

## 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 ad hoc 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 Mosharraf 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 behaviours towards maintaining the sanctity of the House.

In our editorial comments on Kamrunnahar Putul's disparaging remarks and Rashed Mosharraf'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 problems 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?

THE present Awami League government concluded three years of its rule in June. Assessments have been made — generally of its achievements or failures but hardly of the two together. Let us give it a try.

First to describe the positive aspects of Awami League's policy one has to say that their foremost priority, according to Prime Minister herself though it did not feature in her election manifesto and was conspicuously absent in her pre-election speeches, was met successfully with the trial and conviction of Bangabandhu's assassins. Secondly, his name and image were rehabilitated, among other things, with many, rather too many, national landmarks and institutions having been named after him. Thirdly, revitalisation of the spirit of liberation movement represented a strong claim of the Awami League, though those who actually led the liberation war were mostly ignored.

As for foreign relations, the government started to work on right footing with Prime Minister's visit to China and Saudi Arabia, the two countries with whom all governments, irrespective of political affiliation, strive to maintain, and rightly so, cordial relations. Visit of Nelson Mandela and several other world leaders to Bangladesh manifested positive development in the foreign policy. A number of high level visits took place from Bangladesh to many other countries with the intent to improve bilateral relations. Prime Minister also received felicitations from some world leaders and international recognition on conclusion of the disputed Chittagong Hill Tracts Treaty.

Bangladesh's foreign policy, however, right from its very inception as a sovereign, independent nation, has been heavily hinged upon its relations with India. An analysis of this

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 coordination of its foreign policy with the big neighbour's. That explains Bangladesh government's acquiescence in 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

of 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

lively 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 due, 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 ac-

tual 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 im-

portant national issues, includ-

ing law and order, like Udichi

killings in Jessor, for discus-

sion. Opposition staged numer-

ous 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.

## Awami League's Three-year Rule

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### Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

## 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 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 stale sense of self-complacency. And that has since long been stealing away his saner composure provoking unworthy 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 Mukti Juddha 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 accusations against some of the ministers in the cabinet, without course naming them, on their wealth building. He didn't even spare Sheikh Hasina on the same count.

Without questioning or con-

denburst can 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 Juddha 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 furor. He couldn't find any justification for his own standing in the party. His current stance on the call for a 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, till 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 as such rudeness of his party high-ups at whose instance such an unkind deal was meted out to him. The sword of Democles is now hanging over his head. Still then, he appears 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 unholly impression.

The elected members of the Jatiya Sangsad, mainly belonging to the opposition party have been persistently displaying their disinterestedness in the assembly proceedings by their absence.

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.

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 Khorshed Anwar, her party MP deputy was elated with joy and thanked Begum Zia for her realisation.

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