

Augurs Well

Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi's two-day visit to Bangladesh has left us woken to the necessity of strengthening the legacy of bilateral relationship between the two countries. In a way it was not unexpected though. There is something quintessentially common about us and the country in the warmer southern Europe with great traditions. As it were due to the effect of a generous sun people of the two countries share certain healthy streaks in their nature — warmth and exuberance being two very prominent of them. These healthy aspects were unmistakably reflected in Mr Prodi's visit and stay here. Few Prime Ministers or Presidents of European countries would have put the itinerary of visit to this part of the world ahead of a European Union meeting.

Indeed the talks the two Premiers had on this occasion have quite a few splendid features and does a world of good to robust optimism. We are heartened at the Italian promise of taking part in donors' conference on the feasibility study of the vital Ganges Barrage project. However, the most heart-warming facet of the whole gamut of explorative discussion on entrepreneurial opportunity that has taken place between the two countries is the proposition of Italian assistance in telecom and energy sector infrastructure. We have long been trying to project Bangladesh as an investment destination but the underpinnings of all our loud overtures tend to get lost due to our serious infrastructural lacking. Unless we take a few rapid strides towards having a decent infrastructure in place bid, we will lag behind in our bid to catch the bus for the new millennium. This is where Italy's superior technological expertise comes with a note of great significance.

Although Italy and Bangladesh have come to share a tradition of business activities it does not, as the Italian PM so aptly observed in his address to the FBCCI, reflect true potentialities of the economies of our two countries.

We hope the tepid entrepreneurial relationship will follow a course of ebullient activism envisioned by Mr Prodi.

Khaleda-Prodi Meet

Never has the brief report customarily published following the opposition leader Begum Zia's meeting with a visiting head of government been so eloquent. Her Friday's courtesy call on Italian Prime Minister Prof Romano Prodi went off well — on a note of mutual enlightenment and healthy positivism.

Behaving her status as a national leader and head of a shadow government, Begum Zia cast aside her out-of-power inhibitions and made a direct appeal to the Italian Prime Minister to boost his country's investment in Bangladesh. In deference to diplomatic niceties such meetings take place as a matter of routine but these do not necessarily have to be mechanical. These also provide occasions for making a sober departure from the trading of caustic and testy remarks one has got accustomed to witnessing between the government party and the opposition.

There is a terse sentence from the press release BNP issued at the end of Khaleda-Prodi tete-à-tete: "the opposition leader also apprised him of the current political stalemate in Bangladesh". Whereupon, we believe, the Italian Prime Minister with the knowledge of his own country's politics uttered these words of wisdom: "democracy can flourish only through cooperation between the government and the opposition parties."

What kind of cooperation the opposition leader of Bangladesh is extending for the smooth running of democracy in our country and vice versa? We have been unfailingly consistent in saying that the onus for making up with the opposition lies basically on the government party. But even with that kind of a position taken by us we cannot condone BNP's intransigent boycott of the Jatiya Sangsad. Parliament is the place for the issues BNP has taken to the streets for months now. Their first duty to the nation is to go back to the parliament. How can Parliamentary boycott be the absolute bone of contention in a democracy?

Hurry up, the New Ferry

Aricha has always been overloaded and over-used since the mid-fifties. Forty years that is, as the only link between Dhaka and Chittagong divisions on the one side and Rajshahi, Khulna and Barisal divisions on the other. Aricha's service plainly amounted to keeping the nation in one piece. Can a single road — Dhaka-Aricha — and a single ghat — Aricha — discharge that responsibility of supreme importance, not for some while, but for decades at a stretch?

The Mawa alternative does not attract truckers not only because of having so many rivers to cross but also that the ferries are not eminently suitable to them.

Yes, the Bangabandhu Setu over the Jamuna will come as a great relief for Aricha. For the benefit of making it to Rajshahi Division districts at one go, it is possible that both buses and trucks would prefer the great bridge for going places even in Pabna. But as already passenger traffic to the northern districts has for long been using both trains and buses across the Jamuna, the north-bound traffic would not come as that great a reliever for Aricha. The possibility of the Aricha jam can linger even after that.

Now it has been planned to introduce ferries across the Meghna to connect Chandpur and Shariatpur. We wonder at the first that this idea has struck the authorities so late in the day. Not many in the Chittagong division districts are involved in things across the Meghna — in Faridpur, Barisal, Jessore, Khulna and Kushtia, because of the great riverine barrier. But Chittagong being the main entrepot of the nation, trucks need to travel between the zones in a great number. The Chandpur-Shariatpur ferry will come to them as a god-send. And to Aricha what a relief it will provide!

The new ferry is slated to materialise in June. Can't it be done on some earlier date, say, April? Please, treat this ferry as not only good and important but also something very very urgent.

VERY wisely, the Federal Government decided to put off the scheduled non-party Local Bodies Poll from February 7 to April 18. At the same time it was decided to hold the much-awaited long delayed national census from March 2 to March 18. Keeping in mind both the immense increase in urban population and the time lag in demarcation and delineation of new constituencies thereof, the Government should have put the polls back by another couple of months. When we have waited so many years for effective local government, 60 to 90 days would hardly matter but the important thing would be to get it right. The country desperately needs good governance, particularly at the local level, and that can only be provided when representatives elected at the local level get involved and are (and can be held) accountable for their actions. At this time we follow the imperial concept of governance in vogue pre-independence 1947, except that governance in the hands of our administration officials has become a sorry model for system abuse.

One may well ask, why is this nation in serious trouble? The major reason, other than economics, is that the citizens do not find solutions to their immediate needs in the vicinity of the neighbourhoods where they live. The biggest problem is economic, a major part of the population pays no taxes (that would provide funds for system development and management) as they do not see any benefits accruing to them, at the same time there is no real revenue assessment and gathering at the local level. So instead of community development, individuals take to spending on themselves instead of earmarking a part of their income for the good of the neighbourhood. There is a general skepticism even among those who do pay their taxes since what they pay does not go towards civic and

utilities infra-structure in their immediate vicinity. Whatever they do eventually manage to get, they have to beg for it. This is an impossible situation for the common man who sees a few select affluent neighbourhoods in his/her vicinity having electricity, water, sewerage, roads, educational and health facilities, etc., while he or she remains in a 15th century syndrome, bereft of even the most basic form of such utilities and necessities of the 20th century.

Naturally this sense of deprivation creates polarisation and social tensions, the most disturbing model being Karachi where anarchy became the order of the day till the principal perpetrators came across a rock called Nasirullah Babar. His success in putting down anarchy was not followed up by socio-economic initiatives by the Ms Benazir regime and as such the principal grounds for complaints voiced by Karachi's populace remain. While there are elected representatives at the Provincial and National levels from the "deprived" areas, the more important issue of governance at the local level to address the people's problems at their doorsteps and in their neighbourhood is criminally missing. One extremely bad fallout of Gen Babar's success in putting down terrorists was the return of police high-handedness (and in a more vicious form), this highlights justice not being available to the citizens at their doorstep for their immediate needs, except for a price, and a hefty one at that. There has to be a direct link between the community and the local police station with a human resource division managed by locally elected officials to cater to the citizens' routine problems. In this respect Pro-

ject HIFAZAT, creation of model police stations, was conceived at the instance of Mian Shahbaz Sharif in an innovative pragmatic manner.

However even the powerful hands-on Chief Minister of Punjab was surprised at the adverse police reaction to the reforming of their domain and decided he had other priorities to manage rather than have a go-slow law enforcement agency. If the Nawaz Sharif government can reform the system and make it simpler, we will be a long way towards true governance. Ayub Khan's Basic Democracy system faulted in not having direct election for every post in the domain, in-

unity and integrity lies in citizen participation in the community and up the tier into national development. A simple formula must ensure that almost every part of the population has some say in his or her local government and that the person elected will be accountable or at least can explain credibly at the local level reasons why a particular civic facility, utility is not available. Everything is presently laid at government's doorstep and the government propaganda machinery cannot convince the common citizen the reason for his/her deprivation. In fact in Bangladesh the Upazila concept was a very potent exercise, unfortunately manipulated for

20 (or less) who get votes in order of priority must be elected to the COUNCIL provided the potential candidate gets at least 5 per cent of the votes cast. A maximum of 20 people will conceivably form the UNION COUNCIL but THOSE ELECTED WILL REPRESENT ALMOST EVERYONE IN THAT CONSTITUENCY IN THE UNION COUNCIL. This provides for TOTAL DEMOCRACY and Mian Nawaz Sharif has the best opportunity in the world to change the destiny of the nation by this extremely simple expedient.

This process will be opposed tooth and nail by vested interests that at the moment rule constituencies despite being a minority simply because even as a minority they are the majority faction in that constituency. All Local Bodies elections should have a follow-up run-off election to elect a Chairperson i.e. unless one person is so popular he or she has got more than 50 per cent of the votes cast there has to be a run-off exercise to have a majority elect the Chairperson. In the run-off election the two persons who got the maximum votes in the first election should contest i.e. unless anyone does not want to contest and by default you pick the next person on the vote-priority list. In the same round of elections, we should have elections for the next tier also on a SLATE basis i.e. the District Administration, which should be a 20-member body, like a small cabinet. Only those should be eligible to contest in this election who have obtained the most votes in the first election in order of priority. The election must be on a slate pattern with the first 20 getting elected and the person obtaining the most votes automatically becoming the Ad-

ministrator unless two-thirds of those elected vote him or her out of office, when the next vote-getter will automatically become Administrator and so on. Those competing for Union Chairperson in the same elections must have running mates from among the already elected Council members so that the candidate is elected to the higher District body, this person can become Chairperson of the Union Council.

In the first tier, we therefore have the UNION COUNCIL with its 10 to 20 elected members each of whom will then be put onto a one and two-member committees nominated by the Chairperson looking after law and order, justice, public health, communication, recreation, education, medical, civic facilities such as water, sewerage, electricity, waste disposal, etc. in various permutations and combinations decided by the elected members themselves. Similarly in the second tier, we have the District COUNCIL with its 20 elected members and the various sectors similarly allocated for being overseen by the elected representatives. The District Council will be directly under the elected Provincial Administration.

The most important issue that can be settled by a simple amendment to the Local Bodies Ordinance in each Province is the fact of broad representation by all the people in the governance of the country at the grassroots level. In the process of economic development we have lost the aspect of community participation that is the basic ingredient for the unity of the nation, a non-complex simple formula for integrating and solidifying the foundations of this country. Since Mian Nawaz Sharif is genuinely interested in the amelioration of the miseries of the common man, this is the motorway that leads to the heart of the problem.

Local Bodies Elections

Motorway to the Heart of the Problem

The most important issue that can be settled by a simple amendment to the Local Bodies Ordinance in each Province is the fact of broad representation by all the people in the governance of the country at the grassroots level.

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

cluding that of the President. In the present form of the elections, i.e. the first past the post is the winner and the winner takes everything, leaving a large part of the population virtually disfranchised. The winner, with the meagre resources available to him or her, caters only to his own following, thereby effectively depriving the vast majority of civic and other facilities.

If the voters group is in a minority in any constituency their vote hardly matters, voter apathy has meant less and less percentage of the population going out to the electoral box, thus negating the concept of democracy at the grassroots level. The disfranchised voter must be brought out of the cold into the mainstream, the crux of

political purposes it lost its fundamental credibility of government by the people, of the people and for the people. The announcement of the Mian Nawaz Sharif government that the Local Bodies election will be on non-party basis is very welcome.

For the local bodies election, the smallest constituencies (the UNION COUNCIL) in pure urban areas must not be more than 100000 and in pure rural areas not more than 50000. For areas which are partly urban-partly rural, there must not be more than 75000 in a constituency. At least a 100 persons must propose each of the candidates. For the UNION COUNCIL the elections must be on a SLATE pattern, i.e. the first

Indian Elections

The Congress and the Sonia Factor

by Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

Sonia Gandhi is certainly a force for the Congress and her decision to campaign for the party has already stopped exit of Congress leaders and workers to other organisations.

AS the Indian national elections are drawing nearer, different factors are coming up one after another to determine the poll scenario and the developments are being assessed in terms of successes or failures of the major political forces vying for power in the largest democracy of the world. The elections themselves are taking place in an unusual two years time than the last polls took place, since the lower house of parliament (Lok Sabha) is generally elected for a five-year term. In the earlier days after the independence of India, the parliament used to complete its full term but gone are those days and now an era has begun since about last two decades when seldom a house can complete full term owing to lack of strong command by a single party to parliament or political instability.

However, the P V Narasimha Rao government, which came to power after the 1991 polls riding a crest of sympathy caused by the assassination of party president Rajiv Gandhi could complete the five-year term even though the Congress, when it formed the government, lacked absolute majority in the house and had taken others' support to come to power. Rao government remained firm in the saddle due to certain factors including good fortunes for the prime minister. But this was not to be the case in the subsequent days when after the 1996 elections the single largest party took office in the South Bloc but — Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) — bowed out of government only after twelve days despite having a charismatic leader like Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The subsequent period till the present situation saw two governments coming to power and both by the centre-left coalition of the United Front but with two different prime ministers. The fall of the UF governments on both occasions stemmed from withdrawal of the crucial support by the Congress which helped the UF form the gov-

ernment by extending the support. The country had no other option but to go for fresh snap elections.

While three major political forces are the key players to form the next government in India, the 112-year-old traditional Congress that led India to its independence from the British rule, is fighting a case of near-survival in the coming elections. Never before the organisations faced such a critical polls as far as its interest and utility is concerned and it also did not have to face such a leadership crisis in the past. And obviously under this condition, the Congress has turned to the heritage of the 'Nehru' family which is often compared to the 'Kennedys' of the United States. Not only the 51-year old enigmatic and reclusive widow of former prime minister and Congress president Rajiv Gandhi is being persuaded to campaign for the party to refurbish its image and boost chances in the hustings but her 25-year-old daughter Priyanka is also being wooed to contest the coming elections in a bid to project to the electorate that the Nehru family is very much with the Congress and the linkage is felt on the ground.

How far will Sonia Gandhi be able to improve the chances of the beleaguered Congress in the coming elections? Does this party stand any chance to form the government after the polls on its own or even with the support of others? And of course, what potentials Congress holds in the Indian politics in the future? There is no denying that the decision of the Italian-born widow of Rajiv

Gandhi has introduced a new election of inspiration for the Congress in the eyes of the voting. She has agreed to campaign for the organisation seriously and this has already made some impact on the election prospects of the party.

Sonia, after the killing of her husband by a suspect Tamil suicide bomber in the southern Tamil Nadu state in 1991, remained largely behind the curtain ignoring appeals from the party leaders that she take up the charge of the organisation of which her husband, mother-in-law Indira Gandhi and grand father-in-law Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru were the undisputed leaders. Sonia was known to be lukewarm when husband Rajiv had joined politics in 1982 to fill the vacuum caused by the untimely death of younger brother Sanjay in a stunt plane crash in the Indian capital. But mother Indira's insistence that he take up the reins of family politics rather forced Rajiv Gandhi, a professional airlines pilot, to throw his hat into the rings. Rajiv occupied all the highest posts in his not-too-long a political career by initially becoming a member of the parliament, then general secretary of the Congress, subsequently prime minister and president of the party and also the leader of the opposition. Still, Sonia was known to have preferred that her husband maintain a quiet family life away from the glare of the most notable political family of the country.

As such, after Rajiv's assassination, a shocked Sonia Gandhi was more confined in her personal life with daughter

Priyanka and son Rahul and showed scant interest in the political milieu of the country. However, she did keep some links at later stage with the Congress affairs and many important party leaders would keep her posted about party matters. They would often look for unofficial guidance from the 10, Janpath — the residence of Sonia Gandhi. Sonia also at times gave vent to her feelings on different matters. Prime Minister and Congress president Narasimha Rao was not in good terms with her and once she made it abundantly clear that she disliked Rao when they were together at a function commemorating Rajiv Gandhi.

Sonia also implicitly criticised the former Congress government for not taking enough steps to unearth the plot behind killing of Rajiv. But when Congress lost the last polls and was bowed out of office, pressure further mounted on her to lead the party which was in disarray owing to infighting, frustration and lack of attractive leadership. Narasimha Rao had to quit party chief's position making way for Sitaram Kesri but he too lacks charisma.

The Congress which had always depended heavily on attractive leadership is suffering from it for quite sometime. The position of the party has eroded in the eyes of the people in recent past for many people consider Congress as responsible for forcing an early election. First, it withdrew support from the Deve Gowda government without any strong reason causing the fall of government — presumably Mr Kesri taking

a chance to bring Congress to power and thereby himself becoming the Prime Minister. But Kesri's move boomeranged and he had to eat his own words when the Congress not only failed to form government but had to support a new government of the UF. The withdrawal of support from the Gaur government on the issue of Jain Commission report on assassination of Rajiv Gandhi was more plausible but here too, many felt that the UF government should have been given more time to remain in power before a midterm election is forced upon the nation. After all, the Lok Shaba had completed much less than half of its term by then.

Congress is a secular party with centrist policy. It is vehemently opposed to the communal forces like the BJP and others and at the same time its relations with the leftists are not good. The centrist parties like the Janata Dal of prime minister Gaur are its main rivals despite commonality in ideology. It had some allies in the now powerful regional parties but some of them have abandoned the Congress like the Anna DMK of former chief minister Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu. And such developments like West Bengal's firebrand popular leader Ms Mamta Banerjee leaving the party came as a big setback.

It makes a desperate bid to come to power but few would believe that Congress will form the next government in India. In fact, many feel it would be difficult for the party to retain the 140 seats in the 545-member house.

Sonia Gandhi has joined the

politics and the Congress, and has now taken up the responsibility to campaign for the organisation at a very difficult time. She commands respect in the party and also, to a large extent, among the Indian People. But once she is in the game, she had also to face onslaughts from the opponents like the BJP, UF and even the leftists. Her being a foreigner, allegations by the critics that she had links in the multi-million dollar "Bofors arms purchase scandal" when her husband was prime minister and what led to the fall of Rajiv government, her disinterest in the politics over the last few years etc. will be used by the opponents against her. The BJP has already said "people want Lord Rama and not the Roma" — meaning that it is the Hindu religious party which people want and not Sonia, who is from Italy. Possibly, Sonia wanted to avoid these things and remained aloof from seriously involving herself in party affairs. But now that she is very much in the fray, she may have to face the realities. The situation is also vulnerable to the exposure of the "myth" that surrounds her about her ability to attract people and provide dynamism to the party.

One must agree that the Nehru family enjoys the aura of invincibility in the Indian politics. It remains to be seen to what extent it still persists. Sonia Gandhi is certainly a force for the Congress and her decision to campaign for the party has already stopped exit of Congress leaders and workers to other organisations. The workers see a new ray of hope. Her campaign in the crucial Hindi heart land like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar may help Congress improve its seats tally in the polls.

But it is unlikely to be enough for the organisation to be reckoned with as a force for power in the next polls unless its 'condition' is improved in a spectacular manner.

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.

"A Billion Dollar Bridge on the River Jamuna"

Sir, The above captioned article printed in the DS on 9 Dec '97 interested me because JMB at present is of highest national importance and that the writer was Mr Faruq Choudhury, a retired diplomat with a brilliant career and presently a good writer on contemporary affairs. But the article was rather disappointing in that it hardly contained anything new that we did not read before. His caustic remark on BNP as quoted in the letter of Mr Mohd Gholam Mustafa on 30 Dec '97, stood out like a sore thumb.

Mr Faruq Choudhury side-tracked the main point that it was BNP government who, after several years of preparation, laid the foundation stone of JMB project and work started

in full swing. And that Awami League not only boycotted the ceremony, they actually called a countrywide hartal to the great embarrassment of the government in front of the foreign dignitaries.

Iskander Meah
Gulshan North, Dhaka

Heart probe

Sir, After 26 years of the creation of Bangladesh, where do we stand today? We have not advanced much. The hopes and aspirations are not flowering. Some other emerging countries in Asia have progressed noticeably, but we, as a small, homogeneous, compact nation of 120m, with unity of culture and language, today stand divided, fighting amongst ourselves, thanks to the hair-splitting stands of our politicians, and the narrow-minded attitudes of

the political parties, and the lack of statesmanship and leadership.

Have the politicians let us down? This is a core question which has to be faced and debated by the whole nation, including the non-politicians. Let us not blame the external forces which grasped power from the politicians who are supposed to run the state and provide good governance, anticipating coups and illegitimate and forceful takeovers by groups whose job is not to govern the state.

Shabebarat has come and gone, and Ramzan is here. We as Muslims, are far away from the noble concepts of Islamic values. We pay only lip-service, with long sermons. Our sentiment and emotions leak out in the form of elegant and moving poetry, but the prosaic reality of life is bypassed through unnecessary bickering and holier-than-thou attitudes. We look down upon dissenters, and cannot tolerate differences of opinion. Even one day before Shabebarat, one political leader was accusing other sections of countrymen of conspiracy, while the opposing parties were doing the same and alerting all citizens to bring them back to power, forgetting the country.

There is too much egoism, and too little humility. We do not know how to handle power safely and in a popular manner. The command politics has to go. The leaders do not impose the mandate, we citizens do; but it is misinterpreted through nepotism.

Paranoid mentality in politics is taking its toll. Simply because one political party played a prominent role during the liberation movement, the suffering and sacrifice of others do not count, and are not noticed; as its own leadership and contributions are spotlighted, blocking out the sacrifice of others.

This is a very narrow-minded attitude which the whole nation or society will not tolerate. This evil attitude may backfire — suddenly, Basicallly, the society is responsible for supporting the wrong practices, such as dynastic succession to charismatic leadership. A daughter and a wife are foisted up on props to meet vested interests. This system creates a void in the absence of training ground for the next generation of leaders. Is this desirable? We continue to live in the past, quarrel in the present, and do not have the capacity to analyse

what is coming up in the future.

The question arises if the politicians are incapable of running the country, then who should? Another profession cannot take over. The only alternative is to form a national government for five to ten years for concentration of direction towards a common goal, namely the development of the country, not the survival or strengthening of single political parties.

The political culture has to be brought in by the politicians themselves, otherwise the masses will impose it on them through periods of punishment.

The time has come to take a decision. We need a cleansing, very badly. May God save the country from the oppression of ordinary minds who pose as leaders.

A Senior Citizen
Dhaka

Mosquito bite in biting cold!

Sir, My attention has been drawn once again to the small insect named mosquito in this big winter that is also biting! Who doesn't know mosquito is

very dangerous for mankind and other animals. Yet it is spreading alarmingly nowadays.

There are many ponds and drains in the capital city full with water-hyacinth. These are the ideal breeding grounds of the mosquitoes. Sometimes these are cleaned by DCC, but not always. It is very painful that neither DCC nor the government department has taken any serious step to save the city permanently from mosquito menace. Everybody knows that malaria and other hazardous diseases such as dengue spread out through mosquitoes.

The holy month of Ramadan is on. Every Muslim wakes up at Sehri time but cannot do anything (eating, saying prayer, Quran Tilawat etc.) peacefully because of mosquito bite. Are the mosquitoes cold prone? But it is a double suffering for the city people.

So, I urge upon the authorities concerned to take immediate proper step for effective control of mosquitoes and save the city people if not from biting cold, at least from mosquito bite.

Mr Abdul Baten
419/C, Withergate, Dhaka