

The Bridge on the River Jamuna, and ...

Get it Through the Mill

We laud the government for keeping the option of a special JS session for passing the local government bill under active consideration.

From what we have understood so far, the bill is exactly what the doctor ordered to free the rural Bangladesh from the curse of a complicated, corrupt and inefficient thing it has come to put up with in the name of local administration.

We commend the fact that the bill does not only aspire after an administration comprising people's representatives but also women, the most vulnerable section of our society.

Given the enhancing effect the bill is envisioned to have on local government administration, one wishes ruling party's initiative had enough force in it to have pushed the legislation through the just-concluded fifth session of the JS.

We urge the government to exhaust all possibilities of having the bill checked by people and their representatives. This, however, should not be allowed to push the bill into any procrastinating rut of which we have already had enough taste.

Fearful Trend

The horror story all over again. And not very far from Daserkandi where almost similarly six persons were beaten to death. Between the two, another lynching-type mob-murder occurred killing three — their bodies thrown into fire.

No one wants to be a spectator, each must have a hand in the beating. Anything would do for an excuse — dacoity, childlifting, mugging. Raise a cry and you will see your enemy die in the cruelest manner conceivable — or perhaps inconceivably.

There is that quaint fact of finding pleasure in inflicting pain on others — or in other words violence. And then there is that thing called mob psychosis, resorted to so effectively by the Nazis. But this manifestation of the pleasures theorized by Marquis de Sade which is individual based is seldom transformed into social aberration like pogrom and the familiar communal eruptions.

And this insecurity is not all derived from that alone. The exacerbating factors are unemployment and poverty. Our people must be salvaged from this awful hole. If this is a tall order there is a taller one. The brutalisation of the society at large in fact occurred during the nine-month long genocide of 1991.

Strange Turn

It is a strange society we live in. Individual's obligation for conforming to the societal norms here at times borders on the tragic. Even the natural inclination for justice of a terribly wronged man dies without a whimper.

It is impossible to fully realise what she has gone through; the ultimate insult of womanhood. But it is, indeed possible to imagine the workings in her mind that prompted her to dilute the gravity of the case by asseverating to the police that it was not rape.

Well, it is a legacy she is living up to. Let alone sporadic incidents of rape, women ravaged by the Pakistani occupation forces in '71 did not win back their places in the society for all our pretensions to broadness.

Girl, we do not know your name. But we implore you, if you are hiding truth from fear, then out with it. Burying truth from the fear of being ostracised will not take you anywhere.

NEXT year, around this time, if all goes even reasonably well, we should be getting ready for the inauguration of the 4.8 kilometre-long Jamuna bridge.

Success, they say, has many fathers and failure dies an orphan. In the present political dispensation in this country a success must of course have a mother scenario.

It should please the adherents of whatever remains of the Muslim League, to recall that thirty-one years ago, almost to the day, on July 11, 1966, one Mr Shamsul Huq, a Muslim League member (which fact, I do not know) of the then East Pakistan Assembly moved the following resolution.

"That this Assembly is of the opinion that a bridge be constructed over the river Jamuna, connecting Bahadurabad with Fulchhari and thereby also connecting North Bengal with East Bengal."

One doubts, whether while moving the resolution, Mr Shamsul Huq (hopefully he is

"That this Assembly is of the opinion that a bridge be constructed over the river Jamuna, connecting Bahadurabad with Fulchhari and thereby also connecting North Bengal with East Bengal."

alive and well to see the bridge coming up) was fully conscious of its portent, because in its justification he made only one, and rather subsidiary point, about the physical hardships that travellers from North Bengal to the East Bengal had to endure (Everyone is aware of it so are you, Mr Speaker, he said).

There was then an amendment to the resolution, that should sound music to the BNP ears, for it was moved by Mr Humayun Khan Panni, a Muslim League, who went on to hold, among other blessed and august offices, the Deputy speakership of the fifth parliament. The Panni amendment said that the words "North Bengal with East Bengal", in the resolution, should be substituted by "Northern part of the province and the Eastern part of the province". BNP would not doubt approve of the patriotic concern, even in those days of one of their future senior members about the "integrity" of the geographical area of the then East Pakistan. The amendment was to emphasise that divided though the province was, the two parts actually belonged to one whole. The amended resolution was unanimously passed, but not before Dewan Abdul Basit, the leader of the House, somewhat unwittingly stole its thunder by stating that the government had already taken some steps in this matter and had indeed asked "Soviet experts" (of all people!) to prepare a feasibility study.

Here one must get the political setting of the time right. Those were post-Tashkent days following the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war and hence perhaps Dewan Basit's great reverence for "Soviet experts". But more importantly Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had already raised the now famous "six points" demanding East Pakistan's autonomy. Happily for the historian, there is no controversy as yet about who made that announcement! The Assembly resolution's concern for the welfare of the people of the province and the government's unusual haste in acting upon it, even before it was mooted (feasibility report and Soviet experts) were perhaps intended to be Muslim League's counter

point to Awami League's six points. But it was too little too late, for 1971 changed it all, turning the province into a country.

In October 1973, during his visit to Japan as Prime Minister, Bangabandhu broached the question of the Jamuna bridge on a number of occasions. On October 19, 1973, while speaking at a dinner given by the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Tokyo, he said, "a bridge on the river Jamuna will bring about economic integration ... and sought Japan's 'valuable cooperation and help' in the matter.

On October 24, 1973 the Japanese Bangladesh joint communiqué issued at the conclusion of Bangabandhu's visit stated, "The Bangladesh Prime Minister underlined the importance that the government of Bangladesh attaches to the construction of a bridge over Jamuna to bring about economic integration. The two Prime Ministers (Bangabandhu and Kakui Tanaka, the then Japanese PM) observed with satisfaction that Japan has already prepared a pre-feasibility report on the project." Following that nothing definite took place for a while, for on August 15, 1975 Bangabandhu's assassination put the Bangladesh clock back.

General Ershad who usurped power from a democratically elected government in 1982 succeeded in reviving interest in the bridge and his government

tached the right priority to it and the bridge should be ready by July 1998.

All this brings to mind a soccer metaphor. A good throw in, dribble, a short pass, foul, free kick and a long pass, and the ball is now aloft to be headed into the goal. Let every one take credit for this team game. In the hypothetical setting of a room full of politicians let all hands to up, why, let even the Sangsad come down noisily, the goal would have been scored — the Jamuna bridge, a good, useful and impressive gift of our generation to the nation, would have been built.

There are occasions in a nation's history, and we are an old race but a new nation we must work in unison, irrespective of our political persuasions. We have done it in the past. Bangabandhu's call for emancipation and independence, the soldierly and timely battle cry of President Ziaur Rahman and above all the sacrifice of millions, were great and gallant acts, done, never in a parochial but resolutely in a bipartisan vein. We have done it since our independence too, and in varied fields. Regional Cooperation in this part of the world, the unique constitutional provision for the smooth running of democracy in a developing country, microcredit for poverty alleviation, development and provision of Oral Rehydration Therapy for diarrhoeal diseases and nationwide dissemination of non-formal education to the disadvantaged children, are ideas that are now universally acclaimed. Admittedly as a nation, with our shortcomings in many areas, we are not always quick in the uptake, make mistakes and fight with each other. But let us all take credit for whatever little we may have achieved in

forging this nation and for some of our successes. We all know in the heart of our hearts, no matter what political slogan we shout, that in this Green Delta of ours, the best is yet to be.

Prime Minister's recent visit to Japan was understandably a sentimental journey for her, retracing as he did, the footsteps of her illustrious father. But the success of the visit will have to be measured by the outcome on the ground. She raised important matters with the leaders and government of a country, which has, since our independence, at times gone out of its way to give us grant and loan of more than five billion dollars. Thanks to the conditions created by the signing of the Indo-Bangladesh water treaty, she has now been able to convincingly take up the question of the Ganges barrage. The Japanese authorities have shown interest in the whole vista of economic opportunities that have now opened up in the field of sub-regional cooperation among Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Bhutan. The Japanese response to the Rupsha bridge project has been encouraging. Japanese ODA flow in the future is likely to be satisfactory. But then when it comes to investment, we must realise that our regional market, particularly with the coming in of Myanmar and Vietnam in now highly competitive. Beating the cheap-labour drum is no longer enough. We must create conditions eliminating red tape and corruptions and providing security and stability. Instead of noisy rhetoric, we must demonstrate quiet efficiency. We must objectively and clearly delineate our priority to our donors. During her visit the Prime Minister has brought up subjects that call for bipartisan involvement. To use a sports metaphor again, the ball now is very much in our court.

The writer is a former Foreign Secretary and a Columnist.

Frankly Speaking... by Faruq Choudhury

point to Awami League's six points. But it was too little too late, for 1971 changed it all, turning the province into a country.

Delineating New Security Line in Europe

It is widely believed in the West that given Russia's current weakness a threat from her need not concern the NATO members. Now that NATO's decision to invite new members has been taken, Moscow is expected to act pragmatically and simply acquiesce.

DURING the early '90s, for the first time since its founding in 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was confronted with an awkward but fundamental question: where does its security lie, if any, to its security to be coming from in a changed Europe no more conditioned by Cold War politics?

The wings of new Russia — the successor State of the USSR — were sufficiently clipped allowing it little choice. The fallen Goliath, anaemic and exhausted, badly needed regular dose of elixir of western assistance for mere survival. The US gave Russia \$4.3 billion in bilateral assistance since January 1993. The trade between the two countries went up by 65 per cent since then. The US was now the Russia's largest foreign investor. The political support of the West was even more crucial for the country's new rulers to tide over frequent domestic crises. This being the predicament of NATO's principal adversary, what was the rationale of the alliance's continuance?

In the meantime, there is however a renewed alacrity to revamp the organisation. Not only that, there were animated debates over the pact's inseparability from the security of Europe, the plans were afoot, amidst sharp differences within the NATO camp itself, to enlarge the alliance. The post-Cold War Europe witnessed a plethora of security outfits i.e. OSCE, PFP, NACC, EU and Council of Europe, the proliferation of which seemed to be an

attempt to accommodate maximum viewpoints on European security as well as to supplement and substantiate NATO's own efforts and capabilities. What has, however, created an uneasy stir on either side of an invisible dividing line is the projected expansion of NATO eastward and stopping short of Russia and her slavophile European neighbours. Justifiably, Russia cannot endorse the move and vehemently opposed the western plan for any such expansion. Yet during the approaching NATO summit in Madrid, the organisation will formally invite several countries — probably Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic and Slovenia — to begin negotiations leading to their accession to the alliance. If expansion finally occurs Russia will have lost the test of wills, but the West will then be in danger of losing Russia. Why should the West take that risk?

Notwithstanding recent gush of warmth from the western countries they never owned Russia as part of the community; neither Russia could ever catch up with 'real' Europe symbolised by a common heritage derived from classical Greece and Rome, medieval Christianity, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment as well as the great ideals of French Revolution. Historically Russia, fashioned by different traditions, could not be integrated with classical Europe stretching between the Atlantic and the Oder-Neisse. It could also not be among the beneficiaries of Industrial Revolution; neither did it enjoy in colonial tradition, an access to world-wide market. Moreover, geopolitically the bulk of Russia was clearly outside Europe. So an European model of market economy and multi-party democracy was likely to elude her now as they did in the past. NATO leaders were genuinely concerned how to integrate Russia now either

strategically in an Europe represented by NATO or politically in an entity symbolised by EC. The most crucial problem the western leaders were now gripped with was where to draw a security line in post-Cold War Europe to distinguish their friends and foes within the framework of a new European security order? Although the NATO experts were divided or indecisive on the issue of the alliance's eastward expansion the impending entry of the Visegrad countries into the NATO points to the same exercise on ground; delineating new security line in Europe by shifting the NATO's front from the Oder-Neisse to the strategic corridor of Central Europe. But why?

According to the traditionalists projecting the conservative

Russia's sliding back to despotism via a period of anarchy though perhaps not a communist one. But internally a dictatorial and externally xenophobic Russia will be no less dangerous for European security.

Most worrisome for the moment is, however, a continuing unpredictability of an uncertain Russia during its long spell of transition. To make things worse, there appears to be credibility gaps, at least, on two counts. Russia's generals could hardly relish either NATO's warming with some of former members of now defunct Warsaw pact or American dabbling in the country's 'near-abroad'. With Russia's military power and prevalent credibility gap the fear of Russia will therefore remain, at least for the time-being. Consequently the

front line for the NATO has to remain, at the worst, where it was for the last almost half a century. But the majority in the NATO seems to prefer it to be shifted forward thus creating an extended sphere of influence. There are other reasons why the pro-enlargement lobby of the alliance wants it to be expanded up to certain limit. Even if there are inhibitions about Russia, most people in the West do not have much grudge against former East-bloc countries, particularly the ones in Central Europe. In their view, these countries suffered a great deal under Soviet domination ever since the closing years of the Second World War. Most advanced along the road to democracy like Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovenia where democratic as-

pirations were brutally crushed by Soviet forces should, they think, be included in NATO's fold lest the West's newly-acquired control over them slips away under the influence of a dictatorial or unfriendly Russia. Moreover the ethnic conflict in some of these countries should be dealt with in the context of a collective defence framework rather than running the risk of such conflict erupting and spilling into the alliance itself. Such a notion of treating these countries on a basis separate from those for Russia is however fraught with the danger of putting it into effect only at the expense of Russian displeasure.

Expanding NATO eastward without either Russia's inclusion or her endorsement in case of the inclusion of others — none of which is likely — would invariably be interpreted as a move against Russia itself. Current schemes for NATO, many think, are dangerous and provocative. Because NATO is a traditional military alliance — a concentration of power against a common external threat — and its extension would certainly impel Russia to marshal a countervailing coalition. NATO expansion would thus resurrect, not erase the dividing line between Europe's east and west. As expected, Russia persistently objected to the formal enlargement of a western military bloc from which it would be excluded. Moreover, the provocation for an unstable, unpredictable and uncertain Russia would surely bring back perilous East-West standoff from which the world was freed only recently. It will intensify Russian suspicion about the exact motive of the West and inflame the nationalist, anti-western and militaristic tendencies within Russia. The Transatlantic community is surely not less aware of these consequences. When it still wants to shift the alliance's

forward line deep into what is considered Russia's sphere of influence, is it preempting a showdown with Russia?

Not exactly that — while the enlargement of the NATO goes on the alliance would be toying with a few alternatives to placate an enraged Russia. Many in the West believe that a constructive engagement of Russia would take much of the wind from the sails of Russian threat to European security. To them, an integration of Russia into the world community and an integration into Europe merit top priority at this juncture. Another alternative is to develop a special NATO-Russian relationship. It is widely believed in the West that given Russia's current weakness a threat from her need not concern the NATO members. Now that NATO's decision to invite new members has been taken, Moscow is expected to act pragmatically and simply acquiesce. After all, Russia has instances of coming to acknowledge many events, it previously denounced as unacceptable.

It is however a flawed perception of Russia's threat. The problem of Russia is not necessarily from its economic and military weakness but from the overall political direction in which the country may be heading. Russia's estrangement from the West can play into the hands of its ultra-nationalistic forces while economically the reaction would be at the expense of reforms under way. Not only that; internationally, the damage to the post-Cold War security environment can be considerable. At stake are not just general relations but important elements of the current peaceful order including arms control agreements. A possible Russian decision to revert to a nuclear first use strategy is an even more frightening prospect. Although the West is dictating, by attempting a new battle line, the course of history from a position of strength the whole exercise may prove preposterous unless it can successfully contain these grim possibilities.

PERSPECTIVES by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

view of the alliance, the East comprising the remnants of the Soviet empire as well as Russia itself is still the villain. Dangers to European security are likely to come no more from the communist powers but from the unpredictability of internal developments in former communist countries including Russia. In spite of massive political supports by the western countries in putting down the hardliners' revolts in 1991 and 1993 and getting Yeltsin re-elected in 1996, they nevertheless continue to feel uncomfortable with Russia's military might — still strongest in the continent. The world's second most powerful nuclear force remains a source of paranoid anxiety even for the NATO's principal ally, the US. They are also wary of another ominous prospect i.e.,

To the Editor

PM on BTV Sir, Everyone will appreciate our Prime Minister's question-and-answer show on the BTV though the question remains: is it the way the Prime Minister should answer 12 crore people? In other words, I should say, a Prime Minister has got no scope to answer the questions of 12 crore people excepting through public representative. Otherwise such an attempt will turn out to be a mockery, however sincere a Prime Minister might be.

Ahmed Kabir Choudhury 136/Housing Estate, Sylhet

Image-building

Sir, How is the image of Awami League government after one year of ruling on air? Most of the gold is yet to be mined — it is still underground; some of it history had shipped abroad; some of it is floating, some crashed in the stock market; and most of the rest is black.

The latent image of the historic party is now in the process of being refurbished after grabbing power constitutionally. It is time to call for a pause in the hectic activities and assess the

situation, not subjectively, but objectively — how "neutral" and non-Al observers look at the image, building up, bent a little due to overuse/strain, or showing cracks here and there.

The AL has an untarnished reputation; but it was not in active business for two decades. These days, cosmetic surgery is quite popular, depending on the means, not the end.

The question is how to mould an undisciplined society, spilt, split and divided by the politicians, or the environment, whichever has stronger influence. Of course, the politicians have first priority, as they run the state. The ship of state may not be underpowered, but it is certainly overloaded with more garbage than passengers and goods. There is no shortage of passenger traffic, but the goods are generally not good. Too much political value-added tax is being levied, using unusual levers of patronisation, or condemnation.

It would be unfair to put the blame entirely on the present regime. In the Third World, the beast of burden has to carry the overload and spill-overs of history in the making, or unmaking. The situation is never solid, always fluid, and rather

sticky. The clogged drains of emotion and passion have to be cleared once for all, to enable the legislators to read the futures market with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

The preliminary training ground is the new-fangled Dhaka Stock Exchange. One encouraging aspect of the proceedings was that the clients were democratically distributed at all levels of the society, but the puppet dance was controlled by higher and invisible entities in the high heavens: now on (heavenly) bail.

Note the advent of a new national quiz. Al ingenuity has to be admired. Almost every week it is discovering, or re-discovering, more and more 'Days' or anniversaries to be fittingly observed by the citizens (command performance, no options are available) for this or that occasion, suppressed or unremembered. Bangladesh must be holding a world record in the number of anniversaries or 'Days' officially observed in the limited 365 days allotted to the year. Added to the large number of official holidays, the Bangladeshis must be taking it easy while working hard three and a half days a week — the Friday weekend syndrome, re-

lignously hoisted by an earlier autocratic regime for political expediency.

In this country there are many colours of neutrality. Any colour is available so long it is not white. Lately, voices are being heard from the intellectuals to keep the State separate from the Party. Since there is a shortage of leaders (globally), this may take some time, judging from the speed of the deregulation of the electronic media.

Alif Zabr Dhaka

Computer, a "luxury" item?

Sir, A user buying a new computer will have to pay taka 48 to the government for every 100 taka of the price paid. It means that one half of the purchase price goes to the exchequer under the new national budget just passed by the Parliament. Since when PCs became a luxury item? Now even the upper-middle class cannot afford to buy PC for the students for home use.

Surely, this cannot be national policy to encourage computer literacy in an under-de-

veloped country such as Bangladesh. This step is also not the best way to control smuggling out of the imported parts/accessories.

According to the government's declared policy, computer training is going to be imparted to all high school students from Class VIII. What is the incentive for a family to acquire a computer for home use?

Can we have a clarification from the Ministry of Science & Technology on the national S&T policy of the present regime? The continuity in policies have to be maintained — a problem the foreign investors are also facing directly or indirectly.

Abul M Ahmad Dhaka

Weekly holiday

Sir, The government has recently declared two-day week-ends i.e., Fridays and Saturdays. Lot of discussions for and against the decision are going on in the press and elsewhere. This has both advantages and disadvantages. But in our context, the disadvantages of a two-day weekend may far outweigh the advantages. An alternate option could be to go back to a

system which has stood the test of time. Earlier we used to have 37:30 working hours per week as follows:

Monday through Thursday and Saturday 8:30x5=32:30 hrs (0730 hrs to 1400 hrs) Friday 5:00x1=5:00 hrs (0730 hrs to 1230 hrs) Sunday - Holiday Total =37:30 hrs

Some arguments in favour of the above option are:

- a. Convenient international business communication. b. Lunch and Prayer times fall outside the working hours. c. Recently, an Islamic country Pakistan is reported to have found it convenient to go back from Friday to Sunday as weekly holiday. d. Low paid employees can take up part-time jobs or undertake small business ventures in the afternoon. e. For others, afternoons remain free for family commitments. Hopefully, the above facts would merit a second thought from the authorities concerned.

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