

Let The Public Know

This is what happened with Shamim Reza, a brilliant final year business school student of Independent University. Last Thursday, this young man was roaming in front of his place after returning from his university when some Detective Branch Police personnel picked him up under Section 54. Nabbing him on a flimsy charge of illegal possession of arms they had him driven to their office and beat him mercilessly while interrogating. Hours later he came back to a bewailing and tearful gathering of his relatives as a lump of inanimate pounded flesh. We understand police's compulsion to bring out information from the criminals. But there is no way this compulsion can override the norms of human rights. Besides, it was no ordinary case of softening up a suspected criminal or terrorist for 'answers'. From the reports published so far it seems the DB personnel pummelled Shamim to death with a vengeance. Their anger seems to have been stoked by suspicion that Shamim duped them into believing that the arms whose possession he was charged with were actually hidden at his place. It is immaterial whether it was fury caused by the futility of falsely guided search or as Shamim's family sources hinted, frustration on the part of police to extract ransom from the worried relatives. The question that torments us is: is it a civilised country? Can the agencies maintained on taxpayers' money behave like that with the citizenry?

The home minister has reacted with his customary laudable swiftness ordering arrest of the police personnel involved in this medieval piece of barbarism. But this is only the first right step. It will have to be followed by a whole gamut of initiatives that will inform us of everything from the circumstances under which Shamim was picked up, to the permissible legal range of law enforcers so called 'methods' for interrogation purposes. In short, people have to be put in the picture as to what triggered this brutal murder. Government has to show the people that its servants do not get away with murder not only to get across a sense of justice to the family of the killed but also to assure people about the existence of anything called legal system. Government will do well to remember that every incident of gross violation of citizen's right is a tremendous blow to people's confidence in the institutions that form the backbone of a civil society.

Power Outlook

The Daily Star went without power for the better part of a day — Saturday, July 25. When will this situation end and how? The timetables for an uninterrupted flow of power that the government started setting for the benefit of the public since this 'problem first struck' the nation closely after the assumption of office by the incumbent party, have all proved chimeric till now. There is no use seeking a new timetable. And we have always demanded of the government not assurances but a clean statement of the whole power situation. And that is yet to come. The government couldn't be more irresponsible.

What happened to the barge-mounted plants, those emergency and make shift things? Why buy them if they take the time a full-fledged power-station takes to start running? The two Khulna ones, Tiger 1 and Tiger-2, the well-performing ones — would also fail schedule and their 200 megawatts will not flow into the national grid even in August. There is no sign yet of the remaining two physically materialising in even another six months nullifying the logic of going for the barge-mounted things.

What about commissioning the Ghorasal sixth unit? It cannot be believed unless one gets its power flowing in the line. The Mymensingh Rural Power Company's plant is all set to go into generation. But transmission grids are yet to be completed there. So?

It is universal knowledge that all plants and generators inherited by this government are being worked beyond their tenure. And they can do so, stalling and tripping every so often, only upto a time. After that, what?

Can't be Jump-started

There is gulf of a difference between SAPTA and SAFTA. The first one means a preferential trade arrangement of limited concessionary access to each other's market in terms of tariff reduction on a stated number of goods while the latter dreams of *laissez-faire* in South Asia. One is a precursor to the other, but the first phase will have to be completed before the stage is deemed to have been set for a plunge into open and free trade.

SAPTA which was adopted as far back as in 1993 with high hopes for graded reduction in the tariff barriers, notably to the exclusion of non-tariff walls, remains partially realised to-date. Thanks to the unfulfilled commitments of the bigger economies of the SAARC region, the minimally required market inter-penetration has not taken place to rhapsodise about a free market zone right-away.

By hindsight, the last SAARC summit decision in Male to frog-leap into SAFTA by 2001 sounds over-ambitions, premature and simplistic. Why was this declaration made at all on something for which the ground looked so deplorably unprepared? Little wonder, when the chips are down prior to the Colombo summit, scheduled for 29-31 July, the Inter-Governmental Group (IGG) and the Inter-Governmental Expert Group (IGEP) have both recommended postponement of SAFTA by eight to ten years. India having the biggest economy in the region has the free market cake just for the taking if it is offered on the platter right now without allowing the weaker economies of the region a leeway to enhance their trade capacity under a well-implemented SAPTA regimen.

India's lower production costs are an incomparable marketing asset for her. So, we are supportive of the belated demand for a relaxation of the SAFTA time-table, but not by eight to ten years which sounds out of rhythm with the global trend.

If cancellation of polling at one of 93 centres due to disturbances is considered an isolated incident, then the just-concluded by-election to the Barisal-5 constituency of Jatiya Sangsad was, by and large, peaceful. But, was it free and fair in an ideal sense? The answer is — no. Alluring or bribing the voters in any form, promising developments on behalf of the candidates before the polls, creating panic among them, obstructing voters on their way to polling centres, casting false votes clearly amount to violation of electoral rules. The by-election, held on July 20, witnessed all these irregularities. It is now known to many in Barisal town that the ruling Awami League distributed more than five thousand T-shirts and similar number of sarees among male and female voters only a few days before the polls.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party did not lag behind: it distributed several thousand umbrellas. The philanthropy — if the politicians choose to call it — was very timely in terms of attracting poor voters, which clearly amounts to bribing or alluring people for electoral gains.

Visiting a constituency — after election schedule is announced — by ministers or those enjoying the rank and status of ministers is not a direct violation of any electoral rule or the polling code of conduct as such. But the Chief Election Commissioner, Mohammad Abu Hena, advised the Prime Minister to ask her cabinet colleagues not to go to constituency concerned, understandably in the fear that such visits would influence the voters. This advice was entertained

by the government during the by-election to a Manikganj constituency last year.

The premier this time got the 'EC advice' approved by the cabinet, making it a cabinet decision which was eventually distributed among the ministers, persons enjoying the rank and status of ministers and district level officials concerned by the cabinet division.

But a number of ministers and some enjoying that rank visited the areas, 'ignoring' whatever one may call it — EC's advice, or cabinet decision or both. The ministers did not use the usual protocol in Barisal, nor did they use any government facilities that they are entitled to.

However they promised development projects, etc., while addressing election rallies of the party candidate. The government even chose the election-time for distributing the old-age pension and promising a higher amount of pension-money among a larger number of people for future. The strategy worked.

According to many, the distribution of pension-money and promises of development projects by the ministers directly influenced a significant number of voters to side with the ruling party candidate in the polls. The distribution of pension-money just days before

Barisal-5 By-poll Was it Free and Fair?

by Nurul Kabir

Any one visiting the constituency on the election day, and the day before the election, would have sensed a sense of fear prevailing among the voters. It was fear of violence in and around polling stations that kept many voters to stay back at home.

the polls raises serious questions of ethics. This was government money being directly dished to favour the ruling party.

This is what exactly the Election Commission did not want, as it would affect the sanctity of fair polls. The CEC has rightly pronounced his dissatisfaction over the issue, saying that the Commission's 'advice' had been ignored in the polls. His dissatisfaction, perhaps, is applicable to the visit of the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament and BNP chairperson, Begum Khaleda Zia, who also enjoys the rank and status of a minister.

Any one visiting the constituency on the election day, and the day before the election, would have sensed a sense of fear prevailing among the voters. It was fear of violence in and around polling stations that kept many voters to stay back at home, reducing the voters' turnout to 48.77 per cent from 74.19 per cent in the June 1996 general elections.

Many people of the constituency attributed the low turnout of voters, especially of the female voters, mainly to the fear of violence and partially to the rains on the election day that turned the rural roads horribly muddy. The voters feared that the activists of contesting candidates would be engaged in

attacks and counter-attacks in and around the polling centres.

The presence of fear factor in the by-election was further evident when both winning and losing candidates admitted to the press that the BNP supporters worked in disguise of AL activists, wearing League badges.

According to the local BNP, its supporters were compelled to hide their identity in and around the polling stations, fearing possible attack from the ruling party activists and their hired hoodlums.

The AL candidate, however, had a different explanation for this new phenomenon. According to him, the opposition supporters deliberately adopted the strategy to 'cheat' the ruling party voters. But the questions remain, how would the BNP workers have cheated the AL voters? Why should AL voters change their minds at the instigation of 'cheats' wearing AL's election badges? If it did happen, then at least some AL voters would have reported it to the local AL leaders.

The AL argument is, therefore, not tenable in this case. Rather, it was an aspersion on the sincerity of the local AL supporters, whose dedication has significantly increased the party's traditional margin of votes with that of the BNP. In the last election, the gap was more than 26 thousand votes,

while this time it came down to 10 thousand.

Therefore, one might find the other proposition — the fear caused by ruling party had compelled the opposition supporters to fake their political identity — to be more acceptable. If it was so, the polls were not free. Free polling means the voters as well as opposition supporters would be allowed to exercise their right to franchise freely without any fear from any quarter.

Obstructing voters on their way to the polling stations is considered, under the electoral rules, to be another component of an unfair election. There was no direct obstruction in the present case, but allegations were there that some organised groups of political activists deliberately persuaded voters, especially the female voters, at different points not to go to the polling centres as 'the centre had already been exposed to troubles caused by fights among rival political groups'.

Attempts — both successful and unsuccessful — to cast false vote were also there. In one case at Karapara centre, a few kilometres off the town, a middle aged man was seen on the verge of outburst as he found that his vote had been cast much before he reached the station. It could not be ascertained which political party was responsible for

the misdeed. A similar attempt at a city polling centre, however, proved to be abortive. But the unsuccessful attempt left a mark that speaks of ruling party involvement in the misdeed.

When a known BNP supporter found that his vote had already been cast by someone else in the A Kader Chowdhury Primary School centre, he took up the case with the presiding officer concerned. But some supporters of the ruling party candidate intervened, causing an altercation between the Awami League and the BNP activists of the area. Amidst scuffle, some 'unidentified' hoodlums ran away with three ballot books containing three hundred ballot papers. Of these, one was recovered later — already bearing seals of boat, election symbol of Awami League, that clearly pointed towards the political identity of the snatchers. The CEC who was visiting the constituency, cancelled polling in the centre.

The cancellation was undoubtedly the right decision. But the incident, coupled with other allegations of successful attempts to cast false votes in other centres, clearly indicate that attempts at rigging was very much there.

With all these irregularities — direct and indirect bribing of voters, promising development projects by ministers, causing fear among the voters, indirectly obstructing them on their way to polling centres, attempts to cast false votes and ignoring EC advice by the government — the proposition as to how free and fair this latest election was remains a big question.

The writer, a senior staff correspondent of The Daily Star, covered the by-election.

The SAARC Summit and the Expectations

The leaders of India and Pakistan need to display commitments in unequivocal terms to the further development of the SAARC while others should try to lessen the tensions between them which may not be possible under the SAARC ambit but the opportunity can be seized by the attending leaders through their bilateral contacts.

THE coming summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is taking place in Colombo under a lengthy shadow of fear and anxiety that political climate in the region threatens the noble SAARC ventures.

When the leaders of the seven member countries meet for the three-day conference in the Sri Lankan capital, the focus will invariably on the peripheral issues like on the meeting between the prime ministers of India and Pakistan. Peripheral because this is not a SAARC agenda and bilateral contacts do take place on the sidelines of the summit. Paradoxically, the interest of the media — particularly the western ones — will be the Indo-Pakistan developments on the sidelines of the meeting rather than what emerges from the SAARC.

There is no denying that how SAARC deals with the question of increasing controversies in the forum centering the contentious bilateral issues is also a matter of interest.

However, this once again relates not to the core matters of the regional forum like the progress made in the integrated programme of actions (IPA) by the members nations or what are the new areas that are coming or may come for collective cooperation.

This situation notwithstanding, what is heartening is the fact that all are taking place under the broad parameter of the SAARC, which is a non-controversial venture that has made modest progress in last thirteen years and holds promise for greater economic cooperation for the most populous region in the world. As one who has watched the growth and development of the SAARC

and as a newsmen, I must say that the regional forum has seldom been on a smooth ground and often it landed in trouble. When Bangladesh mooted the proposal, its acceptance was not easy although the smaller nations were quick to respond positively as they felt that economic cooperation on a collective footing in the region could bring immense benefits to the peoples living in the area. Two main players of the south Asian spectrum — India and Pakistan — took long time to decide but finally approved the idea. The reason that the two countries took long time was simple. New Delhi and Islamabad, two traditional rivals, sought to examine the proposal from the point of advantage and disadvantage of the other rival.

When this condition persisted, those who were enthusiastic about the concept did not lose hearts. Senior officials from seven countries burned midnight oil to prepare the case for a viable regional cooperation. One of the important meetings at that time took place at the foreign secretaries level in Colombo when Shah A.M.S. Kibria was the foreign secretary of Bangladesh. That meeting cleared much of the misconception about the venture.

When the governments in New Delhi and Islamabad were still dragging their feet on the subject, some intellectuals in both the countries came out strongly for such venture and



Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

that helped greatly to mould the public opinion for the regional cooperation. Here, it will not be out of place to mention veteran Indian journalist Nikhil Chakravarty, who passed away recently in New Delhi. His was one of the most strongest voice for the SAARC and since the time SAARC came into being in 1985, the elder and respected journalist of the region frequently toured the member countries with a mission to strengthen the SAARC. For a left-oriented Chakravarty, the well being of the vast multitude living in the region was the prime objective and he felt SAARC should be used for lessening tensions among the members countries for the greater good of their people.

The SAARC owes much to such persons in the region who worked for the proposal when it did not look like a distinct possibility and also contributed at later stage. Pakistan's celebrated economist Dr. Mahbubul-Haq who also died in recent times was also a votary to SAARC who sought to impress upon the leaders to curtail defence expenditures for human resources development in the region.

But the question that strikes someone's mind on the eve of the Colombo summit is that can the venture live up to the expectations? Is it on the right track and is the progress made in last 13 years meaningful? Can it weather the challenges like rivalries between two principal members which has taken a serious turn in recent times in the wake of their nuclear explosions? Should bilateral matters be allowed to be taken up by the venture? Where does the forum stand when two biggest countries are engaged in hostilities?

During the last SAARC summit in Male, the meeting between the prime ministers of India and Pakistan was the cynosure of most eyes when they agreed on certain decisions like setting up hotlines between them. That time, their ties were also tense because of tensions along the borders which, however, is not anything unusual for them. This time the interest on their prime ministers is bigger because the attention of the entire world will be there as it will be first meeting between prime minister A. B. Vajpayee and prime minister Nawaz Sharif after their countries del-

onated atomic devices in last May. Last time, the talks were between the then Indian prime minister I. K. Gujral and Mr. Sharif. But the last summit did deal on several key issues related to the SAARC and took important decisions.

The coming summit has to take up issues like the progress of the South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAFTA), prospects about the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) within a time limit, greater people-to-people contacts programmes and easing of travel restrictions in that direction, increasing cooperation in the media in the light of the decisions by the SAARC information ministers here some time ago, activities of the technical committees, how best to facilitate greater economic interactions etc.

The leaders will have a heavy agenda on their hands even though media will more look for the bilateral meetings of the prime ministers of India and Pakistan or what they say in their speeches at the conference. The leaders will have to take up their business seriously to demonstrate that they mean SAARC business while other matters are only the side issues. After all, India and Pakistan have reiterated their strong

commitments to SAARC time and again after they had welcomed it following initial hesitation at the formative stage. The leaders of India and Pakistan need to particularly display commitments in unequivocal terms to the further developments of the SAARC while the others should try to lessen the tensions between them which may not be possible under the SAARC ambit but the opportunity can be seized by the attending leaders through their bilateral contacts.

True, SAARC summit this time takes place amidst deepening crisis in the region but in the past the event had to be called off at the last moment due to unavoidable circumstances. The SAARC summit that took place at later stage emerged stronger. While the SAARC acts as a catalyst to deliver sober impact also at bilateral level by providing the scopes for meeting between warring parties, nothing should be done that creates confusion or suspicion in the minds of all members about the cohesion of the collective spirit. SAARC may be at the crossroads but hopefully the coming summit will be able to instill more confidence among the members. Its success lies in taking up more and more business-like issues that come to the welfare of the vast multitude living in the South Asia — home of more than one billion people most of whom are mired in poverty.

Let the leaders show this through their acts and decisions.

OPINION Gas Pipeline across the Jamuna

Dr Abdus Sattar Syed

The gas pipeline along the newly-constructed Bangabandhu Bridge over the Jamuna fell down in the river early morning on 12th June 1998 during hydraulic testing, just 11 days before the official inauguration.

The 30-inch diameter gas pipeline was fixed under the bridge to the main structure with the help of clamps and bolts. As reported in the press, the clamps were fixed at 12 meter intervals instead of 4 meter as provided in the design specifications.

As a result when the load of the 1000 ton pipeline increased by over 3 times due to high pressure of water during hydraulic tests, the entire 4.8-km-long pipeline of the bridge portion built at a cost of Taka 350 million collapsed and sank into the Jamuna, along with the steel safety net covering the gas pipeline beneath the bridge.

If the reported design violations are true, then the callous and negligent manner in which the execution of the undertaking has been carried out is unbelievable. Personally, I feel that the very idea of suspending the 30-inch diameter pipeline under the bridge is badly conceived.

Because firstly, as has been proved, it represents the hazard of proverbial sword of Damocles of very high potential energy, and secondly it is an unnecessary load on the bridge structure. Instead it would have been safer to lay the 4.8 km trans-Jamuna gas pipeline on the river bed.

Underwater gas transmission line is not a novelty. We already have them under the Meghna and the Dhaleswari; the 24-inch diameter transmission line under the Dhaleswari is nearly of 2 km long. More recently, we have the 20-inch diameter submarine transmission line under the

Bay of Bengal carrying natural gas 32 km from the offshore Sangu gas field to onshore Chhillimur processing plant.

In fact, I suggest that no attempt should be made at all to salvage the sunken pipeline lying at its lowest potential energy and re-suspend the same under the bridge spending another few hundred million takas, which may delay gas supply across Jamuna by nearly a year as reported, and a bad idea in the first place as explained. Instead the sunken pipeline should be allowed to remain in situ on the river bed, and gas may be supplied through the same after necessary tests, as news photos show that the pipeline is still firmly held at the ends.

In this manner gas may be supplied across the Jamuna right now at practically no additional expense. It may thus be possible to supply natural gas timely for establishment of gas-based industries as stated recently in the Parliament by the Prime Minister, and also to the 70 MW as well as the 100 MW barge mounted plant at Baghat and bring welcome relief to the gas-starved eastern region of the country's western region.

As the pipeline is now lying under water, necessary pneumatic tests may be carried out safely using compressed air instead of hydraulic test, as should have been done in the first place. In short time, on account of dynamic river bed morphology of the Jamuna, the pipeline will be buried deeper in the sandy bed and in general expected to attain stability. The high pressure steel pipeline may be further secured by erecting rectangular guard pillars of appropriate dimension along the pipeline on the river banks.

The writer is an ex-consultant of UNDP/Ministry of Environment & Forest.

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.

BJMB controversy

Sir, There's a political war over Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge. Both Awami League and BNP are claiming the bridge as their baby. I think to do something big and beneficial to the country requires a consensus and concerted efforts. No one can exclusively claim credit for anything. It requires broad-mindedness and pragmatic approach to the subject giving due credit to all concerned.

The other day I heard the recorded voice of Bangabandhu over television. Of course Bangabandhu dreamt to build the bridge first. Thereafter much water has flown down Buriganga before we saw Ershad in power. He did his part of the job by forming Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge Authority in 84-85, selected sites, imposed surcharge to raise funds and also laid the foundation stones. Then came Begum Zia who slaughtered the same chicken twice i.e. laid the foundation stone again on April 10, 1994.

She also did her best to convince the donor countries and exerted all her influence to start the work of the bridge and it did start in October that year (1994). Then Sheikh Hasina came to power. Her personal attention and dynamic push culminated in the opening of the bridge on 23rd June this year.

Thus we see that Jamuna Bridge is not the baby of any particular party rather it is the sumtotal of combined efforts of all the parties in the interest of the country as a whole.

Then why the bridge should fall prey to political polarization?

Syed Abu Saleh 170, Malibagh, Dhaka-1217.

Private practice in government hospitals

Sir, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's recently expressed view (in favour of private practice by government doctors in government hospitals) provided that they contribute a certain percentage of their consultancy fees to the hospital concerned) to a delegation from the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib University regarding private practice in government hospitals is fraught with danger.

First, in a country where properly equipped government hospitals are few and far between, specialists would then invariably be lured away by rich patients who can afford to satisfy the doctors. Poor patients to whom the government hospitals are the last ray of hope, would then be deprived of medical care and attendance.

In the second place, the medical instruments and equipments supplied by the government to the hospitals would quickly depreciate due to excessive use of the same. I am afraid, the percentage of fees to be given by doctors for attending private patients would not be sufficient to replace those as sooner or later corruption in book-keeping is bound to occur. In the third place, I have a

creepy feeling that this is a move towards privatization of medicare facilities. Is the government trying to lay off their hands from looking into people's health and welfare?

Dr A Z Mia Dhaka.

Multiple duty of the Police Academy

Sir, Cops in our country while serving particular duty seldom attend to other job within their professional responsibility. Recently a national daily has published a news stating that the Kushtia Police had arrested an Indian citizen, Nikhil Mondal, who entered Bangladesh through Rangpur border without any passport. Appreciable job indeed, but the interesting part is, it was a traffic police who suspected Nikhil's movement, challenged him and later handed him over to Kushtia police.

The name of the traffic police was not mentioned in the news-report but I strongly feel that he should be duly appreciated and rewarded for performing a national security/immigration department's service in addition to his traffic control job.

M Zahidul Haque BA1, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar Dhaka-1207.

"Outrageous"

Sir, I came to know from your editorial of 16/7/98 of the above-titled caption that the Pakistani Senator Akram Zaki made a disparaging comment on our liberation war in his speech at the Institute of International and Strategic Studies. It is not clear whether anybody had made an instant

protest to the remark or not. I am sure there were quite a few Foreign Ministry officials present, not to mention our intellectuals!

How could he characterize our liberation as the machinations of a 'lady surgeon' while, in effect, it was the culmination of our historical struggle for independence. It is high time that the Bangladeshi authorities become more careful in selecting guest speakers for any meeting or seminars. If we allow such remarks to go in unopposed, it will gradually erode our pride as an independent nation and sap our self-confidence.

Abul Mohsin 40, Siddheswari, Circular Rd, Dhaka.

Microcredit Summit

Sir, One of my friends who works for an NGO recently attended a meeting on microcredit in New York City, called the 'Microcredit Summit'. This was the second summit, the first one was held in February last year in Washington DC. I was quite surprised because such an important occasion went off without much interest by our media. The one of last year was chaired by our Prime Minister and hence the media coverage was very good.

But this year's was also quite important. About 200 delegates all over world had gathered, including about 40 from Bangladesh. My friend also attended the last one and to him, however, this year's was less eventful. Rather he was disappointed about few things. He thought that the enthusiasm was much less; except for the President of Peru, there was no state-level leader. Last year's was graced by at least three world leaders including the First Lady of USA.

A Soul in Poverty Alleviation, Dhaka