

It's a Government Failure

THE prime minister's directive on May 18 last year to delink power supply by defaulting subscribers failed to comply with a two-month ultimatum to clear their arrear bills has had very little impact, so it seems. The Power Development Board (PDB) reels under the dead-weight of 35 billion taka in unrealised bills. Desperate measures like establishment of power court have paid little dividend. Overall the scenario is grim bespeaking a complete systemic failure. However, heaping the blame on the PDB high-ups would get us nowhere; for the 'default disaster' mirrors an overall governance failure. That the majority of defaulters, including DESA, which owes PDB 22 billion taka, are part of the government certainly bears testimony to that effect.

The ministries of the government and organisations under them surely have a budget allocation to foot electricity bills under the recurrent expenditure head. Non-payment of bills for years together suggests, however, that the allocated amount was either not disbursed or it might have been spent for different purposes. Whatever the reasons, obvious in this regard is the absence of any accountability mechanism which can only be termed as self-destructive. Such widespread irregularities within the government machinery makes a mockery of the prime minister's pronounced concern at the increasing incidence of bill default. On the whole, it damages her and her government's credibility.

Similarly, in the case of DESA, the government or the PDB appears to have let the matter go out of hand. What has emboldened it to defy PDB's repeated reminders to pay up remains a mystery. On the other hand, threats of withdrawing supply through Ghorasal-Joydevpur 132 KV line and other 33 KV feeders appear aimed at the general subscribers than forcing DESA to pay its dues.

The default situation in the power sector has assumed ominous proportions, to say the least, and certainly calls for immediate intervention from the prime minister herself. It is time the perpetrators realised that default does not pay.

One-stop Payment

WE welcome the news of the cabinet okaying a proposal of the Public Administration Reforms Commission for replacing the irksome utility bills payment non-system by a systematised one-stop collection service. This would require a huge logistical preparation, apparently in recognition of which the cabinet has had to settle for implementing it in Dhaka city on 'a trial basis' from January next year before taking a plunge in other cities of the country. To have it going in Dhaka presents a formidable challenge, all by itself, since the banks and post offices which are to accept the payment are not basically computerised. So, the first task here is to have a centralised database with its feeder tissues forming capillaries, as it were, in the respective bank and post office branches. Till such time as we have had the arrangements for an information bank the one-stop service we have in mind may help alleviate the hardship of the subscribers to some extent, but as far as record-keeping goes it cannot serve any useful purpose in the end.

So long as the NCBs keep working with scrolls and ledger books and the post offices are stuffed with the usual receipt books nothing worthwhile can be accomplished by way of an efficient broad-based service. The ultimate convenience and reliability of a system depend critically on computerisation, plain and simple. All you have to do is to look at the foreign banks to comprehend it.

It is common knowledge that by going ahead with ID card preparation and distribution jobs without having got a computerised base in place we messed up things there. So, our suggestion insofar as the plan for one-stop bill collection goes will be this: pending computerisation — which again must be completed in a time-bound fashion — let's do a zoning of Dhaka city, as proposed, and then have almost all branches of NCBs and post offices within a zone accept payment of electricity, gas, water and telephone bills from the utility users. The problem is that we have too few designated bank branches accepting payment and that too, not in one go, but separately.

To break those long queues at the banks and to ensure timely payment of utility bills, the number of collection centres needs to be increased by a big notch.

Our Condolences to Turkey

EXPRESSING shock is not enough for Turkey's worst-ever earthquake that rocked the country's north-western parts leaving more than 1,100 dead and 10,000 injured at the small hours of night on Tuesday. Casualty figures are likely to mount, the tremor having measured 6.7 on the Richter Scale.

Turkey being on a tectonic plate between the continents of Europe and Africa and in a fault-line zone remains extremely vulnerable to tremors. It is worthwhile to mention that authorities in Ankara had criticised builders for failing to protect homes against tremors shaking southern Turkey in 1998.

Now, the rescue and re-building drive would have to be massive. It is a daunting task even for a country like Turkey which is in a better economic situation than many a developing country. Countries like the US, Germany, Israel and Iran have extended a helping hand. Yet more global response and support are needed.

As we mourn the deaths and empathise with the misery of the quake-affected people in Turkey, we urge our government to volunteer some help to the distressed keeping in mind our experience with natural disasters.

The Speaker Should Not Behave Like a Defence Lawyer

by A R Shamsul Islam

There is a tendency of passive resignation widespread in almost all sectors of our social and national lives. If one talks intimately to the chiefs of education, health, executive, police etc. he will hear them saying that the prevalent ills of the circumstances, mostly bred by political corruptions and coercions, have taught them to be surrendering for self-defence. Does the Speaker belong to the same group?

to cease his identity, in acts and deeds, as a representative of the party nominating him and is expected to prove steadfastly neutral, non-partisan. In fact, much of the sanctity, dignity and effectiveness of the Parliament depends on how strictly he adheres to non-partisan character mingled with his professional acumen and efficiency.

One has not to be addledly intelligent to realise what led Dr Alauddin and Mr Swapan to take oath as ministers. How far it was due to a love of the consensus government or a vile stoop to base greed for power and money is but anybody's simple guess. In fact Alauddin-Swapan episode resulted from a clash between a BNP effort to kill the Parliament by continued boycott of the House and an Awami desperation to drag BNP into the House to avert public acknowledgment of the demise of the Assembly.

The Speaker is a holy dis-

penser of justice in the House. What he delivers must be even-handed. The government and Opposition must be equal in his eye. Horse-trading in the Assembly is what the Speaker must abhor most and should exercise his utmost influence and power to stop it. Unfortunately, instead of being critical at the moment, he spent on prevailing over Alauddin and Swapan he is accused of having misused his power by facilitating the retention of parliamentary memberships of those two persons as he refused to be faithful to the Constitution by not sending the issue to the Election Commission whose affair it was to decide on the matter. The issue for its decision does not purport to fall under the jurisdiction of the Speaker. It is hard to believe that the Speaker was ignorant of this deliberation. The present Speaker is undoubtedly a man of class and calibre. He is credited with huge diplomatic experiences sharpened with a knowledge of subtle implica-

tions of law and practice. There are precedents of sending disputes on parliamentary membership to the Election Commission. In the Fifth Parliament three MPs of the Jatiya Party lost their seats in the House by the verdict of the Election Commission.

The present Speaker deviated from the above practice. It is alleged that he acted on the advice of the Awami high commands and his subsequent measures on this matter like filing appeal against High Court order, seeking extension of time to the Supreme Court, after it had upheld judgement of the High Court were a continuation of his straightaway obeying the ruling party dictations. Even as he sends the matter to the Election Commission under pain of Supreme Court verdict he does not fall short of reiterating that Article 70 of the Constitution that invalidates a member's seat in the Assembly was not infringed by those two MPs. His eagerness to retain those two

members partakes of a defence lawyer assiduously arguing to prove innocence of his clients.

On the other hand the alleged chronic tendency of the Speaker to gloss over the points of the BNP legislators about his being fair to the chief opposition party. The recently pronounced Supreme Court verdict was a telling blow on the Speaker being not faithful to his chair.

There is a tendency of passive resignation widespread in almost all sectors of our social and national lives. If one talks intimately to the chiefs of education, health, executive, police etc. he will hear them saying that the prevalent ills of the circumstances, mostly bred by political corruptions and coercions, have taught them to be surrendering for self-defence. Does the Speaker belong to the same group? Didn't he play a like role while the amusing Alauddin-Swapan debate was

being heard in the National Assembly?

The alleged partisan and pusillanimous behaviour of the Speaker is fraught with doing great harms to the country. First, it has assailed the credibility of the institution of the Parliament and hit to the core of nascent democracy in Bangladesh. Second, it is drawing the Parliament and the Supreme Court to a clashing point. Lack of readiness of the Speaker to respect the judgement of the court and fomenting a resentment that the Supreme Court is affecting the sovereignty of the Parliament may lead the country to face a dangerous crisis.

The President is also a nominee of the ruling party. But it is justice Shahabuddin's personality and integrity that have made him a world apart from many of his predecessors. Far from unnecessarily pleasing the ruling party he is never short of necessarily lashing it to shame and sanity. We wish the present Speaker were emboldened not to be subservient to the undue wishes of the ruling party.

The writer is retired Principal, Govt Mohila College, Pabna.

KARGIL CRISIS

A Pointer to the Emerging Power Equation in Asia

by Dr. Munim Kumar Barai

The crisis of Kargil and the role of the United States and China on that have given enough indication as to how the strategic calculations in the US State Department and the Chinese Foreign Ministry are doing for this part of the world.

those in the Gulf region. Moreover, Pakistan has a strategic location at the confluence of the Central, Middle and South Asia. So the US needs Pakistan's help in the immediate future and for the longer term to have a strong presence in the Gulf which is still considered to be strategically vital for its interest. But this line of strategic thinking for Pakistan might be losing appeal to the strategic planners in the US. Reasons for the waning of influence of Pakistan in the strategic thinking of the US are many. Notable of them are, of course, the prospect of rise of China as a great power in world and the menace of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Though US was initially favourably poised to the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, by their ruthless act of terrorism and harboring of Bin Laden they have actually antagonised the US. The Taliban's open door policy to the terrorists of religious colour has become a threat to the Central Asian countries as well as to China. As a common ally to both the parties, Pakistan can no more be an automatic choice for the US if it likes creating a frontline state to pursue a policy of containment, particularly that with China. India becomes an obvious choice for that.

China is a new phenomenon in the international economic and political order. Its rise as a counterweight to the United States' supremacy is much real today. Its geographical size, huge population and present economic promises place it in a better position to fill in the power vacuum created by the sudden demise of the erstwhile Soviet Union. China's growing economic strength along with an increasingly modern military has been generating a debate in the United States for quite some time. A BBC report recently came out with a broader perspective of the world in the new millennium. The report projected that by 2020, the Chinese gross domestic product (GDP) would be equal to that of the US and on the whole China would be a power of equal status with the US in all respects.

Moreover, in that future context, China is expected to pose challenge to both the US and the Western Europe in the international arena. A China with those potentials cannot bode well to the future strategic interests of the present superpower of the world. So it is not surprising that the US policy towards China? Engagement or containment? Though US administration was, till recently, propagating a policy of engagement towards China, a marked change in that policy might be in the offing in the near future.

Successive events actually have heightened the tension between the two countries for some time. The human rights issue, the US allegation of the Chinese espionage to steal secrets of nuclear weapons and the lingering process in the entry of China to the WTO are some of the issues that are coming in the way of the Sino-US relationship and again. But what the Chinese have taken as an insult is the questionable bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. Latest information emanated from Washington suggests that an element of intentionality

might have been there in the bombing incident. Then why did the America do it? Well this is really a difficult question to answer. Many think that the Americans wanted to test the nerve of the Chinese. If it is so, the test has not gone well. The reaction in China soon after the incident is still vivid — the whole nation rose to protest the act. From the incident, China might have learnt a lesson or two that US cannot be trusted as a friend.

The dangerous conflict between the two is brewing up with the issue of Taiwan. The more the support Taiwan gets from the United States on its way to independence, the bitter becomes the relationship between China and US. The latest move by the US Congress to pass a bill to expand relations with Taiwan can be viewed as the furthering of the ground for Sino-US confrontation for the future.

If US becomes serious about the containment policy, it would need some frontline states bordering China in the near future. Japan, S. Korea, Taiwan etc. are of course US strategic friends. But they seem to lack one basic element to fulfil the position. None of them possess the strategic depth, the

vital element to match the hugeness of China. Pakistan's case in this regard becomes out of question at the very first instance. With all strategic depths, India seems to have the foot of the boot of a 'natural front-line ally' of the United States. This line of thinking is emerging in the United States itself. Republican Benjamin Gilman of New York, also the Chairman of the House of International Relations Committee, expressed his sentiment in a writing titled, 'Strengthening US Ties with Natural Allies Like India' to the India Abroad News Service. The writing was also published in The Daily Star, on August 18, 1998.

So had US supported Pakistan in the Kargil issue, it would have simply pushed India closer towards the formation of an alliance comprising Russia, China and India. The idea for such alliance has been broached so many times in different fora. The then Prime Minister of Russia Mr. Primakov when visited New Delhi last year also proposed for such an alliance. Initially the Chinese response to the initiative was totally negative. But after the Belgrade incident, China seems to be receptive to

the idea. By all considerations, these three countries together have the potentials to effectively cut the US influence in Asia. By openly siding with India on the Kargil issue, US has preempted such a move to float and has recognized the importance of India in its future considerations in Asia.

Then why did not China come out for Pakistan in the conflict? A host of reasons might have influenced the Chinese role to be neutral. China has many issues to be addressed at the same time. Its relation with the US is passing through frictions one after another. Historically, Japan is away from Chinese friendship. The claims and counter claims on the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea by at least six countries have the potentials to become a full-blown conflict in this commercially very important sea-lane. That ensures bad relations with the South and Southeast neighbours. Inside China, the anti-Chinese Islamic and nationalist movements among the Uighurs and other minorities in Xinjiang are directly getting help from the Taliban in Afghanistan. The same Taliban are also supposed to be involved in the Kargil conflict. So a fulfilled

support to Pakistan could have sent a wrong signal to the Taiwanese splittists as well as the Taliban. These apart, China cannot risk its relation with India at this juncture. The peace dividend is more than that China can achieve by helping Pakistan in the conflict. Moreover, the eventual emergence of an independent Kashmir can only create a power base of the US at its next door. This is the last thing China wants to see at this moment.

So Kargil has actually made open the unique position India enjoys right at the moment in the international strategic diplomacy. The report of the BBC already referred to actually pointed out that by the mid of next century four to five power centres would emerge in the world. India has been projected as one of them. Both China and US understand the position of India and none of them want to create distance with it, though for different grounds. So the crisis of Kargil and the role of the United States and China on that have given enough indication as to how the strategic calculations in the US State Department and the Chinese Foreign Ministry are doing for this part of the world. Pakistan should take stock of these realities in course of drawing any future action plan for Kashmir.

The writer is an Assistant Professor of Bangladesh Institute of Bank Management, Mirpur, Dhaka.

OPINION

Ray of Hope

A Conscious Citizen

Congratulations to our bold, sincere and honest President for his utterances once in a while symbolise a ray of hope for oppressed citizens. At least the Head of the State is coming out with bitter truths about our politics and politicians about our forum which is heartening for us. Unfortunately the head of the government is not paying any heed to these statements, but the party in power seems to be indifferent to the fact that this news of discord is spreading worldwide making governments and people aware of it. This is a rare case in a civilised society that the head of the state is pointing out few basic mistakes and wrong doings of the politicians and they in return, instead of self-analysis, are completely ignoring him.

Few months back, Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed said that mud-slinging has become the pattern of present leaders. From his entire speech it was quite clear that he meant to say that the party in power specially the Prime Minister is always blaming the previous government for any failure and she should instead pay attention to the well-being of the country and the people. My question is how many times have we heard Tony Blair blaming John Major or Clinton blaming Reagan for any mismanagement of their government, even in India or any other South Asian countries, we do not see such practice. This is the sign of sophistication and civility. Once a party is thrown out of power by votes, it is obvious that the electorate found faults with them and wanted a change. It is the normal duty of the new party in power to govern properly and prove their worth.

Awami League should not forget that BNP is the largest opposition and lost the '96 election at a very marginal vote. What does it prove? BNP is popular, but the people wanted a change for the better. The way the ruling party is governing, life nowadays has become unbearable and people won't tolerate it much longer and soon the time will come when AL won't get away with only blaming the previous government for their misrule. From their AL is very far from governing with masses, but to govern a country and lead it to prosperity is a different ball game about which they don't have much clue.

Now the President has come out with another truth that political parties take huge funds from loan defaulters and they

shelter the 'mastans'. We all know that in Japan and many other developed countries business houses do control politics and business communities have effective say in the government, but when it is proven that defaulters are enemies of the country, they are destroying the economy and jeopardizing the existence of the country, how can they have any influence on political parties no matter how big a business house it may be? It is the duty of the government to punish these culprits, but what we see in our country is that the PM is openly hobnobbing with these culprits, often making them party members even. Thanks to our news papers through which we get all these informations, TV and Radio are never a news media, they always serve as government machinery and often give us misleading news. We warn the government that they should not forget they came to power by people's vote and they cannot ignore public sentiment. People are now becoming increasingly alert.

I couldn't agree more and I am sure most of the conscious citizens will agree with the 13 editorial of The Daily Star that it is now the duty of the civil society, comprising writers, artists, professors, teachers, doctors, lawyers, engineers, businessmen, journalists, women activists and even conscious housewives to take the issue up and start talking and writing about it in support of what the President is saying. Society as a whole can ostracise these defaulters as enemies of the country. Social values have greatly changed for the worse for which these people are getting respect in the society, whereas these types of rich people should be looked down upon. I remember, in earlier days, almost every corrupt person specially particularly government officials, used to be so disgustingly referred to by natives and outsiders that people hesitated to mix with them. To-day these 'culprits' can move about freely and some people including politicians feel proud to hobnob with them. But since these rampant irregularities are telling heavily upon the lives of ordinary people, they are becoming more and more disgusted with the state of the situation. The socio-economic gap between the haves and the have-nots are ever increasing, heading towards an explosive situation.

Even the politicians, whether belonging to the government or the opposition, should by now realise that they do not command as much respect as they used to once. Nowadays, at a lunch or a dinner, very few people would bother talking to politicians, sometimes even cautiously avoiding them. They are usually surrounded by two-mouthed sycophants. They must be intelligent enough to realise that. The dignity of the chair is lost because of their rampant corruption.

Most MPs are called 'Dalaals' these days; they behave like that. Forget about their educational and social background, they don't even have any other source of income. MPs should be ashamed. By hook or by crook, they invest some money to buy votes and become an MP and they expect and try to get a return double or triple the investment during their tenure as MP. This needs to be controlled by the leader of the party. The despicable low standard of these parliamentarians was evident recently in the parliament by their indecent utterances and behaviour. Ruling party wanted to divert the budget discussions by raising an issue of blasphemy saying that Dr Badruddoza Chowdhury compared our prophet with Khaleda Zia. But the opposition also got all worked up and fell into the trap and started exchanging unnecessary notes which the electorate do not wish to see happening in the parliament. Parliament Sessions cost tax payers huge amounts of money and people's representatives there, instead of discussing and trying to solve our problems, waste time on character assassination. We are not interested to know or hear about the life story of either of the leaders — Hasina or Khaleda Zia. This sort of discussion is unpardonable. We have allowed them way too much freedom to do whatever they please, but the time has now come when civil society will force them to do what people want. Politicians should have a lot of interaction with the public instead of mixing with party supporters and that's how they would be able to gauge the public sentiment. They should also read articles written in different news papers and magazines where people's anger and frustrations find expression.

Recent Rajuk's allotment of public about the felling of trees at Osmani Uddayan and there are lots of alternative suggestions from different quarters. We hope the PM would be sensible and re-consider this project, thinking about the welfare of the party and the government. Ruling party cannot play around with public property — the country never belongs to the party in power. This has become the tendency of the present leaders, for which politicians are loathed by people. I want to conclude my opinion with a salute to our President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed. Please keep up your honesty, straightforwardness and boldness and people will continue to hold you in a very high esteem and all your statements will be written in the history of Bangladesh in future.

plots was another disgraceful episode like the share scam or may be even worse. Thanks to our PM that at least she has taken immediate action and cancelled it. It seems she has given importance to people's view regarding this matter. Here the point is, people have so less confidence in the government that some of us are still thinking that may be it is just an eye-wash; underhand irregularities may still continue. Now it is the moral duty of the PM to ensure that nothing of the sort takes place. My request to journalists is to remain vigilant in this respect and keep us informed through newspapers. We would request the PM to read carefully Mahfuz Anam's commentary 'Bold and decisive move, but it must go further' published in The Daily Star on Friday July 16th '99 and give it a serious thought. While cancelling Rajuk's plots, the PM unnecessarily mentioned Kafiuddin Chowdhury (Father of Dr B Chowdhury) without any proof. This sort of useless comments are so unbecoming for a PM. He was a veteran politician, so much senior to the PM, what was the point bringing him in now and comparing with the present politicians? This is another point we feel sad about that our Prime Minister often makes irresponsible and indecent remarks, which makes us ashamed. Once she was warned by our bold chief Justice, not to make loose comments about the judiciary. Is it a good sign for a country? It proves that just having academic degree is not enough to make one a good statesman or a good leader.

There is a hue and cry among public about the felling of trees at Osmani Uddayan and there are lots of alternative suggestions from different quarters. We hope the PM would be sensible and re-consider this project, thinking about the welfare of the party and the government. Ruling party cannot play around with public property — the country never belongs to the party in power. This has become the tendency of the present leaders, for which politicians are loathed by people. I want to conclude my opinion with a salute to our President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed. Please keep up your honesty, straightforwardness and boldness and people will continue to hold you in a very high esteem and all your statements will be written in the history of Bangladesh in future.

What now?

Sir, The opposition political parties protest against the wrongdoings of the Awami League government through hartal, demonstration, hunger strike, road march, etc. Whenever they do so Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her party leaders say that the opposition is doing so only to protect the killers of Sheikh Mujib. Now the eminent citizens of the country are protesting against the decision of the AL government to construct Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Convention Centre by

felling the trees of the Osmani Uddan. The general students of the Jahangirnagar University are agitating and demanding the exemplary punishment to be given to the culprit students of the Bangladesh Chhatra League. Even the slum dwellers are protesting and agitating against the forcible and inhuman eviction. Would the PM and her party leaders say that they all are doing it to protect the killers of Sheikh Mujib?

Iqbal Ahmed
Dhaka