

Foreign Tours

It has been quite a competition. Twenty-five ministers spent 832 days abroad in 1996-97. Against this 27 secretaries to government were away on foreign trips for 877 days. The figures give the secretaries a slight edge. Their per capita foreign travelling comes to about 33.73 days whereas their bosses could tally up a per capita of 33.28. It is expected that both these categories of important persons did their foreign outings on true official business and compelled only by the interests of the nation. At the same time it would be inordinately interesting to compare these figures with corresponding statistics of, say, Sri Lanka or Thailand or Kenya or Tanzania, not to say anything about Ecuador or Chile.

Hopefully we are applying selectivity in attending meetings abroad specially when we have state presence in virtually all the nations of the world, unlike say, New Zealand, Poland, the Czech and Slovak Republics and the eminent state of South Africa.

Suppose one is away for 80 days. Add to this 104 days of week-ending. And then earned leave 30 days, casual 15, holidays 13, medical 10 etc — what are we left with? He or she could be found at the office desk for about a hundred days in a year. The overlaps can add 50 days to it at the best. A prudent state would know that such a one is expensive for an impoverished nation.

Our foreign minister is needed abroad for the good of the feuding nations of the world. The same is the case with our foreign secretary. Holbrooke spends more time outside US without holding corresponding job. They could perhaps economise on the state expenses by running their diplomatic offices suitably abroad. But here is a queer information: why did the Secretary for LGRD and Cooperatives have to stay abroad for long long 94 days? Matia Chowdhury, the taskmaster, allowed herself 26 days of foreign touring and let her secretary beat her by staying abroad double that time — 53 days.

Thanks to Communication Minister Anwar Hossain for not thinking that he was there to commute between Dhaka and foreign capitals, logging only 12 days. He was beaten by the 9 days of foreign travelling by Education Minister Sadeque. Congratulations.

One of the major components of the government's austerity drive following the floods is the potential for saving by cutting back foreign trips. Most people hope this will be done.

Elections Hold the Answer

The government has apparently failed to convince the PCJSS to change its mind on the interim Regional Council which the latter had rejected on a matter of detail rather than principle. Out of six Bengali settlers the government named for the council three have not been looked kindly on by the PCJSS. In fact, they claim that the government has ignored the three Bengali names they had originally recommended for inclusion. The 16 tribal names suggested by the government which is of relevance here in terms of the CHT peace accord has otherwise found favour with the Parbatya Chhattagram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS). So, the stand-off seems overstretched on a minor point of discord. Anyway, the dialogue is continuing and, hopefully, the differences would be bridged at an early date.

Our reaction to the still unfolding episode is two-some. First of all, what we find considerably worrying is the return of the 'raise-new-issues' syndrome we had seen occurring prior to the signing of the peace accord. At issue here is exercise of autonomy through an interim regional council between now and the hill district council elections to be held later on; but look at how the moot-points are on the increase with new agenda being pressed for discussion at every turn of events! For instance, the PCJSS has again brought up the incongruities in the Rangamati District Council Bill, 1998 and the issues relating to appointment of tribal chiefs, withdrawal of army camps and rehabilitation of settlers by the task force constituted for the purpose. Our point is, these are precisely the issues that should be raised at the RC for resolution. Rather than losing breath on a multiplicity of issues we should concentrate on doing the first things first.

Kalparanjan Chakma has spoken for the government saying that they are looking for alternatives to go round the PCJSS' rejection of the interim council as nominated by government. The best alternative, to our mind, is holding the hill district council elections early, so that, in turn, we have an elected Regional Council. That will put all the controversies to rest.

Aberrant Teacher

Must we, need we call the fellow a professor even after finding him giving irrationally high marks to quite undeserving students — for money — as long ago as four years? What else did he do? There are charges that he sold question papers and allowed examinees to write answer scripts sitting at his residence and took money from his students for bestowing many other benefits on them. All this was so terribly unteacher like.

We are not quite new to teachers at school and college levels stooping to commit offences ranging from leaking out questions to helping examinees in the halls. But that stopped there. Recently, however, some teachers at the higher level too were alleged to have been leaking questions in admission tests. We should have known from then on that some morally weak persons were finding their way into the university.

The DU has done well not to suppress the case. It went for the punishment at the risk of endangering its reputation. It requires guts and speaks of laudable abidance by probity. In keeping with the good job the university should delve further into safeguarding the academic integrity of the highest seat of learning.

This is possibly the first incident of this kind to happen at DU or any other university in the country. The universities should be on an appropriate alert from now on.

Is NATO Serious to "Bite" Instead of "Bark" at Milosevic?

by Barrister Harun ur Rashid

The strike is likely to strengthen the authoritarian rule of President Milosevic in Yugoslavia and whatever opposition exists within the country is likely to be ruthlessly suppressed. President Milosevic will gain a great political leverage out of this air attack. For these reasons, Mr. Holbrooke is still in Yugoslavia to clinch a deal with President Milosevic.

cept the demands of the UN Security Council to end the crisis in Kosovo. Only Russia appears to be against the NATO attack as Serbs are Russia's traditional allies. NATO leaders have said that they do not require any more authorisation from the UN to launch their attacks which is being contested by Russia. NATO leaders made it abundantly clear that NATO is prepared to attack Yugoslavia disregarding Russia's views. NATO has 430 aircraft, 60 per cent of them from the US appears to be ready to strike against Yugoslavia. US Defence Secretary said that the attack could include "cruise missiles" as well. The US's contribution to the strike force included 260 aircraft, about half of them carrier borne F-14 and land based F-15 and F-16 fighters

and fighter-bombers. B-52 bombers have already reached Britain. NATO military chiefs requested permission from neighbouring countries to allow military use of their airspace to launch strikes into Yugoslavia (Serbia). With NATO countries moving closer to military action it was reported that Russia stepped up its opposition, warning that it might break the UN embargo on providing weapons to Yugoslavia. Russian leaders warned of "dire consequences" if NATO attacked. It is reported that the major obstacle to an agreement with the Yugoslav President was the UN's insistence on "credible verification" of any commitment by Yugoslavia to the withdrawal of security forces from Kosovo and implementation of peace and humanitarian ini-

tiatives. Mr. Holbrooke is reported to be insisting that part of the settlement had to be the stationing of a monitoring force in Kosovo to ensure that President Milosevic kept his word. Mr. Milosevic is reported to have rejected any NATO presence on Serbian soil. NATO faces a dilemma. The threats of NATO strikes have resulted in the strengthening rather than weakening the control of President Milosevic. This is not what NATO wants. Even President Milosevic's political opponents within the country are against the NATO air strikes as they believe that the attack will be a serious setback to the democratic process in Serbia. President Milosevic has reported to have whipped up an atmosphere of victimisation that turned his nationals in his

favour. He has been playing his political card very well on the Kosovo situation. On the other hand, if NATO remains idle in the situation of humanitarian disaster taking place at its door, its credibility together with that of the UN will be in question. It could be perceived as the policy appeasement towards the regime of President Milosevic who could get away from the unacceptable situation as viewed by the UN in Kosovo. It appears that NATO is hesitant to attack Yugoslavia primarily for several reasons. First, Russia's opposition may lead to its non-cooperative attitude in the Security Council where Russia could veto resolutions sponsored by the West against Iraq, Libya and "other rogue countries". Secondly, the air attacks would not resolve

the problem because the Kosovo Liberation Army does not appear to support the autonomy of Kosovo and they want full independence which NATO does not endorse at this point of time. Third, there could be casualties on NATO side and no political leader in the West would like to see a situation involving the death of young military personnel. Finally, it is likely to strengthen the authoritarian rule of President Milosevic in Yugoslavia and whatever opposition exists within the country is likely to be ruthlessly suppressed. President Milosevic will gain a great political leverage out of this air attack. For these reasons, Mr. Holbrooke is still in Yugoslavia to clinch a deal with President Milosevic. On the other hand some political analysts believe that Yugoslavia may end in civil war after NATO attacks and President Milosevic will be unable to lead his country from its plight. NATO is weighing the pros and cons of the situation and the world is watching with great interest as the deadline for air strike approaches.

The writer is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN in Geneva.

Letter From America

Leave Taslima Nasreen Alone

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

Every society lives within a set of written and unwritten rules. Bangladesh too has rules that govern the society. One of them is that you do not criticise religion in public. That is where, I believe, Ms Nasreen erred... Nevertheless, if Taslima Nasreen committed a sin, it is between her and her maker. It is not for one human being to punish the spiritual indiscretions of another.

M S. Taslima Nasreen's controversial views are well known. That, however, does not warrant an arrest, much less a death sentence. Ms Nasreen is bound by the laws of Bangladesh — and protected by them. The government should honour her request, and offer her protection from those who want to take the law into their hands and harm her. Just because some people are irate and have taken to the streets because Ms Nasreen has been allowed to return home, does not mean that the laws of the land have to be bent to accommodate their anger. Laws apply dispassionately — to livid citizens, as well as to placid ones.

If there is anything worse than the ignorant protesters calling for Ms Nasreen's head, it is the appeal of the sacrosanct foreign human rights activists. Where were these people when thousands of Muslim men, women and children were being massacred in Kosovo? They have the gall to lecture our elected Prime Minister on what she should do, yet, I did not see their "open letter" to President Clinton on behalf of the innocent Kosovars. Where were they when one hundred thousand Iraqi civilians were massacred during Gulf War, and where are they now when many more continue to be killed everyday due to UN sanctions? Is freedom of speech of one more important to these people than freedom to life of millions?

Every society lives within a set of written and unwritten rules. For instance, one never publicly makes jokes about the Holocaust or slavery in the West. If someone strays, believe me, the western human rights activists do not jump to the offender's aid.

On October 6, the European

Parliament okayed the German government's request to criminally prosecute Jean-Marie Le Pen, the far right French politician, for the crime of "belittling Holocaust". I am waiting tirelessly for years, with some success, to that effect. They are the real champions. Nevertheless, if Taslima Nasreen committed a sin, it is between her and her maker. It is not for one human being to punish the spiritual indiscretions of another.

The truly ignorant people are usually humble, because they are aware of their shortcomings. The truly enlightened people are humble too, because they realize how little they actually know. It is the haughty, arrogant, who believe they have all the answers, that cause the world all sorts of grief. Any student of language knows that Arabic, especially Quranic Arabic, is unique among languages. It is mathe-

matical, and the first language based on grammar. The holy Quran can never be translated; only humanly interpreted. A single word may require ten pages of interpretation. Many lifetimes have been spent trying to comprehend a fraction of the mystical book. The interpretations have hitherto been attempted mostly by men (some would say with a male-bias) in the United States very highly educated Muslim women are currently engaged in their own interpretation. If their interpretation of the holy Quran come closer to the truth, the true devotees of Islam should rejoice and embrace it. To make proclamations on the holy Quran based on guesses and half-knowledge, is really silly!

There is no temporal authority in Islam; therefore, the fatwas are innovations. Since no law in Bangladesh conflicts with the sharia, the truly religious person should not harbour any judicial grievance. Islam preaches governance in consultation with the people. Our people elected the present government to run the affairs of the state. If the government's actions are not up to the liking of the mullahs, they should try and get more of their people elected, to reflect their view. Currently, with so little popular backing, they are not entitled

to disproportionate influence. In this vein, let me quote from a piece I wrote in The New York Times on January 14, 1991, in support of Salman Rushdie, which is very relevant in the Taslima Nasreen's case. Under the caption "Rushdie Affair Gives Islam a Bad Name", the piece read:

"Whether or not Salman Rushdie intended it, his fatwa 'The Satanic Verses' deeply offended most devout Muslims who read it. In a dream sequence in the book, he indirectly questioned the validity of Islam, the authenticity of Islam's holy book, the Koran, and insulted prophet Mohammad and his companions. However, even at the height of the controversy, very few Muslims outside Iran demanded his death. The average Muslim would have forgiven Mr. Rushdie if he had retracted the offending passages and desisted from further circulation of the novel — conditions he has now met. Yet, it is not good enough for Iran, which has stated that regardless of what Mr. Rushdie does, the death sentence remains 'irreversible' (news article, Dec. 27).

This flies in the face of what we learn as Muslims: that God is off-forgiving, most merciful and that Islam is a tolerant religion. It is not for man to judge the spiritual content of another man; such matters are best left to God. After all, are we not all sinners? Salman Rushdie took great pains to explain that because he was not a believer to start with, he could not have committed apostasy. If we take his recent conversion to Islam at face value, this should be a joyous occasion for the Muslims. You do not welcome a new convert into your faith by sentencing him to death!

From the untouchables in India to the oppressed tribes in Africa, for centuries the persecuted masses. Conversion to Islam took place more by example of the faithful than by the power of the sword. Unfortunately, because of the Rushdie affair, to the rest of the world Islam is beginning to look like a religion that oppresses.

Unlike the Roman Catholic pope, there is no temporal authority or clergy in Islam. When a death sentence such as that on Mr. Rushdie is pronounced, it can have only an

individual's or a nation's backing; Islam does not sanction it. For such a decree to have moral force, the overwhelming majority of the world's Muslims have to agree to such a course. They do not. For them, the episode has been an embarrassing aberration. Perpetuating the Rushdie affair gives Islam a bad name.

Meanwhile, let us rejoice

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

Bill's Advice to Boris

Art Buchwald

It was the first meeting in Moscow between Boris Yeltsin and President Clinton. The ruble was lower than the Moscow subway.

Yeltsin said to the president, "I'm up to my ears in fiscal borsch. What do I tell my people?"

Clinton said, "Tell them the truth. They'll forgive anything if you tell them the truth."

"But my devaluation plan didn't work. The country is going broke."

"It doesn't matter as long as you level with your people. They expect you to make a few mistakes. After all, leaders of superpowers can screw up. But if you go on television and offer a mea culpa, they will say, 'Let's go on with it.'"

Yeltsin said, "What's a mea culpa?"

"You go on television and ask everyone, including God, to forgive you for your sins."

"Will it work?"

"It always works for me," Clinton said. "I had a problem recently, and I was being criticized for it. So I told the country I had made a slight mistake, and afterward everyone was glad I admitted to it."

"Will they forgive me for defaulting on my loans?"

"They forgave me when I said I had defaulted on personal matters, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief. In our country they like a president who is a straight shooter."

"Suppose I devalued the ruble, defaulted on my loans and had an affair with a ballet dancer in the Kremlin. Should I confess to all three?"

"Two out of three is enough. The Russian people don't want to hear all your mistakes."

Yeltsin was grateful. "I feel terrible about the ruble falling. At the beginning I denied that it had fallen. But then the evidence kept piling up, and I was sure people would not believe me. The Russians get upset about their rubles."

"You did the right thing, Boris. Never explain and never complain. Swearing on a stack of rubles usually works when all else fails."

"Will my confession help me in the polls?"

"It helped me. I was way down in the polls until I told the truth about Hurricane Bonnie on CNN."

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To the Editor...

Phonopollution

Sir, Phonopollution in the metropolitan city of Dhaka has been a matter of grave concern for all. The indiscriminate use of motor horns, microphones and music on record players here and there at high pitch has been creating a serious noise pollution. Noise levels especially in the main roads of the city are excessively high even in the early hours at night. Some experts are of opinion that the maximum level of noise in the roads should not be above 55 decibels. But the current level of noise in the city is ranging from 65 decibels to 100 decibels, which is quite alarming.

Phonopollution has the following harmful effects on our health:

- 1) High blood pressure; 2) Increased risk of heart attack; 3) Incurable damage to hearing; 4) Risk of liver cirrhosis; 5) Strain on eyes; and 6) Impairment of intellectual power.

Many of us are not fully aware of such health hazards caused by the noise pollution. Even the government agencies seem to be ignorant of its damaging effect. Surprisingly enough, Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC), one of our government organizations, is also in use of hydraulic horns for their city buses plying the roads. It is a well-known fact that the use of these kind of noisy horns is strictly prohibited. In spite of this prohibition how could BRTC and other private vehicles be in use of hydraulic horns?

Nitin Roy, Shantibagh, Dhaka

Port obstacle

Sir, In the aftermath of the recent flood that left trails of devastation in the country, one of the most momentous areas of our national efforts for the post-flood urgent need to stave off possible famine alongside the gigantic task of rehabilitation of the economy, will be the speed of unloading the ships at the Chittagong port and the quick systematic distribution of goods through the length and breadth of the country.

In this context smooth and unhindered work at the port is of prime importance. But we have been watching with growing concern that a section of people who call themselves leaders of the toiling workers in the port, obstructs any move for improvement, modernisation

and efficiency if they find that it will threaten their vested narrow coterie interest. They care two hoots for the national interest or emergency. The government has been tolerant and persuasive so far. But in a critical juncture of national crisis, who believe they have all the answers, that cause the world all sorts of grief.

Any student of language knows that Arabic, especially Quranic Arabic, is unique among languages. It is mathematical, and the first language based on grammar. The holy Quran can never be translated; only humanly interpreted. A single word may require ten pages of interpretation. Many lifetimes have been spent trying to comprehend a fraction of the mystical book. The interpretations have hitherto been attempted mostly by men (some would say with a male-bias) in the United States very highly educated Muslim women are currently engaged in their own interpretation. If their interpretation of the holy Quran come closer to the truth, the true devotees of Islam should rejoice and embrace it. To make proclamations on the holy Quran based on guesses and half-knowledge, is really silly!

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OPINION

The DNA of Politics

Alif Zabr

A private and individual sampling of drawing-room and outdoor opinions would reveal a startling view held by the majority of the people (at all levels): that the major solutions of a society's illnesses and weaknesses could be found politically, and by the politicians. The political leaders have been heaved upon a pedestal of public adulation, from which it is difficult to come down through the back stairs. This type of view is stronger in the developing and emerging countries where political culture is taking shape, is fluid, and passing through the teething period. Charisma thrives in the minds of the idealists, looking for Utopia.

In an environment of underdevelopment, the moral side is practically ignored, or treated with indifference, and accorded much lower priority in operating areas of public service (administration and governance). Politics is a very much exposed profession, hence the results or aberrations cannot be ignored, or swept under the mat (no carpet in the LDCs). It looms large in the lives of citizens, because statecraft is directed by the elected representatives of the people, who are politicians.

The politicians, once elected to power, seem (generally) to lose their bearing and background, and start misusing power, money and influence in exponential measure (a state of unbalance and euphoria). Even if it is not done openly, the modus operandi is obvious if monitored through the grapevines. This is an open secret which warrants no denial, even if repeated dozen of times. The politicians generally do not get the benefit of the doubt for a simple reason: if you can read a political leader's mind, he is just no good as a politician or as a leader. A politician does his tricks not with his palms, but with secret schemes up his sleeves. We have the optical illusion, but some use the aural delusion. Religious literature is full of the Word.

What is immoral or unethical politics, and how long could it survive? In any system, if the core is corrupted or contaminated, it would be detected during the processing stage, internally and externally; and the final result or output will bear some of the black marks of bypassing the eternal laws of nature. Politics has its own DNA, which self-destructs, or projects.

But the turbulent regimes in the affected countries (a good show case is Africa, where the African leaders have just met to set their houses in order and meet the other continents at peer level), saturated with power and the good and free things of life, start living in a world of disillusion, and soon come to grief. The lessons have not been learnt, because the successors, starting in a flourish of self-righteousness, are soon afflicted by the same virus, and the cycle continues till the purging is at a tolerable level. Then comes the spring buds of good governance. But poverty and a have-not environment, like Satan, weaken the power to resist evil and temptation, and the distribution of wealth assumes the shape of an inverted pear-shaped balloon, bulging at the top, and emaciated at the bottom (known as the poverty line). Global benevolence is beamed in this lowly world, where self-defence cannot be guaranteed, and the headlines run away with news of global aid to development plans. Those who run the system are assured of their commission or cut. Slim service charges are attractive, but not the blotted sloppers.

The real world is not idealistic; good and evil operate together, with the strong and the weak. How to come up from the bottomless basket? This energy (a huge amount) is destined to be delegated only to the top leaders of the society, with the major portion allocated to the politicians because they represent the people. The latter is a very convenient passport; something like James Bond's movie Licensed to Kill.

We are back to the starting point: Who will bell the cat? First answer the question, which comes first: morals or politics?