system would emerge. But their hopes

demands were abridged to 3 points. The 4 agreed points of the two sides generally covered



the imprudence of our political leaders. The June 1996 election also provided another opportunity to the nation to resurrect the ailing form of democracy. The overall situation of the country during the first seven months of the new government. unfortunately, belied most people's hopes and aspirations. The crunch came with the BNP legislators' abstention from the Parliament since the 10th December.

The original 10-point BNP

all the BNP demands, including assurances given verbally by the Treasury bench. The special feature of the agreement rests on the decision of entrusting an important role on the Whips of both sides. They are to meet as and when required and would secure assistance of the Speaker

in resolving differences. The ruling party's Whip will henceforth consult his opposition counterpart in matters of formation of Parliamentary Committees. The demands relating to appropriate television coverage and proper investigation about harassment and preferring false charges against BNP members were also accepted. These are excellent pro-

visions that call for scrupulous adherence on both sides.

so-called demands, in fact, represented no new demands. These were merely an attempt on their part to vindicate and occure their legitimate rights as members of the parliament as enjoined under the rules, regulations and procedure that are currently in vogue. They had pointed out these inadequacies and anomalies before also in the House, though may not be all together and at the same time. Having received no redress, they had to take recourse to walking out of the House several times and, finally, to the

prolonged abstention.

A section of the ruling party thought that it would be to their advantage not to persuade the BNP back into the House. This would allow them an easy sailing in matters of legislation and in carrying out other functions inside the Parliament Furthermore, in their estima tion, the time was not ripe yet for the BNP to successfully launch a protracted movement effecting a fall of the government. Recently, Prime Minister's statement about holding by-election to all the 116 BNP seats after their continuous abstention for 90 days. suddenly created a dark and stormy cloud on the political horizon. But the situation was According to the BNP, their brought soon under control.

However, it also dawned on the Prime Minister that no amount of talks and cajoling would succeed in successfully invoking foreign investment into the country and restore confidence of the international community, unless political stability is ensured.

The British Prime Minister, during his recent visit to Bangladesh, impressed upon this point emphatically.

We have observed some recent events in mature democracies. President Bush, following defeat in general election. warmly congratulated the victor, Bill Clinton, immediately, Khaleda Zia did that to her adversary Sheikh Hasina promptly after the June 1996 election, though the latter had done just the opposite after the 1991 election. Similarly, as was reported only a couple of days ago, President Clinton decorated his defeated rival. Bob Dole, with the highest civilian award, the Presidential Medal of Gallantry, in recognition of Bob Dole's role as an able legis-

Could one dream that, following the next parliamentary election, our two leaders also would behave similarly - the victor awarding something similar to the vanquished? We are well aware it would ever remain a dream. One had wished if only a gesture of this action were true, democracy will be firmly embedded in our land.

No More Partisan Conflicts, Needed Solution of Problems

People are tired of the way politicians have played with their life and living and cry for a halt to

the acrimony and animosity that only invites misery and suffering for them, writes

HE announcement by the leader of the mainstream opposition party at the Manik Mia Avenue congregation on 7th January almost stunned the nation and raised grave questions about the future of democracy in a land that has suffered under successive military rule, often in the garb of a democratic attire, for most of the 25 years since the liberation war in

In a blistering attack the mainstream opposition party had charged the present government of inefficiency, liquidating the sovereignty and bartering the interest of the country through signing of an unequal water treaty with India. While people belonging to all walks of life have hailed the treaty that seemingly ushers in an era of new life, assumably free from hunger, impoverishment and famine like conditions in the northern part of the country inhabited by 40 million people, the mainstream opposition party has smelled rats in this accord. Startlingly true, this part of the country could have gone into oblivion in the face of the quiet threat of an insidious growth of deserts that loom large and threatens the existence of the people who dwell in these regions. Drought and famine in the last few years reached a catastrophic proportion. Thousands of farmers and fishermen, their wealth of cattle also being wiped out, retreated to city areas of the coun try for food, work and living.

The present government. since coming to power, its each and every move to bolster trade. and bilateral relations with India has come under attack. Precisely told, political savagery is swiftly becoming the norm in the country. While the two major parties battle one another, job quotas are dwindle

day by day, crime becomes words that "they will not see rampant and a spirit of chaotic each other's face." The doctrine violence engulfs the whole of non-violence and forgiveness country in absence of growth of espoused by Bangabandhu in industries and non-functioning the early days of 1972 seem to of the existing ones. These have been cremated. This docevents suggest emerging untrine has been consumed by governability in a nation that party conflicts and clashes that were ignited in the early days of went into a bloody war with the Pakistani marauders in a des-1981 but have fully exploded of perate effort to ride the country late. The most prominent casuof a tyrannical regime. Without alty of this sad development is contradiction, people are wary, the economic emancipation of as the ex-prime minister has the country and its people. expressed in the meeting, of a

Another casualty is the badly needed market economy and foreign investment. Despite the fact that the country has abundant cheap labour and enjoys excellent climatic situation, foreign investors are wary of venturing into an 'inflammable' area that this country now unfolds. Most often hartals, violent clashes and arsons unleashed by self-centred leaders and disgruntled youths that often leads to burning of cars and looting of shopping premises create unstable situation in the country, totally unacceptable for and never congenial to the growth of business in the country. Bangladesh's economic performance rating has reached such a low level that in near future it would become more difficult for the country's entrepreneurs to borrow in international capital markets. As John Major, British Prime Minister who recently visited Bangladesh has said, "The plain truth is, that in the end, trade and investment will only flourish against a stable political background as the absolute, basic and fundamental need for investment." Refer-

people in this part of the world that past enmity of the European nations now turned into a meaningful co-operation of a stable market of 400 million people, the same could be achieved in this region under the umbrella of SAARC. But can anybody guarantee that the country and its people will not witness another bizarre scene right after the Eid-ul-Fitr?

Ominous signals are already there to make people apprehensive that a flare-up is imminent. With prospects of trade relations between Bangladesh and India becoming apparently bright and trade imbalances wearing off after the Indian Prime Minister's disclosure about reducing tariffs on Bangladeshi export items. expanding road and rail links. some political parties are campaigning to thwart these moves. these new found opportunities of transforming a rather collapsing economy into a prospering one, simply out of pera sonal vendetta and on the plea that such relations would liguidate the interest of the coun-

Mainstream opposition party in the Parliament is opposing the idea of sub-regional trade relationships among the closest neighbors like Nepal. Bhutan, Bangladesh and North eastern part of India on the plea that such trade relations would allow foreign hegemony and expansionism gain over the country. Branding this sub-regional grouping as something that undermines the spirit of SAARC, some political party is calling for a halt to such moves. No body denies that the spirit of SAARC should remain alive but at the same time people feel inclined to ask the votaries of SAARC to cite specifically how this impoverished country has benefited from the SAARC membership during the last 15 years?

People are tired of the way

politicians have played with their life and living and cry for a halt to the acrimony and animosity that only invites misery and suffering for them. Despite the fact that the two sides have agreed to forge greater economic co-operation and reinforce their political will for co-operation in certain crucially important areas like checking cross-border insurgencies, agreement on three broad issues including reactivating the joint Economic Commission (JEC), Joint River Commission (JRC) and Joint Economic Group on eradicating cross border insurgencies" suspicion is lurking in some quarters about the motive of such advancement of relations that remained stalled for almost two decades. Reports carried by the press after the conclusion of the bilateral talks reveal that India has agreed to offer Bangladesh tariff concessions on about 500 Bangladeshi items, a move that would substantially put a halt to cross border smuggling that has deprived both the countries of heir substantial revenue earnings in absence of legalised

Happily, the next focus would be on Teesta river. These two geographically contiguous countries are connected by about fifty-four common rivers that flow through the territories of both the countries. And these rivers with their "rich endowment" in the opinion of the Indian Prime Minister, can

trading system.

now become rivers of hope and opportunity in the context of the changed circumstances. It is worth mentioning that the two sides have already expressed their desire to share the waters of all the common rivers on a permanent basis. What can be more appealing and heartening to learn that the bilateral relations, under the aegis of the Joint Working Group, would henceforth tackle the issues related to cross border insurgencies. Chakma refugees and Shanti Bahini, most notably the repatriation of Chakma refugees who were now languishing in different camps at Tripura?

But with partisan conflicts on the rise and tensions between the BNP and Awami League at an explosive level, can democratic governance hold, paving the way for meaningful solution of the country's problems?

People, however, feel that when this new opening in bilateral relations has started in a friendly environment, there is hardly any scope that the move will fall through and the suspicion lutking in some quarters has hardly any basis. Nobody can believe that the ruling party members who had waged a war unto death against Pakistani exploitation would allow the interest of the country to be liguidated at any price?

People are also trying to have a look at achievements of the past regime. The party that ruled in the recent past brought the country's health, education and industrial sector to almost a crippling stage and created an economy that was rather teetering on the verge of a collapse. On the international front, the regime's arrogant and aggressive attitude toward the closest neighbors resulted in angry reaction. Precisely true, the regime has been shortsighted Also True, in their going away from power, people have not lamented either.

Do we really need the DSE?

Sir. A recent issue of The Economist of London questions the need for poor developing countries to have stock exchange and wonders whether the desire to have stock exchanges has more to do with status and to exhibit a freemarket profile rather than to ensure real benefits to the economy, the article also refers to the fracas at the Dhaka Stock Exchange, and indeed some weeks ago, the same magazine, while analysing events in the DSE, called it a "slaughter of the

innocents". Although I cannot agree with The Economist on its approach to many issues, the above article did make me think about what the DSE, as it stands today, has contributed to Bangladesh economy. The purpose and objective of any stock exchange is to channel funds from the public at large to com panies in a manner which will contribute, on the one side, to the healthy and dynamic growth of the companies in question, and hence the national economy, and on the other side to a long-term appreciation of the investing public's money. In order to ensure such a mechanism is operating efficiently and transparently governments strictly regulate and monitor exchanges through bodies such as the Securities &

Exchange Commission (SEC). Is the DSE performing according to this purpose? If the answer is yes, then nothing further needs to be done. To my mind, however, the DSE is not functioning anywhere near its objectives. The present state of affairs is a disaster and needs to be addressed urgently, otherwise it will affect both the actual state of the economy and the private sector's perception of the economy. Developments over the last six months or so have clearly shown that the DSE had become some sort of a casino where those involved appear to have been out for short-term gains. While the going was good, from around August to November of last year, everyone was happy and

behaved as if prices would continue to rise till eternity.

Those who offered words of caution were brushed aside, and in fact brokers and traders threatened the SEC when, last October, it advised the investing public to be careful. Now that the inevitable has happened these same traders, many of whom have made handsome profits, are looking for scapegoats and are busy smashing cars and public property and almost behaving like terrorists

It would appear to many that there existed an unholy alliance among certain DSE brokers and so-called kerb traders a few business houses and a few SEC members who between them manipulated both share prices and the placement of IPOs to their personal benefit. This is quite obviously an unacceptable situation, and should never be allowed to repeat. Further, those who may have been responsible for any irregularities must be held accountable. The authorities must be seen to pursue offenders and reform the stock exchange thoroughly, otherwise no genuine investors will want to have anything to do with an institution where their hard-earned money might be line the pock-

There must be a clear statement whether kerb traders are legal or not. If they are not, they should be removed immediately. If they are legal, they must be organised within a clear set of rules and asked to behave like any other law-abiding citizen. The DSE itself has to be re-organised so that those who are brokers and trade on the floor are not allowed to unduly influence the way in which the DSE operates. The brokers club is far too cosy; it cannot be

ets of an unscrupulous few.

allowed to continue. If the authorities find that they are unable to get the DSE to function in a meaningful manner, it might then be worth considering The Economist's advice - shut it down altogether and look much more closely at setting up a new stock exchange which performs its stated objec-

A Ahmed 75/2 Indira Road, Dhaka.

Asian Highway

ring to the European experi-

ence, John Major reminded the

Sir. Some valuable information regarding a vital national issue has come to light only recently, thanks to The Daily Star's interview with the ESCAP director and the ESCAP-CPD seminar.

The original alignment of the Dhaka-Yangon section of the proposed Asian Highway via Cox's Bazar-Teknaf, which has the advantage of convenient terrain, minimum distance and maximum traffic potential, has been changed, reportedly, at Myanmar's request and with the approval of the BNP government

The new link via Sylhet-Tamabil will pass through the Assam Hills and Chin Hills which are a safe haven for the arms and opium smugglers, and the insurgents. Taking the highway through these hills may be strategically important to our neighbours, but it will jeopardise our sovereignty as well as economy. With all three approaches of the highway through India, our transit to the other countries will be dependent on her good will.

There is no permanent friend or foe in international relationship. So the present government must leave no stone unturned to revive the original route of the highway. The Tamabil-Assam Hills detour may, however, be retained as an additional linkage in the ALTID network.

M A Hannan 9 Baitul Aman Shyamali, Dhaka

Anarchy at Mirpur 10

Sir, Absolute anarchy is let loose regarding fares of public transport modes: mini-buses tempos, auto-rickshaws etc. Mirpur Circle 10 area seems to have fallen in to the clutches of hooligan-like imposers who conduct the transport services from Mirpur to different areas of Dhaka city.

"Direct" buses (mini) stop at every strand, charging the passengers a fare prescribed by the drivers and conductors them selves. Tempos here in Mirpur were easy mode for the poor and

the fixed income people for travelling to main part of the city, especially to Farmgate. Six months ago, the tempo-fare from Circle 10 to Farmgate was Taka 3. Now, it depends, and has become volatile, on their wish who operate this service

on this route. During the rush hours when office-goers are in a hurry to reach their destinations, the tempo operators charge Taka 5 without showing any reason as to why and when the fare (or the price of fuel) has been increased by the "real" authorities. Well, a little after the rush hour, they charge Taka 4 for the same journey. And then — when they literally have to drag people affectionately into tempoes — the fare again comes down to Taka

Interestingly enough, a host of traffic polices, with their hand-bags grapple around the Circle, waits only for the trucks to stop. The thirst for bribes (sorry to say the word) is quite telling on their faces. And if somebody takes the labour to watch, standing in a corner, what they do, the "friendly" corruption of the police will make

him or her ashamed and angry If this is how the authority concerned cares for the people. it has woefully failed, making the dwellers hostage at the hands of the penny-pinchers.

E Kabir Mirpur, Dhaka 1221

Religion

Sir. There is a column in the application forms to mention religion. In many cases, it is a must. One should write in that place - Muslim, Hindu, Christian and the like. But things are changing on this fast-moving earth. Beliefs also are changing with it. One may not believe in 'any' religion but in 'human' religion.

So, the above provision should be relaxed so that one can fill up that portion with 'human' religion, or leave it blank according to his/her

Israt Malek Beparipara, Sirajganj

OPINION "Politics Must Change"

A Husnain

While agreeing with Shahed Latif (column, Jan 14) that "Pol itics Must Change", it is hoped that in a subsequent column he would undertake an analysis of the state of democracy inside the two major political parties in the country controlling the future destiny of the people (the charisma syndrome). Very few local analysts have dared to probe into this vital issue, and its adverse effect on the proper and normal growth of the nation. There is a lot of polarised literature on the listed positive effects issued by the respective groups. A proper study must be independent, impartial and

complete. The objectives of the sub-regional cooperation ventures now being prodded look all right on paper and theoretically, but there is a big bug in the whole academic argument: one of the partners in this council is a very big 'brother' namely, India, and as per past records since the break up of the Indian Raj, it is a bit difficult for the small neighbours to bestow the benefit of the doubt on the big neighbour. Then the classical confrontation between India and Pakistan is very much there till today, on which the respected analyst has

devoted a couple of paragraphs. We have to get out of the vicious circle, and so far we have failed in half a century. The political parties do not remain in power long enough to pay attention to perspective stances covering the neighbours, the region, or the sub region.

Some analysis has been offered on the 'nationalistic' political cross-currents operating in the country, but there is little on how India should behave with the small states. Until the Ganges accord was signed with Bangladesh last December, India's foreign relations with her neighbours cannot be said to have been enviable. The solution cannot be one way. At present, it is a one-way traffic - a stance verging on the principle

of 'take-it-or-leave-it'; so long Congress was ruling India since the partition. To analyse the politics in this subcontinent after partition in 1947, the prepartition background has to be examined to explain some of the abnormal policy stands still being practised today. This makes the analysis more com-

A favourite question often asked in the drawing rooms is: why was there no military coup in India so far? The answer is obvious to the well-informed public opinion. That is the basic reason why two generations of continuous Congress rule in India was able to set up the base of democratic foundation in India. Today, India is reaping the benefit of this foundation — the structures above the foundation are flowering in a very visible manner; while we, at our end, find fault with our political parties for not coming up to popular expectation. The situation in Pakistan has been explained by Mr Latif.

As he has pointed out, there is something rotten in the state of our politics. We, the ordinary citizens, fervently hope that there exists in the country today a sufficient lobby of independent critics who will not hesitate to call a spade a spade, and they will not be victimised by the regime or the opposition. One uncomfortable question, just to cite one example, has not been answered satisfactorily: Why the name of the late Gen Osmani was blacked-out during

the December celebrations? There are other questions on the nationalist approach. It is hoped that many other sensi tive questions will be brought out before the public opinion. We badly need some self-cleansing. The problem is with the process. Consensus can come only after the cleansing process. We have seen many types and styles of operation clean-up. It is any body's guess how many more we have to see.

There's always a tomorrow.