

Timely Reminder

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina could not have done truth a greater service when she accentuated unimpeded rule of law as a sine qua non for democracy in her inaugural speech at the three-day seminar on good governance which, jointly sponsored by the Ministry of LGRD and UNDP, began in the city yesterday. Indeed democracy runs the risk of being labelled as a recipe for chaos unless rule of law is guaranteed. Arresting deterioration in country's law and order has been one of the greatest challenges for Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government. It was there in her party's election manifesto and more than two years down the line in power, this still remains the most formidable task for her government. There is no way one can underestimate the vastness and difficulty of the challenge though. Re-establishing rule of law in Bangladesh is a mindboggling business because years of unabated abuse of laws by individuals have brought institutions on the verge of collapse. From banks to law enforcing agency there is hardly any institution in the consciousness of the civil society which escaped tampering. It calls for a huge overhauling both of attitude and system as well as a departure from traditional concepts to make things hum again to the benefit of the people. Nothing is too hallowed to be immune to this pervasive demand for change. Even the judiciary, usually an untouched component in governance, needs to be shaken up. To promote accountability in every sphere of life judiciary has to get out of its obsession with the idea of Contempt of Court.

But come as she may time and again to this issue of seminal significance, the same amount of sincerity and urgency which her words so unmistakably exude, is yet to be reflected in action. There is no doubt Sheikh Hasina's government has taken some very laudable and hope-generating decisions like for restructuring the local government system for an enhanced and efficient involvement of people in the development process but by and large the firm political will which is a must for making the reforms meaningful has not been there. For that matter we would have liked to see much more firmness and transparency in the government attitude to reforms in the financial sector. Continued factional feud in the student wing of the ruling party is the other major problem that has tended to take the underpinnings off PM's commitment to the rule of law. There is no doubt time is ripe for massive reforms in all sectors. But before that we have to have the preparedness to make reform meaningful and both the parties in power and opposition need to realise that.

Unsustainable Liabilities

That the 19 state-owned textile mills have been on a tailspin is common knowledge but what must be jarringly revealing to many is that their accumulated loss-to-date stands at Tk 1000 crore. Their bankruptcy is so horrendous simply because the government has been doling out Taka four crore in salaries per month untenably impelled by their paltry monthly earning averaging out at less than Tk 50 lakh. With them being so much in the red, the units evidently could not even dream of putting any money into BMRE for years together with most of their power looms going dysfunctional or operating on low capacity.

Now the finance ministry has finally decided, it seems, to put its foot down proclaiming that it is no longer prepared to pay salaries to the employees of the loss-making industries. The action apparently follows a notice served on the textile units that they either broke even or wound up. One would have thought that most of these textile mills were put on the disinvestment list and that it is only a matter of time before they are taken over by the private sector. Since the privatisation process is moving at a snail's pace and the government is at odds with subsidisation they have only asked them to fend for themselves in the interim. But we are at a loss to understand as to whom the directive is aimed at: the government corporation appointed management of those units or the workers.

Any way, the government has two examples to go by. First, they have already closed down nine mills which had incurred Tk 230 crore losses over the years. Severance benefits must have been paid to the workers of the affected units. So, there is a tested methodology in hand to replicate and get rid of the liabilities as quickly as possible. Secondly, one has to study the lone success story of the Chittagong Textile Mills in the public sector and have a few other state-owned units, still with some life left in them, follow the former's footsteps.

Try any of the alternatives, but ensure that all costs that the national exchequer is not bled white by them anymore.

We Denounce It

Today is the Hiroshima Day. After August 6, 1946 when Hiroshima was destroyed and its population wiped off by the impact of the first atomic bomb used on people, power came to man not just to kill a nation but the whole planet, making it as dead as the moon or mercury. The knowledge of this did not elevate him to godhood but threw him down the abyss of unsurpassable immorality.

Leo Zilard, the physicist emigre from Hungary feared Hitler would any day have the ultimate weapon under a push-button — most leading nuclear physicists, Hahn and Meitner et al were German and in Germany — and the world would fall at the feet of Nazism never again to be salvaged. He got Einstein to petition and talk President Roosevelt into launching what came subsequently to be known as the Manhattan Project. By the time the Bomb was complete and ready Germany had surrendered and Japan was frantically suing for peace. The incomparable organised a physicists' resistance against the Bomb, demanding its scuttling. Harry S Truman went ahead to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki to subject the world to a nuclear blackmail.

If men were men, the Hiroshima inferno would force all nations to rise as one man against the fabrication of such an anti-life, anti-planet immoral thing. No, the nations did not denounce the Bomb. It was left only to individuals who resisted and exposed the immorality of the Bomb and its makers. And now the Bomb has come to the sub-continent. The states of the subcontinent have swallowed the Bomb, it seems. Now it is left to the humanity of us individuals to denounce and resist the Bomb. We shall all be sinning gravely if we do not register ourselves against the immoral demon by even a shout in the public square. The remembrance of Hiroshima impels us to that.

Let There be an Opportunity to Resume Talks

AFTER meeting Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif last month at Islamabad, I was confident that he would delink Kashmir from nuclear confrontation. I found Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub hawkish in his attitude. But Sharif was in such a frame of mind that I expected him to accept Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's offer of no-first-use in Colombo.

True, Sharif was under pressure, but not from the army, as he himself told me. It could not have been from Benazir Bhutto, who herself supported the no-first-use proposal. Sharif's Muslim League was his own creation and, therefore, could not have posed him a challenge. (General Jahangir Karamat Ali, the Pakistan chief of army staff, is said to have opposed nuclear tests, though the middle ranks were for it).

My impression is that he is afraid of hardliners who claim to speak in the name of Pakistan as well as Islam. Their strength is limited. But their sentiment is substantial. None dares to come in their way because they have roughnecks in their ranks and a bagful of religious rhetoric. Their increasing say, after nuclear tests, can be judged from a poignant remark that a famous Urdu poetess, Kishwar Nahid, made before me: In 50 years we won the battle to wear a half-sleeve blouse but we are now back to square one.

Before nuclear tests, Sharif's emphasis was on the resumption of talks on Kashmir. He was not happy that after "agreeing to a joint working group on Kashmir, New Delhi went back" on its word. But Vajpayee has said that his government is ready for talks on Kashmir despite cross-border incidents. This should clear the air of doubts.

Just as Shiv Sena has its way in Maharashtra (no Pakistani team can play in the state nor can a Pakistani artist perform there) or the Vishva Hindu Parishad goes wild in Gujarat and most parts of UP, so do fundamentalists in Pakistan's Punjab, the ruling state. The NWFP and Sindh are comparatively less agitated. That Sharif should be so indulgent to the fanatics indicates that his popularity is on the decline. It also means that he needs all the crutches he can muster for support. The worst part is that he has become dependent on chauvinists, who are united in their demand for not delinking Kashmir from the bomb.

Still the delinking is important because Kashmir is a problem, which it will take time to solve. Should the peoples in the subcontinent live daily in fear of death till the two sides have sorted out Kashmir? A misadventure, an accident or a wrong assessment can end up in a nuclear holocaust. If air space violations by India, denied strongly by Air Marshal Saareen, can provoke Sharif to hurl threats, the situation is indeed explosive. And it needs immediate attention. Even at

the height of cold war between Washington and Moscow, there was a scope to rectify mistake because it would have taken 15 to 20 minutes for a missile to span the distance. India and Pakistan live by cheek and jowl. One mistake and it is all over.

Both sides have been shelling for some time the territory along the line of control in

switching to heavy artillery? Take the air space violations, which have annoyed Pakistan, the most. Could Islamabad not check with New Delhi the veracity of violations? New Delhi could also have conveyed on the hot line if its planes had strayed into Pakistan air space. The absence of such recourse indicates not only a lack of faith but also the

maicy, he is wholly dependent on the armed forces. They have their own ends to serve. There is always a danger of their stepping in as they have done in the past. Sharif should himself realise this because there is a whispering campaign that he may be thrown out. Hotheads will not save him, a rapprochement with India may.

Killings in the areas near Riasi first, then in Doda and now in Himachal Pradesh by allegedly Pakistan-backed terrorists reflect desperation. They cannot conquer the territory. By targeting Hindus, the militants are only alienating Indian opinion still more, making the overall settlement difficult. Even the liberal Indians tend to turn against Pakistan when the news of cold blooded murders is disseminated by the Media. That is the time when they talk about advancing in to the 'Azad Kashmir'. Otherwise, everyone has accepted the 'Azad Kashmir' as part of Pakistan.

One does not know what transpired at the one-to-one meeting between him and Vajpayee, but Sharif should have sought economic assistance from India. This would have been an unpopular step in Pakistan but it would have helped the country stave off some difficulties in the wake of sanctions. India should supply wheat, cottonseeds, iron ore and some other commodities on credit to help Pakistan. But this requires vision, which very few people in the BJP have. The best bet is Vajpayee who, as foreign minister in 1977, had offered soft borders between India and Pakistan. The rest will follow.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

Jammu and Kashmir. When I was in Lahore last month, one Pakistani journalist told me that the shelling had assumed serious proportions. I dismissed it as an exercise, which both sides went over every now and then. Sharif's warning to India against 'its irresponsible attitude' has made me conscious of the escalation, which is taking place. It cannot be an accident. If so, why the two sides did not use the hot line to ascertain the facts and came to an understanding before

continuation of enmity. These incidents may lessen or disappear as the days go by as has happened in the past. But the two countries will always be sitting on a volcano if they do not normalise their relations regarding nuclear option.

In an unfriendly environment, Sharif's statement that New Delhi will be responsible for war in South Asia if 'Indians continue killing innocent Kashmiris' is unfortunate. Whatever is happening in Kashmir is nothing new. In fact, the militancy in the valley is more or less over. Why should he talk of war now? Is it because Pakistan has the bomb? The entire approach is faulty. He should remember he swept the polls on the plank of good relations with India. Benazir Bhutto, who played an anti-India card, lost heavily.

In fact, Sharif should have a vested interest in cultivating India. In the absence of nor-

Calcutta relationship cannot be ignored, as also the Calcutta-Moscow platonic affinity. Myanmar is under international scrutiny, with a common border with Bangladesh. Hence the chances of Russian influence taking root in Dhaka is remote. With the US presence very much visible in Dhaka, will the Indo-Russian pressure count? Not likely. But the SAARC region will be under some international tension. Who will, and can, defuse it? The situation is beginning to get complicated.

Now a blunt question: How Calcutta feels about New Delhi and Dhaka, looking into the new century? The West Bengal society appears to be more degenerative than regenerative, despite the great Jyoti Babu's 19-year contribution. No option can be ruled out. Bangladesh needs the highest level of diplomacy to monitor the gathering clouds.

A-Husnain Dhaka

Mandela's wedding

Sir, Nelson Mandela, always fond of wearing colourful and floral dresses, at last have paid an obedient heed to the wedding tips made earlier by his good friend Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Nelson, always with an attractive smiling face having his worldwide fans of all ages, was reportedly in love with a young lady of 50 plus! who is by profession a lawyer and philanthropically an international campaigner for children's rights. Since their first meeting in early '90s the couple started an unusual episode of relationship. Mandela on the eve of his 80th birthday has tied a further wedding knot.

I think his decision to transform a love-affair at this stage of life into a wedding would surely put an end to all criticism and controversies. Pertinently, I could not check myself in recalling a disappointed Winnie Madikizela who, despite an enormous unrest in her conjugal life, sacrificed a long spell of 27 years for this old man.

Still lots of wedding wishes for Mandela and his Mozambique sweetheart.

M Muhibul Abrar Choudhury Chittagong

Mini WC venues

Sir, With reference to the fast ensuing Mini World Cup scheduled in late October '98 it is noted that the entire tournament will be held in Dhaka. Thanks to the Chittagong city's mayor, the local stadium has received a face-lift with the electronic giants 'Siemens' installing the new flood-lights and electronic score-board systems. Hence, the Chittagong stadium is in a unique position to hold cricket matches of the aforesaid international category.

I would even suggest that Rajshahi, Mymensingh and Khulna stadiums are equally capable. Such holding of cricket/football matches in different venues are definitely not an aberration but the norms not only in India and Pakistan, even the recently-concluded World Cup football matches were held in 10 different cities, throughout France.

Above all, the captain Akram Khan, the jewel in the 'cricket crown' of Bangladesh and many other veteran cricketers are the proud sons of Chittagong. Hence, holding a few such 'mega' events will give a tremendous boost to the promotion of cricket which Chittagong so veritably deserves.

I, therefore, urge the Prime Minister to extend her helping hand to this matter.

Salahuddin A Khan, Firozshah, Chittagong

Police Brutality in the US

Sir, As I was surfing the Internet, I came across a website where I found that human rights organisations have accused local governments and federal officials in the United States of failing to address a common human rights abuse there: police brutality.

A human rights report published recently has charged that shoddy internal investigations do not hold police officers accountable for abusive acts, and that criminal prosecutions rarely result. Civilian review agencies lack the funding and access they need to monitor police adequately. Some cities pay tens of millions of tax-payers' dollars in civil lawsuits alleging brutality, rather than addressing the underlying problems.

The report is based on research conducted in 14 cities over a two-year period and found several problems common to all of them. The cities are: Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Portland, Providence, San Francisco and Washington D.C. Police departments like to claim that each high-profile abuse is an aberration, committed by a 'rogue officer', the report says. But these human rights violations persist because the accountability systems are so defective.

Abuses such as unjustified shootings, severe beatings, fatal choking and other forms of brutal physical treatment have been reported in cities throughout the United States. These abuses, and officials' unwillingness to curtail them, are violations of international human rights treaties by which the US is bound. They are also violations of most police departments' policies, and state and federal law. Furthermore, they are a betrayal of the public these officers are sworn to serve.

The report maintains that data on police abuse is very hard to obtain. Internal affairs units operate under a cloak of secrecy and are reluctant to release even basic information about their activities. In 1994, Congress instructed the Justice Department to compile statistics and produce an annual report on the use of excessive force nationwide. Nearly four years later, no such report has been published.

According to the report, in the cities where such data are available, minorities have alleged human rights violations by police more frequently than white residents, a far out of proportion to their representation in those cities. Police have subjected minorities to apparently discriminatory treatment and have physically abused minorities while using racial epithets.

Obaydullah Dhaka

"SOFA" ... the fuss created

Sir, I hail the statement of the State Minister for Foreign Affairs Abul Hasan Choudhury "I really do not understand the fuss that's being created on this matter".

Whereas the gesture shown by the US to offer assistance on humanitarian ground and in the disaster management should have been welcomed and accepted right away without outside interference.

Now I have a relevant question to ask: where were those 'marked' intellectuals and so-

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.

OPINION

Rubel Killing: A Layman's View

Syed Tariqul Islam

During my student life mother used wait in anxiety till my return home at night and the same thing happens till now. Whenever I asked my mother not to be anxious about my return, with a smiling face she used to tell me that as long as I was not a father, I would not be able to understand her feelings. Now I am a father and I certainly understand the pangs of Shameem Reza Rubel's parents and the family members of the departed soul. Not only me none of the civilised human beings has the language to condemn the brutal killing of a meritorious student in the name of law enforcement.

I don't know the total number of victims who had to pay with their lives or had been murdered in the name of law enforcement under the safe custody of police since our independence. But I certainly know the partial number which has been published by the Coordinating Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh (CCHRB). That since 1951 till the death of Shameem Reza Rubel a total of 179 persons have been killed under police/authorities custody (CCHRB has recorded this information from the news reports published in different dailies). Shameem Reza Rubel is one of them.

Table with columns for years 1991-1996 and Total. Data: 1991: 2, 1992: 21, 1993: 16, 1994: 12, 1995: 22, 1996: 48, 1997: 26, 1998: 19 (upto June), Total: 179.

Since our independence we got seven parliaments and these seven parliaments held a number of sessions. Whether our guardians (the position and opposition politicians or parliamentarians) have ever given any thought to this death of people (in the name of law enforcement) under police custody. A lot of people usually face brutal harassment by the police due to "Section 54" and our guardians (politicians) are always fighting to restore our rights!

We may become confident that we have a Bureau of Anti-Corruption. As the newspapers reported that a number of police officials' volume of property does not match with their legal income let us hope that the Bu-

reau will consider to look into this matter. The number of deaths under custody since 1991 clearly shows and proves that these persons were under legal prosecution (even some time not under legal/judicial prosecution), such as Rubel. When the law of the court has not declared someone as criminal and no verdict has been issued against him, then how and under which authority people's police (custodians), who usually get their salary from tax-payers' money are abusing the chance/power to torture an under-trial prisoner (innocent victim)?

In the name of people's security, what are we getting from our legal custodians (police) whom we are maintaining with our revenue earnings? We don't know how many notorious criminals have been arrested and punished by our police force who have bravely killed Yasmin, Seema, Nuruz-kaman Sharif and, of late, Rubel.

We know that a judicial inquiry commission has been formed and it is progressing to unearth the truth behind the killing and the killer. We have some points to express in this regard —

— the truth is Shameem Reza Rubel is dead — he was not given back (alive) to his parents or produced before the honourable court for trial — the police had no legal permission to arrest Rubel other than the renowned(?) "Section 54" — there was no criminal record (case) against Rubel in the local police station when he was 'apprehended' by the DB officials.

If, according to the legal procedure, the judicial commission or the honourable judge does not find any 'evidence' that Rubel was brutally killed by the DB officials then can we imag-

ine what would be the verdict? Whether it would be a verdict like the one issued in case of Seema murder by police in Chittagong. We hope this will not happen in case of Rubel murder and if it happens then we may prefer some disaster to future. He is a wrong pretention's whiteness. I am afraid, may be as follows:

— In future, if any police officials come to arrest some one from a locality then it is very likely the local people may take the law in their hands and police men might be beaten in the upsurge.

— In such a situation the hard core criminals may take the opportunity to smash the police as it happened some days back when a mob killed innocent people in the name of child lifter.

— Guardians (not the police or the politicians) but the real parents, out of frustration and desperation, may march towards the police stations all over Bangladesh. Now let's try to imagine how many police stations and police force we have and how many parents we are in Bangladesh, and what incidences, then may follow.

No more wrong predictions, let's hope for the best and positive thinking, so that people may regain their confidence in their police forces who have fought for our independence in 1971. One more thing that I would like to know from our guardians (the politicians) whether they will give patient thought to this matter? Whether "Section 54" is essential for a sovereign and civilised country? With this question I have an appeal to our guardians (politicians), please organise the police force to secure us, to save us from terrorists, to help us, to guard us against all evil activities, to help the judicial procedure and not to kill the prisoners or innocent people any more. Please remember that we are the tax payers and whether we are poor or rich, day labourer or industrialist and we are parents too, who feel for their wards.

The Government and the Police

A Zabr

I read a column in which the columnist had jotted down some of the details how the previous autocratic regimes corrupted the police system to serve their own ends. The corrosive effect of this corruption is naturally persisting even after the return of democratic governance since the early '90s (the latter regimes were never allowed by the powerful Opposition to settle down to hard, serious basic, reforms works. It is day-to-day pushing along of routine work in an inefficient manner).

It will take time to cleanse the evil police system, and it cannot be done by one single regime, although one can set the ball in motion. The trouble with our politics is its unpredictability, even in the near future. Stability has not returned since independence. All are trying, and the rest accuse the others! The recent Rubel death case

has revealed the tip of the iceberg of how the police work. More details, and recommendations would be forthcoming following the judicial report. The police reforms has to go in tandem with the administrative and judiciary reforms, in an integrated manner. The public awareness and sensitivity have gone so high that matters cannot be delayed any longer or kept in abeyance. The public is not in a mood to wait. The plunge has to be taken.

Sympathy for the regime in power. They cannot act in an isolated manner. So basic are the pending reforms that the whole society would be shaken up (for the better). But the teething troubles would be many, and last long, unless there is political and bureaucratic concurrence. It has to be pointed out that these basic reforms are Revolutionary in nature, and will call for the greatest statesmanship on the part of

the leaders of the society to ensure a peaceful transition, in these times of anarchy and indiscipline and severe bipolarity in politics. Under the existing environment of the governance and parliamentary standard, the situation looks pessimistic. Huge energies and risks are involved. The undertaking needs unity and boldness even to start it. Carrying it through is a superhuman task. Bringing down the reformed system to routine level will take years.

Do we have the will, stamina, and the unity to enable two or more successive regimes to complete the operation without causing instability in politics, administration, and in the civic society? It is a loaded question, which cannot be answered with any degree of certainty. Let the leaders ponder over some of the points raised above.