

Stop this Cat and Mouse Game

The government has been adept in palming off dialogue offers to the opposition. But issued as these have been in the form of press statements rather than a formal written proposal properly made out to the opposition they practically meant nothing.

Whenever the opposition mounts on any agitational programme, Home Minister Mohammed Nasim, who is also entrusted with the job of liaising with the opposition, hardly ever fails to reiterate the offer of talks to the opposition but with a pinch of tough talk in it.

One wonders why for a change he did not send a written proposal to the opposition for a dialogue in what would have been a meaningful points-scoring strategy instead of the all-gimmick approach the government seems stuck with!

The real test of sincerity behind any dialogue offer lies in refraining from vitriol - once the offer has been made so as to avoid spoiling the environ for talks. But it is always the opposite that happens.

On the other hand the opposition's constantly shifting demands make us feel roundly muddled, baffled as to what their specific agenda for talks might be at this point in time. Originally demanding removal of the CEC and reform of the Election Commission they wanted all elections, local government ones and even bye-elections, held under a caretaker arrangement slightly down the road.

The nation is badly fatigued by this cat-and-mouse game. How richly it deserves a break!

Fillip to Technical Education

Technical education has long been deprived of the attention it deserved in view of the truism that its expansion holds the key towards elimination of the country's unemployment problem and therefore, enhancement of its economic growth. The sorry state of affairs in the existent polytechnic institutes bears poignant testimony to the collective apathy policy-makers had shown towards this stream of learning.

Launching a programme is easier than sustaining it. It has often happened in the country that an institution once launched has inevitably trodden down the road to degradation. Lack of proper management and poor maintenance have often contributed to their under-utilisation. Therefore, what the government needs to do before embarking upon the ambitious project is devise a fool-proof plan that puts accent on not only proper implementation but also proper management and maintenance afterwards.

Child-lifting at DMCH

Week-old twins were stolen from their sleeping mother at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital Gynaecology Ward Sunday and later rescued by a sardar of the hospital with the help of his colleagues and policemen. Conflicting stories have appeared in a section of the local press and police are investigating the incident.

The babies have been restored to their mother and the maids taken into custody. Whatever may be the truth behind this sensational child-lifting incident we are flabbergasted by the huge lack of security at the Gynaecology Ward of DMCH. The authorities of the hospital have disowned the maids saying they were not hospital employees. They have also advised patients not to engage such maids 'personally'.

WHEN Ms Chandrika Kumaratunga assumed Sri Lanka's Presidency in 1994, she kindled many hopes. Her initiative on the ethnic conflict came like a breath of fresh air after the stale politics of the United National Party's (UNP) 17-year reign.

Today, scepticism has replaced hope. The shift to open, democratic, governance stands arrested. The anti-LITTE 'Operation Jaya Sukuruli' (Certain Victory) ran out after annually costing 21 per cent of GDP. The time for new initiatives has passed. There is a return to manipulative politics. Nothing shows this more clearly than the April 6 elections to five provincial councils (PCs).

Even if the rigging charges are discounted, the PA's performance marked a sharp decline from the 1994 elections. From 62 per cent, its vote fell to 45 per cent. This put it barely two percentage points ahead of the UNP.

The PA was now on the defensive despite the UNP's poor leadership. It has lost most of its idealism, much of its appeal. It is exercising power delinked from a larger, universal purpose. Recent developments highlight five trends. First, the ethnic-religious minorities, which swung towards the PA five years ago, are returning to the UNP, especially in Colombo (two-fifths of it Tamil-speaking) and in the coastal fishing villages.

Second, in the central highlands, with their Indian-origin tea labour, the influence of Mr S. Thondaman's Ceylon Workers' Congress, a PA constituent, is declining. In 1993, he won 12 seats. This time, he won only seven. This is due to the emergence of educated youth among the Tamils, which is unhappy with CWC leaders' conservatism and corruption.

PA got into a confrontation with independent monitors, to the point of maligning them in the state-owned Daily News.

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Thirdly, the Sinhala-chauvinist Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) has re-emerged as a major force. The JVP was crushed after its 1987-89 uprising, but has now tripled its vote-share to become the third largest party. This puts it in a strong position, for instance in the Western Council, where the PA needs its support. This will involve a bargain.

without a political vision. He is conservative on the ethnic question, but earnest and uncorrupt. His rise signifies middle class despair with the "normal" politician, and a preference for managerial quick-fixes.

A fourth trend is the emergence of Mr Karu Jayasuriya as a power-centre within the UNP. As Colombo mayor, he earned middle class goodwill by improving municipal services like an efficient manager. He won 250,000 votes, only slightly less than Ms Kumaratunga in 1993. Mr Jayasuriya is a businessman

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Whatever the PA does, one thing is certain. The phase of hope and change inaugurated in 1994-95 is over. Sri Lanka has entered a phase of turmoil. An Indian Postscript: Sri Lanka is delicately, precariously poised, India must do nothing to upset it. New Delhi has recently done well to keep its hands off the ethnic issue.

Along with the nuclear and missile tests, which underscore India's negative 'Big Brother' image, that has bred resentment. New Delhi must promptly take corrective action. Deviousness on its part could spell disaster.

Poll Signals—Warning for Chandrika

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

Sri Lanka's public finances are a mess, with the fiscal deficit almost 10 per cent of GDP, export growth plummeting, and prices of essentials skyrocketing. After the fall of Killinochchi, there is no likelihood of a big change in the military balance. With political uncertainty looming, it might be best to call a damage-limiting early election.

LETTER FROM EUROPE

The Tragic End of a Civilisation

by Chaklader Mahboob-ul Alam

On September 22, 1609 and March 22, 1611 the king published decrees ordering the expulsion of all the Moriscos from the soil of Spain to Africa. Even those who had become devout Christians and publicly renounced Islam were not spared. Only the Morisco slaves, who were considered as personal chattels of their masters were allowed to stay.

which had played a dominant role in the Iberian peninsula (modern Spain and Portugal) for more than seven centuries (General Tariq ibn Ziyad started the conquest in 711) had virtually become a spent force. So it was not surprising that when in the winter of 1491, the combined Christian armies of Castile and Aragon laid siege to Granada, the capital of the last Muslim kingdom in Spain (to which Malaga and Frigiliana belonged), Boadil, the last Muslim king had little power to put up enough resistance.

Every thing came to a head on December 24, 1568. The Moriscos in the south of Spain rose up in arms (which they had secretly acquired) against this oppressive system and proclaimed Hernando de Cordoba y Valor (who retook his Muslim name Abu Humeya) as their king. The rebellion soon spread to other parts of southern Spain including Bentomiz to which Frigiliana (where we had gone to have dinner) belonged. The dice was cast - either win the war and live as dignified human beings or lose and perish. It was a desperate situation. Most of the Moriscos were ordinary people without any military training or even knowledge of organised use of arms because since the fall of Granada, seventy five years ago, they had been deprived of the right to carry arms.

Although the vast majority went through the formalities of mass conversion and accepted Christian names, in private they continued to practise Islamic rituals. As a result, further repressive measures were introduced. In many cases, good arable land in the valleys were confiscated and given to Christian settlers from the north, thus forcing the newly converted (the old Muslims) to migrate to less fertile land in the mountainous regions.

converted into Catholicism by force but in reality with the exception of a few continued to practise Islam within the confines of their homes. Was this the end of the Morisco story? Once deported to the north as serfs, were they left alone? In 1598 (more than one hundred years after the fall of Granada), Philip III succeeded to the Spanish throne after the death of his father Philip II. By that time, there was no one in Spain, who openly professed to be Muslim. The Moriscos had been defeated militarily, many of them had been killed, the rest had been dispersed all over Spain. Still two questions nagged the Crown and the Church. Were they really good Christians and did they pose any threat to the established order? The sad truth from the point of view of the king was that after so many years and after so much suffering, the Moriscos, with some exceptions, secretly remained faithful to Islam and were proud of their heritage. This was also true that they (the Moriscos) on their own could not pose any military threat to the king. But the Christians continued to consider them as fifth columnists in the service of the Turks

Those, who had stayed back and vowed their allegiance to the king did not escape the wrath either. They were rounded up, placed into concentration camps, their properties were confiscated and finally deported to other parts of Spain - especially to the north - in small groups. In their long and painful journey many died of disease and exhaustion. All this was done openly in the name of ethnic cleansing (limpieza de sangre) and under the supervision of the Catholic church. Religious and racial prejudices had combined to create an obsession about the "purity of blood" in the Spanish mind. No one talked of Christian generosity or of human rights. So in this unholy act of forced dispersion of a helpless minority, the holy Church and the pious Crown played active and complementary roles. The objective was to eliminate the individual and collective identity of the Moriscos, who had been

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OPINION Ambiguous Telecoms Policy

Alif Zabr

The telecoms projects were reviewed by the government on April 7 as reported in the press the next day. There were hardly any new items as such information and data had been released earlier on several occasions. It was a routine operational and project review.

What is needed is a policy review of the slow and dragging telecoms sector, as the potential new users are feeling frustrated at the long waiting period for a low-cost new telephone connection (not the costly mobile cellular for one per cent of the potential users).

Here is a partial list of some of the sensitive and hanging policy issues for public clarification, to enable those in the business to draw up future strategies to cope with the changing market conditions. The IT sector needs heavy long-term investment, hence the long-term national policy guidelines must be clear, and not subject to abrupt changes by new incoming regimes.

Continuity in national consensus is an essential element in this game. Uncertainty and loss of confidence are deadly deterrents for the investors. The government is keeping mum over the high installation charges for a new telephone basic connection. This silence is not transparent. What are the options available for reducing the installation charges? Modular additional options may be charged for separately, to lessen the initial load of expenditure by modest subscribers (fixed-income groups, homes, retired and old-age groups). The supply must match the demand in this high-growth sector, and there are many shady groups and vested interests in the game. Official monitoring must be strict, to protect the users from the unscrupulous sharks.

mean further haemorrhage; they must call an early election before things worsen.

The economy, which has slowed down, could decelerate further. Sri Lanka's public finances are a mess, with the fiscal deficit almost 10 per cent of GDP, export growth plummeting, and prices of essentials skyrocketing. After the fall of Killinochchi, there is no likelihood of a big change in the military balance. With political uncertainty looming, it might be best to call a damage-limiting early election.

Whatever the PA does, one thing is certain. The phase of hope and change inaugurated in 1994-95 is over. Sri Lanka has entered a phase of turmoil. An Indian Postscript: Sri Lanka is delicately, precariously poised, India must do nothing to upset it. New Delhi has recently done well to keep its hands off the ethnic issue. But it acted duplicitously on the free trade issue—first by promising tea imports and then reneging.

Along with the nuclear and missile tests, which underscore India's negative 'Big Brother' image, that has bred resentment. New Delhi must promptly take corrective action. Deviousness on its part could spell disaster.

or the North African Berbers. They were considered as a danger to national security. So a combination of factors such as the obsession about the "purity of blood" and a possible threat to the national security persuaded Philip III to reach a decision on the "final solution" to the Morisco problem.

On September 22, 1609 and March 22, 1611 the king published decrees ordering the expulsion of all the Moriscos from the soil of Spain to Africa. Even those who had become devout Christians and publicly renounced Islam were not spared. Only the Morisco slaves, who were considered as personal chattels of their masters were allowed to stay. The expelled Moriscos had to leave all their material belongings behind. Some resisted and were massacred by regular troops. Others tried to hide in the mountains but were hunted down. Many mothers with little children committed suicide by jumping to their death from mountaintops. Most left with barely what they had on, when the king's soldiers came to collect them. Many died of disease and violence on their way to the ports (Malaga being one of them). This was a clear case of genocide. Thus ended an Eastern civilisation which had flourished for almost eight centuries. Did it leave any mark on the Spanish civilisation? Did it make any contribution to human knowledge? If so, what? How did the mass expulsion of such a significant sector of the population affect the Spanish economy? These are some of the issues which will be addressed in my next letter.

WHEN we spent our last Christmas holidays in Malaga, a seaport situated at the southern end of Iberian peninsula, which is the birthplace of the famous Spanish painter Pablo Picasso. During our short stay there, we were invited by some friends to an informal dinner party at a Cortijo (farm-house) in a nearby town called Frigiliana. Since night driving, especially on unfamiliar motorways, easily tires me, I was rather hesitant in accepting the invitation. However, on the insistence of our friends and Carmen (who, I admit is more sociable than I am), I reluctantly decided to attend the party. We were given precise instructions as to how to get to the Cortijo in less than half an hour. It was, I am afraid, easier said than done. It took us over an hour to get there. In the process we had to negotiate some dangerous curves and tortuously narrow winding mountain roads. Finally, when we reached the place, we found the narrow road leading to the Cortijo (which was literally located on a hilltop) was packed with dozens of automobiles.

The house was full of family and friends of the host couple. It seemed to me that most of the local dignitaries were present at the party. Our friends, who had given up hope of seeing us there, were delighted that we had finally made it and proudly introduced us to other guests. The dinner was excellent and the conversation pleasant. The whole atmosphere was indeed very congenial. After the dinner, over a cup of coffee, I struck up a conversation with a fellow guest, who happened to be a local government official. When I showed some interest in the past history of the area, he confided to me that he was an amateur historian and that he had done considerable research on the past of Frigiliana. After an hour's conversation with him, I reached the conclusion that Frigiliana had a tragic past and that many of its current inhabitants had conveniently forgotten it.

Long before Adolf Hitler, in his madness, dreamt of the policy of final solution to the Jewish problem or Slobodan Milosevic launched his murderous campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Croats, the Bosnians and the Albanians in former Yugoslavia, here in this tranquil corner of Spain, something similar took place approximately 400 hundred years ago against the Spanish Muslims, who had by then been forcibly converted into Catholicism and officially classified as the Moriscos.

By the end of the fifteenth century, due to the lack of a common purpose, internal dissension and chronic fratricidal wars, Muslim military power,

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Measuring failure

Sir, It's bewildering to read the sweeping statements made by politicians. In April 9 issue the leader of the opposition condemned the government for failing in all sectors, which is akin to the pot calling the kettle black.

The opposition should bear in mind that they will be judged according to their actions (or inactions). So far, they have failed to address the pressing issues of the day in parliament, the legitimate body for airing the people's grievances. They have failed to press for action or put forward their plans to improve the law and order situation; to demand improvement of basic utility services; to address the worsening environmental situation in the country; to remove illegal encroachers destroying natural lakes and vegetation; to improve chaotic traffic; to announce hartals as a means of unconstitutional protest; to basically BE the opposition. When there are so many

fronts to act on, why are they beating empty cans? It would be advisable for the opposition to get its act together, or spend the next five year term shouting from the sidelines.

Sadat Omar Dhaka

Harmless local fangs

Sir, The regimes in the third world countries have little protection these days when the UN system is subject to hostage treatment by the big powers unless the poor nations have the super power (Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq). Where to seek redress? Nowhere. A lot of spine-bending demonstrations can be detected by the critical observers. Bangladesh enjoys no exemption; and there should be no illusion about it.

The local regimes, however powerful internally, may wield a lot of influence at local levels through politics, and other means, but ultimately, the WTO

is threatening to become more powerful than the UN system. The motivation is powerful and recognisable: the urge to survive (by the disintegrating western civilisation).

The self-survival instinct cannot be faulted morally or philosophically; but the means unleashed to achieve the end have generated non-stop controversies in the affected capitals. The poor nations have to take it; and cannot leave it. Democracy is based on the availability of options: how to live a life without options? It is a terrible dilemma adversely affecting the philosophy of collective or individual life.

Therefore the local leaderships have to build up a common platform for decent survival, to serve the people under demanding, distressing, and humiliating foreign and global conditionalities. In Bangladesh, there are signs of disintegration, and the point of no-return may reach soon, unless the leaders press the brakes, and take a look around on how to serve the oppressed and poor people; otherwise those who dare to stand in the way would be removed by means fair or foul, by forces local and/or foreign (one of the tools is the use of communal forces through pawns).

Abul M Ahmad Dhaka

Drugs in the New Market

Sir, I went to New Market to buy a book on the 14th April (Pohela Bhaishak). It was around 9 pm.

While I was coming back from one of the book shops, I saw some 5/6 young men, sitting in the open place in front of the book shops, were gossiping. I was astonished seeing that they were taking preparation to take drugs. I could not believe my own eyes. In fact, this is first time, I have seen drug-taking scene in a public place like New Market. It tells us how cheap and available the drugs are and state of the law and order situation have become.

Ahmed Intiaz Dhaka

Utshab

Sir, We would like to thank BTV for telecasting the magazine programme 'Utshab' on 9 April, 99. In the midst of the so-called magazine programmes of same nature in which own culture and heritage are mostly neglected, it was nice to see that BTV has at least one magazine programme to present the nostalgic tune of 'Dotara' and 'Conch-Shuli' (Shankha).

Syed Anwar Parvez 762, Outer Circular Road Razarbag (Malibag), Dhaka