

Sense and Nonsense

Opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia's Paltan Maidan speech on Monday contained some observations and arguments that neither stand to logic stretched to its most liberal limits nor do they reflect well on her sense of responsibility as head of a government-in-waiting. On top of the harangue that the government has handed over the CHT region to the terrorists, armed and trained by India for decades, she has drawn this baffling conclusion that the reported threat to declare Swadhin Bangabhumhi comprising 10 southern and western districts from New Delhi on 26 March was, according to her, an outcome of the signing of the CHT agreement.

That as a political party chief she would have a natural concern for the country's sovereignty and independence is not to be normally contested, but that hardly leaves any room for her connecting things that do not mesh and in the process make herself sound utterly naive and irresponsible. Here she is talking about a peace treaty that is internationally regarded as having marked an end to a two decade-old conflict with a potential for development in the hitherto insurgency-ridden region. By being sweeping in her remarks, she is also straying into the delicate turf of bilateral relations with neighbouring India, a country she has to be interactive with, if and when she became the head of government again.

Setting aside the question of what others might be thinking, how are our own people judging her by the latest irresponsibility swing to her utterances? Surely they cannot accept the reputations without proof, but what is even worse and dreadful is that they tend to make the confusion worse confounded for all practical purposes.

But it is Khaleda Zia who should be actually providing the nation with an alternative vision of the future, thereby creating a high prospect of gaining confidence and greater credibility for her image among the people. As an instance of what positive vibes she can generate by constructive remarks and suggestions let's cite this one: Speaking at the concluding session of the SAARC conference of Speakers and Parliamentarians in the city on Sunday she put 'out a call for the promotion of the role of the opposition in countries of the region. We endorse her views fully adding that speakers ought to be not only the custodians of parliaments but also the protectors of the opposition. Indeed, we cannot think of making the parliament effective without zeroing in on the role of the speaker and ensuring that it is played in an absolutely non-partisan manner. If necessary, he should tilt a bit towards the opposition to err on the side of neutrality.'

Khaleda Zia for her part needs to return to her responsible mould of earlier days, both in words and deeds. If she is present at the parliament more often than not then it would be difficult to ignore the opposition.

War against Arsenic

Water has become synonymous to woes in recent years for a large segment of the country's population, especially those living in the rural areas. First, they came to know, thanks to the international donor agencies and the non-government organisations, that surface water they had been using for generations worked as a carrier for different diarrhoeal diseases. Ground water, they were told, was the way out. Now, when they have just made the switch from surface water to ground water, they are faced with even more potent a danger called arsenic. Arsenic contamination has exposed them, approximately two-thirds of the population, to health hazard that may often lead to fatal consequences. Remedy, they hear now, is a switch back to the age-old source — ponds and other natural water bodies — for potable water after necessary treatment, of course. One wonders should the concept of combining traditional wisdom with modern innovation in finding safe alternatives to drinking water, bounced at Monday's seminar on Arsenic in Ground Water: Searching for Alternatives to Rural Water Supply, not have been entertained in the first place.

Our efforts towards elimination of water-related health hazards, beyond an iota of doubt, has been exclusively donor-driven. So busy have we been in acting on their plans that we have not felt the need either to weigh the potential of our own resources nor to frame a policy in this regard. Even worse, we have not cared for a comprehensive study of the country's water chemistry before execution of these donor-devised projects. The arsenic aggression has indeed been an eye-opener for the think-tanks. Time has come for realisation that the donor input in this area, to whatever extent we need it, must come into play according to our plans that take into account the country's bio-chemical disposition. Unless we come up with a comprehensive plan, people will continue to switch from one solution to another.

Ordeal for the Homebound

Season for a quickback at the expense of innocent passengers has arrived once again. City's inter-city bus and launch terminals are the hubs for such activities by organised gangs known as 'aggyan' (trancing) and 'tana' (pulling and snatching) parties. As Eid-ul-Azha is round the corner thousands of city-dwellers, who have roots in the towns and villages of Bangladesh, will make a dash for sweet home to offer 'Qurbani' and spend a few days with near and dear ones away from the din and bustle of the metropolis.

Many of these people will take the surface route by bus and the queue is already growing longer and longer. This is the most appropriate time for the swindlers to strike. And this is nothing new in this part of the world. What is alarming is the alleged involvement of some unscrupulous members of the law enforcing agencies, specially the police and the Ansars, in these nefarious acts of cheating and robbing the innocent homebound passengers at these terminals. Police are already active in some terminals and have arrested two persons, according to press reports. According to them, these parties become active at bus and launch terminals during the festival holidays when the rush of passengers is pronounced. Knowing the area and extent of their operation and, in some cases, the operators and their mentors, police must act timely and boldly to nab these anti-socials for making the journeys of taxpaying citizens free from such hazards and also comfortable. Extra posse of police should be deployed in strategic points to ward off attacks by the 'partymen' and if necessary plain-clothesmen should be put on duty to help the uniformed personnel. This will act as a definite deterrent against the snatchers and muggers at the terminals.

In Quest of Democratic Governance

by Prof Ataur Rahman

Despite numerous predicaments that the country is faced with, remarkable resilience of its common people against adversities provide grounds for optimism. It is, therefore, imperative that the political leaders show ingenuity by overcoming their myopic and 'tunnel' vision, and work with broad consensus at least on some vital national issues.

ment took a series of austerity measures, rationalised the tax structure, introduced the new Value Added Tax (VAT) system and streamlined credit facilities of nationalised banks and other financial institutions. New incentives were given to encourage private investment particularly from foreign countries and some measures were initiated to check the widespread loss of confidence in an increasingly corrupt and mismanaged public sector. In fact, in 1994 the public sector lost Taka 20 billion, equivalent to 27 per cent of Bangladesh's Annual Development Programme and two per cent of GDP.

Although, the Khaleda Zia government could not make a significant breakthrough in economic front the growth rate began modest hovering around 4.5 per cent annually, did not face any serious economic crisis. Investment climate showed some signs of improvements during this period, although political disturbances in the form of strikes and hartals often put a damper on attracting significant foreign direct investment. Export boom in garment and comfortable foreign exchange position enabled the government to weather many economic crises and political setbacks. Main economic worries came from unemployment situation, income inequality and endemic poverty of the majority of the populace. There is, however, no doubt that some progress was made during this period towards poverty alleviation and through the government's human development efforts and social uplift programmes of scores of NGOs. Greater awareness was also created to address rural and urban poverty issues.

The main challenge for the regime, thus, came not from the economic front but political front. Success of a parliamentary government, as experienced by other countries show, hinges mainly on the level of development of political parties and the far-sightedness of their leaders especially the prime minister and the leader of the opposition. These positions are more constitutional, limited and less-exalted, and the leaders have to sustain their power and influence on the party and the state power operating within certain rules and traditions. The government of Khaleda Zia could not properly handle this crucial aspect of parliamentary politics in an environment where political institutionalisation was difficult and politicians were highly power-centric.

Politics in Bangladesh has important linkages with personality of the leaders. The personality clashes of leaders coming from hereditary political process and symbolising different values and prejudices often brook no compromise. Therefore, despite many positive political development since 1991, democratisation faced serious problems in resolving power conflict in a compromising and peaceful manner. The continuous boycott of the Parliament by the opposition MPs, drawn mainly from the Bangladesh Awami League and their subsequent resignation in support of a 'Neutral Caretaker Government' at the end of 1994 created a lingering political crisis. The year 1995 and the first half of the 1996 witnessed a period of intense political movements by the opposition that virtually shut down the country's economic activities through hartal. The state seemed helpless. It could neither coerce nor accommodate the interests of the contending parties, and finally transformed into, what some people called in the African context a "collapsed state".

Gains of several years of democratic development dissipated with serious adverse impact on economic situation and social order. The nation seemed to be on the brink and had to be brought back by two general elections — one non-competitive and the other competitive and fully participated — the latter being conducted by a constitutional mechanism of a "Neutral Caretaker Government". This unprecedented political episode introduced a new pattern of politics.

The second transition to democratic governance brought the Awami League to power after more than two decades. Many people thought that the change of government at a high economic and social cost to the nation might bring greater understanding and amity in the political process. Immediately after the formation of government, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina described her regime as a "consensus government", implying greater accommodation of the role of opposition in the governing process. She pledged an impressive array of political, economic and social policies and programmes curbing violence and terrorism, restoring independence of judiciary, granting autonomy of the television and radio, strengthening the role of parliament, ensuring transparency and accountability of the government, accelerating economic development process and helping the poor and the disadvantaged. The government's identification of problem-areas has been largely appropriate. But the performances in most areas has, so far, fallen far short of promises. Constraints of the political process, vested interests and inefficiencies of the bureaucratic apparatus particularly at the implementation level cast a somber shadow on the success of the regime's efforts.

On the contrary, many 'controversial issues' have surfaced to strain relations between the

government and the opposition. In fact, the political process has already generated mistrust, wide perceptual gap and intensified conflict, and violence between two major parties has posed a threat to the democratic process. The Awami League has not really accommodated the opposition in the governing process as envisaged in the 'consensus government' concept. While in the beginning, the Jatiya Party was co-opted with induction of a member in the cabinet and major opposition party, the BNP was given the signal that its voice would be heard and legitimate demand would be conceded, the political process soon generated heat between the two major political parties.

The 1997 witnessed serious volatility in politics with unending conflict between the government and the opposition, particularly the BNP severely undermining government's efforts and jeopardising democratic stability. Political agitations, street demonstrations and intermittent hartals continued throughout the year vitiating the political process and disrupting normal life, particularly in the urban areas. The 1998 also saw unfolding of the same vicious political process with an added dimension of 'police brutality', death of prisoners in police custody and increasing 'criminalisation' of politics and violation of human rights. The 'hollowness' of the parliament was reflected in its inability to stem the tide of violent politics and bring the political action from the streets to the house for resolution of conflict through meaningful debates and dialogue. Rather, the unnecessary and controversial debates within the parliament and frequent boycott of its sessions by the opposition members aggravated the situation. The non-functioning of the committee system for a long time due to extreme 'partisan' outlook also undermined the power of the parliament as an institution. The prime minister's inclination to avoid the parliament in explaining some major decisions including agreements with foreign countries, and the opposition leader's skepticism about the effectiveness of parliament, both contributed to the weakness of the parliament in resolving vital national issues.

The government has faced a number of sensitive issues in the past two years. Its 'India policy' caused furor among the opposition and a large segment of the public who questioned the efficacy of the government's 30-year water accord with India, feasibility of importing power from India and rationale to provide transit facilities to India. The government justified the treaty as a significant achievement to improve relations with the 'big neighbour' and to ease sufferings of one-third of Bangladesh through as-

sured and increased flow of water in the dry season. The opposition, on the other hand, was skeptical and claimed that the government's policy was to appease India. The promise of offering transit to India was particularly resented by the opposition as a move to compromise national interest. The gap between the government and the opposition was further widened with the signing of the peace accord with the PCJSS, the government hoping that it would end years of strife with the tribal people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the opposition interpreting its implications as serious for the territorial integrity of the country.

In his first budget speech at the end of July 1996, the Finance Minister Shah AMS Kibria pledged to accelerate economic growth through reforms, increased investment and exports. The 1997 witnessed a flurry of economic activity to boost trade prospects of the country, to step-up privatisation efforts and increase agricultural productivity. The economic growth rate registered increase to 5.7 per cent because of bumper harvest although the government's economic managers could not improve other macro indicators. The stock market debacle was perhaps the single most significant event of the year that cast a shadow on the economy. The rate of inflation as quoted by the government was below five per cent although most analysts and business community thought it to be more than the government's estimate. There was a panic about the liquidity position of the commercial banks and the situation improved and the government was able to streamline credit facilities and improve bank loan recovery. Exports grew faster than expected and import figures were down partly because of government's policy to discourage imports through devaluation of currency. Aid disbursement was also below the expected level contributing to lower import demand. Industry continued to suffer during the last two years due to a lack of domestic demand, power supply shortages and cheaper imports from India. In fact, the power supply situation has caused serious concern and doubt in government's efforts to achieve the desired growth rate in addition to enormous sufferings of the people.

The Awami League government gave a major drive to attract foreign direct investment through a series of measures including opening of export processing zones and providing a number of benefits to foreign investors. A number of prime ministerial overseas trips, ministerial visits and international conferences were designed to sell the country as a place for investment. However, despite substantial pledges by foreign investors, actual direct investment so far has been

small. International investors' interest was more pronounced in such areas as oil and gas exploration. The government, however, has shown vacillation and inefficiency in responding to those opportunities. The government's ambitious plan to improve the infrastructure including the port remained a key problem. The external trade has also been suffering from the serious labour unrest at the Chittagong port and the government has not yet been able to resolve the problem satisfactorily. In fact, the government's economic policies and programmes are seriously constrained by the incompetence of its agencies at the implementation level which is often linked with the political process.

The recent unprecedented and prolonged flood aggravated the economic woes of the country and put the government in a difficult situation. The government's post-flood management became a target for criticism by the opposition parties who termed the government's efforts as mainly politically motivated and inadequate to the proportion of the crisis confronted by the country. The government, on the contrary, argued that they had averted a famine which some predicted and was seriously engaged in distributing relief and doing other post-flood activities for the affected people in addition to repairing the enormous damages caused by the devastating flood.

The future of democratisation and development prospects of the country is fraught with many uncertainties. Some observers argue that given the vulnerability of the country to natural disasters and enormous 'contextual' difficulties arising from its demographic, economic and social fabric, it would be extremely difficult for Bangladesh to ensure a modicum of internal cohesion and stability essential for development. The country will continue to be a 'crisis state' if not a perpetual 'basket-case' for the international community. In fact, the geopolitical realities, abysmal poverty of the people and technological backwardness put serious constraints on the ability of the country, which is already much behind in coping with the unfolding globalisation and regionalisation process. Despite numerous predicaments that the country is faced with, remarkable resilience of its common people against adversities provide grounds for optimism. It is, therefore, imperative that the political leaders show ingenuity by overcoming their myopic and 'tunnel' vision, and work with broad consensus at least on some vital national issues. Ironically, this is not easy given the mistrust, antagonism and prejudices that have grown over the years. But if the country has to survive and prosper as a nation in the next millennium, it has to come out of the present political impasse and resolve power conflicts in peaceful manner.

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Investing in Trouble

AS I SEE IT
Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

have made it big in foreign countries would be investing some of their hard earned money in Pakistan for reasons other than pure profit. Realistically one should expect that 75-80 per cent of the investment will come from such expatriate Pakistanis.

Unfortunately despite this being a well known fact, our investment presentation is mostly in the hands of bureaucrats who do not believe in attracting expatriate Pakistani investment. The request for investment heavily weighted in favour of foreigners. However even the foreigners get to see a Dr Jekyll/Mr Hyde type of change as soon as the potential investor reaches Pakistan. Bugged down by the bureaucracy in many intricacies, all designed to make the investor pay 'jugga tax' for the privilege of investing in Pakistan, the potential foreign investor is still treated fairly reasonably, take in the Independent Power Producers (IPPs) pre-Saif. It is only some times that while he is frustrated from making any investment.

Not so the expatriate Pakistani, he is mostly treated like a visiting leper, an insect who has crawled into the presence of bureaucracy and had the temerity to propose investment in various opportunities. Sir An-

war has his own tales to tell even though he was connected and knew people in 'high places'. Let me relate the recent story of my cousin encouraged to move from Dubai, at least partially, to invest some of his hard earned money in Pakistan.

To launch his venture, he organised a Convention of distributors and invited from abroad about 20 Japanese representatives the hierarchy of the parent company. To display his products he shipped to Karachi a container of electronic goods. Very dutifully, he had duty and sales tax calculated and then paid. By this time the staff at the Customs House knew he was fighting against time to meet the convention date. As one knows, the contrived delay is one of the prime *modus operandi* for the bureaucracy to make money. Despite repeated instructions of the Collectors and the Assistant Collector to get on with it, the appraising staff in cahoots with his Clearing Agent kept him running around in circles from morning till late evening for several days.

When he made the cardinal mistake of complaining to the Collector, a supposedly contrite Principal Appraiser (PA) promised the senior Customs official that he would take ac-

tion immediately, then took my cousin down to his office and made him wait outside his room for two hours before calling him in and informing him about a "new" observation. My cousin said that he was made to go from desk to desk for four days (musical chairs in reverse) till he almost had vertigo. It was quite apparent that the Collector and Assistant Collector (a lady) were seriously being helpful, particularly because of incoming investment, it was quite apparent also that the lower staff was so well entrenched it couldn't care less, giving them lip-service deference only while doing what they pleased. My cousin desperately pleaded with the officials concerned that he was bringing in positive investment into Pakistan, that cut no ice with them. A keen expatriate investor has now been turned into a vocal recalcitrant. As a fervent Pakistani he has stuck to his own commitment to the country but he vows never to persuade any friend to be exposed to such an experience.

People like Humayun Akhtar, Chairman BOI, can arrange slick, sophisticated presentations for potential investors to attract them to Pakistan, among foreigners only a handful will take up the offer but the real money/expatriate will come from Pakistanis settled or working abroad and they are neither targeted or well-treated.

My cousin said that short of questioning how he had made his money he had to endure many types of innuendoes and jokes imaginable during his

customs ordeal. He ain't seen nothing yet, wait till he petitions KESC for electricity, Pakistan Telecommunications Corporation (PTCL) for telephones/faxes, etc., KWSB for water, etc., and so on and so forth! When self-made hard-working people like Sir Anwar come home and work in the country, only some of them are likely to be well connected. Even those few then cannot ignore the quagmire at the bottom of the ladder. Knowing a little bit of Sir Anwar, one could well surmise that he knew of the pitfalls before he made his \$150 million investment in a cement plant in Pakistan. Knowing that despite his contacts he would have trouble earning one-tenth of what he could with the same investment abroad, he still opted to go the difficult route for the sake of his mother country.

In the circumstances he deserves full praise, for persisting to invest in Pakistan in the face of an incurable bureaucracy that puts patriotism far below the need for filling their own pockets. For being obdurate enough to invest in Pakistan in the face of such odds, Sir Anwar has rendered services 'above and beyond the call of duty'. We must petition the Queen to give him the commercial equivalent of the Victoria Cross (VC) for having the courage to buck the trend. As for other potential investors still keen on trying to put money into projects in Pakistan, God help you, because the bureaucracy won't be as amenable as it has been, against the current, to Sir Anwar.

The bill of Nov '98 showed a higher amount as arrears but it was equal to the sum of July '98 and Sept. '98 though the bill of T&T mentions only arrears without referring to month or period. I produced all the documents of the bills but the bank officials refused to accept payment.

Under these circumstances, I demand an explanation.

Mahbubur Rahman
528, New Eskaton,
Dhaka-1000.

To the Editor...

Who's going to answer?

Sir, The credibility of holding the Pourashaba Election is questionable. News from across the country clearly indicate the incident being marred by violence, rejection and of course usual political differences of opinion and activities. The opposition enforced hartal should be enforced not only against public sufferings, but also loss of man-hour, economy both immediate and long-term and other factors like the image of the country, future of foreign investment etc. After all this, the critical question which comes logically in our mind: will this election hold any good? If not then who is going to answer for the draining of our

national wealth by a few at the cost of so many?

Tanzia Choudhury
Comilla.

Senseless hartals

Thanks for the timely and bold commentary of Feb 8, 1999, condemning both the past and ensuing Feb 9 and 10, hartals. The bottom line of our national political problem is the unquenchable lust for power of our politicians.

Salahuddin Y Jamil
Firozshah Colony,
Chittagong

No cricket in Eden, please

Sir, I refer to the write-up in The Daily Star dated 25th Feb '99 by one Vikram Goel relating

the unpleasant incidents at the Eden Garden, Calcutta on the 19th of Feb '99 in which he has been unkind to have made some uncharitable remarks on Syed Mahbub Morshed's opinion on the subject. Mr Morshed wrote about what happened at the Eden Garden on facts, pure and simple, without any exaggeration whatsoever. His contentions were well corroborated in the West Bengal press and also by the management of the Cricket Control Board who even went as far as to consider the abandonment of future international cricket games at the Eden Garden, once the paradise for the cricket fans in Calcutta.

If one compares the crowd in Chennai and the cricket crowd in Calcutta, one will find the difference. One is extrovert and liberal and the other is intro-

vert and chauvinistic.
Logman Hossain
15/1 Kamal Ataturk Ave
Banani, Dhaka.

Practical advert

Sir, Presently some Indian TV channels are telecasting an advertisement of a detergent in which the Vice President of a certain washing machine company is being shown using in her own house that particular brand of washing powder which they recommend. Very practical advertisement indeed!

By following the above mentioned advertisement, I would like to request the cigarette manufacturing companies whose product ads are regularly shown on the ATN to please arrange to make appearances of their top executives in their ads

with statements advocating smoking, such as, "I smoke this brand, our staff-members consume number of cigarettes per day, etc." Let these esteemed executives also explain why should not these protest affixing the statutory warning on their brand packs — "smoking is injurious to health"?

M Zahidul Haque
BAI, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar
Dhaka-1207

Tele-trouble

Sir, I paid my telephone bill of July '98 within the due date at the designated Agrani Bank, New Eskaton, but the Sept '98 telephone bill showed arrears amounting to exactly the same amount for July '98. The bank