

Pay Heed to Real Problems, Please

IT is a truism that our politicians are more pre-occupied with politics of power than politics for people, although their relentless rhetoric may suggest the contrary. Against this backdrop, it is highly likely that the gravity of two front-page news items — *Millions at risk of arsenic cancer* and *50 pc babies are born with low weight* — in The Daily Star of yesterday, will be lost upon them. The issues highlighted through the reportage, in all probability, will be deemed as not having enough significance or weightage for inclusion in the list of agenda of our political parties, ruling and opposition alike. Worse even, the legislators, on both sides of the aisle, may not be able to squeeze time out of their busy schedules to have even a cursory glance at these ominous findings, let alone try to fathom their cataclysmic significance.

The Dhaka Community Hospital projection, based on a nation-wide survey on arsenic contamination, puts the number of people exposed to arsenic cancer at several millions. The Centre of Health and Population Research of the ICDDR,B study says that nearly half of the three million babies born every year in the country are of low birth weight, thereby susceptible to physical and mental impairment, infectious diseases, malnutrition and growth failure that account for one-third of deaths in the first year of birth. The rest grow up with abnormal mental development and physical impairment, and are at a greater risk of morbidity and premature death from heart disease, hypertension and diabetes. More alarming is the fact that it is a continuum, an inter-generational phenomenon — a girl born with low weight "may grow up stunted and may give birth to a low weight baby." It means that the malcontent will be there in generations to come.

These findings have unnerving implications: our dreams of a healthy nation may well turn into our worst nightmare until and unless we invest money and energy in reversing the trend. At the Parliament and on the streets, there have been plenty of perfunctory talks for enhancement of the quality of life for the masses; however, real issues have always been conveniently ignored. There is a crying need for change in the attitude of our politicians. They are expected to set aside their relentless pursuit of power and dedicate their efforts towards welfare of the nation. They have not been up to popular expectations. One wishes they would be, sooner than later.

Shrill Voices Unwelcome

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has drawn the battle-lines for AL MPs with an eye to the imminent opposition stridency against the budget at the on-going JS session. She has counselled them 'not to spare' the opposition on the floor of the House. We understand her spirit but cannot quite appreciate the phrase she has used.

In all fairness to her, we are giving other excerpts of her advisory note to AL MPs: "Come up with statistics and arguments" while you face your opposition colleagues. Furthermore, the PM 'preferred' to wait for opposition suggestions on controversial points of the budget before reacting to them. In other words, we understand that all she is basically urging her MPs to do is to provide a stout defence of the government budget in a spirit of competitiveness to outscore the opposition in the public eye. We wish she had said just as much without even unwittingly giving any provocation to the other side.

That said, we cannot help condemn the opposition's mindless hasty call on taxes within hours of presentation of the budget. We said as much in a previous editorial and we say it again. Not only have they ignored and undermined the JS already in session to debate the new budget but also added insult to the injury by gloating over the fiction of a 'successful' hasty proving that the people rejected the budget.

The provocative language must now be eschewed by both sides because of the simple reason that the people look forward to a constructive, meaningful and rewarding debate on a budget that contains some controversial proposals. The Leader of the House is expected to set the right kind of idiomatic tenor because she vociferously wants the parliament to be the centre of all political debates. Rather than shrill voices and bombastic rhetorics reverberating through the budget session of the Jatiya Sangsad people crave for a serious battle of facts and logic on the floor of the House. There may be sense in what the critics say, a view the ruling party needs to take for the benefit of governance without being dismissive of whatever the opposition says.

Playground Put to Business

DHANMONDI playground is once again being used for holding a two-week tree fair. This open space meant as a regular playground for youngsters has often been the venue for various kinds of melas, meenabazars, circuses. It has also been used as a market-place for cattle. All this for the purpose of raising funds for the Dhanmondi Sporting Club situated at one end of the ground.

This paper had in the past reported such unsporting act of the club and the DCC officials concerned assured that nothing of that kind would take place in the future. But once again the playground is being used for a tree fair by the forest department in collusion with the club officials who have pleaded their innocence about the whole affair though. The ground belongs to the Works Ministry but the Dhaka City Corporation is in charge of its maintenance. The organisers of the tree fair have claimed that they applied to the DCC for permission to hold the fair. It is impossible to believe that the playground is used without the knowledge of the three parties involved here — public works, DCC and Dhanmondi Sporting Club.

The arbitrary use of this important playground at the heart of an important residential area must be stopped forthwith. An inquiry committee should be in place to probe the financial matters arising out of the lease of the ground from time to time. The playground should be restored to sporting activities at all times.

Talks Fail: What Next?

by Harun ur Rashid

A crisis has its own momentum and one situation leads inevitably to another. In that process, a war is not unlikely to break out between the two countries to the consternation of the other countries... The neighbouring countries do not want to see an armed conflict on their doorsteps.

THE face-to-face talks between the Foreign Ministers of India and Pakistan on 12 June failed in Delhi. They met for 70 minutes and ended their discussions. The result was not unexpected. It would have been a miracle if the talks were successful.

India initially hesitated to accept the visit of Pakistan's Foreign Minister saying that it was an inappropriate time for such a visit. Furthermore India was reported to have narrowed down the agenda of talks on only two topics: (a) withdrawal of the infiltrators from Kargil sector in Kashmir and (b) the causes of such a flare up in Kashmir since 9 May.

Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh said after the talks: "It is for Pakistan to establish its bona fides. We do not have luxury to talk about talks". The statement appears to be very tough in diplomatic terms. It demonstrated India's determination to continue its measures to push back the alleged infiltrators from Kargil sector of Kashmir.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz said in New Delhi that Pakistan respected Line of Control (LoC) in the disputed Kashmir territory agreed after 1971 war but there was confusion as to the actual line of demarcation in the hilly region.

This implies that Pakistan doubts the existing LoC in the Kargil sector, apart from that Pakistan maintains that the so-called infiltrators are in fact the Kashmiris who demand a free and fair plebiscite to determine the status of Kashmir.

The talks were clouded by the allegation from the Indian side that the six dead Indian soldiers whose bodies were returned were tortured to death and India accused Pakistan of "barbaric torture" of its soldiers. Pakistan summarily dismissed the accusation. The atmosphere was vitiated by

such allegations on the eve of the talks.

It was reported that Pakistan Foreign Minister went to China prior to his visit to New Delhi and India claimed to have the transcripts of the conversation between Pakistan's Army Chief Musharraf and another Pakistani General Aziz while Pakistan's Foreign Minister was in China. The transcripts were issued by India to the press which read: "My recommendation for Sartaj Aziz is that he should make no commitment in the first meeting on the military situation. And he should not even accept ceasefire." Hardly the environment was made conducive enough for the talks to succeed.

It appears that the purpose of the release of the alleged transcripts by India was to indicate that it was Pakistan's military and not the politicians who control and conduct the policy on Kashmir. India implicitly makes out a case Pakistan's powerful army acts independently of their politicians and the present escalation is the making of Pakistan's army. Pakistan rejects this insinuation.

Pakistan Foreign Minister knew that the talks would be inconclusive given the wide divergence of views on the causes of such flare-up in Kashmir. Pakistan's primary purpose was to defuse the tension by raising the wider issue of the sovereignty of Indian administered Kashmir, dominated by Muslims. India did not accept to widen the issue at the meeting. Another reason for Pakistan to undertake the visit is to show to the world that Pakistan has made efforts to settle the existing tension by peaceful means. If Pakistan retaliates with armed attack, they can argue that they are not to be blamed for further escalation. The international community has to look up to India and not

such as Pakistan.

If the attitude and the mode of the parties is anything to go by, it does not presage any improvement of the situation in Kashmir. On the other hand, it may escalate further. It is reported that Pakistan has been assured by China that Pakistan's security and integrity would be safeguarded. India's Foreign Minister is reported to make a trip to China to brief the Chinese on the New Delhi

such as Kargil.

Both India and Pakistan do not seem to be in a mood to defuse the tension. Each party feels that it is right to protect its territorial integrity. Added to it, Pakistan maintains that the conflict has a moral dimension in that the Muslim Kashmiris should not be denied of their right to exercise self-determination. The danger exists that failure of talks is likely to harden both countries' positions on Kashmir. Pakistan will continue trying to prove that Kashmir dispute needs international intervention while India will strive to show that it is a bilateral problem.

As I have argued earlier (DS/28 May 1999) that a crisis has its own momentum and one situation leads inevitably to another. In that process, a war is not unlikely to break out between the two countries to the consternation of the other countries of the Indian sub-continent. The neighbouring countries do not want to see an armed conflict on their doorsteps. In that situation, do the leaders of Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan have any joint role to play to defuse the tension between the two key players of the sub-continent?

The writer, a Barrister, is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN in Europe, Geneva.

LETTER FROM AMERICA How Good are We in Sports?

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

LIKE Bangladeshis everywhere, the writer rejoiced at Bangladesh's victory over Scotland and Pakistan in Cricket's world cup. Actually, the basking was in reflected glory — my happiness derived from the ecstasy exuded by my fellow countrymen at home and abroad.

Although the writer was fortunate enough to be a member and captain of Bangladesh Track and Field team in the late 1960s and early 1970s, that does not make him an expert on anything. Nevertheless, I shall use that excuse of a "sports insider" to evaluate what we really accomplished.

During Pakistani days, we believed that our weather — hot, humid and rainy — were the main impediments to our excellence in cricket. Of course, Sri Lanka, with worse weather, put a dent in that argument. Nevertheless, Bangladeshi cricketers were steadily gaining on Pakistan right up to the War of Liberation. Raquibul Hassan represented Pakistan against MCC at Dhaka in 1971.

We were pretty good in other sports too. Abdus Sadeque was a member of Pakistan's world beating hockey team in 1970. At least half the Pakistani football team used to be from Bangladesh; Nabi Chowdhury captained the team in the 1950s. After liberation, Bangladesh became the dominant football power in the Sub-continent. If we could be as good as, if not better than India and Pakistan in football, why should we be so far behind in cricket?

I guess the simple answer to that was the level of popular participation in the two sports. Whereas football is played in every village in Bangladesh, cricket is predominantly a city sport, and very much a sport of the elite. The elitist nature of the cricket lies in its origin — after all, it was the English nobility who invented cricket — and even today, in England and elsewhere, it remains the game of choice of the upper class. Cricket can be an oddity in a society like Bangladesh, which aspires to be egalitarian.

There is a gulf of difference between a champion and an also-ran. Mere proficiency in a sport is not enough; to go to the

next level one needs to take a quantum leap. And only a true champion can provide that. By all account, Bangladesh attained exalted level in cricket under the tutelage of the former West Indian test superstar Gordon Greenidge.

The writer was lucky to watch Gordon play in his prime in the 1970s both for Hampshire (he believed) and of course the West Indies. I had never seen a batsman square-cut the ball more exquisitely. Having been a member of the unofficial World Champion West Indian team of the 1970s that featured Sir Gary Sobers, Rohan Kanhai, Clive Lloyd, Alvin Kallicharran, Lance Gibbs and Andy Roberts, Greenidge knew what it took to be a champion. His talent and experience clearly rubbed off on the young Bangladeshi Tigers, as exemplified by their victory in the ICC trophy.

It was ironic that Gordon Greenidge was dismissed the day Bangladesh achieved its supreme cricket glory against Pakistan. Without knowing the inside story, it will not be fair to criticize Bangladesh cricket authorities for their decision to fire Gordon Greenidge. However, the timing could not have been worse. If Mr. Greenidge was fired because he thought Bangladesh was not ready for test cricket, the decision is even more scandalous. Gordon Greenidge knows what he is talking about; what it takes to be a test playing nation. The last thing Bangladesh wants is to be the doormat of test cricket via a premature entry into test status. Firing Greenidge will not hasten Bangladesh's entry into test cricket — it may delay it. It is shameful to fire someone for his opinion, not his coaching ability.

The risk of sounding unpopular and unpatriotic, I should like to state that we overemphasize cricket, we will be in danger of committing the same mistake that India and Pakistan did with field hockey. For years, India and Pakistan wrapped their Olympic aspirations solely around that minor sport. The writer was surprised to see that in the semi-final of 1972 Munich Olympic hockey between India and Pakistan, very few non-subcontinentals were in attendance (West Germany won the gold). Yet, perusing newspapers in India and Pakistan, one would have concluded that the Olympics was all about field hockey! Now that some western nations have taken a little more interest in field hockey, the subcontinental dominance is history.

Let us face it, cricket is a minor sport on the world stage; less so than field hockey. One can count on one's fingertip how many nations play it. Excelling in cricket, while commendable, will not make us a world sports power. The other day, all excited, I told a colleague from Scotland that Bangladesh had beaten Scotland in cricket. "I did not know Scotland played cricket," he replied. Now, if Bangladesh had beaten Scotland in football, he and the rest of the world would have known!

Like all sports, cricket requires extraordinary coordination of the body, especially that of arms and feet. With that satisfied, the other part of the torso becomes less critical in cricket. An on-and-off game like golf, cricket is much more forgiving physically. That is why "fatso's" like former English batsman Tom Graveney could play the game at the highest level. Football, on the other hand is a game of perpetual motion. Excessive weight, or lack of fitness is unthinkable in a top football player.

One-dimensional approach is not going to help us raise our sports standard. We have to develop talent in whichever field we find it. Way back in 1960 Rome Olympics, India's Milkha Singh finished fourth in men's 400 metres run. As recently as, the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, India's P.T. Usha finished just outside the medals in the women's 400 metres hurdles. The writer remembers that in the 1960s and 1970s Bangladesh boasted of excellent athletes like Shiraj (100 metres), Miraj (pole vault) and Sultana Ahmed (Khukuri sprints).

Ir Roger Bannister, the first person to break the 4-minute barrier in the mile, says that with their elevated bone structure around the hip, black athletes have an advantage in the sprints. I am in no mood to argue with Sir Roger, a physician

sess how much feelings the Punjabis have for their Bengali brothers" and Javed Miandad is a Punjabi.

Najma Alt
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Nice victory

Sir, May I first take this opportunity to congratulate the Bangladesh cricket team in its recent victories in the World Cup in England.

I had the great fortune to have attended the match against Pakistan, and let me tell you the pride that ran through my veins as I witnessed our team defeat one of the pre-tournament favourites, in such an convincing manner. Both Wasim Akram and Imran Khan have commented on the exemplary way in which Bangladesh have proved themselves this year.

But there is a down side to this famous victory. Already

Now, Information War

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

Fortunately, an intra-Kashmiri dialogue across ethnic and political divides has started. Around the Hague Peace Conference last month, a large number of Kashmiris, from Pannun Kashmir to pro-Mujahideen groups met for the first time. They called for an end to all violence, for free dialogue between Kashmiris, and return to Kashmir's traditions of peaceful co-existence.

The media's litmus-test is not loyalty to officialdom, even arbitrarily defined "patriotism", but to truth and critical analysis. It must question and verify official claims and be prepared to cross swords with power. This is doubly important in a crisis. It is profoundly wrong to suspend or abridge the role of the media as mirror of the truth.

The second larger issue is the link between Kargil and Kashmir. It is futile to pretend that Kashmir is not a dispute. Numerous UN resolutions and even the Simla agreement recognise this, although this does not mean Pakistan should alter the LoC.

The present crisis partly stems from the festering of the Kashmir dispute and periodic border skirmishes. It shows how civilians have become victims of India-Pakistan rivalry. Kargil's Shias have never been part of the Valley's *azadi* movement. But they have been turned into refugees. This is not inevitable.

The Kashmir problem is amenable to solution. This can come about through changed Indian and Pakistani mindsets and involvement of the Kashmiri people in the determination of their fate.

Kashmir is not just about Partition and the Maharaja's refusal to accede to India until October 1947. Nor is it about Muslim identity. It is about giving Kashmiris a voice in a just solution to the problem, which enhances everyone's security. Kashmiri's relationship to India and Pakistan must be settled on a modern, secular, pluralist basis.

The Kashmiri people's involvement in the conciliation process will transform its complexion. All concerned will then have to confront the issues of democracy and plurality in culture and society — outside the straitjacket of rivalry. This is just what is needed.

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This is a positive step. Real progress will come through such moves, not military conflict with its horrific potential for nuclear devastation.

The writer is an eminent Indian journalist.

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

Gun Guarantees?

After the shootings in a Denver suburb, where 15 people were killed, I read the constitution again. I was interested because Charlton Heston, president of the National Rifle Association, and his people still insist the Second Amendment has to be protected, whatever the fatality rate.

I looked through the amendment to see if there is anything about shooting students. Then I checked on whether or not there is any guarantee for the sales of gun dealers.

There didn't seem to be any.

The Second Amendment says nothing about sawed-off shotguns, automatic carbines, pistols and Saturday Night Specials.

The NRA says it doesn't have to — arms are arms, and militias are militias, and good people have to protect themselves from bad people.

The question arises, "What did the people who voted for the Second Amendment have in mind?"

The pro-gun lobby, which finances your politicians, believes that the founders wanted everyone to have a gun in his home and should be permitted to buy a second in case the first one doesn't work.

Guns are not to be used in crimes or homicides, though there is nothing spelled out as to who are the good guys or who are the bad guys.

The founding fathers never dealt with teenage shootings because none of them had children in high school. Besides, it is not guns that kill people, etc., etc.

The NRA says the anti-gun bledders are going to destroy the constitution. As a matter of fact, the NRA is now sending emails begging its members to give money.

Where does any sane person stand? If previous school shootings are any indication, the furor will die down, the international media will leave Colorado and people will forget about it until the next shooting — when everyone will ask: "Why didn't they do anything about this?"

By arrangement with Los Angeles Times Syndicate and UNB.

To the Editor...

Miandad! No thanks

Sir, I was appalled to read that Bangladesh is considering hiring Javed Miandad of Pakistan as the coach for the Bangladesh cricket team. It was rightly pointed out in the DS that in what language will Miandad communicate with our cricketers? And since when have the Pakistanis begun to have the best interest of this country at heart? But most importantly will or anybody care to investigate Miandad's role in the infamous tour of Bangladesh in the early '80s by the Pakistani team, when they made derogatory remarks about our team? Wasn't Miandad then the captain of the Pakistani team?

Please, anybody even remotely suggesting Miandad as the only option for a coach for us, should not only be questioned for ulterior motives, but should also be encouraged to visit Punjab