

Ominous Signs

Disconcerting reports have been published by the local press about the state of the city cattle markets and prices of and demands for the hides and skins. The sudden disappearance of sacrificial animals just before Eid day from an overnight thriving business at reasonable prices with adequate supply and demand led to investigation by the local press and they came up with stories that were unthinkable even a year ago. This paper had warned about the impending dangers from the cattle market goons which came true as five lost their lives on the Buriganga trying to rob a trowler full of cattlehead, according to reports. It was not the end of the story. Mastans ruled many cattle markets in the city controlling the flow of animals there and dictating prices that rose sharply. In some markets they let loose a reign of terror forcing many traders to run for safety leaving their merchandise at the 'safe custody' of the goons.

If such was the scenario at the cattle markets, hides and skin business was no better. Here also vested quarters and local musclemen made their presence felt. They virtually dictated the prices which were much less than last year's and practically forced the middlemen, known as faria, out of business and filled in their positions themselves, offering very little scope for the sellers to bargain. As it is, the market for raw leather is dull at present due to various factors — the main one being the low demand in international market for finished leather. Another reason was cited as less cash flow at the tanneries. The nationalised banks have disbursed around Tk 175 crore as loans for procurement of leather this year compared to Tk 250 crore last year. Though about 50 per cent of the total procurement of leather is made during this time, the process has been slow so far and if this trend continues much of the hides and skins will be smuggled out of the country which in turn will fetch good money for the 'parties' across the border because of their opportunity to export wet blue leather which is banned in Bangladesh. This is a vicious circle from which our leather sector must come out as quickly as it can.

The recent trend of controlling the flow of cattle and their sale, deprives the poor traders of their legitimate earning while stifling prices of hides and skins and robbing traders on the roads are ominous signs that point at a bleak future. These are all indicators of a general deterioration of social norms and ethical standards and planned attempts to grab the important cattle as well as leather markets. The administration must intervene to root out the corrupt elements from the scene right now or this can take a root so deep that it will not only hurt the business in question but set a precedence that will have far-reaching repercussions in the society as a whole.

Futile Festive Time

On Thursday morning, when different national dailies reached the readers after a three-day break for Eid-ul-Azha, they must have been horrified by the sheer number of reports on unnatural deaths across the country over the last seventy-two hours. News coverage on road accidents, murders, political killing, police brutality, slum fire, etc., consumed substantial space in almost every daily, once again blaring a disconcerting truth: life is not secured anywhere — either out on the street or inside the familiar walls of home.

This paper reported 15 deaths in road accidents in the span of three days till Tuesday last, while more than 150 people were injured. For some of the victims, Eid never came, and for their families, it brought anything but happiness. Eid didn't come for Ripon. The 22-year-old chicken vendor was killed when police opened fire during a clash with the hawkers at Kaptan Bazaar in old town. Saleha met similar fate. A constable jokingly aimed his gun at the maid servant and pulled the trigger. He didn't know that it was loaded. Jewel's killers, however, knew what they were doing when they took him out Saturday night before strangulating him to death.

For one reason or the other, people get killed in this country. Every day the number of unnatural deaths rises. We have, in a way, distanced ourselves from political killings. We have reasoned that until and unless the prevailing political unrest subsides, such incidents will continue. But what about the deaths of the father and the son in Noakhali, who were killed following a dispute over distribution of sacrificial meat on the Eid day? What do their killings signify?

Over the three-day Eid vacation, we have been blissfully unaware that while we were having fun people were losing their lives in road accidents, and in the hands of professional killers, extreme political activists and even police. Accumulated counts of death published in the dailies after the break come as a rude awakening and make us realise that how futile even the festive time can be in this country of ours.

Holiday-holics

The morning press on Thursday carried reports of deserted-looking government offices. Although all public and private offices re-opened on Wednesday, the former experienced more of lean attendance. Press reports said that the city offices were still in a state of "holiday hangover." This has become a usual, but lamentable, sight after every festival, particularly the two Eids. Truly, this happens when holiday-happy people go on a leisure-spree, and habitually find it quite convenient to return to their workplaces after spending longer-than-usual period. This clearly reveals a lack of commitment to their respective duties. Normally, government offices are first to be hit by this over-the-year undue advantage-taking. And for quite some years now this has become a trend of sorts. The holiday-seekers, who head for the countryside during festivals, have taken it for granted, for nobody has so far been penalised for being so absent from office.

This 'holiday-holicism' no doubt, is anti-work and can inflict far-reaching negative consequences. It's however true that when a large number of city dwellers leave the metropolis, the rest have a sigh of relief finding the city environment cleaner with much lesser polluting traffic on the roads. But if the socio-economic loss is computed in this regard, the 'fresh-feeling' turns too ephemeral, for this state of things, long unheeded by the administration, has been causing a colossal injury to our development process. If this time-wasting syndrome goes unabated Bangladesh might face a jeopardised future for it in the global economic rat race.

THERE was an interesting news item in the front page of The Daily Star (March 17) saying, "They disagree on all points but gas." In elaborating the UNB report Star added, "Bangladesh natural gas is not for export, now or in the near future. This is the word from both Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Opposition Leader Khaleed." On March 21 while inaugurating the Malabadi Gas Plant in Sylhet the Prime Minister once again reiterated the country's stand and said "Bangladesh has no plan to export gas." Earlier she said, "We don't think about export of gas yet." Former Prime Minister and now the Leader of Opposition in the Parliament Khaleed Za said, "We cannot sell our wealth and then become beggars."

These are the policy pronouncements that came from the Prime Minister as well as from the Leader of Opposition in the Parliament and incidentally the Prime Minister's reaffirmation came as late as March 21. But on March 22 US Ambassador John Holzman while speaking at a seminar on "Developing Bangladesh's Gas Resources" said that "Bangladesh should now consider gas export to India as the domestic consumption alone would not bring about economic breakthrough" (The Daily Star, March 23). Ambassador's suggestions, as Star correctly put, were contradictory to what the Prime Minister and the Leader of Opposition in the Parliament recently said about gas export. Similar comments came from several sources on Ambassador Holzman's suggestions that openly contradicted the "policy pronouncements" as mentioned above. It seems that Ambassador Holzman preferred the path of "open engagement" over diplomacy. Of course, he is entitled to his views and also free to put forward his country's interest. He is a seasoned diplomat and he knows how to use the diplomatic channel. He has full access to all the officials and also the highest political circles. He can meet all concerned and insist on what, in his opinion, is right and how his country's interest could be promoted. The diplomats usually try to avoid "open engagement" which often creates public confusion and embarrassment.

Ambassador Holzman himself followed, in my opinion, the correct path last week when he skillfully avoided the reporters after having met the Leader of Opposition on an important issue that bothers the "Developing Partners". Indeed, the Ambassadors of the "Developing Partners" have also been following the diplomatic path for voicing their concerns on issues that affect the business interest of their countries. Though some feel that diplomatic approach should not get involved directly on domestic issues, some others, however, try to justify their involvement on the ground of those countries' business interest.

After a long time, the working of the government has been exposed by insiders, who are important. They have told us how decisions are taken arbitrarily on key matters, both civil and military. Both Guruswamy and Bhagwat have neither spared the Prime Minister nor important cabinet members. They have stuck their neck out whatever their motive. True, both of them are not ideal persons to level charges. Their own stock is not all that high. But they are the ones who have opened their mouth. The details they have provided in the cases cannot be brushed aside easily. It is apparent from their account that power-brokers or extra-legal hands swing deals in a particular way. The Congress should not inject politics. The charges are not something between the two parties. They concern the administration's credibility and they demand serious looking. So far the Vajpayee's government reaction is not helpful.

On the other hand, the Congress should not inject politics. The charges are not something between the two parties. They concern the administration's credibility and they demand serious looking. So far the Vajpayee's government reaction is not helpful. The Congress should not inject politics. The charges are not something between the two parties. They concern the administration's credibility and they demand serious looking. So far the Vajpayee's government reaction is not helpful.

On the other hand, the Congress should not inject politics. The charges are not something between the two parties. They concern the administration's credibility and they demand serious looking. So far the Vajpayee's government reaction is not helpful.

On the other hand, the Congress should not inject politics. The charges are not something between the two parties. They concern the administration's credibility and they demand serious looking. So far the Vajpayee's government reaction is not helpful.

On the other hand, the Congress should not inject politics. The charges are not something between the two parties. They concern the administration's credibility and they demand serious looking. So far the Vajpayee's government reaction is not helpful.

To the Editor...

Lopsided priority! Sir, It was the 21st of March. I was on the stage at the Guide House auditorium performing a Brecht play. The audience seemed suitably involved. The lights went off. I came out of the theatre and was greeted by a brightly lit sky in the south-east. These were the flood lights of the stadium where a cricket match was going on.

It was the 24th of March. I was trying to explain to my daughter what the subject Sociology was all about. The lights went off and we decided to hit the road for an untimely walk. We looked up towards the southern sky and, lo and behold, the sky was washed by the pervasiveness of the flood lights.

It was the evening of 25th March. I was again on the stage at the Mohila Samity auditorium. We were half-way through with, perhaps, the most popular play in our repertoire, we were subjected to black out again. But the stadium was ablaze with lights. We had to apologise to our audience for not being able to end the play.

Regular and intermittent staging of plays in Bangladesh started in the beginning of 1973. It was said then that theatre was one of those few positive things that had happened in Bangladesh. We did not say this. It was said by others. Newsmen, experts from home and abroad, politicians, bureaucrats et al.

I would not dare question the prowess of our cricket team nor would I compare cricket with theatre. For that would be an uneven comparison. Achievement in cricket can be quantified. While that in theatre can at best be qualitative or judgemental. I question the authority to schedule these matches as day-night matches. What could have been the possible reasons? It could not have been the excuse of the ensuing world cup. All world cup matches would be played in day light. I would also refrain from questioning the purpose of these day-night

Politics of Gas Export

by Muslehuddin Ahmad

As the country has been dealing with gas and gas exploration companies for some time, considerable expertise has developed within the government. If enough opportunities are given with proper transparency these experts can jointly design the appropriate production sharing agreements in consultation with the international advisers.

The purpose of bringing up this matter is to highlight the sensitivities attached to such diplomatic activities and the way the citizens of a sovereign democratic country view or perceive them.

However, the issue of gas export has been with the policy makers for some years. Sometimes the politicians say we are floating on gas. Various reports put the gas reserve from 15 tcf to even 80 tcf, but no definite basis is available regarding such high estimate. However, figures like 21 tcf as the reserve discovered and 12.6 tcf as proven or recoverable reserve appear to be offensively acceptable. Newly discovered reserve but not announced yet put forward by some source appears to be 5.5 tcf. If the present negligible consumption at the rate of 900 mmeft per year continued, the proven reserve can serve the country for 45 years but if consumption rate is increased by 10 per cent the present reserve will be exhausted in 17 years. The consumption should increase manifold for generation of electricity, production of fertiliser and other gas products and use of gas in transport to save the environment.

All these lead us to one conclusion that there is urgent need for exploration of gas. Series of bids have taken place and the investors have been waiting for

long time. It is high time that the decisions are taken to award at least majority of the blocks, if not all, for exploration on a type of contract that will avoid payment of cash foreign exchange. It has also been reported that our own state organisation Bapex did a good job in the exploration sector but they have not been given adequate funds to continue their work. They could form joint venture with foreign companies for exploration purpose. Unfortunately many experts being frustrated reportedly have left Bapex and joined foreign exploration companies.

The technicalities relating to gas exploration, production, utilisation etc are fairly complex. However, the export of gas would certainly depend on the quantity we have. If we really float on gas then it would be easy to decide on the issue. First we need to be more or less sure about the total reserve and the amount that the country would need in say next 25 years keeping in view the increased rate of consumption.

Everybody knows that the export of gas means export of raw materials. We should not do this unless we have too much of it and when the possibility of making proper use of it is virtually nil. In Bangladesh we do not seem to have too much of gas and the possibilities of using it in this modern world are

immense — starting from production of electricity and fertiliser to other downstream products which are value-added exportable products and can provide a lot of employment in the country.

It is not true that only export of gas can bring about economic breakthrough. Indeed, proper utilisation of gas using all modern technologies in the downstream facilities, which we should try to build, can bring real economic benefit. In fact, the latter course can attract more of the foreign investors who, in joint ventures with local investors, can reap extensive investment benefit in the gas sector in Bangladesh. The present slump in the oil prices do have some dampening effect in the oil and gas sector but this may not stay for long. There are reportedly several proposals of joint ventures, which are awaiting government decisions. Only problem is that things do not move fast and this is why the investors get frustrated and leave.

If the foreign companies are allowed to export gas to India, it is possible that they will take gas to the other side of the border and set up facilities there to produce electricity and also set up other downstream facilities to produce other exportable products. Then why not do the same here and export electricity and other gas products to India

Status Quo Does Not Help

The Prime Minister is not on a strong wicket when he says that the opposition by the Congress reflects its frustration. Any political party, wanting to come to power, can be ascribed to such motives. The BJP or the former Jan Sangh did the same thing when it was in the wilderness.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

should be given a time-limit so that the monsoon session of parliament has something concrete to discuss.

The Vajpayee government has been caught on the wrong foot. The Prime Minister's office, the finance minister, the defence minister, the steel minister — all of them have to do a lot of explaining for their wayward decisions. They should not be let off the hook. It appears that Congress is interested in the charges for political gain.

If the party were to look back, it would realise that it did not do anything by stalling the Rajya Sabha for nearly a week. The party looked like hitting in the dark in the hope of finding some target. Parliament's stock also went down by several notches. The Congress should re-map its strategy during the recess in parliament and bring round other parties to support it in the demand for judicial probe.

Such an exercise may begin the much-needed coordination between the Congress and the non-coalition parties. This may also set in motion a serious effort to dislodge the Vajpayee government, something which the Congress desperately wants. Yet, the manner in which it has behaved in the past has given the non-BJP parties an

impression that it wants their support to pull down the government for an early poll. If this is its real intention, why they should support it? None of them wants to face election soon: the Lok Sabha has finished only one-fifth of its 5-year tenure.

The Prime Minister is not on a strong wicket when he says that the opposition by the Congress reflects its frustration. Any political party, wanting to come to power, can be ascribed to such motives. The BJP or the former Jan Sangh did the same thing when it was in the wilderness.

The real grouse of the Congress is its inability to have a fresh general election. This may well be the reason why there is a change in the party's

administration. It may hold up parliament's proceedings to make the government functioning difficult. It will be messy and exasperating. But the Congress feels that it does not have any other way out.

Really speaking, parliament has ceased to function. So has the government. The BJP wants to remain aloof, without doing anything decisive or important lest it should create problems. The Congress and non-coalition partners look like blocking everything, particularly in the Rajya Sabha where the coalition does not have a majority. One cannot imagine such a situation continuing for the next four years when the Lok Sabha elections are due. But there is no running away from the fact that very little will be done by the government. A fresh election is the best alternative but only a handful of members are prepared for it. Someone's remark that the present government can continue for five minutes or for four years is apt.

But the status quo does not help the country. It cannot make any progress. India may go deeper and deeper in the slough and listlessness in which it has been stuck for some time now.

DEATH ANNIVERSARY A Tribute to Murshed

by Prof Kabir Chowdhury

Justice Murshed is no longer with us. But his example rests with us as a source of noble inspiration. Today, we are in dire need of men like him, men who can act in accordance with the ideals that Justice Murshed upheld and fostered.

I first met Justice Murshed most probably some time in the mid-fifties at a national seminar where issues like the inter-relationship between nationalism and culture were discussed and debated. He spoke brilliantly. His talk displayed his firm grasp of the many dimensions of the subject, intellectual breadth and range, ability to develop his point of view through lucid logical arguments bolstered by quotations from great writers of several languages, many erudite references and wonderful felicitous phrases. It was a treat to listen to him. One could immediately see that he was interested in the subject, that he spoke sincerely and with conviction and that there was true learning and not its pretence, which unfortunately we came across, not infrequently, in quite a few of our academics. I was also a participant at the seminar and he later complimented me on my paper. It was most gracious of him and a source of encouragement to me.



currents of human need. It was obviously this awareness that prompted him to incorporate in one of his stirring judgements the well-known lines of Shakespeare from "Measure for Measure":

"Of it excellent To have a giant's strength, but it is tyrannous To use it like a giant!"

Justice Murshed's dedication to his vocation, total fearlessness and fierce independence of spirit have carved for him in our hearts an abiding niche of love, affection and respect. The Judgements he delivered in the famous cases popularly known as the "Minister's Case", "Colonel Bhattacharya's Case" and "Pan Case" are still regarded as historic for his brilliant exposition of constitutional law, among other things.

Justice Murshed is no longer with us. But his example rests with us as a source of noble inspiration. Today, we are in dire need of men like him, men who can act in accordance with the ideals that Justice Murshed upheld and fostered. I am reminded at this point of the closing words of Presidential address that Justice Murshed delivered in 1967 at a seminar on "The Rule and Law". Let me quote:

"The spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias; the spirit of liberty remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which emanates from faith that there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered side by side with the greatest. In that spirit lies hidden, in some form, the aspirations of us all. In that spirit, I ask you to pledge our faith."

Moving words! And very pertinent at the present moment when the spirit of liberty seems to be threatened in so many parts of the world including our own little corner by the forces of tyranny and oppression from the aspirations of us all. In that spirit, I ask you to pledge our faith.

and agree to the proposed peace plan. This appears rather intriguing. The opposition of Russia seems to be somewhat understandable because of a sizeable section of ethnic Serbs in the Yugoslav population. The position of India is similarly understandable because of the Muslim majority in Kashmir which forms the bone of contention between Pakistan and India. But the position of China is mysterious.

The most tragic thing appears to be that none of these powers is really sincerely concerned for the terrible humanitarian disaster facing the Muslim-majority Kosovo.

We can only hope that the strong-arm policies adopted by NATO and the US to bring peace in Kosovo will succeed and Serb atrocities will come to an end.

ASM Nurunnabi 29, Dharimondal R/A, Road 1, Dhaka.

Right to express views

Sir, As a regular and serious reader of the DS, I find no cause for alarm after reading Mr A H Jaffer Ullah's letter of protest (DS, Opinion, Mar 21). — a diatribe against Dr Rashiduzzaman, now living in the USA.

Both of the above views and all views may find a place in the press or mass media. Poorly run Bangladesh will not be decapitated by polarised views.

In fact, in the late 1940s and '50s, there were sharp differences of opinion in our families on partition, and one of my uncles, a scholar in the BSES (Bengal Senior Education Service) refused to migrate from Calcutta to Dhaka while the rest of us did.

I find it refreshing that DS is now opening up more, and is more accommodative and tolerant.

A Z Dhaka

Humanitarian crisis in Kosovo

Sir, After prolonged dithering, the NATO, with strong support from the US, whom faced at last with the humanitarian catastrophe emerging from the ongoing brutal Serb policies, which is said to be the worst since the end of the Second World War, launched planned air-strikes against Slovan Milosevic's Yugoslavia to halt his 'ethnic cleansing' operations in Kosovo by large-scale massacres of Kosovo Albanians, burning their villages and driving them across the borders.

These atrocities were being carried against the Kosovo Albanians who formed an overwhelming Muslim majority in Kosovo. The NATO air-strikes are intended to compel Milosevic to agree with the peace plan finalised last month in Paris (which the Kosovo Albanian leadership has already signed) as a means of bringing peace to that war-torn province.

The continuing air-strikes against Yugoslavia may have received some measure of support from many of the world's Muslim countries which were shocked by the terrible ordeal which the Kosovo Albanians are passing through.

Some countries, however, particularly Russia, China and India are opposed to the ongoing NATO military action to bring Milosevic to his knees