

Timely Initiative

It is not the size of a country but the relevance of its diplomacy that elevates its image abroad. Given our non-toe-sparking foreign relations stocks it was clever of Sheikh Hasina to have seized the opportunity presented by nuclear tensions in South Asia to take a redeeming role for Bangladesh.

Bangladesh Prime Minister has done the country and region some good by successfully completing her peace and understanding mission to New Delhi and Islamabad. It was a good and timely move by her to play an honest broker not in resolving any dispute between Pakistan and India but in smothering the mutually stinging salvos against each other following their last month's nuclear tests. So that they are in a position to step back from brinkmanship through an early resumption of talks. True, acquisition of nuclear deterrence has traditionally moved the rivaling parties to a dialogue table like in the case of former Soviet Union and the USA to cite the most obvious example but that did not reduce the importance of Hasina's initiative. A catalyst of sorts was certainly needed in the given Indo-Pak alchemy to churn it towards talks with a focus on SAARC's future being in a jeopardy. Sheikh Hasina has contributed her mite in that direction on behalf of the smaller member-countries of SAARC.

When she initiated the move it carried a risk of being dubbed as unsolicited. Yet both New Delhi, which disfavours third party mediation, and Islamabad which is keen on it for the Kashmir issue, welcomed Dhaka's gesture. Dhaka had not only hosted a business summit earlier on bringing India and Pakistan together, her sincere concern over the two countries having worked themselves into a nuclear dire strait could not be brushed off by them.

We consider Hasina's mission as an integral part of the tension-defusing trend that is necessary now in the region. Pakistan PM Nawaz Sharif has written a communicative letter to his Indian counterpart saying that Indo-Pak relations are crucial to peace and prosperity in South Asia and that he looked forward to his bilateral meeting with Vajpayee on the occasion of the Colombo SAARC summit. Let the process of dialogue begin between Vajpayee and Sharif.

Mind the Quality Now

Good sense has prevailed. BNP has returned to Parliament. They had left it on May 3 in a huff over "limited discussion" on CHT bills. Operatively they absented since June 10, though when the budget session of the Parliament began. The main opposition party's attendance in JS sessions should have been a matter-of-course, guaranteed thing, but because they snap it up so frequently that it takes on a dramatic hue — quite unnecessarily, we think. One would have expected that their unflagging participation in parliamentary proceedings had produced dramatic results instead. It is not the form but the substance that is of the essence in parliamentary practices which the BNP seems to be rewriting for the posterity by the indelible ink of its poor attendance records.

It transpires from the BNP parliamentary party meetings that the pro-participation MPs stole the thunder off the boycottists by forcefully contending that their grievances were much better reflected through the parliament than via street agitations. At least the two options can run concurrently, so argued some in a commonsensical but otherwise portentous approach.

We have been ceaselessly imploring the BNP to realise that Parliament is their legitimate place of activity, that it is the parameter which the electorate has set for them by voting them into the opposition. Please never go out of it. If you fail to play your watch-dog role your locus as the principal opposition party would be negated. Downstream, your vote-pooling credibility will be badly holed up.

Now that the BNP has gone back to Parliament and finds itself in the thick of the budget session let the quality of its debate prove equal to the task.

Murder of a Cakeseller

You have to pay every minute to ensure your right to live. You pay or you die. For the ordinary law abiding citizen, life has become a relentless struggle of renouncing basic rights to the law breakers and criminals who seem to be infesting Dhaka's roads and alleys like rats and cockroaches. The moment one refuses to oblige these pestilential presences or raises his voice to defend his rights there is every chance that fatal wrath may be incurred and he might be history in an instant. This is exactly what happened with Maqsood, the poor *pithawallah* or deshi cakeseller at Lalbagh Wednesday last. He refused to pay *chaanda* or extortion money to a group of youngmen who ate cakes from him and then instead of paying the bill demanded money from him. Maqsood's courage to question and refuse this illegal demand proved to be his doom.

It was no ordinary group of customers he was dealing with. They were lethally armed and diabolically quick to settle Maqsood's hash in the most inhuman and cruel way one can think of. They fired several shots at him and after silencing the superciliousness of an unarmed mortal they walked away to safety as they always do. Maqsood has been taken care of the burden of living. But what will happen to his widow and three young kids for whom he was the sole breadwinner? Doesn't this society owe these helpless creatures an answer? Do we have to pay every minute to cling to that caricature called life? And who says paying guarantees existence?

Between Genius and Insanity Falls the Shadow

RECENTLY a scientist friend of mine sent me a feature-article by Geri Guidetti. It is about a new agricultural bio-technology which can be best described as the Terminator Technology. The technology, as the writer argues, may be brilliant science and definitely good business, but it has crossed the tenuous line between genius and insanity.

The Canada-based Rural Advancement Foundation (RAFI) points out: "If the Terminator Technology is widely applied it will give the multinational seed and agro-chemical companies an unprecedented and extremely dangerous capacity to control the world's food-supply." People will no longer enjoy their natural and God-given right to freely grow food to feed themselves and others. People's livelihoods, food-supply and even survival will be beyond their control. Terminator Technology will ensure absolute dependence of farmers and people they feed on giant seed-companies for their seed and food.

What is this technology, recently patented in the U.S.A. all about? "Benignly titled 'Control of Plant Gene Expression', the new patent will permit its owners and licensees to create sterile seed by cleverly and selectively programming a plant's DNA to kill its own embryo."

The technology has been jointly developed by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Delta and Pine Land Company, a Mississippi firm and the largest cotton-seed company. Within nine weeks of the announcement of the patented technology, Monsanto, the giant seed and agro-chemical multinational bought the Delta and Pine Land Company and with it complete con-

rol of the Terminator Technology. As the March 3 press announcement makes it clear, the technology "has the prospects of opening significant worldwide seed-markets to the sale of transgenic crops in which seed is currently saved and used in subsequent plantings." Incidentally the patent, bearing US patent number 5,723,765, applies not to any particular crop seed but to plants and seeds of all species. The application of the innovation will not be limited to any geographic location or single crop, but eventually cover all crops in all countries. The goal in the words of USDA spokesman Willard Phelps, "is to increase the proprietary seed owned by US seed companies and to open up markets in the second and Third World Countries." USDA wants this technology to be widely licensed and expeditiously made available to many seed-companies. Applications for patents in at least 78 countries have been processed.

Once commercialized USDA will earn royalties of about 5 per cent of all sales. As Phelps himself argues, it will be profitable for USDA. Even more so, for seed companies. The new technology will ensure, as I shall elaborate later, that the patented seed can neither be saved and replanted by a farmer, nor used for farmer to farmer exchange. How? Because the sterile seed will yield no future seed at harvest time.

"Peapods, tomatoes, peppers, heads of wheat and ears of corn will become seed-morgues. In one broad brazen stroke of his hand man will have irretrievably broken the plant to seed to plant to seed cycle that supports most life on

the planet." (Guidetti) Genetically altered proprietary seed will finally wrest away from the farmers their natural right to save and use their own locally produced and conventionally bred seed. It will eventually ensure that the farmers are prevented from saving non-hybrid, open pollinated seed. Open-pollinated varieties of rice and wheat are best examples of farmers' own seed. Eighty to ninety per cent of seed used by farmers in our sub-continent comes from farmers' own seed-supply or farmer to farmer exchange.



Do or Dare! A Z M Obaidullah Khan

Women have been important innovators and protectors of seed. Their indigenous knowledge, however, belongs to the 'intellectual commons' of the farming communities. The goal is meeting both survival and social needs. It is not for profit, nor is it trade-related. The community innovations are for local and public use and not for international trade. Thus the knowledge system being private, non-profit and not trade related falls outside the purview of Trade-related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIP). But what is wrong with the picture? A seed company puts in a lot of money for research, development and eventual commercialization of new(?) varieties of seed. Naturally it hopes to sell a lot of the product to recoup the investment and

realize a reasonable profit. These so-called proprietary seeds may be no more than genetically altered older seeds whose origin at the source is the intellectual commons of farmer-innovators. But the logic of private rights is different. "Change a gene to give seed resistance to some new strain of disease, and the seed no longer belongs to the people to grow and save as they like, but to the seed company."

In fact, and I paraphrase from Guidetti, some major seed-companies have staked their claim over whole species

food plants based on the logic that they had altered a gene in a number of the species, and hence now own its whole genome. Food is a Big Business. The companies want to sell more and more seed, and in many cases, the accompanying chemical, Monsanto's leading herbicide 'Roundup' comes up to mind which accompanies the sell of genetically engineered "Roundup Ready Soybeans."

Seed-companies around the world have been working hard to prevent the farmers from saving their own seeds, particularly from the plants grown with purchased seed. "Plant-patents, gene licensing, intellectual property laws, investigations and law-suits brought against farming families for infringing on a seed company's monopoly on seed-varieties."

The rationale is farmer's own interest. If proprietary seed is supplied at a reasonable cost to the farmers, and if the yield is much higher than from locally produced seed, it will provide better income for the farmers. With the Terminator Technology, however, the licensee can forget about legal wrangles, and clever marketing techniques. Even the enactment by a country of an effective genetic system to protect its bio-diversity endowment and knowledge heritage will not help. The technology is so powerful and so flawless that its licensees and corporate owners can potentially have complete biological control over the food crops in which it is applied.

There is a more serious danger waiting in the wings. The planned disappearance of non-hybrid, open pollinated seeds will now only be a matter of time. Farmer's right to retain the means of growing their own food, i.e. the right to seed will become a folklore of the primitive past. Nor will there be any place for traditional seed that can provide minimal food security in insecure times and difficult environment. Seeds to protect bio-diversity, so patiently conserved and nurtured by farming communities over generations will be doomed to extinction.

As I have cautioned in these columns earlier that destruction of species is irreversible. Extinction is forever. Not even nature, with all its healing power, can bring back the dead from obliteration. But now the terminator threatens even the open-pollinated seeds. How?

Let me quote verbatim from the article by Geri Guidetti of the ARK Institute: "Molecular biologists re-

viewing the technology are divided on whether or not there is a danger of the Terminator function escaping from the genome of the crops into which it has been intentionally incorporated and moving into the surrounding open-pollinated crops or wild, related plants in the fields nearby. The means of this infection would be via pollen from Terminator altered plants. Given Nature's incredible adaptability and that the technology has never been tested on a large scale the possibility that the Terminator may spread to surrounding crops, or wild related plants in fields must be taken seriously. The gradual spread of sterility in seeding plants would result in a global catastrophe that could eventually wipe out higher life forms, including humans from the planet."

This should not happen in any of the 78 countries in which the patent has been applied. This should not happen, here, or anywhere in the world. We have been witness to decimation of biological diversity, and we are gradually waking up to the dangers of dissolution of our indigenous knowledge system. But the Terminator is a threat not only to genetic diversity and our rich intellectual heritage, it is a threat to our most fundamental freedom, the freedom to own and control the means of producing the food we need.

Right to food is right to life. That I believe is the most fundamental freedom, freedom from hunger. And that freedom cannot be guaranteed when our need for food is controlled from the outside. History is full of example of peoples and cultures who have lost their fundamental freedom, because they relinquished their control over the means of production and allowed their knowledge system to be vanquished.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

"Don't Take the People..."

Sir, Your editorial *Don't Take the People for Fools* published on June 11, '98 is really laudable.

The opposition political parties repeatedly declared that their Long March will be peaceful and they expressed their hope that the government will not obstruct it in any way. On the other hand, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also assured them of not hindering the Long March.

What happened despite the Prime Minister's assurance is very regrettable — the long march had to stop for 10 hrs at Kanchpur as dozens of trucks blocked the road which were put up there by Awami League workers on the previous night by deflating the tyres by gun shots. We are stunned, if Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina really meant her words, then how did her party workers dare to defy her words and do such a thing which has belittled the government in the eyes of the public.

I think by now the government must have realised that people are not happy over the Peace Treaty in the CHT and it is not simply the opposition political parties' propaganda. People's enthusiasm and participation in the Long March proved it beyond doubt. The decision to obstruct the Long March, was a wrong move by the government because people have become outraged and more sympathetic to the 'long marchers' for their ordeal, they showed it by waiting with pitched up drinking water, lemons and other fruits by the roadside and offered those expressing their support and encouragement.

Nur Jahan East Nasirabad, Chittagong.

Long march — long distress

Sir, I'm now convinced that the BNP's long march on the 9th June was aimed at nothing but to cause more trouble. The march (actually an excursion long drive) not only gave rise to unnecessary agitation, but also snatched away some lives, no matter which party they belonged to.

Following this rash long march, BNP-called 'dawn-to-dusk' strike on 18th of this month for no transparent reasons despite ardent request of the HSC examinees to call it off. The party did not even ponder over the adverse reaction in the minds of those tender students. Opposition for opposition's sake — this mentality has to be changed.

Arun Kumar Biswas Dept of Eng., DU

Bangabandhu Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge

Sir, Bangabandhu Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge is now ready for use. Thanks to the Almighty Allah who enabled us to have such a magnificent bridge.

Whether of the Mujibur Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman dreamt about the bridge like millions of people of North Bengal. Former President Hus-

Underground railway

Sir, For the last few years traffic jam in the metropolis has become unbearable. Man hour lost in the process of movement of people to offices and business centres is extremely high. To solve this problem time has come to think about an underground railway system for Dhaka city. In Calcutta, underground railway has eased the problem considerably.

Huge cost in constructing the underground railway may act as a dampening factor. But if a cost-benefit analysis is made, that is likely to prove highly viable. Of course we shall need foreign assistance for a huge project of this dimension. But I feel that the entire cost may be realised in about two decades. Number of passengers using underground railway will be so huge that the project is likely to be more viable than Jamuna bridge.

M Zahidul Haque BAI, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka-1207

At stake is the BUET

Sir, BUET, an Alma Mater of promising brilliant students, is on the verge of losing its deserving glory to the nation. And what is going on over BUET is very much frustrating. BUET authority has notified the students of the postponement of the classes up to the end of the World Cup '98. A few arrogant Junior-level students, who happen to be very fond of World Cup Football, forcibly locked the main gate of the campus on 14th June, resisting the campus going students. At the night following the day, these students brought out a procession, went on the rampage with a slogan 'no classes during the World Cup' and damaged some university properties. What a infantile behaviour they displayed! No academic institution in Bangladesh even in France — the host country of World Cup '98 — is reported to have postponed its classes on this issue.

In DMCH and IBA the classes are going in full swing. The BUET teachers sat for an emergency meeting and decided to postpone the classes for a month, stooping to a funny demand of the youngsters. Isn't it very much contrary to the teachers' pedagogical principles?

What is then the difference between the so-called political leaders and the BUET teachers, the conscience of the nation?

M Anisur Rahman Room : 302, Nazrul Islam Hall, BUET, Dhaka-1000

Tobacco on the ATN

Sir, After a long gap the ATN has returned to the cable television network. It has resumed its transmission. But I am rather disappointed and a little bit irritated to find a lengthy advertisement of a certain brand of Bangladeshi cigarette on ATN. Such cigarette ad, I am afraid will seriously influence the younger generation to switch on to smoking habit.

It may be mentioned here that President Bill Clinton in his weekly radio address on June 6 called to pass Tobacco Bill by the Congress without any further delay. The President said — "There's a broad consensus for this bill. It's rea-

Underground railway

Sir, When the three-wheelers have already overcrowded — better say overtaken — the Dhaka streets, and that adds to the inconceivable traffic congestion, further import of the kind will lead to which is not beyond anybody's imagination.

As we came to learn from an in-depth reporting on sanction of a huge amount of bank loan appearing in the DS of 21-5-98 that the already defaulting organization, namely Auto-Rickshaw Association is being granted loan for no other commodities than 3-wheelers.

The report also unveiled the political clout used in favour of the loan despite many strong reasons against the same. Your editorial that followed the report should serve as a pointer to many omissions or commissions the present government is alleged to be accused of.

A H Dewan 396/1 South Kafraul Dhaka Cantt. Dhaka-1206

Nuclear arms race and Kashmir

Sir, During World War II Germany wanted to prove that might is right and she wanted to conquer the world. But Germany's jingoism was nipped in the bud when the Russian troops in particular and the US military aid in general inflicted a crushing defeat on Germany and made the later lame and cripple. Meanwhile, the USA invented the atom bomb and mysteriously instead of using it on the dreadful and terrible Germany made Japan a victim of two atom bombs holocaust.

Thereafter due to various reasons, problems, international crisis and power politics the former USSR nor Russia, the UK France and China manufactured nuclear bombs, one

Is it a jungle society?

Sir, It seems repression on women in Bangladesh has surpassed all past records and a large number of people have gone mad everywhere in the country. They can just kill their wives for a small dowry of say one or two thousand taka and then go to the seelife.

It is a shame that our authorities — the police, home ministry and the judiciary have totally failed to even exert an impact on these criminals that law and justice are still there and that we haven't just converted it into a jungle society. Even little kids are not being spared.

Our law makers will take ages to make a tough, stringent law and our law enforcers will enjoy their sweet discretion as if none has any serious concern about the matter. We urge upon the government to come forward to prove that they mean what they say.

F Ahmed 5, Bank Bhawan Rd Dhaka

What you care about law?

Sir, To the displeasure of many, I must say that our society has, at present, reached such a stage that many people who are in authority and the people who are the protector of law are frequently violating law.

The Section 292 of Bangladesh Penal Code (BPC), it is stated that "whoever sells, lets to hire, distributes, publicly exhibits or in any manner puts into circulation, or for purposes of sale, hire, distribution, public exhibition or circulation, makes, produces or has in his possession any obscene book, pamphlet, paper, drawing, painting, representation or figure or any other obscene object... shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three months, or with fine, or with both."

The violation of this law seems to be the fashion of the day. The professional dancers

O. H. Kabir 6, Hare Street Wari, Dhaka-1203

Of power disruption, HSC exams and World Cup Football

Sir, We very often do fail to prioritise our goal in terms of the degree of importance and accomplish them which accordingly leaves sufferings later on. This transpires in our personal life and our national life.

For now, World Cup Football craze is prevailing all over the country. To facilitate the people watching the World Cup, the government has taken various steps. For instance, directives have been issued to close all shops and business houses and put out road lights after 7 pm to mitigate power shortage. On the other hand, when HSC exams began all over the country on May 28th last, the government did not take any visible step to facilitate the study of the examinee removing power disruption.

Today, our most prospective garments industry has been reeling under the wheels of power disruption amidst some other difficulties; works in offices, business and commerce are being hampered irreparably; production in mills and factories is being throttled; sufferings in public life is being multiplied due to power failure but the government appears to have taken no dynamic, fruitful step other than releasing political hot air in public.

But the government is more concerned to facilitate the people watching World Cup ignoring the problems of the nation.

Fatema Farzana Customs Complex Banani, Bogra

Status of Selection Grade University Professors

Sir, I am glad that a move is under way to review the existing warrant of precedence as disclosed recently in the Parliament by the Minister in Charge of Cabinet Division, Mr ASHK Sadique. While agreeing with the Minister the need to raise further the status of Members of Parliament in a parliamentary democracy, I also strongly feel that the status of Selection Grade Professors of universities drawing the maximum salary of Tk 15,000 (fifteen thousand) only (fixed) should also be raised favourably.

Presently, while they do draw the equivalent salary to that of the Secretaries to the Government but their status has been placed below that of Joint Secretaries to the Government. This is most anomalous to say the least. In this connection, it should be remembered that a teacher of a university cannot get further promotion beyond this by dint of his merit and excellence alone. The VCs, Pro-VCs, National Professors, UGC members and its Chairman, and some PSC members are no doubt university Professors but they are purely political appointees.

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Mahmudul Hasan Dhaka University

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Shamim Ahsan 64/M, R K Mission Road Gopibagh, Dhaka-1203

What's wrong with Chatkhil tele-exchange?

Sir, Chatkhil Telephone Exchange is not a new one. As far as an concern, it has good and modern equipment. Very recently I tried an entire evening and a entire morning from Dhaka to reach Chatkhil through telephone to know about my seriously ill father. But in vain. Then I gave up.

There is an allegation from the inhabitants of Chatkhil that they also fail to get connection with Dhaka if a fixed amount of money is not paid by them which is more than double than that of usual charge.

Nowadays buses reach Chatkhil from Dhaka within three and a half hours, but a telephone call is unable to reach after innumerable attempts. Is this not a shame for T&T? Where the wrong lies?

Main Uddin Ahmed 19, West Monipur, Mirpur, Dhaka

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Dr A Z Mia 68, Azimpur Estate, Dhaka

Take it easy

Sir, The other day I along with some of my friends went to Modhumita Cinema Hall to watch *Titanic*. We found all the ticket counters closed and before being upset the ticket 'blackers' (who sell tickets illegally) readily came to rescue us. We had to pay only ten taka extra per ticket and we were rather happy because we got rid of the suffering of standing in long line for tickets.

However, the whole business of buying and selling tickets illegally was being taken place in presence of about 7 or 8 policemen (I simply didn't realise why they were there but promptly assumed that their duty perhaps was to ensure the smooth transaction of tickets between blackers and buyers).

Of course it is not an incident worth mentioning because it is the usual picture of almost all the cinema halls. Indeed, this known-to-all secret did not stir me to write this letter and I also don't consider it a great crime. What worried me was our attitude to this sort of misdeeds. I didn't see any sign of anger or annoyance let alone that of protest on the face of the buyers (though, they were being forced to pay the extra sum).

Perhaps we have taken it for granted and have ceased to think it illegal, the alarming thing is that we are being affected by a dangerous virus called 'take it easy'.

We have begun to take everything easy and it seems that the elasticity of our mental strength is infinite and we can get used to anything within the shortest possible time. This sort of wrongdoings have been going on in different arena of our society and we have also become habituated with these things to the extent that we even don't bother ourselves and think 'let it go as it is going'. We have grown in ourselves a 'compromising self' which can look at things with blank eyes, without any sense of the need of protest.

We must give it a thought.

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