

A Very Good Sign

We welcome BNP's decision to take part in the by-election to Manikganj-3 Jatiya Sangsad constituency, scheduled for June 30.

A political party's participation in by-polls is deemed to be a routine and taken-for-granted affair under normal circumstances. Only the final list of those remaining in the fray following the scrutiny of nomination papers and the declaration of poll results usually merit prominent treatment in newspapers.

BNP had participated in the by-elections to 15 constituencies held on September 5, 1996 but subsequently went on a boycott of the Habiganj and Thakurgaon by-polls which fell due after the death of two AL MPs.

By-elections are very important adjuncts to the electoral process capable of shedding light on the appreciating or depreciating standings of political parties with the electorate at a given point in time.

BNP's return to the electoral process must be hailed as a welcome impetus to the working of a democratic system. In combination with their ending of the parliamentary boycott earlier on, the party's positive decision to contest the Manikganj by-poll signifies a qualitative improvement in the political environment.

It is noteworthy that BNP's electoral stand-off has ended with an understanding reached between the EC and the BNP on the conduct of by-polls. We are hopeful that the opposition party will have no misgivings whatsoever down the road.

True Industrial Potential

Speakers at a seminar have advocated for turning Dholaikhal into an exclusive zone for light engineering works. This is a very good suggestion and merits immediate consideration by the relevant authorities.

This, to our mind, is not too much to ask. After all the enterprising people there have proved a point. The point is that they have, thanks to their ingenuity, developed a need-based local technology which can be used as a foundation for rapid industrialisation through the adoption of appropriate technologies.

Now the problem is that most of these factories have to heavily depend on their own resourcefulness and meagre fund for investment. Institutional facilities for import of raw materials and development of infrastructure are almost absent.

What is needed is to enforce some discipline in the factories and provide institutional support so that the light engineering industry develop and diversify according to the needs of the time.

Shibir Brutality

Compared with the savagery and brutality resorted to by the Islami Chhatra Shibir, this is a mild form of attack on opponents by them. Yet the bomb attack on two buses of the Rajshahi University defied rationality.

Those who chop off opponent student activists' hands and sever tendons are least likely to take into consideration the consequence of their action. But what did the policemen guarding the buses do? They surely could not rule out such a possibility and therefore were required to be extra cautious.

It is not yet clear how critically wounded the three who have been admitted to Rajshahi Medical College Hospital are. If their injuries prove to be fatal, the demand obviously ought to be for the severest of punitive measures against the perpetrators.

Afghanistan — Never-ending War

The see-saw that we witness today in Afghanistan in modern times started in the beginning of the present century. If we climb back in history we will find that war, skirmishes, small or big battle, have been the way of life in this unfortunate part of real state called Afghanistan.

Whether Tadjikistan, torn from the Soviet Union, will be able to preserve these social gains is another question.

With the departure of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, the Cold War has effectively ended but the war goes on in Afghanistan. Only this time the players are not the Soviet Union nor the USA but minor players like Pakistan and Tadjikistan.

This is the genesis of the Taliban phenomenon, in Afghanistan. In the confused situation inside Afghanistan, where gun toting is a culture as old as the hills of Afghanistan, Taliban made its appearance with their guns only a couple of

years ago. The anti-Soviet operation was carried out from the hills on the Pakistani side of the border and a formidable arsenal and trained men were assembled. It is pretty certain that Pakistan has been deeply involved in the Taliban venture

buffer and will not be allowed to play an independent role. It is also pretty certain that the neighbours of Afghanistan will call the shots and Pakistan is not alone among the neighbours.

Among the neighbours of

Taliban phenomenon in order to involve the UN into this situation. Iran has historical and cultural interest in Central Asia, whose roots are very deep. She is deeply involved in the pipeline diplomacy to carry oil and gas from the rich fields of Central Asia to destinations in the West.

Although the Soviet Union has collapsed and new independent states have emerged, Russia has been busy reaffirming her links with the states of Central Asia and Azerbaijan through the institution of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In some states like Kazakhstan she has nearly 50 per cent of population and in all the states she has high stakes.



The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman

since she has been the first one to recognise the new Government installed by the Taliban in Kabul.

In the recent past when things seemed to be going in favour of the Taliban, they have faced their major reversal again in the inhospitable terrain of northern Afghanistan. The fact remains that Afghanistan will remain a

Afghanistan, Pakistan has to take seriously, the anxiety of Iran. Ever since the birth of Pakistan half a century ago, she has maintained specially cordial relations with Iran, her neighbour. And this despite the fact that Iran has strained relations with the USA, since the downfall of the Shah almost two decades ago, Iran must be sufficiently troubled by the

Will the Aslams Face Justice?

by Nilratan Halder

The public are overjoyed to know that an infamous thug has been arrested but when nothing is proved for months and years, the entire exercise of the authorities concerned becomes suspect.

forcefully was this. From his point of view too his appearance on the national TV is not very helpful. Any trial to be held for the alleged cases — if it is held at all — could be strongly influenced by statements that could either be embarrassing for the administration or be totally misleading for the viewers.

Now the disturbing question is, if someone under custody with such serious charges can be a subject of a TV programme. His is not a heroic feat and there is hardly any chance for anybody benefiting from projection of a character like him or his answers to different questions on the national TV screen.

On this point, we are free to draw our own conclusions. His reply to the question on the issue in the TV programme and his confident remark on the possibility of his release soon

are evidently contradictory. What is however unmistakable is that he showed no sign of nervousness and was equally confident about his release from jail. One might wonder where from does he collect such unshaken courage and confidence? Well, let us suppose he has no source other than himself for his supreme confidence. He should be well aware that a price was fixed for his arrest and an administration goes for such desperation when the involved criminal poses a serious threat to society and an enormous challenge to the law and order of the country.

The more important and pertinent issue is to arrest the other top mastans who also carry prices of different amounts on their heads. Terrorists like Aslam and Nasir of Chittagong fame — better say infamy — must be made to suffer the penalty they deserve. The process cannot stay because with undue deferment of trial or justice, people get frustrated. When alleged criminals like

Aslam cannot be tried expeditiously because of weakness in the constitution of cases or for lack of material evidence or witnesses, we are bound to ask then, why raise people's expectation so much by telling them that arresting them was equivalent to a coup in terms of the drive against criminals? That they are so notorious is made public by the police or the home ministry.

Here is the catch. The public are overjoyed to know that an infamous thug has been arrested but when nothing is proved for months and years, the entire exercise of the authorities concerned becomes suspect. Has any terrorist charged with murder ever got punished? A common man has to suffer the severest of punishment when the guilty verdict for murder is pronounced against him. Then is there a qualitative differentiation between a murderer of a humble de- brand? Why their crimes cannot be proved has to be answered first. Something might have gone somewhere wrong.

Will the administration be serious about looking for a clue?

We suspect the mafia-like network of the mastans have been spread far too widely. And there is no reason that it can lay its firm stronghold without direct or indirect patronage from powerful quarters. Before such quarters the administration, more often than not, proves powerless and helpless. Over a period, the administration itself catches the diseases. People therefore expect a lot from a new government. But entrenched corrupt elements within or outside continue to sabotage much of the good works. Under constant pressure the new administration is also forced to compromise. Years of undemocratic forces have patronised and pampered the anti-social elements. Now one needs a determination of Himalayan height to fight and defeat the violent and destructive elements in our society.

It is because of this we can readily recognise the confidence expressed by Aslam about his release. He may not be released soon, but the real test of the

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The long and short of all this is that the tug of war will continue in Afghanistan some times with the participation of major players like Britain and Russia and the USA and the Soviet Union and in more normal times with the participation of smaller players like Pakistan and Iran.

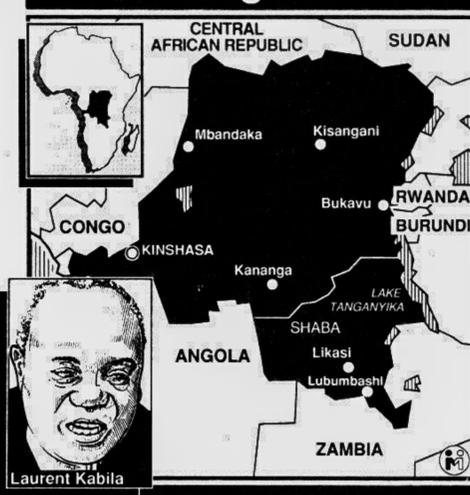
government's determination and seriousness about dealing with elements like him will be in the steps to be followed for his trial. He is however not the only one to strike terror in the minds of people. Some of them have gone into hiding. We do not know if they will get caught, appear in public during this government's reign. With the change of governments characters like him come out almost on a clean slate. A militant student leader of Dhaka University and known for his notoriety in favour of Ershad just before the latter's fall spent years in prison but was released by a democratically elected government. Why? Did it feel his service would be of consequence in its trying time.

The rulers take it for a guarantee that the public have a short memory. That is a mistake. People watch and wait and given the chance they reply properly. This government is also under watch. If it cannot rise up to their expectation in tackling terrorism, they perhaps know what to do. Already, they are somewhat dissatisfied. They may still wait for some time and the country's Aslams will provide them with the right opportunity to arrive at a considered conclusion.

The Renaissance Man Who Deserves an Encore

Laurent Kabila's rebel army marched rather than talked its way into Kinshasa. But, says Gemini News Service, this fact does not lessen the value of the quest for peace there by Nelson Mandela, a man determined to fulfil his historic role in Africa. Cameron Duodu writes from London.

Democratic Republic of the Congo



Republic of Congo). Mandela was fully briefed on all these possibilities. All advisers said there was big trouble

in store for Kinshasa's five million inhabitants if fighting broke out there. Mandela felt so apprehen-

sive that he put a South African naval vessel, the *Outeniqua*, at the disposal of Mobutu and Kabila. He then summoned history to be his ally.

Listen, he told them in effect. I did not like the apartheid government of South Africa any better than you guys like each other. But I negotiated with it even when it was holding me in prison. That is how my country reached where it is today. So you must talk. There's no point just allowing your people to be killed when you can negotiate peace round the table.

Did they listen? Even boarding the ship posed problems: neither man wanted to lose face, and both found excuses that led to cancellations and postponements.

When they did meet, their positions were so inflexible they might as well have saved Mandela the trouble of allowing himself to be cooped up on ship for days, courting sickness.

Mobutu, having stonewalled at the negotiations, went to meet his cronies in Gabon, only to tell them that he was "too sick to stand for elections" in future. The word "resign" never passed his lips.

It was all enough to make any normal African walk away from the whole mess. But Mandela did not do so for three reasons.

manner, that the incessant troubles in Black Africa north of the Limpopo river are undercutting his own experiment in multiracial, civilised governance.

And, despite the noises against "grandstanding" that occasionally come from some members of his ruling African National Congress, Mandela is acutely aware of the role that history has thrust upon him in Africa, and will do his best not to duck the sacrifices, including possible "loss of dignity", that are occasionally required of that role.

He is interested in an "African renaissance", and whatever insinuations lesser minds might make about that, he will do his utmost to contribute towards making such a renaissance a reality in his lifetime.

I had an insight into his thinking on these matters during an interview in Johannesburg in 1995, shortly after his attempt to save the lives of the writer Ken Saro-Wiwa, and eight of his Ogoni compatriots, had been treated with scorn by Nigeria's military dictator, Sani Abacha.

Reacting to Abacha's insulting dismissal of Mandela as a man who had spent "so many years in prison that he did not understand modern diplomacy", all Mandela would say was: "Everybody knows that this is a man who has no re-

spect for the facts." Mandela said he had tried to intervene in Nigeria because Abacha's "barbaric" actions were not contributing to "the African renaissance".

Mandela does not see African problems in single, episodic terms, but as a string of events confirming or denying that the continent — so badly treated by history — can rise above the situation bequeathed it by foreigners, find its own soul and do what is right for itself.

When he heard that Western governments were pressing Kabila to hold elections even before he had firmly installed himself in Kinshasa, he reacted angrily.

"There is a great deal of hypocrisy," Mandela commented. Western governments had watched Zaire being destroyed by the Mobutu dictatorship for decades and had seen nothing wrong in that. Now they were trying to demonise Kabila before he had a chance to settle into power.

In a way it is a pity that Mandela has already won the Nobel Peace Prize. I wonder whether it can be awarded twice. The Prize Committee has an excellent excuse to do the unusual: Mandela's first prize was shared with his presidential predecessor, F W de Klerk. Surely, Mandela is worth another, all to himself. I am sure the inhabitants of Kinshasa would agree.

The writer, a Ghanaian journalist, author and playwright, was editor of the magazine *Dram* in west Africa for three years.

To the Editor...

Cyclone preparedness

Sir, It is a great relief to learn that the casualties in the coastal belt during the recent 200 km/hr cyclone was much less than expected compared to the previous figures. Much of the credit should go to Bangladesh's Cyclone Preparedness Scheme which has been running for several decades now.

The people have become accustomed to the exercises, and have become disciplined enough to follow instructions for evacuation to the Cyclone Shelters, and taking precautionary measures for safety and survival.

It has taken many years for a developing country such as Bangladesh to set up the infrastructure for Disaster Preparedness, under severe handicaps while coping with the weak logistical support initially available. The role of the electronic media is vital for fast dissemination of warning and instructions. Some hi-tech applications may be tried now.

The Third World. The relevant UN agencies and the international NGOs can draw upon Bangladesh's experience to initiate tailored programmes for other countries.

One way to publicise our experience is to hold a number of seminars and workshops at home and abroad. There is nothing unusual in this statement: The Grameen Bank's micro-credit scheme has caught international attention, and it is being replicated in dozens of countries. Bangladesh is not poor mentally!

A Zabr Dhaka

Erratic behaviour of electricity

Sir, Water, gas and electricity are daily necessities. These are the responsibility of the government to ensure 24 hours supply to users. Electricity is a driving force to keep everything alive. Erratic behaviour of electricity at present has reached to a dimension that proves erratic nature of electric supply management. Tax-payers are being kept ignorant of

actual picture of electricity and crisis management to supply available amperes usefully. Schedule of supply of electricity in domestic, commercial and agricultural places should be informed through the media so that users can make their own schedule accordingly. At the same time, we want to know when can we get electricity 24 hours without load-shedding. Bose Asoke Kumar House # 413, Road # 10 Block-B, Chandgaon R/A Chittagong -4212

Padma Barrage

Sir, The demand of the drought-affected people of the northern, southern and western regions of the country to construct a barrage on the river Padma has been most clarion now. It is learnt that about 61 lack acres of land will come under irrigation if the barrage is built up. A plan to implement the project 3 kilometres downstream of Hardinge Bridge at Kushtia was accepted long ago but no effective initiative was taken. The aim of the barrage was economic and life-standard development, increasing pro-

duces, reserve of the Padma water, flood control, irrigation facilities, salinity prevention in dry season and underground water control.

At the review meeting of the donors and the government, held recently, the Finance Minister informed the donors that the government had a plan to construct the barrage for better water management which would need huge investment. We are happy to learn that but he did not make any specific proposal to the donors for funding the project. We request the government to immediately fill up the gap to better the people of those parts. Kamrul Islam BA College Road, Straggarj

The Rich and the Poor

Sir, The income, standard of living and the lifestyle of our people as well as those of foreign nationals who are working and living in our country are getting anomalous, distinctive and inconsistent day by day. It is said that some hotel managers of foreign countries

posted in Dhaka are paid highest salary in the country. Beside these foreign personnel working in different foreign embassies and organisations in Dhaka draw more pay and allowances than our president, ministers and secretaries to the government.

Moreover there are many MPs, businessmen, doctors, lawyers and landlords in our country whose monthly income are sky-scraping. They all lead luxurious and lavish life. We do neither complain, grumble, bemoan their income nor their higher standard of living under market economy. But when we compare and contrast a man of riches with that of a hungry, destitute, poor and a man beset with abject poverty, we are terribly shocked and surprised. Our conscience is endured with grief and we are morally wounded to see and find the distinction and difference between a man with another man of same and equal blood, flesh and bone.

Is there no economics and politics in the world to prove and implement that all men and women in Asia, Europe, Africa and America are equal

in the eyes of God.

We wonder for whose sake is the UN and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights meant for? OH Kabir 6, Hare Street Wari, Dhaka-1203

Child labour

Sir, A large number of child labourers in the city is deprived from compulsory primary education programme. It is harmful for our society.

It is unfortunate to say that children of the primary schools, aged 10-12, have been dropping out due to extreme poverty and are found labouring from dawn-to-dusk on the footpaths, markets and other different areas. Children are always seen to take up hard jobs for their survival.

It is really a violation of human rights. Authority concerned should take care of it. Mostafa Sohel Barani, Dhaka-1213