

Cloudy Political Scene

Recently, the President said in a public address that if the ruling party goes north, the opposition, with its eyes closed, will go south. As if to prove the President's point, Sheikh Hasina has gone eastwards, visiting Indonesia, while Khaleda Zia is in the west. We know that this east-west direction of the two leaders' visits is a coincidence, however, the real going off in the opposite direction is not.

Two good elections — as good as we can ever get in a developing country — have not taught our political parties that being in power is not the *be-all and end-all of politics*, and that *opposition for opposition's sake* does not do any good to anybody, especially the opposition. But then, nobody is willing to listen or learn proving only the aptness of president's other observation made on the same occasion. We seem to be caught up in a vicious cycle of destructive politics in which the mentality is 'damn you, even if it damns me' and that nothing is acceptable unless 'we' are in power.

We have said so before, and we do so again. Awami League is reaping today what it had sown while in opposition. Boycotting parliament at the slightest of pretext, taking issues to the streets instead of the floor of the Sangsad, blaming everything on the government whether true or untrue, twisting everything that government says and finding some sort of malicious intention in all its policies and everything else that we see today in the BNP's politics comes from what the AL did while in opposition. So the situation is *tit for tat* and let the country be damned. BNP is going to do everything to the government that AL did to it while the former was in power.

However fair and well deserved this sort of politics may appear to be to the BNP, for the voters it is quite unacceptable, and for the country extremely dangerous. Referring to the President's remark again, BNP appears to respond to one mistake of AL by willing to make three of its own. The total boycott of the last session of the parliament, the indirect talk of mid-term polls, more and more hartal calls in the districts, constant hammering that the country is on the verge of collapse and brisk preparations for what is euphemistically called 'movement' but what we prefer to call attempts to grab power, are all signs that we as a people and Bangladesh as a country will not get the respite and the chance to go for that single-minded effort at development that we need to survive. Politics, which one day saved us from military dictatorships and gave us our independence, appears today to be bent on destroying whatever we have been able to achieve.

Garments Death Again

Another five young women killed in the cruellest manner conceivable. Second in only five weeks, the first taking 23 lives on July 30. The Saturday afternoon tragedy was enacted in the now all-too-familiar pattern. A electric short circuit, resulting bang and smoke, scare overtaking six to seven hundred workers, a race to the one and only five-foot wide stair, stampede and death from being trampled over by hundreds of feet. The worse part of such an internal situation is no one is evidently being moved into reacting sympathetically and helpfully to the repeating garments tragedies. Neither the government nor the garments owners are known to have gone into any remedial action touched by the inhumanity of these most unfortunate and utterly unacceptable incidents.

And the worst part of this accursed situation is: sure enough some more are going to be trampled to death in some other garments factories this month or the next. How can a government allow this to happen, allow murder of its citizens even after having prior 'knowledge' of the crime?

We have been strumming on the same tunes of standard prescription against garments deaths. Still we repeat the most obvious of them, one that must be obeyed by all garments entrepreneurs. On pain of being barred from business. No garments factory in unspecialised high-rise buildings. These must be housed in buildings specially designed to answer to the special needs of garments factories. But we know this cannot be brought about simply by wishing. This will take time.

Meanwhile all the establishments must introduce fire drills participated by all workers and officers at least once a week. All supervisors must be extensively trained, specially not to run away in the face of catastrophe. All factories must have special and adequate fire exits. The Fire Service must certify about the efficacy of the fire exits.

Stairs must be widened without even a month's delay. And there must be more than one stairs in each establishment. There must be other escape chutes other than stairs. All such tragedies in the garments factories had their origin in electric malfunction. Let strict supervision be regularly mounted on electric arrangements of the establishments after the initial okaying of the power set-up of these at the time of launching.

It is for the entrepreneurs and the government to jointly guarantee that these supremely avoidable deaths would not occur again. Will they be responsible enough, humane enough to do that?

Indefensible

Bangladesh have played themselves out of reckoning for the ongoing maiden version of the South Asian Football Federation championship. After yesterday's 3-0 thrashing to India following a 1-1 draw with the Maldives, our football team has actually forfeited its moral right to look ahead even if some quirky calculation falls in place to help it make further headway in this meet.

Agreed, India is ahead of us in FIFA ranking. But is that enough to justify the kind of drubbing our soccer team — one of the favourites — took in Kathmandu last afternoon? When did we lose to India by that big a margin? Last time the two national teams met in the football championship of SAF Games, India prevailed over Bangladesh by a lone goal. The picture was even brighter few years back when Bangladesh in a SAF Games engagement in Colombo actually beat India by the odd goal in three.

That shows our football is on a steady decline. Not that it has come down from a dizzy height. But there was a time when things seemed to be heading in the right direction. Particularly, at the time of the '82 Asian when Bangladesh beat Malaysia and lost to China narrowly. It has been a highly inconsistent run since then. This diminishing standard dawns with a special dose of poignance when one has to witness the sure sign of improvement of minnows like the Maldives.

What is wrong with our football?

Prime Minister at Large

Eyebrows are raised when the Prime Minister goes to a country to be present at a seminar or conference where a Deputy Secretary's presence would suffice.

THE Prime Minister made an interesting disclosure in Parliament. She had said that there were ten foreign visits by her in the past fourteen-month period. In fact, the people had started counting the number of such visits long before her statement in Parliament. Even when she was explaining her previous visits she was preparing for the forthcoming one. When this article appears in print, our Prime Minister will be abroad. This time she will be in either Indonesia or the Philippines. The Prime Minister's statement did not include her much criticised, justifiably or not, long stay in the United States last month. That visit was, of course, personal and a family affair. Therefore, it cannot be considered a business tour at the expense of the state exchequer. Others were known to be official, some were state visits. I have no particular conception about the difference between official and state visits. This is a subject that may be discussed in the diplomatic circle only.

Official or not, the Prime Minister's visit abroad means absence from the country and this is being discussed more than her presence. Some of her political enemies as well as well-wishers have already named her as absentee Prime Minister. I personally object to this terminology as cruel and harsh. After all why wouldn't she be away on missions if those bring good to the country? The goods delivered from this visit, however, have to be political and economic. If that is so, what are they? The Prime Minister had given a statement of accounts on this.

The major achievements that have been reported in the press relate mostly to economic pacts and agreement on kind donations and commitments for a few development projects. Sometimes these tours appeared to be business promotion missions. Even the Prime Minister saw to it that a sizeable number of businessmen and CIPs or Commercially Important Persons accompany her. Outwardly, a few missions looked like business delegations and naturally the question asked was why the head of the government had to head such insignificant missions. Even if these missions were to be given weightage, couldn't the ministers-in-charge be weighed enough? There are Ministers of Commerce, Planning, Jute, Textile, Communication etc., etc. to sign accords with their counterparts on relevant projects, and on some occasions one or two of them did accompany her. Pictures showed that they did the job and the Prime Minister was only an onlooker.

I do not, however, rule out the importance of certain visits such as the one when the Prime Minister of Bangladesh and India signed the historic treaty on sharing of the Ganges water. Here the presence was all the more necessary in view of the fulfillment of a hope as well as beginning of a new era of friendship and understanding between the two countries. But eyebrows are raised when the Prime Minister goes to a country to be present at a seminar or conference where a Deputy Secretary's presence would suffice. That is what a representative of an NGO remarked while referring to the Prime Minister's recent visit to Rome.

Who really does arrange or plan such visits abroad by our dignitaries and for what purpose? In the past it was said that such visits were even 'manipulated'. During my long stay abroad, I had come across some of our Mission chiefs who confided to me how helpless they felt when asked to 'arrange state visits.' This was one of most duties of our diplomatic representatives abroad during the autocratic regimes. This was necessary for the persons who, unacceptable at home, had to show that they are acceptable by the foreign countries. Heads of democratically elected government do not need such boost-up or image-building exercises.

Another factor that works behind the frequent foreign visits is the enthusiasm of some persons in the Foreign Office. This is also a kind of psychopathy. They want to show the persons in power their over-zealousness in building up foreign relations. They make to understand this unnecessary exercise as image-building. The person in power is thus trapped into an uncanny situation and has a feeling of complacency about so-called diplomatic success. These bureaucrats in the Foreign Office had been following these

procedures since the days of the autocrats and forgot that the head of a democratic government has a better role to play at home rather than enhancing prestige abroad. The relevant personality should in this case look around and find out how many in his or her position in our neighbouring countries spend how much time abroad.

Unfortunately, because of these travel and tour exercises, the Prime Minister is now looked down as a business promoter or foreign-loan seeker, and her role had been reduced to a level that does not appear to be dignified. One may get the impression that where others have failed to perform the responsibilities they are supposed to accomplish, the Prime Minister has been dragged in unnecessarily. Meanwhile, her absences from home, be it on official mission or due to family obligation, have been made a political issue by her critics. Of course, criticism of mere absence of the Prime Minister is not reasonable as nothing comes to a standstill due to her stay abroad. After all, running of a democratic government is not a one man or one woman affair, the state responsibilities in a parliamentary system is collective. Even then, the frequent absences of a head of government have to be justified by the purpose, or explanation of inevitability or even justifiable excuses. All the details and the reasons placed before Parliament by the Prime Minister failed to do that. So our Prime Minister's sojourns abroad will continue to be openly and murmuringly criticised as travel-happiness. To avoid such criticism she has to be choosy about where and when to go. She cannot just start packing her bag and baggage whenever someone from the Foreign Office asks her to go.

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On My Honour

ABM Musa

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The Lesson Unlearned

If India is big, equally big are her problems. We must be able to emulate many of her virtues retaining however our own independent choice of when, where and how much of it will be done so that the nation's vital interests are safeguarded.

THOSE who are wise learn from others' mistakes. Only the fools learn from their own mistakes, because learning in that case becomes costly. But those who do not learn even from their own mistakes are destined to doom. The assumptions would not appear pleasant to the Awami League — the country's premier political party, but it so aptly applies to the outfit. The mistakes certainly do not bring ignominy to anyone so long one takes it in positive spirit and garners lessons from it for future contingencies. The AL has not done either. On the contrary, it suffers from an obsession that any complaints even of lapses and slips on its part are fabrication and a product of an organised vilification made possible after its ouster from power through a conspiracy.

True, there had been both conspiracy and vilification against the AL. But wasn't it the AL itself which had, through a series of mistaken steps, provided the bases for vilification to build on and fertile ground for conspirators to thrive with total impunity? One such step was the way the AL handled our relationship with India in the wake of Bangladesh's independence. Given the geopolitical imperatives of the events of 1971 both an Indian involvement in Bangladesh crisis and an AL-India collaborations were inevitable. There was no conceivable way of avoiding them even if one did not like the newly-growing fraternity and neither India nor the AL could be blamed for it.

But what came under severe public criticism in Bangladesh was the subservient manner in which the AL conducted itself in the formative stage of our bilateral relationship. It did not in anyway match the dynamism and objectivity of the Indian team dealing with Bangladesh crisis. Notwithstanding the limitations of a government-in-exile, sheltered by India, the AL also did not seem to have any capacity to influence the course of events independently. In absence of Bangladesh, there was virtually none capable of parrying the thrust of India's overwhelming political and diplomatic weight.

As a result, India enjoyed a free hand in relentlessly pursuing her strategic interest in the region and enhancing her international stature in the name of Bangladesh if not at its cost. In that milieu, Bangladesh failed to evolve her own personality and images as a nation in consonance with its history, heritage and ethno-religious culture. The foreign and security policy of the government-in-exile remained indistinguishable from those of India. In external and even in domestic matter, it seemingly toed the line charted by the host country.

Even when Bangabandhu returned from his captivity, things could not immediately improve because by then an unwritten policy framework for Indo-Bangla relations presumably agreed upon during the war was already in place. Now its hitherto unknown provisions seemed to be unfolding in quick succession. The blatant Indian influence on our policy-making was soon evident. The higher echelon of Indian bureaucracy started to take Bangladesh side for granted not only during negotiation on bilateral issues but also in taking unilateral action involving Bangladesh. In the name of 10-mile border trade, a wide-scale smuggling became rampant and Bangladesh turned into dumping ground for low-quality Indian goods. India started unilaterally withdrawing the Ganges water after the expiry of 3-month trial run agreement. Soon after the independence 25-year friendship treaty was signed between India and Bangladesh both pledging an 'eternal friendship' between them much to the public consternation.

Bangladeshis who just recently drove out their Pakistani masters were now justifiably alarmed. They certainly did not want to replace the Pakistanis with another set of masters. Only 23 years ago they gave thumping mandate in favour of getting rid of exploitative Hindu majority of India. Now a high-profile Indian presence in Bangladesh marking a U-turn in the course of their history could not but cause a great deal of reservations and apprehension. The AL did little to allay the public anxiety. The cordial relations developed during and after the war could not succeed in completely obliterating the old fears and suspicions of pre-partition India. Those were rather compounded now by the asymmetry in the political and economic status of the two countries. Added to this was an element of servility that persisted in the leadership.

Thus shortly after the independence anti-India sentiment visible in the country. India, despite her massive contribution to our war of independence, seldom enjoyed a favourable image in this country. In learned circle, her involvement in Bangladesh crisis has often been viewed more as her seizing of a strategic opportunity in the wider context of South Asian politics. The common people tended to hold India responsible — rightly or wrongly — for most of their woes. It

was not thus surprising that the growing anti-India sentiment gradually turned into anti-AL bitterness giving its opponents a chance to fan unrest, destabilise the government and hatch conspiracies. The AL was dubbed pro-Indian eroding its massive popularity as the stalwart of the country's independence. Its leaders were lulled into complacency that people would ignore any allegation against them as the country's liberator. It was an irony that the party's pro-India stigma was drowning the AL when it was at the height of its power.

Still greater irony was that even Bangabandhu could not stop the avalanche of a public ire on this count, although he was doing his best to come out of numerous pressures and manipulations of India and its local lobby. In the context of the grand sweep of the country's history he knew exactly what Bangladesh should be destined to become. For at least last 100 years, the Bengali Muslims were heading towards a rational sequel encompassing in it their religion, ethnicity, geography as well as historical experience. So when Mujib got post-liberation Bangladesh vacated by the alien force at a short notice it was instinctive of him. Defying the wishes of India when he flew over its territory to go to Lahore for joining the OIC Conference it was that historical sense which was working at the back of his mind. It would be interesting to project what would be the shape of Indo-Bangla equation, had he lived long to influence it with his political belief anchored to the soul of the nation he created. It was a tragedy that he had to end up with a pro-India stigma.

The AL bore the burden of the stigma for long 20 years while its opponents capitalised on an anti-India plank.

The BNP successfully held the AL at bay with this single magic. The AL realised rather late the liability

of its pro-India image and tried to shed it off through various political postures and pronouncements before the last election. For a while, it realised that for domestic power politics in Bangladesh the factors like 'India' and 'Islam' are crucial and the AL apparently toned down its strident views on them during the election campaign. And the result was instant. In fact its victory reflected people's endorsement of AL's moderation of policy on both 'India' and 'Islam'. This AL-policy equation could sustain the party's credibility without requiring the AL to fundamentally reverse its policies.

But again there are syndrome of the AL falling prey to old Indian gambit luring Bangladesh into a kind of seemingly innocuous bilateral and multi-lateral arrangement which would only serve India's economic and strategic interests. The attempts are under way to draw Bangladesh in a chimerical growth quadrangle involving, among others, a volatile north-eastern region of India which is virtually at war with the centre. Numerous developmental efforts even within the framework of Indian union have failed in the past in this turbulent area. How can they work under a multinational framework under the same conditions? Dealing with equally sensitive issues like the transit, the proposed Asian Highway entering and re-entering Indian territory and the port facilities without taking public into confidence would be exorbitantly costly for the AL in political term. By committing itself to any of these controversial issues, it would simply head for its political hara-kiri thus dashing the hopes of many who want the AL to retain its rightful place in Bangladesh politics. We already have plethora of issues with India to settle. If we can resolve them honourably it would be by itself a great achievement.

This is, however, not to suggest that we turn our back to India. We can never do that because both of our historical and geo-political involvements with India are rather deep. In fact, more than 50 per cent of our foreign policy is the management of our relationship with India. India is not only our closest neighbour, she is in her own right a great country and the largest democracy of the world immersed in the legends of Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Nehru, Maulana Azad and many more luminaries of global stature. It is the cradle of an ancient civilisation, vibrant with ideas and dynamised with great stride in science and technology. It is where the great religions of the world interacted producing a rich composite culture. It is the sixth great centre of power. We must respect the sensitivity of its bigness but not fear it.

If India is big, equally big are her problems. We must be able to emulate many of her virtues retaining however our own independent choice of when, where and how much of it will be done so that the nation's vital interests are safeguarded. India which herself often defies and takes moral stand against the great powers to uphold her national interests whether it is on the NPT, CTBT or the right to deploy its missiles — would in all likelihood appreciate it.

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY DAY Education for All by 2005

by Prof Roushan Ara Hoque

To achieve 'Education for All by 2005', local community should be involved in creating awareness among the people and the parents.

FOLLOWING a resolution taken by 81 heads of state in an international Conference on Education held in Tehran in 1965, 8th September is being observed everywhere in the world with enthusiasm chalking out colourful educational programmes in order to create mass-awareness about the importance of education. Bangladesh is also a participant and signatory to the resolutions of The World Conference on Education for All by the Year 2000 held in Jomtien, Thailand. Hence Bangladesh is both nationally and internationally committed to ensure educational opportunities for all of its citizens.

A Sample Vital Report of 1995 has revealed that the present rate of literacy in Bangladesh is 47.3 per cent. The statistics of the Ministry of Education on Primary Education shows the following:

Chart - 1			
Year	Total number of students	Boys	Girls
1991	1,26,35,419	69,10,092	57,25,327
1995	1,67,84,343	91,34,632	76,49,710

Chart - 2	
Year	Number of students completing primary education
1991	35% (combined)
1992	60.4%

Chart - 3			
Year	Total	Male	Female
1991	2,07,478	1,53,534	53,944
1995	2,35,186	1,71,686	63,500

Chart - 4	
Number of Schools	
Government Primary Schools	37,710
Registered Non-Government Primary Schools	19,684
Non-Registered Private Schools	3,963
Attached Primary Schools	1,883
Ebtidia Madrasa	12,958
Kindergarten Schools	1,434
Satellite Schools	200
Community Schools	1,412
Total Number of Schools	79,244

In the above different types of primary schools about 1,76,00,000 children of 6 to 10 years age-group are having their education. This age-group of children constitute about 40 per cent of the total population. So the present 79,244 schools are quite insufficient for them. Seventeen NGOs like BRAC, GSS, UCEP, Fulki, Aparajeo Bangla and others are playing an important role in increasing the rate of literacy. By establishing about 3000 non-formal primary schools they are giving education to about 1,50,000 of 5 to 8 years age-group children.

The present government has increased the span of the EPA programme from the year 2000 to 2005. The budget allocation for education has already been raised and new programme has been chalked out for the period 1997-2001. To minimise the present rate of drop-outs from 38 per cent to the possible lowest government has already taken various programmes to make the schools attractive to

awards to best teachers, students, and education officers, bring out special supplements in paper on education, holds seminars, radio and TV programmes.

To make school education more attractive to children and to improve the standard of education one primary school in each thana has been selected to be made more attractive with trained teachers, better classrooms, furniture, library, sanitation facilities to be sports facilities, audio-visual-gadgets, cultural facilities etc. As this project has been proved to be helpful in improving the school attendance and reducing the drop-outs more schools are expected to be included in this project in gradual phases.

For the successful implementation of the programme of 'Education for All by 2005' all the children of school age group will have to be brought to school by intensives and efforts such as:

1. The Food for Education

programme should be introduced in all rural schools.

2. Thousands of Satellite and Community Schools should be set up.

3. As in western countries, parents should be made accountable and even fined for not sending their children to schools.

4. School-dresses, books, slates, exercise-books and tiffins should be supplied to all children free of cost.

5. To meet the shortage of schools for the time being local people, tin-sheds of weekly markets may be utilised and afternoon and evening shifts may be introduced in all the existing schools.

The above steps have been proved to be fruitful in western and South-East Asian countries in reducing the number of drop-outs and increasing the rate of literacy. In the present perspective of Bangladesh these steps may be helpful here as well.

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To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Standard of education

Sir, The strength, vitality, economic progress and development of a country depend on its highly educated manpower in all fields of education including science and technology. Any advancement of a country is dependent on its highly skilled manpower. A case in point is the city state of Singapore, where its people have been able to earn one of the highest per capita incomes in the world. USA, Japan, South Korea, and also India can boast of a very high level of education and trained manpower in the world of today, only a scientifically and technologically advanced country can effectively compete and survive. The quality of education in the field of humanities and the social sciences is also relevant to a country's progress, because these branches provide manpower for the higher echelons of the government services and the private enterprises.

Higher education in Bangladesh has suffered over the decades. It has resulted into poor quality of our manpower in the field of administration, medicine, engineering, technology etc., etc. The standard and quality of our education has reached a very low and alarming level and as a result, we

compare very poorly with other countries of the world. Even in India and Pakistan universities are free of campus violence. In other parts of the world this is unheard of. Must not, then, that should be the top priority of the nation?

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