

Depoliticise the TUs

Our society, lorded over more politically than can be good for it, is a behemoth deaf and blind and heedless not words of caution and wisdom.

On Monday President Shahabuddin spoke at a seminar on grooming managers for the new century. He said industrial management gave way to anarchy as early as in the first years of independence.

The President on this occasion ambled to new ground when he took up the case of trade unions and CBAs. Together with ridding industrial management, education and financing, appointment and transfer and promotion completely of partisan political influence, he called for depoliticising trade unions and CBAs.

This must change. But Shahabuddin says not through banning trade unionism. That can't be done. Trade unions must become trade unions and not lackeys of this or that political party.

IT Holds the Answer

The headline of a front page item in yesterday's Daily Star summed up the message: The time is more than ripe for Bangladesh to plan and push if she is really looking for inspiration from the Information Technology (IT) sector for its fragile economy.

This is essentially the age of information technology and we are at the threshold of IT consciousness. To its credit the government has showed a commendable alacrity in recognising its responsibilities.

IT is one sector that really holds promise for a resource-constrained country like Bangladesh. Unlike other fields it does not require great economic strength or status to steal a march over others.

Stormy Build-up

Iran was planning a military exercise with 70,000 soldiers along her eastern border with Afghanistan. The proposed show of strength has not been conceived with an eye to any 'confrontation' with the Taliban.

There is a Shia-Sunni angle to such a patently confrontationalist outlook. On an extended plane, conflict of interests simmers between Iran and Pakistan with the latter being widely viewed as materially backing the fundamentalist Taliban cause for quite some time now.

That region is really hotting up calling for powerfully mandated mediation efforts to end the suicidal divisiveness in Afghanistan.

Russia Needs Bold Leadership

Amid growing demands for Yeltsin's resignation, the government hastily concluded an agreement with the Communist bloc in Russia's lower house of parliament, the State Duma. Under this agreement, Yeltsin agreed to give up portions of the almost-dictatorial powers of the Russian presidency.

In control of his fate. The fact that he had been forced to at least negotiate some of his powers with the Communist-dominated parliament only goes to further this view.

The deflationary pressures that were seen last year in Asia is, in large part, responsible for Russia's economic woes.

Last week, Russia's central bank, with a depleted foreign exchange reserve, abandoned its defense of the rouble and announced a three month payment moratorium on debt owed to foreigners.

The banks have for years gambled heavily on short-term domestic debt that is now in default. Nervous depositors are lining up to withdraw their money, leaving the banks scrambling to find a way out of this liquidity crunch.

With a view to balance the interest of foreign investors with its own need for cash and political support, the Chernomyrdin government announced the terms of a \$40 billion debt restructuring plan.

Under this plan, holders of Russian bonds maturing by the end of next year will be able to trade in their bonds for a number of new securities, all of which mature much later and yield less.

The announcement has led to a sense of disappointment among foreign investors, who hold more than \$11 billion of these bonds, as many of them will suffer substantial losses.

The situation in Russia would definitely add a little more deflationary pressure to the western economies, although I do not see any chance

for these economies to fall into recession. The market fundamentals in most of these countries are good. However, it is possible that if investors in these countries panic, their fears can lead to an economic decline.

A particularly frightening aspect to the financial crisis that has pounced on Russia is the passivity of the Russian and the world leaders in the face of it.

Any concrete decision taken by Chernomyrdin would affect three interest groups: foreign investors, who want to cut their losses; Russia's vulnerable banks, suffering a liquidity crunch; and ordinary Russians, who already are hit by a rouble devaluation and non-payment of arrears wages.

Admittedly, Chernomyrdin faces a political problem that is as big as Russia itself. He has to somehow mollify diverse and powerful interests: Communists who dominate the Russian

parliament; Russia's financial leaders; foreign lenders including the IMF; and Russia's own economic reformers.

Equally dismal and dangerous has been the absence of leadership from the world leaders, especially the G-7 leaders. They seem baffled by developments in Russia.

Later this week, Clinton is scheduled to have a summit meeting with Yeltsin. Both leaders are fighting for their political life. It is unlikely that any bold step to face the economic crisis would come out from this meeting.

Chernomyrdin tried to sound upbeat about all this week, saying that the situation in the country is difficult but manageable. He claimed to have a plan to rescue the economy, but until now he has provided no specifics.

Long term financial health for Russia, or any other country, requires sound economic policies combined with strict, consistent enforcement of banking and other laws.



Connecting the Dots

Dr. A. R. Chowdhury

We Need to be More Than Sorry or Sentimental

by Dr. M. Zakir Husain

Endless seminars, processions, parades in defence of civil liberties are short-lived agitation. Action speaks louder than intentions. In the short or immediate term, there is very good reason to set up well trained and capable squads of neighbourhood vigilantes to deal a deterrent blow to the social outlaws and obscurantist adventurers.

THE Bangladesh Television (BTV) recently aired a short programme on the subject of harassment and cruelty against females in this country. It was heartening to hear young students interviewed saying clearly what they thought of the causes and remedies.

Women and girls are often subjected to cruel and harsh treatment. Cultural, social, and religious beliefs and norms often support these practices. Preference for male children, neglect of girls' and women's education and health, restriction of their movement and of access to various services—all of these have a cumulative effect putting females at a disadvantage and keeping them weak and vulnerable.

Violence against women and children should be dealt a very firm and determined response. The State as well as the civil society must send unmistakably clear signals against all forms of social crime, but particularly crime against women and children. Pious protests without tangible action will prove futile.

Let us explore the possibilities of securing foreign assistance to help develop our country. There is no dearth of honest people and experts here. As soon as law and order improve it will make a new horizon of development and progress.

May Allah bless us with his gifts of vision and courage to create a better Bangladesh for the present and future generations.

Abul Ashraf Noor house #9, Road #4 Sector #5, Uttara Dhaka-1230

Water pollution Sir, The sewerage system of Khilgaon and its adjacent areas has completely collapsed due to clogging of the underground pipes.

Thanks Mr. Kabir Sir, The wonderful letter from Mr O.H. Kabir published in the DS on 22 August, '98 is a unique reflection of his deep love for the country. It has drawn my attention to an urgency for regeneration through purging by means of elimination of corrupt and dishonest people who are close to power.

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adventurers. Swift and sure retribution will demonstrate civil society's uncompromising and unmistakable will to act.

Yes, some may fear it will create a parallel law enforcing mechanism which could clash with existing agency. It could also create new forms of tyranny. To some it may even sound as a dangerous step. But the present confidence in police system being what it is—and seemingly for good reason—there is enough of security gap in public life that cannot be ignored.

But what else in the short term? The search for the best is often the enemy of the pragmatic course. A disease as malignant as this one indeed needs strong medicine, strong enough to deter. The risks are calculated and confining while benefits are within grasp and almost immediate. Of course, such voluntary groups of neighbourhood security must be kept well above party and parochial affiliations but introduced only with participation and acceptance of people in neighbourhoods they protect.

Civil society in Bangladesh is not the monopoly of few intellectuals only. Grassroots representative groups are also parts of the civil society; they

need to be vocal but also need to be empowered such that they compensate the lack of capacity of the individual to act in defence of her/his civil freedom and security of life and limb. Well intentioned debates and deliberations will be of little consequence and give no tangible result.

A clear expression of the will to act from the civil society is required while the State prepares adequate interventions to redeem its pledges for public security and rule of law. Murder in police custody, rape of women in offices, dowry related murder of women are no ordinary or isolated events. These should evoke serious attention by established government; noted and acted upon by the cabinet of Ministers, and decisions effectively and publicly implemented. Where is the public accountability of law enforcing agencies which are maintained at public expense? All civil servants are paid from public money at taxpayers' expense; rather than being accountable to the public the State officials seem to hold the members of the public hostage to arbitrary threats and punishments. This is a travesty of good governance and public accountability.

People of Bangladesh is general and the young and educated in particular inherit a largely secular tradition. That is a big asset. The lines of class and caste distinction are either very thin or do not exist; society is largely imbued with egalitarian ethos though there is a certain divide between the educated and the illiterate. But there has been a seductive propagandist intolerance especially among the youth and keeps the poor and weak under a spell of ignorance of their rights. But time and again, the people have generally shown little following of obscurantism and scant support to the neo fascist groups.

But seek to keep the women and the weak under bondage. The militancy of these forces must, when needed, be met with State power. But that may not be adequate or universally available. The civil society can, and should not fail to send a very strong message to the delinquents, deviants and decadent streak that plague the society. The civil society must respond with effective mechanisms to secure civic freedom and security especially for the women and the weaker sections. At the same time, it will be necessary to wrest the initiative away from those who are in fact accomplices to social crimes and expose their misdeeds.

Crime against women is a symptom of an underlying social morbidity. Thus, some long term structural remedies are necessary to strike at the root of this disease. Female education and employment of females in greater numbers will reduce excessive dependence of women on men and raise the status of women; glorification of women in literature and folk lore will not be allowed as a ploy to keep them subjugated in the name of physical or cultural traditions. Social security of women has to be ensured by vigilance and cultural; education.

Women in Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar feel safe and secure on the street, in bus and work place unlike their sisters in Bangladesh. That is the

chartered engineer of Australia. I don't think it is a difficult problem to be solved. It can be done in few days. All it needs to recognize the problem, find the solution and execute the decision.

I just cannot believe there could have such sufferings as my mother going through in the 21st century because of the negligence of some officials. I wonder what part of the earth we are living in where people's welfare are not considered. My mother would have expected better living conditions under the present leadership.

Sunset rule: Male oppression? Sir, I would like to thank you for your timely editorial on the recent happenings of JU. You have rightly pointed out that JU authorities in the past have not been able to stand by the grievances of their students. I also appreciate one of your comments that read, "...sorting to measures like the imposition of the sunset rule will amount to diverting attention from the principal crime". In this connection I would like to put forward another dimension. That is, it has been many times that JU authorities have resorted to such heinous measures whenever a problem occurred, be it a rape, kidnap, physical or verbal abuse.

It not only diverted attention but also justified such crimes by personifying the victim's personal or moral conduct. What I would like to mention here precisely is that imposition of sunset rule has been a politics of authority and there is no reason to believe that these institutional measures were innocent by nature. Rather I would like to put it this way that this is one character of institutional sexism/male oppression of which we often don't have a good insight.

Smuggled sugar Sir, In order to meet country's shortfall of sugar, about two lakh tons are smuggled into the country from India through the border. Despite being a food item it is smuggled by hiding inside railway toilets and under passenger seats etc. This consumable item smuggled sugar is

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transported in the most unhygienic way where every possibility of contamination by the germs of various diseases exist which is undoubtedly a serious health hazards for the consumers.

At present about two lakh tons of sugar is imported by Sugar Corporation by paying highest tariff rate (80% approx). Although all concerned are well aware of smuggling of Indian sugar, no step has been taken to curb it. If four lakh tons is allowed to import and the present tariff is reduced to 50 per cent it is possible to fix the retail price of imported sugar between Tk 22-24 per kg. Since price is the only factor of smuggling sugar, the above measure will certainly stop it.

TV weather reports Sir, The Met Office is not feeding (via fax) the BTV properly on the daily news and graphics (the latter are not difficult to produce with the help of computer).

As a viewer I would like the following information: i) a Sat map of the country showing the weather pattern, clouds, and the fronts (as seen on the BBC; Dhaka has several sat images available); ii) areas of heavy rainfall during the last 24 hours (only the forecast is broadcast); iii) the changing flooded areas (shaded); iv) high river water marks of the important rivers (going up or down). Graphics are easy to visualise. Make the presentation easier for the viewers, where the means are available.

The Flood Control department can coordinate with the Met Office to present an integrated picture to the public (at present bureaucratic gaps). There is always lack of integration in news from the government departments.

A Zabr Dhaka

Simon Mahmud Department of Anthropology, JU

Bold Clinton and Beautiful Monica Sir, Illegal sexual relationship, nudity, strip-tease, lesbianism, prostitution and abortion are trifling and frivolous matters and day-to-day affairs in Europe and America.

We cannot blame US President Bill Clinton's single-handedly for his inappropriate physical relationship with Monica Lewinsky.

But we strongly feel that the great office of the President of the United States of America does not deserve such fit and justify it. Rather the US presidency should detect, loathe and hate such immoral acts.

President Bill Clinton may have boldly spoken the truth, admitted his guilt and sought an apology for the wrong he has done but for the sake of splendour and colossal fame, fame, image, honour and prestige which the United States enjoys worldwide President Bill Clinton should do more to erase the black spot which he has created on the US presidency and save the people of the United States from shame and disgrace.

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

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