

Hills Gored Again

The hills have been bloodied once again. Three including a member of the law enforcing agency were killed as a militant faction of the Shantibahini launched an unexpected attack on a border outpost in the CHT in the early hours of Saturday. The onslaught of the tribal militants led by the so-called Major Shamiron which came at a time when a ceasefire was in force and the reconciliatory mood was about to gain momentum following the resumption of repatriation, does not, in a way, come as a surprise. History shows that whenever any headway towards the initiation of a process for a permanent, peaceful and just solution of the problem in the CHT was made, forces of militant faction unfailingly appeared in their role of agent provocateurs.

We see these deadly displays and the resultant casualties as the unavoidable price for bypassing hostility and giving peace a fair chance; for undertaking a time-consuming patient initiative of rebuilding trust, harmony between two communities who do not quite share a history of togetherness.

The second major attack in the space of three months shows that elements within the Shantibahini who have been opposing the peace talks between the government appointed National Committee and the PCJSS from the beginning, have become desperate. They seem to have understood that unlike the previous ones the latest peace initiative is based on genuine bilateral urgency and sincerity, hence much less prone to the fragility. So, they are out to nip the efforts of rapprochement in the bud.

Now, we feel, is the time to take extra care to steer clear of these sparks of provocation. Communication between the two parties concerned should be at its frequent most so that disruptive forces cannot capture the stage and by a few provocative actions and utterances put the peace initiative back. Heaven knows by how many years.

These small sparks are essential occasions when the character of leadership is tested. We believe there is no dearth of it on either side and peace will continue its march in the slow but steady manner as it had been doing before the incident and come to full fruition before it is too late.

The Power Lesson

The nation suffered its worst power blackout on Saturday as a result of a transformer in the Ashuganj bursting out of commission at noon that day. The interdependence between one generation and distribution system and the other in our power sector was perhaps never better illustrated.

Energy Minister Nooruddin Khan's observation was a study in obviousness. It was a mechanical failure, machines do fail at crucial times. Power collapse on this scale has happened before, the minister said consoling perhaps himself. And Power Secretary Towfiq Elahi Chowdhury has in effect cleared our misgiving as to how one single transformer's failure can cut off almost 1200 MW of energy by explaining about the cascading effect of tripping turbines. These and a myriad other explanations, however, should not be good enough to make us accept that such an accident — or accidents — is built into the power thing and we better be prepared for a repeat performance in two or five or ten years' time. In civilized societies there's isn't a power cessation for even a moment for decades on end. We use the same machines, don't we? So?

Machines have to be maintained and modernised and replaced as a matter of continual process. These must not be allowed to approach the bursting point. Now that this huge thing has happened — to so much cost in national production loss and domestic suffering and dislocation, the technical-managerial key persons would surely network the systems in such a manner that the bursting together of no one two or three transformers can disrupt power on such a massive scale. If imponderables cannot be wholly banished, one can very well have arrangements to take the shock and overcome the harm.

Every time you need a plant or some big component of it you have to fabricate it from nil. That should be the reason why one should not be allowed to be caught unprepared in these things. Maintain well and that includes timely overhaul and even replacement. And have provisions at the ready to minimise the effect of any accident that may occur even after best of maintenance. Let us agree that our energy people have been found wanting on both these counts. And let us expect that such an eventuality will not be repeated. The lesson of May 3, 1997 should be well-learned.

Dear Hilsa

There can be no happier tidings for a Bengali than comes from a BCSIR Scientist's researches into that silver beauty, the hilsa. The hilsa is not only paramount to the Bengalee taste, its oil cuts at cholesterol, the chemical that helps human blood to coagulate. This is one dread word that haunts all that have crossed forty. Understandably, cholesterol is at the root of most cases of thrombosis, or an appointment with death.

This is not exactly an earth-shaking revelation. This was doing the rounds for quite some time in the medical and nutritionist circles as well as among the layman omnivores. Oil of all sea fishes cut down fat in the human body. The riverine fish oil doesn't do that trick. The difference comes from the sea fishes' feeding on planktons and other algae which are not available to the denizens of the rivers. The hilsa is a sea fish and, little wonder, its oil should help man, especially those of advancing years.

That is all to the good. But the hilsa offers something more. It is particularly rich in triglyceride which is almost a poison to the human body. Does T then cancel out the C benefits of hilsa. Or something of the good remains? Or the bad overwhelms the good?

These and similar other questions are, however, futile, for hilsa, a species that used to be the most profuse among all fishes in Bengal, has become a rare bird accessible only to the affluent.

Democracy without Democratic Values

For establishing and maintaining a fair and just society, a properly functioning democratic system must be guarded and protected. This needs a free and fair electoral system. In protecting and maintaining such a system, all well meaning and uncorrupt people and ordinary citizens have a great responsibility.

DEMOCRACY has been facing difficulties in many countries especially in South Asian sub-continent. From the last Thursday's election outcome in Britain the disheartened and down-and-out democrats all over the world have some comforts to take. One can perhaps say a lot more. The landslide victory of the Labour over the Conservatives has profound lessons for the democrats, pseudo-democrats and anti-democrats alike. In the first place, without resorting to violence, bloodshed, intimidation, electoral manipulation, false voting, or vote purchasing (whether with white, black or drug money), voters have been able to achieve what was considered unthinkable until a few years ago. After 18 years of continuous rule, voters have been able to throw out one party and place another in power according to their own free choice. This is the only decent and civilised way of changing the government that humanity has discovered so far.

People's Power in Democracy

The second lesson is that people's power prevails in the long run through democratic system if it is preserved, protected and allowed to function properly. Even if democracy is not allowed, it prevails through bloodshed and untold human sufferings which history has borne out. However, in the British situation this time apart from huge unemployment (which is there all over Europe for decades now), there were all kinds of open and implicit charges of corruption, inefficiency, indecision and in-fights among the Tories which have been swept away overnight like in a devastating storm or earthquake by ordinary citizens' simple voting power. If money could buy the votes, no one could have removed the Tories because they are the ones who represent the richest segment of the society. Huge concentration of wealth and money became powerless against the simple voting power of the common folk.

In a broader perspective, taking into account the history of both the developed and the less developed countries, one can legitimately say that this is the way democracy vests ordinary citizens with the bludgeoning power to bury the financial tycoons, fascist dictators, gun-toters, muscle welders and social scums into the heap of dusts based on the simple principle of one-man one-vote. In the history of this country since 1947, power-hungry and corrupt politicians, autocrats and military dictators have been disgracefully overthrown and have been buried in the junkyard of history. No sensible historians can dust them down and present them as clean and respectable leaders and patriots. They are just litter of history. Ordinary people have won and they have lost out. The lesson to be drawn from these annals is that democracy is, therefore, the worst enemy of all such categories of people of any society, rich or poor and east or west. But people will have to be vigilant against any tyranny and

electoral machinations of such kinds of people especially those who try to cling on to power by using force of one kind or another.

Dignified Entry and Exit

In the third place, in a properly functioning democratic system, when the voters' choice is revealed through the electoral outcome, the winner enters into, and the loser exits from, the office without any rancour or bitterness against each other. At this moment, the loser congratulates the winner and the winner compliments the loser in a decent and sportsman like spirit. Sheer decency requires that both sides accept the verdict of the Election Commission, who are supposed to be strictly neutral, and assume their respective roles in parliament in a constructive manner. Further, the opposition gives the incoming government a period of three months, known as democratic honeymoon, to comfortably settle down in power and begin to run the administration. It is after this period that the opposition begins to critically examine and censure, if necessary, the activities of the government for the benefit of the country and for the enlightenment of

environment in the country which is essential for economic development, they will have to cultivate and practice the basic democratic values of tolerance, acceptability of people's verdict, mutual trust, moderation in the use of their language and behaviour, and the sense of cooperation between the government and the opposition. In running the parliament and the administration. Further, the leaders will have to be truthful to what they say and say what they mean. Any distrust between the two will only destroy people's trust in them which will have terrible consequences on the functioning of a vibrant democracy. Anything that was considered wrong and loathed (e.g. Special Powers Act) while in opposition cannot be right while in position and vice versa. Doing this will destroy the integrity of the leaders' commitments to various national issues.

Similarly, anything that was right while in power (e.g. eternal flame) cannot be wrong (e.g. fire worship) while in opposition. To assert it to be so would mean irresponsible utterance unbecoming of leaders. So is the case with the electoral pledges. If parties promised

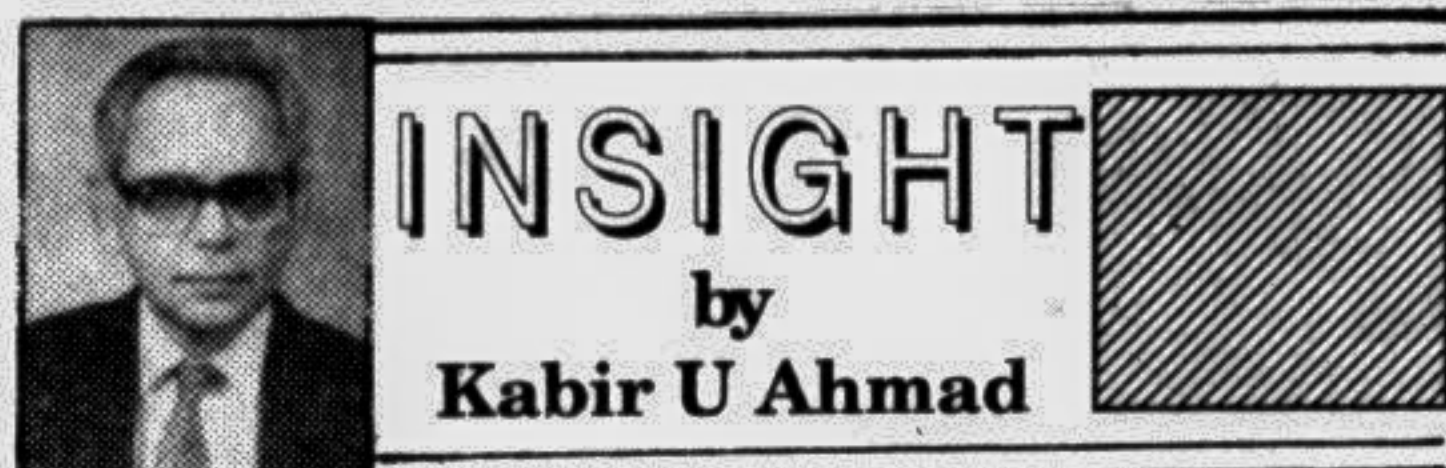
government with dignity and responsibility and cannot call upon the civil servants to defy legally established government's orders. Both parties must come to an agreement about keeping the civil administration above partisan politics and punish those who take part in partisan politics while in the civil administration. Otherwise, no government will be able to function properly in future. Civil service rules must be implemented irrespective of party positions.

"Scoundrels" and "Rascals" in Politics

It was George Bernard Shaw who said that politics is the refuge of scoundrels, and *The Economist*, April 26-May 2, 1997, has observed that election kicks out one set of rascals to give opportunities to another set. This writer however takes a somewhat different view of politics and politicians. Politics no doubt attracts scoundrels and rascals who have no scruples in aggrandising their vulgar self-interests at the expense of the national interests, but it also attracts many idealists and honest people because they realise that it is through political decisions at the highest level that many urgently needed changes in the society can be brought about for the welfare of ordinary citizens of the country. The constantly changing socio-political and economic conditions of a society need reforms which have to be brought about at the highest political level.

However, the bottomline of all that has been said above is that for establishing and maintaining a fair and just society, a properly functioning democratic system must be guarded and protected. This needs a free and fair electoral system. In protecting and maintaining such a system, all well meaning and uncorrupt people and ordinary citizens have a great responsibility: They should be supporting the good and sincere people in all parties and oppose, if possible socially boycott, the corrupt and the "rascals" in politics and everywhere, and maintain a constant vigilance on the actions of both the government and the opposition parties by making them accountable for all their actions and statements on all platforms — public and private. Combat in peaceful manner all terrorism, violence, illegalities and political manipulations especially on electoral system. That way, a new sense of awareness and vigilance can be promoted among the ordinary citizens and a sense of accountability among the politicians.

People's power will have to be restored, promoted and protected. Ordinary people have been fooled for too long by those who could wield power of one kind or another and let not anyone fool them any more. Let the corrupt people be in social disgrace permanently and the good ones, wherever they are, come to play the constructive roles in all spheres of the society. Let politics be clean and fair first, then the cleansing of dirt and filth from every other walks of life will follow automatically.



the citizens about the government performances. It is the duty of the opposition and it owes it to the country.

Need for Democratic Values

But, unfortunately, the political culture that has developed in this country is one of militant rejection of outcome of the election, raising all kinds of allegations about (subtle or crude) vote rigging may be with or without evidence, and vehemently opposing the government from the first day of its assuming power. Decency, decorum, tolerance and dignified behaviour in and out of parliament which are the hallmarks of democracy, are totally ignored. These traits of behaviour have become common with the leaderships of both the major parties since the election of 1991 which was acclaimed, by and large, as fair by all national and international observers. So was the election of 1996. All complaints should have been lodged formally in the appropriate court for judgement.

However, such behaviour seems to reflect inherent mistrust, belligerency and deep-seated hatred of one party against the other. Since all externalized actions of a person is a reflection of one's attitude which springs from one's values, the actions of leaders of both the major parties are springing from undemocratic values. If the leaderships of these parties are interested in providing a less confrontational and unstable political

something before the election, they should implement it once they are in power; if, however, after new information and knowledge, they find it genuinely unfeasible, then they should explain it and apologise to the people for their earlier position. Otherwise, voters will lose confidence in political leaders as well as in the whole electoral process to the detriment of the democratic system. One party's activists and gun-toters cannot be left loose while other party's activists and gun-toters are caught and penalised. Arresting leaders or workers of the opposition without valid charges or shooting at the supporters of opposition in or out of public meetings will show the party in power to be vindictive which will destroy the integrity and neutrality of the operation of laws of the land. This will weaken the legal system and will establish the party in power as oppressive party. It may promote militant confrontations between parties to the detriment of democracy and the entire socio-economic fabric of the country. If this happens, then all the talks of development, poverty alleviation and encouragement of foreign direct investment will sound hollow and hypocritical.

The party in power has a special responsibility in getting the support of the opposition on some vital national issues. A hateful and belligerent attitude to the opposition will not be conducive to getting such critical support. At the same time, the opposition has to behave as an alternative future

Work Abstinence at Festival Time

by ASM Nurunnabi

WHY DON'T YOU SPEND EXTENDED HOLIDAYS LIKE THOSE MUGGERS IN DESA OR TITAS?



Dhaka city seems to fall under a spell of work abstinence mainly on occasions of big religious festivals. In the cases of big festivals, the spell continues for quite sometime, say less than a week. Shorter durations of such work abstinences for one reason or another are also considered as part of this culture.

This characteristic feature of metropolitan life is widely in evidence for any city dweller who chooses to stay back in the city without becoming part of the mass exodus which takes place on the eve of the festivals.

During the spell of work abstinence, primarily due to the mass exodus of a large number of the city dwellers, a dramatic change takes place in the whole urban panorama. It is as if a magical power, throws the city life into a stupor. The once bustling city centres, throbbing with intense activity and energy in diverse fields lose much of their hectic pace; most shops and commercial establishments keep their shutters down. Except for limited movements of men vehicles, the main city roads look somewhat deserted with the disappearance of the jostling crowds and horrendous traffic jams which used to be devil the daily life of the citizens.

Such a departure from the normal pattern of city life proves so attractive to one, normally exposed to the furor of civic life that one feels like attempting to experience a dose of unusual peace and tranquility of the city environment at this time. This is possible if one takes a solitary ride on a rickshaw, through the previously congested roads like, for example, the Mirpur Road, Elephant Road, Shahbag Avenue, Topkhana Road, North-South Road etc.

This picture is, of course, a transitory one, staying only for a day or two after the end of the Eid holidays. The city life is re-activated gradually as more shops open, more vehicles ply on the roads and the city dwellers after enjoying their holidays in their respective village homes trickle back to the city.

Some may feel that most city dwellers take a relatively long time to resume their normal activities after enjoying the holidays following the big festivals. Whatever be the substance of this feeling, the reality of the situation is that a vast majority of city dwellers are village-based. Having had their roots in the villages, people engaged in various occupations in the city, make a bee-line in large numbers for their village homes, resulting in temporary abstinence from their work.

In this context, the culture of work abstinence, as some call it, is considered undesirable in some quarters in view of our pressing need for accelerating the pace of our development activities in all spheres. But, as observers point out, there is a positive aspect to this phenomenon. The deserted city roads and the stalled business activities of the city dwellers are soon enlivened with people returning from their villages imbued with renewed zest and enthusiasm. From this angle, the so-called culture of work abstinence, which is transitory in nature, has a great socio-economic significance for the city dwellers.

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.

Hide prospect, seek politics?

Sir, Both the major political parties seem to be playing a hide-and-seek game. They are acting as untouchable. The communication gap is extreme. They are speaking from different planes. There is no level or plain platform. The citizens do not know how to advise them.

The political leaders have to find a political solution, for the sake of the nation, instead of bringing the compliments to the public. It is not a question of public support, but of political understanding. That's why we have leaders. They should show statesmanship.

The country is losing valuable time. The people are tired of waiting. Smaller minds have less patience. How long the status quo will continue? The people demand an answer.
A Zabr
Dhaka

Safe custody

Sir, I wrote to you in May 1996 concerning the rape of a 14-year-old girl by police officers. Since then there have been more reports of rapes by police officers, particularly directed at young girls in their custody. It is shocking to think that this brutality continues even though the public is aware of it happening. I believe many people in Bangladesh are afraid to speak out against it for fear of arrest, threats or abuse.

A 16-year-old girl named Sheema was detained and then gangraped by police officers. This occurred in Chittagong. Sheema died from a severe illness on February 12th, 1997 after being transferred to hospital from "safe custody" at Chittagong District Jail.

The police officers responsible should be brought to justice. Children in Bangladesh

need to grow up in a safe environment.

Sue Townsend
Norway

Ill desire in the name of merriment

Sir, What happened on the 9th April last in nothing but a horrible and shameful event after Bangladesh cricket team qualified for the World Cup '99.

The enjoyment became painful and a matter of shame. No doubt that the physical harassment and insult to the girls and women by some young people were totally intentional.

There roughish people committed an unpardonable crime. They used the opportunity to fulfill their ill desire. How perverted they are! I am doubtful whether at all humans. These uncivilised, roughish people should be — and must be — purified.

Asjadul Kibria
Garhail, North Masdar
Narayanganj-1400

Hold a referendum

Sir, Following the signing of historic 30-year Ganges water treaty between Bangladesh and India in December 1996, some of our Awami League leaders claimed victory for their efficiency in diplomacy, made ecstasy of delight and out-burst of joy for the bountiful of the Ganges water they had been successful in bringing it from New Delhi after long 20 years.

But before the holy ink on the monumental signatures of Hasina and Gowda could dry we found the water level in our river Padma at Rajshahi, Hardinge Bridge and other places drastically dipping day by day. Why has the Ganges water gone dry? Where has the Ganges water gone?

New Delhi leaders have once again proved that no matter who comes to power and who goes out of power in Dhaka, India will never abandon its strategy and manoeuvres for supremacy and hegemony in South Asia.

New Delhi made duplicity with our Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the name of trial operation of Farakka Barrage and now she has deceived his daughter Sheikh Hasina.

New Delhi took over our territory of Berubari by chicanery and she refused to hand over to us their territory of Tinbigha in exchange. India also forcefully occupied our territory of Talpatty. Smuggled goods and commodities of India have flooded our markets. The huge trade imbalance between India and Bangladesh is fracturing the backbone of our national economy and millions of our people are being reduced to penury.

Under such circumstances, how can we allow road transit and Chittagong Port facilities to New Delhi to carry Indian goods, commodities and passengers from West Bengal to seven north-eastern states of India, divert the Asian Highway route from Cox's Bazar to Tamabil, Sylhet, import electricity from India, agree to sub-regional grouping with Indian states?

We sincerely believe from the core of our hearts and we urge our government and all political parties, and all concerned to hold a referendum in the country on the issues like Bangladesh's joining sub-regional grouping, change to Asian Highway route, import of electricity from India and grant of transit and Chittagong Port facilities to India in the greater interest of national unity, integrity and peace in the country.

We strongly believe that the will of the people should always prevail.

OH Kabir
Wari, Dhaka-1203

Food adulteration

Sir, The Public Health Laboratory of the Institute of Public

Health (IPH) has revealed that 45 per cent of the food items tested during March last was found adulterated (Star March 24, '97). However, the news item does not mention the names of the adulterated food items. How many food items were tested? What was the result?

If the IPH is looking after the Public Health, then, in all fairness, the results of the food testings should be published by the IPH so that the citizens are aware of these adulteration. IPH cannot stop the adulteration but they can effectively make the public aware of their tests.

I request the IPH to publish the names of the 45 adulterated products of March '97, test results of last four months and regular monthly publication of future tests.

LA Ahmed
Section-7
Uttara Model Town, Dhaka

Netanyahu's folly

Sir, On April 13, 1993, Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin had a historical handshake in Washington under the blessing of President Bill Clinton, following the grant of self-rule of Gaza Strip and Jericho, West Bank, by Israel to the Palestinians. Things started moving slowly in a faltering way, set by step but quite satisfactorily and smoothly since then overcoming many initial snags and hitches. Every problem that came up in the course of implementation of self-rule and peace process was mutually solved without any bickering and snag.

Even after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in late 1995 when his mantle of premiership was taken over by his deputy premier, Shimon Peres, the momentum and rhythm of implementation progressed, without any gripe. He picked up the thread which was left by late Rabin and followed the peace process quite smoothly and the modalities carried out peacefully.

The cordial scenario was, however, completely put in reverse gear and spanner was thrown in the works when Benjamin Netanyahu of Likud

The allure of 'couture'

Sir, I am aware that "couture" is a relatively new term in the fashion scene of our country. My opinion is that this form of dressing (hence this term itself) should be more familiarised so that our fashion industry can grow and bring more smart clothes to the public.

Dressing in "couture" clothes are the exact opposite of dressing in "off-the-peg" clothes. Couture clothes are those which have been made to measure, after several fittings; which are in impeccable fabric and are exclusive to the customer alone.

As more and more designers are appearing on the fashion scene in Dhaka, I am sure, those of us who can appreciate the flattery of clothes will turn to such custom-made form of dressing. Popularising such "designer" clothes will only make it easier and sooner for the common masses to indulge in one or two such clothes once in a while!

NH Sufi
17/6-C, Tajmahal Road
Mohammadur, Dhaka.

Victory of Bangladesh Cricket team

Sir, By beating Scotland in the semifinal of the ICC Trophy, Bangladesh Cricket team has qualified to play in the World Cup. It is a great honour for the country and its people. The whole nation prayed for the victory and when it happened was overjoyed. People came out in the streets to celebrate with processions and slogans. We want to see these sorts of processions which fill the hearts with joy, not processions of agitations which sometimes become unruly.

But why only in the sports sector — why don't we unitedly try for the prosperity of our country in every sector so that as a Bangladeshi we could become proud?

Nur Jahan
East Nasirabad, Chittagong.

Cricket and few thoughts

Sir, May I express some thoughts on our recent cricket related activities? Firstly, the coach, officials and the players themselves got justified applaud for the historic achievement.

But I found no honourable mention of our wage-earners who created a home-ground atmosphere to inspire the players.

The other point is that the selection of site for the proposed cricket stadium. The spot selected and the size is not suitable and would make the already-crowded Mogbazar and Tejgaon area more chaotic. A more suitable spot is the southern side of Bijoy Sarani (part of old airport).

Farzana Yasmin Mannan
Shambazar, Dhaka.

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MA Haq
Dhaka-1205