

OIC Straight-jacket

It seems to us at long distance from Tehran which is hosting the OIC summit that its opening day was freshened up and suffused with Shiraz roses. None of the reports say as much but unmistakably the fragrance of the queen of flowers mingled with the air. This was palpable from what the Iranian President and OIC Chairman Khatami said about Bangladesh and its government leader Sheikh Hasina.

The glowing tributes paid to our prime minister are deemed by us as an honour done to Bangladesh. And, as Bangladeshis, we have our observations, crystallised through watching the organisation for a long time, to make on the present state of affairs in the Islamic world. We don't underestimate the machinations of the external forces arrayed against the Islamic world nor are we oblivious of the majoritarian tyranny over the minority Muslims in several countries; but to our understanding, the main challenge facing the Muslim world today is the dissension within not the conspiracy of external origins.

There are obvious contradictions between lofty aspirations and real-life situations. We crave for unity of purposes and stances vis-a-vis the rest of the world without having unified our ranks from within in the first place. Secondly, we never tire of projecting the glory of Islam, we have long since ceased to live up to, in a 'nothing but Islam' attitude while the ground is slipping away underfoot through a disuse of the original value system of Islam comprising tolerance, live-and-let-live, respect for knowledge and justice and fairplay. While Islam at the time of its origin and thereafter through the golden ages of Abbasydes and Ummayyads was forward-looking it now appears to be ironically backward-looking close to the 21st century. How long shall we remain ignoramus, our boat rocking away from the shores of new knowledge as we diminish through ideological differences compounded by a suicidal persistence in keeping to intellectual straight-jackets.

Deep fissures have developed between the Arabs and the non-Arabs and between Shia and Sunni, apart from other sectarian differences that interminably erupt. Let the Muslim countries all democratise their politics and turn into knowledge-based societies with broad outlooks replacing rusty prejudices.

HR: The Social Snag

Yesterday was World Human Rights Day. The annual observance of the day has at its base the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted at the UN 49 years ago and endorsed by the nations of the world by and by. This document is a unique achievement setting an ideal for man's ultimate and inalienable need for liberty and dignity as distinct individuals and connotes at the same time the laying down of the minimum that each human individual must enjoy. The day offers us a chance to assess our national situation in respect of the Declaration. The best way to do that is to look at the sections of our people more vulnerable to human rights violations socially, economically, culturally. What is the quantum and nature of human rights accessible to a Dhaka slum-dweller or a woman garments worker, or a landless peasant and his wife or members of religious and ethnic minorities? There cannot be any elevating answer to that just as there is none as to why and how a 3000-taka office worker treats a 4,000-taka rickshaw driver as a creature essentially inferior to him. Social strata are so stacked one upon the other based on a graduated denial of dignity to the lower by the upper.

Poverty is a great source of social inequality and as such of institutionalised violation of human rights. It is expected that with economic improvements vast segments of our people would become aware of their rights and would be only too delighted to exercise them. This is not to say that human rights for all must await elimination of poverty.

Human rights cannot be salvaged from the clutch of vile social value-mechanism without a pervasive social movement. A cultural movement spearheaded by a thrust for universal education will also help greatly in eliminating the inequalities that thrive in the minds.

Human rights is another name for fairplay to the individual. It will be best ensured if the individual battles every act diminishing these.

The Spreading Rot

Ten thousand answer scripts of six thousand examinees whose HSC results were published last September are being reexamined. The leading Bengali newspaper that carried this news item yesterday described it as some sort of a record. Perhaps it is a record but certainly a dubious one. What message this mindbogglingly huge task that the Board now claims to be panting under conveys to the future examinees and the rest of the world? The recent in-depth stories on flagrant corruption in the Education Boards are reasons enough to explain as to why many examinees should apply for reexamination. In fact, as the report informs, 150 answer scripts of examinees from the last SSC examination revealed 'marking flaws' on reexamination.

There is no point asking why confidence of examinees in the evaluating authorities is ebbing. This is one secret that everybody--the Board official, employee, examinee, guardian--every one is in possession of more or less that money has a way of making or unmaking things in the Board. But this cannot go on.

As we said earlier in this column reexamination system is a farce for all practical purposes because it is effective only insofar as it matters in tallying the total and checking any unmarked question but cannot question the judgmental flaw or incapacity on the part of the examiner.

Blaming computers for the problem is one red herring the Board people better not use any longer. We demand of the education ministry to get a move on about setting strict guidelines for teachers who would be assigned the task of evaluating the scripts and make arrangements to monitor their unflinching observance.

Treaty on Chittagong Hill Tracts A New Era of Peace or Beginning of a New Conflict?

The government did not pay heed to the widespread demand of the people to bring major provisions of the treaty on this vitally important national issue to the fore to elicit public opinion or to raise it in the parliament before conclusion.

A Treaty on Chittagong Hill Tracts was concluded last week. It was signed by the Chief Whip of the Parliament from the government side and the Chakma head of the Parbatya Chittagram Jana Sanghati Samity, claiming to act on behalf of the tribes who live in the territory. The government and the government-backed parties hailed the treaty as a great success, as a herald of peace in the trouble-torn region festered with insurgency for over two decades. The BNP and most opposition parties rejected the treaty, terming it as capitulation of the government to the unacceptable demands of the insurgent group. They call it unlawful, unconstitutional and discriminatory to almost half of the population, the so-called Bengalis who came from the plains and settled there since decades and centuries. There have been mixed reaction marked by violent demonstrations and hartals for and against the treaty both in the CHT and the rest of the country.

To dwell upon the background of the issue briefly will perhaps help comprehend the problem better. After the Moghul time and till the thirties during the British regime the Arakan and even the bulk of erstwhile Burma were generally part of one political entity, technically enjoying free movement of people in the entire area. Although special considerations were allowed in administering that region in accordance with the CHT Manual of 1900, in the Manual published in 1870 the Chakmas had been described as "settlers". So the settler is a relative term. Strictly speaking, even the Americans, Canadians and Australians of today are settlers but they enjoy even more rights and benefits than the original inhabitants, tribes and aborigines. The new settlers in CHT, the Bengalis or Bangladeshis, therefore, deserve at least their legitimate democratic rights and privileges.

In any way, Chakmas being relatively old settlers, have greater facilities and privileges than the new Bengali settlers. Being a depressed community living in a relatively less developed area, the tribes legitimately and humanly deserve special treatment, favour, finance and even authority. But these must be in conformity with the laws of the land, constitution of the country and must not infringe upon the rights and privileges of all citizens as enjoined under the constitution.

Whether any provision of the treaty is in conflict with the existing laws or violates the letter and spirit of the constitution is a matter for the constitutional experts to say and ultimately the Judiciary to decide. There are, indeed, opposing claims, as expected. Even prior to the conclusion of the treaty, there were cautionary demands in this matter by the opposition. It would, therefore, be fair to assume that the ruling party had fortified their position by consulting eminent constitutional experts. They might even have modified the text accordingly in order to avoid later criticism effectively.

Though the preamble suggests that both the parties will uphold the constitution, territorial integrity and rights of all citizens, some of the provisions, according to many, negate that postulation. Even if any provision becomes repugnant to a law, this can be remedied by the government by enacting enabling or such other appropriate legislation. But any conflict with the letter and spirit of the constitution is beyond the means of the ruling party to redress, except with cooperation of the opposition. Whether interests of one section of the people are subordinated to those of another section in a democratic system, can be figured out, besides resorting to legal means, by examining political and humanitarian considerations. Here political parties and the people in general play a crucial role.

People, almost without exception, have great regards for lawyers, some nurture fears about them but more view them with suspicion. The ordinary simple-minded people ponder with both awe and admiration how two highly distinguished lawyers bitterly argue against each other, lending personal conviction of the latter on the same issue in serious doubt. So, both the government and the opposition will probably commence a battle of the wise in due course of time, if they fail to reach a political compromise. I do not wish to interfere in their avidly guarded domain.

The growth of the insurgency had its seed sown shortly after the liberation of Bangladesh when the Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Mujib on his visit to the Chittagong Hill Tracts called upon all the inhabitants to become Bengalis. Bangabandhu's efforts to secure total integration of all communities of the land, as it were, became counter-productive. The fear of losing their distinct ethnic and cultural identity infuriated the tribals, the Chakmas in particular. They took up arms and commenced acts of terrorism, with help and succour from across the borders.

During the Zia regime, initiatives for various measures were taken to assuage the bitter feelings of the tribals. At the same time, a good number of settlers came from the plains to seek economic opportunities in the face of increasing pressure on land there. The process intensified the sense of insecurity among the tribals, who

found their land and privileges threatened. Ershad's rule also witnessed some laudable actions to impart economic benefits and political confidence to the tribals. He introduced District Councils for the 3 CHT districts where tribal population would have greater say in running their affairs. He also made worthwhile contribution to the development of infrastructure on that difficult terrain.

During Begum Zia's epoch the trend to settle the problem of tribal insurgency continued unabated, rather intensified. The newly constituted National Committee started to work vigorously and held 13 long sessions over several years to this end. But the negotiations did not succeed due to the insatiable appetite for increased demand of the tribal negotiators which, once whetted could not be satisfied. Begum Zia did not compromise, as she found that the unreasonable demands were not only in conflict with laws and constitution but were highly discriminatory against the other half of the population, hence could not be a harbinger of a lasting peace. In spite of that, she succeeded in repatriating some six thousand Chakma refugees from Tripura and gave them land, home, provisions and equipment.

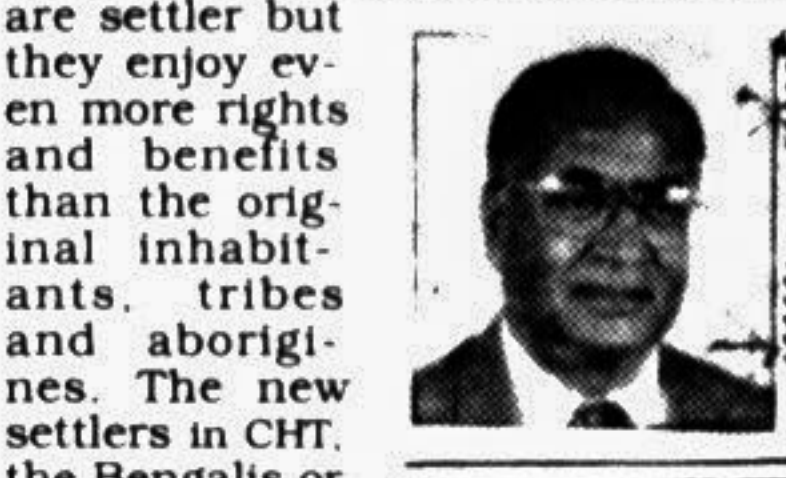
The present Awami League government was determined to reach an agreement. But will this agreement, which was negotiated and concluded in a great hurry, establish a lasting peace? The protracted negotiations and broken peace accords in Palestine, Northern Ireland, Kashmir and in various other places on the globe, notwithstanding their dissimilar characteristics but with similar demands for peace by all parties, provide a message loud and clear that establishment of a permanent peace can be ensured only by a just and equitable settlement acceptable to all concerned. But can the CHT Treaty be termed so?

The declared and real objective of both the government and the opposition is, no doubt, to attain peace, a real and lasting peace. But peace at any cost serves only short term objective and can be neither just nor durable. History is replete with numerous instances. The CHT has now virtually been elevated to an autonomous region to be ruled by mainly one section of the people, most of whom had been against the creation of Bangladesh and have long been engaged in armed struggle against all successive governments of the land. The new rulers will distribute land to the people of their choice, specially to the tribals as envisaged in the treaty, appoint police officers and constables, again specially among the tribals, including those who are supposed to lay down their arms and give up insurgency, and will have to be consulted, if they so desire, when the sovereign national parliament legislates on an issue that affects the region.

The government has to withdraw troops, para-military forces and even village defence corps into barracks in far-flung towns from which it is difficult to deploy promptly over an impassable terrain, thereby losing its effective control over one-tenth of its territory. History has shown and our country itself no exception that, despite solemn agreement, not all insurgents lay down all arms. Over and above, in this case, replenishment of arms from across friendly borders is more easy and less time-consuming.

For settlers from the plains, they will be most inadequately represented in their local Parishad, being denied one man one vote, and will lose their basic democratic rights to have a say in governing their own affairs. Most of them had no land in the plains as they had no money, and now they can have no land as they have no rights. They will virtually be relegated to the status of second class citizens. Their principal apprehension now is about their physical security after the withdrawal of troops and civilian forces and, being deprived of land and rights, their gradual phasing out of the territory. On the other hand, tribals can go to any part of Bangladesh owning lands and property, as all citizens should have the right to do so, irrespective of race, religion, sex, colour and creed. Again, no list of the insurgents is to be provided to the government now, but after 45 days of careful thought.

The government did not pay heed to the widespread demand of the people to bring major provisions of the treaty on this vitally important national issue to the fore to elicit public opinion or to raise it in the parliament before conclusion. The agonising and repeated drumming of the demand by all political parties, except the government and government backed ones, fell on deaf ears of the government. Admission of the belated realisation by the government of the danger of the issue so as to place it before the parliament after committing fait accompli is viewed with disdain and as a deliberate and humiliating act of ignoring earlier public demand. The die is cast. The turmoil that was so long confined to a region has now the potentials of engulfing the entire nation, albeit in a different form. It is now for the political pundits to find a way out amicably, as implementation of the present text of the treaty appears to be less than easy.



Currents and Crosscurrents

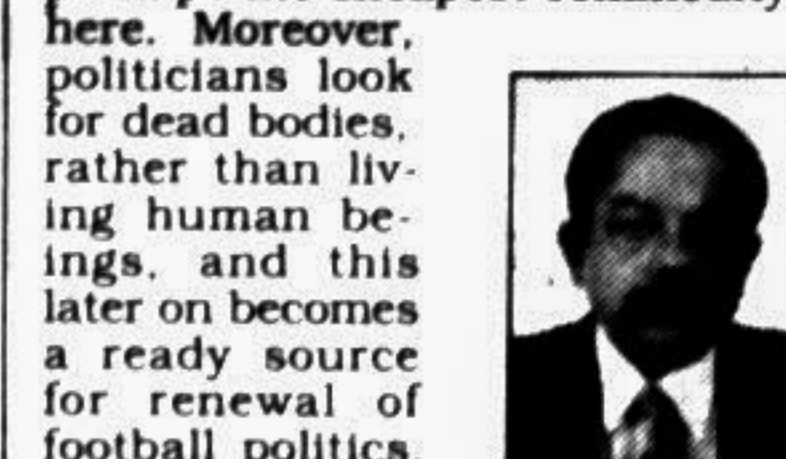
by M M Rezaul Karim

Football and Politics in Arcadia

The end-result of all this turmoil is the ever-lasting poverty of the people. It is indeed remarkable that they survived thus far. There is no reason why Arcadia should remain so poor.

In Arcadia, politics is comparable to a roughly played and badly handled football match. There are basically two political parties — one occupying the seat of government and the other out of it. But politicians of all kinds are continuously striving to find opportunities to kick politics (like a football) into the desired directions; usually the directions opposite to each other. The two directions are: the seat of government which in physical terms is the huge national administrative complex and the other, is the small two-storied building occupied by the party in opposition as a whole for their meetings and official work. The discrepancy is glaring. The discrimination is overwhelming. Not a single room in the administrative complex is earmarked for the opposition.

As a consequence, football politics continues either to kick the party in power out of office or to kick out all attempts to do so, and like love and war, everything is fair in the peculiar politics of Arcadia. Interestingly enough, this type of football politics is not being played in any earmarked arena. The most preferred venue are the streets of Archdoom — the capital city of Arcadia. On the other hand, no game is interesting without the spectators. In Arcadia, the ordinary citizen by force, become the audience and some of them end up slaughtered or injured victims of murderous football politics. The danger is, citizens have no alternative but to access through the venue of football politics. The people must move through streets of the capital city and instruments like guns and bullets, so frequently used, become a great danger to life. However, nobody bothers about it in Arcadia. Human life is perhaps the cheapest commodity going around here. Moreover, politicians look for dead bodies, rather than living human beings, and this later on becomes a ready source for renewal of football politics.



Window on Asia

Shafiq Latif

Remember the Roman times, when gladiators used to fight unto death and spectators used to gleefully watch the gory details of killing? In Arcadia, politicians are determined to move in a reverse direction. They are tracing back the path to the brutal days of ancient Rome. Instead of gladiators, paid hoodlums and gangsters perform the same tasks with an extremely deleterious exception: the victims are innocent bystanders. The real politicians, who issue press statements and get their names published in the newspapers, hardly ever receive a scratch. They are mostly visible up on the dais from where violent speeches are delivered to the delight (entirely costless) of the listening audience and often to the detriment of the national interest.

Politicians of hardly any creed and ever changing colours have made an informal treaty among themselves that through football politics, they will not only keep politics alive and kicking but strongly influence the economy in such a way that it will always remain poor and backward.

Football politics in Arcadia gets priority over everything else. Workers are encouraged through free joyrides as well as cash payments to switch off factory machines and join the fun. Important business meetings cannot be held. Banks stop their transactions; shops roll down their shutters. There is football politics in town. So everything else must stop.

This is the politics of death. Politicians of Arcadia do not care. They are so callous and self-centered. However, the thoughtful editor of Archdoom Times told me that there were cunning political ambitions lurking behind such football politics. If Arcadia remains poor, citizens will continue to remain illiterate and therefore ignorant and susceptible to all sorts of political propaganda. In a country of rising prosperity, nobody will dare to stop the wheels of economic growth. Football politics, Arcadia-

To the Editor...

Aiding the AIDS-affected

Sir, According to a recent report released by the UNAIDS in Paris, it has been stated that more than 30 million people in the world are being infected by the dreadful disease, AIDS. About 16,000 people are infected everyday. Very alarming situation indeed!

Accurate treatment to cure AIDS patients has yet to be developed. Of course, some drugs developed by certain pharmaceutical companies have been proved to be effective against AIDS, for instance, Glaxo-Wellcome's 'AZT', Bristol-Myers Squibb & Co's 'Zerit' etc. Some other techniques for AIDS treatment are either under development or being developed.

Well, in order to combat the AIDS epidemic, non-formal education and campaign against AIDS have to be intensified in all the countries of the world, especially in the developing countries. The State Departments of Agriculture and Agricultural Extension of different countries may include AIDS education in their respective non-formal education system to create awareness against AIDS among the rural people with whom these departments work very closely, even in the remotest areas.

At the same time, the UN agency on AIDS should help in establishing an international channel for easy and free availability of AIDS treatment drugs in every nook and corner of the world.

M Zahidul Haque BAI, Dhaka-1207.

Crisis in Pakistan

Sir, Most of the time last 50 years the political leaders and army commanders had been wrestling for power in Pakistan. They always boasted of their status and position, but as a matter of fact, they secured very poor marks in performing their duties and responsibilities with regard to public administration, rehabilitation of refugees, solution of Kashmir problem, stopping ethnic violence, eradicating corruption and smuggling implementing family planning programme.

disposing off thousands of criminal and civil cases, effectuating economic and industrial developments, raising the poor standard of life of the people, and alleviating the untold sufferings of the people.

In such a sorry state of affairs some ambitious, bulky and well paid judges of the Supreme Court have also jumped into the arena of power politics adding fuel to the fire of disastrous socio-economic and political situation of the country. It's a pity that Pakistan constantly suffers from one crisis after another.

O H Kabir, 6 Hare Street, Wari Dhaka-1203

Owes of self-billing

Sir, DESA and Dhaka WASA introduced self-billing system for their bonafide and regular consumers few years back. This system created interest and enthusiasm among the consumers who are in a habit to clear up the charges for such utility services regularly. But due to non-cooperative attitude of some staff of DESA and WASA who are responsible to maintain up-to-date ledger book, consumers have been gradually losing interest in self-billing.

Besides, a section of staff discourages this system through their non-cooperation. While the customers used to pay the water and power bills as per monthly meter reading in the designated banks but such paid bills are not regularly updated in the ledger books. When the pages of bill books are exhausted it is very difficult to procure a fresh book from there. DESA has already stopped to issue new books of self-billing without any official announcement.

Although WASA has not stopped self-billing but to have a new bill book, it takes many days altogether. Consumers are to attend WASA zonal offices for making the ledger up-to-date by showing their paid bills before getting a new book. Sometimes, though consumers records show up-to-date payment of all bills, but in the ledger books due wrong entry there are discrepancies in the balance when consumers are to pay excess amount.

As a consumer, it is my sug-

gestion if WASA and DESA are really interested to collect revenues through self-billing system, then their service in respect of ledger posting of paid bills should be improved — otherwise this system should be discontinued to stop consumers' sufferings.

M A Jalil, 372/B, Khilgaon, Dhaka.

"Aliens on US Soil"

Sir, This refers to a letter written by MG Mostafa on the 3rd instant in your paper. The writer has rightly pointed out the present conditions of the aliens on US soil. I would like to point out the following facts for further information from the US Embassy in Dhaka.

1) That I am a government employee and I got due permission from the government to visit USA.

2) That I applied to the US Embassy in due time for a visit visa in person.

3) That the visa officer asked me some questions and I replied as I could.

4) That the visa officer returned my passport with a seal of receipt of application without asking any papers or evidence.

5) That later I wrote a letter with evidence, but there is still no reply.

M Ali Dhaka

Frequent power failure at Rampura

Sir, Frequent power failure and loadshedding have been paralysing the normal life of the dwellers of Rampura for the last several months. Failure of the electricity occurs five or six times in the evening. Students are the worst sufferers as they cannot sit and study.

Moreover, when there is darkness all around, thieves and anti-social people get the opportunity to indulge themselves in different anti-social activities. As a result — theft and other anti-social activities have increased in our locality.

We have repeatedly complained to the local WAPDA office but it seems they do not want to pay any attention. Mahbubul Alam, SKCS, Rampura, Dhaka