

Onus on PM

This is perhaps for the first time that an officer in charge (OC) of a thana has ever made a general diary (GD), seeking protective security for his and his family members' lives.

Now we must commend Home Minister Rafiqul Islam for his personal initiative to make Tuhean's arrest possible. At the same time we condemn the local Awami League leadership of the thana for demanding his release.

The home minister's approach to the problem is certainly in the right direction but when the thana committee of the ruling party puts its weight behind the terrorist gangs, how can the campaign against the number one social problem of Bangladesh bring about the desired result?

Water Dialogue

The fourth Indo-Bangladesh dialogue on water issues concluded in Dhaka at the end of the last month. Water or its shortage — and at times excess — have been bedeviling the very physical existence of Bangladesh for decades and the situation — physical sustainability of this land, that is — was all the time getting worse and worse.

The Water Treaty not only stands to save Bangladesh from certain desertification, but is besides, a great springboard for subcontinental co-operation in many areas. It is pregnant with possibilities. After the inking of the Treaty, the official lean period of the Ganges discharge commenced and for only two 10-day slots water was received far below the treaty stipulated quantum.

Detractors there were forsworn to undermine it for political reasons. But the kind of amnesia that Bangladesh manifested about the positive aspects of the Treaty, however badly it was started, could not be the work of the detractors alone.

It is a cruel irony that when the four co-riparians, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal are contemplating a platform to share the water problems or potentials after decades, popular perception in Bangladesh is not properly valuing the achievement. This must end.

Distrust has been given a long enough tenure — 50 years — and did not do any good to any one. Now is the time to build trust which is the other name of self confidence.

Now It is Manjila

Can a person be held without any charge? And be sent to hospital under detention? And handcuffed too? Ailing and handcuffed, the victim, lying in a hospital bed, has again been tied to the legs of the bed with a rope. The incredible story points to only one reason. The victim is a young woman and indeed of a very comely mien and dainty presence.

Manjila left her job at a Chittagong garments factory and went to Kurigram to unite with her husband — as directed by the latter. She only landed into a trap. Her father-in-law and brother-in-law held her in forced detention and drove away her husband. The culprits raped the girl but could not make her sign divorce papers. Then they got her arrested by police. The police sent her to jail custody where she lost mental balance and was sent to Kurigram hospital but in hand-cuffs.

Why was she arrested? Why is she in handcuffs? Who will now restore her to health and sanity and pay appropriate compensation? What punishment should be meted out to Kurigram police who handled Manjila in such criminal fashion? It is the duty of our Home Ministry to see that Manjila comes to no harm. Let Manjila come round well and be presented to newsmen in Dhaka formally.

On June 30, 1997, two events stole the thunder of the opposition walk-out from the parliament during the consideration of this year's Finance Bill. For a Bangladeshi with a modicum of interest in politics, these were the Manikganj by-elections, and the return of Hong Kong to China — perhaps in that order of importance.

The outcome of the Manikganj poll had turned out to be of primordial concern for the future of by-elections in this country. The opposition had been crying wolf at such a pitch that even an unlikely, but genuine Awami League victory, in this BNP held seat, would have brought the simmering political broth to the boil. In this event, the country, for the time being at least, has hopefully been spared the ordeal and the authorities deserve a round of applause for conducting an election which by all accounts has been free and fair.

He has been at times compared unfavourably to his counterparts of a couple of countries of this region. I have had the privilege of watching elections in those countries over the past decade or so, perhaps on more occasions than those who have drawn these comparisons. I dare say that the standard of our last general elections was as

Events of Importance

Both the winner BNP and the loser Awami League may draw comfort from Manikganj results — may be the loser a little more than the winner, for the Awami League has after all reduced its margin of defeat in a mid term by-election, held in the BNP heartland.

But it is important for the future of democracy of this country that by-elections are properly held. After all by-elections have to be held under political government, for unlike the somewhat ingenious method of our general elections, we cannot possibly have each and every by-election under neutral, non-party caretaker governments.

The Election Commission and the administration rose well to the occasion at Manikganj. Mr. Abu Hena, the Chief Election Commissioner deserves a special mention. He had been lately subject to unfair criticisms by some, including a defeated by-election candidate whose dear wish must have been to make a Magura out of a molehill. The Chief Election Commissioner has been at the receiving end of gratuitous advice about leaving his job, rendered with thinly conceived political and personal motives. I hope he is no quitter.

high as I have seen anywhere in this region. No, the Chief Election Commissioner need not pay any heed to those 'advice'. A Chief Election Commissioner does not have to be loud mouthed to appear to be effective. If quiet efficiency is his style, so be it. He must keep his chin up and get on with his sacred constitutional duties to the

majority. What went wrong? Too much India-bashing creating question marks of credibility in the public mind or an annoying propensity of talking about taking to streets? In another day and in another time the Awami League practiced the latter (they could not possibly, according to some, indulge in the former) with good effect, but

won. This brings me to the other reason that stole the thunder of the BNP June 30, walkout. I refer to the return of Hong Kong to China. Unlike the event in Nehru's India half a century ago, thanks to today's electronic media, the world did not sleep but kept wide awake at the stroke of midnight hour, when Hong Kong returned to China's rightful lap. As one who has worked in that region, three-and-a-half decade ago, I was grateful to have lived to see the day, or shall I say the night? For there also, after a lapse of a century and a half it was democracy that emerged victorious. The British were dignified in their departure and the Chinese looked composed and serene as they arrived to take over. Governor Chris Patten's tears mingled well with the falling rain drops. And when China's turn came to step in, it was, as if, even the rain god withdrew and watched.

In the utterances of the Chinese leaders, in those of President Jiang Zemin and Tung Chee Hwa, the new Chris Patten, one had a new taste of the next century. Neither harked back to the past nor looked back in anger. Indeed they gazed at the past but once, very briefly, while respectfully re-



Frankly Speaking...

by Faruq Choudhury

best of his ability, admittedly under circumstance most difficult. But no matter what, people will, at the end, judge him right.

A quick comment on this by-election results: Both the winner BNP and the loser Awami League may draw comfort from this results — may be the loser a little more than the winner, for the Awami League has after all reduced its margin of defeat in a mid term by-election, held in the BNP heartland.

The BNP will no doubt have a good look at its reduced ma-

then in politics what was sauce for the goose yesterday may not be the same for today's gander. We have a party in the opposition, experienced and strong and by God patriotic! It will do our democratic future a lot of good if they get their act right and quickly. As expected the Jatiya party did not do well. These are not happy days for the party and one wonders, for them, is it all love's labour lost? The BNP must admit that in Manikganj it is the unbridled exercise of democracy that has

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Bad News for Flying Saucer Fans

Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

America's obsession with UFOs has never been greater, and is getting out of hand. A case in point is the suicide in March, of 39 members of the Heavens Gate cult, who believed an alien ship passing near Earth would take them to an eternal paradise!

eastern New Mexican desert at the dawn of the space age was glimpsed and embellished over the decades into false evidence of aliens.

It all began in New Mexico in July, 1947. Ranch foreman W. W. Brazel found strange, shiny materials littering the ground. Mr. Brazel gave it to the sheriff, who turned it in to the military authorities. On July 8, the Roswell Army Air Field issued a news release about the crash of a flying disk, prompting a newspaper, The Roswell Daily Record, to run an article under the headline: "R. A. A. Captures Flying Saucer."

Military authorities retracted the next day, calling the curious debris merely a downed weather balloon. But the damage was done. Just as old sightings of squids and whales spawned tales of sea monsters, the "Roswell incident" became a celebrated part of America's alien culture. In propounding vigorous theories of alien visits and government cover-ups, the space buffs have become a formidable force against government rationalisations.

The government says that a serviceman who crashed in a test balloon 10 miles north-west of Roswell suffered an injury that caused his head to swell and resemble the bulbous

cranium of the classic science-fiction alien. This secretive 1959 mishap, apparently led to tales of a crashed extraterrestrial that walked under its own power into a military hospital.

So, too, dummies were routinely dropped from balloons to test parachutes and were sometimes lost in the desert and discovered in suggestive ways, their hands often missing a finger. A distinguishing characteristic of aliens supposedly sighted near Roswell, is four fingers.

The Air Force also describes the crash of a KC-97G military plane near Roswell that killed 11 fliers, leaving their bodies badly burned and reeking of fuel. The stench was so foul that identification work at the Roswell air base was moved from the small hospital to the commissary, which had a large refrigerator. Recalled years later by a civilian who visited

the air base and talked to workers there, he prompted his account of small, black, mangled, dead aliens who smelled so bad that their autopsies were moved from the base hospital to a place better suited to the dissections!

The US's desert work focussed on the development of sky gear and high-altitude escape systems. Starting in 1950, for instance, balloons rising as high as 19 miles, dropped dozens of life-like dummies to perfect parachutes for pioneering pilots, including those in the X-15 rocket plane and U-2 spy plane. The dummies landed all over the New Mexico desert, and several were lost. (A witness had said of Roswell aliens: "I thought they were plastic dolls.")

Starting in 1957, test pilots began to join the dummies in ballooning at high altitudes,

culminating in Colonel Kittinger's 1960 leap from a balloon nearly 20 miles high, which remains the highest parachute jump ever. At times, this human research was also quite suggestive of the aliens. A balloon flight in 1959 ended in an accident that caused Captain Dan D. Fulgham's helmet to shatter and his head to swell. His eyes became mere slits in a puffy face. He was taken to the Roswell base where a high security escort and was eventually transferred to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio for treatment.

The Air Force report says that this accident probably accounts for reports of an alien that walked into a Roswell air base, under its own power, and the shipment of aliens to Wright-Patterson base, where according to Roswell lore, they underwent

close scrutiny. The finding of shiny wreckage in 1947, it says, "was the first of many unrelated events now collectively known as the 'Roswell incident'."

The report also tells of other activity in New Mexico that conceivably was mistaken for extraterrestrial craft. A V-shaped balloon flown in 1965 bears a striking resemblance to the sketch of an alien spacecraft drawn by an anonymous "witness". Between 1966 and 1972, balloons lifted and dropped mock interplanetary probes to aid space research. To the untrained eye, the probes looked like flying saucers!

Not surprisingly, true believers in Roswell are unshaken, seeing the new report as evidence of the most egregious Government cover-up of all time.

There are reasons why the US government felt compelled to put a damper on the planned 50th anniversary celebration of the "Roswell incident." America's obsession with UFOs has never been greater, and is getting out of hand. A case in point is the suicide in March, of 39 members of the Heavens Gate cult, who believed an alien ship passing near Earth would take them to an eternal paradise!

Of Hartal, Allegations and Vendetta

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

So they have ultimately stepped in the shoes of their adversaries — the Awami League vis-a-vis the present government. Observing a half-day hartal on 23rd March they exercised their democratic rights to ventilate their grievances against the government when it was only about ten months old. Too premature a timing, indeed. This is also in the process of exercising democratic rights.

And when it is just a year old, they have called another hartal on July 3 to protest the budget what they brand as 'anti-people, anti-development, anti-investment'.

The Awami League leadership, on the earlier occasion acknowledged its opponent's democratic rights and hence kept itself purposefully away from interfering the activists from the street. Still then it had been slandered by the BNP. Hoodlums inflicted physical injuries to some of the processionists including former Home Minister Abdul Matin Choudhury who received head injuries and profusely bled. Parallel to such an unruly incidence we also took into cognizance the unfortunate killing of a Naval officer at Luxmipur and two others elsewhere. All such sad incidences were reported to have been perpetrated by BNP musclemen during the hartal. Ransacking of shops and other business establishments, arsons, looting and putting on fire public vehicles had also been in the news.

Then speaking to the newsmen at the airport on her return from Islamabad where she attended OIC conference, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina posed a pertinent counter question to the journalists on the reason for calling a hartal. She did not say a word against hartal since, she admitted plainly, she in opposition she too has had recourse to it. But she wondered how Begum Zia, when in power, used to severely criticize hartal for its being destructive of national economy could adopt the same measure.

The issues of Transit, Asian Highway, repression of BNP leaders and workers, arrests of four top BNP men, chasing of a few more by the police — all came up in the impromptu press conference. The first two issues, Sheikh Hasina observed, were preposterous as her government was only following up the decisions of BNP government. This time the issues are not so many, it is only one — the budget. Already much has been said for and against it and opinions are still expressed through the newspapers and other media. Ultimately people will decide how much 'anti-people, anti-development, anti-investment'

it actually is. So isn't it too early to be in the exigency of calling hartal?

Of late, the BNP chairperson and other leaders are accusing the party in power of 'sale out' of the country to our neighbour. How a country can be a commodity for sale, and that too in this age of democracy, one cannot simply understand. But one wonders if it is a tact of retracting public attention from allegations rife against them.

During their time BNP was very vocal against corruption. Even before going into power Begum Zia and her party leaders used to pamper Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed and his care-taker government into taking punitive measures against General Ershad and his ministers. As a result, the hauling up of a sizeable number of JP members and putting them in jail was witnessed when in power after emerging victorious in 1991 election, some of the ministers and leaders including BNP Chairperson's son and brother, allegedly, went into a self-same rampage. The opposition at that time had sought the intervention and examination by a Parliamentary Committee in the specific instances of corruption. The Committee sat for one or two occasions but could not make any headway due to purposeful and deliberate indifference of the party in power. It was an exercise in futility.

And when Awami League was installed in power it became naturally incumbent upon the government to reopen the issues in the process of upholding the laws of the country. The Bureau of Anti-Corruption was immediately revamped to take formal and legal action against all corrupt persons exercising an absolute freehand without prejudice. Consequently, the Bureau has had to go into an in-depth examination of the allegations of corruption that started pouring in against the former Prime Minister, her son, brother and a relation, some of her cabinet ministers, leaders of the party and its associate youth and student wings. Their involvement in specific instances of corruption and bungling when made known to the news media, instantly roused loud resentment in the rank and file of the party. In numerous public meetings they started expressing their wrath, sometimes in uncouth manner. They were all for indicting the chairperson and warned that if anything happened to her they would 'set ablaze the whole country or would make everything stagnant'. Following the 23rd March half-day hartal, Mir Showkat Ali, in an undertone of threat reminded the audience in a public meeting that BNP

was though a tame 'cat' once when its workers were fearful, now was a veritable 'tiger'. And taking cue from the ex-army general, a labour leader and member of Parliament Mosharraf Hossain warned the Prime Minister to accept their demands forthwith. Or else, he cautioned, that all would be over in one single night... Such an outrageous remark laments to a direct threat to Sheikh Hasina's life and is liable for immediate preemptive legal action. Meanwhile, patriotic citizens of the country must have been utterly intrigued by the report attributed to Ms Robin Raphael of the US State Department. She was reported to have asked the Bangladesh government to tell her of the circumstances under which four BNP leaders were taken into legal custody. For one, would consider it as a direct and ominous interference in our internal affair. I wonder too, if GoB would be obliged to make any reply to such an uncalled for intervention. In any case, this overt interference created a sense of disaffection among the people of the country and it would not be at all surprising if they seek to locate a eerie linkage of such awful interference with any vicious gamble to overthrow the government. Our poor country has been unfortunately a playground or a hot bed for international intrigues for long.

In the movement for the ouster of BNP government Jamaat-e-Islami was a strong part in the opposition retaining its own independent identity. It did not, perhaps, anticipate that Awami League would be in power, rather, most likely, it thought that Begum Zia would be able to return to the administration in a dilapidated shape and would be compelled to seek their help to form a stable government. It was proved mere day-dreaming for them. They themselves were almost totally rejected by the people bagging only three seats in the Jatiya Sangsad as against 18 in 1991 election. BNP was also routed. Having thus failed in their strategies to dictate terms on BNP they made immediate realignments, tuning themselves again with BNP. A fear of AL has worked here. They have good reasons to be apprehensive of a massive reprisal from the pro-independence forces represented by Ghatak Dalal National Committee. Siding with BNP in such an uncertain hour has been to shield themselves against any possible onslaught.

Fear apart, the Jamaat leaders have been observed to be frequently critical of the exuberance of the freedom-loving people in observing the Silver Jubilee of our independence.

They have even criticized the kindling of 'Shikha Chirantan' by Sheikh Hasina on the historic 7th March 1997 which made a tumultuous tour of the whole country from Taknaf to Tetulia and was finally stalled at the Suhrawardy Uddyan on 26th March '97. The symbolic flame has been compared by them with fire-throwing. Surprisingly, they haven't so far made any such criticism of 'Shikha Anirban' in the Cantonment(s). Coincidentally, both these flames have been symbolic representations of our love for independence and also potent reminders of the great sacrifices made by the armed forces and the civilians together in the War of Liberation. The blighters are now publicly ridiculing the flames — vis-a-vis the 3 million martyrs! Wherefore they could gather so much strength to be so audacious?

The whole nation has shown enough tolerance to the anti-liberation forces within the country. By now, these elements have ample breathing time to consolidate their sinister bases. The freedom fighters in BNP have been silent spectators of the seditious activities. They are actually helpless, perhaps, because of the role played by their leader at rehabilitating Golan Azam. The malevolent overtures since Zia's time have now assumed staggering and almost unmanageable proportions. They have gained so much strength that gives them the scope to play second fiddle to BNP.

In such an awe-inspiring episode being enacted in our socio-political arena the pro-liberation forces belonging to every shade of political opinion and affiliation must forge a unity of purpose on a single issue: protect and safeguard our hard-earned independence.

Last but not the least, the Manikganj by-election being a peaceful, free and fair one, BNP has little scope to blame the party in power for any vote-dacuity or rigging of sort. But the blemish of 'Magura' still remains with them, which ultimately culminated into a national movement against them, and the rest is known to all. So a hartal must have enough fair ground for calling, not just 'personal' or 'party' vendetta. For it is the people who suffer and bear the brunt. They are yet to feel the effect of the BNP, not to speak of judging whether it is 'pro' or 'anti-people'.

It appears that BNP has little time to think whether the reasons for its calling hartal or street agitation etc. are premature or not, it has atleast one mature objective — dislodging the government. But isn't it too early to go for 'action' as such.

Undeserved Reward

Sir, I fully support the views of Mr A M Choudhury expressed in his letter captioned 'Undeserved reward' and published in your esteemed daily of 22-6-97. We have got full respect for our Parliament and its members. The MPs are representatives for the common people. As a member of the parliament, one cannot demand a privileged position in public affairs, rather he or she should be more careful about the demand of the common people.

The MPs get salaries. Why? Are they government servants? I think they are all placed in financially solid positions. But if there is anybody who has been pushed by the public to take up the position and financially not up to the standard, then only some financial grant can be made to them — and their number will be a very meagre one. That may be zero also. My idea for all other ministers is the same.

Dr Jalal Uddin Ahmed 2/18 Block B, Lalmitia Dhaka-1207

the dogs (an English idiom, I hasten to point out, at the peril of my life), but the standard of regulatory supervision is worse. Who are patronising whom?

The urban housing development plan has to be accorded top-most priority in the major cities. If multistoried office complexes come up at the same rate as the shopping centres, then the problem of office and business floor space would be solved to a considerable extent. But it appears that the private investment is very shy in the office sector. Can we have a survey report?

My appeal to the government is simple. Do not separate us from our families, and force us to remove the family members into the interior, upsetting all social amenities. I am sure our brilliant politicians can solve these unwanted trends in the society. If they decide to do less politics and display more development aptitude (how do you acquire this taste?), I suspect we have more politicians than we need!

A Husnain Dhaka-1207

Community centres inside residential areas

Sir, As a peaceful long-term resident in Dhaka city, I strongly protest against the indiscriminate official approvals to the establishment of new Community Centres right in the heart of residential areas, disturbing the peace and the social structure of areas where families live.

There is another nuisance: opening of offices in the flats in the residential areas where families live. For example, a family on a floor may be sandwiched within two floors of offices. Also health clinics and tutorial centres are springing up in the residential areas. At this rate of indirect business eviction of families, where the families will go? Are there no restrictions binding on the landlords? Like the consumers, the tenants cannot assert themselves at peer level. The law cannot have multi-levels on a single issue. Such anomalies have to be sorted out by the government.

The standard of law and order in the society has gone to

Wanted code for telephone business

Sir, A large number of small private shops are operating in many cities offering the public the use of their telephones on cash payment basis. The usual charge is Taka 4 for one local call. But those who have digital/ISD telephones charge Tk 5 per local call, compared to the official rate of Tk 1.75.

It is a profitable business affair. The major portion of the line rent of Tk 18,000 is recovered after a short period. Do they have trade licence, and are they taxable?

The government is aware of this side business. The public may be informed if these establishments are registered and licensed for offering such telephone services, and what are the approved, standard rates the public may be charged (no notice seen in any shops).

A business code has to be published and publicised in public interest. Former queries in the newspapers were unanswered. The BTTB may issue a clarification.

Abul M Ahmad Dhaka