

The Gopalpur Lesson

This is not the first time that police has moved against Awami League front organisations. Latest in the series is the arrest of five leaders of BCL and Jubo League in Gopalpur, Tangail. How can this journal forget that it had challenged the government to prove its bonafide in eliminating the terrorists by moving first against the criminals in its own fold.

We comment to emphasize the point that the affiliates of the ruling party have no moral right to contest government action. When government has been compelled to nab its own political affiliates, cases against them must be quite serious. It doesn't then go to enhance the glory of the party to resist or protest steps taken by police.

Both the government and the party stand to lose if a chasm begins to develop between the two. The government governs not as a representative of the party but more on behalf of the whole nation and for the good of the whole nation.

Greetings to Sharif

Nawaz Sharif's assumption of premiership in Pakistan on the crest of an overwhelming electoral mandate unlocks possibilities of a better tomorrow not just in Pakistan but perhaps for the whole region. And, what furthermore looks like an icing on the cake is the exemplary note of early bonhomie struck between the victor and the vanquished.

With a hearty sense of graceful practicality sloughing off her initial bitterness over what Benazir called 'engineered results' of the February 3 general election, she has promised cooperation and wished good luck to Nawaz Sharif without any mental detour.

We congratulate Nawaz Sharif on his ascension to power with an unassailable parliamentary strength, the Pakistani electorate for returning such a decisive verdict and the key political players on their display of a trend-setting maturity.

Pakistan's hitherto embattled polity and the troubled economy stand a fair chance for an overall improvement in the hands of a well-vindicated Nawaz Sharif. His brand of eclat consists in straight forward dynamism and worldly-wise sagacity.

Nawaz Sharif has been a proven friend of Bangladesh. Our relationship with Islamabad is likely to be markedly enlivened in some moribund backwaters of concern which got put away during the Benazir days. It was during his previous term as prime minister (1990-93), that a serious effort got underway to repatriate the stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh.

Pakistan's reported rejection of any dialogue with India even in matters of trade, pending negotiations on the 'core issue' of Kashmir, sounded out of step with the new hopes generated for an ice-breaking phase in the Indo-Pak relationship. Concerns between the two countries which are key players in the maintenance of stability in South Asia can be taken up separately without a vitiating overlapping of issues.

Inadequate

The beleaguered garments sector may feel somewhat consoled but hardly elated by the latest news about an administrative support getting into motion for the sake of their export facilitation. A commerce ministry committee has come into being to review the premium rates of insurance covers the apparel manufacturers and exporters need for delivering to export orders.

The committee has a loose time-frame to complete the recommendatory phase itself in no less than a two-month period. Given the pressing circumstances of the garment businessmen, a speedier remedial process would have been in order. Let us hope the time-table is compressed.

The oppressively gingerly customs clearance of their raw materials predisposes our exporters to losing in the race with their counterparts in the region. Whether they can be offered a "green channel" rightaway, we do not quite know, but there must be ways to induce a quick clearing mentality among customs officials.

We are against any impudent referrals to the National Board of Revenue in keeping with our earlier editorial appeal for untangling the administrative ensnaring of the garments export business.

The Iftar Bazaar

The emergence of a new month-long market is good for the economy since it would easily be a few billion taka market. It not only creates seasonal employment but takes away housewife's work which is not counted as a contribution to our gross domestic product while Iftar Bazaar related income and employment is a net addition to the aggregate domestic product of the nation. This is well and good.

THIS year, Dhaka seemed to have undergone a permanent change during the month of Ramadan. Iftar was always sold in restaurants and small outlets all over Dhaka, particularly at the Chowkbazar area of the old city. But people mostly preferred home-cooked meals and such Iftar outlets used to be few - mostly at established eating places serving local dishes and not at specialised Chinese restaurants.

This year, the entire city turned into an Iftar Bazaar - from around three in the afternoon to six in the evening. Since my birth 55 years ago, I have never seen in Dhaka so many Iftar sellers with so few varieties of foods. It is an Iftar Bazaar that for 29 days sprang up around mid-day and continued till sunset.

Why Iftar Bazaar? Simple, modern day housewives of Dhaka are no longer at home all day long. They work in schools and offices. Maids and cooks who used to prepare Iftar in the past are few and far be-

Only a limited number of the same old stuff were offered. Foods available are fairly standardised and monotonously the same everywhere. Mama or shahi halim (sorry, I do not know the difference between mama and shahi) is a fairly recent innovation. In my childhood days at Purana Paltan, I never saw it and one could find it this year at all the outlets. This was the only change although a great deal of product diversification, should be possible.

Foods well-cooked, hot and spicy (crispy as well) should be a welcome addition at the end of the day-long fast. Mushroom is easy to grow, needs very little land. You can grow it on your roof top cold room round the year and given the right type of management practices, a net profit of Tk. 10,000 to 20,000 per annum should not be difficult provided there is a market for mushroom. There is none at the moment since the Bangla name for it - frog's umbrella - acts as a deterrent. But think of mushroom samosa - intro-

wheat sales at a premium - consumers are even prepared to pay a price higher than rice for wheat. It is no longer a substitute of rice only. Long before that, English traders introduced tea through free drinks of hot tea on the bazaar days all over rural Bangladesh. Today it is our national drink.

Traditionally, we are not fond of eating at restaurants. We prefer home-cooked meals. Only the Iftar Bazaar has brought in a new dimension to our consumer food market. At no other time of the year, we eat so much food, cooked outside our own kitchen. This is particularly true in urban areas. At least in Dhaka, it was so very true this year and the trend is likely to continue into the future. Therefore, Iftar Bazaar offers the ideal opportunity to introduce new food items particularly those which are protein-rich and from the nutrition point of view, it makes no difference if it is of vegetable or animal origin. In fact, the former is considered better than the latter. It is said that the in-



Window on Asia

Shahed Latif

tween these days. It is difficult, if not impossible, to find a good cook at a salary affordable by middle-class households. Above all, both our appetite and the city population increased enormously since 1971. In one Dhanmandi Residential Area plot, there used to be one family home.

Today, there is an apartment block - six floors above ground and 24 flats. Imagine density of population living per square feet of land all over Dhaka city. And, the growth in appetite, fuelled by rising income is also noteworthy. The month of Ramadan is devoted to eating after sunset only. The day long fast needs to be compensated.

Emergence of Iftar Bazaar was therefore inevitable and in spite of so many Iftar vendors, almost everything get sold by Maghreb prayer time. Restaurants of all types, bakeries, even non-eating places like a Pharmacy - perhaps with vitamin added - set up Iftar outlets. It must be good business.

The emergence of a new month-long market is good for the economy since it would easily be a few billion taka market. It not only creates seasonal employment but takes away housewife's work which is not counted as a contribution to our gross domestic product while Iftar Bazaar related income and employment is a net addition to the aggregate domestic product of the nation. This is well and good.

However, emergence of the Iftar Bazaar did not lead to any improvement of the Iftar menu.

duced by an enterprising Iftar vendor. I am sure it would catch on like a wild fire and if it was introduced this year by one vendor, everybody else will be selling mushroom samosa next year during Ramadan.

Mushroom is a high protein food and its cost is much less than traditional sources of protein like fish and meat and not only samosa, varieties of foods can be cooked based primarily on mushroom. Also, it is a vegetable product and there cannot be any objection to its introduction from any quarter. After mushroom, I think soya protein-based ready-to-eat cooked foods can also be introduced as a part of the Iftar menu. It will be much cheaper than meat-based products or even pulse-based fried items - commonly consumed in large quantities in the month of Ramadan.

The vast majority of our malnourished population cannot afford meat or fish. The answer to protein deficiency is mushroom and soybeans which can be grown in our country but had never been grown on a commercial scale because of lack of demand. Consumption of mushroom and soybean must be promoted first through cooked foods so that consumers would know the taste, develop a liking and eventually become a part of our daily menu. There is nothing new about it. In the 1940s, wheat products were introduced in our part of the world as a substitute of rice and now consumption of bread or chappati has become so widespread that

idence of heart disease or cancer is much less in China compared to other countries because of the high levels of consumption of both mushroom and soybean and less of meat.

Once mushroom and soybean became part of the Bengali diet, sky is likely to be the limit demand that may be generated by a population of 120 million. Iftar Bazaar should be conceived as an opportunity to initiate new types of food business. It is the best and the largest of its kind in the country. Therefore mushroom and soybean are solid business after solid promotion at the Iftar Bazaar.

I was told that Coca Cola or Pepsi was introduced and widely consumed today without any such promotional effort. But it would not be the same for all food items. Food as a business is an excellent money spinner.

Although no analysis is available on the Iftar Bazaar this year, my gut feeling is that thousands of vendors have made good money, although for one month only.

More important is the fact that we are getting increasingly urbanised in terms of our food habits. Iftar Bazaar has the potential to expand many fold and become a round-the-year food bazaar when cooking at home will become the exception rather than the rule. If so, then imagine the income and employment potential of the food market for a population of 10 million living within the greater Dhaka metropolitan area.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

"A Course on Courtesy"

Sir, It refers to your editorial on 'A Course on Courtesy' on 16 February 1997. While I agree with your appeal to the members of our law enforcing forces to be courteous, I would like to add a point.

We have seen in our country that the members of the army and other law enforcing forces keep on their uniforms while performing their own civilian/personal duties even when they are 'off duty'. In other democratic and developed countries, an army personnel is not allowed to enter a shop to make even a small purchase while in uniform. This also applies to their police and other law enforcing agencies/forces. If this rule/law was to be in force in our country, perhaps the incident involving 90 BDR jawans would not have taken place at Barisal Steamer Terminal on the night of 14 February 1997.

Perhaps our Home Minister would like to ponder on this point.

ANAH Siddiqui
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Dhaka is becoming uninhabitable

Sir, Dhaka is now, perhaps, the most crowded city. The people of Dhaka are inhaling polluted air everyday. The autorickshaws and buses are emitting lead which is injurious to health. The people of the whole of Bangladesh are trying to come over to Dhaka in search of jobs, education, medical treatment etc. It seems now that Dhaka has got all the opportunities. We have never tried to make equal distribution of development. Except Chittagong and Khulna, no other district town has got any opportunities for employment. So the burden is on Dhaka and Chittagong. If the planners fail to shift the areas of development to other districts, the people of those districts having no other alternative will come to Dhaka. The

environment will be further polluted and Dhaka will become unfit for living.

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Thanks a lot

Sir, I have read the article 'The Incidence of 22 January on DU Campus', written by Dr A K Monowar Uddin Ahmed published in your paper from first to last which was written directing to take punitive action against the terrorists who beat up a student of the English Department. In the article, the Professor pointed out the rules and regulations which can be applied against any terrorist.

I heartily thank the Professor and urge the university authorities to take punitive action against the terrorists so that nobody dares to indulge in such nasty activities on this campus in the future.

Sheikh Shahjahan
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Police walkie-talkies need to work

Sir, On the 21st January, 1997, after the sudden morning drizzle, the Dhaka-Mymensingh road (near Nikunja) became unusually slippery due to soil deposit on the road. As a result, one side of the road of that section had to be closed for the traffic and was available for both way traffic. Hence there was logjam till rest of the day. Each vehicle took more than one-and-a-half hours to cover that part of the road. Air-travellers (irrespective of male/female, young/old) had to walk down to the airport with their belongings to catch their scheduled flights. Loss of any individual is not meagre, and the collective loss is immeasurable.

I wonder why the traffic

sergeant didn't use his walkie-talkie. Why that piece of equipment is for? Doesn't he know there is a Disaster Management Dept under the Ministry of Disaster Management? If the Duty Traffic Sergeant called the Disaster Management Dept., then they would have deputed their men and materials/equipments to remove the slippery slush from the road. A fire engine water jet would have removed that in no time.

Can anyone knowledgeable explain to us as to why these gadgets and grand organisations are being maintained by public money, if those are not being used to remove public sufferings? Why then, it was at 1:30 hrs or so, the Fire Brigade appeared on the spot and not earlier? If there is none to answer, the PM has to, as she is accountable to the public.

A R Choudhury
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Celebration and holiday

Sir, It is matter of shame for all of us that during the Eid holidays, we were in the dark from all sorts of news and information from the rest of the world. I understand that the employees of the media also have right to enjoy holidays, but how the machinery of all the newspapers of a country can sleep for about a week? At least, some leading dailies can publish their issues in a concise edition. In so doing, they might have to pay some incentives to some of their employees required during holidays; or some employees might have been recruited who can substitute during Eid festivals.

Similarly, the Muslims can take care of the responsibilities of the employees from other religions at the time of their respective festivals. As Eids are the great festivals of the Muslims, the newspaper publications can be suspended only on the Eid day, or at best, for two days including the Eid day.

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A Death that Reminds of a Necessity

by Chandra Shekhar Das

On October 9, in the security of a police station what some uniformed protectors of good and punishers of bad did to a poor, helpless woman was not mere molestation of a female but the rape of all our claims as a civilised nation.

THE country is now rumbling in resentment and protest against the death of Seema Chowdhury, the 17-year-old female factory worker who died on the first Friday of February in the most unconvincing and unfortunate manner while being in judicial custody over a case of gangrape on her by the personnel of Raozan police station in Chittagang.

Premature and pathetic as it is, her death has given rise to very strong suspicion of a sinister conspiracy being afoot simply to bury the prospect of a proper probe into the matter. On the ninth of last October, Seema, who was picked up by police on flimsy and unclear ground, was raped by the constables and officer of the Raozan police station.

Instantly reminding us all of Yásmeneq the teenage girl from Dinajpur who was killed after being gangraped by police and the public protest and wrath over the administrative procrastination in prosecuting and punishing those torturers and killers considerably contributed to the fall of the BNP government, this monstrous instance of human rights violation by none other than the very guardians of law too provoked a huge public condemnation and a criminal investigation was duly under way. It was on the fifth day after the issuance of charge sheets against the accused persons that Seema's death was announced. Post mortem report suggested Seema went through the hoop before dying. Her teeth were loose, and there was blood on her nose. Both hint at violent physical struggle that Seema was subject to and there are indeed very solid grounds for such a conclusion.

Seema was the only witness of the orgy of carnal feast let loose on her on that fateful night in the Raozan police station. So if she could be vanished, so to speak, the underpinnings of a potent rape case will be considerably weakened. Suspicion goes even deeper when one comes to think about the timing of her death and the post haste with which her funeral was done. Seema was reported to have died on February 7, only a day before the beginning of the Eid holidays. The case which earned Seema most there is something fundamentally wrong with our police. Police today is the other name of peril. More people are prepared to remain silent and suffer than

out. For people bent on to take a witness for a ride, there cannot be a more opportune time than a spell of prolonged holiday. But the real claim of a foul play of very serious nature can be staked from the particular mode of a funeral. Although a Hindu by birth and thereby deserving cremation as her funeral rite, Seema reportedly embraced Islam having loved and married a Muslim. So there was no way the authorities could justify the act of cremating her. Moreover, Seema's mother refused to accept the death of her daughter. An old poor mother's refusal to shoulder the funeral responsibilities of an utterly scandalised daughter is thoroughly understandable. But the act that really begs to be taken up as an ethical transgression of the vilest nature is jail authorities' responsibility in Seema's death and the subsequent funeral. By any stretch of religious and ethical imagination she deserved a proper burial as one would expect in the case of any Muslim.

The whole incident starting from Seema's rape to her death reeks of such enormous violation of human rights and trust that no sane man can but shudder at the reality we are all putting up with in Bangladesh. On October 9, in the security of a police station what some uniformed protectors of good and punishers of bad did to a poor, helpless woman was not mere molestation of a female but the rape of all our claims as a civilised nation. The enormity of the crime is not lessened even by an iota by the recent attempt at the projection of Seema as a floating prostitute. So what if Seema was a prostitute? Does it in any way imply that members of the law enforcing agency have been endowed with the authority to treat the prostitutes as the vessels of their lust and perversion? Civil imagination of law has no room for discrimination and police being enforcers of law cannot be imagined let alone tolerated on such flagitiousness.

Seema's is not the only case in the annals of police crime. They were there before, the most notorious, and notable among them being the Yásmeneq murder case. These incidents of protectors appearing in the role of predators clearly suggest there is something fundamentally wrong with our police. Police today is the other name of peril. More people are prepared to remain silent and suffer than

going to police to lodge a complaint against an act of injustice. As one of the many cases in a study of extreme injustice by police, Seema's case serves as any eye-opener. For a semblance of improvement in the already tarnished image of police and restoration of public faith in its existence and utility, immediate police reform seems to be what the doctor ordered. Frustratingly, and damagingly for this agency of the government itself, reform has so far been more of a much harped word in the seminar and the pages of the newspapers. Despite his resonant utterances in this respect, the Home Minister is yet to make his presence felt as a reformist. It is the formulation of recommendations and their immediate implementation that the police administration needs most.

The behavioural pattern of police in the recent times particularly in the case of sexual harassment suggests that it is not just a case of accepted inefficiency stemming from a pay scale that is ridiculously low at the lower tiers but also an increasingly felt absence of moral imagination - so vitally important in the case of people committed to the cause of public service. It is likely that the recruitment process and training of police is seriously flawed. Perhaps, the uniform is bestowed on an aspirant member of the law enforcing agency without any systematic or durable effort to get the idea of moral obligation sufficiently sunken in him. How else can one explain the sacrilege of custody by some members of the law enforcing agency?

For a sincere and meaningful attempt to restore or establish the proper image of police, those responsible for the pathetic and premature end of Seema's life should be given exemplary punishment to start with. Extra-ordinary punitive measure has become a must because more and more members of the law enforcing agency are getting involved in these types of human rights violation and they are showing an alarming increase in their tendencies of hoodwinking the law to cover up their criminal acts. Since moral obligation is no more working as an ensuring factor in making police behave in a manner they always should, harsh punishment seems the only way to deal in these cases. The government cannot afford to make light of the increasing number of police crimes. It has to act now.

OPINION

Proposed Shaymoli Drainage Pond: an Unsound Plan

Dr Jasim Uddin Ahmed

Dhaka WASA has recently taken up a plan to develop a municipal drainage waste-water pond at Shaymoli by acquiring land from Uttar Adabar, Baitul Aman Housing Society, Darus Salam and other adjoining areas. It is understood that this project has been planned by the government with foreign assistance. As a result, a dump house has already been installed on the embankment on the west border.

Initially, Dhaka WASA took up a plan early this decade to construct a culvert on the present canal running from the Kallypur area to Turag river. For that purpose, it acquired necessary land along both sides of the canal and payments already made as compensation.

While the construction of the culvert was an environment-friendly plan, the development of an open drainage waste-water pond will result in an environmental hazard, health problem of enormous dimension. Already, domestic and industrial liquid effluents from surrounding areas have polluted the canal badly. Particularly, during the dry season the canal and its both banks look lary and spread offensive, rotten smell in the area that is detrimental to health.

An open drainage waste-water pond as planned by WASA will imply an intention to store the drainage waste until it comes to a level to warrant pumping out to the Turag river. This would mean that drainage waste-water will continue to accumulate over the dry season; the need for pumping out will arise mainly during the monsoon. It is heard that liquid drainage waste from some other parts of Dhaka city will also be dumped into this drainage pond.

City drainage waste from domestic and industrial sources contain both organic and inorganic matter that include toxic chemicals and elements. Accumulation of such waste in the proposed drainage waste pond will become a huge source of environmental and health hazard of various type. Rotten organic waste will spread offensive smell in the whole surrounding area where various housing societies are developing residential buildings rather fast. The whole area up to Gabtali will in the long-term become a densely-populated zone of Dhaka. Rotten organic matter

in the sediment on the pond floor will generate gas bubbles which, on reaching the surface, will burst causing toxic matter to get airborne.

Birds, domestic animals, ducks, chickens, rats, insects, flies, etc. will become another group of agents to spread toxic matter to the populated areas. Temptation to catch fish by some people cannot possibly be checked. Hence, contaminated fish eaten or sold in the market may be another source of health hazard. Poor class people may bathe or use water from the pond for domestic purposes, particularly during monsoon period, and unknowingly subject themselves to health problems.

In summery, the proposed drainage waste pond planned by WASA will cause health and environmental hazards, unquantifiable in terms of money, and the extent of the damage will grow with the time to a point of catastrophic nature. Many kinds of disease will possibly emerge among the people living in the surrounding area. The damages to health and environment may eventually be irreparable. At such point in time any attempt by the city authority or the government to decontaminate and rehabilitate the pond area will be economically unmanageable.

Dhaka city area is already polluted with vehicle exhaust such as carbon oxides, sulphur oxides, unburned or partially-burned petroleum molecules, and toxic metals such as lead. The lead pollution in the air in Dhaka during the dry season is reported to be the highest in the world and several times higher than the internationally recommended safe limit. Environmental and health hazards arising from the Shaymoli drainage waste pond will add insult to injury; people in the surrounding area will have to think of leaving the area. Two examples may be cited to throw some light on the kind of damage that can be caused by the city drainage waste to the environment:

The city of Bogota, the capital of Colombia, dumped its liquid effluents for years into a hilly gorge at the outskirts, north-west of the city. This area was a bird sanctuary and healthy outing spot. Accumulation of rotten waste, toxic and

chemical pollutants over the years caused ecological disaster to the area. Birds have fled, other animals left, visitors do not go there, and the pungent and offensive smell affected the entire surrounding area. Following strong public outcry, the authorities established a filtration and treatment plant, stored the filtered water in an artificial lake and disposed the residues as solid wastes. The project turned out to be impractical and economically unmanageable. The government then took up a plan to duct the city drainage waste to about 50 km. south of Bogota. This project has recently been put into operation.

The second example is the Dhanmoldi lake in Dhaka proper. The adverse effect of toxic liquid waste gaining access to Dhanmoldi lake has been reported in the news media (Janakantha, August 2, 1996). Already fish have begun to die in huge numbers; the effect on health of people bathing in there using the lake water for domestic purposes is not yet known.

Coming back to Shaymoli waste pond, I would like to say that WASA plan for this project is unsound and does not seem to have taken into perspective all the long-term health and environmental effects that may result from this pond. A short-term solution of this kind conceived by Dhaka WASA to handle the city liquid effluents will eventually end up in a long-term regret, and at a great health, social and economic cost. Again, pumping out untreated drainage waste to the Turag river will disperse the pollutants on both sides of the river long way downstream.

I would request all concerned authorities to reconsider the matter with serious thoughts given to the long-term health and environmental effects and revise the decision. In my opinion, the plan for open drainage waste pond must be discarded. The original plan for a culvert should be preferable, but a treatment plant must be installed to remove toxic matter before dumping the effluents into the Turag river.

The writer is retired Head of Radiation Safety and Environmental Protection (Director) International Atomic Energy Agency, Vienna, Austria