

Purchase of MIG-29s

PATRIOTICALLY, however small a country we maybe, there is need for us to have as strong and modern a defence capability as we can get within our means and subject to our socio-economic priorities.

What validates the craving for such a bulwark of defence is the multipolarity of the geopolitical matrix today which is fraught with more uncertainties than in the by-gone context of a bipolar world where a set-piece defence approach could work well. In this paradigm shift, the maintenance of sanctity and sovereignty of national air spaces has no doubt become a prime concern for defence strategists especially in the volatile regions of the world.

Even granting all this, we have to say that we feel somewhat confronted with the news that the government has finalised a deal with Russia to purchase eight MIG-29s at a cost of 11 million US dollars apiece. Training, transportation and technical services are to cost about 9 million dollars more. Recurrent maintenance costs for these advanced aircraft are going to be sizable, too. We are not against expenditure on defence where a strong case can be made out for it nor are we measly in our attitude to modernisation of the air force for reasons adduced above. But we certainly have questions to ask about the manner in which this seems to have come about with a degree of thought provoking suddenness. Quite definitely, the BAF must have submitted a rationale for buying these aircraft to the Defence Ministry or for that matter, the government. The natural question to ask is: was this discussed threadbare in the parliament? We are not aware whether the parliamentary standing committee on defence had knowledge of the deal. But if these steps were taken there would have been media coverage leading to public discussion over the points at issue with no cause given for any public misgiving to arise about the transparency of the process.

Well, any discussion on a subject like this is usually put under wraps saying that it might entail sensitive security interests of the country. But we feel there is a margin of flexibility between what the public deserve to know and what must be retained as a state secret.

From our baseline equipment status the new purchase means a jump-start into sophisticated gadgetry in air defence. The question that is bound to arise is: whether it fits in with an overall sustainable defence strategy or is an adhoc step to gain an abrupt elevation in terms of prestige acquisition. Is it the best way to strengthen the airforce? The public have a right to know. The parliament and other important public fora need to be used extensively for the sake of transparency and information dissemination in matters of governance and national policy formulation.

Stain on Parliament

IT is a pity that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had to indulge in an innuendo against the Leader of the Opposition on the floor of the House on Monday. By doing that she has lowered not only the sanctity of the highest forum of elected representatives but also the prestige of her office. Moreover, her casting a direct aspersion on Khaleda Zia's personage has created a negative impression about her taste. Her utterances sound no different from the personalised tirades against Begum Zia hurled by her party legislator from Bogra-Jaipurhat constituency Kamrunnahar Putul, and the State Minister for Land Rashed Mosharrar on the other day. Besides, the prime minister's momentary lapse of reason — we desperately hope that it was only so — negates exhortations from conscious quarters of the society for the legislators' responsible behaviour towards maintaining the sanctity of the House.

In our editorial comments on Kamrunnahar Putul's disparaging remarks and Rashed Mosharrar's unpardonable insinuation, we called for the Speaker's intervention. The speaker has, in the meanwhile, issued a warning against such digressions from parliamentary norms. Unfortunately, his resolve has now been put to test by none other than the Leader of the House herself and he has failed, obviously, to live up to his pledges. It is no less ironical that Sheikh Hasina herself, in the same speech, had urged her colleagues not to "indulge in personal slander and indecent remarks". Her own personal remarks have rendered her preaching pointless.

The parliament has once again been subjected to a sacrilege, this time around, by the person who is in the best position as the leader of the House to uphold democratic norms. The incident has surely left an indelible stain on the parliamentary fabric and the responsibility falls square on the prime minister's shoulders. Instead of setting a healthy precedent for democratic behaviour, she has done the exact opposite. The very fact that a person of her position indulged in a direct aspersion against the Leader of the Opposition makes the situation rather frightful. Are we witnessing a collapse of the system? We hope the answer is negative.

Casualty Ward in a Coma

PERHAPS the most important of all wards at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) is the casualty ward. But this has become a casualty itself of departmental procedures and red-tapism.

The casualty ward which provides emergency treatment to about ten thousand patients a year, is devoid of proper equipment and even lights to perform operations on patients.

A report in a local Bangla daily on Tuesday vividly depicted the pathetic state of affairs in the casualty ward. A photograph showing an operation being carried out with the help of a torch light in the absence of proper lights at the operation theatre was the height of absurdity. The report says that OT lamps having been out of order for the last three years spot lamps came to be used but even these went kaput last week. This is a very painful situation. Not only are the lights out of order but the operation table is also in a precarious condition having been reinforced by bricks which can cause severe damage to the patient if these are dislodged accidentally.

Conditions in the casualty ward OT are worse than in a field hospital. Everyday around thirty patients are admitted to the casualty ward for treatment of various kinds of wounds but there are a thousand and one problem for the doctors to render service to the patients who need them on an emergency basis. Recently a lot of money has been made available for the expansion of DMCH but if normal medicare cannot be provided to emergency patients then the extension of buildings will be of little avail. Why should the purchase of lights for an OT should take such a long time? Would the Health Minister please look into the matter personally and ensure that the casualty ward receives some emergency treatment?

Awami League's Three-year Rule

Achievements and Failures

Awami League leaders must be honest in their pronouncements, be less partisan in action and adopt a forward-looking policy. Otherwise, people will not forgive them as they had done in the last election.

aspect of our foreign policy, therefore, warrants a careful and objective treatment. The conclusion of the Treaty on sharing of waters of the Ganges with India has been claimed as the most outstanding achievement of the present government. On the other hand, the opposition political parties came out with scathing criticisms, describing it as an uneven Treaty under which interests of Bangladesh were sacrificed and Bangladesh's dependence on India on water issue was formalised.

Yet, the price paid for this treaty was heavy and this clearly reveals the true nature of the foreign policy of the present government. The unsatisfactory water sharing treaty was concluded on a *quid pro quo* basis with the apparent pledge by Bangladesh for granting some special facilities to India and reaching some understanding about some sort of co-ordination of its foreign policy with the big neighbour's. That explains Bangladesh government's acquiescence to India's demand for a corridor to provide a direct and short link with the rebel-infested seven sister states in eastern India as well as to India's other proposals.

The subservience of Bangladesh's foreign policy to India's has been aptly demonstrated recently. The detonation of nuclear device by India last year caused, to the surprise and consternation of most people, little or no reaction from the government of Bangladesh. It was only after similar action

by Pakistan that the government came out with a statement, that too merely containing advice to exercise restraint by all concerned.

This policy of carefully avoiding currying displeasure of India was again demonstrated by the absence of any reaction, not to speak of condemnation of Serbs' ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, when NATO air action commenced to



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

bringing the criminal Serb President to the negotiating table. It took two more weeks for the government to come out with a statement, emphasising mainly the need for redressing plight of the refugees. A token donation of \$50,000/- by the Prime Minister was too little, too late and a product of after-thought. All this was due to India's immediate and forceful condemnation of NATO's air strikes on Serbian targets which prevented the Bangladesh government to give vent to real popular feelings in Bangladesh on Kosovo. Such a policy does not resemble the foreign policy of a sovereign, independent nation.

But, even greater failure of government policy appears to be in the domestic field. Restoration and maintenance of law and order in the country, which the Prime Minister publicly declared as the first priority of her government, has been at its lowest ebb in all times. Recurrence and intensity of crimes of all types, such as murder, rape, extortion, women's repression and death in police custody, took place in larger number than ever before. Political repression became so obvious and widespread that the government broke all time record by being fined by the

Supreme Court for unlawfully putting opposition leaders in jail on totally false charges. Terrorism on educational campuses and outside have kept its pace with other crimes. The economic and commercial policy again has brought nothing but disaster to the nation. People never had experienced such misery with prices of essential goods soaring record high, despite jugglery of statistics by the government. Price of rice, the staple food of the people, shot up from Taka 11 to Taka 17 in no time, and has not come down. The industrial sector has become stagnant and, besides other factors, to unfair competition from across the borders, lack of finances and liquidity of banks as well as reduced purchasing power of the consumer. Many old industries, specially small

and medium scale ones, have closed down and few new industries have been set up. The only sector on which foreign investment has been forthcoming is the energy sector, more specifically the gas sector, but in all other major fields the actual and net foreign investment has been amply shy. The stock market crash of 1997 pitifully exposed government's inept handling and inability to manage the financial sector, which has been heavily depended on government borrowing from banks, thereby siphoning away latter's liquidity.

The institution of democracy, represented by the conduct of politics in and outside the Parliament, has been receiving serious jolts from time to time. Parliament has unfortunately become a forum of unparliamentary acts and behaviour of its members several of whom have been prone to using highly abusive language. Legislations on major national issues like Ganges water sharing treaty and treaty on Chittagong Hill Tracts were made in the House without virtually allowing any discussion, dismissing heavy demands for it. Opposition was not allowed to raise other important national issues, including law and order, like Udichi killings in Jessore, for discussion. Opposition staged numerous walkouts and absented from the House on various pleas, including allegation of the Chair being partial to the ruling party. Provocation and frustration of opposition led their members to proceed to Speaker's rostrum in anger. An

agreement between the government and the opposition was concluded only to be violated soon. The ruling party made a commendable rule of making non-ministerial heads of parliamentary committees, but its operation and proceedings in the House made Parliament, the focal point of democracy, much less than desired.

Finally, one may wish to evaluate some of the other pledges made by the ruling party. One of the major election pledges was to repeal the Special Powers Act. The government not only failed to repeal the nefarious Act, but the Prime Minister herself strangely came out publicly in support of its continuation. The other pledge of granting autonomy to state-run radio and television is yet to be redeemed. Separation of the executive and the judiciary at present remains a far cry from being implemented. As a matter of fact, contrary to Prime Minister's oft-repeated assertion that justice will follow its own course, she had been in a way reprimanded by no less a person than Chief Justice of the Supreme Court himself for her disparaging remarks against the judiciary. Most people are of the opinion that Prime Minister and government leaders generally do not match their words with deeds.

The above consists of some of the observations that may be made in a short article on a vast subject like the one being dealt with. Many other relevant matters and issues could have been added to do justice to it. But one thing is clear in everyone's mind. Awami League leaders must be honest in their pronouncements, be less partisan in action and adopt a forward-looking policy. Otherwise, people will not forgive them as they had done in the last election.

The author, former Ambassador, is a member of the BNP's Advisory Committee.

Loyalty of Party Members and Overall Political Scenario

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

Undaunted by the cries of the combined opposition the party in power led by Sheikh Hasina celebrated its golden jubilee with pomp and gaiety. The first session on June 23, 1999 was addressed, among others, by a large number of foreign dignitaries ... The opposition movement against the government is yet to attain the required momentum.

him and he had no other option but to surrender to the court after he was assured of better dealing.

There is no doubt that this valiant freedom fighter had created such a glittering image that he easily outshone all other fellow fighters. It is equally true that if anyone damaged the image of this great son of the soil it is he himself because this image has long been haunting him, perpetually, seizing him ultimately with a state sense of self-complicity. And that has since long been stealing away his saner composure provoking unwitty statement to the detriment of his own standing in the party. His current stance on the freedom fighters vis-a-vis the compilation of an authentic list of the genuine ones at the behest of the Muktiyuddha Sangsad deserves thoughtful consideration.

This has been the first time in 28 years that he has been so vocal on the issue of granting a 2000 taka allowance to every freedom fighter. Ordinarily, this could be a very legitimate demand. But when he alludes to the financial and other benefits granted by the present government to the 'insurgents' at Chittagong Hill Tracts in consequence of the Peace Accord, for their rehabilitation, he speaks with an undertone of satire, evidently to upbeat the sense of frustration preponderant among the freedom fighters. He has been so very critical in the course of his demand that he unleashed stinging accusation against some of the ministers in the cabinet, without of course naming them, on their wealth building. He did not even spare Sheikh Hasina on the same count.

Without questioning or contesting his allegations, his sudden

burst could be attributed to the fact that it was all born of a feeling of being ignored by the party high command and of his ambition remaining unfulfilled for long. It is true that he has no place in the Mukti Joddha Sangsad nor in the administrative machinery of the government. He may have many more grievances awaiting redress. It is hoped all these shall be looked into quickly and settled, if found reasonable, only to honour a brave warrior.

And away in the main opposition party BNP Maj (rtd) Akhtaruzzaman, MP, from Kishoreganj has again caused a furore. He couldn't find any justification of the call of hartal on last 13th June, 1999 and urged upon the people not to observe it. His grounds were that this call was not discussed and approved by BNP parliamentary committee, rather, it was approved by the so-called liaison committee of the four-party alliance which, in his opinion, had no such authority. This was for the second time that the ex-soldier turned politician and member of the parliament had come in direct clash with the party high command. Last time the matter was amicably settled and was not pursued further. But this time all now things appear uncertain for Maj (rtd) Akhtaruzzaman. He has been issued show cause notice and meantime his seat in the Jatiya Sangsad has been shifted from 4th row to the last row. Terribly offended he has expressed his consternation at such rudeness of his party high-ups at whose instance such an unkind deal was meted out to him. The sword of Democritus is now hanging over his head. Still things appear to have been prepared to face any eventuality. In case of his expulsion from the party

he promised to go back to his own constituency to seek the verdict of the electorate.

Both Abdul Kader Siddiki and Akhtaruzzaman shall await the decision from their respective party high command and till then a state of uncertainty shall invariably prevail. Unless a compromise is there two legislators may have to change floor. Let's wait and see.

Currently we were having budget session of our Jatiya Sangsad but it was as drab as ever before. The thin attendance of the people's representative, and thinner quite often as viewed on the television screen, gave us an unholy impression. The elected members of the Jatiya Sangsad, mainly belonging to the opposition bench have been persistently displaying their disinterestedness in the assembly proceedings by their absenteeism. A few days ago the leader of the opposition had stated that she considered Jatiya Sangsad as the ideal forum for ventilating people's grievances. It indeed signified a good omen born of wisdom on the part of the leader of the opposition. The treasury bench or for that matter, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was elated with joy and thanked Begum Zia for her realisation.

But the latest statistics of her own attendance as published in the national dailies showed that out of 230 days she was present only on 29 days and participated in the debate on 14 days. Again it was she who remarked that the Speaker and the ministers had been all along flouting the rules of business. She is yet to explain her absence in the proceedings of the business advisory committee of the parliament for a single day till date. Mr Khورشid Anwar, her party MP deputised

for her. This is ridiculous in as much as this is a veritable abdication of the rank and stature of the leader of the opposition who is also the shadow Prime Minister. I doubt if such deputisation is legally tenable let alone the logical part of it. The Speaker, who is also the Chairman of the said committee might give this aspect a rethinking.

The uneven wed-locking of four parties is yet to prove worthwhile. There appears too many loose ends blocking any cohesive plan. Within BNP many are still opposed to a joint front with Ershad and the pro-liberation forces hate to work together with Jamaat-e-Islami. This being the situation the so-called Liaison Committee has to pursue its assignment half-heartedly with leaders of lower ranks. The summit of the four top-leaders continues to remain a distant possibility.

The Jatiya Party chief General Ershad, on the other hand, stands out totally disillusioned.

OPINION

Food Safety: A Neglected Issue

Dr M Ahmed

Recent news on dioxin contamination of food and drink in Belgium, France and the Netherlands has hard hit the international media. The Daily Star has written editorials on this subject on 20 and 26 June 1999 to express its concern. When one, scientifically, looks into the 'hygienic' condition of our food, there is ample reason to get scared of. The consumers' lack of understanding the risks associated with the improperly processed, prepared and served food on our platter is one of the main causes of the growing incidence of food-borne diseases and contamination in our country. There is no appropriate government regulatory safety network to look into the kinds of food we are buying in the market and the quality of food we are commonly eating in private and public catering establishments.

We do not lack approved specific standards of food. Bangladesh is a member of Codex Alimentarius Commission, a joint programme of FAO and WHO which looks into the food safety and fair trade in food, and she actively participates in its activities and receives international codes, standards and practices recommended by this organization. Our problem is non-adherence to standards and practices of food products for domestic consumption.

Food and water-borne diseases are responsible for 75 per cent of the deaths of children in developing countries, including ours. It is also a major cause of malnutrition in a major portion of our population. It is the need of the hour that we must start somewhere and at some level of our catering services for providing safe, hygienic and wholesome food to the consumers.

Developing countries are dumping grounds of poor quality food and feed from the exporting countries, particularly in the west. One should not forget the attempts by the unscrupulous importers to import radiation contaminated powdered milk following Chernobyl reactor accident on 26, 1986. Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission inter-

cepted the import and later a laboratory was established in Chittagong to monitor all the imported food of radioactive contamination.

As huge quantities of poultry feed components are imported from Europe, the experts fear that some of the dioxin-contaminated feed might end up in our country. Dr Malek, a scientist of the Institute of Food and Radiation Biology (IFRB) of BAEC stated to the DS reporter on June 24, 1999 that no facility exists in Bangladesh to detect the dioxin contamination. IFRB is doing commendable research in detecting pesticide residues in our food in cooperation and under technical assistance of the Food and Environmental Protection Section of the Joint FAO/IAEA Division of the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna.

The Agrochemical Research and Analysis Laboratory of IFRB is well equipped. With some additional inputs, it could be developed into a national reference laboratory for detection of toxic contaminants in our food, in cooperation with Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institute, BCSIR and other national research organizations. Although dioxin scare is dying down in Europe and that our government has taken measures to control the entry of dioxin contaminated dairy and animal feed, due to absence of a detection method, some unscrupulous traders, as stated by the DS in its editorial on 26 June, 1999, will try to fish out of troubled water.

Therefore, it is high time that government keeps a constant vigil and takes appropriate action in establishing a reference laboratory to detect food and feed contaminants in order to enhance the regulatory requirement to protect the environment and health of our people.

The writer is a former Director of the Institute of Food and Radiation Biology of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission and Technical Officer of Food and Environmental Protection Section of the FAO/IAEA Joint Division of the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna.

To the Editor...

Hello, big 'brother'!

Sir, While appreciating the inauguration of the formal bus service between Dhaka and Calcutta (the East and the West!), it will take time to establish empathy, as the 120m Bangladeshis are puzzled at the disparities in the relationship between the two neighbouring countries.

India's foreign policy towards its neighbours need specialised planning for strategies based on mass psychology factors, remembering the background that most of the South Asian regions was part of the Raj for about two centuries. Living together was evidently disrupted after 1947, hence the intensity of the emotions, positive or negative, are deeper and wider; and these cannot be brushed under the carpet or vaporised through platitudes.

The partition was based on religion; currently the economic approach is dominating. In the so-called western concept of free market in the background of globalisation of trade, unilateral or bilateral stands cannot be depended upon for long and in depth, because the international big powers will intervene, to ensure their own *daal-bhaat* during the sunset of their civilization.

This intervention has already started, carefully planned by G8 and other 'trading partners', to create conditions for seamless trans-border trading through the South Asian countries, starting from Singapore, and penetrating deep into Central Asia and Europe. They have two powerful

tools for bargaining: the access to vast investment funds, and the controlled transfer of technology through trading partnerships.

First the SAARC concept has to be meaningful and practical, and visible at the mass level. Like Anderson said on landing step on the sunlit moon, but a giant step for mankind.

The mental barriers have to be removed; starting with reducing the huge official trade gap between Bangladesh and India; noting that the unofficial and informal disparity (smuggling across the borders) might be of the same or greater magnitude. The man-in-the-street here will resist turning Bangladesh into a market for India, so the politicians have to be careful in their optimism.

Diversity thrives in both the countries, but the advantage of homogeneity lies with the Bangladeshis (note the 1971 unity). This factor has to be tapped. Untapped, it might create havoc to all plans and agreements (volatility obeys no formula, watching the red poverty line).

Atif Zabr
Dhaka.

Duty on pesticides

Sir, Next to fertilizer, pesticide is an indispensable agricultural input in the modern scientific cultivation. Although attempts to grow a bumper crop may be futile if the pest control measures are not taken in time. Last year post-flood pest attack on the aman crops throughout

the country caused heavy crop losses. Presently the Ministry of Agriculture has been implementing two projects under IPM which are funded by donor agencies, the objective of those schemes are to train the farmers to follow the principles of IPM in order to be less dependent on pesticides. But in a country like ours where the environment is completely polluted and degraded, ecological imbalanced IPM principles may not be effective in all cases. Besides, for a number of crops the control measures under IPM are yet to be evolved. It may be mentioned that all over the world where IPM principles are applied uses of pesticides are also being increased. In Bangladesh too uses of pesticides are increasing to the extent of 10-12 per cent per year.

But unfortunately the prices of pesticides in Bangladesh are the highest in the world due to multiple reasons. Although all the agricultural inputs are exempted from duty and taxes pesticides are subjected to all kinds of taxes and duty. Government hardly earns Tk 10-12 crore from pesticides revenues which is responsible for enhancement of its prices. The farmers of the country can't afford to buy such highly priced pesticides. As a result crops are eaten up by the insect pests. As of today there are deficits in production of all edible crops resulting regular imports. According to rough estimate crops worth of Tk 2000 crore are damaged by insect every year in Bangladesh.

Therefore urge the government to exempt the pesticides from all kinds of taxes and like

other agricultural inputs which will be undoubtedly helpful to reduce the present price of pesticides when the farmers will take interest in buying and applying pesticides in their pest affected fields.

M A Jalil
Founder and Ex-Chairman
Pesticide Association.

Violet coloured hybrid rice

Sir, A reputed daily recently published an attractive picture of a section of a paddy field of Kabirajpara. Sherpur depicting rice-plants of violet colour. In the corresponding report it has been stated that Velu Mia, a progressive farmer of Kabirajpara under Ghagra PS of the Sherpur district has cultivated violet-violet coloured paddy, while the grains are of golden colour. When contacted with the local Agricultural Extension Department, they expressed their ignorance about such paddy and informed that a local NGO has distributed the seeds of violet paddy to the farmers calling this a hybrid rice variety.

Naturally a question comes to our mind, under which authority the NGOs are distributing hybrid crop seeds to the farmers without taking approval of the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE)? These imported hybrids may cause a disaster in crop production and management in the near future if not properly tested and certified by the agencies concerned. M Zahidul Haque
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