

Big Threat, Small Response

Is the invasion closing in on the capital, inexorably? With Narsingdi and Comilla falling to the advancing enemy, that should be only a matter of time. How have we prepared ourselves to engage this arsenic enemy and beat it before it exacts a wider and crueler toll? The government has been amply moved on the danger by many quarters and we ourselves have at least thrice appealed to them to take up the job seriously and comprehensively and do it real quick. There have been reports of government recognising the arsenic threat and also of some limited action. The Jatiya Sangsad has also been told of the government's idea of the situation. All this, however, adds up to nothing more than the age-old and disgusting bureaucratic cover-up kind of thing. Explaining things complacently rather than addressing the problem on a war footing.

This failure to respond appropriately to the size and nature of the problem endangering currently about a half of this nation is unfortunate. And it all stems from a possible failure to comprehend the problem in a manner it calls for.

Theories have been forthcoming as to the source of this problem, specially after the experienced School of Environmental Studies of Jadavpur University has been involved in the work by the Dhaka Community Hospital Trust, so far the only organisation rendering yeoman's service in the cause of arsenic-free water. Researches into the causes of and also for effective prevention and cure of the contamination must be both very extensive and very deep to yield a sure-fire way out.

As we have earlier mentioned, it took almost ages to motivate people to turn to groundwater and for the government to make hygienic tubewell water available to all. The 1997 UNICEF Report in a way congratulates Bangladesh for reaching potable water to 98 per cent of its population. Now, in the affected areas, it has become very urgent and necessary to persuade the people to shun the same tubewell water and even to seal a large number of tubewells yielding more than one microgram of arsenic in a litre of water. The highest level safe for Bangladesh, as set by WHO, is 0.05 micrograms.

The answer is to cure all contaminated tubewells. Will this need a technological breakthrough? Well, this will need a gigantic and whole-hearted campaign. The present scale of activity would not simply do. The government must respond appropriately and — yes — visibly.

Height of Irony

State Minister for Health Dr Amanullah's wish to serve people has created a problem for him. According to a leading Bangla daily he is simply twiddling his fingers because his ministerial superior would not reportedly give him any work. The two are known to be at loggerheads over certain issues.

The dual affliction of idleness and conscience has stirred Mr Amanullah sufficiently into seeking cure of this non-medical problem from none other than country's top executive boss. As the reports say, being tired of his unprescribed rest, the eminent cardiologist has written a letter to the Prime Minister requesting her to assign him some task.

Dr Amanullah's problem is out of the ordinary. When most people look for ways to evade work or responsibilities one way or the other, here is one person, that too a government official who is lamenting the lack of it. But one wonders how in a poor, developing country like Bangladesh where deaths and diseases are in oodles, can possibly the second executive of its health department literally beg for work. Since when life became such a lovely, sunny tale of health and happiness?

This is the height of irony. Not want of work, but an excess of work which actually should have driven Dr Amanullah to this kind of desperation. The candour shown by this former professor of the National Cardiovascular Institute can serve the purpose of an example in any future effort to heal our national inclination towards truancy. For the moment though, a reconciliation between the two top men of the ministry of health is what everyone is keenly waiting for.

If the ministry is myopic enough not to see any work for its top functionaries to justify the taxpayers' money then let us volunteer to show the areas in our health care system that are dying for a healing touch. Nobody is expecting you to conquer new worlds. Just draw a plan and implement it to remove the problems that have been afflicting the health sector for years. Go, get the public hospitals rid of their inadequacies and corruption to start with. Nation will be indebted to you.

Why This Error?

According to a report published in last Saturday's issue of a leading Bangla daily, some Foreign Ministry publications like Bangladesh Today and Bangladesh Basic Information Guide are plagued with gross factual errors. For example, the date of Bangladesh's declaration of independence has been mentioned March 27 when it should be March 26. As the report used other suspect excerpts from those publications, bloomers seem to be galore. Mind you, all these publications are aimed at giving foreigners an idea about the political history of the republic.

The discrepancy between the constitutional version of our history and that provided in the Foreign Ministry's publications reportedly dates back to the pre-75 days — the point from where the revisionist theory of our history is touted to begin. No wonder that this confusion and often erroneous business continued for the last twenty years.

Apparently the AL's return to the nave of power has not changed the trend of some people being quite at peace with themselves by publishing the photo and profile of country's executive head.

History is the ceaseless source of inspiration for a nation in its march ahead. More so when it is about as glorious an event as that of its struggle for independence. We hope there are more conscientious and self-esteeming people in our foreign or information ministry than a few moral sleepers to put an end to this undesirable status quo.

Dead End for Middle East Peace Process?

Agreements that have already been reached reduce the prospects for further agreements because it would run the risk of compromise on either side. Also there is less urgency now than before. The status quo is better than what it was five years ago or what it would be henceforth. The passage of time also has hurt the prospects for peace.

HERE are enough indications that the Arab-Israeli peace process is now mired in the shifting sands of Middle East politics. As the process is now moving towards a 'final status' agreement, there are numerous roadblocks on the way either slowing down the pace of the process or halting it totally at times. Few are however surprised or disappointed at the setback because scepticism as to its success abounded even before the process started. Yet, amidst the hesitations on either side the process took off from the Madrid peace conference of October 1991 when Arabs and Israelis met face to face for the first time as an inevitability in the backdrop of 'new historic realities'. The realities could not be more favourable to the peace brokers who also wanted to complete their unfinished mission in the Middle East.

Ever since the West planted the state of Israel right in the Arab heart-land as its strategic outpost in a hostile Middle East — the accompanying experience, despite many successes, has been far from pleasant. Not only that, the Arab world did not accept the entity in its midst; it fought a series of wars with the nascent state making its existence miserable. Even though Israel won each one of the wars fought and also occupied vast chunk of Arab land it had to live under the shadow of constant insecurity and the cost and burden of the occupation also had been tremendous. Moreover she continued to remain a pariah state with at least half of the world withholding its recognition to her. During the Gulf War, the Iraqi scud missile underlined Israel's vulnerability to new generation of the weapons of mass destruction. An ever-growing power of Iran with her nuclear ambition and the reconsolidation of Iraq's large military continued to pose threat to an exasperated Israel. Worse still, the UN General Assembly condemned Israel in 1975 equating its Zionism with racism.

The new realities came as a great relief both to Israel and the West. The West had just won the Cold War with no rival left any more to oppose its schemes of things in the global politics. The Arab governments lost their Soviet benefactor. Iraq, the new Centre of Arab resistance was thrashed in the battlefield. Meanwhile, under the trauma of the Gulf War most of the Arab countries came to accept Israel, as a permanent, if not welcome, reality. The Palestinians' fortune reached its

nadir with additional problems they faced. The PLO lost its Arab financial backers in the Persian Gulf region for choosing the wrong side during the Gulf War. Moreover, the Intifada was fast losing its steam. The Palestinians were divided with the rise of several extremist groups. The realities could not be more conducive for Israel's patrons to complete their unfinished tasks to establish the bonafide of Israel surrounded by her unfriendly Arab neighbours. The Middle East peace process initiated in 1991 precisely aimed at that.

Essentially a product of Nasser's Pan-Arab dreams, PLO with its sanctuary and operational base provided by Egypt was however heavily influenced by intra-Arab politics. Only after Egypt's defeat in the six-day war in 1967 the PLO moved on somewhat independently and within a short span of time achieved spectacular success both in military and diplomatic front. Diluted in an all-embracing Arab nation under the Turkish rule and British mandate Palestinians were for the first time defined as a distinct nation by Arafat who articulated the cause of the Palestinians expelled from their homeland, organised and fought for them under the banner of Al-Fatah. Yet the Arab defeat in 1967, the infamous 'black September' of 1970 and subsequently the Egyptian recognition of Israel in 1979 dealt PLO a mortal blow. And ever since the PLO was on retreat. Finally, when driven out of its bases in Lebanon following the tragedies of Sabra and Shatilla, PLO lost much of its bites and the Palestinian cause was almost lost in the maze of an intra-Arab feud.

At that critical juncture, it was in fact the Palestinian Intifada starting in late-'87 which provided key political bargaining chip for Arafat to come into with his struggle for the Palestinian state. Now with that Intifada dying down Arafat had little in his hand to redeem his pledges to create an independent state in the entire length and breadth of their historic homeland. Moreover with his loosening grip on the Palestinian movement with the emergence of rival Hamas, Arafat had no choice but to step into a trap garbed as peace process. He gambled as he always

did with a desperate hope of making best out of it. The result was a decision by all of Israel's immediate neighbours who were evidently crestfallen with the demise of the cold war and by Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza to attend October 1991 Madrid Conference.

Israel, meanwhile, saw Madrid as a way out of the imbroglio. For her, the status quo already proved costly, outright annexation seemed fraught with grave risks and a Palestine state was out of question. The worst she could bargain was the question of autonomy for Palestinians. All these alternatives for the resolution of Arab-Israeli conflict were already under consideration of Israel and her allies. Now in Madrid they saw a prospect for resolving the issue with the least of the price — may be with even less than autonomy. But of

to start with — only little more than a municipal control over a dreary Gaza Strip and a decrepit city of Jericho near the Dead Sea. Later, the Oslo agreement of 1995 extended Palestinian authority to the major cities of the West Bank.

The Oslo agreement of 1993 also yielded a formal peace treaty between Israel and Jordan as an unexpected dividend. What promoted the October 1994 treaty between Israel and Jordan was a change in Jordan's political calculus; it would lose all influence over the settlery of Jerusalem and Palestinians unless it entered into a peace treaty with Israel. In addition, Yasser Arafat's and the PLO's open willingness to come to terms with Israel made such a step for Jordan acceptable.

The peace process also produced two grand regional economic conferences, led to serious

no longer appears to be an active or willing mediator. She is left with few incentives to push the process forward once her immediate objectives have already been achieved. So the onus of carrying the process forward squarely falls on the contending parties themselves. Are they equal to the tasks when the issues of 'final status' are indeed difficult, tricky and in a way elusive? The issues, particularly like those of Jerusalem, Palestinian statehood, the right of the millions of Palestinian refugees to return home, and now also water would be difficult and perhaps impossible to negotiate even if all sides have the will to do so.

Today, there is neither the will nor the ability to conclude an Israeli-Palestinian 'final status' agreement — that is, an accord for enduring final peace. The PLO leadership fears it will lose support and, in the end legitimacy if it is seen to compromise important political goals. There is the additional fear that the Hamas and other radical Islamic group would gain at the expense of the PLO if anything were done to weaken the Palestinian claim to Jerusalem. It is often safer to espouse dreams that are whole than to accept incomplete realities. For its part, the new Likud government of Benjamin Netanyahu won the election on a plank that opposed a Palestinian state, the right of the return for Palestinian refugees and any dilution of exclusive Israeli sovereignty over an united Jerusalem. For Israelis, too, it is politically safe and expedient to live with an imperfect status quo than to experiment with controversial alternatives. Israeli leadership would not miss taking lesson from the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin.

Prospects are even bleaker for a treaty between Syria and Israel without which no comprehensive peace is possible. The Netanyahu government has been explicit in its intention to maintain sovereignty over the Golan Heights and in its refusal to return all of the territory gained in 1967 war. The Likud's notion of minor concession in exchange for peace and normalisation appears both unrealistic and unacceptable. It is highly unlikely that Syria which is known to have rejected the Rabin government's position of

offering most or even all of the area in exchange for peace and security, would be prepared to accept 'half a loaf' offered by present Likud government. Similarly, there is no chance of an agreement between Israel and Lebanon, a vital component of Middle East peace package. Lebanon is not an independent actor and would always be influenced by Syrian military presence in that country.

There are also more general explanations for the poor prospects for peace. The close fight in last year's election in Israel underlined that it was a divided country with no overwhelming mandate for any political party. It is difficult to define what mandate, if any, Netanyahu can rightfully claim. He perhaps got elected by tapping Israeli frustration with a peace that did not ensure absolute security. So long Netanyahu is in office it is futile to expect any change in Israel's attitude or policy. There are also factors in the Arab world that will make reaching any new agreement difficult. For example Egypt, the first Arab state to make peace with Israel, is pursuing policy more suited to placate domestic critics than to promote the cause of wider Middle East peace through building bridges with the neighbours. King Hussain of Jordan enjoys little support at home for his hobnobbing with Israel. The Gulf states are more embroiled in the internal political problems and threats posed by Iran and Iraq. Indeed, home-grown Islamic groups and their external benefactors will discourage further normalisation or compromises with Israel.

Agreements that have already been reached reduce the prospects for further agreements because it would run the risk of compromise on either side. Also there is less urgency now than before. The status quo is better than what it was five years ago or what it would be henceforth. The passage of time also has hurt the prospects for peace. The impact of the demise of the Soviet Union and outcome of the Gulf War have been mixed. So too, has the stature of the US. The current military situation in the Middle East with an armed deterrence between Israel and Syria is otherwise unstable and explosive. However, thanks to deterrence it may be possible to maintain 'no war, no peace' for an extended period of time when, at the best, a cold peace fraught with the chances of its collapse would be prevailing in an ever turbulent Middle East.



PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

greater interest for them was also the prospect of getting Israel recognised by the Arab adversaries including the PLO. With that, they knew, Israel's last legal battle would be over almost at no cost.

The post-Madrid diplomacy made possible the 1993 Oslo agreement. What made Oslo Israeli willingness to accept the PLO at long last as a negotiating partner, along with the PLO's willingness to accept a step-by-step process with no guarantee of where it would end. Nevertheless the immediate objectives of the peace process were, as expected, instantly achieved with the signing of first Oslo agreement on south lawn of the White House in September 1993. The most striking feature of the agreement had been the formal ending of hostility between the PLO and Israel and the mutual recognition of each other. While Israeli recognition hardly meant anything for the Palestinians in tangible term, the PLO's conceding to Israel's right to exist was a net gain for the latter. However 1993 Oslo agreement gave Palestinians —

ous peace negotiation between Israel and Syria, and prompted several Arab states and many other governments around the world to establish diplomatic relations with Israel. The understanding generated by the process helped the UNGA repeal its 1975 resolution on Israel and Zionism. So far as the interest of Israel and her allies were concerned it produced miracles. Is there any chance of further miracle? Not because now onward it was the turn of the Palestinians to profit from such miracle.

Israel and PLO began 'final status' talks just before Israel's 1996 election. The goal was to complete these talks and sign a treaty in three years, by May 1999. There is no conceivable way now that this goal would be met. Several factors, not just the June 1996 election of a more conservative Israeli government, account for this abrupt end of a period of promises in the peace process. The US which was the cosponsor of the Madrid Peace Conference and, in fact, the principal driving force behind the peace process

The Man Who Cared and Shared

by Faruq A Choudhury

I have just returned from a trip abroad and find it difficult to resume life in Dhaka without Kaiser Bhai around. Kaiser Rasheed's friendship spanned generations. My father used to refer to him as, 'my young friend, and to me he was a friend and a cousin, very much in that order. My two children had their own very special rapport with him. Kaiser Bhai had that rare capacity of communicating with people, that endeared him to anyone who came across him, no matter to what age-group he belonged.

Kaiser Bhai, slipped out of our lives without any 'fuss or bother' as he would have put it, only a couple of days before I was scheduled to go abroad, leaving me barely the time, as it were, to attend his extraordinary 'Janaza' at the Kurmitola Golf Club. As we, his fellow golfers, bade him a tearful farewell and as he was being driven out of the club for the very last time, on his final journey to his home in Sylhet, the monsoon clouds hanging heavy, burst into rains over the lush green fairways and foliage of the golf course, he used to so dearly love. Standing in silence, all we knew at once that the club, without him, would never be the same again.

My trip abroad hardly helped lessen the grief of his

sudden parting, for it was to Beijing that I went, where three and a half decades ago, I had had for the first time, the privilege of sharing with him the excitement and thrill of a diplomat's life in the China of those days. Many memories came into mind, one of which was an evening while on an official trip to Beijing he came home for dinner, with a friend of his, Javed Iqbal, son of Allama Iqbal, and we sat and talked about China, through the night, without realising how time had passed, till the morning rays of the sun, peeping through the drawn curtains, reminded us of the busy day that lay ahead.

The three of us had a hurried breakfast and were at the Beijing University at nine o'clock in the morning, in time for the delegation's visit to that institution. It was as if the beginning of a normal day after a restful night, and there was Kaiser Rasheed, looking fresh, handsome and debonair as always, alert and receptive enough to engage our hosts in a lively discussion on higher education in China. In Kaiser Rasheed's company one had the most extraordinary experiences, and this was one of those.

I have had the privilege of sharing so much with him throughout life that it is just not possible even to touch upon those in this brief tribute. He



Kaiser Rashid

was my mentor, as a senior colleague in the Foreign Service, and his generosity, warmth and sincerity were so much above the ordinary that one always felt elevated in his company. Kaiser Rasheed had a style that was inimitable and whenever in life one felt low and desolate Kaiser Bhai would be around. On the other hand, when the going would be good one had to search him out. He was always a true friend in need.

The last evening we were together, only three days prior to his death, he told me that he had decided to write. He would, he said, write regularly about certain routes and reserved intimately in life, getting to know people had always interested him. His mother, he said, would be at the top of that list for she was a fascinating person to whom he owed a great deal. And then breaking into one of his familiar grins he added with a twinkle in his eyes, 'You know, and chaps like you may also deserve a line or two!'

I shall, as long as I live, treasure this remark as a compliment from a man I have always admired and adored.

OPINION

In Another Country

It was only to be expected that the PM's absurd assertions are contended in the print media sooner or later. And you (Mahfuz Anam) have come out with an incisive analysis in the 13 July issue of The Daily Star of the 'theorisation' attempted by PM about appointing her in law as our new ambassador to Canada. You have raised issues which come to the fore almost automatically when one reflects on the PM's statement in the Parliament.

I would like to start with your penultimate paragraph for two reasons — one, it dealt with the issue of 'how' (almost unceremoniously) an ambassador was recalled after having done only five months of his two year extended tenure, as this rightly has a profound effect on the host government; and two, it mentioned about the much vaunted 'untiring effort' of the government at enhancing the image of the country. Without going into the question of the recalled ambassador's credentials, one thing could surely be said about the government's action. It made the process of appointing ambassadors look cheap, more so, as you have mentioned in your own commentary, when it was done to 'make place' for PM's relative. For one thing, the host government has the scope to read a lot into this action and some of that could even be felt by the next ambassador — PM's relative.

On the other hand, it would not be unexpected if this action sends wrong signals to all other Bangladesh ambassadors. After all, official reprimand for inefficiency is one thing and deliber-

ate public affront to one's dignity is quite another. This will in all likelihood demoralise our other envoys who now would mind the job of 'keeping the job' more than that of 'enhancing the image of the country'. Is it in the interest of the country to demean the process of appointing our ambassadors who represent the country in the name of the President? I raise this question for the same reason mentioned by you — appointing one of PM's relatives — following a sudden recall of an ambassador, the sole purpose of which is to accommodate a competent relative of PM.

At the end of your well-argued piece, it is perhaps clear that the PM did not think this matter through. This means she may not have been properly advised on making such statements which created more problems for her than it removed. Here lies the most important aspect of this whole episode. What sort of advice led her to adopt policy of seeking 'reward' for the 'immense sacrifice' made by her illustrious family at the cost of decency of administrative norms? It would be in everyone's interest to understand now that in matters relating to diplomacy and foreign relations, in spite of rules and regulations, conventions and practices, there is and will always be a definite place for decency and dignity in each and every government action.

Ensuring that will not only instill the required confidence and predictability in our own people, it will also generate trust and respect in our foreign interlocutors which go miles

more in convincing the potential investors than the scores of BOI 'ads' in foreign media. If at all attracting foreign investment is the declared goal of the 'economic diplomacy', we should take greater care not to appear incapable of protecting the 'political' trust which forms the mainstay of relations between governments. Whim and vacillation in foreign relations are to be avoided for all times to come.

It will not, then, be out of place to mention that a number of ambassadorial appointments by the present government in its first few months generated 'debate' as they were said to have been done at the behest of interested quarters and in a haste not allowing for proper scrutiny that they usually call for. One such was the appointment of our 'recalled' ambassador to Canada. The others do not need to be mentioned here.

In view of such paroxysms, the vital concern remains whether the government is properly advised in matters relating to diplomatic relations, the tone and nuance of it. As would be well-known to all discerning observers, in its first year, the present government has made great strides in foreign relations yet much remains to be achieved and even more to be consolidated. Perhaps, caution and pragmatism yet to be the guiding light for us. This warrants serious consideration lest the government falls prey to self-seekers who like to operate from within as ever.

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To the Editor

Safety in factories

Sir, recent deaths in the garment factories due to 'fire' have shocked the nation. This is possibly the price that we have to pay for our indifference to safety at places of work. No other nation in the world is so callous and indifferent about safety at places of work as we are. It is very common to see workers working in very elevated places without having a safety harness tied to their waist, it is unthinkable in any other country.

Today safety offers/inspectors are common in factories in most countries of the world. Just like charity begins at home, safety also begins in the factory itself. It is important that both employees and employers are made conscious of requirement of safety at places of work. Safety officers/inspectors having adequate training and experience on industrial safety may be employed in factories with the responsibility to oversee the all round safety aspects/requirements in factories, carry out safety/fire drills, ensure that

place safe for work, make employees conscious of the requirements of safety in place of work and what it means to them and their family, train the workers on basic rules of prevention, control of accidents, use of basic fighting and safety equipment etc.

A conscious effort by all in a factory to make the working place safe will go a long way in preventing accidents in our factories. I would urge the authority concerned to develop a cadre of well-trained safety inspectors for employment in our factories in order to minimise these unfortunate and avoidable loss of life. Polytechnic Institutes in collaboration with fire service could be utilised to develop this cadre of safety officers/inspectors.

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Women in buses

Sir, Most of the time women are utterly embarrassed when they are compelled to sit next to a man. Personal experience

shows, a man occupies the empty seat beside a woman without the slightest hesitation and to the woman's utmost disgust. The woman tries her best to avoid body contact with the man. But it does not really help. When the man gets off at the next stoppage, another man comes and sits down beside her and the misery of the lady continues. But who will listen to her discomfort when innumerable problems of women in our society go unnoticed? Every conscious citizen feels the need of separate bus for women in certain routes and reserved seats for them in others to preserve and uphold women's dignity. And this is our earnest request to transport authority both in public and private sectors.

There is no need for separate seats, for men and women and it undermines women's position — such comments of some feminist organisations of our country do not at all depict the actual feelings, thought and sense of morality of mass-women. Most women abhor the idea of being seated next to a

man. Moreover, it sometimes creates opportunity for respect to women and take action.

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Appointment of "competent relatives"

Sir, From the recent discussion in the Parliament we came to know that the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had appointed the father-in-law of her daughter Mr Mosharraf Hossain as High Commissioner to Canada. She also had given her argument justifying such appointment on the floor of the Parliament. She said, 'There is nothing wrong in appointing competent relatives... The PM is competent enough to appoint any competent person to any top position if she so likes. The High Commissioner to Canada is one of the top-most diplomatic assignments of our country. It is quiet evident that a competent man would have been selected to fill such an im-

portant position. But the moot point here now is, how competent is this competent person?

The 'Third view' by Mahfuz Anam in The Daily Star, of the 13 July, 1997 on the 'relative' question was really a very bold and intrepid assessment of such a perfunctory action of the government.

People have taken to the fancy to know how competent is the present High Commissioner and what was the incompetence of the previous one? A clarification in this respect from the government can satisfy these queries. But what we know is that the called-back high commissioner from Canada was foreign secretary of our country immediately before the present one. He is a career diplomat and served many countries with unblemished records before joining here as foreign secretary. The examples of foreign secretaries serving as ambassadors/high commissioners are very rare to find out. What prompted the government to rescind the appointment of such a career diplomat forthwith and place a close relative of the

prime minister to this important post?

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Discipline in bank transaction

Sir, I am a humble client of Sonali Bank, now living at Uttara, Dhaka. The other day the weakness of the Uttara Sonali Bank Branch was openly exposed to the clients of the bank because of the shortage of its staff and unhealthy atmosphere now developing in the bank premises in transaction.

This branch does not have enough staff to meet the needs of the clients in different sections of banking transaction making it a bad place to visit.

The higher authorities of the Sonali Bank should come forward with a possible solution to the existing problems facing the Sonali Bank, Uttara Branch now. The sooner the better.

Abul Ashraf Noor
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