

A DCC Failure

The only facility for testing foods and items used for their preparation available in the city for public consumption has been lying inoperative for the last two months. This is because the testing laboratory itself has been moved from its previous location at Luxmibazar to the Nagar Bhaban without any firm decision about its new home. Now there is an indecision about whether it should be housed in the Nagar Bhaban or in the Dhaka City Corporation's environmental building situated in old Dhaka, close to Banga Bazaar. If it has to move to the environmental building, another six months are reportedly to elapse before the laboratory can be brought to its normal functioning.

Now here we would like to know what compulsion was there for shifting the laboratory without finalising its new location? Then we are told that Tk 20 lakh worth of equipment will be added to the laboratory, replacing its old inventory, to raise its capacity. The money seems to have been allocated. So there was a need for coordination between the two moves—shifting of the laboratory and replacement of the obsolete equipment. Clearly this important requirement has not been addressed.

Who took the preposterous decision to move the laboratory? Did it not occur to the concerned authority that the equipment of the only facility of its kind for the city cannot be left packed for months? It appears from the report that at least some top DCC officials have hardly any idea about the significance of the food testing done at its public health laboratory. That the DCC is hardly worried about making the laboratory operational once again is proof enough of its ignorance about the laboratory's role.

This is unacceptable. We want that before unscrupulous hoteliers, manufacturers of food and food items in the city do irreparable harms to public health, the laboratory should start functioning. Reports published in different dailies have exposed the unethical and unlawful practices often resorted to by traders and manufacturers in maximising their profits at the expense of food quality. Such an indifferent attitude will only make them more adventurous putting public health at further risk. What we need is constant monitoring of the quality of food and punish those found guilty of breaching the food codes and regulations. If the DCC fails to do its part of the duty to ensure the quality of food in the city, it will be held responsible for damaging public health.

Decline, Ethnically

We are decidedly in a process of ethnic decline. This is far more dangerous than poverty and backwardness. This decline starts with the physical degeneration of the individual constituents of a nation — growing steadily worse to affect endowments such as capacity to labour or disease resistance or intelligence — capacity to think and innovate that is. Although in the towns, specially cities, the independence generation, or those born after 1971 and into families secured both socially and economically have been showing a noticeable physical gain in height and weight the opposite has been happening to the majority peopling the villages. Now the UNICEF 1997 report has quantified this shrivelling process.

The report says, would our leaders please take note, 63 per cent of all our children below five years of age are stunted. Lack of proper growth has already impaired for life their capacity to learn and work. Low protein intake inhibits brain growth and of these 63 per cent, a vast majority would grow into near-morons. This amounts to saying that in another two decades' time this our nation would consist mostly of near-idiots. This outlook shouldn't prove pleasing to whoever has the good of the nation and of posterity at heart.

There is a still more gruesome side to this. Of the stunted, half are girl children. These will have pelvis smaller that makes child-birth unsafe both for the mother and the child. This would result in high maternal mortality — and a spate of infants not quite whole.

The UNICEF report gives Bangladesh good scores on literacy and child mortality counts as also in the reduction of gender gap in primary enrolment. But these can be of use only when the child grows up wholesomely. Phenomenal has been the increase in access to safe water — an achievement of a very basic nature. But how will it help the stunted child?

Malnutrition is almost wholly an euphemism for hunger. We grow enough food so as not to go hungry. Poverty bars millions from access to food. Why should it be so?

Decelerate to Zero Growth

Dhaka is at present the 22nd largest city in the world. It could be a flattering piece of tidings come from that tall match-box building by the East River. The news brought to us via a United Nations report, alas, fills us rather with fearsome forebodings. In 18 years' time Dhaka is projected to become the fifth largest in the world with a population of 19.5 million. This plainly means that, excepting for a handful of cities, Dhaka is the world's highest growing city also. We already know at this point of nine million residents that Dhaka is not growing, it is blistering. And the process is a testament not to healthy development of the city but to a nation's miserable failure to effect a harmonious growth among its regions and numerous towns and cities. The Dhaka corpulence is an obesity thriving on the slow and steadily dying villages. And how Dhaka grows! By slums and swamps, slime and stench.

If the UNICEF figure for Dhaka's population is correct — 9 million — Dhaka should have been consuming at least 900 million litres of fresh water every day. The actual consumption is way less than half that. The consequences in growing uncleanness have to be experienced to believe. The same problem applies to power consumption, road length and park space etc. It is already a foul and filthy city. More than doubling the city — headwise — in 18 years would only mean a geometric progression to a fouler and filthier city.

The job at hand should then be for Dhaka to go for zero growth. Devaluation of government dispensation, decentralisation of the industrial, educational, military, professional and administrative concentration in Dhaka would be needed as first prerequisites of sparing Dhaka the condition of Mexico City and the nightmare that can be Dhaka 2015.

One Year of the Awami League Government: A Brief Evaluation

PLENTY has been written about the success and achievements of the present Awami League government during the first year of its rule. Some have been written about its shortcomings and failures too. It is indeed difficult to make an objective evaluation without the risk of being partial or even partisan.

During the recent television interview, Hon'ble Prime Minister herself articulated her assessment and one did obtain a fair picture of her present policy and actions on many important national issues. She termed awakening the spirit of the liberation war and portraying its history as her most important singular achievement during this period. It is true that the present generation needs to be educated about the glorious history of our liberation war and about those who had led and contributed to this proud chapter of our national history.

The Prime Minister is fully justified in her claim. What critics attribute to her efforts on this is that she somewhat overdid it. Disproportionate treatment was meted out to the leaders involved. It appeared as though everything was done by one person. Those who actually gave direction and led the war were almost glossed over. One was ignored completely. Objectivity and balanced perception are imperative necessities to record history that is likely to stand the test of time.

A very wise decision taken by the Prime Minister was to choose Justice Shahabuddin to adorn the highest office of the Republic as President. The present incumbent is widely respected and regarded, in the light of his profession, as just for his consideration and judgement. He is hailed by all and he enjoys everyone's confidence.

The revelation comes to set at nought the reason earlier ascribed to Nuruzzaman's death in the government handout: illness. Clinical verification which confirms it as a case of homicide makes one thing quite clear. Members of the law enforcing agency to whom Nuruzzaman was handed over by the security personnel of PM's Secretariat mauled him with such barbaric severity that even before his relatives could trace him the thirty seven year old young man and a father of a minor daughter was dead. Nuruzzaman will not come back to tell us how he provoked such extraordinary and unbridled wrath of the guardians of law but through his death he has left a very grim message written on the wall: no one is safe in the hands of police. It might and will sound as a twice told story but for a civil society this is a very dark and disturbing reality to live with.

What is likely to be the fate of the man in the street if Nuruzzaman, no pushover from the socio-economic consideration, could get such treatment? The paranoid pummeling the dead man must have been subject to two possibilities: Either the staff at the police station where Nuruzzaman was kept, was a bunch of maniacs bent on making punchbags out of the people at their mercy or those people had a score to settle with him. In the first case, blame falls squarely on the system and the authorities while in the second, culpability lies more with an individual or a group of people than with the police. This is not to say police in the past was an epitome of kindness and sensitivity. This is probably one of the antonyms of life that maintenance of law and order automatically leads to the breaking of a law less cur-

There have been many worthwhile pledges made by the government. Until these are redeemed, mere pledges and initiation will not satisfy people. The issues relate to poverty alleviation, employment generation, exports expansion, investment opportunities, etc. No laws have yet been initiated towards separating the executive from the judiciary and prospect for the autonomy of Radio and Television appears to be receding mysteriously.

The Prime Minister has called upon all political parties to cooperate with the government. This is indeed in keeping with the principles of good governance. She has time and again termed her government as one of consensus. A true government of consensus, for example, was formed in the wake of the great depression of late twenties in Britain which virtually incorporated representatives of all political parties. Even during the second world war, which initially reached a national crisis point for Britain, no government of consensus existed, it was merely a coalition government of the two major political parties.

In recent times, a government of national unity (GNU), similar to a consensus government, was set up in 1991 by the superb specimen of homo sapien, Nelson Mandela. Who else could embrace, without obligation, in government his and his people's arch enemies and perpetrators of the worst form of human indignity and crimes — the apartheid leaders and the rival Zulu Inkatha Chief. Only to secure temporary support of a political party to enable the Awami League to form government in return for the release of the former's Chief from prison as well as to get in the fold a loyalist opposition, cannot be called even a coalition government, not to speak of a government of consensus.

Consensus can and should evolve on important and national issues through discussions among political parties,

mainly in the Parliament, and various groups of people on other fora. The principal opposition party in the Parliament have almost consistently alleged that they are not allowed to deliver their speeches and replies due to partisan attitude of the Chair. They vehemently protested against the government signing international treaties without prior deliberation by the law-givers.

The government, however, did well to place the Parliamen-

tary committees under the chairmanship of a member instead of the Minister concerned, as being practiced so long. Still, they have fallen short of meeting the opposition demand of ensuring Committee representation proportional to parliamentary strength of political parties.

One major point of discord between the ruling and the opposition lay in the field of law and order situation as well as terrorism. Despite the ruling party's assertion, immediately before and after the election, that restoration of law and order as well as suppression of terrorism were at the top of their list of priorities, the opposition regards this to be the

most serious breach of promises of the former. Only the systematic detention, on baseless charges, torture and killing of opposition members and their supporters have been the order of the day, the latter alleged. On the other hand, members and supporters of the ruling party have also been victims, but much less in number. Yet, the present government has set a record in national history to be the first one to be fined by the Supreme Court for having

worthwhile pledges made by the government. Until these are redeemed, mere pledges and initiation will not satisfy people. The issues relate to poverty alleviation, employment generation, exports expansion, investment opportunities, etc. No laws have yet been initiated towards separating the executive from the judiciary and prospect for the autonomy of Radio and Television appears to be receding mysteriously.

The GDP envisaged is an admirable growth rate of 5.7 per cent, depending on the anticipated growth in the agricultural sector. With the increase in the cost of fertiliser and agricultural implements, farmers are likely to be further discouraged to grow crops at the existing low price. The target is difficult to achieve. The declining growth rate in industry due to imprudent imposition of tariff on its raw materials, coupled with the problem of lack of liquidity, poses a serious setback to this sector. The foreign exchange reserve has plummeted to a dangerously low level and the inability of financial institutions to advance loans, due to heavy government borrowing, have already stagnated economic activities. The stock market debacle is unprecedented and has caused the uttermost disgrace for the government — not only for its inept handling but also for government's incredible inability to prosecute the accused in the right court of law.

The Prime Minister, on the other hand, has earned credit to set priority to visit several

countries, like China, Saudi Arabia, India and others, who represent important factors in the formulation and implementation of our foreign policy, both on the political and economic domains. The 30-year Ganges water treaty appeared to be a positive factor initially. But the failure to provide Bangladesh with the quantum of water as envisaged in the treaty within the first few months of its execution and the inability of the government to react promptly and assertively, prove hollow, ineffective, process and unsatisfactory character of this hastily concluded agreement.

The government is in the process of allowing a corridor from India to India through Bangladesh and lends its support to an undefined concept of a sub-regional grouping. Besides other things, the first has an element of security factor worthy of consideration, and the second has the potentiality to threaten our indigenous industry, specially small and cottage industries. Negotiations on Chittagong Hill Tracts, as had been done also by the previous regime, are progressing and can be acclaimed only on its satisfactory conclusion.

All conscientious citizens aspire peace, stability and progress for the nation. The people have the right to live, decently and without deprivation. We can do it and should be able to do it. In our march, we must not look back to our faults of the past, but proceed cautiously but steadily forward. The success is ours, no doubt, if only we are able to bury our petty hatchet. In this context, one may borrow the saying of a celebrated person, with modification — do not ask what others have given to your country, ask what you can give to your country.



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

University Halls and educational institutions have been forcibly occupied by pro-government students organisations in no time. Armed struggles and bloodshed among various factions of different pro-Awami League organisations have occurred often. The Prime Minister stated that she, while in opposition, had proposed to disarm her people but declined to do so after she took over power. The defence of the Special Powers Act, which she condemned so often and for so long, as not so black at all, is most unfortunate, to say the least.

There have been many detained on ridiculous or no charge some distinguished members of the opposition. University Halls and educational institutions have been forcibly occupied by pro-government students organisations in no time. Armed struggles and bloodshed among various factions of different pro-Awami League organisations have occurred often. The Prime Minister stated that she, while in opposition, had proposed to disarm her people but declined to do so after she took over power. The defence of the Special Powers Act, which she condemned so often and for so long, as not so black at all, is most unfortunate, to say the least.

Another Custody Casualty

by Chandra Shekhar Das

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shrinked in the concept of modern statehood; the job of police is such that it has to be cruel and do things that are contrary to human rights and sensitivity. But if we look back, we will see in most cases it was necessary cruelty with some of the worst and poignant scenes enacted during the twilight of the British Raj when the colonialists were caught in a desperate struggle to retain their empire. Locals were up against the locals as the colonial police force hounded those involved with independence movement. But what was a professional obligation and also perhaps, the overpowering compulsion to keep the body and soul together in any of those stages of the pre independence period of our history seems to have become a monstrous collective psychological syndrome. Police in the nineties seem to be increasingly relishing the violation of human rights; it is taking opportunity of man's helplessness as any ordinary criminal would. From Yasmeen of Dinajpur to Seema Chowdhury of Chittagong it is the repetition of the

same tale. More often than not, police behaviour makes people feel as if they are under some sort of colonial rule with the men in uniform paid to toy with their rights. Nuruzzaman's death comes as a variation in the sense that it goes to prove that there are other temptations in life than sensual gratification for police to depart from its ethical obligations.

We can and we have to see it as an alarming characteristic developing in police over the years for a variety of reasons but this does not in any way take the underpinnings from the argument that administration of the day has to do a lot with the degeneracy of police. Police today has become virtual frankenstein. Designed for the maintenance of the law and order in the civil society and reared on the money of its members, today its time and

energy is spent more in violating the rights of the law abiding citizens than in nabbing criminals! Over the years, police have been exposed to so much abuse of human rights mainly to protect the interest of the party in power that it really rings hollow when we exhort them to show a semblance of respect to human rights on their own.

According to the press reports, the man drove into the premises of the PM's office without proper credentials by which the officials probably meant the necessary permission to see the highest executive of the state. So what? He was not carrying a gun or any weapon. Reportedly, the man was caught in a welter of professional problems. Probably, he was at the end of his tether and there was no hope in sight; probably, after exhausting all possible fora in vain (a very po-

ssible for a man who decided to take a desperate attempt to inform the PM of his problems. A bit of regional sentiment might have contributed; he and the PM being from the same district probably lent support to the emotional conviction that there was more than a realistic chance for him to manage an appointment. And not very unthinkingly, he chose Friday, a day of weekly holiday and redolent of religious significance, for his mission.

Nuruzzaman's method was no doubt flawed and the members of the law enforcing agency in whose custody he was kept were not responsible for his murder. But one cannot help feeling that unless discretion and democratic consideration become the attitude of the government regarding its use of the law enforcing agency, deaths like this will continue to hog the pages of papers. And no matter how neutral and judicious we prove ourselves in bringing the killers to the book, the conscience of the society will not be calmed easily.

raise slogan for them, we vote for them, we fight and kill one another empty words. Can't we tell the political leaders in straight terms that if they do not try to sincerely mourn for the deaths of the commonmen or care for them in their adversities, they will also be given the same cold shoulders?

On the other hand, why the leaders cannot see that whether said or unsaid, people will pay back in their (leaders') own coins if they fail to meet their physical and mental/psychological needs! When will our leaders learn to engage themselves to emulate Mahatma Gandhi/Nelson Mandela/Mother Teresa and such other role models?

OPINION

Unnatural Death

John Arun Sarkar

Like every unnatural death, the death of Nuruzzaman, a crew of Biman, has shocked the nation. Yes, we have become used to such deaths but, time and again the nightmarish realisation how unsecured we, the citizens of this country, are haunts, shudders and shatters our minds.

While the departments concerned will do their jobs, from the bits of reports available in the newspapers, the commonmen are applying their commonsense to comprehend and assess the reality, and are trying to see through the hazes and cloudy mazes, while casting enough doubts about the transparency of the things. When police torturing has been alleged to be the cause of Nuruzzaman's death, the investigations (s) by

some neutral body/bodies probably could convince the citizens.

We have many a time come across the stories of somebody (attempting) scaling the walls of distinguished palaces of the world or entering unauthorisedly the offices of dignitaries for different reasons and purposes but we have not come to know of any of them dying in the custody of the police. On the other hand, deaths in police custody is also becoming commonplace in our country.

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The Yankees are Coming!

A Husnain

The Yankees are coming! A large delegation of American industrialists are converging in Calcutta coming December, in anticipation of huge participation in infrastructure development projects in the greater delta zone centering Bangladesh. President Clinton is said to be interested, said the BBC, because Burma is close by, whatever signal it conveys.

Bhola is coming up in a big way. Nature provided the excuse to erect military-type barracks in St Martin's Islands — for the civilian population. Some core development projects in the coastal areas around the Sundarbans may not be getting the publicity it deserves as a low-key stance is preferred (remember the mysterious tree-top disease scantily reported in press?). The CPI delegation from across the West was in Dhaka recently, there is power in silence.

So the triangle or the quadrangle is taking shape, quietly but firmly. The project hush-hush seems to be proceeding like a well-oiled machine, sans publicity, sans transparency. Good if it can push the GDP up from the poverty line, the Bengalees' traditional abode of plain living and plain thinking.

Further west, the PM of Pakistan suggested that Pakistan and India might do some paper exercise on reduction of

the defence budget or expenditure. Economist Mahubul Haque of Pakistan carried the message earlier to Dhaka. Thailand has been brought into the Bay development master plan; now reinforced by the D-8 idea. The G-7 influence on Hong Kong would evaporate from next month. Therefore, naturally, contingency plans have to be set into motion. One feels quipping 'Things are going according to plan.'

Geographical location plays its part in the game of luck. Bangladesh may be the gainer (or the loser — the pessimists are a nuisance). New Delhi's dozen-party coalition might be looking on helplessly, propelled by unseen forces beyond its control. Pakistan is helpless with foreign debt of 55 billion dollars. Bangladesh is divided with the two strong ladies in control over the destiny of the nation. Whether the divide-and-rule policy will once again flourish in Bangladesh remains to be seen.

What is the game? Anybody's guess; but the western thinkers do their homework well, and in advance. Balkanisation is a favourite game of the western imperialists. The Balkanisation of Europe turned some of the European nations into sizes smaller than Bangladesh. Now

due to the economic misfortune brought about by (Toynbee's) cycles of history, the weak Europeans are fighting over united Europe (catching at floating straws). In fact history is floating now, in every centre or corner of the globe, with political instability and economic insecurity. Only Gulliver reigns supreme amongst the Lilliputians.

India is well aware of the subversive foreign long-term schemes to break up the huge and potentially rich country into smaller states for better control and manipulation, flanked by buffer states such as the hypothetical Greater Bengal on one side, and Pakistan, born out of religion, on the other.

The reward is rich and enduring — a market of a billion consumers. Such a configuration should provide security to the economic rulers for at least a century. There is a pre-condition — if the Kali Yug or the Aquarian Age would deign not to play any practical joke by making some land masses disappear, as happened in the conjectured ancient continents known by the names of Atlantis and Lemuria (be prepared for the tilting of the earth's vertical axis, warn a number of esoteric books).

What's the local news? The nation is fighting over a cashless budget.

To the Editor...

BTV question time

Let me congratulate you and the prime minister for the pleasant and lively BTV question time this evening (23/6/97). You deserve congratulations for your boldness and the PM gets it for her attitude for openness, and apparent accountability and transparency, all of which are the fundamental, uncompromising pillars of an open democratic, peaceful society.

The PM however, did not give us any single ray of hope in mitigating our present chaotic state of affairs encompassing law and order, education, economy, or autonomy of the media. The PM has repeated her unquestionable love for the country, but there is, it seems to be, one large gaping hole in that gesture — her hatred for BNP.

While her patriotic zeal is noble, she should gracefully realize that BNP is a party made of people of her same beloved land. Her love and affection must include her *deshi* politicians too, and only then meaningful solutions and the will to resolve irritants can occur.

The PM's explanation that a certain system must be evolved first before the autonomy, cannot be accepted. The very cry for autonomy persists because the BTV fails to run as it should run in a democracy.

The question time is a proof that even for the chief executive of the country, openness and being exposed to public questions is not harmful to the sovereignty of the state, neither does the government become weak and collapse facing people's onslaught of questions. This is an evidence enough, that if media transparency and accountability is repeated and practiced by the BTV every evening, then more confidence will be created within the voters than disillusionment, as we face today under a non-autonomous structure.

Regarding the PM's defense of SPA, she critically discredits all past governments when it comes to banking, law and order, judiciary, etc., but the past governments did only one thing right — keeping the SPA! The correct answer is that, all past and present governments did not make enough efforts towards democracy, and their re-

fusal to repeal SPA is one big example.

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Budget

Sir, It is a lame, tame, defensive, PR, sugar-coated budget for survival under hostile environment, as heard on TV/radio.

AL dare not go on the offensive. The stock exchange, securities, banking and financial sectors were lightly skipped. There were cheap PR tricks (pension for 10 poor).

There was no comment on lack of local investment. Taxi-cab service was a suspicious surprise. Import duty on cars 1600 cc & above is very high. Import @ 7.5 per cent is very tempting. Why is no fare meter for auto-rickshaws? The support for electronics industry is marginal.

Tax on landlords is not enough — offices in residential flats should pay additional 15 per cent tax on rent. No incentive for mass construction of office buildings by the private sector. There should have an 'accident tax' on public motor vehicles — one guilty party to pay on police report.

DFI is required for mass printing of foreign text-books — 'cheap students editions,' for local use and export. The government office cars may be sold and officers may purchase own vehicles on HP and fixed car allowance.

The new pay scales might shoot the inflation rate near the z-digit figure. Where are the tax structures for private medical clinics and tutorial centers, of high cost English medium schools? Why the sweetmeat shops do not hand over cash memos to the customers without asking?

The import duty on condensed milk is inexplicable, as none is imported (too costly). How will the milk vans travel in the rural/village roads, when the farmers crops have no freezers at collection points?

In loss of perishable fruits and vegetables to the extent of hundreds of crores. The government may encourage building up of a coop network in the country through BOT-BOO schemes with special bank/financial facilities. A more transparent black money 'laundry service' would have enhanced revenue collection.

It is predicted that a large number of limited companies will import a large number of 1600 cc cars, and the start of the taxi-cab service will be postponed on one pretext or another. This looks like big business (without doing business).

A Citizen
Dhaka

DU affairs

Sir, It was disconcerting to read (DS, June 8) the elaborate public criticism of the VC DU by one of the professors of the university. The very fact that the professor had to come out in public with the state of affairs inside the administration in the august institution shows the frustration prevailing amongst a section of the teaching staff, for reasons apparent from the opinion expressed.

It is unfortunate that the atmosphere inside is neither ideal nor normal. This state of undesirable polarisation has been prevalent for several years in some of the major universities of the country. RU and CU are also frequently in the news. Sporadic sparks are seen anywhere at anytime. This 'culture' has to be discouraged.

The continued armed campus politics is a reality of life. The politicians cannot solve the problem except indulging in bouts of mud-slinging; which leads the nation to nowhere. How long this vicious will continue in the highest academic circles?

Start with the core issues, and then carry out the operation wipe-out at the fringes. If we all agree, then who will bell the cat?

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka