

Dhaka, Tuesday, July 13, 1999

President Says It All

WHAT more can an elected President in a parliamentary democracy say? What more can a patriot say? What more can a man who believes in decency say? In a speech that should put all our political leaders, especially those belonging to the ruling party, to shame President Shahabuddin has pointed his finger at the political patronisation of the big loan defaulters as the root cause of the crisis that our banking system faces today. In saying "political parties take huge funds from loan defaulters and shelter them", the President has articulated what the public and we, the independent media, have been saying for quite a while. He went further saying that, "political parties cannot continue without the support of loan defaulters just as they cannot continue without students, musclemen and terrorists." This clearly shows that the President is convinced, as most of the people are, that political parties have direct links with terrorists and musclemen who are mainly responsible for the rise in crimes and terrorism that is destroying the very fabric of our society.

We are fortunate to have a man like President Shahabuddin who speaks out on issues and has the guts to call a spade a spade. This is not the first time that he has done so — boldly and clearly. All his previous warnings and suggestions have been ignored. We are afraid that those for whom Sunday's speech was meant will ignore as they did before. But we will not, so also our people will not, and all this will get reflected in the various levels of elections as and when they will come.

We strongly urge that the civil society — comprising our writers, artists, professors, teachers, doctors, lawyers, engineers, businessmen, journalists, women activists and all other professionals — should start speaking out in support of what the President is saying. We must create a situation in which it will become impossible for the government, the ruling party and the opposition to ignore our issues and concerns. For far too long we have allowed our politicians to do things as they please. Time has come for us to force them to do things that we want them to. The just-concluded parliament session was the latest example of the failure of our politicians to address our concerns. In fact, it was also an example of their failure even to be decent. They revelled at a level of indecency that we feel ashamed even to think about. But how will all this change if we, the members of the thinking public, do not act? The President's warnings have been continuously ignored by our leaders. Should the civil society make the same mistake?

Peace in Kashmir

THAT the Islamic militants have finally started withdrawing from their hilltop hideaways in the Indian Kashmir certainly puts to rest the hitherto lurking fear of another full-scale Indo-Pak war. This development comes as a welcome relief. Whether the agreement on the "sector-by-sector" cease-fire — worked out at an unannounced meeting of director generals of military operations on the Indian side of the border — signifies an outright victory for the Indian armed forces or a last-gasp attempt by Pakistan to avert embarrassment, in our view, is inconsequential at this point of time.

What has emerged from this showdown is definitely the fact that the Line of Control has been restored. And this holds the key to deter recurrence of similar conflicts in future. Also, both India and Pakistan must recognise the fact that since solution to the intractable Kashmir dispute is not readily forthcoming, they must eventually settle for a compromise formula. Although the recent spate of military operations may have suggested otherwise, we believe that both sides can, and hopefully will, build on the spirit of the Lahore Declaration that called for bilateral negotiations on all outstanding issues including Kashmir. Responsible behaviour from the two nuclear powers in South Asia is imperative for maintenance of regional peace and harmony.

While welcoming the cessation of attritional hostilities between India and Pakistan over Kashmir we urge them to apply restraint in the use of words relating to each other. Anything that facilitates a bilateral process on and a negotiated settlement of the Kashmir question must be consciously furthered. The lessons of Kargil should stand in good stead on the road to peace.

A Brutal Murder

IFF anything is cheap at all in this country it is human life. There maybe a hundred and one reasons for this, including the natural disasters that take a huge chunk of human lives annually. But the man-made reasons are the ones that we detest and abhor from the core of our hearts. Hundreds of lives — young and old, male and female, even children and infants — are taken by their fellow beings for the most obnoxious of reasons and most of the killers get away with impunity. Political animus and intra-party rivalries resulting in wanton killings have taken enormous proportions in recent times. One such killing has just taken place in the Polytechnic Institute premises of Dhaka on Sunday evening. A former vice-president of the students' union of the Polytechnic Institute was brutally murdered in front of a dormitory. Sohel Alam, a young man of 26, was dragged into a residential hall, mercilessly beaten with hockey sticks, stabbed indiscriminately and finally shot and killed at close range.

The elaborate process of killing an unarmed person, allegedly by a rival group of Chhatra League to which the deceased once belonged, brings out the brutal nature of the executioners, and the grudge and vengeance they were harbouring against the dead. This was not a murder committed for ideology or principles but one that was rooted in a conflict over area of influence. Strangely, there was no case promptly registered with the police and no arrest could be made as eye witnesses claimed that the culprits themselves demanding punishment of the killers joined the protesting procession.

Is Ehud Barak New Hope in the Middle East?

The heart of the Middle East question is a settlement of the Palestinian question. Ehud Barak has shown great statesmanship by declaring that there will be no further Israeli settlements. He is thus starting with a clean slate.

EHUD Barak, the newly elected Prime Minister of Israel has totally changed the order of priorities in the Middle East. He has made an auspicious start.

Ehud Barak handily defeated Benjamin Netanyahu of the Likud party. People in Israel voted for the continuation of the peace process and voted against those, who damaged the peace process. Indeed since the signing of the Camp David accord between Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, the peace process started its majestic journey.

The Camp David accord was composed of two parts — withdrawal of Israel from Egyptian Sinai, conquered through the 1967 war, in return for Egyptian recognition of the state of Israel. I as Bangladesh Ambassador witnessed the opening of the first ever Israeli Embassy on Arab soil in Cairo.

There was no euphoria in Egypt. Rather the Israel Embassy was virtually ostracised by the Egyptian public. A torrent of abuse was heaped on Sadat specially by the Arabs. They broke diplomatic relations with Egypt and threw her out of the Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC).

The second part of the Camp David accord was to reach an agreement between Israel and the other Arabs, whose land she had conquered. The most important question was an accord between Israel and Palestine. For all the Arabs the Pales-

tinians have suffered most, having been thrown out of their hearths and homes and become refugees for decades. Returning home for the Palestinians and forming their own state remained the most pressing question in the Middle East.

Following the Camp David accord negotiations started between the Palestinians and the Israelis in Alexandria in Egypt but it led to nowhere. After a few fruitless sessions the negotiations were broken off.

The Middle East peace process, which has been masterminded throughout by the sole superpower the USA, was virtually kept on hold throughout the eighties when Republican Ronald Reagan occupied the White House. The peace process got a new lease of life with the arrival of another Democrat to the White House, the youthful Bill Clinton. All the interested parties assembled in Madrid, capital of Spain. Then secret negotiations took place between the Palestinians and the Israelis in Oslo, the capital of Norway and the two parties reached an accord. We must remember that in the Middle East drama, the most important player is Palestine and it is through a solution of the Palestinian problem that the gordian knot can be cut.

The Oslo accord was for-

malised by the most spectacular handshake on the lawns of the White House between Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, with a beaming Clinton between the two. Peace process now became irreversible. The moot point of the accord is land for recognition. In other words Israel would withdraw from Palestinian territories in the West Bank and Gaza and Palestinian would give recognition and security to Israel.

Netanyahu did not oppose the peace process but drove enough spoke in the wheel to bring it to a screeching halt. In other words his actions attempted to frustrate the gains achieved after many years of toil and tears. He would not part with land promised to the Palestinians, he brought in the question of Jerusalem, the most contentious issue between the Arabs and Israel, he started building new settlements for Jews on Arab land. The three

cess. Rather than taking care of the domestic situation he has started his job as Prime Minister by a visit with Hosni Mubarak, President of Egypt. Egypt is the most important country of the Arab world and has constantly played a positive role in advancing peace in the Middle East. It was with Egypt that Israel signed the Camp David accord and established the first Embassy in the Arab world.

While warmly welcoming Ehud Barak in Cairo, Mubarak asked for patience in solving the problems between the Arabs and Israel. Ehud Barak has quickly followed by visits with Yasser Arafat of Palestine and Hafez al-Assad of Syria.

After the visits with the Arab neighbours Ehud Barak will visit Washington DC. This is novelty indeed for the Prime Minister of Israel. Washington is the first stop for any Israeli leader after his election. Ehud Barak is signalling his acceptance of the reality that you cannot run away from your geography. True the ties between Israel and the USA are so deep and strong that there is not a chance of its slackening in the short or long run.

During his election campaign Ehud Barak had vowed to pull out of South Lebanon. This is an emotional issue for the Is-

raelis. Due to their presence in South Lebanon for nearly two decades they have become targets of murderous attacks and have not achieved any degree of security for the state of Israel. Closely linked with the withdrawal from South Lebanon is the question of withdrawal from Golan Heights of Syria. Serious negotiations on these twin questions have not begun.

Therefore Ehud Barak will hopefully follow the calendar carefully crafted in Oslo. Barak will thus resume dialogue with the Palestinians where it had been left at the time of his slain predecessor Yitzhak Rabin. For the heart of the Middle East question is a settlement of the Palestinian question. Ehud Barak has shown great statesmanship by declaring that there will be no further Israeli settlements. He is thus starting with a clean slate.

After half a century of sterile warfare and hanging by the apron string of a faraway power like the USA, Israel has come to realise that she has to live with her Arab neighbours. It is not going to be easy. I recall that the first Egyptian diplomat, who had opened their Embassy in Tel Aviv, talking about his impression of Israel said that it did not look like a Middle Eastern country.

Sooner or later Israel will have to learn to live with this reality. The area, home of three monotheistic faiths — Judaism, Christianity and Islam, must find a way to live together in concord and harmony.

No Place For Triumphalism: Don't Demonise Pakistan

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

We must stop blindly glorifying "India" and demonising Pakistan, and admit that like Pakistan, the Indian state too is in crisis, albeit less severe. As much as restoring the LoC, our real priority is to put our house in order. Security demands peace with neighbours, including Pakistan.

GOING by what much of our media says, Mr Nawaz Sharif hoisted the "flag of surrender" in Washington by agreeing to withdraw troops from Kargil. We are told India's battle for Tiger Hill made him see reason: force is the only language he understands.

On this view, the Washington deal is a massive defeat for Pakistan, and a great triumph for India, pulled off without mediation. It vindicates India's official position.

The reality is different. The deal was indeed a setback for Pakistan: Mr Sharif had to agree to unconditional withdrawal. He only partially succeeded in highlighting Kashmir. He conceded that "bilateral dialogue" is "the best forum" to resolve disputes.

However, his setback does not translate into an Indian triumph. The absence of a time-frame for withdrawal opens up uncertainties. There is resistance to the deal from *jeihadis* and from parliament. Mr Sharif's visit was not spurred by India's military advances, but by Mr Clinton's call.

The truth is, India invited *de facto* mediation through a triangular dialogue under U.S. supervision. U.S. officials early involvement in this cleared the way for close intelligence-sharing, e.g. the famous tapes of the conversation between Gen Musharraf and his deputy.

Mr Clinton called Mr Vajpayee on June 14 and Mr Sharif the next day. By this time, journalist-middleman R.K. Mishra and MEA official Vivek Katju had visited Pakistan. Just before the G-8 Cologne summit, Mr Vajpayee requested Mr Clinton to intervene.

Frequent consultations on July 3/5 between U.S. and Indian officials provide clinching evidence of mediation. Mr Clinton would not have shared with Mr Vajpayee "readouts" of his talks with Mr Sharif, had they not already agreed on indirect mediation. India so-

licitly paid for a messy withdrawal, denying India a quick victory. So far, Indian forces' successes are confined to two-fifths of occupied posts. Tiger Hill was significant. But it may not be a "decisive turning point", as Mr Fernandes claims. Its recapture does not automatically lead to other openings.

The battle could be long and bloody. For the BJP, Kargil's larger context goes beyond LoC defence. The real agenda is to give Kargil a communal colour, with Pakistan as "Islamic" aggressor.

The Directorate of Audio-Visual Publicity has launched a vicious campaign pouring "shame" on Pakistan. Ministers call a "rogue" state. The *Hindutva* brigade is shouting "We Want War" and urging the government to "recapture" PoK. Mr Bal Thackeray's foul anti-Pakistani cricket campaign has prevailed — with little resistance.

The sangh parivar wants us to believe Kargil is a conflict between an undifferentiated, homogeneous India, and an equally undifferentiated Pak-

istan, both detached from their domestic contexts of misgovernance, vengeful nationalisms, and legitimacy crises.

We are asked to demonise Pakistan and manufacture a false image of "India", independent of its rulers, as a "peace-loving" nation: "my country, right or wrong".

Such plastic patriotism is the stuff of which Hitler and Ayub, and Golwalkar and Godse, are made. It is easy — and fashionable — to malign Pakistan as an "irresponsible" "rogue", likely to use nuclear weapons.

This conveniently forgets that it is the BJP which goaded and teased Pakistan into testing. If "rogue state" means one that routinely violates international law, then that description suits the U.S. more than Pakistan. But the BJP won't have the guts to say this about its Cold War friend. Maligning Pakistan also covers up human

rights violations in Kashmir.

Lacking reason, the BJP vents its spleen. An editorial in a pro-BJP paper screams: "There can be no ceasefire agreement till the last intruder has vacated Indian territory, alive or dead, preferably the latter." Before there is a dialogue, intruders "must be taught a lesson so severe that... their succeeding generations [never] contemplate such a misadventure."

"In any case", says the edit, "it is not a dialogue, but a monologue... that India wants... Pakistan must 'solemnly declare in a chastened... tone that hereafter it will never again plot to wrest Kashmir...' This is disgusting jingoism under the guise of national defence."

Regrettably, the Opposition parties are not criticising the BJP as they should be. It is not enough for them to demand a Raja Sabha session, although

that is imperative: how else can a "caretaker" government be brought to account?

The Opposition has to go beyond that and make out a strong case about the BJP's communal mishandling of Kargil and its collusion with the U.S.

But it is not enough to condemn the U.S. It is equally vital to recognise the historic folly of South Asia's nuclearisation. Without it, the U.S. could not have tried aggressive mediation, nor obtained some international support for it.

We must stop blindly glorifying "India" and demonising Pakistan, and admit that like Pakistan, the Indian state too is in crisis, albeit less severe. As much as restoring the LoC, our real priority is to put our house in order. Security demands peace with neighbours, including Pakistan.

It won't do to hysterically demand, like some "patriots" do, that India must "destroy the Pakistan army" to achieve peace, or engineer Pakistan's collapse through an arms race.

These are recipes not just for a "nuclear Somalia" on our borders, but for India's own Somalisation through bigotry, communalism, and uncontrollable conflict — the shortest road to disaster.

To the Editor...

Contrasts and contradictions

Sir, While the country is experiencing some serious setbacks in many sectors, the ruling party celebrates their golden jubilee with pomp and flare spending crores of taka in a month-long programme. We

cannot but recall the government's failure to observe the National Day for the disabled giving the excuse for the ability to fund shortage.

Air pollution has become a major threat to life, people are falling sick and many are dying with diseases relating to it but the government has no time to redeem the same, as it has other things to be busy with like constructing conference centre, changing names, arranging celebrations and the like.

Everyday lives are being lost

in the hands of miscreants, in accidents and many a time in the hands of the police. Even the animals are not spared from the ill fortune. In the last three years, a great number of animals died at the Dhaka Zoo in want of proper care and adequate good supply.

There is not a single sector to which we could look upon with hope and happiness, even the Parliament where our leaders are supposed to be busy with discussing important issues regarding the welfare of the country.

has become a place filled with vile language which will put even the gutter to shame.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

'Don't get confined'

Sir, This is in response to Mr

International human rights norms

Sir, I would like to congratulate Justice Naimuddin Ahmed for his article "Law Reforms in the Light of International Human Rights Norms" published in the Daily Star on Sunday, 4 July 1999. He has very effectively presented a comparative analysis of constitutional and legal positions of various countries in respect of international human rights instruments and what Bangladesh can do for incorporating these instruments in the domestic law.

However, some of the facts presented in the article could be further clarified and updated. Regarding the number of existing human rights instruments, the recent edition of the "Multilateral Treaties Deposited with the Secretary-General: Status as at December 1998" published by the United Nations records only fourteen international human rights instruments. Apart from those, this document also lists five instruments regarding refugees, twelve on traffic in persons and three concerning status of women. Most of these instruments can be considered as international human rights instruments. Altogether, the UN lists twenty five human rights instruments as internationally applicable. Mentioning that there are ninety-five international human rights instruments can be misleading as a number of those are regional instruments which are not universal and declarations of which are non-binding in nature.

The article does not mention the following six international human rights instruments to which Bangladesh became a party last October:

(1) International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
(2) Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide
(3) Convention on the Political Rights of Women
(4) Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages
(5) Convention Against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
(6) Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and Members of their Families

Therefore, in total Bangladesh is party to fifteen instruments out of the twenty-five.

Ambassador Anwarul Karim Chowdhury
Permanent Representative of Bangladesh
to the United Nations
New York

Iqbal's letter titled "Don't get confined" published on the 7th July. We strongly refute the argument made by Mr Iqbal in light of the fact that there are numerous NGOs as well as government agencies which work relentlessly to promote women's rights and raise awareness about women's rights abuses. It is not correct to state that no efforts have been made to take action against women's rights abuses since 1975.

Mr Iqbal, we draw your attention to the laws that have been passed by the government since 1975 to protect our women and children — The Dowry Prohibition Act (Act no XXXV) of 1980, the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961 (Amended in 1985). The cruelty to Women (Deterrent Punishment) Act of 1983, Child Marriage Restraint Act (Amendment Ordinance) 1984. The Family Courts Ordinance (Ordinance No XVIII) of 1985 and The Oppression of Women and Children (Special Enactment) Act 1995. It is essential to acknowledge the efforts of the women's organisations, which have been instrumental in pressuring the government to take action to protect women and children. Moreover, we are continuously involved in trying to bring the criminals guilty of trafficking, rape, child abuse, dowry demand, justice.

Women's rights organisations are also trying to bring punishment to those who manage to escape through the loopholes of the legal system. Moreover, we are trying to take action on behalf of the rural women who are illiterate and who are victims of illegal *fatawas*, child marriages and other illegal activities. It must be stated that women's organisations are also responsible for reintegrating these victims into the mainstream of the society.

We acknowledge the fact that heinous crimes are being perpetrated against women and children. But it is wrong to state that we are "mysteriously silent" about the plight of the women in our country. Work is being carried out to fight against the injustice. As concerned citizens we urge to do your part to make Bangladesh a "happy" nation.

Research cell,
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