

Call for Sanity

We are into the dark tunnel, darker perhaps than anything the nation has known before. Politics has been grossly mishandled to miscarry into an eye ball to eye ball situation that finds the entire nation writhing like a sacrificial lamb. The people's worst predicament is they have been coerced into it. No understanding could be reached in good time to head it off simply because none was seriously attempted in the first place. Most irresponsibly time was allowed to run out as if all concerned were set to present the nation with a self-destructive *fait accompli*.

The lack of initiation of a dialogue process is the principal culprit. It is the ruling party in whom vests the power to 'give', so that it must bear a greater responsibility for the fact that no pre-emptive dialogue could take place. Dealing perfunctorily with the opposition demands they chose to stay focused on the mechanics of the municipal elections holding up a 'list of opposition candidates' purportedly participating in the polls against party directives at the drop of a hat as if that by itself took care of all the eventualities. On the other hand, one could argue that the opposition demands concerning removal of the CEC and reform of the election commission being outside the purview of the government's natural authority its hands were too tied to deliver anything positive on the questions raised. Our point is, without being obdurately self-righteous about such things the ruling party could initiate a dialogue with the opposition to explain its position to them and arrive at a compromise solution that could merit justification on pressing political grounds. Technicalities cannot override a bipartisan political compulsion that has taken the character of national interest.

While the ruling party is to be faulted for the lack of dialogue, the opposition has to be squarely blamed for calling the hartal against the wishes of the people and in total disregard for socio-economic consequences and erosion of national image.

We think democracy has received yet another setback — thanks to the coercive and vengeful conduct of politics by the parties concerned. They are hell-bent upon getting even with each other. We condemn the tendency.

Deep as our shared disappointment with the nation is, we urge both sides to be on maximum alert to ensure that the dark tunnel into which they are pushing us does not bear witness to any further loss of innocent lives than their unabated political confrontation has already exacted from the citizenry.

Lahore Declaration

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's bus journey to Pakistan this week may not have caused a breakthrough in resolving outstanding disputes between the two countries, but it has certainly given impetus to efforts to restore confidence. Official pronouncements made by the two prime ministers may have been rhetorical, and the 'bus summit' may have been strong in symbolism. But the Lahore Declaration has sought to chalk out a focused agenda for talks between the two sides, which represents the first step in establishing a mechanism for information exchange to prevent an accidental or unauthorised use of nuclear weapons by one against the other. In other words, both India and Pakistan are waking up to their responsibilities as nuclear powers, by addressing the need to minimise the chances of war in general and a nuclear exchange in particular.

Relations between the two, strained for decades due to conflict over Kashmir, had plunged to a new depth in May last year, when both carried out test explosions of nuclear devices. Coupled with the huge investments both are making in developing medium to long range missile systems capable of carrying nuclear warheads, this had raised the stakes in the dispute over Kashmir to a dangerous level. While Kashmir remains an intractable problem, over which neither side appears willing to concede an inch, the need to reduce tension and avert war has become paramount due to the introduction of the nuclear factor.

What the nuclear element means is that the idea of a military solution to the Kashmir problem now carries zero credibility. The question that remains is whether India and Pakistan are prudent enough to manage their relations in such a manner that a war, which might escalate into a nuclear one, does not break out. The region would expect that India and Pakistan work towards building mutual confidence and take whatever steps necessary to avert a war. The bus summit portends well for the future, but it is only the first step. The real hard work, where the defence establishments of the two countries have to work closely to keep each other informed, is yet to come. It is vital that momentum created by the bus summit is maintained through continuous dialogue and rapid implementation of confidence-building measures.

Long, Hot Summer Ahead

The slips have started showing. The short warm' winter has already given way to what could actually be a long hot summer rendered hotter by the shortage of electricity. Since the crisis started staring in the face of the government in 1996, political rhetorics have abounded with not much of a positive effect seen on the deteriorating power supply situation. The energy minister lost his portfolio to no less a person than the PM and a short period of improvement that apparently followed has been overshadowed by a chronic shortage of this vital ingredient that is absolutely necessary for a country to develop socially and industrially. A prominent Bangla daily has published an elaborate report on the power sector that sends alarming signals for the coming months of summer.

Lack of coordination among the government agencies that are responsible for producing and distributing power on the one hand, and between them and the energy ministry on the other has pushed the power sector on to the edge of a precipice. The net result will be the suffering of the people and disaster for commerce and industry in the country. Only one out of the proposed four barge-mounted power plants has gone into operation, the rest hang fire. The Meghnaghata Power Plant remains still a far cry. The sixth unit of Ghorasal Power Station was commissioned on 31 January but it was shut down after a week for technical reasons. The current demand for power is around 2600 MW which will increase to around 2900 MW in summer. But together with Ghorasal, Baghabari and Baroawlia the generation will not exceed 2200 MW leaving a shortfall of at least 600 MW this summer. The scenario looks depressing. The government must come up with practical solutions to this gigantic problem.

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Russia's Response to NATO Enlargement

Even if most Russians including President Yeltsin see NATO enlargement largely in terms of threats to Russian interests, enlarged NATO is actually smitten with crucial weakness. The relegation of American influence in Europe's security by making the alliance answerable to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has been a persistent objective of some Russian foreign policy makers.

In the year 1999 when North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, the modern world's most enduring and successful military alliance, is due for its golden jubilee celebration and enlargement with three new members — Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic — the outfit remains an entity in search of a mission in post Cold War environs. Earlier, of course, the NATO not only had a mission, it deterred the advance of Soviet communism, fought and won the Cold War and validated the concept of collective defense. Now regardless of all the institutional changes and its 1997 decision for an eastward expansion the core question about NATO persists: what is the strategic purpose of new, enlarged NATO? Beyond grand rhetorics, NATO's key business and how it hopes to accomplish that remains obscure.

The 12-member NATO of 1949 will soon become 19-member alliance with its door open to more members in future. The decision-making even in 12-member NATO was far from easy with disagreements occurring rather frequently. There were deep strains, out-of-area problems, burden sharing, alliance nuclear strategy and so on. The NATO with limited number of members, in a limited geographical area, bound together in the face of clear and common threat could however overcome those hurdles. In a non-Cold War environment a 19-member NATO — likely to be enlarged further — will find a consensus in the decision making extremely difficult. Now that the new entrants have been asked to join the alliance by

To appease the Russian sense

of betrayal and threat, the NATO-Russia Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security was agreed upon before the NATO's Madrid Summit in 1997. This granted Russia permanent mission at NATO headquarters. The Summit created the European-Atlantic Partnership Council comprising dilutions from NATO and all the Partnership of Peace' states. As it was to be a link between NATO and the rest of Europe, Russia could be af-

menia-Azerbaijan conflict and the internece internal strife of Tajikistan to shape government and local politics to suit Russia's interests.

Russian diplomacy has also been very active in the Middle East. The driving force behind this diplomatic alacrity is none other than Russia's former foreign minister and now Prime Minister Primakov who has been an acknowledged Middle East expert in the final Soviet administration. In the Gulf,

about pursuing Russia's national interests throughout the greater Middle East from Caspian Sea to North Africa.

The denial of free hand to the US in the south and south west Asia is of strategic interest to China. In her calculation, the more stretched the US is in the Middle East the less energy and fewer capabilities it will have in the Asia-Pacific-China's primary strategic focus. Moreover China is also interested in having an access to Gulf oil and the Middle East market for her fast-expanding trade. Spurned by the US as a strategic partner Russia is now seeking China for the same, and a pragmatic entente is already under way. Mutual interests in oil, secure border vulnerable to militant Islam in South West Asia, arms sales, trade links and a common front against the rising wave of Pax-Americanis are the bases of present Moscow-Berlin axis.

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OPINION

Oh Calcutta! Pangs of Unrequited Love

by Abdul Hannan

As manifest by the proliferating newspaper reports, post editorials and published comments here by columnists and delegates returning home after attending the Calcutta Book Fair, there is angry reaction, widespread frustration and deep disenchantment over the seemingly cool and shabby treatment the delegation received during their visit. The chronicle of protest denunciations over their bruised pride and self-esteem are:

The visit of the 81-member strong official delegation headed by Prime Minister Hasina and comprising the foreign minister, education minister, the cultural affairs minister, the political adviser to the prime minister, the chief of whip, some MPs and eminent scholars, writers, poets, artists and journalists was handled in a slipshod manner; the authorities of West Bengal made a short shrift of protocol formalities normally available during such a visit by a head of the government of a foreign country; she was received on arrival at Calcutta by none representing the Indian government in Delhi; the inauguration ceremony of the fair attended by Prime Minister Hasina as the chief guest and Chief Minister Jyoti Basu was held in a very ordinary, pedestrian and lacklustre stage not befitting the grandeur of the occasion marked by the presence of the prime minister of a foreign country. Even some Calcutta newspaper reports deplored that the stage was worse than ordinary *pya mandaps* in remote villages.

The organisers of the fair made a mockery of Bangladesh as the focal theme of the book fair this year as no writers, poets and intellectuals from West Bengal were present to hear Bangladesh scholars speak at the discussions and seminar on Bangladesh culture on the designated Bangladesh day on January 30; the cultural elite of West Bengal was conspicuous by their absence at the reception held at the Bangladesh Deputy High Commission in honour of Bangladesh delegation members; 26 book stalls of Bangladesh publishers were squeezed in an obscure and inaccessible corner of the fair pavilion.

Lastly, there was inept handling, mismanagement and lack of coordination by our Deputy High Commission in Calcutta, the Foreign and Cultural Affairs ministries. When no less a person than a former foreign secretary, Farooq Ahmed Choudhury in his column 'Frankly Speaking' (The Daily Star, February 8) writing about the 'poor mentality' of the organisers and 'bitter taste in the mouth' left by the visit says 'standing at the immigration queue at the Calcutta air-

port I had the unpleasant experience of watching left to their own devices by those whose responsibility it should have been to receive and extend the minimum courtesies due to an official delegation of considerable literary eminence', the matter cannot be dismissed as mere sentimental outpouring of some fuddy-duddy intellectual fringe but needs to be examined.

What was a well-meaning visit by the prime minister who was invited to be the chief guest at the Calcutta Book Fair and receive the honorary award of 'Deshikottama' by Visva Bharati university in Shantiniketan ended in a disaster, according to the intellectuals accompanying the prime minister. Yet, the laments, fume and frets over what Prof Zillur Rahman Siddiqui, a former vice-chancellor described as 'a futile and frustrating visit' are self-inflicted wounds.

The frustrations are due to the self-conceited and overpowering love and infatuation of our intellectuals for the cultural milieu of West Bengal. It is not intelligent why an inordinately large team of 81 scholars, writers, poets, artists and journalists should have run pell-mell and join in droves the prime minister's entourage. The mad rush for the Calcutta visit by our intellectuals is reminiscent of religious frenzy for pilgrimage to a holy place. Unless our culture is seized with decadence, we could not have displayed such a mendacious mindset.

Our intellectuals felt ignored and humiliated as none from West Bengal seemed to take any notice of their presence in Calcutta. In their penchant for love and attention from the intellectuals of West Bengal they sadly betrayed a provincial outlook.

It is a pity we often forget that we are a nation with a proud

history and tradition of our

successful struggle for language and literature, freedom and democratic rights drawing inspiration from within and not without across the border which is swamped and assimilated by the greater Indian culture.

We have many individual talents in arts and literature who can be more than favourable compared with those in contemporary West Bengal.

As for the lack of interest by West Bengal writers and poets about the visit, there was nothing surprising about their reaction. For them there was nothing new and extraordinary about the visit. Familiarity breeds contempt. West Bengal writers and poets are too familiar with our writers and poets to be excited about their presence as many of them visit Calcutta individually and 'meet them'.

Besides, for many of them the visit was 'a return of the prodigal son', 'a return of the native', 'a home coming by the renegade' and had the resonance of 'Epar Bangla Opar Bangla, Ganga Amar Ma Padma Amar Ma' refrain about which many of our intellectuals find a common chord. It is what is reiterated by Annada Sankar Roy, the noted West Bengal writer when he says that 'the political border between West Bengal and Bangladesh is artificial'. It is an attitude of high brow paternalism which in essence is irridantist and partly explains their condescension to the visiting guests from Bangladesh.

The harsh reality of the experiences of our intellectuals during their visit, though bitter, was necessary in as much as it provides a defining moment for introspection and self-questioning by those of our intellectuals who suffer from a schism in the soul, who ridicule and are

contemptuous of the description of our distinctive identity as Bangladeshi as opposed to Bengali and are euphoric about everything in West Bengal. Bangladeshis or what you name it, there is no denying that we are a separate entity — a nation with distinct history, culture and tradition, habits, rites and rituals, hopes and aspiration. This realisation dawned on poet Shamsur Rahman who while inaugurating the book fair forcefully articulated, perhaps much to the chagrin of the local audience, 'despite our many commonalities we are different'.

It was not altogether a failed visit as some of our intellectuals would have us believe. The improprieties and indiscretions of the organisers of the fair apart, the West Bengal hosts treated the prime minister well by giving a civic reception, holding banquet dinner by the West Bengal governor and lunch by chief minister Jyoti Basu and on top of all, conferring the distinct honour of Deshikottama award by the Visva Bharati University. The visit certainly created goodwill for Bangladesh in West Bengal. But questions are being asked 'does the goodwill created in West Bengal contribute to building goodwill and understanding with India?' 'Do we need West Bengal to hold our brief and broker peace, friendship and cooperation with India?' Chief Minister Jyoti Basu's remark in course of his meeting with Bangladesh journalists that he would persuade Delhi to allow more exports from Bangladesh during his visit to Delhi on January 29 savours of a patronising tone and is demeaning.

The Indian government, however, could not care less about the visit than sending its foreign minister Jaswant Singh

to Calcutta not exclusively for paying courtesy to the visiting prime minister on behalf of the central government but for holding 45 minutes substantive bilateral talks with prime minister Hasina on wide ranging issues including trade, energy and transport, particularly Dhaka-Calcutta, Dhaka-Agartala bus service. It would have been appropriate and graceful if the bilateral talks were held at the level of foreign ministers of the two countries. If we do not zealously guard, protect and preserve our national honour and dignity, nobody will offer it in a platter.

Perhaps, the prime minister was not well advised to lead such a large delegation. It is not understood what was the compulsion of the visit at a time when the government was busy successfully picking up pieces of the ravages of one of the worst floods of the century. If anybody has to be blamed, the accusing finger must lie with her advisers who before entertaining the invitation should have seriously considered its potential outcome — gains and losses for the nation.

The Deputy High Commission in Calcutta unfortunately has received much of the drubbing in the writings of disgruntled delegation members. It is palpably unfair to make a scapegoat of the Deputy High Commission whose scarce resources must have spread thin to handle such an unwieldy delegation. The buck must stop at the door of our High Commission in Delhi and the Foreign and Cultural Affairs ministries which should have anticipated and forestalled the pitfalls of organising such a large delegation of writers, poets and journalists prone to chafe at the slightest infringement, real or imaginary, of their hallowed privileges.

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.

BD-Jordan ghapla

Sir, Our Foreign Ministry has some explaining to do to clear up the *ghapla* (situation) normally all fumbled up created by Dhaka at the non-representation level by Bangladesh during the funeral of King Hussein (despite enough early warning of the fatal illness); and the late flight of the Prime Minister to Amman to make amends. Of course business topics cannot be discussed, especially during the period of mourning.

Our foreign relations with the Muslim countries needs to be reviewed at the highest level, and on top priority basis. We as a Muslim community (9 out of 10 are Muslims) cannot afford to be indifferent to the Islamic world in these days when the slow resurgence of religious urgencies has become a fundamental political issue. Many of our citizens are not aware that a Jordanian embassy in Dhaka is yet to open.

A Concerned Citizen
Dhaka

We should protest

Thanks for your today's commentary on February 14. People should have courage to protest against all misdeeds of the government and the opposition. The parties are for the people, not the other way round. People should be educated and you are doing this through your emails.

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portation and distribution of the marketing system is a big problem in the developing countries. The government projects loudly proclaim in statistical units a large number of rural-based projects; but this type of shortcoming continues.

The difference is between quantity and quality. There is another hidden area for improvement: QC or Quality Control. It would be sarcastic to point out that this quality factor is as high as the QC in politics! Smooth operators should not be slippery, and should operate from firm grounds.

Let our administrators take some lessons in milk runs: which course does not mean screwing.

A Zabir
Dhaka

"Consumers Cheated!"

Sir, This is in reference to the letter of A Zabir (DS 10.02.99) who wanted to know 'would it be impolite to ask for an explanation' of CAB (Consumers Association of Bangladesh) as they remained indifferent to the deprival of the consumers towards the benefit out of devaluation of various currencies.

It's true that the CAB is a body in name only. I haven't seen much activity of the so-called association for the consumers in course of decades of their existence. The question of benefit by devaluation of other currencies is a far cry which in fact is absorbed quietly by the devaluation of our currency. Yet it should have been able to monitor such developments and look after the welfare of the people.

But what about their other basic role to save and protect the interest of the consumers by intercepting and stopping invasion of our markets by spurious goods like 'bottled

mineral water' which have been reported to be full of impurities and harmful (nomenclature of the water being baffling). There are a number of products marketed even with the 'BSTI' mark are questionable for their claimed quality and there is where the CAB proved to be quite a failure.

It's perhaps time to propagate public concern and opinion against cheating of the innocent and unaware consumers and go for a new worthwhile exercise.

A F Raman
Dhaka

EU in CHT

Sir, In a diplomatic swoop, duly escorted officially, reps of eight EU countries, descended or ascended on CHT with bright promises to assist the GOB to develop the local infrastructure, for improving the quality of life in the zone.

In the gas energy sector, small Cairns has been replaced by giant Shell as the former's energy gassed out in the financial market overseas. The Dhaka-Calcutta bus service is scheduled from Ekuksy February. A high powered energy delegation from the US is in the city to smooth out energy administration and processing. President Clinton is likely to visit S Asia during the next winter. Lots of goodies in the year 2000 minus one, despite our tiny Y2K problems.

After the EU qurbani, the mighty Uncle Sam might like to squeeze tiny CHT with further investment prospects during a holiday bing of the tourist hill resorts. Perhaps from the highest point somewhere in the CHT, the pagodas of Mandalay might be visible using VR (virtual reality) scanning devices. The mobile solar generators for the remote and isolated areas is a good transfer of technology in the sense 'small is

beautiful'. Some micro or mini hydel projects might sprout in the CHT. Our PM had exclusive talks with the CHT chief recently in Dhaka. Suddenly CHT is in the spot-light, perhaps in a bid to get out of some tight spots artificial or real.

If winter is here, can spring be far behind? Perhaps something more interesting than hartals is going to materialise. Let us keep a playful watch.

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka