

Sanity Missing

A stumbling start to a week: following hot on the heels of hartals, an eight-hour road and rail blockade across the country on the very second day of our diminishing ration of working days! Although casualties as such were not high last Sunday given the provocation on both sides and the militant popular support that both ruling Awami League and opposition BNP wield, the country felt enormously terrorised and goes through great debilitating anxiety every time there is an occasion for political confrontation like this.

This confrontational streak which seems to have coloured the imagination of our leaders of late is essentially a manifestation of their political bankruptcy. The fact that the end of politics irrespective of the element of acrimony and personal aggrandisement inherent in it, is after all to ensure the progress of the country and the amelioration of people's lot does not seem to register with them. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has trumpeted investment-friendly atmosphere in the country every time she has been abroad recently. Do we really have a political environment that can woo the veering foreign investors? Can, for that matter the opposition leader, Khaleda Zia vouchsafe that whatever her party has done lately in the name of opposing the government or its policies has been done by sparing country's interest, for instance, by keeping the businesses outside their programmes?

They do not have an answer. Common sense and logic would say if you do not have a sane and meaningful answer for what you are doing you had better stop doing it. Provocations will be there but that does not mean one has to go berserk from one's own sense of righteousness. People have not given politicos a *carte blanche* to toy with country's future. And every disruptive programme puts us that much behind the clock. Improvement or marching ahead will always be the Greek Calends if we are kept perennially in the cycle of going back to square one and starting all over again due to thoughtless and mindless politics.

Mind you, we are presenting the world a spectacle which is quintessentially and symbolically no more savoury and new than the oft-read and told tale of a monkey's futile endeavour to go up by an oily pole. Self-destructive how long shall we continue to be?

What a Habitat!

The nations yesterday observed the World Habitat Day '97. This was a day when our thoughts turned particularly to the present state of the habitat called Dhaka city and a prognosis of what will happen to it in the foreseeable future, say 20 years into the new century. The UN Conference on Human Settlements, at whose instance the Habitat Day was introduced and is being observed, has in a message painted an ideal city. And it has given us exactly what questions to ask of our dear snowballing city. Is it a city without fear? No. Can its streets be walked freely by all, men and women, young and old? No. Is it a city offering relief from concrete and asphalt by way of green landscapes and silver water bodies? No. Is it a city without homeless people? No. Is it a city where water is available to all, rich and poor? No. Why no for an answer for each of the queries, well, it is our city?

Water we get at half our requirement and the air we get is the most polluted in the world. Parks and ponds must also be record-setting among the world's cities — in the absence of them. Roads and transport facilities are already such that traffic jams are routine for daytime and unavailability of public transport seats a regular feature after dusk.

Worse is the city's state in the intangible aspects of urban living. Freedom from fear and ugliness of all kinds has been unknown in Dhaka for over decades. Dhaka is very much in the throes of a mental and at times physical and violent grabmania — far from settling down.

The theme of the World Habitat Day '97 is 'Future Cities'. Quite appropriately. Perhaps there is a pre-supposition that the villages with a very sparse population in the next century will be far less problem-ridden than the towns racing towards becoming megacities. For Bangladesh this is not true. The villages are dying here and hence the crowding of the cities. Dying villages cannot make living cities. The former can only infect the latter with death. It is foolish to think of the city in isolation.

The day is observed with human habitat as its subject. Mother earth is habitat to all forms of life in universe already known. Man's habitat, in cities and villages, will not be congenial if it stands to harm the habitat of other creatures of the plant and animal kingdoms.

Redefine Its Job

It looks like there will not be enough books in the market for country's school students next year. Administrative indecision originating from vested financial interest and lack of accountability and clearly laid out policies have paved the ground for an impending text-book crisis. Authorities know best what they will do with an institution that has over the years been a den of flagrant corruption; but our question is why the National Curriculum and Text Book Board gets involved in the business side of the affair in the first place? Ideally, it should be dealing with the intellectual side of national education. Let some sort of a set-up take care of the business side.

Besides, the genesis of the National Curriculum and Text Book Board is an outcome of thoughts based on socialistic principles. Now that we are deeming the ideas of free market as the panacea for all our economic problems why should we stick to a fogey anachronistic piece in as vital a sector as our education?

From that point of view, the National Curriculum and Text Book Board needs to be bifurcated immediately so that its efficiency can be monitored and the present frightening scale of corruption brought down. We urge the government to have the issue of redefining the duties of National Curriculum and Text Book Board placed on its agenda.

Why cannot we have a system whereby the publishers are asked to print and supply five sets of books for the same class? This will not only offset the stereotype that the present system is affected by but also create the much-desired dynamism in our educational recipe.

"DEFENCE against whom?" This was Jawharlal Nehru's reply to Pakistan's chief martial law administrator, General Mohammad Ayub, who had proposed on April 29, 1959, that in the event of external aggression both India and Pakistan should come together to defend the subcontinent. Nehru's 'no' was understandable but unfortunate because the beginning of a lasting friendship ended their and then.

Nehru had in his mind Pakistan's membership of the CENTO and SEATO defence arrangements against the Soviet Union, which was India's close supporter in its stance of non-alignment. Had the joint defence against forces coming from 'northwards,' the word used by Ayub, been effected, India would have been better off three and a half years later when it was attacked by forces from northward, that is, China. When Ayub offered the joint defence, Islamabad and Peking stood apart, although Delhi was lost in the *Hindi-Chinti bhat bhati* euphoria. But the roles changed a few months later, China becoming Pakistan's ally and India's main rival.

The proposal for joint defence died with Ayub. Yet the suggestion of a no-war pact has been renewed off and on. It is not one country but both of them have taken the initiative to propose non-aggression treaty over the years. But either procedural wrangling or just cussedness has come in the way of understanding on the banning of war. That may explain why there has never been a se-

rious discussion on the proposal.

Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's suggestion can form the basis. At the UN General Assembly session he said: "Offer India today from this rostrum to open negotiations on a treaty of non-aggression between the two countries." He put no conditions. Nor did he say that the pact would be dependent on the solution to Kashmir.

It is not understandable how BJP spokesperson Sushma Swaraj has rejected the no-war offer on the ground that it pre-supposed a solution on Kashmir. In fact, that sequence is the other way round. Nawaz Sharif said that a non-aggression treaty should be signed to facilitate resolution of Kashmir dispute. This is how Lahore's daily, *The Nation*, has reported. How can the BJP twist words to suit its purpose? I expected a person like Atal Behari Vajpayee to welcome the proposal. I thought he would see the difference between the earlier proposal and this one. But the party's ideology is squeezing out liberalism from anything it has.

For the last few years there has been no progress on any front between India and Pakistan because the latter would make Kashmir the core issue. First Kashmir, then anything else has been Islamabad's refrain. The talks between foreign

The Talk Must Go On

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which Nawaz Sharif did while referring to Kashmir. Pakistan is spoiling the case.

Mercifully, the third round of talks in Delhi has been 'adjourned' not ended. The two sides are bound up to pick up the thread again, particularly after a meeting between Nawaz Sharif and Inder Gujral government to accept because even the mention of Kashmir is not to the liking of

do not look healthy at all. There is mistrust. Whatever one side does is suspected by the other side. Motive are sought where there may be none. True, the two foreign secretaries will resume the talks because both governments are determined to continue the dialogue, come what may. But the baggage of the past is too heavy. There is not much likelihood of progress on the actual problems between the two countries.

That is why the no-war pact offers great importance. There is a possibility of the two countries coming to some understanding on keeping hostilities out while grappling with such issues as have defied solution for the last 50 years. Peoples on both sides will welcome a no-war pact because their present thoughts are dominated by the fear that there may still be another war if the Kashmir problem remains unsolved. A no-war pact will assure them that whatever the outcome of discussion on Kashmir, the two will not begin shooting. What a relief a no-war pact will be!

Meanwhile, both countries must seriously consider the proposal by Mahboob-ul Haq, a Pakistan expert, to scale down the military expenditure by five per cent and to divert the amount to the programmes to eliminate illiteracy. His estimate is that both countries will come to have at their disposal \$ 6 billion, more than Rs. 2,000 lakh. This is a lot of money. More than the money, the cut in defence expenditure may set into motion a process that may ultimately banish hatred, if not estrangement, between the two.

Things as they stand today

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

the anti-Pakistan lobby which is quite strong in the country. Does Islamabad want a solution or the sham of propaganda?

Pakistan is, however, making a mistake by insisting on a separate, visible discussion on Kashmir. Once New Delhi agreed to discuss Kashmir in a substantive way, Islamabad should have left it at that. It is no use pushing it beyond a point. What is important is content, not the form. After a lapse of many years the talks have been held and Indian foreign secretary has given an undertaking that New Delhi would discuss the problem in depth, covering all aspects. By accelerating or by abusing India,

opinion that the dialogue should continue and they have brushed aside objections to the resumption of talks between the two foreign secretaries.

Yet the best thing that has happened since the last meeting of foreign secretaries is Nawaz Sharif's offer of non-aggression pact. And for the first time in the history of India-Pakistan relations, the pact is offered without any prior understanding on Kashmir. Even the Pakistan press has pointed it out.

But it is not understandable why Indian officials are determined to sabotage the proposal. The vested interests of some of them is known. But that they would go to the extent of giving

violence, destruction and interruptions in work must stop. The solution does not lie in heaping accusations on the opponents, and believing in *mastaan-maship*. The politicians should solve their professional problems themselves, without dragging in the non-politicians and the man-in-the-street into their fray, and without holding the country a hostage to their antics for two decades.

The terms and conditions of the informal contracts between the voters and the politicians are being flagrantly breached. Is it not time to think of compensation (when other sectors are doing the same)? The political parties are fighting amongst themselves on this issue. How about the claims of the civilian voters to exert their basic rights on the right type of governance? It looks like the time has come

for the people to review their verdict.

This syndrome of destructive politics is not practised in other countries, perhaps due to a sharper sense of patriotism. We all may ponder over the lessons of history which displaced the politicians from power and statecraft. We have to become more realistic and pragmatic. The political cracks are showing, and failures strengthen the negative images.

There is still time to bring back sane politics and transparent democracy in this unfortunate society. Now transparency is desired, and not the *qurbani* that bleeds the limping nation to death.

Political Culture is Not Changing

by A Husnain

It is worthwhile to repeat the aphorism that politics is too important an issue to be left entirely in the hands of the politicians

the goods, and come up to the hopes, expectations and goals which are not extraordinary, but universal in consensus and practice. We continue to be poor, hence cannot afford continued experiments.

The whole world is unstable today, hence we, at our level, have to set up pockets of stability, to which the present generation can cling to, and the next generation can build up to their satisfaction. Aiming for basic stability and success is also a basic approach to life or politics.

It is time the people (the silent suffering masses) sent some strong and clear messages to the politicians to pay more attention to the economy and physical development than to patronise out-of-tune political overtures.

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