

Be Stern

On the face of it, it looked like a good decision. But what was wrong with it was that it was not true, or that is how it appears now. Yesterday, this newspaper along with many others carried the news, based on a PID handout, that government has sent the 7-point demand of the BCS administration cadre to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Establishment Ministry. On inquiring it was revealed that no such JS Standing Committee exists. So where did this news originate from, and why did the PID issue it, though it claimed its source to be "unofficial".

However we would like to repeat our call for patience on all sides. We strongly resent the way BCS admin cadres have been behaving. They cannot act like trade unions nor a group of them behave like CBAs. Government servants are public employees and every aspect of their behaviour must follow certain rules and regulations.

Mass demonstration in front of selected offices are not how BCS admin cadres are expected to behave, nor are other cadres for that matter. However we have to admit that such behaviour of public servants have a long history and has become entrenched with the gradual politicisation of the government functionaries. All government of post-independence period-both civil and military-are guilty of using the government officials for their narrow political ends. Thus over the years the curse of partisanship has gradually eaten away the whole notion of impartiality and objectivity on which our administrative edifice is based.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has a very difficult task before her. We must not forget that it was her party that blatantly used the government servants for its own political goal towards the fag end of BNP rule. She later rewarded those who took active part in that process. In a way she is paying the price of her shortsightedness then.

Whatever may have been the past follies, it cannot be allowed to continue now. We urge the government to be stern and strictly go by the book. As for the parliament, we think it is an administrative matter, and should be solved by the executive branch.

A Change of Heart

Doctors need a change of heart, said a *Daily Star* headline yesterday in big italicised types. That the journal was not proposing to bring in practitioners of Christian Barnard's art but was meaning to say what the phrasal expression stands for figuratively, nobody was in any doubt about. But hospitals especially those run by the government and the experience of anyone having to run after a doctor do strongly suggest that short of Barnardian surgical intervention there will never be any change of heart among the healers in Bangladesh.

Even the smartest among our citizens would be puzzled to decide what to do in case of a bloody or serious burn injury accident. Even in cases where money is no problem. Rush her to hospital emergencies? *The Daily Star* story would very correctly advise against. Private hospitals? It would be quite a quiz to know which of these offers the right service. These are medically manned by personnel of the government health service and hospitals. They all need a call and some notice or time to respond to any need at the private hospitals. The best that these can do is offer some first aid-type care by a medical green-horn pending the arrival of the majestic ones from the government cadre. And the general rule is the visiting big shots come abiding strictly by a routine, not according to anyone's need.

Doctors enjoy here the benefit of the convention of being kept above criticism. Just as do the judges. How many people go abroad for treatment of even ordinary illnesses — not to say anything of serious ailments calling for repair of heart or kidney or staving off oncological degeneration? May be more than a hundred thousand. Specialised hospitals in nearby Calcutta thrive on never-ending processions of Bangladeshi patients. And far off Vellore or Madras or even Chandigarh share the patronage of the Bangladeshi patient. The moneyed ones, however, go to Bangkok and Singapore. Why?

The doctors can afford to care little as the number of the impecunious patient is so large and continues to grow so much all the time that they would not have to fear losing patients to others up to the day of judgment.

It is indeed a question of the heart. Most of our doctors do not put their heart into their job — professionally. Their heart is elsewhere, most likely lucre. And seldom it is on the sufferer that has come seeking his or her cure a thousand times more ardently than any beggar. Churning that craving from all of one's existence, does make a difference. Loss of one's own nation's confidence. A change of heart you need, indeed.

A Season to Lose Sleep

It is admission time in the city schools. And time for some guardians to lose sleep. With most of the private schools closing their gates pretty early, parents are in a mad rush to carve a niche for their wards in the schools of their choice. Government schools with a reputation are having to take the brunt of this maddening 'hunt' for good schools.

This sickening frenzy is not typical of this year only. It has become a pattern by now. Because it is not merely a matter of putting children to schools. Every parent is keen to find a berth for her child in a school he or she reckons as capable of providing quality education. And although in terms of sheer number there is not quite a crisis of schools in Dhaka this preferential attention to certain schools leads to an unequal distribution of pressure ushering in what now has assumed the proportion of a seasonal crisis.

We believe it is a two-way problem. While there is no denying that there is not exactly a numerical crisis of schools in Dhaka, there is no denying also that most do not ensure quality education. In fact, quality has become such a rarity these days that even the schools that many parents deem as good are found wanting more often than not. Main problem is the lack of qualified and dedicated teachers. So the mere mushrooming of schools won't help. There will have to be more schools that can ensure quality education. Then the parents have to come out of their mindset about certain schools. Unless a balance is struck between the two, the seasonal rush would never go.

Sonia's Entry, Not Unmixed Blessing

BJP leaders still believe that the regional parties will be more hit than they. Their argument is that Congress, with Sonia, will eat up a substantial support of Muslims, dalits and the backward that the state parties enjoy at present.

HE would rather beg in the streets of Delhi than join politics. This was not the best of expression in defence of Sonia Gandhi. Still Mohammed Younus, who behaves like a member of the Nehru-Indira Gandhi family, used it when there was great pressure on Sonia to lead Congress a few years ago. Her own equivocal response to the loyalists, literally forcing her to preside over the party, made it doubtful whether she would ever take the plunge.

Now that she has, the discussion on why she did it is futile. Instead, the question which needs to be posed is how her electioneering will affect the fortunes of Congress or, for that matter, the Bharatiya Janata Party. However contemptuous the critics may be, she has already made a difference, at least psychologically. For one, desertions in Congress have stopped. Whether her entry will be translated into votes is yet to be seen. But even if she is able to tilt three to four per cent of votes in favour of Congress it would mean 33 more seats for Congress in the two states alone, Maharashtra and Rajasthan.

In Rajasthan, Congress secured 40.51 per cent of the votes polled against BJP's 42.36 per cent in the 1996 Lok Sabha elections. The difference was only that of 1.85 per cent. Again, Maharashtra gave Congress 34.78 per cent while 38.64 per cent to the BJP-Shiv Sena combine. A difference of less than four per cent. There are many seats where Congress lost by a few hundred or a couple of thousand votes. Sonia may effect the necessary tilt to win the party those seats.

The BJP regards Congress as the only viable opposition and is worried over the Sonia factor, which is unknown and untried so far. Already the wave of buoyancy that the party was riding has been stemmed and the initial advantage is dissipating. Some BJP leaders still believe that the regional parties will be more hit than they. Their argument is that Congress, with Sonia, will eat up a substantial support of Muslims, dalits and the backward that the state parties enjoy at present. This is not true. Theirs are now separate set up and space. They will not want to lose them to Congress. In fact, the BJP may be the loser. It is as much closer to the upper castes as Congress is. The Congress gain will be BJP's loss.

Sonia's stronghold may turn out to be the rural electorate, besides women. I found the evidence when I was in Rajasthan a few days ago, after Sonia had announced her intention to campaign for the Congress candidates. Many people and pressmen told me that she wielded influence over villagers, particularly women, who had sympathy for her as the widow of the assassinated prime minister. Even UP, which gave only four out of 85 seats to Congress last time, shows the signs of stirrings after her entry. A BJP leader concedes Congress at least 10 more seats.

Indeed, the dynasty still sells in certain parts of India, more so in the South. One saw

how after the Janata's sweep in northern India, following Mrs Gandhi's authoritarian rule from 1975 to 1977, the four southern states, which generally returned Congress, reversed the trend. Five years ago, Rajiv Gandhi's assassination in the midst of elections won Congress more seats in the South than it would have otherwise. Sonia may be a hit below the Vindhyas, although editors of leading newspapers in the four southern states think differently.

I do not believe that she would be the prime minister if

will be solely directed at her. She should know that before long the names of those who received the kickbacks in the Bofors gun deal will be out. The Italian connection has already been established. And it was her husband who had opened a direct channel other than the official one, to negotiate the deal and to distribute the cut. Her close friend, Ottavio Quittrocchi, linked with the bribes, has fled India with the then Congress government's connivance. Corruption is going to be the main issue in election and she will be increasingly hearing that

little too early. Apart from Rajiv Gandhi's misdoings, Sonia's problem will be to explain why she retained the Italian citizenship even after a decade of her marriage. The note that the Union Home Ministry prepared in 1982, two years before Rajiv Gandhi became the prime minister, has said nothing in her defence. Like other notes by bureaucrats, this was also vague.

The note was entitled, "Shrimati Sonia Gandhi, an Italian, who has not applied for citizenship so far." It said: "Smt Sonia Gandhi, wife of Shri Rajiv Gandhi, MP, has not so far applied for or acquired Indian citizenship. She is staying in India as an Italian national, on the basis of authorised stay facilities granted to her. However, being the wife of an Indian citizen, she is eligible for registration as Indian citizen under Section 5(1) (C) of the Citizenship Act 1955." The note further said: "Italian ladies married to Indian citizens, like other foreign wives of Indian citizens, are considered for registration under Section 5(1) (C) of the Act on the basis of Indian citizenship of their husbands." The wording was hog-wash but what it implied was that Mrs. Sonia Gandhi could be an Indian citizen by marriage, but had not chosen to be so.

Before I go further, let me explain what section 5(1) (C) of the Citizenship Act 1955 is. There are two ways to earn Indian citizenship: one, by registration and the other, by naturalisa-

tion. Sonia came under the registration clause and section 5(1) (C) which relates to "women married to Indian citizens." Sonia was also governed by the naturalisation clause and for that, according to official sources, "any eligible person will have to apply in the prescribed form through the concerned state government, and if such an application is eventually accepted by the central government, he or she will be issued a certificate of naturalisation, after he or she has renounced his or her original nationality." Why did she not embrace citizenship through marriage?

Even after some references here and there Sonia did not renounce her Italian citizenship. So much so, she allowed her name to be deleted from the electoral rolls in Delhi, indicating that she did not want to be an Indian national. She must have weighed at that time the advantages and disadvantages to Rajiv Gandhi. Ultimately, she became an Indian citizen, only a few months before Rajiv Gandhi assumed prime ministership.

Congress has, no doubt, got vigorated after Sonia's entry. Workers are particularly rejuvenated because they feel that she may ignite the embers of the dynasty's glory once again. What they — and the party — overlook is the baggage she has brought with her, the baggage of Bofors gun kickbacks and other shady deals effected during the regimes of Rajiv Gandhi but not Mrs Gandhi. And in the background was the extra-constitutional authority of Sanjay Gandhi. All those horrible memories may stir up again. She may not turn out to be an unmixed blessing.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

and when Congress leads a coalition government at the Centre. That has a different kind of impediments which she may not be able to surmount. Her candidates for the office of prime minister are former Finance Minister Manmohan Singh and former Kerala Chief Minister AK Antony. She may choose any of the two. Nonetheless, if Congress does well, there will be efforts to draft her. She cannot say that she would not go that far. Politics knows no part-time participation.

Sonia should, however, be prepared for the attacks which

Rajiv Gandhi was not Mr Clean. Will she be able to face all the accusations hurled at her and her husband and how effectively will meet them is the question. The Sonia factor may be important for Congress, which has been desperately looking for a prop. But how does that help her in what she should have assessed before jumping into the arena. She has even endangered the prospects of her children, Priyanka and Rahul, who would have had greater chance after the people had been disillusioned from all. The dynasty card cannot be played twice. I think she has played it a

Efforts to Improve Iran-US Relations

by A S M Nurunnabi

If the new overture leads to the resumption of meaningful contact between the two countries, it is expected to contribute to the lessening of tension in the Middle East and hopefully reopen a new chapter of cooperation.

hostage until January 20, 1981. On November 14, 1979, US President Jimmy Carter ordered frozen all Iranian assets in US banks. An unsuccessful US attempt (April 24, 1980) to rescue the hostages aggravated hostility between the two countries. On January 20, 1981, the day of Ronald Reagan's inauguration as US President, the hostages were released.

When Ayatollah Khomeini died on June 3, 1989, Ali Akbar Rafsanjani was elected president. He favoured a policy of rapprochement with the West. A move towards that end was facilitated with the resumption of diplomatic ties between Iran and the United States on September 27, 1990. Such relations, however, remained rather cool. Washington imposed tough economic sanctions on Tehran saying that it was against the Middle East peace process and that it harboured terrorists who see American interests as the prime target.

After two decades of confrontation with Washington, new Iranian President Mohammad Khatami has moved cautiously to ease relations of offering a "thoughtful dialogue with the American people." This move has been further supported by the Iranian foreign minister who said it was up

to the United States to improve relations with Tehran and that his government wanted good relations with western world. He said: "The ball is in the court of the United States. Improving relations is something that depends on their sides. We are ready to work with all nations based on mutual respect. The Americans must change their behaviour towards Iran."

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami's unusually conciliatory message aimed at the United States has been reciprocated by US President Bill Clinton in equally conciliatory terms, saying he was greatly encouraged by the opening from Iran. If the new overture leads to the resumption of meaningful contact between the two countries, it is expected to contribute to the lessening of tension in the Middle East and hopefully reopen a new chapter of cooperation between the two countries.

It is open to question whether the American perception of Iran as a country encouraging terrorism and impeding the Middle East peace process is shared by her allies. The economic embargo imposed by the US also does not appear to have been fully effective in as much as many countries have been lukewarm in honouring it. It is reported that even US com-

panies are violating the embargo to promote their own business interests.

There are hopeful indications in this direction from other quarters. Saudi Arabia lately offered to mediate between the US and Iran to reconcile them in the interest of regional stability in the Gulf. The Saudi Crown Prince said: "It is not hard for our Iranian brothers or for a friendly country like the United States to reach a settlement to their differences, and we will be happy to see stability and security in this sensitive region." Leaders of the European Union also lately confronted President Clinton with their long-standing objections to US sanctions on international trade with Iran.

In the opinion of international observers, the encouraging thaw in the relations between the two countries is not likely to lead immediately to any major development, keeping in view the present uncertain state of the over-all situation in the Middle East. In this context, each side will carefully watch further developments before taking any meaningful next step.

The United States still has reservations about Iran. It also wants to be sure about power equations in that country. Whatever be the nature of power

structure at the high level as between Ayatollah, the supreme leader and President Khatami, the willingness on the part of Iran to normalise relations with the US is indicative of a consensus among those who wield power in Iran.

There is another refreshing aspect of the present internal situation in Iran. Until recently, Iran's Islamic leaders tried to prevent their people from knowing when things were going wrong. When they chose to publicise problems — economic or moral — they preferred to blame the West, notably the United States. Now, Mohammad Khatami's relatively moderate government in office and with a growing public hunger for openness, this may be changing. Newspapers have begun to reflect the darker side of life under Islamic rule and to raise political and religious questions that push at the limits of the state's tolerance.

Over the past few years, western policy has been a muddle. The aim was fine: to persuade Iran to change its more dangerous ways. The Americans tried to do this by enclosing it in a corset of sanctions, Europeans by talking it into good behaviour. Neither method worked. And so, both sides began to agree it was time for a joint reassessment. So far,

America's policy has remained officially unchanged. In 1995, the Clinton administration cut off all dealings with Iran. Last year, the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act laid down that any non-American firm investing over \$40 million a year in Iranian oil or gas would be punished. The plan to pipe gas from Turkmenistan across northern Iran to Turkey and beyond may not technically break the letter of the sanctions act, but it certainly breaks its spirit. But the US administration decided not to oppose the project. Three distinguished former US officials jointly attacked current policy as crude and ineffective. Senior US officials are also said to be giving hints about their desire to end the Iranian estrangement.

In the light of the latest Iranian overture, for reconciliation, the western view of Iran as sponsor of terrorism needs to be revised particularly because a beginning has been made with the Iranian President taking the first major step by offering a dialogue and President Clinton's response eulogising Iran as "a country with a great history" and declaring that Americans "have been greatly enriched by Iranian, by Persian culture."

In the context of the above developments, there seems to be no doubt that a rapprochement between the United States and Iran will help to ease tension and contribute to the creation of peace and stability in the region.

OPINION

MAKING peace in the insurgency-affected Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh is just like chasing a chameleon in the deep forest. As the government opposition standoff continues on a secretly negotiated and recently signed government-rebel pact, layer after layer of smoke-screens of uncertainty darken the prospect of the long-awaited peace transforming it fast into something very difficult, illusive and unattainable.

Day in and day out since the signing of the highly disputed pact on December 2, peace lost its ground little by little to a new wave of unrest across the area. If the current situation goes on unchecked, the picturesque region of south-eastern Bangladesh that still bears the marks of bruises for a prolonged animosity may come under a renewed and intensified trouble — both from inside and across the border.

High hopes for peace and tranquillity in an area of about 5,000 square miles have now been replaced by a growing fear of violence in the entire region — and beyond in other parts of Bangladesh. BNP, the major opposition political party of the country which outright rejects the peace pact dubbing it as a "black deed with seeds for future separatism" has reconfirmed its stance to continue movement through the holy month

of Ramadan demanding its cancellation.

As of now the so-called peace is at a very critical phase and so is the government. Ironically, the problem facing the government today was created by itself. The government couldn't take into confidence the opposition parties, the public and the press until the treaty was signed. Although the pact was immediately hailed by the heads of several foreign missions in Dhaka, such an accord would probably have never been reached even the corridors of their countries' legislative assemblies without a bipartisan support or national consensus, not to speak of its reaching the signing table.

Peace-making between two parties is always a difficult task and it is more so when one or the other party is fighting for a political cause. This is precisely the reason why peace hasn't yet been established in many parts of the world including Northern Ireland. However, this doesn't mean that there cannot be peace between the Bangladesh government and the Shanti Bahini. Of course, it can and should be. But the process of peace-making that was followed by the Awami League government was grossly flawed.

A Cry for a Durable Peace

Syed Badiuzzaman writes from Boston

In a democracy, the government must take people into confidence in all important matters. This is, in fact, the most important precondition for this system. The merit of this is that the government's responsibilities for all major decisions on matters of national importance are shared by the people. Democracy never allows the government to take major decisions unilaterally on national issues keeping the public in the dark. So, by striking a deal alone and secretly with the rebels who fought a prolonged guerrilla war in Bangladesh which is a serious national issue, the Awami League government seems to have ignored the basic rules of democracy.

One cannot but be convinced after taking a closer look at the peace pact that on implementation of the accord the entire Chittagong Hill Tracts will be governed in one fashion (through the high-powered Regional Council) while the rest of the country in another. This new administrative arrangement exclusively for the hilly region obviously goes against the spirit of the unitary character of the Republic of

Bangladesh which has been clearly spelt out in the very first article under part one (The Republic) of the Constitution of the country. This is just one example of how the treaty came into conflict with the Constitution.

Articles 28 (The state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.) and 29 (There shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in respect of employment or office in the service of the Republic. And no citizen shall, on grounds of only religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, be ineligible for, or discriminated against in respect of service of the Republic.) also clash with the provisions of the peace pact. The power of the sovereign Parliament of Bangladesh has also been curtailed by allowing the Regional Council a final say on anything relating to Chittagong Hill Tracts.

A close scrutiny of the peace pact suggests that a fair amount of autonomy has been granted to Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity cutting across

the provisions of the country's Constitution. This truth cannot be denied by any argument and it must be told to the nation. However, instead of frankly admitting the fact to the people, the poorly advised government of Sheikh Hasina is unsuccessfully trying to suppress it through misleading statements. By doing so, Sheikh Hasina is offering the opposition parties — particularly her archrival BNP — an opportunity to make up exaggerated and colourful stories on Chittagong Hill Tracts which are further misleading the people.

What is the ultimate goal of a peace pact? To achieve a durable peace. And a durable peace is that what is endorsed by all parties. The Awami League government should have made exactly that peace with the Shanti Bahini which would be ever-lasting outliving not only its tenure but those of all other subsequent governments. But regrettably the prospect of recently made peace looks dim with all major opposition parties — not just the BNP — registering their protests against it. Even Jatiya Party headed by General Ershad — which is a partner of Sheikh Hasina's government — is also convinced that the peace pact was signed violating the provisions of the Constitution.

The opposition BNP with its seven other allies, Jamaat-e-Islami and Ershad's Jatiya Party publicly oppose the peace treaty. This means that the majority of the people of the country are against it. Then where this peace treaty is going to go from here? Can it be imposed on the nation even without the consent of the majority to it? Well, not under a democratic system. If the rules of democracy are not abided by for a desperate attempt to push the peace pact forward anyway, would that be an intelligent move? The answer is 'no'. Because none other than Sheikh Hasina herself probably knows it better that things change quite easily in Bangladesh with the change of governments.

If such a change takes place

in case of the current peace treaty too when Awami League government will not be in power, that will be a serious embarrassment not only for this party but also its partners for peace. That kind of situation will be very unfortunate not only for Chittagong Hill Tracts but for the entire nation. So, only a durable peace broadly supported by all parties can be a permanent solution to the long-standing problem, not the fragile one pursued by the Awami League government alone.

The government should candidly admit to the nation that certain provisions of the Constitution might have come in conflict with the peace treaty and sit with the leaders of all political parties and professionals including lawyers and journalists for solving the problem collectively. If peace in a given part of the country badly ruined by a prolonged guerrilla warfare is worth certain amendments to the Constitution, so be it. Why not? Constitutional amendment is a commonplace. It can occur anytime in the greater interest of the nation. The prime purpose of the constitution is to serve the people on the basis of equality, fairness and justice and guide the nation live a happy, prosperous and peaceful life.

Breaking with its past tradition, BNP should come forward to help the government correct its mistake, if it thinks there has been any. Bringing thousands of Bangladeshis back home from a foreign land after a prolonged stay there, helping them rehabilitate and restart their lives anew in their own country, and also supporting a government move to establish a lasting peace in Chittagong Hill Tracts are equally the solemn responsibilities of all opposition parties including the BNP. For a lasting peace in Chittagong Hill Tracts, serious and heart-to-heart government-opposition discussions should be held both in and outside the Parliament. The government may consider putting the peace pact in abeyance to start a full-house constructive and lively discussion on it leading to its ratification.

To the Editor...

Levy of Jamuna Bridge

Sir, It is known that the Cabinet has already approved the levy of Jamuna Bridge for different types of vehicles. In some newspapers the proposed rate has been published. But it is surprising that the rate will be about 2-3 times higher than existing ferry charges between Aricha and Nagarbari. The picture is quite different if it is compared with the existing bridge toll at Meghna and Daudkandi points on Dhaka-Chittagong highway.

It is customary that after completion of a big development project, nation is benefited in

many ways. But in the case of Jamuna Bridge — except ease in communication between northern parts of the country and Dhaka — general public will be adversely affected economically. A bus/coach passengers shall have to pay at least Tk. 20 more as excess fare while passing over this bridge. Agricultural products which are transported from northern districts will be more expensive in the city markets.

Similarly finished commodities from capital city and imported goods from Chittagong port will be costlier in the northern districts.

I, therefore, appeal to the Prime Minister to kindly look

into the matter and revise the proposed Jamuna Bridge levy taking account of the poor economic condition of the country as well as the common people.

M A Jallil
372/B, Khilgaon, Dhaka.

"... Men Behind"

Sir, This refers to the editorials of January 6 titled "Expose the Men Behind" and of January 5 titled "The Signal from Aganagar" and "Boards in Limbo". The solutions of all these can be summarised as:

1) There should be a central administrative service apart from the existing cadres headed by the head of the

government.

2) The persons should be selected from Deputy Secretary and Secretary levels through written competition by the PSC.

3) These persons will be entitled to be head of any department of the government.

4) These persons should be honest, sincere and acceptable to the public.

5) The government should find these people out and assemble them for our bright future failure.

If we can do so as early as possible, then there will be no further Aganagar etc.

M Ali
Dhaka.