

The Will is Missing

It does not take a probing eye to see why the AL government's privatisation agenda has been drawing a blank. As many as 56 losing state-owned enterprises (SOEs) were catalogued for disinvestment within the current financial year.

There is nothing wrong in aiming at the sky, so that, at least a tall tree can be hit, but vaulting ambition without having crossed any hurdle at all is nothing short of kite-flying. It can raise questions about the seriousness of commitment, send wrong signals to all concerned and encourage the no-changers to regroup.

The fact of the matter is the government had not done the required spade-work before undertaking the disinvestment exercise. First, it started out without a legal framework. It has only been drafted now and is to be tabled at the Jatiya Sangsad in the near future.

Whereas the pundits pinned hopes on AL's historical experience in the trade union movement to stand them in good stead for carrying forward the privatisation programme it is the opposite which seems to have happened. Only the other day the AL government signed an agreement with the Sramik Karmachari Oikya Parishad (SKOP) promising them not to go for a massive privatisation drive.

So, it is the growing lack of political will that is at the root of the disinvestment debacle.

The July's Salary

A law ministry proposal to enhance the salary of the judges of the High and Supreme Courts, reported in the press yesterday, cannot but remind one of Hastings' wise act of giving the judges a super-salary. How much do the judges get now? Can they sustain themselves without the support that comes from society even to the most fastidiously correct officers of the government?

We wholeheartedly support the law ministry's proposal. But we have something to add. The proposed amounts of enhancement would fail to give result. Our society, unknown to many of us, has perhaps stealthily moved to a stage where maybe hundreds get a salary of Tk 50,000 plus. Judges must get substantially more than what has been proposed.

But this all should come only after the separation of the judiciary. The proposed raise should be declined by the judges as long as that separation is not effected and the whole judicial service has to eat out of the hands of the executive. Why cannot the judges take a united professional stand on this? This separation seems to have been packed to the cold storage, in spite of Law Minister Khasru being an ardent, impassioned and vocal advocate of it.

We have something to seek, something of these men and women of justice. Please help us, lead us as Habibur Rahman had more than merely hinted at, in bringing the matters of the court closer to public scrutiny. Not only the physical or manning or performance standards of the facilities but also the performance and pronouncements of the unquestioned ones. In Shikwah Iqbal questioned so many of the creator's doings. We want to say no more for fear falling foul of the contempt laws.

A Necessity, No Doubt

These are the salad days for regional cooperation. Hang-ups, prejudices are going away; governments of this part of the world are showing a welcome resolve to wake up from the nightmares of history. Bangladesh has been in the middle of some outstanding achievements in this regard of late. The Water Treaty with India, Peace Accord with the tribal insurgents in the Chittagong Hill Tracts are there as magnificent results of this new wave of cordiality.

A lot of this bonhomie, this spirit of togetherness has been shaped by the contemporary global economic order and the wholesome impact of slow but sure reaching for the democratic culture in the region. But this spirit is not immune to vicissitudes of time and the peculiarities of whims and interests of governments and it is a pity that people in and outside the governments who have been working for a collective and regional approach to problems, both international and bilateral, do not have a single unified and regional platform.

Once translated into reality, we believe such a forum will not only contribute in helping the governments with ideas to meet the new challenges of changing times but will also impact immensely in healing the long festering wounds in bilateral relationships and give democracy a firm foothold in the region.

US Records of Human Rights Violation in Bangladesh
A Sordid Tale of Crimes and a Futile Attempt to Cover-up

Bangladesh never has a dull moment for diplomats, expatriates and its inquisitive citizens. A report recently published by the US State Department on the subject under title provided another such excitement to continue the process. The report charted some of the various acts, incidents and crimes relating to human rights abuses that took place in Bangladesh in 1997.

The Foreign Office reacted and did so, with undue sharpness. Foreign Secretary conveyed the US envoy and conveyed to him government's displeasure about holding the press conference without permission and for what he termed as inaccuracies, half-truths and unsubstantiated stories relating to the substantive matters contained in the report. Let us analyse.

To obtain permission of the government for holding a press conference by a diplomatic mission is not necessary, except, perhaps, in a totalitarian state and a dictatorial regime. Ours is neither a totalitarian state nor is a dictatorial regime per se. Also, to my knowledge, no permission was made obligatory in our country for any diplomatic mission to hold a press conference in the past. Diplomats in our country have been free to hold and address

The abuses under the Special Powers Act have been so pronounced and widespread that the High Court of Judicature sometimes have to come to rescue the victims. In an unprecedented case, the High Court not only released four former BNP Ministers and State Ministers detained under the SPA under absurd charges of sabotage, but ordered the government to pay monetary compensation to the victims.

any meeting, seminar or conference without obtaining clearance of the host government, let alone to release a report prepared by their government for public consumption. No such restrictions, it is understood, has also been imposed in a code of conduct for diplomatic missions. Of course, it would have been in order to inform the government press agencies of the proposed conference. One gathers there was no special invitation extended to anyone and the general notification for the press conference had been designed for all concerned and all those who were interested.

Secondly, the practice of holding a press conference by a US diplomatic mission to release their country report on human rights is in vogue in a number of countries all over the globe. No such protests by the host government against holding a press conference as such appear to have taken place. Furthermore, a press conference obviates the need for answering many individual queries on a report. The increasing quantum of human rights abuses in Bangladesh in recent times might have likewise raised the propensity of people to seek more information and clarification than ever before. To enable them to answer all these queries at one go might have also been one of the factors that goaded the Embassy to hold the conference.

Finally, the snap decision to lodge a diplomatic protest the very day following presentation of the report indicates nervousness of the government at the possible impact of its contents on the general public. It also suggests that, more often than not, our leaders remain insulated and live in a dream world fabricated by their sycophants. The information contained in the report wake them up to stark reality of the situation and make them wonder with an

been overruled that the reaction to a formal protest would be counter productive. Instead of letting the report die a natural death, the measure regenerated the issue and is likely to keep it alive and thriving at least for some time to come.

As for the substantive issues, the most notable one appears to be the continuing deterioration of the law and order situation in the country. The number of incidents of political harassment, un-

opposition. How could one justify such police actions, which must have been dictated from the top.

Similarly, one Yasmin murder case stirred the previous regime so strongly that the delay in taking legal recourse almost shook its very foundation. But subsequently, there have been more unresolved cases like the rape and murder of Shima Chowdhury and others which have failed to evoke even the routine, customary criticisms from most of our otherwise active human rights organisations. The report has listed some of these and left out many more of such heinous crimes. Besides, many other types of incidents of violation of human rights, such as child abuses, have been incorporated in the report.

It was alleged that Prime Minister herself did never promise to repeal the Special Powers Act under which illegal detentions and consequent unlawful acts take place. A juggle of words appears to have been attempted in its defence. Can one deny that the Awami League and its leaders had relentlessly struggled against this and other black laws since the autocratic rule of General Ershad? Is not this a fact that the election manifesto of the Awami League pledged to abolish all such black laws? Does not the ruling party regard the nefarious Act passed by its own

party about a quarter century ago as a black law, a grievous stain to the nation, a negation of democratic principles and a gross violation of human rights? No excuse could be justifiably entertained, even the failure of previous governments in this regard. On the contrary, during the time of the immediate past government of Khaleda Zia application of the Act was much less frequent and rigorous than that is now.

The people do realise the lack of sincerity of the Awami League to carry out the mandates given by the people voting them to power. They can no longer be hoodwinked.

The abuses under the Special Powers Act have been so pronounced and widespread that the High Court of Judicature sometimes have to come to rescue the victims. In an unprecedented case, the High Court not only released four former BNP Ministers and State Ministers detained under the SPA under absurd charges of sabotage, but ordered the government to pay monetary compensation to the victims. Never in the history of Bangladesh a fine had ever been imposed on the government for having committed political harassment and unlawful detention of opposition leaders on flimsy and ridiculous grounds. The BNP has alleged that about 200 of their party leaders and activists have been killed and several thousands of them illegally detained during the past 19 months of the Awami League rule. The US report speaks of a far lesser number of victims and the government can perhaps derive some solace out of it.

Currents and Crosscurrents by M M Rezaul Karim

incredulous gaze—how could that be possible at all? It is a simplistic notion, but some may regard the exercise as nothing but a mere pretence.

The Foreign Secretary did raise certain substantive issues which are by far political in nature. These should have been dealt with better by a politician — by State Minister or by Foreign Minister himself, as they were present. The Foreign Secretary, as a duty-bound conscientious officer, carried out the instructions emanating from top. He must have advised and

lawful detentions, torture and death in police custody, rapes, killings, etc. have abounded in the past year. Who could defend the allegation that a young opposition political activist, who after being held in police custody, was repentant for his past misdeeds and committed suicide the very next day by hanging himself by his shoe lace? The police did. How many people would buy this story as authentic? Again, during disruption of opposition party meetings by hoodlums, the people who had been arrested by the police belonged mostly to the

US-UN, and Their Problem Child

The imminent war over Iraq seems not to be so much about weapons or even about the Gulf, as it is about the other yawning gulf, the one between an arrogant super-power and a proud country that refuses to bite dust. It is about the perceptions of dignity. Maybe a little less high handedness on both part and some tact could ease the tension. Dialogue with dignity,

POSTSCRIPT Neeman A Sobhan

breaking the child's hold by bringing down an iron rod over his hand. Going the diplomatic route may seem to, temporarily, give the Iraqi leader ascendancy, but in the long run, he could be lulled into complacency and then brought into line.

Admittedly, this adversary is more recalcitrant than just an obstinate child, more like a brat who needs to be taught a lesson, but it must be realised that he is incapable of learning, so he must be manipulated. Force is not going to make him comply. Possibly, diplomacy will not either, but what we need is the contents of that closed fist, and for that we need to get close to the hand, allow him to let us hold it. Breaking that fist and spilling out the dangerous contents, or worse, destroying the stubborn little boy is not the main objective. Or is it?

For some, like George Stephanopoulos, the news analyst with ABC news and a former top adviser to Clinton, it is a viable solution! A few months ago, he told the host of the American talk show Good Morning America, quoting Lincoln on 'justifiable tyrannicide' that the US should kill Saddam because neither sanctions nor bombing would eliminate the Iraqi leader. 'It's illegal, but not immoral'. Former Secretary of State Eagleburger who was also at the show, rightly reprimanded him and reminded him of the moral issue of setting a

precedent which could be used against anyone perceived as a Pol Pot or a Hitler.

And with that, we come to the issue of perceptions and perspectives. Seeing things from the others point of view, isn't this what the world of diplomacy and a world forum is about. Seeing an issue with the eyes of the US, whose power and ego is being undermined by a down at the heels but recalcitrant Arab country, and also looking from the perspective of that country itself which, strangled by economic sanctions and humiliated, is desperate to play any game however dangerous and self-destructive to get the world's attention, or even understanding the view point of an old hungry France or a Russia anxious to retain its place on the Middle-

Eastern stage, these are things that the UN and the civilised community of nations must do as the process of seeking a diplomatic solution is allowed to continue.

The crisis hinged on Iraq's thwarting of the UN weapons inspection team from doing their work, the findings of which would have been the basis for the lifting of the sanctions imposed on the country. Iraq complained that the US dominated the UNSCOM team. Scott Ritter who had headed the team of experts on arms control issues and specially concealment of weapons, was claimed by the Iraqis to be a spy and expelled from the country. Finally, the Iraqis did accept, in principle, the admission of inspection teams. But the issues seems to have boiled down to the sites that are open for inspection. The bones or sites of contention are the eight Presidential Palace sites. US wants an unconditional compliance by Iraq of the UN regulations on weapons inspection. And there

we are, stuck outside the palace gates. To have come this far, and to sound the battle drums on what seems to be an issue that can be sorted out across the table, is a sad commentary on the art of diplomacy in these times.

The imminent war over Iraq seems not to be so much about weapons or even about the Gulf, as it is about the other yawning gulf, the one between an arrogant super-power and a proud country that refuses to bite dust. It is about the perceptions of dignity. Maybe a little less high handedness on both part and some tact could ease the tension. Dialogue with dignity, rather than the deployment of weapons in a war against weapons, might strike the right note. Force and vengeance can only generate more of the same. And children learn not by the precept but by the actions of adults. The child with the clenched fists must be taught to stand up and voluntarily give up his possession, not his pride in himself. It may be a longer process than a short, purposeless battle of might, in which nothing is achieved, but it is the process which must be allowed to function. The UN is not just about Iraq or the US, its about the correct thing to do.

OPINION

Ban on CBAs

Md Shahjahan

I chime in with your editorial of 25.1.1998 acclaiming ban on CBA activities in Bangladesh Bank and suggesting similar ban on NCBS as CBAs have ceased to be dedicated to the service of the workers and staff members.

I had a relative serving in a textile mill in Tongi, Dhaka from whom I heard unerving stories of CBA activities crippling the industry. As a Timekeeper he was the worst sufferer. Workers drawing strength from CBAs used to be absent for months and come back with a slip in hand from CBA leaders. The plight of a poor Timekeeper in such a situation could easily be imagined. Failing to undergo the torment he had to quit his job.

Not only that textile mills, almost all the public sector organisations are afflicted with this CBA syndrome. Normal functioning of administration is totally impossible due to CBAs' interference in the day-to-day administration. CBAs maintain parallel administration exerting unfair influences in all matters of administration.

petuating its narrow political interest without considering the interest of the country. Such indulgence by the political parties not only distracted the CBAs from its object but has jeopardised its own interest and endangered its existence. Some penance should be done by political parties too.

We have a lot of other such problems the root cause of which is marriage of political convenience, such as debilitating law and order situation in the educational institutions, extortions in market places, capturing of bus terminals, anarchy in the ports and prevalence of mastedanism in the country. Now the question is: should we, to stop all these evils, put ban on student politics, on trade unions in port; can we put a ban on mastedanism and extortions? Trying to do so will be tantamount to wrap the earth with leather to save the foot from dust. Why not cover the foot? Why not cut off the political umbilical cord to stop these evils?

The CBAs have always been pampered by one or the other political party simply for per-

A Titanic Struggle

A Mawaz

The country is passing through various transitions since 1971. The political transitions are well marked through the different regimes which reigned for certain periods. The democratic transition of the '90s is having its impact on the civil society, as conditions have not yet returned to the normal routine level (stability). Some are good, many are undesirable, and quite a few unnecessary.

Those who run the country have to analyse and sort out the implications, retain the good ones, discard the bad ones, and filter the grey areas to pick up the good points. Undesirable trends have to be suppressed firmly, and controversial ones brought to a conclusion. The leadership has the responsibility which it cannot shirk indefinitely, or even for long, without feeling the backlash.

Evil must be nipped in the bud, before it can take root. Unfortunately, there are many saplings which can be readily spotted.

There is no time to keep issues pending. Public patience is limited, and transient. Delays bring in uncertainty, which is uncomfortable for the politicians, who have got the opportunity afresh to run the state. The volume and level of criticism rises, images are tarnished, confidence becomes shaky, and the benefit of the doubt is withheld for periods longer than necessary. Since the differences of opinions are internal and within the Bangladeshi society, the society has the controlling mechanism to arrive at solutions which are in public interest, because the end goal for all the factions is the same, namely, building a better Bangladesh. In democracy, diversions do not change the ultimate goal. In recent press reports, there were grumblings about shifting of the goal posts. This analogy could be applied to the other ills of the society.

The major negative implications have been well articulated through public opinion in the media. These are mainly campus violence, corruption in all its forms, the weakening of the established institutions as universally recognised, the political bipolarity which has divided the nation and stalled progress, the lack of consensus at the national level of decision-making (the parliamentary process is crippled), the defiance of authority, the law and order situation, and the widening gap between the people and the national leadership. In short, the communication gaps have to be narrowed or overcome. Convergence may not be possible once the divergences become too wide, scattered or isolated. At present, the sense of national unanimity is at stake. The civil society is in danger of losing its sense of direction. The being has to be corrected, and the final course set once for all. It does not matter who does it, so long it is done. It is a titanic struggle.

If the spectacle, recently in Washington, of the mutually back slapping and gushing, kissing cousins from Downing Street and the White House, was a trifle too cloying for good taste, the sharp acerbity of their belligerent policy towards the common enemy was no antidote either. Agreed that the provocation of the unrepentant, uncompiling Saddam is a trial indeed, but it is a challenge that has to be met with discussion, dialogue and diplomacy.

Diplomacy with a fully prepared war strategy is a contradiction, and is also self-defeating. Its like going into a marriage, sincerely avowing full commitment, but tightly clutching divorce papers in the hands. For the US-UK to gloss over the diplomatic options, and only barely repress an indecent eagerness to demonstrate their flexed military muscles is almost as unseemly as if they had spoken out their innermost fantasy, of toppling and eliminating Saddam Hussein himself, though Clinton has stated that the Iraqi leader would not be a target. But it is obvious that the Clinton-Blair duo would really rather dispense with all this tedious business of finding a diplomatic solution, espoused by France, Russia and China, and get on with the real business of bombing some sense into Saddam.

But would bomb attacks on Iraq do the trick? Would the show of force effect any satisfactory change in the scenario? Will it bring Saddam to his knees? Will this achieve what the UN is trying to do with its inspection team; getting access to and smoking out Saddam's hoard of biological and chemical arsenal? Or will it only trigger his releasing these on his neighbours and cause what is euphemistically called, collateral damage. Even worse, what about the chance of accidental US-led attack on the biological, chemical or nuclear sites, releasing the poisonous agents?

Douglas Johns of the Strategic Studies Institute of Army War College in the US is sceptical about the any advantage to be gained from cruise missile and laser guided bomb attacks on Iraq. What targets should be aimed for would be a problem. If the US hits a chemical weapons site it will release chemical material. If it hits a nuclear weapon site, it will have to ask if there's any nuclear material there, and how far you spread it by blowing it up, and if anyone is insane enough to target a biological weapon facility, they ought to be confined for the rest of their natural lives.

So it seems that the only mad man would not be the one just producing and hiding the weapons of mass destruction, but some insanity can also be attributed to those who, in the fever of the moment are aiming at destruction too, rather than deterrence. Experts agree with Johns that attack with high explosives are not the answer to a biological weapons threat. "We don't want to blow any of these things up. We need to seize and secure them and remove the contents."

Well, when a child gets something dangerous in his clutch and then obstinately clenches tight his fist, any parent can tell you that the only way to get him to relax his grip, is not by brute force. You have to tempt, distract, bargain, cajole, even fool him into giving in. This is the crude and brutal language of diplomacy. It calls for another kind of arm twisting which is far subtler than social, economic and religious thinkers — had ever thought of. The subject — to free the world from poverty, not through dole and charity, but through the establishment of universal human right to credit, is a new philosophy. Yet the dream and vision of a poverty-free world was almost tangible to the viewers. So much so that by the end of the programme when he was asking, "What are we waiting for? Why don't we start working to make this world free from poverty?" or words to that effect, both he and the interviewer were glowing with the reflection of a great dream!

Used as we are to watching all kinds of TV programmes with hardly anything to inspire us, it would be an excellent idea if the Bangladesh TV authorities arranged to get this programme from BBC, dubbed it in Bengali and broadcast in BTV programme at a prime time (BBC broadcast the programme twice in twenty-four hours).

A Z M A Ali House#9, Rd#11, Sector #4, Uttara, Dhaka

Grameen philosophy Sir, I watched with rapt attention the BBC TV programme HARP that were an half-hour long interview of Professor Yunus, taken by Tim Sebastian, was broadcast a couple of days before the Eid holidays. It was a wonderful show and it made me proud to watch Professor Yunus talk about his Grameen philosophy.

The way the Professor answered all the direct and incisive questions left no doubt in any viewer's mind that here was a great visionary who dared to dream and pursue a subject, none else — not even our great

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