

Why See a Bug-bear in It?

The furore over alleged rape of a British woman by four policemen as she went to report a theft to a city police station in early 1998 is apparently crossing a threshold it had better not. For, Britain and Bangladesh have been otherwise in an excellent state of relationship worthy of furtherance from strength to strength. Since the BBC report which revealed the episode and the resident British High Commission's supportive statement in this behalf are topical matters relating to an old case it would have been perhaps in the fitness of things to recapitulate full details of it, albeit at the official level. On the other hand, if the British authorities had furnished the particulars earlier on, then what is left to be done is to look into the records and respond to the situation, accordingly. True, there may be an element of confidentiality involved in publicly revealing the identity of the person concerned, but that, to our mind, is not quite material here.

The focus of our attention should be entirely on what was done in the case after the British Consul Geoffrey Fairhurst had formally reported the incident to our Inspector General of Police on December 21, 1998, as claimed by the BHC in Dhaka.

If we had verified the matter promptly, taken a view or an action on it in light of our findings and informed the British authorities accordingly then the misunderstanding that ensued subsequently could certainly be avoided. That was the right time for us to have insisted on their furnishing the full particulars if they had not done so to begin with. And, after having carried out an inquiry on the basis of whatever information we had we could have taken an action and have the matter treated as closed. At any rate, keeping in touch with them was an imperative necessity.

Just to turn around now and smell a conspiracy of vested quarters in all this sounds wide off the mark. To flog the BBC by adducing to an incident of misreporting on flood casualties which it eventually retracted is an utterly irrelevant exercise in drawing analogies. When a world service has to handle so much information material some error may creep in, but if it was set right by admission, the matter ought to have ended there. If on the other hand, British authorities have persistently refrained from giving out full details of the case without which the matter could not be effectively dealt with by the Bangladesh side, as the Home Minister says, then it is obviously for them to be introspective. All concerned must now try wholeheartedly to put the row behind them.

Only Talks, No Headway

PCUSS leader Shantu Larma, seems more inclined to talks than work. During his latest round of talks with the government, Larma reportedly refused to take charge of the Regional Council, insisting that the demands he had been pressing for would have to be met first before he did so. Immediate end to this stand-off looks highly unlikely, which essentially stalls implementation of the CHT Peace Accord, signed on December 2, 1997 and functioning of a vital land commission to conduct a land survey in the region.

When the peace accord was signed, general expectations were that along with the two decades of bloody conflict being put to rest, all kinds of controversy on governance of the region would evaporate, too. That has not been the case yet. On the contrary, every round of talks seems to spawn new problems.

The fact that the regional council is just an interim arrangement, and will be replaced by an elected body in due course when elections to the three hill district councils are held, seems to have evaded Larma's attention. The hill district council elections will form an electoral college for a truly representative Regional Council to be put in place. However, Larma's obstinacy, at this point of time, is not letting the process move forward. Besides, his insistence on another appointment with the premier without having a follow-up meeting with CHT Affairs Minister Kalparanjan Chakma on the outcome of his 7th February talks with the PM is indicative of his prestige-seeking working style. There is a task force to implement the CHT accord and that is where basically his mind should be. Only in exceptional circumstances should he approach the Prime Minister for her intervention, if required.

Opportunities for peace and development in the CHT have come after two decades of bloody conflict. Responsibility to implement the peace pact rests equally on both sides. The European Union has made it clear that aid will come for development only when all conditions stipulated in the CHT peace accord will have been fulfilled. By refusing to take charge of the regional council, Larma is, more than anything else, delaying the dawn of a better tomorrow for the people in the hill tracts.

Police Excess, Again!

A young man, Mujibur Rahman, was brutally murdered on 14 March last. He was chased and caught by Sabujbagh thana police in the jheel of Basabo, mercilessly beaten up and then drowned in the waterbody, alleged his relatives who saw the gruesome incident happening before their eyes. The autopsy report also confirmed the death by drowning with multiple injuries at the back of the head. Muji, as he was nicknamed, was neither a criminal nor a suspect, so he tried to flee the police as the latter raided their house without warrant at the instigation of a local ruling party heavyweight, as alleged by Muji's relatives.

Reports have it that four of the inmates of the house were arrested under Sec 54. This seems to be another typical instance of police excess committed in exercise of sweeping powers. Memory is still fresh of the death of a young man in custody at Motijheel thana which the police tried to pass off as suicide by 'shoe lace'. We do not know what happened to that case.

The government has formed an inquiry committee to probe Muji's death but we have reasons to keep our fingers crossed over the outcome of the initiative. The local leader responsible for the incident was reportedly being given police protection till Sunday and the officer and three constables connected with the tragic incident are said to be at large without any departmental action against them. We strongly condemn the murder of Muji and also protest the highhandedness of the law-enforcing agency. Culprits must be brought to book.

NATO Enters Eastern Europe

Warsaw pact included territories like Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, which have become the new members of NATO. The original role of NATO was to defend the West against Soviet aggression. Soviet threat has totally evaporated. What then is the raison d'être of NATO?

The most obvious explanation is that NATO is a giant bureaucracy and a bureaucracy does not easily go away.

With the inclusion of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) has taken a giant leap into new territory and has extended its frontiers to Russia. Except for a meek protest, Russia has done precious little.

Rather than being a shrinking business NATO appears to expand in size if not grow in strength. NATO appeared on the scene shortly after the end of the Second World War. Cold War between the former USSR and the West led by the USA followed almost immediately and divided the two in hostile camps. There had been innumerable crisis between the two adversaries including the Berlin airlift in the early fifties.

The most frightening confrontation took place in 1962. The Soviet Union had installed missiles with nuclear warheads in Cuba, soft underbelly of the US. I was posted in the Pakistan Permanent Mission to the UN and my boss was Sir Muhammad Zafarulla Khan, who was also the President of the UN General Assembly. We could feel the tension that ran through the corridors of the UN. The young US President John F Kennedy threatened the USSR to withdraw her missiles from Cuba under US inspection or face US nuclear strike. We witnessed the humiliating spectacle of Soviet ships carry mis-

siles from the shores of Cuba and the ships inspected by US ships on the high seas. It is then that the great statesman Charles de Gaulle of France exclaimed that the US had won the Cold War without knowing it.

Since the Cuban missile crisis it has been downhill for the USSR. She has been treated like a superpower because of her size and nuclear and space achievements. They have helped mask the truth that inside was hollow. The Soviet Union was not rejuvenating nor its leadership. In fact the state looked singularly unsteady in the hand of old and unhealthy looking Leonid Brezhnev.

The misadventure in Afghanistan heralded the death knell of the Soviet Union. She got caught throughout the eighties in a murderous war in the inhospitable terrain of Afghanistan. It was a no win situation and the Soviet troops returned home with defeat writ large on its forehead.

In the meantime Soviet economy was going from bad to worse. The stark reality was that she was producing much less than she was consuming.

There was clamouring for consumer goods of the western variety. The state enterprises of the Soviet Union continued to churn out shoddy and shoddy goods. On the food front the situation became desperate. Year after year we saw the sorry spectacle of the Soviet Government coming to the US market to buy food grains. In other words this was a spectacular

the vanishing of the Soviet Empire. Of all the actions taken by her the dismantling of the Communist party was undoubtedly the most far reaching. For it is through the Communist party that the Soviet Empire was held together and tentacles of the party reached out to the farthest corner of the globe.

This action of Gorbachev reminded me of an experience

failure of the Socialist style of economy. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

Then came Gorbachev on the scene — the last Soviet leader. His glasnost and perestroika have been much criticized. They are supposed to open the flood gates to Soviet disintegration. My feeling is that Gorbachev made a valiant effort to salvage a sinking ship but found the waves engulf his hip. His misfortune is that he presided over

in Africa. I was special envoy of President Ziaur Rahman. I met a Ghanaian, who had been converted to Islam by a Qadiani preacher. In Africa almost all conversions to Islam have been done by Qadianis. President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had got passed a bill through parliament that Qadianis were not Muslims but non-Muslim minorities. The Ghanaian gentleman was totally at a loss about his religious identity.

Shortly after the splintering of the Soviet Union I had an occasion to visit, as a member of a Bangladeshi delegation, nearly all the states of the former Soviet Union. Utter confusion reigned almost everywhere and in some capitals like in Ashkhabad we found authorities quickly removing Communist party signs from official buildings. The action from Moscow to which they were neither consulted nor participated left them in an utterly helpless state.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, we have witnessed dramatic developments and it would be foolhardy to predict the shape of things to come. One major event has been the fall of Berlin Wall and reunification of Germany. The USA has been attempting to draw Russia in a tight embrace. The twin operators, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have free run in Russia. Russia has been trying bravely to hold on to her disintegrated Empire. She has built the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and has been fending off overtures from the US.

Since its birth nearly half a century ago NATO has come a long way. Shortly before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the counterpart of NATO, the Warsaw pact, saw its demise — unmourned, unsung. Warsaw pact included territories like Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, which have become the new members of NATO. The original role of NATO was to defend the West against Soviet aggression. Soviet threat has totally evaporated. What then is the *raison d'être* of NATO? The most obvious explanation is that NATO is a giant bureaucracy and a bureaucracy does not easily go away.

As we approach the new millennium the world continues to change. There is no definite shape emerging. It is Pax Americana for the present. It is still a soaring power. No world problem can be addressed without the direct involvement of the US. Yet new forces are emerging. Like dawn follows the night a new balance of forces is bound to take shape. Let us hope that the transition is not painful.

The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman

AL-BNP Standoff

How Long Should People Bear the Brunt?

by A R Shamsul Islam

There is a historic need for both Awami League and BNP to see through the menace of the situation obtaining in the society chiefly because of their suicidal stubbornness. It is high time they should wash their hands and sit across the table with a view to finding out ways and means for breaking their recent standoff. Where there is sincerity there is solution.

MUNICIPAL elections however got through. The opposition alliance spearheaded by BNP boycotted them. Mere boycotting was not enough. They vowed to resist holding of elections. They called hartal for consecutive 66 hours covering election days. The government, on their part, stood firm to carry elections through. Awami activists roared loud and long on streets and places of public resort in support of elections. The opposition could not exert so much force as to confine the voters indoors on election days.

Out of a total of 182 pourasabhas, election to 136 were held on three days from 23 to 25 February. Elections to remaining 46 pourasabhas were not announced following High Court orders and border delimitation disputes. Two thousand ninety-one polling centres were installed. In only 19 centres polling remained suspended for disturbances. 18 on first day and one on last day. Subsequent repolling to these suspended centres took place on March 1 and 2.

The opposition declared that barely 10 per cent voters turned up at polls vouching that people had rejected elections. They alleged that ruling party activists had planted ballot boxes with forged votes.

The Election Commission (EC) claimed 60-70 per cent turn up of voters at the polls.

Repolling to postponed centres drew larger number of voters to the tune of 76 per cent.

It claimed the elections to be fair, transparent. An independent observer group, FEMA, viewed that hartal call by the opposition combine could not exert that tangible influence on the polls. Other observers more or less subscribed to the same view. Of course, by and large hartal was observed almost across the country but it could not hold up the voters from casting votes as free movement — on foot and by rickshaw — was found ensured.

Local bodies elections are quite different from those of the National Assembly. The former are based on contest for sphere of influence in the locality.

They are mooted on local leaders' test for neighbours confidence in them. They are not run on party basis. The candidates and voters are immediate to each other. Obligation to and

persuasion for giving votes are greater and more direct. Local bodies elections are the base wherefrom local leaders spring upon greater platform of the nation. So they do not like to let a local bodies elections slip from their grasp and fall on their laps.

Chief political parties, while in power, have developed a culture to ignore the opposition. The last BNP government ignored Awami League on many occasions. This defiant attitude did not, however, pay off on the issue if municipal elections ought to be held without participation of any of all major parties the verdict might have gone merrily in favour of a 'No'.

In fact municipal elections with the participation of all parties, particularly the major ones, are what the people wish for. The people as well desire and demand that both the two major parties should know very well that it is their bounden obligation to make for an ambience for all-party-participated polls in a truly free and fair manner.

Both Awami League combines and BNP allies have sat to assess the post-election situation and determine their future course of action. Awami League and BNP have viewed from their typical angle and ego. It is alleged that both of them suffer from a false sense of complacency and conceit. Awami League thinks it has gained by the outcome of elections. Large turnout of the voters and peaceful holding barring some stray cases of turmoils, of elections have increased government's popularity. It has won the first battle of local bodies election despite opposition's vow to spoil them. This will facilitate holding elections to next tiers of local bodies even if these are opposed by the opposition alliances.

It is ruling party's prime responsibility to defuse tensions and bring the prospect of solution, once seemed impossible, within a range of practicability. This requires utmost tolerance, tact and above all total commitment. People want Awami League to dispassionately think if it has ever attempted to reach that excellence of attitude. Politics is not a crude game of excelling in brute force. Rather it is a fine art of achieving edifying missions.

Awami League has no reason

to think that people participated in municipal polls in compliance with its persuasions. In fact people came up to vote from their own urge to elect representatives of their own immediate areas and to show respect or courtesy to the call of their area candidates who plodded home to home, over and over again. This time direct election of female commissioners to reserved seats added a new interest and excitement. Had there been a referendum on the issue if municipal elections ought to be held without participation of any of all major parties the verdict might have gone merrily in favour of a 'No'.

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The Prime Minister has already declared sitting Mayor Hanif as Awami League's nominee for the next mayoral election. Awami League believes successes achieved in the recently held municipal elections

and to be achieved in other tiers of local bodies elections will pay the party rich dividends in the National Assembly elections that may be held in 2000 earlier of termination of the term as expressed by the Prime Minister. Further, a fraction of the main opposition BNP together with Ershad's Jatiya Party was enticed to participate in the polls. Violating party decisions, 62 from BNP and 37 from Jatiya Party contested in chairmanship. Thirteen from BNP and eight from JP were elected. Many more from these two opposition parties contested in and were elected for the post of ward commissioners. This process may increase rank and file BNP.

On the other hand, the opposition combines have measured the situation in a different way. BNP claimed hartal was successful and only a handful of voters turned up at the polls. The essence of elections — credibility — was completely lacking in municipal polls. Losing candidates of the elections will tilt towards the opposition combines and contribute to strengthening ongoing movements against the government.

In fact, a more consummate and pragmatic outlook from Awami League and BNP is needed. Awami League should bring home the truth that any election without the participation of BNP cannot fill the cup of credibility. If BNP is not brought under the fold of next tiers of local bodies elections it may be driven to extremities riding the path of destruction in sheer desperation. Winning an immediate gain having neglected the opposition as achieved in municipal polls cannot yield a final victory in the long run.

On the other hand, BNP should not miss reading that its non-participation in and failure to thwart municipal elections have demoralised party members and a reversal of its policy is needed in the interest of retaining strength of the party. To topple the government by street movements appears a far cry. Time has come for BNP to develop a wisdom that pursuing a policy of pulling down a government by street agitations should be abandoned.

Terrorism and violence of harder stuff have erupted in quick succession across the country. JDS leader Kazi Aref Ahmed and five others were shot dead in a brush fire on a public meeting in broad daylight in Kushtia on February 16. Only 19 days later two high-power bomb blasts killed eight and wounded another 200 on an open stage in the concluding function of the Uddihi held in Jessore town in the early hours of March 7. So on and so forth.

OPINION

The Power of Politics

Alif Zabr

The politicians in power appear to be acting in a hurry, evidently under pressure, not only from the turn of events, and accumulated list of 'accomplishments' but also under the new combination of the opposition parties, who are brandishing hartal as the deterrent weapon, so effectively used by the party now in power several years ago.

Tasting one's own invention is a sobering experience. Now the poet and the Taliban are on the same platform (not harmoniously of course); and the madrasah boys are watching for some cue. The government offices will henceforth be playing hide and seek, avoiding the hartal days.

Such flexibility in resolve is praiseworthy. Some inflexible areas and reside in documents as percentage of areas to be developed: over-population, rural-urban, under-fed: human rights, marginal living, living below the poverty line, the death rate, the birth rate, and other mortality facts and figures. Some physical structures come up as symbols of new projects, without foundation, structure, or infrastructure. Drums sound because they are empty: full drums do not sound.

Satisfied people do not make much noise. The ambitious do, especially the politicians, who cannot cross flooded rivers, but magically cross the floor effortlessly. Strange public political liaisons are more intriguing than those concocted by the likes of Monicas.

The politicians have some magical powers, although it would be unkind to ascribe it to black magic. They have nine lives like the proverbial cat; but they do not meow or bark, but thunder pronouncements, as if it were the political day judgement. There are no sick, disabled, or retired politicians. Their omnipotent is omnipresent. They can turn night into day, but cannot remove the grey shades, the plea that they need some shade for rest after their super-human efforts for the people. They almost die for the people; mercifully it is 'almost', otherwise the annual loss would be irreparable.

Their hearts are bleeding for the people, hence all the time they look so gloomy and ferocious, and all the time scowl while addressing the public meeting or parliament. They fling their arms and roll their eyes, as if facing some apparitions of past misdeeds perpetuated on the *janata*.

It is difficult that God made the politicians; but at least He can unmake them as we ordinary mortals do not have the power to get rid of them; or to live without them. What greater compliment the politicians expect? We are at their beck and call. What have they done for us, confessing gratefully that they are trying all the time?

To the Editor...

Will Pakistan ever learn?

Sir, While reading the DS (March 2, 1999), I came across the news item of the D-8 leaders visiting our National Memorial for the martyrs. I scanned the names of the leaders to see if Mr Nawaz Sharif's name was included. All the heads of the delegation, who represented their countries, were present to pay their tributes to the martyrs of our Liberation War, but the Pakistani head of state was not there. The Pakistani Foreign Minister Mr Sartaj Aziz went instead of Mr Nawaz Sharif.