

All Up to One Person

The just concluded Awami League council session will go down in history for having established two very important things — one, that Sheikh Hasina is at her strongest and two, that Awami League as a party having collective decision making system, is at its weakest. What we saw in the name of the council session was nothing more than paying tribute in the court of the mighty leader. What revealed Sheikh Hasina's complete control of the party is the fact that all decisions about its future leadership were taken NOT by the designated bodies meant for such decisions, but left to the sole discretion of the party chief. However flattering it may appear in terms of widespread confidence enjoyed by her, it is totally self-defeating in terms of nurturing democratic norms within the party. Such practices kill initiatives and natural growth of leadership, and create the climate for sycophancy.

The party's present state of powerlessness was revealed by the fact that no councillor dared to criticize any aspect of the party or the government except to say that there was a growing distance between the workers and leaders — a normal complaint for all those who are left out of power. To the best of our knowledge there was no introspection that could have had some sobering effect on the party's activities, no self-analysis that could have given birth to new initiatives and no stock taking of their performance that could have given an indication as to where the party is vis a vis public opinion at the moment.

There was never any question as to who would be the chief of Awami League. But there was widespread expectation about a change in the number two spot. In opting for status quo Sheikh Hasina has revealed that she is either not willing, or not confident about anybody in her party to fill that post. The decision not to change the second level leadership reveals an inner weakness of the party which should be addressed sooner rather than later. Sheikh Hasina has always been the supreme arbiter of her party. For the first time she also combines in her person the tremendous power of her elected post. Not risking a change even now has surprised most. Sheikh Hasina's opting for stability may have sown the seeds for sterility and stagnation of her party. It is hardly a recipe to lead a vibrant mass party to the 21st century.

A Stitch in Time

The earthquake that shook all Bangladesh on Thursday could not be measured for its intensity and its epicentre also could not be located. Indian electronic media is reported to have quoted the intensity at 5.7 on the 10-point Richter Scale. The reason for our national failure on these counts are two — a. the only facility for taking the Richter Scale reading, located at the Ambagan Geophysical Observatory at Chittagong, is out of order for quite some time; b. locating the epicentre as also the direction of the tremor cannot be done by the only one observatory, the Ambagan one, and the required two others are still awaiting materialisation from the planning stage.

This exposes a dangerous gap in our preparedness to meet natural calamities. And this serious indifference on the part of the state and government in the matter of earthquakes gains manifold in national weakness when we see the way the media — both print and electronic — treated the tremor and more so by the very evident social response of couldn't-care-less. This is not going to help in a quake-prone area like Bangladesh. The social indifference is strange because many senior and perceptive citizens have said that this was the longest and severest quake of all they had experienced in their life. As there was no loss of life and as no significant damage to property was reported, the nation perhaps will continue in its indifference. But this will be both foolish and dangerous.

It is said that the two severest continental quakes occurring in human history had their epicentres quite close to Bangladesh — 300 km away for the worst and only 80 km for the one next. And even in recent times at least two quakes had their epicentres in a territory that is now Bangladesh. It is as such imperative that we cut down on our ignorance of and indifference to this phenomenon.

It must be borne in mind that the difference between a sweet escape and massive destruction is as sharp as a razor's edge. Seconds more and the quake could lay waste vast chunks of Dhaka and Chittagong consider a Kobe-like strike on Dhaka and Chittagong. Can we think of the consequences?

Please, prepare, we say. Why not have a full scale seismological institute and grow a goody crop of seismologists? And take their advice to minimise the consequences of a severe earthquake?

Deadly Rivers

Although test reports are still awaited for a definite attribution of cause behind this enormous damage to a shoal of fish at the river Shitalakkhya there seems little doubt in the word which has been out since the catastrophe: pollution of water due to dumping of the wastes from dye factories in the upstream of the river.

Pollution of water due to dumping of industrial waste has come to enjoy the watchword of the environmentalists for quite some time. But not much has been witnessed by way of governmental initiative towards minimising the price man has to pay for his destiny of being hitched to the wagon of progress.

We have already encountered the danger of arsenic pollution which is attributed to over use of ground water level and excessive use of chemical fertilizer. We are alarmed that apart from devastation to fish population, it can give rise to great number of cases regarding health complaints among those consuming the diseased fishes.

Even in these days of nostalgic reference to abundant supply of fishes in the yesteryears, fish remains an inseparable component of our diet and a wonderful source of protein. If we cannot stop our rivers from turning into deathbeds of fishes, very soon we will be facing major health hazards apart from being protein starved.

All these are signs of our long and dangerous neglect of our environment.

We urge the government to take immediate measures to minimise the scope of pollution of river water through dumping of industrial wastes. And the measures have to be effective and viable and certainly not as unclear as the one recently taken regarding the relocation of leather industries.

An impression is gaining ground that some people are out to queer the pitch for further peace talks between the Government of Bangladesh and the PCJSS which, as the political wing of Shantibahini, faces now the test of will against the militants in their ranks.

The fourth round of negotiation is due on May 11. On the agenda is the vital question of the hill people's land right touching on the fate of settlers from the plains. The substantive issue of amending the law governing the three hill district parishes is bound to figure against the backdrop of the persisting tribal demand for autonomy. This has been in the works for some time with the PCJSS having already submitted their amendment proposals to the government and our law ministry duly communicating their response to the Shantibahini. A nudge for this also comes from the imminent prospect of the present district councils, which expire on June 30, to be replaced by government-nominated bodies.

Certain untoward incidents have taken place lately casting a shadow over the peace process but hardly shaking it in the foundations made so much the stronger by the largely successful resumption of repatriation of the tribal refugees from India. The repatriation has, on the flipside, however, reopened the wound historically festering around the land rights question. In returning their plots of lands to the refugees who are

back, the occupiers from the plainland are being evicted with Tk 4,000 given to each family in rehabilitation money along with a promise made to them for their relocation in government khas land.

It is complained by some government sources that the BNP government in 1994 applied a similar procedure when recovering lands for the returnees, but is now, with the Jamaat-e-Islami in tow, resisting it by politically fomenting the tribal-settler differences.

There had been a national conference of basically non-tribals held in the CHT on April 25 at the BNP's initiative which was attended by, among others, the Jamaat. A teasing invitation was extended to the ruling party. The left parties, though invited, just kept away.

The refugee repatriation has begun following a 20-point agreement signed between the PCJSS and the refugee leadership in India on the one side and the Bangladesh authorities on the other whose very first clause refers to the Constitution of Bangladesh and upholds the obligation to respect the rights of all citizens, tribals and non-tribals alike.

Despite being a member of the national committee on CHT affair, the BNP kept itself out of all the meetings and negotiations held by the committee with the PCJSS, and the only normal option left to the party to dilate on the subject has been to unwind the mental coil inside the parliament. There is still an opportunity for this to happen.



Time and Tide
Shah Husain Imam

Looking at the shape of things, India does not seem blame-worthy anymore for providing sanctuary and arms to the Shantibahini now that the repatriation of our tribal refugees languishing in the Tripura camps has resumed in earnest. With the change of government in Bangladesh, the Indian central government went on record having refused permission to a prominent Chakma refugee leader to attend

an international conference on ethnic rights held in Calcutta a few months ago. Tripura state government had also shown signs of fatigue with the refugee problem. And the news is Shantibahini operations have been terminated from across the border.

Manifestly, these are proofs of a change of heart on the Indian side but what clinched the

issue is the new Bangladesh government's assurance to India that it would refrain from providing any sanctuary to the insurgents from the north-eastern states of India.

A certain change in the geopolitical outlook of the region has also been noticeable following a perceptible degree of rapprochement taking place in the once adversarial Indo-China relationship. The US

network for watching China over India's north-eastern shoulder was moved to India's northwest during the 1962 Indo-China war. The Naga, Mizo and Tripura insurgencies are placed in an altered geopolitical context today compared with what used to be seen as having the makings of a flash-point in the pre-detente period.

After that bird's eye view from the sputnik, so to speak, we land on the unsettling episode of a bloody Thanchi encounter in Bandarban on May 4 which left a BDR Lance Naik dead. Two Shantibahini militants among a large number who raided the BDR camp were also killed.

By standing guard over acts of sabotage our security forces are certainly helping the peace process to move forward.

Agent provocateurs are at work with their usual stake in a status quo that gives them an opportunity to fish in troubled waters. Besides, those who are habituated in the possession and frequent use of fire arms hardly ever get over the heavy feel of power they are intoxicated by, especially when it can be romanticised in association with the spirit of freedom and

self-determination. Sri Lanka is a glaring instance of the dichotomy between the almost universally felt need for peace and the difficulty in disarming the LTTE cadres.

It is now for the PCJSS leaders who represent the political clout of the Shantibahini to make sure that their influence extends effectively over the militant elements in their ranks. There can only be endless wrangling over their rights so long as they fail to set their house in order and adopt a unified stance on their demands. Speaking with one voice will be helpful.

The basic question in the CHT revolves around a colourful indigenous people's rights to their own culture and traditional way of life. These need to be safeguarded by political autonomy granted constitutionally to six hundred thousand of our compatriots on the hills.

Since a constitutional amendment providing for such a dispensation cannot be passed without a two-thirds majority in the parliament endorsing it, the issue does cut across the party-line, so that there is no escape from bipartisan understanding on this question, too.

Could we not take a confederal approach to strike at the root of tribal problems? The days of rigid unitariness are gone, and we have but just the colourful ethnic diversity to cater to in an unbroken pattern of national homogeneity we are almost uniquely endowed with in a wide world of multi-ethnicity.

CHT Peace Talks

A Peeping Rainbow

Could we not take a confederal approach to strike at the root of tribal problems? The days of rigid unitariness are gone, and we have but just one colourful ethnic diversity to cater to in an unbroken pattern of national homogeneity we are almost uniquely endowed with in a wide world of multi-ethnicity.

INDUSTRIAL POLLUTION SCENARIO

There Must be Agenda for Change

by Md Asadullah Khan

There must be some proper laws regulating the location of industries and deterrent punitive measures that would force the polluting units to compliance. The pollution control boards must be armed with power to control the location of industries and prescribe clean technologies and a time frame for their adoption.

plastic, factories, distilleries and sugar mills generating different types of solid, liquid and gaseous waste with varying pollution burden.

The river water adjacent to these industries are highly toxic containing high concentrations of suspended and dissolved solids with high biological oxygen demand (BOD) loadings of 2000-3000 mg per litre. The consequences of this alarming pollution menace is horrifying. The process to fishless lakes and streams, dying forests and barren crop-fields has started.

The country's pollution menace does more than degrade the quality of life; it dramatically cripples and shortens life of human beings. In recent times, community health physicians calculate that illnesses traceable to environmental pollution account for more than 30 per cent of the country's health budget. One out of 20 people in the country now dies of environmentally induced causes officials estimate.

The present government overwhelmed by political and economic disarray can scarcely think about the environmental nightmare it has inherited. It might take huge amount to the tune of millions of dollars to clean up the present magnitude of accumulation of industrial pollution. In the neighbouring India more than 10,000 industries nationwide were either shut down or asked to move out of cities mostly by the courts, whom citizens approached as a last resort.

Respiratory ailment, allergies, skin diseases, disease of the central nervous system and cancers have increased several times over the last few years in the cities where people live cheek by jowl in a scenario of grimy smoke-spewing industries. Sadly true, until this time when the alarm bell has been sounded all around, even the government's planners utterly ignored environmental concerns, so to say. People now realise that irrational industrial policies make a mockery of environmental requirements. However, there are some

practical difficulties and constraints standing in the way. It has been learnt that most effluent treatment units can be installed within 5 to 15 per cent of the total cost in industries like paper; for manufacturers of consumer electronic goods and printed circuit board, the cost can be as high as 25 to 40 per cent of the total investment. Pollution control system in power stations can be as high as the investment and in a country chronically starved of power, the question of closing them down for non-compliance of pollution control norms is now beside the point.

The government policy of industrialisation vis-a-vis development of the country right from the Pakistani days is responsible for today's problem of chronic pollution. First of all, Tejgaon industrial area was created right in the heart of the city's residential areas. Even if it was there, connivance from the regulatory authorities did not stop the growth of industrial units in other densely populated residential areas. In consequence, we see growth of scores of plastic, polythene and small scale steel and chemical industries from Mirpur to Gandaria, in Hazaribag, Rayerbazar, Mohammapur, Narinda, Jatrabari, Sayedabad, Zairani, Farashganj, Islampur, Nakharpala and even shop areas like Uttara and Dhanmondi. In some of these densely populated areas, excessive use of varnish, dye, coal tar, DDT, acids, phenyl, carbide, sulphur, gunpowder and chlorine has created a hazardous situation; noxious fumes and effluents from these industries have added to the toll of human life quite stealthily.

The setting up of chlorine based industries like paper, slipper pesticide in the residential areas trigger alarming consequences. So says a chemist, "God created 91 elements, man a little more than a dozen, and the devil, one-chlorine". Speaking about chlorine, it is a greenish yellow poison gas that rarely exists in nature. It is produced by man and reacts with carbon to create a new

range of stable and highly toxic compounds, called organochlorines. Ominously, are spreading using chlorine are spreading fast in the country. Among them: chlorine used to bleach wood pulp to make paper and viscose rayon; and chlorine as the main ingredient of the plastic and PVC used to make every kind of petrochemicals to pipes to slippers.

Organochlorines are particularly damaging because they travel through food chain and affect the liver and kidney, may cause cancer and interfere with processes like brain chemistry, spleen and bone structure and also to the extent of causing hormonal diseases. The indiscriminate use of chlorine in the industries could possibly account for the increasing number of hepatitis cases in the country. The outlook is ominous. Treated effluent water containing organochlorines is widely used to irrigate crop fields. The pulp and paper industry has failed to invest in chlorine-reducing technologies. The PVC industry plans to deal with the crisis primarily by promoting recycling. But that only converts plastics into other plastics, ending in the ubiquitous multicoloured polythene bags.

The greatest environment hazard perhaps has come from the 300 tanneries located in the Hazaribag area of the metropolis. Untreated effluent and waste to the extent of 16,000 cubic metre per day are blatantly dumped into the adjacent (residential) area with no regard to health of the people residing there. Wastes from poisonous gas to toxic sludge dumped this way on land for years in absence of any sewage system are leaching into the water we drink, mingling with air we breathe. Some years back these effluents were poured into drains that would have carried them to the Buriganga. But after the construction of Dhaka Flood Protection Dam, these effluents are poisoning the water and land in the vast area covering Rayerbazar, Mohammapur and Shyamoli. None of the tan-

neries in the Hazaribag area has any effluent treatment plant and that would only trigger the menacing situation in the days to come. Understandably, sulphur dioxide (So₂) oxides of Nitrogen (No_x), Hydrogen Sulphide (H₂S) belched out from the boilers of these tanneries have created a disastrous situation causing illness of various types like asthma, lung infection and heart diseases. Besides the problems emanating from the big ones, innumerable small scale industries have sprung up in densely populated areas even like, Dhanmondi, Uttara on one side and not to speak of Islampur, Narinda and Gandaria on the other without the approval of DoE as a result of weak industrial policy which is at best confusing and rather encourages pollution. While notices have been served on 1176 big industrial units, the smaller ones get off the hook.

It must be brought home, to the entrepreneurs of the industrial units that there is money in recovering waste, instead of discarding it. Tax incentives must be offered to firms that manage to reuse their waste. The environment protection laws provide jail term of five years in default fine of Taka two lakh to the violators after repeated warnings. Ruffely, no one has yet been brought to book. Industries contribute to more than 60 per cent of the poisons that pour into the country's water systems. Effluents untreated over the years, since these industries were set up, have increased levels of toxins like cyanide and chromium several times the safe level. De-

spite public outcry about the harmful effects of setting up industries in the residential areas, administration has hardly been able to keep these off the city limits.

There must be some agenda for change: proper laws regulating the location of industries and deterrent punitive measures that would force the polluting units to compliance. The pollution control boards must be armed with power to control the location of industries and prescribe clean technologies and a time frame for their adoption. Understandably, the department concerned till now, is woeful ill-equipped to fight pollution. It is not involved in the making of industrial policy, and as much as it is known, is both numerically (personnel) and technically unable to enforce the laws against pollution. In the backdrop of all these distressing signals, the decision taken at the meeting of the National Environment Committee held on May at the Prime Minister's office with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in the chair to set up "Environment Court" to control environment pollution and to introduce environment laws along with the assurance of providing working capital for treatment of toxic effluents and sludge spewed by the industries is, however, a laudable step. This, among other measures recommended, speaks of the awareness of the present government about the gravity of the problem that threatens people's life. Now we have to wait and see till the implementation process is started. True, we must realise that all developments should be sustainable, meaning that it should use up resources no faster than they can be regenerated by nature. Government should also henceforth oblige local lending institutions, mainly banks, to review the environmental consequences of proposed loans.

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To the Editor...

Poor medicare

Sir, Like a carrot tied up with a long bamboo and hung before an ass the former Ershad regime, BNP government and now the Awami League which came to power after 21 years have always been assuring us of health for all by the year 2000. Years are passing by one after another but there is no sign of any improvement of medicare in the country. On the contrary, medical services in the government hospitals and health complexes are deteriorating, cost of medicine is rising higher and higher, doctor's consultation fee is increasing and the sufferings of the people know no bounds.

We hear promises about health for all by the year 2000 but we wonder what will be its ultimate outcome? Of course, a handful of persons would be going to Singapore, India, Europe and America as usual for treatment and they might take a few days rest in our government hospital's cabins or costly clinics, but the common people would continue to be deprived of even the basic and minimum medical services in the country due to poverty and financial crisis, large-scale corruption and irregularities in our healthcare services both in the public and private sectors.

Do we have a national health policy in the country? Whether the reply is 'yes' or 'no'

the people are not aware of it. But it is an open secret that doctors, consultants and specialists who realise exorbitant fees from the patients and earn lakhs of Taka every month all ways evade payment of income tax to the government — neither the medical and drug stores display any price list nor they provide any cash-memo to the patients.

Who cares and realises the problems, difficulties, humiliation and grievances of a poor patient requiring medicare and recovery from illness. Would our Ministry of Health kindly look into the relevant matters and help provide medicare before the patient dies?

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doctrine to rid shackles of slavery of exploited people.

We cannot ignore his existence in achieving today's egalitarian society. Exploitation was rampant and the world thought again to take preventive measure. Labour law has been changed to cope with human rights. Here, too, V Lenin is still alive. We have witnessed reign of both capitalism and communism. Fall of communism was inevitable for its inherent authoritarian view. We still feel his presence.

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Thanks to BNP

Sir, BNP, the main opposition party of our Parliament, arranged a grand reception for the victorious Bangladesh cricket team at the official residence of the Opposition Leader Begum Khaleda Zia at Minto Road on 27th April. It has been a praiseworthy act on the part of BNP. At least, this time, when everybody expected prudence and magnanimity from them, BNP leaders did not show any follies.

Hence I thank Begum Khaleda Zia for expressing her consensus of behalf of her party

regarding development of games and sports. I think, seeing that even political parties have crumbled their tradition of being strictly opponent to the counter-part in any national issues, our players must be inspired by this.

In fact, it is a must for the political parties to be united when it is necessary for the well-being of the country and the countrymen. So, thanks a lot again to Begum Zia simultaneously her party for their prudent act of giving a splendid reception to our tigers.

Md. Moshir Rahman
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Weekly holiday

Sir, An esteemed advocate tried his art to maintain Friday as the weekend holiday. He appears to have missed the main point, which is economic. If our standard of living were such that we would control the world economically, then the "West-Christians" would gladly follow Friday as a holiday, rather than Sunday.

The time may be coming soon, according to data on the rise and fall of civilisations.

A Z
Dhaka

Art
Buchwald's
COLUMN

Living with Sleaze

THE political fund raising scandals are starting to be felt around the country. All you have to do is say that you live in Washington, and you are suspect.

I realised this recently when I was in Orange County, California, and complete strangers started calling me "sleaze ball." I was shocked and denied that I knew anything about anything when it came to political financing. One person wouldn't buy it and perked up. "What do you know, and when did you know it?" I replied, "I knew something was up when the Democratic National Committee started to refund all the money they had raised. No party does that unless something is rotten in Indonesia."

"You live in Washington. You know that every politician has his hand out. You can't plead ignorance."

"You might think that, but a lot of us walk around the city with our eyes closed. For example, we never see any lobbyists at night because they are always attending a fund-raising party. But there isn't that much to do in the nation's capital, so we never dreamed that they were attending parties to buy access to their politicians."

"Why didn't you know about the coffee parties at the White House?"

"You can't see into the windows. I did notice Chinese people going in and out of the Main Gate, but I assumed that they were members of the Taiwan table tennis team."

"Weren't you suspicious when you heard that the vice president had made so many calls from the White House that he blew his cellular phone?"

"No, I wasn't. I only began to wonder when he danced with a hundred Buddhist monks at the Reflecting Pool on the Mall — wearing a yellow robe."

"Even if you didn't suspect the Democrats, you must have thought that the Republican Party was up to no good."

"Well, I did hear that congressman Dan Burton, who heads up the committee to investigate the Democratic fund-raising, was reported to have threatened the US lobbyist of Pakistan. The threat was that if the lobbyist didn't come across with a US\$ 5000 contribution, Pakistan would never eat lunch in the House dining room again."

I said, "Look, I know now, but I didn't know about all the sleaze until recently."

"What would you had done if you had known before?"

"I'd have written my congressman."

(By arrangement with Los Angeles Times Syndicate and UNB)