

President's Reminder

Call him a guardian angel, conscientious objector or moral crusader and all that will fit his persona. But the fact of the matter is that President Shahabuddin Ahmed has been merely voicing the basic concerns of the nation as a sagacious senior and first citizen of this country. And in doing so he hardly ever enjoys himself. For, quite simply, he cannot be elated over his having to say the unpleasant for the umpteenth time because the key players of politics have not paid heed to it. It could not obviously please the president to be a role-model in public pulse reading when placing the finger on it and acting to its throbs are the basic functions of political leaders. Not his. But well, he seems to be bearing that cross, too.

What is it President Shahabuddin has been persistently driving at? If one were to recall his speeches of last five to six months it will become crystal clear that his one clarion call to all concerned has been to save the educational institutions from ruin. If our present is endangered by intolerance between major political parties our future is imperilled by the campus scavengers of terrorists working "under the banner of various front organisations of different political parties", as the President reminded their mentors once again. The political parties are still dragging their feet on the most pressing agenda of declaring a complete disconnection with their student front organisations thus paving the way for their deweaponisation in the conclusive sense. The handy slogan "terrorists belong to no political parties" has regrettably become not only an obsolete cliché in record short time, it has also begun to sound hypocritical especially after the armed feuding incidents in the BCL. The internecine outbursts exacerbating the campus situation — already so deeply troubled by BCL-JCD clashes — reveal how little control the political leaders wield on their boys in the student fronts.

It is a shame that the President's words of advice which strike a responsive chord with the patriotic citizens of the country have been ignored so brazenly for so long. We want an affirmative action on this before it is too late. For we are chary of the prospect of being 'a below-standard nation', as the President put it.

Now with Foreigners!

One item of yesterday's morning press that raised eyebrows of all and sundry was the intimidation of the foreign oil company executives by gangsters in Feni. The officials were reportedly motoring their way to attend a private function of a local agent of an oil company at Durgapur of the Parshuram thana when a small group of youngmen in motorbikes made the party turn about and speed back to Dhaka after an effectively terrifying demonstration of lethal weapons. Who were these youths and why did they do it? Evidently robbing or killing was not their purpose. Reportedly these armed cadres belonged to a local AL leader and MP and the reason the foreigners were scared away was because the host, local Director of Shell oil, is supposedly a staunch BNP supporter. The incident serves as a pointer of two things: law and order in Feni, and the unabated tyranny of groups and individuals under the signboard of the ruling party.

Feni has long been the eye of storm. Terrorism has become a way of life there and law and order has deteriorated drastically as powerful individuals holding enormous clout over the administration lock horns over vested interest. The present acrimonious culture of our politics has made things worse. Law enforcers dread the prospect of taking them on for obvious reasons. The number of incidents having to do with the said MP's area, as reported in the press so far, would make a legion. Yet he remains unbothered.

We would like to ask one simple question to the government. How does it expect foreign investors to be wooed by a country where narrow political rivalry can stop people even from attending a private party and neither law nor its enforcers can do anything about it? And how, for that matter, it thinks its anti-terrorism slogan would hold water when people or fronts are indulging in violence and terrorism in gay abandon under ruling party's banner? Politics is perhaps all about discrepancy between word and action. But certain amount of consistency is needed for the interest of the party in power, if not for others.

We sure are sending wrong signals to the world.

Privatisation of Trains

Eight trains on Bangladesh Railway's six routes — both on broad and meter gauge tracks — are being privatised on the Dhaka-Narayanganj pattern. Behind the decision are two obvious considerations that have, with time, turned into compulsions. As the earning from the Dhaka-Narayanganj route has just about doubled after privatisation the message couldn't but be heeded.

We welcome the decision wholeheartedly. For on top of cutting losses and turning in profits in the particularly bad patches, the private managements will hopefully improve passenger comfort and as such increase their number. Bangladesh is in need of making its citizens more railway-minded than road-minded. We expect the private trains to contribute towards that end. The decision is, however, an open admission of the failure of BR. How will it happen that private trains will attract more passengers than now, or that there will be less or no ticketless travelling in these? And all this will happen when the passengers will have well-lighted and aired accommodation, how? The private managements can do all this and the BR cannot, why?

Public sector or private, BR must deliver. For much too long it was on the suicidal path, proving to the world, donors in particular, that railway is bad business here. If Dhaka-Narayanganj trains can run with profit and with so many trains in the teeth of saturation-competition from the buses, we do not think any of these newly-privatised trains will have difficulty in earning profit by doing what it takes to do that. Something in this whole deal, however, keeps on worrying the citizens. The routes and trains that BR is retaining as profit-making may, for all one knows, in disguise be depriving us of hugely more profits. The BR should wake up.

Globalisation: Threat to Nation-State?

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THE globalisation has, of late, become a convenient buzzword to express so many things with so different connotation that the term is finally left with no widely acceptable formulation of a concept of its own. However, amidst its diverse and loose definitions there runs a central strand indicating something new in the world affair which keeps eroding the national seats of power — so far the foundation of all economic, political and social life of humankind. It is something that is changing man's pre-occupation with territorially arranged state system and has initiated a "process" where the people, practices, norms, ideas, currencies, goods, services, information and institutions will transcend geographical barriers obliterating on its way the traditionally held state boundaries. In other words, it is boundary-broadening process allowing people with varied activities to move across increasingly tenuous national frontiers.

But then it cannot be looked upon as altogether a new phenomenon and somekind of globalisation existed even earlier — as early as in early nineteenth century when industrial revolution was taking place with its impact felt all over the world. The international mobility of capital which began in small ways by late eighteenth century has, in fact, been the sine qua non of twentieth century globalisation. There is however difference now — difference in its volume, intensity and pervasiveness through the acceleration of technology and information revolution. The power of economic variables have been further strengthened with the diffusion of consumer products, the rapid transfer of financial resources and the efforts of transnational compa-

nies to extend their market share. These factors have proved to be so forceful and durable as to withstand and eventually surmount any pressure of political and cultural protectionism. Civilisationally, we have reached a level of development in which it is possible for innovations occurring in any sector of any country's economy to be instantaneously transferred to and adapted in any other country or sector. The spread of economic innovation around the world and the political and cultural adjustments that accompany such diffusion can hardly be stopped any more.

The inexorable surge of globalisation that we witness today is nevertheless a direct challenge to one of the central features of modern civilisation which brought mankind, in successive stages, to a vivid and sometimes an all consuming state of their existence as nations. The control of money, credit and fiscal policy was the most important pillar on which Jean Bodin, one of the exponents of nation state based his concept during the late sixteenth century. That pillar is now on the verge of collapse which has, of course, come about over a period of time. By late nineteenth century, the dominant currency was no longer the state minted coins or state printed bank notes but the credit created by fast growing privately controlled commercial banks.

Even though every nation state countered the trend with the establishment of central banks to control the commercial banks and their credits, throughout nineteenth century one nation state after another had per force been under the

control of non-national gold standard which imposed strict limit on a country's monetary and fiscal policy. A gold exchange standard agreed upon at Bretton Woods after second world war also did not give individual state full monetary and fiscal sovereignty. It would thus be seen that the nation states have since been under assault from some of the symptoms of globalisation. Now with the diffusion of the potent forces of the global economy there are new and more restraints on the individual government.

Today an expanded concept of globalisation, by shifting

power from states to non-state authorities like multinational or transnational firms, has allowed international bureaucracies to further undermine the state fabrics. It has virtually assailed the rampart of nation states which are now almost non-entities in its all-pervasive sweep. The phenomenon has totally changed the traditional structures of production. For example, the goods and services which were earlier produced by and for the people within the space of a state are now increasingly produced by the people in several states and for a world market, instead of local market.

Second, the globalisation involves changes also in the financial structure — the system by which credit is created to finance production and trade in goods and services. Whereas once the creation and use of credit took place within the societies of a territorial state, it now takes place across territorial frontier, in global market linked into a single system. Although there are local banks and market within that system for creating credit for local use these are no longer autonomous. On the contrary, these are parts of the larger system and also vulnerable to its ups and downs.

Finally, the globalisation takes place at another very important level — the level of perceptions, beliefs, ideas and tastes. This is exactly where the process of globalisation collides with cultural — albeit civilisational differences that exist between and among the nations. True, the sensitivities and susceptibilities of individual human being and human societies are being increasingly modified by a simultaneous process of global homogenisation and the local culture and values are gradually winding up, it nevertheless leaves in its trail pervasive complexities and contradictions. There is apparently a clash between national past and globalised future.

The cumulative effects of the structural changes have resulted in the steady decline in

the state authorities over the years. In the events of full-scale globalisation, the success in gaining world market share will be more preferred than territorial acquisition as the means for survival as well as aggrandisement. Unless for the command over the sources of energy and water there will be few temptations for the nations to wage war rendering the country's armed forces — one of the symbols of state authority — redundant which will be merely an ornamental anachronism in future. But the erosion of state's authority over its finance will be the severest blow for the nation state. The justification for state authority — that it maintains the value of the currency and preserves the money as a reliable means of exchange, unit of account as well as store of value — is also fast disappearing. The states can no longer resist the foreign exchange markets; neither can it determine interest or inflation rate. The forces of globalisation has also curtailed the state's means for the provision of welfare to their disadvantaged segment of population.

The globalisation has opened up tax-evading doors for multinationals and many individuals. As more tax havens open up and more use is made of them states' revenues suffer and welfare services and subsidies are cut back. In desperation, states raise money by selling off state-owned enterprises.

It is not thus surprising that the demise of the nation state has been widely predicted from time to time — and seriously since the talk of the globalisation of the world's economy began some thirty-six years ago. As a matter of fact, the speculation to the effect was in the air

for last 200 years beginning with Kant's 1795 essays on 'perpetual peace'. In recent times, people asserted that for all but the lowest earners the Internet would make tax avoiding so easy and riskless that sovereignty will inevitably shift to the individual, leaving the nation state to die of fiscal starvation.

Yet the nation state has shown amazing resilience. So far, at least, there is no other institution capable of political integration and effective membership in the world's political community. On the other hand, according to the detractors of globalisation, it is still a great myth and illusion and therefore not to be taken seriously. It is illusion because the state still exists; because enterprises still belong to some particular state; because their directors are almost exclusively of one national origin; and because their corporate culture is markedly different from that of other national firm. The nation states fought and survived the forces of globalisation in some form or other for over two hundred years — almost from the time they came into being.

Since the early industrial revolution it was argued that economic interdependence would prove stronger than nationalist passion. But whenever in last two hundred years political passions and nation state politics clashed with economic rationality the political passions and the nation states have won. In all probability, therefore, the nation state will survive the globalisation of the economy and information revolution that accompanies it. But it will be a greatly changed nation state, especially in domestic fiscal and monetary policies, control of international business, and, perhaps, in its conduct of war.



PERSPECTIVES by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

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Finally, the globalisation takes place at another very important level — the level of

GOVERNMENT-OPPOSITION SHOWDOWN

'Withdraw False Cases' versus 'Law Will Take its Own Course'

by A R Shamsul Islam

When a government sets its hand to scrapping cases, does it know what a stigma it is swallowing and what a chain of hazards and harms it is letting loose? Isn't it publicly demonstrated that there are cases, at least some, that do not have to be dealt with by the hand of law?

STREETS are rent with slogans — "withdraw false cases". It is a common exercise of the Opposition. With customary pose-posture the government's first reply is — "law takes its own course, law will take so." When put across the bargaining table, the government gets softer. With a fumble it proceeds to say that the withdrawal of the political cases may be considered, but nothing can be done with regard to the cases that have specific charges of murder, arson, loot etc. Rounds of higgling between the government and Opposition continue. The common outcome is that several cases in which the opposition activists were charged are found dropped or kept in abeyance in return for the Opposition to come to some terms of the government like joining the parliament, refraining from agitation, works on certain issues etc.

How does a case come to be framed. The police is to look after law and order, protect people's life, property and right. It is supposed to take cognizance when these are violated. Cases are to be registered with the police station for commission of criminal offences. Police will apprehend the culprits, conduct enquiry

into the incidents, examine evidences, frame charge-sheets and send these to the courts of law for trial. After free and fair trial, judgement is delivered sentencing different terms of punishments to those proved guilty and acquitting those against whom charges are not proved.

The whole thing is to be guided by sets of laws and ethics of procedure. It is facts and evidence that figure up in the entire matter. Since these are related to the law and order of the land, protection of the rights of the citizen for which they amply pay, each and every move of these works should be done with extreme care, honesty, sincerity, courage and without any bias to anybody whatsoever. There should not be any scope for any persons or any associations, organisations of any description whatsoever position they hold to interfere in the matter for the sake of upholding law and justice. But the irony is that some-

times some of the cases are found withdrawn, dropped, stayed, be they under police investigations or trials in the courts of law at the instance of the government.

When a government sets its hand to scrapping cases, does it know what a stigma it is swallowing and what a chain of hazards and harms it is letting loose? Isn't it publicly demonstrated that there are cases, at least some, that do not have to be dealt with by the hand of law? They are slaves to the desires of the government. It can make them move, grow up or embrace extinction all on a sudden within moments. Maybe these are the creations of the government. Law does not have anything with their birth and growth. Before coming to power didn't the government pledge to uphold law at all costs and establish rule of law in the society? The actions of the government constitute lying. Thank God, Bangladesh is not the US. Clinton is facing the peril of al-

leged lying. His great, glittering presidency may be at stake.

The Opposition are also to be condemned enough, if not equally. While forwarding demand for withdrawing cases they allege to be false they are no short of mixing some genuine cases (genuinely instituted and have genuine merits to be tried) with the baggage of false cases. They have sullied and soiled the sanctity and dignity of law. If the government is the first violator, they come the immediate second. And the Opposition today are the government tomorrow. The first and the second rotate automatically. It is said that democracy has two legs — the government and the Opposition. In a true

democracy the two walk harmoniously. In Bangladesh it is in breaching democracy that they gallop so freely.

As cases are withdrawn exposed is the fact that the government can condone criminality, no question how extrajudicially it is done. This is a nice bait for the criminals and terrorists to flock into the yawning government camp. The government may be adjudged the greatest sponsor of criminality and terrorism. And the greatest godfather. Ironically, it is the government that proclaimed terrorism-free society as its number one election manifesto.

The Opposition do not lag far behind. As they successfully pressurise the government into

withdrawing cases that are a fine mixture of false and genuine ones in which their activists are involved, they also prove no less safe shelter for the hooligans in their parties. So they finish up a close second greatest sponsor and godfather of anti-social elements.

In developed countries this phenomenon does not have any scope to take root. Democratic or Republican governments of the US, the Conservative or Labour governments of the UK can't think of a situation like this in their countries. But in the 'developing countries the practice is spilling. In Bangladesh where street agitations are frequent and aspire to capturing mantle of the government instituting political cases and indulging in their scrapping are no stranger fall-outs.

The writer is a retired principal of Gout Mohila College, Pabna.

To the Editor...

Is sugar sweeter than molasses?

Sir, According to your Rangpur reporter, farmers and traders are ignoring the ban on molasses production in sugar mill areas (DS, 15-2-98). Well, good for them! Every year we hear these saccharine-sweet announcements on TV ("our peasant brother are informed...") threatening cane farmers with dire consequence if they try to resist the Sugar Corporation's coercive measures. One year there was even police violence wreaked on farmers whose only crime was that they were trying to get the best price they could for their produce. This should surely be the birthright of every peasant.

The fact is that the sugar industry can only survive by exploiting both farmers and consumers, and often the general taxpayer as well in the form of subsidies. There is therefore no possible justification for this industry to be kept alive in Bangladesh.

Abu Abdullah Dhaka

National documents: translation service

Sir, In today's global village, Bangladesh is keen to establish itself through foreign trade, foreign investments, and export of goods, services, and manpower. Selected important documents published by the government, such as the relevant Notifications in the Bangladesh Gazette, may be made available to foreigners and Bangladeshi individuals and agencies, in an international language, namely English, for reference and guidance.

It is not possible for all to get copies of official documents in Bangla translated quickly into an acceptable English version on an ad hoc and day-to-day basis due to shortage of time and the high expenses involved for individual assignments. The foreign embassies also need copies for reference; as also the

BOI and other private bodies doing international business.

It is therefore proposed that the government may consider setting up a Translation Service Cell for the counter service at a small fee. The fee may be based on the number of pages/words, plus a service charge. Or the job may be contracted out to an authorised private agency who may provide semi-official versions of the texts/documents after official clearance (the clearance must be fast and not subject to bureaucratic delay).

In fact, the Cell may operate within the BOI, or BOI may monitor its output. In the second phase, online service through computer may be made available (LAN, Web, Internet) for instant reference.

Whatever be the arrangement, a translation service is needed, via the public sector, of official/government documents. A Zabr Dhaka

Military solution of Iraqi stand

Sir, It is unlikely that the US will go for a military strike in Iraq for the second time, in view of the unanimous global protest. Even if it does, it may be for a short demo period; otherwise the retired second superpower might go for a diversionary movement to contain its home front, where the financial and social conditions are none too good for the present or future regimes. The expansion of NATO eastward in Europe is not palatable to many.

The Muslim world is definitely publicising its options view of it if it does, it may stand on global issues. How far the US can support Israel from thousands of miles away remains to be seen. Can the US afford to get involved in a long or short war, economically, financially, and psychologically?

The future of the trends in Wall Street cannot be predicted optimistically during the next 36 months. Iraq will be desper-

ate, having tasted the treatment once. Gas masks are being issued in Israel.

The days of shuttle diplomacy appears to be gone. USA is getting isolated — it was never strong in international foreign relations or diplomacy, as the USA is a vast and different world, away from the stark reality. Clinton may play with virtual reality, but not in real time.

This is the last chance for the US to correct its perspective, because the next triggering may go out of control. A Husnain Dhaka

Ma, I'm your child

Sir, I am saddened and upset to learn that Bangladesh does not recognise that a female Bangladesh citizen can pass her citizenship to her children. It only passes through the male line! This is so in spite of the guarantee of equal rights for men and women in the Constitution. I do not understand the legal niceties. But there is a more fundamental issue here than legalese.

Is this not against all norms of fairness and decency? Does it not tell the world that we are incapable of fulfilling the obligations of any civilised and civil society when we assert that a group of our citizens are second-class by virtue of gender? We make so much of our "Ma" — mothers and yet they are lesser beings. With this interpretation, are we not ignoring the sacrifice our women made in the liberation war and the sacrifice they make daily in raising our children and grandchildren?

Sheikh Hasina and Begum Zia can lead us in war and peace, make life and death decisions affecting millions of Bangladeshis, but cannot pass their citizenship onto their children. Isn't this incredible? It is about time that higher courts or the parliament acted to remedy this. Ahmed Badruzzaman Los Angeles, USA

OPINION

How 'Stable' is the Economy?

M Gholam Mostafa

It was very reassuring to hear our Finance Minister claiming in the Jatiya Sangsad, as reported in The Daily Star of February 18, that the national economy was in a "healthy, strong and dynamic state". He, however, admitted that "capital market was in a fragile condition."

We remember the Finance Minister assured us when the capital market had suffered a free-fall plunge from the peak index of 3600 to less than 2000 in mid 1996 that his government would "intervene" if the index slid further to 1500. The rest is all too known a history to merit repetition. Presently, the index is hovering around a dismal 700. With the crash of capital market many a small investor who had no other avenue to invest money in has been ruined. There is hardly a family in Bangladesh which has not burnt its fingers and suffered. The Ministry of Finance is studded with brilliant fiscal pundits who in their discretion did away with the "lock in system" way back in 1996. This opened the flood gate of flight of foreign capital overnight wrecking innumerable hapless families. Innocent investors did not have an inkling of what was happening around the corridor of arbiters of nation's fate. When they came to know of it, it was too late and the deluge already had overcome them. One may ask, how such governance contributed to alleviation of the lot of commonmen — a slogan the government is crying hoarse in chanting.

The Finance Minister has a word of solace for us by calling the economy "stable" and prophets of doom have been characterised as but vicious propagandists of "certain quarters". We are not oblivious of the fact that our Finance Minister had a brilliant academic record. For lesser mortals like us, we are, however, apprehensive of the news of one hundred thousand labourers — skilled and unskilled returning home from South East Asian countries reeling under financial turmoil. Far from remitting foreign exchange earning back

home these droves of labourers are going to prove an added burden on our fragile economy. We cannot feel reassured at the optimism of the Hon'ble Minister that turmoil in South East Asia will not affect us, and that there is no crisis in Bangladesh. Neither in his assurance that currency depreciation is the lowest among those in this part of the world. A small example may not be out of place here. Say, when each of the one lakh Bangladesh labourers remit US \$100 to their families per month it comes to 10 million or one crore dollars; it becomes 120 million or 12 crore dollars a year. But when these people lose their jobs and come back home we are not only poorer by 120 million dollars a year but also left with one lakh strong extra unemployed workforce on our hands. Do the government have any emergency plan for their rehabilitation? And how about the 120 million dollars? It may be peanuts for our Finance Minister but not for the poor economy of the country.

There is no denying that industrial growth is going to be sluggish because of higher cost of imported infrastructural and industrial raw materials owing to devaluation of our currency. The government has disputed press reports that the industrial output was on a downward trend" saying "they amounted to misinterpretation and misrepresentation of facts" (DS Feb 10, 1997). The plight of the industrial sector has been dismissed as "seasonal fluctuations".

Taking office in mid-1996 the present government swooped with a big bang on the massive bank loan-defaulter with iron hand and diagnosed the behemoth as sapping vitals of the economy. The high flown life style led by the so-called tycoons gave us to believe that they were the salt of the earth and earned the milk and honey, the hard way, in which they were rolling. Common people, who run from pillar to post, for a paltry sum of bank loan

against hundred and one collateral discovered with dismay the highway robbery of investors' savings by blatant abuse of trust. In order to curb the menace and to nab the defaulters the government poste-haste enacted several remedial laws and embarked on examining affairs of banks and their directors. We thought the rot will be stemmed and culprits brought to book. Alas! The bang gradually waned into a whimper and the defaulters (barons and Mughals) strode in the society more flamboyantly than ever, and with impunity. Recent collapse of South Eastern Asian countries' economy has been largely attributable to bad and non-performing bank loans. Can we call ourselves healthy?

Food deficit in the current financial year has been quoted at 25 lakh metric tons by the Food and Agriculture Minister at the Jatiya Sangsad recently. In the face of donors' global policy of reducing food aid, a bulk of the deficit has to be met through import against hard currency in order to tide over impending crisis. Describing forex reserve as satisfactory the Finance Minister assured, "If we are required to import five to 10 million tonnes of foodgrains we will be able to handle that easily" (DS Feb 10, 1997). How is the yawning gap going to be plugged? Besides, depreciated Taka will necessarily exert inflationary pressure on economy on account of bloated imported bill of foodgrains.

In this context we remember the famous saying of Winston Churchill at the end of World War II. The war saw Great Britain's economy completely shattered and industrial complexes pulverised. The great leader did not mince matters when facing the nation. He urged his fellow countrymen, "Produce or perish". So that his nation is not caught mapping amid impending crisis and tighten its belt to face up to the challenge. We also witness real leaders of the people of developed countries who consider it beyond their ethics and beneath their dignity to keep their nation from truth — however bitter.