

The Emphasis on Reform

The World Bank-led donors' review meet in Dhaka on Tuesday was a test of nerves for the Bangladesh side. In a greater sense perhaps than on previous occasions. Because in our slanging match with the reform process we were past the preliminary rounds to be good for the counting of points. The score-card reads.

Giving a mixed chit of health on that count — more mixed on the negative side — the donor community urged the government to speed up the reform process. They gave top priority to administrative and financial sector reforms and privatisation of the state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Progress in these areas has been at a snail's pace. We will be stuck with corruption and inefficiency so long as the reforms package eluded us.

On the sensitive questions of privatisation, administrative reform and quality of ADP projects Kibria's views reportedly differed from those of the donor community. But understandably both sides have reached a broad 'consensus' on what need to be done. Privatisation will be only stimulated, as far as we can see, by a convincing implementation of the safety-net proposals for retrenched employees. A comprehensive privatisation law must be put in place at the earliest.

We go along with the very bleak view taken of the status on public administration reform. The Public Administration Reforms Commission (PARC) remains a virtual non-starter much to our regret.

Some reforms have been carried out in the financial sector but they are largely of a peripheral nature. Judging by the effects they are having on economic management. Bank loan default puts the government's will to test more than perhaps the laws of the land.

The reform agenda is very crucially a matter of either political will of the government of the day or a bipartisan consensus across the political spectrum. We have to muster either of the two in the near future or we remain where we are. Reforms are better carried out after the elections. However, since more than two years are left before the election year, there is still time to hit some tangibles.

Love for Crisis

A report published in a national daily yesterday suggested not all of WASA's problems stem from inadequate power supply. Short-sightedness of the authorities and poor maintenance are considerably, if not equally, responsible for the severe water crisis facing the city.

WASA is reportedly running a deficit of sixty million litres in its daily share of lifting water. This is in addition to WASA's daily shortfall of 4500 million litres when it comes to the total demand for water.

The specific reason? One hundred and nine pumps and three refineries are currently out of action due to low voltage. Unless the average daily index of DESA-supplied power rises to 132 KV from the available 110 KV now, WASA pumps will continue to remain idle.

Power shortage has become a national problem. And we all know things will not look up immediately. But has that got to do with WASA authorities' preparedness to minimise the negative impact of the crisis on their performance? Doing that called for some advance planning and commitment to professional obligation. Not unexpectedly WASA had neither.

We are told there was very little for WASA to do when some days back people in the older part of the city were grovelling under acute water crisis because the refinery at Chandni Ghat was not working due to power inadequacy. But to admit they could not provide for contingency supply to the suffering lot of that area because some of their vehicles were out of order is not a candid expression but shameless confession of professional ineptitude.

But even this gross maintenance inefficiency tends to pale when one comes to think of the authorities' foot-dragging on the prospect of reviving up power-starved pumps with imported generators. They say the present crisis will be over once the generators arrive from Sweden. But that is not going to happen soon. There will be no relief for the denizens from the scorching heat of summer. Since they are procuring those generators anyway why did not the authorities push for their earlier import just to make sure the dry season did not catch the city dwellers and them napping? Why they always lag behind crisis?

Cardiac Hope

Action or idea, it looks as though Devi Shetty will never run short of the talent to win our admiration. First it was his proven surgical excellence and affable, reassuring manner which made this reputed Indian cardiac surgeon an instant hit with the Bangladeshi patients suffering from heart ailments and now he comes with an altruistic brainwave.

Shetty has expressed his desire to set up a 500-bed heart surgery hospital. The joint venture institution proposed to be set up in collaboration with Manipal Heart Foundation, Shetty's employer back home, envisages a miracle with the economics involved in heart operation. The idea is to bring the cardiac operation in the realms of possibility of people in the income group of Tk 2000 to 8000 per month.

The problem with heart ailment is two-fold. One is the lightning speed with which it transforms from a tolerable complaint to cessation of life and the other is huge expenses involved in the surgery needed to cure the condition. It has been revealed that only 40000 of the 1.5 million requiring surgery are actually operated upon in India. Heart disease remains as much of a lethal predator in Bangladesh as it is in neighbouring India. Perhaps the case is even worse. A hospital for heart surgery with doctors like Shetty on the staff albeit in the visiting capacity is what heart patients will be looking forward to.

We hope initiatives from our side to translate Shetty's desire into reality will not be found wanting. The man himself came with a mission and reportedly went back home with positive response from the quarters that matter.

CHT Regional Council Bill Passed

A Harbinger of Peace or Forerunner of Turmoil?

A true and effective agreement among differing communities can be a lasting one only through evolution of a consensus or near consensus among them. This needs time and cannot succeed in haste. The Accord was made in haste and, therefore, is suspect of its efficacy and permanence.

THE moot CHT Regional Council Bill was passed in the national parliament on the 6th instant by the ruling party, with dissenting Jatiya Party and abstaining BNP members. The three District Council Bills on Chittagong Hill Tracts had been passed by the parliament earlier. These four represented the enabling legislation that would allow the government to implement the CHT Peace Accord concluded on the 2nd December between the government of Bangladesh and the PCJSS, the principal organisation of the tribal people there.

The government was vociferous in its claim that the new Acts, along with the Accord, will restore peace in a region which had been troubled by insurgency and bloodshed for the past 21 years. The resultant loss in human lives and resources, on both sides, were enormous and these will not recur in future. The government takes credit for success on an issue for the settlement of which the previous regimes had tried and failed. This to the government was the floor of the parliament.

The opposition had so long abstained from the parliament in protest against what they termed government's violation of an agreement to enable opposition members to legitimately address the House, to ensure fair telecasting of parliament proceedings, impartial conduct of the sessions of the House and the like. They now returned to the House and asked for holding a general debate on the CHT Accord. The government rejected the demand and suggested that the discussion would take place only during the debate on the Bills to be introduced later for the purpose of implementing the Accord and not before. The opposition felt their legitimate rights as legislators thwarted by the government and vowed to continue with their movement, in protest, with rallies, hartals and brief walk-outs from the proceedings of the House.

Anyway, the government introduced into the House four Bills relevant to the Accord. BNP members of the General Committee of the parliament recorded objections on these Bills, which were ignored by the Speaker on grounds of late receipt. BNP members alleged that, for strange and inexplicable reasons, they either did not receive the notice of the meetings or received it late. However, the opposition BNP, Jatiya Party and others tabled over three thousand amendments to these Bills. Hon'ble

such an absurd number of amendments, which they claim was a product of their frustration, so was the decision of the Speaker to allow only 13 members to speak for a total of only 13 minutes on almost four thousand amendments. Already the opposition had been denied a general debate on the Accord, which is considered to be an issue of vital national interest, and to make a mere lip service of allowing only 13 minutes of discussion on amendments to



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

Speaker observed, it would take three years and eight months to hold proper discussions on these amendments. Though the huge number of amendments was unprecedented, the Hon'ble Speaker's advisers appear to have been guilty of gross miscalculation. On the contrary, it would have taken less than 20 hours or two and a half day of parliament's sessions to enable all the BNP MPs to speak for 10 minutes each on these Bills and amendments.

Instead, the Speaker ruled that he would allow only 13 BNP MPs to speak on these Bills, but only for one minute each. As it was ridiculous for the opposition to allow tabling

the Bills tantamounts to government's deliberate and pre-planned policy of denying a debate or real discussion on it. This exposes an act of gross insincerity and betrayal of promise on the part of the ruling party.

The Speaker's decision was not only heavily partisan, but it was unfortunately most unjust, undemocratic and unparliamentary in nature. The opposition decided not to avail of the opportunity of speaking only 13 minutes on four Bills on an issue of such national significance, and decided to abstain from the proceedings of the House. The BNP legislators led by its chairperson went to the

It is time to take stock of the political situation of the coun-

try. The opposition BNP and the seven party amalgam have made the CHT Accord an important focal point of political grievances in their current movement against the government. To this has been added many other demands, such as deteriorating law and order situation, spiral rise in the prices of essential goods, economic and financial debacles, mismanagement in energy and other sectors, rampant corruption, etc. CHT Accord and the relevant Acts of parliament appear to have acted as the last straw on camel's back.

Optimists as many of us are, we still feel askance as to whether this exercise of the government will really bring about a lasting peace. People, indeed, like many other issues in our society, are divided in their opinion. There appears a strong sense of insecurity in the minds of Bengalee settlers, and many feel strongly that effective control of the region from the capital city would be in jeopardy, to say the least, and this could breed similar demand in various places inhabited by other tribals. Even a section of the tribals are not happy; they want more; their appetite will continue to be whetted. Even Chakma King Devashish Roy declared the other day that the CHT Accord marked only the first stage of the demand for full autonomy of the people there. A true and effective agreement among differing communities can be a lasting one only through evolution of a consensus or near consensus among them. This needs time and cannot succeed in haste and, therefore, is suspect of its efficacy and permanence.

India's Nuclear Explosions and South Asian Security

By using ultra-rightist nationalism, BJP may have enhanced its political gain but has not certainly India's security. Along with it not South Asia's in general. In sum, India's nuclear explosions have cast an ominous shadow over South Asian security environment.

THE very recent nuclear explosions — not one but as many as three — conducted on May 11, 1998, in Pokhran of Rajasthan, the site for India's so-called Peaceful Nuclear Explosion (PNE) of 1974, have taken the world by surprise. The fact this time, unlike the PNE of 1974, that testing were carried out to demonstrate to the international community India's 'proven' capability to develop various grades of nuclear weapons, has badly shaken the security environment of South Asia. It is particularly worried due to a number of factors. First, the hope for an eventual South Asian security framework, which could be made feasible through negotiations and discussions with SAARC as the focal point has somewhat been irrevocably damaged, at least for a long period of time.

Given their 'love' for each other, one cannot altogether rule out the possibility of a nuclear confrontation in future Indo-Pakistan war. There is a possibility that Pakistan would also go for a nuclear test since India has shed its nuclear ambiguity and gone overtly nuclear. Most ominous would be intensification of the missile race between the two. Previously, India's short-range Prithvi was matched by Pakistan's Hafiz, III and intermediate-range Agni by Ghauri. Now Pakistan would go to its limit to acquire similar nuclear delivery weapon like India's recently tested surface-to-surface and surface-to-air missile Trishul. It has been made evidently clear when Pakistani foreign minister, in his interview with BBC, indicated that India's trio of nuclear tests 'has made his country's defenses made impregnable.'

Among all the factors, Indo-Pakistan heightened tension and Beijing's responses are two most important ones having more impacts than the others. Pakistan's reaction and the defense strategies it would adopt would be crucial. It is already evident from the statements of its foreign minister that Indo-Pakistan bilateral relations would now enter into a more bitter and acrimonious phase.

Islamabad has condemned India's nuclear explosions in strongest terms, accused India of sucking Pakistan into a 'nuclear race,' called for international sanctions against India as well as hinted that it too may revamp its country's defenses made impregnable.

The second factor i.e. Beijing's reaction (it is not yet made public) and its likely response to India nuclear explosion are also equally crucial. It is somewhat obvious that Beijing will not like the latest development in India for various reasons. Beijing has somewhat shunned the politics of confrontation since the end of cold war. It has made peace with its erstwhile enemy the former Soviet Union and even opened hot line with Moscow. It's looking forward to having stronger ties with the United States and soon open hotline with Washington as well. It wants peace and stability because economic development is its number one

priority. And Beijing's post-cold war South Asian policy is also being motivated by the same considerations. As such Beijing was happy at the visible signs of improved relationship with India after about thirteen years of frozen ties following the Sino-Indian war of 1962.

This somewhat improved relationship with India has been possible due to a number of factors. First, there has been a subtle shift in China's South Asia policy. It wants to maintain friendly relations with all its South Asian neighbours. Normalization of relationship with India is a very important

component of that policy change. In order to keep that component undisturbed it has moved away from entangling into inter-state conflicts, though it is still considered to be a trusted and reliable ally by its smaller South Asian neighbours.

It has even made it clear to its time-tested ally Pakistan that it could no longer give any active support on its contentious issue with India like that of Kashmir which by the way has not affected their friendship. Second, though Beijing is quite often accused by India of supplying nuclear technology to its arch-rival Pakistan, which both countries deny, it has been playing a responsible role in UN's world wide non-proliferation efforts. It is a member of IAEA, has joined MTCR, and signed both NPT and CTBT.

International community

believes that Beijing's responsible behaviour in this regard would be a great boon in its non-proliferation policy including South Asia. Moreover, it has repeatedly assured India that its nuclear arsenal is defensive, and its nuclear doctrine makes it a most unlikely aggressor to any of its neighbours. In order to assuage India's overt preoccupation with Beijing's alleged nuclear threat, it has gone an extra mile. This has been evidenced when the then Prime Minister Li Peng, during his first ever visit to India by a head of Chinese government since 1962, announced

that there is a possibility of subtle change in Beijing's South Asian policy. There would possibly be new power configuration, informal alignment and realignment, alliance and counter-alliance, in which India's security, which BJP-led government supposed to be enhancing, may be somewhat less than before.

Why did then the BJP-led government decide to take such drastic steps in the face of possible sanctions and condemnations by the international community as well as risking the chances of a better and improved relation with China for which both countries have been working painstakingly since late 1970s? Why did they give up India's ambiguous nuclear status, (now that the explosions have rested even the shred of doubts about its advanced nuclear programme and capability) which could have bargained for better deal from the international community?

The likely reasons for India's nuclear explosions may be ostensibly for its security needs but the underlying causes are different. Since forming coalition government, BJP had to dilute a number of its ultra-rightist election manifesto. Now by

mentioning to Indian government that Beijing had put a moratorium on the upgradation of its medium range and intercontinental ballistic missiles in its attempts to mitigate India's perceived threats from Beijing. These measures were adopted for the peace and stability in the region. This is not to say that India did not reciprocate. Both countries have come a long way after painstaking efforts. Now the situation has altered dramatically. The ensuing regional conflict may compel Beijing to somewhat be more actively involved into major sub-continental conflicts. The gathering storm over India's latest nuclear explosions may suck Beijing, however unwillingly, right into the center of that storm.

Obviously, China is not happy with the recent development in India. What then would

Shazneen case that brought this type of crime into the limelight and the intelligent people of society felt that our people's safety is being threatened.

The rally, 'Platform to resist violence against women,' carried out on Saturday 2nd May was to raise awareness against these crimes and punish such offenders severely. While this movement has been moderately successful, there is doubt in people's minds about the longevity of this procession.

Arbab Quadri
Dhaka

Bright, but misled

Sir, I was under the impression that in a democratic country — like ours — what the President says everyone listens to. From the outset, the President had been screaming his voice hoarse to abolish student politics, but our politicians have not shown any interest at all.

Once Dhaka University was known and admired by most, now it has turned into a bright-but-mislead-student's graveyard. How painful it is to witness the slow but gradual death of a fine institute as such.

People were shocked to hear about these crimes, especially after the brutal murder of Shazneen. Can you believe that three-year-olds are being raped? Who are the people connected with these crimes? Are they insane or something?

Are our people ready to fight to prevent this from happening? Many of the people I know told me that they were angry with the fact that Shazneen's murder got so much coverage. The reason I do not fully agree with them is because it was

jeopardised. Incidentally, we may cite two examples here:

1) The US government has imposed anti-dumping duty to the tune of 445 per cent on super-computer manufactured by Japan.

2) Malaysian government has put a ban on import of hilsha fish from Bangladesh due to financial turmoil that made dollar costlier.

We, therefore, suggest that the government should impose high tariff quantity restriction on the import of finished goods to protect the interest of our national economy which has in the meantime been deeply jeopardised due to liberal import in the name of global policy of free market economy.

Abdul Majid
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Let's start a movement

Sir, I want to express my

most profound shock at the

most horrifying death of Shazneen and wish to convey my sincerest condolence to her parents although no words or deeds today can really console her nearest family and friends.

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Global economy

Sir, Even in the present age

of free market economy, the liberalisation of import is

permissible only to the extent that national economy is not

jeopardised.