

Why Give a Walkover?

BY the time this sees day-light BNP parliamentary party will have decided either to join or boycott the Jatiya Sangsad session that begins today. In case it has made up its mind to boycott the session, we urge the party to revise the decision forthwith. These are the reasons why we think they ought to feel obliged to do so. The ostensible purpose of their stand-off is to protest the government decision to provide 'transit facility' to India. If this is their rallying point for the parliamentary stand-off then we are afraid they are doing gross injustice to their cause itself, not to speak of committing other grave mistakes, ethically and politically. Parliament is an infinitely better place than the open air or the closed chambers of political party offices to debate the issue at length, 'grill' the government on, contradict its claims, convince the people with the superiority of their logic they think they have in their arsenal, and earn public support for their stance. We know what they might say to this: "The ruling party will scuttle their adjournment motions, time allotted to them could be too little for a threadbare discussion and no matter what they did the end-result would be the rejection of their proposals anyway." Should they indeed do so the opposition's viewpoints will stand vindicated before the people. On the other hand, if they have chosen to boycott the parliament and keep at it, the negative signal sent across would be three-some. First, the people might think they have a weak case; secondly, they would be giving the ruling party a walkover; and last but not the least, the electorate will think the opposition has lost confidence in them. Since trust begets trust, people's confidence in the opposition could also dwindle. The position is not only morally indefensible it is politically foolhardy as well.

It is incumbent on all MPs to attend the sessions of parliament, more so for the opposition MPs whose role it is to question the ruling party on governance, legal and international issues without which their locus standi itself will be shattered. If they recapitulate the news reports and commentaries that appeared in the print media over the last week they would know the kind of agenda that beg immediate attention of the parliament. Walkover and boycott are a means to make a point, but when they fall into an endless pattern of abdication of elective responsibility they are definitely a stab in the back of democracy.

Expedite HPSP

THAT one in every five people seeking services has to make "unofficial payment" for proper treatment at the public healthcare establishments (HPSP) is a poignant indicator of the poor health the country's health-care sector is presently in. This is revealed in a baseline survey conducted over 26,207 households in 44 thanas and four metropolitan areas as part of the ongoing health and population sector programme. Also, it underlines the need for expeditious implementation of the HPSP which aims at unification of general and family planning services at the thana level and below thereby ensuring quality service, as well as convenience, for the country's rural populace.

Unfortunately, the five-year multi-million dollar programme has hit more snags since its inception than one might have expected. Red-tape and administrative 'cold-shoulder' have never really allowed the project to move forward. The annual performance review, prepared by the government and the World Bank and released in May this year, had expressed grave concern at the progress of unification and reorganisation of general and family planning staff. Reportedly, the health ministry's exaggerated concern over statutory regulatory order (SRO) played the devil. Similarly, delay in signing memoranda of understanding with relevant UN agencies posed threats of serious shortage of drugs for malaria, tuberculosis and acute respiratory infections at the public healthcare centres. In effect, the Essential Service Package (ESP), a major component of the HPSP, has been put in jeopardy.

Besides, there appears to have been in-built inertia. The project co-ordination cell (PCC) and the management control unit (MCU) seem overtaken by what may well be called a slow-go syndrome.

As one senior health ministry official has put it, expeditious implementation of the HPSP reforms will put an end to the corrupt practice now prevalent at different public health service centres. The authorities must realise that delay in this case means denial of the people's rights to healthcare.

Exploiting Our Poverty

THE poignant story of 4-year-old Juru has jolted our sensibilities severely. It is a miracle that the infant is still alive and being treated at a hospital in Sharjah, according to Gulf News. From the hospital bed Juru narrated the miseries inflicted upon him by his captors who had lured his mother into a trap for bringing her three infant sons to Emirates for a better job for herself and education for her sons. But as it always happens in such a tale the bloodhounds bared their ugly teeth as soon as the prey fell into their hands. Juru has survived to tell his heart-rending story of gruesome treatment meted out to him by the vampires who tortured the 4-year-old child without food and water for days and then threw him on the ground from the camel's back deserting him there. This is one story that has been picked up, but we are sure there are ten more which remain untold. Juru's two brothers are not as fortunate as Saiful, another 7-year-old child who was rescued and reunited with his family.

These stories unmistakably point to the exploitation of our poverty by others. Because of unemployment and absence of economic activities in the rural areas women and children are lured out of the countries by traffickers. We are appalled by the cruelty of these rascals and urge the government, the NGOs and the civil society to come forward as saviors of these wretched victims.

If someone had said in the beginning of the year that the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance would come back to power, he would have been labelled as biased. Today, if someone were to deny the alliance a majority in elections, he would be considered biased. I do not want to hazard figures. But I have no doubt, after touring some 12 states, that the alliance will win comfortably.

The two states, which the BJP and its allies look like losing, are Gujarat and Punjab. Similarly, the Congress, which was poised for a substantial gain in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, has got stuck in the state day by day.

If the Janata Dal had stayed as one party, the Congress would have won hands down in Karnataka. But the present combination — the "United" party combining with the BJP and the Lok Shakti — will eat into the Congress vote. So will Deve Gowda's Janata Dal (Secular).

The Telugu Desam in Andhra Pradesh, as a survey by a leading newspaper in the state showed, was losing heavily to the Congress in the Lok Sabha. By having seat adjustments with the BJP, the Telugu Desam may be able to get the BJP vote, which is necessary for it to win in marginal constituencies. The Telugu Desam seems to have taken a calculated risk, believing that the Muslim vote it loses because of an alliance with the BJP would be made up by the BJP supporters.

Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress has more or less replaced the Congress in

West Bengal. The CPI (M) will still get a majority, thanks primarily to the image of Chief Minister Jyoti Basu. But the main loss is that of the Congress, which is diminishing in the state day by day.

Former Speaker P A Sangma is making waves in the northeast. The number of seats in the area is, however, so few that he can bring about only one or two upsets. The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) is such a divided house that the Congress will gain by default. Moreover, Chief Minister Mohanta's statement that the ISI has hideouts in mosques and madrasas has upset the Muslims, the AGP's mainstay. They are moving towards the Congress.

The real loss of the Congress may be in Maharashtra because of the Sharad Pawar factor. He will spoil several Congress seats. He has worked hard and has not left the state since he has constituted his own Congress party. He may fling a surprise in the Maratha area. The Maharashtra assembly will, however, be a hung one, not even the Shiv Sena-BJP combine getting a majority.

True, it is a confusing scene: Still the Congress would have done better if Sonia Gandhi had clicked with the masses. She did very well as Congress president, probably because she did not have to interact as much with people as she has to do

now. As the party chief, she refurbished the Congress, which wrested power from the BJP in Delhi and Rajasthan and retained its hold on Madhya Pradesh. Her downfall and that of her party began when they tried to form a government at the Centre. If they had only been patient, power would have fallen in their lap like a ripe fruit.

If one were to point out the exact time for the downward trend, it would be the press conference where she claimed she had the support of 272 members. The graph fell rapidly when she could not make the figure good. Perhaps people accept her as the Congress president, not as the country's Prime Minister, somewhat influenced by her Italian origin and her intent to go beyond the written speech.

Still if by a miracle, she had made the Prime Minister's seat, the prospects of the Congress in elections would have been far brighter. She would have faced the Kargil incursion and earned the kudos for having rolled it back. The Congress would have

got the electoral advantage which the BJP-led alliance has now. Kargil is still very much in the voters' mind and they give the credit to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, if not the BJP.

In fact, the performance of the Vajpayee government was so bad after one year of its rule that even the most optimistic did not give the BJP more than 100 seats. Vajpayee's bus ride to Pakistan sky-rocketed his image. The manner in which he faced the violation of the Line of Control (LoC) demonstrated his grit as well as restraint. He emerged a tall, mature leader. It is his stock which has increased the BJP's chances of success.

The party may improve its figure of 181 in the last Lok Sabha by getting 10 or 15 more seats.

Strange, the incumbency factor is not working against the Vajpayee government. Probably, the success at Kargil has made amends. A country-wide survey shows that 67 per cent of the voters are not influenced by the fact that the government's performance in most

fields has not been up to the mark.

The BJP expected a wave in its favour in the north. It does not look like that. Although Vajpayee's liberal image has been also to hide the party's Hindutva stance, both Muslims and Christians still difficult about the BJP. A part of them has moved towards the Congress. But a substantial part is supporting regional parties.

Sonia Gandhi is evoking wider response in the south as compared to the north. Even in the election that followed the excesses during the emergency (1975-77) the south returned the Congress in a big way. The party was almost wiped out in the north. Yet, if election develops into a referendum between Vajpayee and Sonia, as the RSS cadre is trying, the Congress may not be able to win even the 141 it had in the dissolved house.

The BJP would like to secure as many seats on its own as possible. It is not more a secret that there is confrontation between LK Advani, in charge of the BJP election activities, and George Fernandes, president of the Samata Party, which has stuck in the Lok Dal (United) and the Lok Shakti. Differences over the distribution of seats between the BJP and other constituents of the alliance were bad enough but they might be accentuated after the polls.

Then it would be a fight for power.

The alliance may not stay as coherent as it looks today. If the BJP fails to improve upon the strength of 181, it would face challenge from its allies. The Congress may also have to confront the same situation. Both of its allies, Jayalalitha of the AIADMK from Tamil Nadu and Laloo Prasad of the Rashtriya Janata Dal from Bihar, are already looking for formulating the post-polit strategy.

In the midst of rumours of differences between the BJP and its allies on the one hand, and the Congress and its allies on the other, soundings have begun among the non-BJP and the non-Congress parties to see whether the BJP and the Congress can be played against each other for a third alternative to emerge. It is too ephemeral and too uncertain at present. But such possibilities may become realities if the BJP and the Congress secure fewer seats than they had in the last Lok Sabha. If the other parties secure around 150 seats, the entire politics will undergo a drastic change.

Anyone from among Sharad Pawar, Mulayam Singh Yadav, Jayalalitha, Mayawati and the last, though not the least, George Fernandes, may throw his or her hat in the ring. All depends on which combination gets how many seats in the 545 member Lok Sabha. And what seems settled at present — Vajpayee becoming the Prime Minister once again — may

It's Again BJP-led Alliance

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BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

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A Revolving Scenario

One hopes that the PM will turn from mediocrity to the cutting edge that qualified and dedicated professionals can deliver for the nation in every sector of life, that the PM will listen to advice on a bi-partisan basis, the only litmus test being its usefulness for the country.

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

where is the future of democracy? In both Balochistan and NWFP contrived majorities keep PML(N) men in power. For the first time in PML(N)'s short electoral history, it has party men as Governors in all the Provinces, having followed up Moin Haider's sacking by that of another retired Lt Gen, Arif Bangash, as Governor NWFP.

The Kargil episode has given life to some of the religious parties. JI profiting the most from the regime's sorry performance. In the meantime Maulana Faizul Rahman of JUI(F) has taken up cudgels against the US on behalf of Osama Bin Laden, making threats seldom heard from responsible political leaders and thus adding to Pakistan's woes internationally. The saner Opposition political parties are in the meantime concentrating rather unsuccessfully on a one-point agenda, the separation of Mian Nawaz Sharif from power. Their idea is to foment protests on various issues ranging from Kargil to GST and use the resultant street power to dislodge the Sharif brethren from their hold on the administrative machinery.

There is no doubt that Kargil

nals to the powers-that-might-be in Pindi, a damning indictment of the loyalty factor in the PML(N), calling into question the PM's leadership abilities and his credibility as a responsible leader of a nation.

In the field of External Affairs, we may have temporarily tested China's friendship but in the long run we know that it is one country that can be trusted. Unlike the holding back of submarines and Mirage aircraft by France, Chinese combat aircraft on order are on standby. Afghanistan must have peace, if only to bring our relations with Iran to an even keel. As for the US, the State Department seems to have got control in the post-cold war era over the projections of the Pentagon, mainly to Pakistan's detriment. This will soon pass as the world returns to reality, even in a unipolar status. Far from lasting diplomatic damage, the real damage has been to perception because of the media. This is a fickle state of affairs and can be reversed as the west's reaction to India's proposed nuclear doctrine has shown. We have to effect "damage control" by sending in professionals to energise their contacts and renew the logic behind our diplomatic stance. Already some bi-partisan moves are being made and that shows real pragmatic synergy in the regime's tackling of difficult issues by bringing the best and the brightest to bear.

The judiciary is supposedly tame — or is it? Pakistan's Supreme Court has proved again and again over the last decade that it has a life of its own in interpreting the Constitution as per the rule of law and it will bring but what permanent change it may do to the body-economic or the body politic. For the time being that is the only salvation for Pakistan.

Art
Buchwald's COLUMN

A Leg To Stand On

THERE is good news from the friendly skies of United. It has just announced it is giving its top coach passengers five to six more inches of legroom than they had before. This will not be available to everybody, only to frequent-flyer club members and those who pay full coach fares.

Everyone is rejoicing. This is a real breakthrough, particularly for people who have leg problems.

In the past, many of our airlines have requested that people stow their legs in the compartments above their seat. Those with particularly long legs were requested to check their legs at the terminal curb and pick them up when they arrived at their destination.

United said it would have a special section set aside to provide its favoured people with legroom. Those who are in the back of the plane will still be required to hold their legs up against the passenger in front of them.

Instead of Smoking and No Smoking, the lights will indicate which sections offer room for your knees.

The question arises, how did United arrive at giving us the extra legroom? My guess is it put a passenger in a flight simulator and tested what would be a reasonable area for him without creating too much animosity among the poor coach passengers who were lucky someone would even sell them a ticket.

An interesting thought occurred to me and that is, was United admitting by its move that it was not providing enough leg space to economy class? We all know that economy-class passengers, based on what they eat, do not demand much compared with those in first class.

United says it is catering to the legroom class because most of the complaints have come from businessmen whose companies won't let them fly first class.

Doctors for the airlines say that most passengers in economy have enough legroom if they sit on their legs and don't try to stretch them.

Reports indicate that the others will match it. As one plane designer said, "We consider this one small step for man and one giant step for mankind."

I'm not a chronic complainer, but I believe everyone — man, woman and child — should be entitled to six inches of leg space. If Lindbergh had to fly with leg room the airlines give our economy passengers, he would never have made it to Paris.

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Evicting slum dwellers

Sir, Unemployment and extreme poverty in rural areas make the people rush towards the city where work of any kind is readily available. These poor people neither can buy any land in the city nor they can pay for rented apartments. Instead they make shanties by bamboo and poles there, by the side of a road or railway or in open space and these shanties are termed slums.

Slum dwellers constitute about 25 per cent population of Dhaka city. Their labour is essential for the city life of 'gentlemen'. But the city fathers do not like these 'dirty' creatures, and demolish their shanties time and again. The Home Minister found yet another point in evicting slum dwellers. The 'lesser humans' are themselves terrorists or give shelter to respected terrorists. So, recently, demolition of slums gained a new pace.

The PM collected data on slum-dwellers and wrote essays on them during the last BNP regime. But now she is giving green signal for their eviction! How does it happen? I do not understand. We are churning out tall-tales for human rights, but failing to ensure it.

Government should generate employment in rural areas and towns rather than expanding the cities further, buying MGs and building International Conference Centre for sitting, meeting and eating!

M A S Molla
Member, BAAS
Dhaka

Transhipment agreement

Sir, Why are the major opposition parties protesting so vehemently against the government's decision to allow India the transit facilities through Bangladesh? The fact is that India is presently carrying goods through our country's rivers and has been doing so for several years. If the BNP and