

Task Before Nasim

Mohammad Nasim with his strong party man image has replaced Major (Retd) Rafiqul Islam as the Home Minister. He enjoys the Prime Minister's confidence, is a long-time party loyalist, and has a dynamic and hard-driving aura about him. After the Kushtia and Jessore shocks of law and order debacles, a changing of the guard at the home ministry must have looked as an imperative necessity for the government to put up a better, dynamic front. But the question is: will a mere replacement of Rafiqul Islam bring about a sea-change in the terror-stricken society where security of life and limbs is at the lowest ebb of visibility and enforcement? There is little doubt that we are in dire need of toughness to tide over the law and order breakdown. But there is even less doubt in anyone's mind whatsoever that if such toughness does not come with neutrality and objectivity it will prove counter-productive, to say the least. Because of the 'strongman' image of the incumbent home minister an apprehension is rife in certain circles, which we would like to see disproved sooner than later, that there might be a crackdown on the opposition, principally on the BNP. If the extremely needed 'dealing with an iron hand' were to be so misdirected, we are in for a worse kind of troubles.

Home Ministry's performance is the touchstone against which the neutrality of governance and its democratic content is tested. Under no circumstances, its solemn, serious and businesslike mandate is to be changed into an instrumentality for cornering the political opponents. It is not the home ministry's writ to be used as a political weapon but serve as a law enforcement mechanism and the sentinel for internal order and security. The home ministry need only be tough on lawbreakers and terrorists, and not on political opposition.

When non-partyman Major (ret'd) Rafiqul Islam was chosen by the PM to be her first home minister it was held aloft by many as a sign of good judgement and wisdom on her part. She was thought to have begun well there. Down the line, however he failed to deliver, a failure that has been basically ascribed to a couple of reasons: first, the growing distance between the PM and her home minister as the latter felt sidetracked by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and secondly, he was regarded as being 'soft' towards the opposition BNP.

Nasim may have a strong party image on the debit side, but he has advantages like having 'effective ways with the bureaucracy' and good equations with the PM, so that he starts from a vantage point, so to speak, to deliver the goods. But of utmost importance will be the policy framework under which he works, a set of prime ministerial guidelines that must necessarily be sound and devoid of any partisan slant.

Still No Dialogue

Over two weeks have passed since the end of the municipal elections and the last round of opposition agitation against the government. It was hoped then that the two sides would see the folly of their respective positions and strive to effect a fundamental change in direction. For both the ruling and opposition parties, this would have meant abandoning the path of confrontation and opening a dialogue with an open mind. Unfortunately, there does not seem to have been any serious move from either side to change course and engage in a dialogue. Time is passing by and an aimless drift seems to have set in. Worse, in the absence of dialogue, the distance between the two sides appears to be growing by the day. This drift has to be stopped.

The current state of BNP-Awami League standoff appears quiet in comparison with what has been going on till recently. But this kind of 'peace' is rather dangerous because it can breed the kind of frustration, which later finds outlet only through greater outbursts. The goal of the government should be to ensure sustained stability, in which all political players would view the electoral process as the focal point of politics. Such a stability cannot be ensured unless the two sides thrash out their differences across the negotiating table, reach agreement on issues of discord and earn each other's trust to abide by the rules of normal, democratic politics.

To date, the ruling party has made some informal overtures to the opposition to open a dialogue. The general secretary of the Awami League has also offered to start talks through the press. But these are time-worn diversionary tactics, and it does not take a genius to see through them. A dialogue between the two sides would have to be a formal affair, and the AL general secretary needs to make a written offer directly to his counterpart. The government bears the principal responsibility to ensure political stability and the public would like to see the ruling party live up to that responsibility. But the opposition bears responsibilities, too. They need to make it clear that they are prepared for dialogue without any preconditions.

Security at ZIA

The Daily Star has carried a story based on the reports of two probe bodies that investigated the death of a youngman at the wheel carriage of a British Airways aircraft on January 2, 1999. A similar death occurred to another youngman in the wheel carriage of Saudi-bound Biman aircraft in early 1997. The inquiry committees felt that lack of proper security supervision might have enabled Junaid, the victim, to sneak into the wheel bay of the British Airways plane when it stayed overnight at ZIA. Following the first such incident in 1997 a probe body made 10 recommendations which were not implemented. This time around, the two inquiry committee submitted 40 recommendations altogether, which ranged from withdrawal of some officers from ZIA to beefing up security measures at the Airport to tightening security cordon around the apron and the runway area. The probe bodies also pointed out the lapses of the station engineer of British Airways who failed to carry out physical checks of the wheel carriages before take off, specially after the aircraft had stayed overnight at ZIA. The bottomline of these reports is that the authorities ought to immediately improve the security measures at the airports. The committees have also suggested creation of new posts for proper implementation of its recommendation. But the vital question remains whether these can be achieved without the will to do so. We strongly feel that government should immediately consider the reports and take appropriate actions to eliminate the possibility of such horrible incidents in the future and make the airport fool-proof in terms of security.

SOME self-appointed defenders of our religious minorities get active not when people are under attack, but when an opportunity arises for scare-mongering about their faith being 'in danger'. The Shahi Imam of Delhi's Jama Masjid and sections of the ulama elsewhere belong to this group, which includes Christians, Sikhs, even Parsis. Many such 'leaders' fell on lean times after their promise to protect the Babri mosque against the Hindu-communal onslaught was betrayed. To overcome their isolation, they launched two emotive campaigns. The first was the 'triple talaq' fatwa. This failed to evoke a response. The second was job reservations for the minorities.

This too won little sympathy, because the vast majority of Muslims believe that the reservation demand can trigger off a move for separate electorates — with nightmarish implications. These 'leaders' have long been in search of issues to clutch at. Now, one issue has been literally thrown into their lap — ironically, by the Muslim-hating BJP. This is the granting of a visa to Salman Rushdie. Some communally-minded Imams have already launched a vicious campaign against Rushdie's visit. The visa issue could turn into a repeat of the Shah Bano episode

THE title of the article is shamelessly plagiarised (with apologies to the now defunct MIRROR monthly, Mrs. Zaibunissa Hamidullah's photo-heavy chronicle of Pakistan pre-1971. The Second D-8 Summit in Dhaka on 1-2 March 1999 was filled with photo-opportunities and formality but had little substance. Of the 8 leaders meant to attend, it was understandable why the Nigerian Head of State Gen Abubakar Salam could not leave the country during the all-important election week — but why (alphabetically) Presidents Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Habibie of Indonesia and Khatami did not turn up, except for disinterest one could not well understand? President Suleyman Demirel of Turkey and Prime Ministers Mahathir of Malaysia and Mian Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan more than made up in sheer value and enthusiasm so that the host country Bangladesh was not embarrassed but that particular ingredient that should go into such an association was unfortunately missing.

The idea of having the developing countries of the Muslim world combining their assets and talents to meet the two challenges of modernisation and globalisation was excellent. One must give credit to President Demirel of Turkey for having carried and nurtured this idea along, especially since Turkey has been looking westwards to joining the European Union rather than looking east to the less fortunate members of the Muslim Ummah. It is very true that while the 8 countries have different expertise and

Issue(ing) a Visa: Rushdie, 'freedom' and communalism

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

They must express secular solidarity with Rushdie. But they should also warn him of the harmful consequences of a high-profile visit. Rushdie would do us all a service if he made his visit a low-profile one, so as to avoid giving communalists an issue, and a chance to inject poison into it.

— to the Hindutva forces' delight. The BJP has been cynically duplicitous on the issue. It cannot claim to defend tolerance or artistic freedom. It has never subscribed to these values. The BJP is the most intolerant current in our social life. Faced with the Minorities Commission's mild criticism of its handling of the communal situation, it shamelessly demands that the Commission itself be scrapped! The Hindutva forces have contempt for the freedom of expression: witness the assaults upon Sahmat's exhibition, Hussain's sketches, and Fire. The thugs who carried out these attacks are laying down, along with the BJP, what is 'decency in art and public morality'. The BJP has always held matters of faith to be above the law, beyond facts. Its Hindutva makes nonsense of any claim to objectivity or rationality. The BJP assails universalist notions of free inquiry, individual liberty and personal choice.

Suddenly, this party of intolerance now pretends to be sweetly reasonable. This derives from its Machiavellian plan to polarise the communal situation and push the religious minorities into a corner, so they can be made to appear intolerant. The BJP is inventing another 'Shah Bano' crisis. It hopes this will take some of the heat off itself on the minorities harassment issue. Given the sympathy in the West for Rushdie — in part driven by anti-Islamic prejudice — the BJP reckons its move won't attract folk internationally, but will help divert attention from its many failures. The party stands discredited. Its stock plummets daily as its leaders play out their parts in today's low comedy. Conspiracy apart, the BJP and the fanatical mullah have something in common. They perceive Islam as monolithic, and Indian Muslims as homogenous. But Indian Islam is not monolithic

or inflexible. It is plural, and admits of many sects, practices and rituals. There are more than a dozen schools of Islamic theology in India, including the two most important ones east of Suez, and a host of sufi traditions, some even influenced by tantrism. Greater differences separate the Meos of Rajasthan from the Moplahs of Kerala, than from Hindus of the same region. Scholars such as Muzaffar Alam masterfully argue that the very idea of 'Muslim rule' in India needs to be broken into discrete phases, dynasties, and state structures. It is illegitimate to bracket the Turkish-origin rulers of the Delhi Sultanate with dynasties from Afghanistan, or with the Moghuls. Contrary to prejudice, the Moghuls were in some ways refugees from Central Asia, then under Mongol invasion which threatened that region's Persian-influenced culture. They had a stake in seeking

accommodation within India, not in imposing Islam. The real confrontation in medieval India was not between Islam and Hinduism, but between Persian power and Brahmanism. Hindutva ideologists totally fail to understand this. Their effort to depict Islam as monolithic involves manipulation. In the Rushdie case too, the manipulation is stark. BJP ministers have tom-tommed the visa issue. It is one thing to quietly grant a visa to someone; India gives out 9,000 visas every day to foreigners. It is quite another to shout from the rooftops that you have done so. That does not mean Rushdie shouldn't get a visa. His right to visit the country of his origin, about which he has written so well, is undeniable. India should be glad to receive a writer of his stature. Not having him is our loss. However, Rushdie's coming here for a series of public appearances amidst a vitiated communal

situation is fraught with danger: Islamic bigots will act up, strengthening Hindu communalism through a backlash. Rushdie is politically too serious to want this. Secular-minded parties, intellectuals, and activists too are aware of the danger. Therefore, they must not ignore the BJP's devious plans. They can act responsibly without in any way denying Rushdie's rights. They must affirm his right to a visa, and more fundamentally, to the freedom of expression. They must expose the BJP's double standards: appealing Hindu communalists, but professing 'liberalism' when dealing with Rushdie. They must express secular solidarity with Rushdie. But they should also warn him of the harmful consequences of a high-profile visit. Rushdie would do us all a service if he made his visit a low-profile one, so as to avoid giving communalists an issue, and a chance to inject poison into it. He should strongly criticise the BJP's politics and the logic of appeasement that led to the banning of his book. We should extend unstinted support to Rushdie. But we should tell him that a low-profile visit will make for many more future trips — to our mutual benefit.

Dhaka Doings

What we need in Bangladesh is not another diplomat bureaucrat to head the Mission but a knowledgeable political appointee who can make things happen positively for Pakistan by cutting across diplomatic morass.

varied resources to match than individual skills, they could well learn and gain from each other. Though Iran was represented only by its Vice President Dr. Hassan Habibi, the proposals put forth were workable and achievable, showing a seriousness of purpose that was endorsed by Mahathir enthusiastically. Mian Nawaz Sharif gave some very practical suggestions about cooperation, emphasis being on the private sector participation, this was reflected in the adoption of the 33-point Dhaka Declaration that spelt out the agreed agenda till the next summit in Cairo in 2001, a distant two years later. The participating countries pledged to form the new grouping into an effective trading bloc with greater cooperation and thrust in 13 key sectors. While recognizing trade and business as most important for cooperation and collaboration, the Summit welcomed globalisation but cautioned that the accompanying risks and increased inequality between developing and developed countries must be recognized.

A permanent coordinating centre was agreed to with intent to hold meetings and seminars to follow up on the agreed points in the Declaration. Both Mahathir and Mian Nawaz Sharif emphasised and got included their concern about free capital flows contributing to the global financial crisis with each country promising to effectively contribute in one's principal expertise. A workable platform can be established if there is positive follow up on the issues. A word about the hosts and the well arranged Summit. No effort was spared to make the guests comfortable but the venue of the meeting in Dhaka Sheraton Hotel (the old Intercontinental) is not logistically equipped to deal with such an event. The lobby is cramped, the two old lifts are overworked and security was stretched beyond such limits that the guests were often uncomfortable. While the events were well con-

ducted, the format could have been made more imaginative to overcome the shortcomings. Even at the best of times Sheikh Hasina is rather wooden in her verbal expressions at the international level, it painfully shows through the veneer. To be fair, there was no lack of enthusiasm and hospitality, the Bangladeshis spared no effort. However, the conduct of the South Asian Business Summit in January 1998 was much better, even though as respects leaders there was far more star power here. While there is already good chemistry between Mian Nawaz Sharif and Sheikh

Hasina, there was certainly some moves which appeared to embarrass Pakistan. The print media laid a lot of stress on the fact that the Pakistani PM not coming to the Savar Memorial to lay flowers, conveniently forgetting that (1) he had been there twice during earlier events and (2) the schedule for the ceremony attended by the leaders was scheduled for several hours before he reached Dhaka. Moreover the Bangladesh TV showed bad taste in focussing on 1971 atrocities. You do not call a

guest to your home and then proceed to rub his nose in the dust. There is a fine politico-bureaucratic-type sanction that is lacking of grace behind these orchestrated embarrassments, particularly against the leader of a country who is genuinely interested in increasing cooperation and collaboration across the board. For whatever it is worth Ms Benazir Bhutto carries herself far better internationally about inserting the memories about her father out of context into such occasions than does Sheikh Hasina. There was a remark passed by another Head of State/Government about 'forgiving them as they have yet to grow up as a nation'. The atrocities of '71 has been well documented in the Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report. It is time to let it see the light of the day. Bhutto kept it under wraps because it skewered the politicians on both sides far more than for the sake of the Pakistan Army. However it is believed to be far more precise about casualties and damage, painful though it may be, it is time to publish the truth so that certain myths may be blown away, particularly about the extent and nature of the atrocities from both the sides. Others who have been bound by the Official Secrets Act, it is time to lift that restriction and see the ugly face of reality under that veil. It may well invite some debate, the end result will be, we will be over and done with 1971 once and for all. A word about the Pakistan High Commission and its staff. The outgoing envoy, Karam Elahi is a fine gentleman supported by excellent people right down the line who were enthusiastic about their duties and responsibilities. Nobody doubts either their intent or purpose but one must question their ability within the parameters given to them by the Foreign Office. Bangladesh is a country with a vast reservoir of goodwill among the populace for Pakistan. The Diplomatic staff cannot function here as they do

in New Delhi or other places. True there are visa restriction problems, from the Pakistan side to discourage 'Stranded Pakistanis' and intending Bangladeshis immigrants who all make a bee-line for Karachi and from the Bangladesh side to stop the illegals who are already in Karachi from coming back. However these need to be explained through the media and wonder of wonders, there is no 'media section' in the High Commission in a country where it is vitally important to maintain a proper flow of information. The bureaucracy in the Foreign Office is mind-boggling about its priorities. Foreign Secretary Shamsad should get this right without any delay, at least in Bangladesh where a media representative is vital. What we need in Bangladesh is not another diplomat bureaucrat to head the Mission but a knowledgeable political appointee who can make things happen positively for Pakistan by cutting across diplomatic morass. The new envoy is supposedly a fine foreign service officer, he will be strait-jacketed by the standard Foreign Office parameters from reaching the people in the street imbued with good feelings about Pakistan. It is always a pleasure to be in Dhaka, the city may be cramped with traffic that badly needs flyovers and raised expressways but it is visibly brimming with prosperity despite the country's many travails. We were once a country in name together, now we can go forward together as two disparate countries having not only complementary economies but common faith and belief.



Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

only be ratified only after both houses favour it. Sensing an embarrassment and ultimate failure to approve the dismissal, the government decided to revoke the decision and the RJD government was restored in Bihar. Indeed, this has been a setback for the Vajpayee government. Clearly the decision by the federal government to sack a government often evokes controversy. President K. R. Narayanan was visibly unhappy when a few months ago a recommendation was made by the Vajpayee government to dismiss the Bihar government on the ground that it was not performing well. Two influential ministers in the federal

government, Mr. George Fernandes and Mr. Nitish Kumar, who come from Bihar and belong to the Santa Party, which is a constituent of the ruling coalition, wanted the Rabri Devi government to go. The President sent back the recommendation to the government without approving it. Under the constitution, the titular head of the country can do it but he is bound to approve it if it is sent to him for the second time. The government did not pursue it that time but when this time it was again sent to President Narayanan, he approved it and the government in Bihar was terminated. RJD supreme and former state chief minister Laloo Prasad Yadav, who is the husband of Rabri Devi, built up

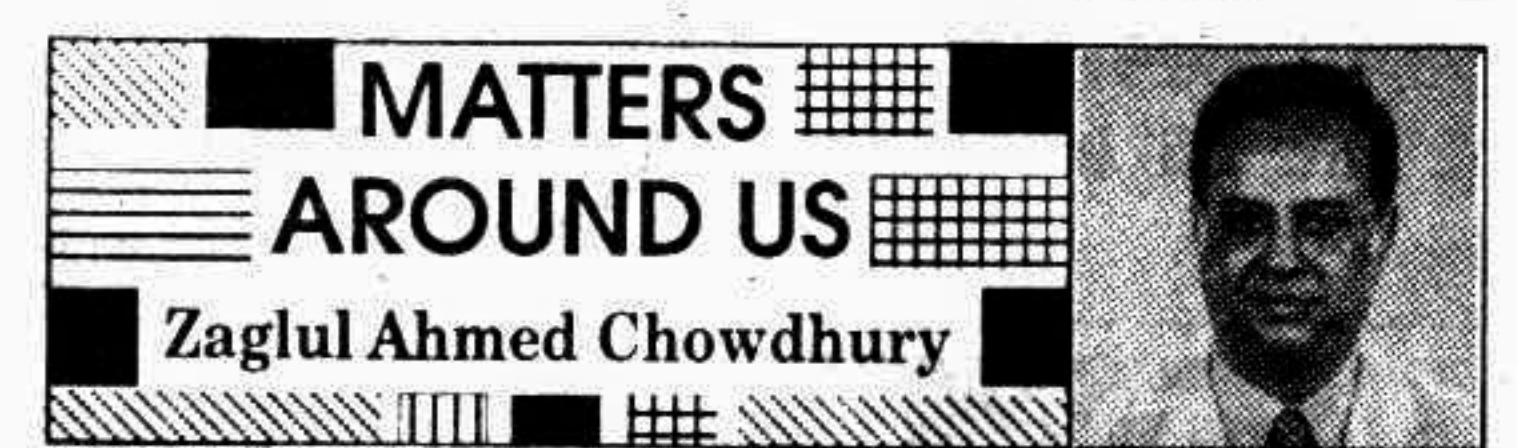
a movement seeking support of all opposition parties to this 'unjust' dismissal and the effort paid dividends. Opposition parties which are seldom on common platform found unity in the issue and the support of the biggest opposition Congress has been crucial. The revocation of the step is being considered by the opposition as a big triumph for the 'cause of democracy'. Many Indian politicians including West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu and Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Dr. Farooq Abdullah are extremely critical of the 'misuse' of Article 356. They say the decisions are taken on political grounds rather than called for by the conditions in a state. Even if the council of ministers takes a decision on this regard, the ceremonial president every time does not see eye to eye with the government on the matter although he has little choice constitutionally except only once sending it back to the ministry. President Narayan did not approve it when the previous

Is Bihar a Setback for Vajpayee?

The Vajpayee government is seen as faring not bad at the centre and this is one reason for which the fractious coalition, mainly depending on the image of Mr. Vajpayee, is still firm in the saddle in the south bloc. But decisions like sacking of Bihar government can be counter-productive and will also be considered as incompatible with democratic norms.

Vajpayee had a meeting with Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, leader of the Congress, in a bid to convince her on the need for her party's support for the move although it had opposed the action in Lok Sabha. Mrs. Gandhi's party was not favourably disposed to the RJD government in Bihar and its state unit supported the federal government's decision to dismiss Rabri Devi's government. Still, the Congress opposed the move at the Lok Sabha considering this as an attack on an elected government and fearing such steps may also be taken against state governments under its leadership unless the move was resisted tooth and nail.

The ruling party won the voting despite the challenge of opposition parties but it needed Congress support in the Rajyasabha where ruling coalition's strength is much weaker. But Mrs. Gandhi remained unmoved and made it clear that her party would oppose this in the upper house as well and this made the passage of the decision difficult since the move would



only be ratified only after both houses favour it. Sensing an embarrassment and ultimate failure to approve the dismissal, the government decided to revoke the decision and the RJD government was restored in Bihar. Indeed, this has been a setback for the Vajpayee government. Clearly the decision by the federal government to sack a government often evokes controversy. President K. R. Narayanan was visibly unhappy when a few months ago a recommendation was made by the Vajpayee government to dismiss the Bihar government on the ground that it was not performing well. Two influential ministers in the federal

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United Front government of Prime Minister I. K. Gujral wanted to dismiss the BJP government in the largest state of Uttar Pradesh and similarly, he refused to sack the RJD government in Bihar last year. It seems the rationale of Article 356 or its application is questionable. There is talk from time to time to reconsider this article of the constitution with a view to amending it but political parties cannot agree on this as whichever party controls the federal government wants to retain it for its own advantage. However, the check and balance like ratification by both the houses of parliament of this move certainly ensures that it is not misused. The restoration of the Bihar government is a glaring testimony in this direction and this should be another lesson for the federal governments in India. The Vajpayee government is seen as faring not bad at the centre and this is one reason for which the fractious coalition, mainly depending on the image of Mr. Vajpayee, is still firm in the saddle in the south bloc. But decisions like sacking of Bihar government can be counter-productive and will also be considered as incompatible with democratic norms.

To the Editor...

A new way to celebrate Ekushey Sir, I believe it is time to think hard and deep, take a new look at the way we annually celebrate Ekushey memorial. As a student directly involved in the events of those momentous days in February, 1952, my thoughts are often away from the ritual manner in which we remember the 21st February. My thoughts are beyond laying wreaths, gathering in verbose seminars, waiving colourful posters, holding Melas, and worse still, hijacking it for partisan agenda, often laced with violence. In fact, the Day should have little or nothing to do with any of those. So let me begin. As a memorial, the Day should be according to the Bangla calendar i.e. Falgun, and each year, the same day of Falgun as it was in 1952. Much more importantly, the Day should be observed by thoughts and deeds to make

Bangla a richer and sturdier vehicle for contemporary arts and sciences. Each day of each year should be dedicated to get to the goal of full literacy leaving no one illiterate. Forty-seven years have passed since 1952. What have we got, as a nation, to show in regard to ability of the people to read and write? It is a national shame and tragedy that more than half the population is not literate. To the large majority of the population, what is the meaning of all these feasts, banners, speeches, exhibitions other than being hollow? Do these celebrations bring any of those deprived even of literacy nearer to their basic rights? Bangla cannot draw any prestige nor can Bangladesh take pride from this condition. Barefoot or otherwise we may walk, poignant chorus we may sing, speeches we may make, meals we may hold, functions we may attend — none of these reduces the national stigma of denying more than half the people right to read and write. Time to pause, time to think again, act different. The best and only celebration of the Day, the most respect we can show to the 'Shaheeds' the highest glory we can crown Bangla with, will be by giving each citizen of the land the right to education. To deny that remains a sin — a national sin that no amount of pious manifest in flowers, festivals, words, and walks will wash away. It is painful enough for anyone who witnessed those events in 1952 to see how the Day is being turned into a virtual 'feast' of competitive emotional, political and commercial posturing. It is better to redeem the pledge of 'Ekushey' with new resolve and deeds. That alone will be the true celebration of the Day and bring real meaning and substance to it. Dr M Zakir Husain 4/4/1-B, Block-A, Lalmitia Dhaka-1207

Defence officers housing scheme Sir, A number of DOHSs have been established by the government in different areas of Dhaka city. But land is very scarce in the city and those who are young officers now have very little prospect of getting a plot. Hence instead of allotting plots, if flats of different size are constructed by the government and offered for sale to the officers in instalments this will meet the requirement of the defence officers for at least the next 20 years even from the existing available Army land. HBFC also offers loan these days for flats. Hence it is felt that there should be a long-term plan in this regard instead of going for cheap popularity through allotment of plots. It is high time that government and authorities concerned thought over the matter dispassionately and find out a pragmatic solution to the problem.

It may not be out of place to mention here that in India and Pakistan, flats are allotted to officers instead of plots although there is no scarcity of land in those countries. A Young Officer Dhaka Tania's ordeal is still not over Sir, A report published in a newspaper on February 18, '99 about Tania, the little girl who was violated in the Dhaka CMM court premises, is very poignant. It was disclosed that Tania's father Fazal Bepari is in a very distraught condition because police has confined his daughter in an unknown place, not allowing him to see her. He has lodged a complain with the Society for Enforcement of Human Rights seeking justice. This is really too much, Tania has not committed any crime, she is the victim of an unspeakable offence. Why her parents are not allowed to see

her is unfathomable. One can just imagine the sufferings of Tania's parents not being able to see their daughter who had gone through a nightmarish experience, to hold her in their arms and console the frightened little soul. Tania's father further complained to the Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR) that CID police lured him and his daughter with a promise of three thousand taka and Taka 10,000 in cash to make false statement that Mora violated Tania. We are aghast and outraged by this action of the police department; how could people expect protection and justice if this is the condition of our country? We urge BSEHR to take immediate steps so that Tania can return to her family as also try their best to make the real culprit pay for his crime. Nur Jahan Chittagong