

Home Minister Should Intervene

The twin incidents of violation at Maneshwar Road in the old city, in our view, bear an ominous message — criminals do not give a damn about the law of the land, so regular citizens should think twice before seeking justice. FIR on the 16-year-old Monica's misfortune led to arrest of two culprits but, unfortunately, it also invited the wrath of the wrong-doers. Within 24 hours, Monica's 14-year-old cousin met with similar fate.

It often happens in our country that victims of rape prefer not to file reports with the police to keep the traumatic episode of their lives from public glare. At times, they don't even take their families into confidence. They opt for social certitude instead of trial and punishment for the criminals. But Monica was not one of them. She wanted to put her faith in the system. She hoped police would not only bring the criminals to trial but also provide protection for her family. Her belief and hope were brutally belied.

Once again the efficiency of our system has been put to test. Once again the credibility of the law-enforcers has been put on the line. We hope the authorities concerned would act and act fast. The criminals would have to be tracked down, arrested, tried and punished. They have not only committed crimes but also challenged the system. We solicit the Home Minister's immediate intervention to make sure that the victims' cry for justice does not go unheard. We demand exemplary punishment for the criminals. Justice done today will work as clear warning against wrong-doers tomorrow. The system will get to work with no one gloating he can be above the law.

The incidents also point to our submission to the reign of wrong-doers. That Monica's cousin was raped in broad daylight on the ground floor of a factory on a working day only reveals our selfish indifference. Shame on those who watched the miscreants drag a young girl off the road into a nearby factory and rape her. What about the workers and the management of the factory itself? They are no less criminal than the ones who ruined the lives of the hapless girls. Instead of abetting in such crimes, we should start helping the law-enforcers by fighting them wherever they occur.

Monica and her cousin felt they were safe indoors in the evening and outdoors in the afternoon. They believed in the police and in their fellow people. We expect an end to belied beliefs. We want young girls like Monica and her cousin to believe they are safe out in the street and at home, even if they are alone, because the system ensures their safety.

Incentive Scheme Row

The incentive scheme for dock workers which the government latches on to as the 'Eureka' to the problems of Chittagong port has itself run into trouble. Why? Because the port ministry in an apparent anxiety to take all the credit for the trouble-shooting turned a blind eye to the port users forgetting that it is the latter who have to pay for the incentives. This looks like a classic example of how a thing-is-done becoming more important by default than what is materially sought to be done.

The government was perfectly right in thinking that by incentivising the dock workers the loading and unloading operations at the port could be helped to reach levels of efficiency required under conditions of severe pressure exerted on it by the recent floods. But the port ministry or the government for that matter is obviously wrong in having presented the incentives scheme for dock workers as a *fait accompli* to the port users. If the latter have not overstated their complaint then it appears that they were served with only a two-day notice to study the draft formula involving 25 per cent enhancement in salary payment as incentive to the dock workers. This is flawed, but more so is the fact that the port users were not consulted on the issue *a priori*. Furthermore, it came upon them as a settled bi-lateral deal primarily struck between the government and the leaders among the private dock workers. In all fairness to the would-be paymaster — the port users forum in this case — the deal should have been a tripartite one.

At any rate, the port users forum's threat to create a stalemate at the port on this issue must be regarded as an unacceptable over-reaction on their part. The government needs to draw them in to a fresh dialogue to hammer out a compromise formula that could eventually boost private sector participation in port operations. It should be possible to relate the incentive to computed 'performance'.

Returnees Extorted!

Returnees from the war-torn Iraq and Kuwait of 1990 face a new ordeal in the form of extortion, at the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training as they queue up to receive compensation from the United Nations. They had to return home leaving behind all their possessions and stepping into an uncertain future in Bangladesh. They have been waiting for eight long years to be partially compensated by the United Nations. The amount is modest for the 13,524 Bangladeshi Gulf War returnees but it could help heal the wounds of the sufferers to some extent. But at the BMET they were subjected to a new kind of harassment allegedly by the DG and his staff. The Daily Star staffer witnessed the 'push sale' of a book purportedly written by the DG and sold at more than 250 per cent higher price than the jacket value. As if this was not enough of an ordeal for the returnees, they were even made to pay more than one thousand five hundred taka each to the so-called Kuwait-Iraq Repatriated Bangladeshis Association (KIRBA) for a certificate which is not an official requirement for receiving the compensation. The place has been infested with touts to further compound the miseries of the returnees.

It appears that we cannot do a simple thing properly. Why should these people be thrown into additional adversity after eight years of waiting? We urge the ministry concerned to take a hard look into the allegations and inspect the books of the KIRBA. We strongly recommend that the wrongdoers be punished according to the law of the land.

Political Turncoats: Tales of Hopes and Pathos

Clean and gentle politics is fast being relegated to history as something practised in the past. This particular incident, irrespective of its being a case of hijacking or a case of frustrated expectation, raise the ugly heads of muscle power and greed. It heralds a continuing unhappy future for democracy in our country. The nation must work for a remedy and find a solution to this unfortunate problem.

form an independent Bangladesh.

The above illustrate some of the numerous instances from history where switching from one group of individuals, mostly political activists, to another took place due primarily to a real change in perceptions and circumstances. This manifested a healthy and logical evolution or transformation of principles and commitments. There has, indeed, been the other ignoble category of people who took similar action for different reasons. Their motivation was generally characterised by an urge to satisfy their own narrow personal interests. Unfortunately, Bangladesh has been witnessing many more of these cases of turncoats of unprincipled political opportunism.

One such incident came to the fore a few days ago. Joint Convener of the Dhaka City BNP, S A Khaleque, created a sensation by joining the Awami League in the morning in front of the Prime Minister only to rescind his action before Leader of the Opposition a few hours later by saying he had been hijacked and made to declare his allegiance to the Awami League under duress. He said that photographic session with the Prime Minister was made against his will. This created a great furor as well as claims and counter-claims

from both the political parties. To add insult to injury, Khaleque made a serious allegation that DGFI officials had been working for his defection for months and were instrumental to the process leading to his presentation to the Prime Minister for confirmation. After all that, he has remained in hiding for evading, according to members of his family, wrath from certain quarters and to ensure his personal security. Speculation was rife about

Daily Star discerned some elements of this episode worthy of serious pondering by conscious citizens. To follow the thread of his thoughts and going beyond, one cannot help but to become pensive and sad about the existing democratic polity in our country. Let us analyse.

Firstly, one is well aware that to change parties by political leaders and workers is a common phenomenon and should be accepted as such. Even the efforts to persuade

pie of the ruling party's efforts of sticking out carrot policy. The defection of three BNP UP chairmen on the eve of Pabna-2 by election to the parliament, during the stay of two influential Ministers in the area, makes a pointer in that direction.

The dramatic episode involving S A Khaleque also appears to be a sequel to the Awami League's past mode of action necessitated by the advent of a Mayoral election. BNP claims that if Khaleque had really joined the Awami League of his own volition, he had no plausible reason to return to the BNP's fold in the first available opportunity. On the other hand, they contend, it becomes logical that he would promptly go back to his own party, if he had really been hijacked earlier by the ruling party and was forced to take action against his will.

Secondly, this incident only reconfirms the degenerated policy and actions pursued by some of our politicians. They are devoid of principles and ideals to which our old and traditional political leaders were committed. Politics and election to any office, be it in parliament, union parishad and upazilla, are now, in most cases, a factor of money and muscle power. Clean and gentle politics is fast being relegated to history as something practised in the past. This particular incident, irre-

spective of its being a case of hijacking or a case of frustrated expectation, raise the ugly heads of muscle power and greed. It heralds a continuing unhappy future for democracy in our country. The nation must work for a remedy and find a solution to this unfortunate problem.

Thirdly, the involvement of the DGFI, a highly respected Armed Forces, in the matter of political persuasion and even more in the favour of a political party is a highly unfortunate element of the allegations made by the BNP leader, whose support in the forthcoming Mayoral election was courted by the ruling party as a trophy. The ISSB has denied DGFI's involvement in the matter. Yet, whatever may have happened in the past, for a democratically elected government such an allegation is preposterous and must be shunned. The matter being highly sensitive, some opinion, only the parliament as the supreme legislative body would be the most appropriate forum to take a decision as to whether to discuss this matter at all and, if so, the manner in which to do it. It is the fervent wish of all democratic minded citizens that such allegations must not tarnish the impartial and noble image of our Armed Forces.

The question remains, however, how long will Khaleque have to remain in hiding and for how long he will remain safe after he comes out of his hiding. This is a question posed not only by members of Khaleque's family but also by the civil society.

Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

what and why all these happened. Many subscribe to the story that he had been enticed to join the ruling party with the promise of a reward. Prime Minister's alleged utterances that he should be satisfied by simply being with her apparently did not satisfy the recalcitrant. He immediately went back to the leader of his own party, whom he claims he had kept informed of the process from before, to reaffirm his allegiance as well as to seek solace, reassurance and security.

The notable editor of the them to do so are condoned, depending, however, on the nature and extent of that persuasion. If these actions represent the classical carrot and stick policy, it is not acceptable and must be shunned, if we are to allow free growth of a democratic tradition. The Awami League's policy, unfortunately, has been akin to a combined policy of aggregating the interests and many allegiances, intimidation. The defection of two BNP MP's and their induction into the "consensus" government a few months ago is a glaring exam-

The People of the Lie

Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen stressed the need of integrity of peoples' character for welfare economics. It goes equally for a healthy political development of any polity. Our hope is that the country's top political leadership would not lose sight of this fact.



Dilara Choudhury

activities of the state, government and the political parties together have undeniable faith in the working of a democratic system. So when the chips are down it is the quality of the people, which matters. It is the people, who can operate and make any system, be it parliamentary democracy or presidential one, work. It is the quality of human materials that counts, especially at the leadership level.

But it is with deep pathos, disappointment and anger that we have to point out that the malaise, the rot and the kind of politics that have afflicted our polity strangely stem from this highest level: the level that is supposed to give us direction, instill values and mode of behaviour that democracy demands. We make these comments from the sad experience we have had from our twenty-seven years of political history as an independent nation. We note with regret and disappointment that our history of political development has been strewn with politics of opportunism, corruption, where politicians had minimum sense of morality and ethics.

Despite this fact the recent 'high political drama' by S A Khaleque, a city BNP leader who joined ruling Awami League in the morning and gave in the same evening a vivid account to the journalists, while sobbing constantly, of how he was hijacked and forced to join the party against his will, has probably crossed the limit of all decency, ethics, and political opportunism. The politician concerned is well known for his frequent change of political colour. During most of his chequered career, since Pakistan days, he had been with the existing ruling party. The man was reported to have claimed that he does not change parties but it is the government that changes. In a word he belongs to the government party. It does not matter which party it is. So such volte-face is expected from some one like him. These are the people of the lie. Obviously

we are not surprised by his behaviour. Mahfuz Anam in his commentary (The Daily Star, December 27, 1998) has eloquently analysed what can be expected from people like him. But we are indeed surprised by the actions of our political parties, especially the ruling one.

What is alarming is that, among our political elite there are plenty like S A Khaleque. They are instilling a culture definitely detrimental to the concept of democracy. And what is even more painful is that we are getting used to it. Let me give you an example. The other day at Banga Bhaban I met an acquaintance after a long interval. He is a reputed politician and is regarded with high esteem. Despite his reputation, somewhat unconsciously, I asked him about his present political affiliations. It was a slip and I bit my tongue. My mother always told me not to open my mouth until I said something pleasant. This was contrary to her advice. But I guess I did ask him that embarrassing question (and I apologise) simply because our political culture permitted me to do so. Deep in my heart there seems to be a tacit acceptance of this political opportunism on the part of our legislators. This is where the danger lies. Acceptance gives legitimacy of such behaviour, which eventually evolves into norms. We begin to accept legislators who don't have the sense of being part of a nation's history. The driving force, thus, becomes only naked desire for power.

Now the vital question is why and how people who frequently change their political colour continue to flourish in our political system. Though there are a number of factors, I

would mention three. First, the prevailing nature of party-politics in Bangladesh. There is impressive literature on the subject. What can be summed up from the existing literature is that our political parties don't behave like their counterparts in the established democracies.

The main task of the political parties is to broaden their base by aggregating the interests and demands of the electorate so that they win the election. No such attempts are discernible from either BNP or AL. There have not been any major change in the structure of these major parties although such measures are needed. We need not go too far to observe how the parties constantly make structural changes in order to inject vitality into the party and woo the electorate. In neighbouring India Mrs. Sonia Gandhi has done so within the Congress so that party base can be broadened. In the recently held Congress Working Committee meeting the party stalwarts bowed to her wishes to reserve 33% for women and 20% for the Schedule Caste at all tiers of the party structure including the Working Committee — the highest decision-making body. Once the party base is broadened and interests of the electorate is aggregated only the people with real ties with the constituents have a chance to win the election. But our political parties have failed to create such milieu. Instead they want to co-opt people who can manage to get elected through any means.

It is unfortunate that both the major parties instead of dumping people like S A Khaleque and others are, on the contrary, entered into a tug-of-war as to prove which party is he re-

ally loyal to.

Second, the role of our electorate. In any democracy the ultimate sovereignty lies with the people. A conscious, aware and vigilant electorate is, thus, crucial to good governance. Enormity of the importance of election and election of the right candidates are so important that developed democracies have permanent bodies which continuously find ways and means to make the representation as effective as possible. Various mechanisms are provided to the electorate so that it can not only select the right candidates but also keep its representatives on their toes. Media, political parties, government machineries constantly feed information to keep the electorate educated and alert. Mechanisms like recall, initiative, etc. effectively put a check on a legislator's performance once he is elected for five years. We need such mechanisms that our electorate alert and reject the people who are hankering only after naked power and nothing else.

Third, the role of the Election Commission. Its role in

making representation effective is crucial. It is the task of the EC to make sure that candidates contesting the election are following the rules and regulations of the EC. But do they really follow them? We are all aware of the importance of musclemen and money factor in our electioneering process. And how even in free and fair elections results can be manipulated by pumping black money in the face of blatant violation of EC's ceiling on expenditure. Some of the constituencies have fallen prey to the musclemen and black money to such an extent that they can be compared to the long gone rotten boroughs of United Kingdom. EC needs to look into these matters and take appropriate measures like redrawing the constituency boundaries, if needed. The fact of the matter is as long as free and fair elections are subtly manipulated, people of the lie would continue to flourish. And no democracy can be made operative with people without integrity and moral character at the helms of a country's affairs. Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen stressed the need of integrity of peoples' character for welfare economics. It goes equally for a healthy political development of any polity. Our hope is that the country's top political leadership would not lose sight of this fact.

Think Before Partying on New Year's Eve

by Navine Murshid

Every year we see the same dreams and every year we are disappointed. New year, in our perspective, holds no value. Every day flows into another and one day is no different from the other.

WHEN the sun sets for the last time in a year, it is thought to take away with it all the pain, the harshness, the sadness, the ugliness of the year gone by. The new sun brings with it a new start, so that the new-year will be a better one than the year passed. It brings with it hope, hope to succeed, hope to love, hope to survive through the darkness that may befall. It brings with it songs of joy, of laughter and merry. We forget what we left behind and we look forward to the future. We erase from our memory the dark aspects of the year left by. We strive towards enlightenment. We see in our mind's eye a Bangladesh, free from the clutches of poverty, free from the evil of illiteracy, free from the parasite called lead compound in air.

We see our 'golden Bengal'. Every year we see the same dreams and every year we are disappointed. New year, in our perspective, holds no value. Every day flows into another and one day is no different from the other. The routine life goes on. For most people, new-year celebrations are only for the rich because celebration today means no food tomorrow; an opportunity cost much greater than one can afford. So there really is no point in celebrating a new year which for most mean nothing.

What is there to celebrate when a street child freezes in the December cold? What does the new year have to offer to the child who knows that if he doesn't work for a day, he'll starve? What does new year have to offer the rickshaw-puller who has to break his back even on a new year's eve?...perhaps an extra few bucks, but then is that what the spirit of new year is all about?

One would have thought that it would brighten up life for a while, so that, even if it was for a moment, that moment would give a little joy, that little moment would not be a lie. For most of us, the new sun looks like it did last night, or the night before, even forever. The new sun signifies waking up and getting started with work, just like any other night, 1919 or 1999, for most it is all the

same. A year comes and goes away, leaving behind no trail that can be followed. But what it does leave behind is an addition to the national stock of air, water and land pollution. Perhaps, that can be a reason to celebrate, for there is little doubt as to whether the area: pollution ratio is greater anywhere else in the world!

Another reason to celebrate may be the fact that this country is a laboratory for a lot of research work. Where else can one find such a combination of poverty, population, discrimination, urbanisation, migration, starvation...and what not! This is more rooted to our soil, for this deals with us, the people of this soil. This is more important to us than any new-year wish, for time again has proved that all this is mere fallacy. It is not only about hoping for a better future but doing something to ensure a better future. Its not words but action that has a substantive effect.

Someone once said that tears are better felt than seen. We have to be able to see the unshed tears, the broken hearts, the loveless lives of the people around us, and not fill them with empty, beautiful words of hope and a lovely future. We should be about hoping for a better future but doing something to ensure a better future. Its not words but action that has a substantive effect.

So, before elaborate plans for development, economic growth, fundamental rights of the people and et al are all prepared, perhaps the relevant bodies could take up an 'all for one and one for all' programme to make us a happy family. The new year resolution should therefore be to love and respect humanity, because otherwise we would soon prove that this is a man-eat-man world.

To The Editor...

BRTA rule on displaying licences

Sir, I was not sure whether to laugh or cry, when I read the report on the BRTA rule for displaying vehicle licences in motor vehicles. The notice was published on the 28th December and is supposed to be mandatory from 1st January. BRTA has given vehicle owners an enormous period (exactly 3 days) of time to get the labels from post offices, and stick them on their vehicles.

We all know that it will be impossible. The law is such that even law-abiding citizens,

WHO WANT TO OBEY THE LAW, cannot do so. There are many instances of such impossible laws. I saw on a street that the maximum speed was 5 mph. Since it is barely above walking speed, it is impossible to obey. Thus, one is forced to break the rule.

Underlying the humour, there is a serious implication. If lawmakers make laws, which CANNOT be obeyed, even law-abiding citizens will have to break them. And eventually it becomes a habit. Subsequently, more and more laws are ignored, since one loses the fear

of disobeying laws. And therein lies the tragedy.

Hasanat Khan
Uttara, Dhaka

Mandatory for Motor Vehicles

Sir, Seeing a news item on 'Mandatory for Motor Vehicles from January 1' on the front page of DS on 28th December '98 that BRTA makes it mandatory for all from January '99 to display tag, fitness and route permit labels, I contacted the Uttara Post Office over phone the same morning but the post mas-

ter expressed his ignorance on the subject and said that he did not receive the labels. Yesterday morning I personally visited him and his answer was again in negative.

I don't understand if a regulation is going to be effective from 1st January '99 how the announcement could be on 28th December '98 i.e. only 3/4 days prior to the target date unless BRTA delayed its announcement? Moreover, how could they do it without arranging supply of labels to post offices?

A Citizen
Uttara, Dhaka.

clude lung damage, brain damage, asthma, and cancer to name a few.

Hey! I may be a mere fifteen year old voicing my discontent. However, I'm not the only one. I'm sure that many other kids, if not all of them feel the same way. We want to be able to breathe clean air, to smell the sweet scent of flowers. We want to hear ourselves think, and to sleep undisturbed at night. We want to get to school on time, without waiting uselessly in the roads for the jams to clear. We want our younger siblings to learn to speak politely, and not spout the despicable language so clearly to be heard from the people just outside. Is all this too much to ask for? Will Dhaka never change for the positive? Will the saying 'Silence is Golden' become a mere cliché?

Sabrina F Ahmad
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Silence is golden!

clearly audible level by the workers. Where there was once golden sunshine streaming through the windows, there is now only the shadow of a rising flat, and boy do I miss those crows!

I have to wake up a full hour earlier in vain hopes of escaping the nightmare associated

At school, my class-mates and I would fill our minds with knowledge. The halls and classrooms, the playgrounds, all of these would be dominated by the sounds of our laughter, proof of our sheer, uncomplicated love of life.

with the journey to school. All manner of vehicles belonging to all kinds of people, with complete disregard to traffic rules, block the roads, and we, the unfortunate schoolchildren, have to sit, silently grinding our teeth, and smell the toxic exhaust fumes. Once inside the school, we have to struggle to ignore the melodious sound of construction work going on

next door. The halls and playgrounds are filled with shouts of students trying to make themselves heard, and the library is no longer a place where one can hear themselves think. One is used to revel at the idea of going out, especially on long drives. Now the mere word 'ride' inspires in me a thrill of

horror. It seems the drivers believe that the louder the better. Or maybe their weary elbows are most comfortable when leaning on the horns. Okay, I can plug my ears. What about those exhaust fumes. Five minutes in the car and I start wishing I had brought a barf-bag. I read somewhere that the unpleasant repercussions of inhaling this black smoke in-

Sir, Five years ago, I would wake up to the sound of the chirping of birds, the occasional barely tolerable caw of a crow, and a soft tink of my alarm. I would stretch, refreshed by a good night's sleep, and silently offer thanks to the Maker for the sweet haven he has given me. On my way to school, I'd hear the muted honks of a few cars. At school, my class-mates and I would fill our minds with knowledge. The halls and classrooms, the playgrounds, all of these would be dominated by the sounds of our laughter, proof of our sheer, uncomplicated love of life.

Five years later, today, the routine remains the same, but the story has changed. I wake up, unrefreshed, to hear the banging and clanging of construction workers as early as six in the morning. Accompanying these daily concerts from hell are the sounds of trucks roaring back and forth, the colorful expletives uttered at a