

Expedient Alliances

In a major shift of political policy set to roll many heads and raise not a few eyebrows, BNP chief and mainstream opposition leader Begum Zia dropped what we would like to call a 'bombshell' at her Friday meeting with OCAB. She strongly hinted at a joint movement with Ershad's Jatiya Party to oust the AL government. Only the other day when Ershad offered to align with BNP saying that hartal by the latter was fully justified and that a part of the country, the CHT, has been handed over to 'aliens', never mind his party's representative in the AL Cabinet, we counselled BNP to beware of his track-record. Since the bigger party is willing now to take the smaller Jatiya Party on board, the cycle of new polarisation seems theoretically complete and we have the full prism to look at it through. By the very nature of things, it is the bigger party which has to take a greater responsibility for its action than a smaller one needs to.

Public memory may be short but cannot be discredited with being too short. Only two general elections earlier, the three-party alliance forged total national unity based on the 19-point charter of understanding they had reached to uproot an entrenched autocracy. Not only that, in replacing the discredited regime by a democratic value system they entered into a covenant to seal off all routes for autocratic revivalism in any shape or form complete with a mutually agreed code of conduct whose salient features are too known to be repeated. Even in the worst kind of nightmare could we imagine that on top of consigning that solemn tripartite agreement to the 'dustbins of history', the major parties would stop short at nothing to bring each other down. Getting a slot through the pluralistic polity Ershad participated in the general elections, but to bring him up along the avenues of power a major party has to think hundred times before demonising politics like that. Yes, the AL and Jamaat closed their ranks against the BNP rule before the 1996 elections which the AL went on to win. The AL cemented its ties with Jatiya Party twice over as well. But Ershad had not merely usurped power from an elected BNP government in 1982 he was also a total anathema to Khaleda Zia since that time on through his long 9 years of autocratic rule. How can Khaleda Zia forget all these things?

We owe it to the nation's political conscience to say that unprincipled and expedient alliances tend to diminish people's faith in democracy as nothing else does.

Filmland Murder

Even before the dust over the mysterious death of matinee idol Salman Shah two years ago has settled, news comes of another tragic death of a filmstar. Sohel Chowdhury, one of the leading actors on the Dhaka silver screen for some years, was gunned down on Friday by as-yet unidentified assailants outside the Tramps discotheque in Gulshan. Chowdhury was not quite a top-flight actor, but he certainly had his legion of fans and a measure of success at the box office. Also, due to his marriage to actress Diti and their recent break-up, Chowdhury was in the public limelight. However, it is far from clear as to what could have led to his murder.

Press reports so far suggest that he may have been involved in an altercation with a "godfather" of the movie world who regularly patronises the Tramps discotheque. There are also allegations, though not yet widespread, that Chowdhury's murder may have been perpetrated by a powerful underworld lobby active in the movie industry of Dhaka. Whatever the motives behind the killing, the murder of Sohel Chowdhury has come as another reminder that Dhaka's underworld is increasingly becoming murderous in intent and audacious in operation.

The question before the government is: are these deaths unrelated, or do they represent a pattern of terrorism and intimidation being perpetrated by the underworld? If it is the former, then police investigation ought to deal with the individuals who were involved in the murder of Chowdhury on Friday night. But if it is the latter, then the investigations have to go much deeper. The idea should not be to unmask the man who pulled the trigger alone, but to expose the gangs that nurture these murderers and use them for their own criminal ends. If activities of these so-called "godfathers" are allowed to go unchecked, then the monster of the underworld would come to dominate and devour not just the film industry, but the rest of society as well.

Bronze-only Performance

Curtain has been drawn at Bangkok on the 13th Asian Games Saturday. Bangladesh participated in eight areas of completion and have ended up with a 'bronze' in Kabaddi, a game which many in this country consider to be truly a national one. This is the total achievement of a 67-strong contingent majority of whom made this trip on public money. Judged by the achievements in last two games where Bangladesh achieved at least silver medals a 'bronze' this year speaks of a dismal performance of such a big contingent. A couple of examples will not be out of place here. In field hockey, where experts pinned their hopes of moderate success, Bangladesh finished 9th ahead of hosts Thailand among ten competing nations. In golf we were placed 14th among as many teams.

Since the inception of the games the Indians have been doing reasonably well in the face of stiff challenge from the Chinese, Japanese and Korean athletes. Pakistan had their days of glory. Even Sri Lanka as a small island-nation of South Asia have been doing exceptionally well in international sports. Then why can't Bangladesh do well? This is a million-dollar question that has been asked since 1974. There has been so many answers to this simple question, but none of them seems to be appropriate. Without relying too much on teething problems or early years of nationhood we must take a hard look into the reality, pinpoint the problems and try our best to solve them. Too many lame excuses have been offered by experts for our failure at these levels for too many years. It is time now to turn around and take the bull by the horn. To save the nation from embarrassment in the future strong guidelines for selection should be formulated and effected along the lines of known international standards.

For a Means to an End, Not the End Itself

There are too many demands from too many sides. How to balance them? Consensus is not possible because the different pressures in a democratic structure are inevitable; they represent the urges of the electorate. Still political parties could reach some understanding; for example, not to have bandhs or strikes, which cost the nation dearly.

At the first press conference — the only one he held — Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri was asked how he would tackle India's economic problems. His reply was: one, he would bring down prices; two, he would bring down the various plans and projects spilled out in jobs, not in outlays.

This was nearly 35 years ago when the living was cheap and when unemployment had not touched the figure of 80 million. The import of down-to-earth Shastri's observation was that he would do what benefited people. They had precedence, not a predetermined growth rate.

Today, targets are fixed first; people are accommodated later. Mainstream economics assumes that the common man's problems and his privations are secondary to the primary objective of having impressive statistics. An individual has to be sacrificed at the altar of targets.

Jawaharlal Nehru warned against such an approach. He said: "We talk of the good of society. Is this something apart from and transcending the good of the individuals composing it? If the individual is ignored and sacrificed for what is considered the good of society, is that the right objective to have?" Woefully, his concept of an egalitarian state failed in his lifetime. The system was taken over by the nexus of bureaucrats and businessmen.

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has once again focused attention on the common man. He has said in an interview that India's priorities are wrong.

They should be "people-related, not commodity-related." Raising economic growth is important, he concedes, but the ultimate objective is to expand the ability of most sections of the population to earn their living.

No one can find fault with his analysis. Indeed, the economic activity is a means to an end, not the end itself. The end is the welfare of people. Of what use are the plans, which do not improve their living conditions? Socialism, capitalism or any other ism are good concepts. But they are for the welfare of people, not people are for them.

True, India's annual growth rate of 3.5 per cent before the nineties came to be sneeringly termed as the Hindu growth rate. But the entire thinking, however muddled, was how to improve the lot of people. The public sector undertakings were given the highest priority because they were meant to benefit the nation, not individuals. That the projects got snarled into red tape or that the bureaucracy defeated every effort towards welfare is another story.

Then came the phase to push the growth rate. Figures became important, not people. It was the escalation of graph that mattered. How it was achieved had little meaning. Controls, permits and licences were, no doubt, roadblocks and they had rewarded only a few. Still when

they were dismantled, people did not gain, the upper strata did. And the biggest beneficiary was a foreign investor. People were nowhere in the picture.

The scene has not changed since the advent of the BJP-led coalition. The party has only made noises about indigenous economic framework. The policy of Swadeshji has also been flaunted to check "liberalisation". But the effort is, at best, a feeble protest against economic reforms. The RSS, the party's

elgion capital should be kept away. Nor is anyone opposed to new technology, which the country badly needs. But the gates did not have to be thrown wide open. What was needed most should have been sought and permitted first. This was how China, which averages a growth rate of 10 per cent a year, went about in our country. colas, hamburgers and breakfast foods came first. They still constitute the bulk of foreign activity. The target has

says a top industrialist, who has sold his set-up to the Japanese. "A few may survive but all others will be taken over by foreigners." His argument is that the Indian industrialists, not used to competition, should have been gradually exposed to it. Even the facilities advanced to foreign investors have not been made available to Indians, he complains.

This may well be true. But once the indiscriminate process of economic reforms began, the writing was on the wall. That the change had to be quick. That is the law of liberalisation. Bridges are broken so that a country does not go back. India is no exception. In fact, the change is that the process has not been fast enough due to political and other pressures from within the country. The controversial insurance bill, which offers one fourth of equity to foreign companies, is meant to assure them that all doors will open if they remain patient. The purpose is to get foreign capital, which has lessened in flow.

Yet for the sake of foreign capital, the nation cannot allow itself to be pushed. The fate of Asian countries is before us. They were forced to adopt certain reforms in the economic field — both the World Bank and the IMF gave them blueprints — that left with no space of their own. They over-stretched the

resources and they came tumbling down. All that the West could say in sympathy was that they did not turn out to be the tigers it had imagined them to be.

There is no set formula to growth. Opening markets and privatising government ventures are the two known methods for curbing monopoly on the one hand and the bureaucracy on the other. But it is not necessary that they should work. Competition alone is no solution to the India's problems. In fact, as Nehru said, "In a poorly developed country, capitalist methods offer no chance."

The problem, which New Delhi faces, is that there are too many demands from too many sides. How to balance them? Consensus is not possible because the different pressures in a democratic structure are inevitable; they represent the urges of the electorate. Still political parties could reach some understanding; for example, not to have bandhs or strikes, which cost the nation dearly.

Ultimately, the policies will have to be drafted in such a way that will benefit more and more people. Probably additional allocations for the agriculture sector, which sustains nearly 75 per cent of the population, will have some impact. The question is not how to accelerate reforms but how to cast in such a way that they improve the living conditions of the society on the whole. A broad-based economic growth is what the country needs, not the high-flaunting words like globalisation.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldeep Nayar writes from New Delhi

mentor, is more forthright, it is not allowing the BJP to go overboard. The party has neither courage nor an alternative blueprint that it can place before the nation. The BJP is back on the track, which the desperate Congress had hewed from the mountainous difficulty. No wonder, Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha announced a few days ago in the Rajya Sabha: "We shall carry (forward) the reform process initiated by Dr Manmohan Singh."

It is nobody's case that for not been people but the elite, which fattened itself even in earlier regimes. Not only that, the self-sufficiency built over the years has been demolished and what has been raised on its ruins is an edifice, which is more foreign than India. Multinationals have grabbed a substantial share in the industry. Many Indian companies have closed down and many are on the verge of doing so. "We have neither resources nor the government assistance, to face the multinationals,"

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Bombing Iraq, Why Now?

by Dr A R Chowdhury

Instead of resorting to new military attacks, the United States along with the other Security Council members should try to convince Saddam Hussein that, if he cooperates, the UN would lift the economic sanctions that have crippled the Iraqi economy.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out the timing of the US military strike on Iraq. A day after Richard Butler, the chief UN weapons inspector, issued his report saying that Iraq failed to live up to its promise to restore full cooperation with the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM), Bill Clinton ordered a military strike. Incidentally, this is also a day before the US House of Representatives had been scheduled to vote on four articles of impeachment against Clinton.

In his address to the nation, Clinton mentioned that the timing was dictated by at least three considerations: submission of Butler's report, the necessity of a swift response in order to give Iraq less time to prepare, and the Holy month of Ramadan.

Is the timing a coincidence? I think not. Clinton is too clever a politician to give up this opportunity of getting impeachment off the front page of newspapers and maybe even postponed. He has partially succeeded in his attempt. The Republican leadership in the US Congress has decided to postpone the impeachment hearings for at least several days. This would provide Clinton with some time in his last-ditch effort to garner the support of several Republican Congressmen in order to defeat the vote on impeachment.

In my earlier article on this page I had noted that I believe what Clinton did regarding the Monica Lewinsky case was deplorable, but not impeachable. I still hold on to that view. But the timing of the bombing against Iraq makes me cynical about his ulterior motives.

Last week, with about two dozen Republican members of the Congress still undecided, there was a feeling that Clinton may still be able to pull it off and the articles of impeachment may not pass the House vote. However, the tide against Clinton started to run following his speech to the nation prior to his trip to the Middle East. His refusal to admit that he lied under oath seemed to have infuriated some undecided Republican congressmen and broke open the floodgate of pro-impeachment sentiment.

Though the majority of American public is still skeptical of removing Clinton from office, the stampede of Republicans supporting impeachment

indicated for the first time on Tuesday that Clinton may not be able to turn the tide. With this background, the UNSCOM report on Iraq, submitted to the Security Council on Tuesday, gave him a window of opportunity. Whenever a political leader faces trouble in the domestic front, it has become customary to look at foreign scapegoats in order to divert the attention of the people. For Clinton, who could be a better scapegoat than Saddam Hussein!

Richard Butler in his report mentioned that since starting on November 18th, his inspectors carried out more than 300 site inspections. However, in five instances he found the Iraqis to be uncooperative. Based on these instances, Butler concluded that Iraq had reneged on its promise to cooperate fully with the inspectors. What is interesting is that even before the Security Council could discuss the contents of the report, Butler withdrew all weapons inspectors from Iraq. The UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has conceded that the United States had advised Butler to withdraw his staff from Baghdad.

The intention of Richard Butler can be genuinely questioned in this instance. He seems to be more closer to the United States than to his employer, the United Nations. Was the language of his report such that it could be used by the US as a pretext for the military attack? Assuming his report was correct, Iraq was found to be uncooperative in only five out of three hundred site inspections. Was that enough to trigger a full-scale war and endanger the lives of hundreds of innocent people?

Having cast doubts on the timing of the attack, let's turn our attention to the actual bombing campaign. Is it an exercise in futility? The stated goal of this mission is to attack Iraq's nuclear, chemical and biological weapons sites. The mission is fraught with risk for what it may not accomplish. That which does not remove Saddam only makes him stronger.

As you watch the aerial attack unfold on your TV screen, remember that Saddam has seen, and survived, far worse attacks during the Persian Gulf conflict. During that war, the US-led coalition hammered Iraq with their high-tech weaponry but did little to destroy Saddam's military machine, which the UN inspectors have been trying to dismantle ever since.

Saddam escaped the 1991 onslaught unscathed, and chances are good he will survive the latest display of Western military might as well. Let me point out here that Saddam is not a saint either. Who can forget the atrocities committed by his army in Kuwait and the misery and sufferings that he has brought upon his own people? There can be no doubt about his intransigence. He flagrantly defied international requests to comply with UN directives.

Although US warnings to Iraq have become increasingly harsh in recent months, one thing has not changed: the serious drawbacks to any US military action. It is difficult to see what would be achieved by a new bombing campaign. It would not enhance the prospect of a permanent solution to the ongoing crisis in the region but would only add to the misery and suffering of the common people of Iraq, destroy the Gulf war alliance and weaken the Security Council. Such a campaign would be counter-productive for at least several reasons. In earlier articles on this page, I had discussed them in details. Let me summarise them again.

First, the people of Iraq have already suffered immensely, both due to Saddam's autocratic regime as well as the economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations. The military attack launched by the United States would simply add to their misery. During the last stand-off between the UN and Iraq, Hussein put human shields on the grounds of his palaces and other potential targets.

Second, any new military

action is opposed by most of the world, including the Arab nations. US air strikes would magnify their dissatisfaction with the double standard in US foreign policy. One area certain to be affected is the Middle East peace dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis. Many Arabs feel that the US is willing to attack an Arab country, but not willing to pressure the current Israeli government to seriously continue with the peace process.

Clinton had inspired people when he visited Gaza last week and raised Palestinian hopes to a whole new level. This bombing will definitely throw cold water all over it and I am sure it won't reverberate well around the Muslim world. Third, it has been clear from previous bombings that a military campaign may not destroy all of Hussein's chemical and biological weapons, which are easy to conceal and move. This time the US objective is more destruction than deterrence. If the US attacks a chemical weapons site, it will release chemical agents. Similarly, hits on a biological weapons site would release biological agents. The exact consequences of such an attack and the collateral damages that it can inflict in terms of human lives and environmental pollution are hard to imagine!

Finally, an attack would also give Hussein another excuse to break off negotiations and contacts with the United Nations. Such contact appears to be the only hope to resolve the impending crisis in that region.

If the United States decides to continue to bomb Iraq, it will have to do it without many allies. Only Britain has agreed to provide unconditional support to any US action. On the other hand, Russia, supported by China and France in the Security Council, has publicly lambasted the military action. In Iraq's perspective, there is no light at the end of the tunnel. They believe, with some truth, that no matter how much they comply with the UN directives, economic sanctions will not be lifted in any time soon.

They see it as a game with no end. So they see no reason for playing fair. They have no incentive to comply.

The only way United Nations can make Saddam comply would be by explicitly linking Iraqi compliance with the lifting of the economic embargo against Iraq.

Instead of resorting to new military attacks, the United States along with the other Security Council members should

try to convince Saddam Hussein that, if he cooperates, the UN would lift the economic sanctions that have crippled the Iraqi economy.

The United States and the international community must realise that compliance is more important than bringing down Hussein. By responding to the economic issues raised by the sanctions, the international community would not only acknowledge Iraq's concern, but would also provide Iraq with incentives to be more cooperative and obey UN resolutions.

The solution to the current crisis will arise not from continued air strikes but from new initiatives to withdraw the economic sanctions.

Art Buchwald's COLUMN  
Lincoln's Other Speech  
THERE were two Gettysburg addresses. Here's the one Lincoln never delivered.  
Four score and seven grand jurors ago Ken Starr brought forth on this country a special prosecution dedicated to the proposition that all presidential sexual activity had to be accounted for either by taping the participants or testing by DNA.  
"We are now engaged in a great political war in which the private lives of our public figures are being exposed to the point that we are all being asked to lie for our country."  
I take full responsibility in denying that I had a sexual affair in the Black Dog Cafe with a Yankee intern in the Massachusetts Infantry Division.  
"It was a mistake, and I only did it to protect the nation and the men and women who gave their lives at Gettysburg."  
The world will little notice nor long remember what we say here — except for the New York Post, New York Daily News, National Enquirer, Hard Copy, Geraldo Rivera, Bob Novak, Jim Carville, Meet the Press, Sam Donaldson, Barbara Walters, Diane Sawyer, Alan Dershowitz, George Stephanopoulos and Larry King.  
But I can never forget what the FBI said we did here.  
"It is for us, the living, to dedicate ourselves to eliminating consensual sex from the White House and forget my hugging of interns on the White House lawn. It is for no other reason than it could lead to high crimes and misdemeanours that might be witnessed by the Secret Service, who up until now have had the full measure of my devotion."  
This nation, under God, shall have a new birth of morals, and hanky panky of the people, and hanky panky by the people, and hanky panky for the people shall disappear from the face of the earth — or at least from the White House for the rest of my term of office."  
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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.

Arsenic contamination

Sir, It was reported in The Daily Star of Dec 15 that water in the southern and eastern parts of Dhaka city is contaminated with arsenic. This is not the case. Extensive testing of well-water from Dhaka city has shown that it is arsenic-free. This is one piece of good luck for Bangladesh.

However, what perhaps the reporter was referring to was our finding that there is significant arsenic contamination in the rural parts of Dhaka district. This occurs to the south of the city but does not extend into the city.

I hope this reassures the readers in metropolitan Dhaka.

Dr D G Kimbrough  
British Geological Survey

A Paradox Indeed

Sir, I think The Daily Star can rightly be called a newspaper with a difference. Sometimes it comes up with amazing and incredible news. For instance, it printed a news photo where a policeman was seen

the city have inflicted on her. The plastic sheet, often the only roof in such conditions of homelessness in Bangladesh, provides her the cover from the cold.

The question now is that when the elected lawmakers have appreciated a just and reasonable pay hike, what effective measures have they taken to protect the long overdue interest and right of the helpless Anwaras and many such Anwaras? If not, then do they think that Anwaras's problem is outside their scope of consideration? If so, do we have to take the representatives elected by the people but not to serve the people?

Elected people's responsibility to the poor ceases as soon the poor persons have been coaxed into casting their votes. Then they are left to their own lot. Otherwise how has the below-poverty-line percentage has gone up to 53 over a period of time while the number of rich has increased from 22 families to possibly 22,000 families? A paradox indeed — islands of affluence in a sea of poverty! And these islands of affluence has been gaining strength because of the support, care and nourishment from the people in power.

Then what is the remedy? It is difficult but not impossible! The remedy lies in electing the right kind of people. With such people the interests of all are supported to be served equally. And if justice in the society could be established then no-

body would be illegally deprived or allowed to gain. And hence much of the problems of the people would be solved. And then even if some problem won't be solved, people would understand the circumstances and limitation that debar solution. There would be a healthy relationship between the ruler and the ruled, and chaos, confusion, and exploitation avoided. Only then greater good for greater number could be ensured and peace prevailed.

Abu Imran  
Dhaka

Amartya Sen

Sir: Apropos the report on receiving Nobel Prize by Prof Amartya Sen, an incorrect news has come out some Dhaka dailies.  
Amartya Sen was born at Shantiniketan and not at Manikganj. His only sister Supurna was also born at Shantiniketan. Both their names were given by Kabiguru Rabindranath Tagore.

(Dr) Asoke K Bagchi  
Noble Chronicker  
(Author of the Encyclopedia of Nobel Laureates: 1901-1998), Calcutta

The ABC of rates

Sir, This is in reply to O. H. Kabir's question printed in The Daily Star on Dec 13th. The rate of exchange of a foreign currency in terms of Taka is simply the price of the foreign

currency in terms of Taka. Like the price of any other commodity, this price is also determined by the forces of supply and demand i.e., in case of dollar, the supply of dollar and the demand for dollar.

The supply of dollar stems from the export of domestic goods and services to USA, remittances from our workers who are working in USA, an American investor investing in Bangladesh, etc. The Bangladeshi exporter receives his payment in dollar and converts it into Taka in the foreign exchange market (where currencies are bought and sold). Sale of dollars in the foreign exchange market creates a supply of dollars.

Again, the demand for dollars is created from import of US goods and services in Bangladesh, a Bangladeshi student going to USA for studies, etc. The Bangladeshi importer has to make his payments in dollars but he has the local currency, Taka. Therefore, he goes to the foreign exchange market and buys dollars, thereby creating a demand for dollars.

Speculation also plays a role in the determination of the rate of exchange. Speculators buy and sell currencies with a view to making a capital gain. When the value of dollars is expected to rise, speculators buy dollars, thereby, creating a demand for dollars. When the value is expected to fall, they sell dollars, which results in a supply of dollars. The interaction of supply

and demand for dollars establishes the equilibrium price level i.e., the price of dollar in terms of taka which is the exchange rate.

When the exchange rate is allowed to act freely, it is termed as the floating exchange rate. When it is maintained by active intervention of the central bank, the term is managed exchange rate.

When taka is devalued in terms of any foreign currency, it makes the price of domestic goods and services in terms of foreign currency and the price of foreign goods and services higher in terms of taka. This may result in both positive and negative ways. The export-oriented sector of our country may get a boost while people have to spend more taka in order to purchase the same quantity of foreign goods.

A high rate of exchange does not indicate that the economy of a country is flourishing. The exchange rate depends entirely on the demand and supply of the foreign currency. One US dollar equals to 48 taka because the demand and supply of dollars establishes the price of one dollar. The same holds for Japanese yen, Kuwaiti dinar and Saudi riyal. The exchange rate is determined by the exports and imports and also by capital flow from one country to another and does not necessarily indicate the strength of an economy.

Salman Sabir  
Economics Deptt (2nd year), DU