

For National Unity

Just when we were hoping that perhaps the ordeal was over for this year comes the news that the countrywide flood situation has worsened so much so that the nightmares of 1988 deluge might be replaced by new ones. It hardly strikes a new chord though. The great onrush of water from the upstream of rivers coupled with persistent monsoon rain inspired us to indulge in some sort of an ineffectual clairvoyance earlier in this column that may the flood this year may appear special even by our own floodprone imagination.

Now that the writing is on the wall we feel there should be a change in the government attitude. The way it has approached the mammoth task of disaster management and relief and rescue operation one cannot help feeling the government miscalculated the vastness of the problem at the onset. However, a mere reassessment of its strategy or simple pressing on the buttons will not make the healing touch felt by the suffering masses. Its efforts have to be galvanised by a sense of national unity. From this point of view the perfunctory rejection of Opposition Leader Khaleda Zia's demand for the formation of an all-party relief committee by the Prime Minister's secretariat may give wrong signal about government's sensitivity and understanding about the gravity of the problem. Not that the AL is the first party to do it. When BNP was in power with Khaleda Zia as the Prime Minister, a similar proposal from the opposition parties had met with the same fate. This is not a time for political tit for tat. In fact, when a huge disaster looms there is hardly any scope for divided approach to it. While the government think twice about its decision in this regard it cannot perhaps avoid making the announcement of a disaster emergency — this is the need of the hour. Under the purview of this declaration it should go for a both territorial and ministerial coordination to make sure highest managerial efficiency is achieved in providing succour to the suffering millions. The point is the sense of an integrated approach has to percolate all units of the administration at all levels.

A Threat to Health

What for is there the disposable syringe? To fully ensure that it does not have any biologically active micro-organism before being used to inject medicine into the veins or tissues of someone under treatment. This is a special care now being taken for less than two decades. Before, the same syringe was used to push different injectibles into bodies of hundreds of patients, taking a casual care that it hadn't any residue from an earlier push. The diseases AIDS and Herpes, and the HIV agents of disease transmit through blood transfusions of whatever mode. The new awareness and caution born of the scare of those has been a boon to medical treatment because of the full reliability of the disposable syringe in all cases of intravenous and intramuscular intervention in the body system — in the case of all diseases.

Even best of things can be reduced to worst hurting vile vitriol depending on who uses it and for what purpose. For more than a year conscientious physicians in Dhaka have been extra-cautious in choosing the syringe they would use. For there was suspicion in the air that all disposable syringes were not unused fresh ones. As with many other thrown away items of regular garbages, the used syringes were feared to have been collected and re-packed and sold.

This situation of insecurity in this nation's activity in curative medicine has further been given a shot in the arm — by a suspect syringe may be. An importer of medical things is selling cheap, almost sub-standard syringes of Chinese origin as quality Korean products. Moreover, the syringes are brought in by unpacked lot and are packed in Dhaka. Experts have expressed fear the use of these syringes may lead to attack by various diseases including jaundice, malaria, tetanus.

When contacted by news people the Drug Administration did not seem overly worried over the facts. This is unacceptable. It is for the government and its related agencies to ensure that only fully reliable syringes are sold in the market. Sale of sub-standard or used syringes over the counter is a big threat to national health. The authorities should take care without fail and loss of time.

Whither Labour Reform?

The ban proposed by a government task force six months ago on trade union activities in the nationalised commercial banks looks effectively shelved. The cabinet committee on finance which validated the prohibition order against trade unionism in the central bank has apparently cringed from even placing it under active consideration insofar as the NCBs go. The terse reaction from the cabinet committee on that point has been that the matter required a 'further study', ostensibly to avert a hasty decision on a politically sensitive issue. The TU lobbies may have held a temporary sway there.

Under the circumstances, we share the concern expressed by the chief executive of the NCBs over the delay in declaring a ban on trade unionism in their sector.

It is essential to realise that the government task force had itself justified the moratorium in the light of their own findings of trade union malpractices in the NCBs. The TUs have virtually held the banking system a hostage to their self-styled management that ran counter to the management proper.

A very cogent question to ask here is: what has happened to the core need for labour reform in the country? The multiplicity of trade unions in an organisation feeding and fattening on overt and covert support from the national political parties constitutes the very heart of the problem and this has to be exorcised by labour reform.

The Myth of People's Police

by A R Shamsul Islam

Being selfish prohibits being people's. The police is not to blame alone. But that a greater blame may lie with the police cannot possibly be denied at this moment.

WHEN Bangladesh became independent in 1971 following a bloody war, we cherished as one of our many expectations that we would get a police force of our own dedicated to the welfare of the people. The expectation got keener in that the police had sacrificed a good deal in the Liberation War. A fond hope was kindled that their sacrifice would render the police purged of many of its anti-people blemishes.

Ironically enough, it has not quite worked that way. Otherwise Bangladesh born out of a vast sea of blood couldn't have figures so badly. Almost all sections, public and private, government and non-government, are found afflicted by people-unfriendly infections.

Though it may require a latest computer to calculate which government department is the first of such firsts, even a naive person can say that it is the police persecution that the public fear as most direct, most instantaneous and most lacerating.

The recent-most tragic death of Rubel has displayed on national spectrum once more what our police is. In fact, this is no new picture of the police. What is different is that the image is thrown on a national canvas all at a time. It has been made so for certain causes.

First, the victim Rubel was a very promising youth, a meritorious student of Independent University. Second, he is immune from any crime record (curiously enough new records are now being invented to malign him as a criminal). Third, the police tortured him in presence of his relations, particularly the female ones who were even kicked up by the policemen as they tried to clasp and implore the torturing policemen to refrain from beating the

lying Rubel. Fourth, the incident occurred at the heart of the metropolitan capital, a congregation of mediamen ready to spurt out on such an occasion.

Now we are watching the aftermath of a police crime in the best tradition of 'a police action against the policemen'; this time with a set of new novelties. But the people's concern centres around the punishment of the killers of Rubel. They are tired of seeing it as a repeated myth.

The question that haunts our mind is — why do the police indiscriminately torture the public for whose protection they are supposed to exist?

For an answer no Hobbes or Locke etc., is essential. Our own experiences and an honest consent to reading the facts around us with an open eye may lead us to the true contention. Some potent ones are summed up as below.

First, the police are also a product of the present day society we are enveloped and imprisoned in. The new summum bonum of life is: make money by hook or by crook and make no pretence of a prodigal parade of new acquisition.

The old philosophy of 'plain living and high thinking' has been practically gone a sound police beating to flee to exile. If torturing men, sometimes innocent, in the wave of indiscriminate beating exercise, promotes acquisition of money, why shall the police stand aside?

Second, most of the governments appear intolerant of the Opposition's views. So is most of the Opposition prone to unjustifiably protesting against and resisting along all the government's activities. The Opposition is hardly willing to wait for the full five-year term of the government to test people's mandate. Hence follows an ever increasing confrontation

between the two. Most governments are accused of using the police for suppressing the Opposition. Police thus used by the government will naturally charge high prices from the user to further its own personal gains.

Third, the police enjoy a managed and menacing freedom from accountability for its activities. It is reassured that there is none to question them. It is a faith crystallised in their mind day by day, layer after layer from cumulative results of harder and harder arbitrary and wanton acts done by them under the very nose of the government.

Fourth, in our society criminality and terrorism have proliferated. This has on the one hand hardened the job of the police. On the other, it has widened the scope of the police to fetch more money to its pocket. The police are alleged to have opted for the second. Some segments of police department have degenerated into something like a 'Limited Company' run for the benefit of the shareholders. No breakthrough for the people.

The police department is not protected by a benign system of checks and balances. Previously the ACR of the police used to be written by the magistrates. That system was done away with. Internal discipline in the police is alleged to be woefully lacking. Chain of command, so vital for a force like the police, works very feebly. As for a glaring instance, on March 1998 when the IG of police was speaking in an exchange-of-views conference called by the Prime Minister, he was silenced in presence of the Prime Minister, by one of his subordinates alleged to be a member of the so-called G-7.

Sixth, the police are supposed to be the guardian of law. But in fact, the impression is they twist and break the law. Law does not permit torturing a captive. But police did it to Rubel defiantly declared and devastatingly. When asked, after the killing of Rubel, why police beat him so severely, a police officer had the audacity to reply: 'We have to do something to obtain confession'. In fact, this 'something' has accounted for the death (killing) of at least 179 persons in police custody since 1991 according to a report of coordinating council of Human Rights Organisations.

Curiously enough, when AC Akram, the chief accused of the Rubel murder case, is placed in police custody he is served, as a wide section of the press narates, with dainty dishes, cosy bed and his health and welfare are anxiously queried about by many of the so-called guardians of law. This is how law is playfully twisted and torn.

The episodes of police disorder, disarray, degeneration and public persecution, are too vast to be unfolded fractionally. In fact, the police may be light years away from 'people's police'. But the question is who in other areas is acting in a perfect symphony with the people's heart? It may sound cynical but the plain, unvarnished and harder truth is that every section appears absolutely dead to its own interests. Each one is in a maddening haste for self-aggrandisement that cannot be achieved without the cost of the people.

Being selfish prohibits being people's. The police is not to blame alone. But that a greater blame may lie with the police cannot possibly be denied at this moment.

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The Lessons of Nairobi and Dar es Salaam

The bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam point to a 21st century in which orthodox war between states is replaced by proxy terrorist attacks that kill indiscriminately. Nowhere is now safe from this sudden slaughter. And so far, reports Gemini News Service, the record for tracking down international terrorists is not encouraging. Derek Ingram writes from London

IN the early 1960s, when I called on Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru for an interview I drove up to the front door of his house in New Delhi in an ordinary taxi. Afterwards he stood on the steps to see me off. There was just one policeman on the gate.

Two or three years later, I sat in the front garden of his successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri, and had tea with him and his wife. We were in full view of the main road less than 50 yards away. Again, one policeman on the gate.

It was another world. In those days, political terrorism and bombings, such as we have just seen in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, were almost unknown in many countries, although the occasional assassination and other isolated incidents of political violence took place, as had happened throughout history.

These days, sudden outbreaks of terrorism are commonplace. They are becoming a replacement for international wars, much less wasteful of human life, but terrifying in their suddenness and indiscriminate nature.

The 20th century has seen a terrible culmination of warfare between states, with two world wars that cost about 65 million lives and hundreds of smaller conflicts.

But in the last two decades, direct wars between nations have virtually come to an end. What may prove to be the last great war of this type was the Iran-Iraq conflict of 1980-88 which took about a million lives.

Now almost all wars are civil or ethnic conflicts such as in Chechnya, Sudan, Afghanistan or Kosovo. Wars between states still threaten from time to time — in South America, for example — but they seem less and less likely to develop. In Europe today that type of war is becoming unthinkable. The most talked about possibility, a third war between India and Pakistan, is increasingly unlikely. The two countries will be more hesitant about going to war now that each has a nuclear capability.

The deterrent effect that arguably prevented the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union from ever becoming a hot war has now come into play in South Asia.

In these circumstances, factions and countries are turning to terrorism, mostly by bomb but also increasingly by assassination. The killings of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and later her son, Rajiv, were both the result of ethnic conflict.

Quarrels in the Middle East are being fought out these days by factions using terrorism in third countries. The weapons are becoming more lethal and sophisticated but the total number of casualties is tiny compared with those resulting from wars between states.

This is no comfort to the victims. It is even less comfort to the victims that they are often total innocents living in countries that have nothing to do with conflict.

Terrorism leads to the death and injury of few of the people who are employed to

fight: the armed forces. The bulk of the victims are ordinary people totally uninvolved in the terrorists' causes. Until the 20th century, comparatively few civilians were directly killed by war between states, although they often suffered severely from its consequences — hunger, disease and poverty.

Wars are events happening hundreds or even thousands of miles away and fought by paid armies with which they made no contact unless friends or relatives were involved. The advent of flying changed all that, bringing mass death to great towns and cities like Guernica, Dresden, Warsaw, London. The civilians began to do the dying. Now, in the age of terrorism they, not the soldiers, are mainly the victims.

The prospect ahead is grim insofar as acts of terrorism are now likely to occur more frequently and in just about any part of the world. Stamping out this activity, despite the most sophisticated methods of detection, is tough.

Modern terrorism is a form of global guerrilla war — a type of warfare that has always been the most difficult to combat. You never know where the enemy is going to strike next.

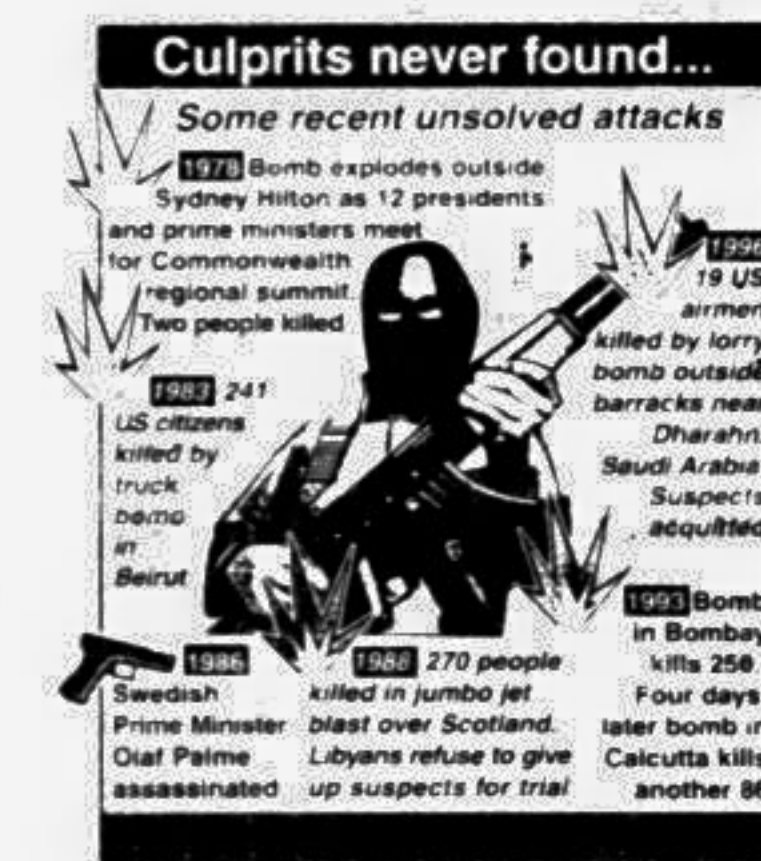
Dar es Salaam is one of the world's most tranquil capitals, the last place where anyone would expect to find a giant car bomb. The shock to the local people is difficult to imagine.

The record for tracking down international terrorists is not so far encouraging. Car bombers are particularly difficult to identify. Often the perpetrators are prepared to blow themselves up with the hundreds of others.

Many of the most serious outrages in recent years remain a mystery. In some cases, even the area from which the attack originates has never been identified.

Today, if you visit the home of the prime minister of India, or any other prime minister for that matter, you have to pass through several security gates equipped with metal detectors, X-rays and video cameras and be frisked, tagged, and maybe have your passport held. Your taxi must part far away.

In the circumstances, all this has to happen. But the price can be high in terms of relations between those who govern and the people they are supposed to represent. Instead of leaders becoming closer to the people, terrorism is in danger of forcing leaders into increased isolation.



— Gemini News Service
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To the Editor

A rose is a rose ...

Sir, A satellite imaging station is being set up in CHIT for the proper development of the hill peoples' natural resources above and below the land; in continuation of the electronic chain (eyes and ears) working along the Himalayan wall for some years. Formerly we had in Dhaka a Landsat station; now the name of the unit has been changed.

I have a map of Bengal showing new islands being born under the water surface, the bug-infected Sunderbans trees, and the geological features (the map is not classified). A spy satellite could pick up these details; formerly the number plate of a car at the door step of a home could be read from thousands of miles above.

One lack of information is puzzling: this hi-tech bird can't indicate whether we have OIL Unbelievable. To reduce political tension, why not commit, yes or no (subject to physical verification). We are 'floating on gas, speculating on oil, sipping on politics, and stumbling on heartbeats. This is no slippery diplomacy, but energy options plus huge HR is a bit unnerving even for the big powers. Bangla Jadoo seems to be working! Minister Janab Tofael

is honest and blunt (DS Aug 4).

A Citizen
Dhaka

A black law

Sir, I appreciate all the reports and the editorial published in the DS regarding the Rubel murder case.

We wonder how a black law like Section 54 still exists in Bangladesh. We all know absolute power corrupts absolutely and when a junior police officer is given so much of power, no one could expect him to use it with reason and restraint. It is a shame that the top police authorities could not check any of the past incidents even in Dhaka. How could they do it in the countryside where police atrocities go totally unchallenged? Then what are the senior officials for? Just to get the share of the booty? The IG could entrust a senior executive to check what is going on in thanas everyday. The OCs could also be compelled to report every operation before and after starting it.

They know they can ensure proper use of law but they don't care. And they can be made to care only if the government takes drastic — apparently un-

believable but real — action against the top notches. Nothing but exemplary punishments can deter the criminals, be they in uniform or without. Meanwhile DB which has proved to be only a corrupt money-making organisation should be dissolved and all special powers including those under Section 54 may be withdrawn. No interrogation by any agency should be allowed without prior permission of the court and without a lawyer and magistrate present during such interrogation.

F Ahmed
S Bank Bhawan
Minto Rd, Dhaka

Darkness in AGB colony

Sir, We are the government allottee of the flats of E-type building No.12,13,14 & 15 at the Motijheel AGB Colony in Dhaka. The colony has recently been street-lighted with sodium lights and some pockets with tube lights.

It is learnt that the work has been completed by the contractors of Dhaka Municipal Corporation under the guidance of the Ward Commissioner. There

are about 40 families living in the above and adjoining flats and in front of above buildings, there are street-light posts. These posts had earlier been lighted with tube/bulb occasionally.

We were happy to see that the area was being decorated with sodium bulbs. Almost the entire area has since been decorated but the light posts of only the above buildings have not been fitted neither with sodium nor with tube bulbs.

As a result, at night the entire area plunges into darkness and that encourages the anti-social elements to do their jobs. Most of the officials in the ranks of Dy. Joint and Addl. Secretaries live in these buildings. After dusk and throughout the night we are to remain confined in the house. Even the guests cannot come in the darkness, whereas other portion of AGB colony remains lighted.

We tried to contact the authority concerned, but failed. We therefore fervently urge the Mayor of Dhaka to city look into the matter as to why we are not given the same facility.

Ansaruddin Ahmed
B-15/E-4, Motijheel AGB Colony
Dhaka-1000

Cobbling an Alternative Coalition?

Pallab Bhattacharya writes from New Delhi

Jayalalitha rejected the new scheme evolved by the Vajpayee government, insisted on implementing the 1991 scheme and threatened to review support to the BJP-led ruling coalition if this was not done.

THE political scene in India is once again buzzing with speculations about the longevity of Bharatiya Janata Party-led government at the centre following a fresh threat by its key ally from Tamilnadu state All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) to withdraw support.

The threat by AIADMK came as BJP and AIADMK were embroiled in a row over an accord brokered by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on an interim arrangement for sharing of the water of Cauvery, a major river of India, by four southern Indian states.

The Vajpayee government worked out the scheme for implementing the interim arrangement on water-sharing between Tamilnadu, Karnataka, Kerala and Pondicherry following a directive from the Supreme Court.

An earlier scheme prepared in 1991 and run into rough weather following strong opposition to it by Karnataka. Jayalalitha rejected the new scheme evolved by the Vajpayee government, insisted on implementing the 1991 scheme and threatened to review support to the BJP-led ruling coalition if this was not done.

Her contention is that the new scheme 'goes against' the interests of Tamilnadu but Jayalalitha, arch political rival and Tamilnadu Chief Minister M Karunanidhi, who along with the Chief Ministers of Karnataka, Kerala and Pondicherry accepted the scheme worked out by Vajpayee government, refuted the charge.

The scheme brokered by Vajpayee ended a decade-old dispute but BJP soon earned the wrath and threat from AIADMK.

The Prime Minister's emissaries George Fernandes, Defence Minister, and Pramod Mahajan, BJP General Secretary, rushed to Madras and met Jayalalitha seeking to mollify her.

Whether or not they succeeded in winning her back, a meeting of AIADMK and its allies in Tamilnadu on August 13 refrained from withdrawing support or pulling out of the Vajpayee ministry but at the same time authorised the AIADMK supreme to 'take an appropriate decision at an appropriate time'.

While AIADMK not taking any decision on withdrawal of support has given BJP and Vajpayee government a breather, sources in BJP feel it could be a temporary one. BJP's anxieties stem from possible implications couched in the phrases 'appropriate decision' at an appropriate time.

BJP now seems resigned to face possible withdrawal of support by AIADMK and its allies which have 20 members in a delicately-balanced arithmetic in Lok Sabha (lower house of Indian parliament), if party general secretary Venkaiah Naidu's remarks on August 15 were any indication.

'We are prepared to face any eventuality,' he said soon after news came from Madras that AIADMK was not after all pulling the rug from Vajpayee government.

OPINION

The Diplomacy of Oil Lubrication

A Zabr

The civil war in Afghanistan is not of local origin. Foreign vested interests are interested in the country, as the gateway between central Asia and the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean (control of global economy, speaking generally). The country's infrastructure and economy are too weak to sustain the local strife for more than a decade.

The problem is lubrication, and the goal appears to be oil, helped by a long fuel pipeline to tap the untapped resources in the regions around. Far away Bangladesh is also involved, indirectly, peacefully and silently, if local press reports are to be believed that a giant US oil company has the ambitious plan in visualizing the world's longest fuel line between S/SE Asia (Bay of Bengal) and the CIS region of closed seas, Caspian, Black or Aral.

The alternative pipe route is through Iran, as seen by the US investors via the recent slant in US foreign policy (the USA lost the football match to Iran in the WC98); and the Iranian interest in Afghanistan. Uncle Sam is oil-prone to energy and lubrication, and Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh are feeling the slippery pressure. The ends have not to be tied up, but the middle is loose.

Hence it looks like that the Indo-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir has to be resolved diplomatically, as neither side can now afford even a conventional war, without taking the precarious economy to the point of no-return. Till then the second alternative is to branch the pipeline to the Arabian Sea through Pakistan. The first stage of the master project appears to be under way, as huge new port is being built in the western coast of Pakistan by the Americans, resulting in sharp questions in the press.

Therefore the long pipe of friendship has to travel across the South Asian peninsula filled with juice and harmony. The trans-Asian rail and road projects through these regions are also being seriously revived, with some members from ASEAN and SAARC forming another sub-group (BIMSTEC) to improve the physical infrastructure between the two regions, and reduce the communication gaps independent of language, culture and ideology. Perhaps the SARRC members need a catalyst with a long pole or pipe to bring the whole system to click with empathy.

Apparently unmindful of the pressure from AIADMK, BJP termed the accord on interim arrangement on Cauvery water-sharing as a 'major victory' for Vajpayee government. BJP leaders pointed out that the 'success' lies in bringing the four southern states Tamilnadu, Karnataka, Kerala and Pondicherry, which are ruled by parties traditionally opposed to BJP, into accepting something worked out by the BJP-led government.

The BJP leadership is still hopeful that AIADMK-Left Front would 'see reason' and give up her opposition to the water-sharing scheme. At the same time, BJP strategists are reportedly exploring how to neutralize the deficit of support of 20 MPs belonging to AIADMK in the event of withdrawal of support.

Even if BJP manages to get outside support of DMK's seven MPs — DMK has been of late showing signs of trying to reach out to BJP — the Vajpayee government still has a long way to go to ensure its survival.

Even as BJP continues to do firefighting with some of its allies especially with AIADMK, Congress President Sonia Gandhi hinted more than once that her party should be ready to for forming an alternative government in the event of collapse of Vajpayee ministry.

She, of course, remarked in an exquisite manner with the obvious intention of not to give any impression that Congress is hankering for power.

Besides, Sonia Gandhi, according to highly-placed Congress sources, is also a 'little wary' of the other opposition groups which are now egging Congress to take the initiative to form an alternative government because she knows the same parties could be 'difficult customers' in a new coalition set-up through 'tough' demands.

Sonia Gandhi's 'cautious' approach towards the idea of an alternative government appears to have the endorsement of a majority of senior Congress leaders. Congress sources said the party leadership has decided not to respond, at least for the time-being, to repeated calls by Samajwadi Party and Rashtriya Janata Dal leaders Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav to take the initiative to pull down the Vajpayee ministry and form an alternative government.

Besides, Congress is aware that there exists hostility among the parties which would like to back a Congress-led government. For instance, Janata Dal has openly come out against the presence of Mulayam Singh and Laloo Prasad Yadav in a possible Congress-led coalition ministry.

Rather, the Congress' present strategy appears to be: (1) to allow the BJP-led coalition fall under the impact of 'contingencies' among its constituents; (2) allow the anti-establishment feelings among non-committed voters to fester and disenchantment in BJP's vote-bank and (3) use all this time to try and resolve differences among anti-BJP forces by the time an alternative coalition is cobbled.