The Baily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

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Golden Opportunity

The balmy breeze rustling the new-found foliage of totally salubrious and unifyingly patriotic sense of national well-being in the wake of our entry into the international cricketing circuit is for the keeps. Let it go on wafting our senses till we have made it to the records book of the world giants and developed their kind of stake in international cricketing honours.

The Kuala Lumpur victory has been our people's triumph, far beyond the customary expression of courteous sentiments with which one is apt to greet such an occasion. The people of Bangladesh kept posted of the winning streak on a daily basis and the dramatic turns in the weather raising occasional trepidations, inspired them, egged them on, with their sustained interest in the proceedings and the profusion of support, concern, blessings and doa that got duly transmitted to Kuala Lumpur through fax and telephone calls. In return, our team gave their people a leap of the mind they will cherish for ever. The pulsating and reverberating empathy that connected the expatriate Bangladeshis, the cricket team and the overwhelmingly attentive Bangladeshi audience has been the greatest experience in spontaneous national unity since the liberation war. Congratulations to our people once again!

The multitudes of young celebrators deserve special thanks for their behavioural maturation after the final within a couple of days of their obnoxious conduct following the semi-final victory. The improved notch in the celebrative flourish is where we should set our behavioural standards for the fu-

The crowning glory of a fitting civic reception to our heroes that we had longed for was somewhat missing — let's put that on record. It was nice to see some representatives of political parties other than of the ruling one, cultural activists and liberation war heroes on the dais but conspicuously absent from the spectacle were any BNP or Jatiya Party leaders. Apparently, attempts were made to make the function non-partisan but we don't know how sincere were these to take the BNP on board. The national civic reception committee was flawed in its composition, it should have been led by a truly non-partisan person.

But if an approach was made to the other political parties in some earnest, then a golden opportunity seems to have been lost on both sides for forging a workable unity pegged to the potentially catalytic cricket victory.

The Clean-up Concern

This second biggest religious festival of the Muslims comes this year on the heels of a victory celebration of a cricketing glory and Bangla New Year's welcoming festivities. So, the joyous occasions seem to have merged together in our life this year. Eid-ul-Azha connotes religious solemnity, fervour and obligations. It is an occasion marked by man's readiness to sacrifice in the name of the Almighty with the purest of heart. We, therefore, have some responsibilities to share along with the sacrificial aspect of it.

In the capital and other cities the disposal of sacrificed animals' innards etc. poses a great problem. On this count, the Dhaka City Corporation did an admirable job last year. This time we would like to see that the DCC does even better. Although the sacrifice has a religious sanction for three days, the first day is crucial. Let the DCC put its acts together with help from the ward commissioners. Each ward can have some designated places for kurbani and encourage the individuals for the safe dumping of the remains of animals. The public need to be aware of and doing their part of the responsibility because it is they who will ultimately be affected if the left-overs are littered in the open for rotting and spreading the germs.

Our citizens have sometimes exhibited an admirable spirit of discipline and responsibility on being properly motivated about the stake involved in failing to do so in matters of civic decency, health or hygiene. BTV and Bangladesh Betar in particular can lend a hand in sensitising people about the disposal of animal remains. The DCC, other city corporations and municipalities may be pleasantly surprised to find a more responsive and responsible public to make their task lighter by virtue of such an information campaign. But the results on the ground have to be ensured by the city corporations no doubt.

Fair Deal to Consumers

A week-long drive starting on April 3 against dishonest shop-keepers has ended in realising Tk 16,300 in fines. The Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI) initiated the move by forming two mobile courts which were led by metropolitan magistrate M A Baset. The drive was against shop-keepers using sub-standard weights to deceive consumers in areas like Sutrapur, Tejgaon, Gulshan and Mirpur.

People everywhere are getting deceived in the matter of weights. It is a crime in which a large number of shop owners are consciously involved. Is there any possibility of ensuring that shopkeepers throughout the country would use approved weights and measures so as to help the citizens in getting their money's worth?

Now that cheating of consumers has become an endemic disease, we feel that BSTI should be given wide-ranging powers to deal with the unfair business practices, including adulteration of consumer items. The institution has very little power to enforce standard business practices or take action against the violators of these. It has to operate with support from the administration. If the cumbersome process can somehow be simplified for immediate action against cheating in weights or violation of other business regulations then we will have taken the basic step forward.

Boils down to the Quality of Negotiations

The cheque for the first tranche was issued by the World Bank with customary ease and generosity. But when

N our anxiety to procure funds, especially when the foreign exchange reserve has taken a tumble, we succum b to a self-imposed pressure of hurried negotiations with multilateral financing institutions contracting obligations that we find ourselves hard put to fulfil

down the road. For instance, when writhing in a severe resource crisis after Ershad's fall, the succeeding BNP government in 1991 negotiated a three-tranche programmatic loan worth \$150m with the World Bank called the Public Resources Management Adjustment Credit to shore up the economy. This was tagged with certain conditionalities: annual increase in the revenue by. 5 per cent from the base level with reconsideration of the tax holiday waiver, expansion of the tax base, public expenditure-cuts, reduction in the ADP size by jettisoning 10 projects perceived to be of dispensable priority, updating of the debt service liabilities of stateowned enterprises (SOEs) and such like.

The cheque for the first tranche was issued by the World Bank with customary ease and generosity. But when came the time for the second tranche to be handed in, questions began to be asked about our meeting the contractual obligations and we were found wanting there. We got it all the same, but matters came to a head when the third tranche fell due in 1994 and we had some hard explaining to do be-

HE recent "atta" c risis

hit Pakistan out of the

which the Benazir regime left in

a continuing crisis of unimag-

inable proportions, the gov-

ernment lost sight of the fact

that the country runs on its

stomach, mainly on bread. The

most famous example is that of

Marie Antoinette suggesting

plaintively "if the people do not

have bread, why don't they eat

cake?" The people took her head

instead! For the first time in

Pakistan, after the sugar crisis

in the late '60s, we had "food"

riots in a number of cities in the

country. These were sponta-

neous, not engineered, there

was also no doubt that political

activists of different ilk took

advantage of the situation later

tion of the ruling government

was that it was due to the wrong

policies of the previous regime

because excess permits for lift-

ing flour had given to their

favourites. This was true to an

extent as well as the fact that

the Caretakers erred in asking

for April shipments of the

wheat purchased from abroad.

However, the 90 days between

the Nawaz Sharif government

and the Benazir regime the

Caretaker Government was a

buffer period. The "atta" crisis

peaked a full 45 days after Mian

Nawaz Sharif was sworn in as

PM. As far back as Jan 11, 1997,

there were stray reports of some

shortages. Responsibility must

be shouldered by the present

Federal Government, in partic-

ular the lifting of ban on the

The typical knee-jerk reac-

and added fuel to the mass ire.

came the time for the second tranche to be handed in, questions began to be asked about our meeting the contractual obligations and we were found wanting there agreements finalised, albeit out fore we got past the embarrassing situation.

moratorium on the energy sector credit, which fell in a slightly different category, is too well-known to be recounted. But what started out as a mild variety of a test of our political nerves in the Public Resources Management Adjustment Credit (PRMAC) which demanded a raise in tax volume and belt-tightening in the SOEs turned out to be less so in the case of energy sector credit that called for a duel for the first time with the CBA on the twin question of privatising the supply side of electricity and putting a lid on the systems

The story of the prolonged

More to the point have been the ill-fated Jute Sector Adjustment Credit programme and the 4th Dhaka WASA Project. In the first case, we were to privatise ten state-owned jute mills but now we are wrestling even with the much scaled down requirement of having to show as a proof of our bona fides that we can disinvest at least one jute mill. The WASA project envisages structural changes of such a nature that we may have to replace the relevant SRO by an ordinance, if we are to go about it quickly, wiich has obvious political or parliamen-

tary implications. The above is a resume of

of practical compulsions and as parts of the reform agenda but without sufficient fore-thought or ground-work going into the real task of ensuring their implementation. Government negotiators go abroad to strike loan deals or carry out negotiations for the same at home on the so-called strength of cabinet approvals that lack in an effective political will which is

tural productivity out of the harm's way of political agitation are matters that better be taken up in the parliamentary committees for arriving at a consensual package on them in the form of a covenant of understanding. Both the major political parties would be in a position to eventually enjoy the dividends of this whilst our negotiators came back with laurels from abroad, not of inflated notional dollar figures



consensus on the purely economic issues at hand. How is that bipartisan understanding to emerge in our political culture that upholds the ruling party's success or good work as the opposition's failure and vice versa, even though their respective roles admit of clea :- cut definition and need not, therefore, militate against each other on

Disinvestiture, industrial relations in privatised units, and labour retrenchment, retraining and rehabilitation, fixation of utility rates, and keeping industrial and agricul-

that fail to make the short run from donor pledge to their disbursement because of our reneging on commitments given with the casualness of the halfwitted latching on to the belief perhaps that donors will have to invest more in us anyway to get back the money we owned them. There are several candidates for those loans in the post-detente world prepared to give good returns on their money. In spite of that, Bangladesh has been receiving a special consideration from the international community

for the proven resilience and

instinct of survival of its people against stunning odds.

This is no unreserved defence of the donor conditionalities; for, incontestably, their reform prescriptions leave a scope to be more country-specific and country-sensitive and not sweepingly global in temper and insistently demanding as some of these sometimes are. At any rate, there is no point in signing up the conditionalities and then dubbing them as 'unfair' when these hurtle along the implementation phases and thus unnecessarily have a lengthening shadow cast over future loan negotiations or renegotiations.

It is time for our negotiating capabilities to compare favourably with those of some South-east Asian countries, especially Indonesia and Malaysia. Enlightened national interest, not in quixotic or dogratic isolation from the global village, but in association with it, ought to be the first priority with us. On a similarly philosophical plane, there is need for keeping a vision of growth and national advancement so that the resulting policies can be owned and implemented with the propulsion of right doses of motivation and mobilisation. Not merely the political leaders, the negotiators, too, are required to be visionary in the creative sense of

thorised to negotiate, with their briefcases invariably containing all answers to possible queries that might crop up. sometimes unexpectedly, in the course of negotiations.

the term. They must be fully au-

The level of understanding. knowledge and expertise of Bangladesh delegates, in short, their grip of the subject under discussion has often been circumscribed either by their poor access to all the relevant information, reports and studies. not to speak of the unreliable statistical base we have, or by their lack of diligent reading of materials made available to them. Those who sit across the table may be better informed and could come up with queries that might make a Bangladesh counterpart mumble over 'referring the matter to the headquarters'.

And, if time-constrained, he could end up re-signing to a deal half-baked on the topside.

So long as we depend on an incomplete mix of bureaucrats and technocrats, with the latter playing a second fiddle to the former, to deliver the goods, we shall remain the back-runner in the race for clinching wellrounded deals. Private sector managers and technical experts deserve to be included in the negotiation teams with their equations redefined in relation to the government bureaucrats and technocrats. We have to raise a new breed of dynamic negotiators in the 35-50 age group on a crash basis to be in the reckoning in a super- competitive world.

Crisis Information and Management

The prime reporting agencies only confine themselves to ferreting out "subversive" activities, this is a farce

personal motives rather than any national cause

when most such material is motivated out of individual jealousy or vested interest designed to serve blue. It was not enough that wheat in considerable volume had gone to the flour mills, on leaving the premises movement of wheat inter the milled wheat followed the Province on Mar 11, 1997 "market economy" philosophy which allowed hoarders and and went to where it was smugglers full licence to move fetching a better price, across stocks across the porous borthe border in food-starved ders to more "lucrative" havens. Afghanistan and beyond to Central Asia as well as to the arid areas of Rajasthan in India. Somebody made a killing, not only in supplying flour to the needy ex-Pakistan but when the crisis hit Pakistan, at exorbitant prices within the country. Focussed primarily on the economy.

The crisis came about because of lack of adequate information that could have led to action designed to prevent such situations from going out of control. Information may be of varied nature but anything out of the ordinary that can have repercussions on the social, economic and political balance of the community needs to be known in a hurry so that measures can be taken for tackling the problem before it becomes a crisis. Sources of information are always available in any administrative set up but the means of collecting and collating that information in Pakistan as well as transmitting it with speed in methodical fashion is out-dated. An "early warning" system has to be evolved that automatically takes cognisance of a potential problem and ensures that necessary details reach the primary Federal and Provincial set-ups by the fastest means available.

There may be some problem about jurisdiction i.e the Provincial set-up may not want to involve the Federal Government in many issues out of the jealous prerogative of their autonomy, that is their privilege. The Federation already has its own independent intelligence gathering sources in the Provinces, these must be geared to providing traditional and non-traditional intelligence in a hurry. Furthermore, alternate "early warning" systems must be developed, the ruling political party must be sensitive to information sent by their own political infra-structure.

Unfortunately the prime reporting agencies only confine themselves to ferreting out 'subversive" activities, this is a farce when most such material

is motivated out of individual jealousy or vested interest designed to serve personal motives rather than any national cause. Making a mountain out of a molehill does not adequately describe such intelligence gathering, making mountains where no molehill exists is a much more appropriate description. Governments must not always react to a situation, their "Standard Operating Procedure" (SOP) must take command of a situation even as it

develops. The problem arises where all this information will flow into? If there is law and order

CCR concept need to be duplicated in the presence of a Main CCR?

Let us take the route of the "atta" shortage. When the ban on inter-Province movement of wheat was lifted, the border areas must have seen an increased inflow of wheat and the market shelves a decreasing quantity of atta, this should have been reported through various channels by various agencies. Similarly when "atta" started to disappear totally from shelves through the country, this should have set off alarm bells in concerned quarters in the Provincial Governments as well as the Federal Govern-

problem e.g. about ethnic or re-ASISEEIT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

ligious basis, it will go to the Interior Ministry through the Intelligence Bureau or the Provincial Special Branches of Police. Does the Interior Ministry have a fully-equipped Central Control Room (CCR) manned 24 hours by an experienced officer who can assess the magnitude of the problem and take steps for its rectification on his own authority or if it feels it exceeds his authority, to bring appropriate notice for action of the authorised person? In theory, probably yes, in practice, probably no. Whereas the Interior Ministry can be expected to have such a CCR (as probably would the Defence Ministry and the three Services) do the Food and Agriculture Ministry, the Communications Ministry, the Health Ministry etc., have such an institutional information and management early warning system operating around the clock? Or would the ments instead of the functionaries being made aware of the crisis through newspaper reports, which when made further exacerbated the crisis into unmanageable proportions as people rushed to clean out the existing stocks. Why was not our publicity machine geared to stem the panic? Why was not a full-fledged "damage control" operation launched to counter the adverse propaganda? One does not doubt that reports and half-hearted efforts of various kind on the media were made where was the massive coordinated response till the Food and Agriculture Minister, MS Abida Hussain, herself took charge of operations, and even in her

case, why so late? One would expect that given the many problems of different nature facing Pakistan, both man-made and natural eg. (in this government's short tenure alone) the Shantinagir incident

(Muslim-Christian riots), the Multan incident (Shia-Sunni riots), the major railway accident at Khanewal, the earthquake in Balochistan etc., there needs to be at least one 24 hours Crisis Information and Management Center (CIMC) each at the Federal and Provincial level positively, at the Divisional/District level certainly and at the Police Station level preferably. All the CIMCs should be equipped with adequate maps, computers, faxes High Frequency (HF) links and banks of telephones, the number of equipment decreasing in descending order of level. Between the Federal and Provincial CIMCs there should be at least two hotlines, one on voice and one on fax/E-mail, there should definitely be an HF link. With the recent advancement of computer technology, electronic mode (E-mail) can be used to send messages or typed out directly as required. Once information is available about any abnormal activity, an SOP must act as a guideline to the senior personnel in the CIMC for further action. On a cautionary note, all the information must be checked, verified and cross-checked so that alarm bells are not set off that in turn result in panic due to an initial hasty reaction based on disinformation and/or misinformation. This is always a major risk to guard against since some individuals and/or groups specialise in spreading

politically motivated rumours. Once information has been received and verified in the quickest possible time, the official concerned in CIMC must decide whether the magnitude of the problem warrants that the official concerned in the appropriate Ministry or Department should be alerted or if the management of the problem is well within the capability of the CIMC to cope with, at least during non-office hours. It may even be necessary, depending

upon the magnitude of the problem, whether "early warning", even without verification, should be passed onto the person concerned with the caveat that the facts were in the meantime being cross-checked for authenticity.

This would give reaction time for any of the parties concerned. For cyclone warnings pre-1971, there was in place an "early" warning system of danger signals, similarly for both man-made and/or natural disaster, timely warning will lead to better management of the

The three-year period leading up to the elections (and even after the elections till he assumed power) was a period of experience for Mian Nawaz Sharif gained at the expense of the PPP regime, he saw at first hand the bankruptcy of not making the best use of expertise and talent from all over the country, the rulers opting instead for an inefficient, nepotism-ridden "crony" system. In Mian Sahib's second tenure, he owes it to his many supporters to show more inclination to shake himself loose from those who do not take kindly to professional management or expertise from outside the confines of the "inner circle" in any position of influence.

totally subservient and act as cheerleaders for all the actions of the rulers good or bad, in the image of the predecessor Zardari's government-in-allbut-name, they in fact become a sort of an all-pervasive "kitchen" cabinet without the responsibility for the authority they can manage to influence. On the other hand, a crisis information and management system is completely geared to professional management and reaction thereof. In today's advanced technology world, no entity of any size, whether it be a country or of corporate nature, can do without a 24 hours information and management thereof to give early warning of a potential crisis and if a crisis does occur, to contain it without allowing anarchy to rule the streets as happened recently.

Courtiers always tend to be

Lo 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.

Donating blood

Sir, Donating blood not only rescues others, it may save you as well. Finnish researchers report that middle-aged men who periodically donate blood reduce their risk of a heart attack by 85 per cent.

Reason: excessive levels of iron in the body seem to cause damage to arterial cells. When blood is lost, iron stores drop. Source : British Medical Journal

Dr Rumy Tabrez Hyder 222/KA Malibagh, Dhaka 1217

National awards

Sir, The government gives the Ekushey and Independence Day awards every year to individuals and organisations for making significant contributions to the national life. This year also, the Prime Minister distributed these awards in February and March respectively for the year 1996. The awards for 1997 have also been declared. We do not have any question regarding the rationale of selecting the individuals or organisations for the awards as, we believe, these are done with utmost care and that all who have been given probably deserved it. We, however, are surprised to see an overlook.

And this is BRAC. I have been following the

process of development of BRAC as an organisation. The Daily Star has also published a lengthy piece on the organisation a couple of years ago. If there are two things for which we feel proud of as a nation, one is certainly the development activities initiated by BRAC. Over the years since its inception as an aftermath of the War of Liberation, BRAC has silently been carrying out its development work among the country's poorest sections, with well documented good result. Today BRAC's activities can be seen in over a half of the country's villages. The oral rehydration programme that it carried out in the 1980s for controlling the menace of diarrhoea is still regarded the largest programme ever carried out anywhere in the world. Through this BRAC's female workers visited almost all the households in rural Bangladesh to teach mothers about oral rehydration for diarrhoea.

According to the head of the Dhaka-based International Centre for Diarrhoea Control, BRAC could claim a legitimate share of the recent decline in mortality in Bangladesh ("A Simple Solution" by Drs A M R Chowdhury and R A Cash, University Press Limited, Dhaka, 1996). The contribution of BRAC can be seen in many other areas of development. The 34,000 schools that it runs for children from the poorest fami-

lies enrolling over 12 lakh children is another significant milestone in the nation's march towards developing its human capital. BRAC is also second in the world, after Grameen, in microcredit; the latest report from BRAC indicates that they disbursed over Taka 450 crore in small loans to poor women with 96 per cent

recovery. I don't want to sound like a P R manager of that organisation but what I want too communicate is my utter disgust at our failure to acknowledge their contributions nationally. They have been well recognised international as a giant in the field of development and have received numerous awards from abroad. It this our meanness that we don't recognise our

A R Khan Sylhet

Sub-regional quadrangle

Sir, Following the signing of 30-year Ganges Water Treaty on December 12 last presumably in exchange for grant of transit facilities by Bangladesh to India via Bangladesh to seven north-eastern provinces of India to curb the so-called separatist movement, a sinister, subtle and insidious strategy by India for the formation of subregional group, comprising India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan, has now been formulated.

This regional group is apparently designed to promote trade and commerce, industrial links, economic thrust, cultural lies, bonds of friendship and

other areas of mutual interest What is the need of this Indian move, when we have already for identical purpose, a seven-na-

tion regional group of SAARC? But India exhibited her lack of apathy and lukewarm interest in this regional group. She even boycotted the Summit Conference of SAARC in 1991 and threw spanner in the works of SAARC on one pretext or the

No doubt, some progress and forward linkage have been attained in this forum i.e., trade, commerce, cultural programmes etc., yet it leaves much to be desired. We have to enlarge and expand SAARC by inclusion of more neighbourly countries on our western, northeasterly and eastern front, just to make this forum broad-based and viable and to give a shot in the arm of the expanded region.

But, unfortunately, such expansion and enlargement of areas does not suit India, since she has something up in her sleeves and if this four-nation group comes into being, it will be a hard punch for India for be-

ing a super-power of Asia. In this backdrop, apparently India intends to assert itself a super-power and a maneuvering stunt to have permanent seat in the UNSC, conveniently forgetting that to be a permanent member, a country needs to have a financial clout, which she does not have. Another reason is that she has thrown this feeler to the formation of this sub-regional group is just to contain China and her arch ri-

val Pakistan. To India, any group and al-

liance, short of military muscle is just trash but minus hot war. Bangladesh should, therefore, judge the pros and cons of this grouping and tread the path gingerly and watch her steps, so as not to incur the wrath of some friendly countries.

N H Sufi 17/6-C, Tajmahal Rd.,

You can do better

Sir. With the enforced postponement of activities during the holy month of Ramzan, the restless Bengali mind should now be looking for some (un)warranted activities during the post-Eid months. The Opposition has already promised to stoke the fuel; feeling rather helpless and useless outside the corridors of power. Mystery player Ershad had enough time to re-check his anticipated moves during this year and the next. The volatility of GF came earlier than anticipated.

Uncle Sam, after President Clinton's State of the Union message, is looking benignly at Bangladesh, heaping bouquets and LLDs, plus the Mircocredit Conference, remission of PL-480 adverse balances, reactivation of the Asian Highway project (the ADB is in unusual haste), pushing American energy companies into the Bay of Bengal and CHT, and the goodwill visits of US generals. The sun rises in the East.

The Indo-Pak relation enters a new phase. After the Bhutto regime, Pak-Bangla review has its merits, considering the strategic location of Bangladesh as a bridge between

the Muslim worlds of the ME and SE Asia. How long the Myanmar region will remain dormant globally remains to be

UK has also stepped up its activities beginning with the visit of Prime Minister John Major. Cautious and disciplined Japan is willing to tie up with S Korea in the EPZ area. The Thais are looking for investment areas offshore; Singapore is showing keen interest, and, lastly, the Indian businessmen seem to be serious about tie-ups, compared to the earlier stance of dumping finished products in the BD market. . The transportation and communication industries should be receiving a shot in the arm: we have the human resources to equip the factories middle down, but these industries have to set up the infrastructure themselves! But the spoke in the wheel is

the confrontation of the Begums, now assuming a classical style. The people may be feeling sad at this unfortunate political division or diversion, artificial or real, and many or all are praying for an early termination of the status quo, to the satisfaction of both the major parties. Where there is a way, there is a will.

This is the time to display dazzling statesmanship, rarely seen in this part of the world. after the month-long fasting and cleansing. Our leaders know best what is good for the country, and how it should be brought about. We, at lower levels, are rather confused on what is good for us, in view of the stigma that three Bengalees cannot run a company or show. They also serve who stand and stare.

A Husnain Dhaka