

All Stick, No Carrot

THE mid-term review meeting between the Government of Bangladesh and the Development Partners, an euphemism for aid consortium members, has ended on a sour note for the former, most of the brunt being obviously taken by Finance Minister SAMS Kibria. World Bank Country Director Frederick T. Temple did not pull his punches in what must be regarded as the most scathing 'wrap-up' of a mid-term review meeting. Speaking for the development partners Temple was comprehensively critical on a whole range of governance issues: pervading corruption, poor human rights situation, lack of transparency in defence expenditure, non-functional watchdog institutions, slow administrative and other reforms, extortion and above all, politics 'taking a collision course'.

Even macro-economic management which has so far earned the government plaudits drew a measure of criticism this time. The IMF expressed concern that the macro-economic apperception (the phrase is ours) might well be upset given the current trend of revenue shortfall, together with expenditure overruns, which raised the budget deficit to more than five per cent of the GDP, overshooting the post-flood deficit. If the state-owned enterprises and the banking sector are not reformed quickly the sheer weight of liabilities would send whatever remains of the budgetary discipline crumbling to pieces.

The ailing power sector and Chittagong Port remain a damper on investment, or for that matter, on the entire so-called private-sector led growth strategy.

The government ate its humble pie on the eviction of slum-dwellers and sex workers promising their early rehabilitation with due respect to their human rights. The administration has now agreed to search out sex workers who fanned around, many carrying the HIV virus, on being evicted from the brothels.

The donors have expressed their 'disappointment' over lack of progress on implementation of any of the recommendations put forward by the PARC and establishment of a human rights commission and the Ombudsman's office.

As we look at it, the government has courted all this 'embarrassment' by allowing the problems to linger and adding new dimensions to them. Times without number have we highlighted these things but without much success by way of a redressal. All we want to say is, if we paid timely attention to the home-truths we would have obviated the donor 'strictures' much to the preservation of the country's dignity.

Abduction Menace

TWO college students were kidnapped at gunpoint from the busy Elephant Road in the city on Tuesday around 3 in the afternoon. They were said to be abducted by a group of Dhaka College students who confined them for about two hours in the Mohsin Hall, a dormitory of the Dhaka University, until the mother of Rajib, one of the kidnapped students, rescued them both from captivity. The entire sordid episode was allegedly enacted by some activists of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the student front of the ruling Bangladesh Awami League. The two captive youngsters were beaten up without any reason and then locked up at room Nos. 212 and 331 of the hall known as 're-mand rooms'. Thereafter the kidnappers telephoned Rajib's mother demanding ransom for his release. The traumatised mother got her son and his friend Tanvir back from the guest room of the hall at around 5 pm. The lady, quite naturally, refused to disclose all the details to the newspaper, obviously fearing a reprisal.

The kidnappers are alleged to have been led by one Sujon, a Dhaka College student assisted by Adnan and Palash, students of the same institution, and backed by BCL hall unit chief Shafiq. "Some outsider 'terrorists' including Munna and Wadud who had been given shelter at the hall, were also involved in the incident", alleged some sources on condition of anonymity.

When we have the full picture, why does the Dhaka University authority need to form a probe committee and not inform the police about the details they already know by way of initiating a police investigation? The incident happened at one of the DU halls, the room numbers and names of the alleged culprits are all known to the Hall and DU authorities, yet they do not want to lodge an FIR with the relevant police station. This smacks of putting wraps on the criminal offence.

This kidnapping is not an isolated case, we have received complaints from worried guardians about occasional threats of abduction from schools around Dhanmondi area; but somehow they are afraid to go to the police. This surely is a menacing trend which needs to be arrested at any cost.

Shame

WITH three important delegates to the mid-term review meeting losing their money and other valuables, our reputation for hospitality looks tainted. Basically, it highlighted the fact that no body cared to prepare a check-list, far less ensure that the details were ticked off. How could such a breach of security occur in that place?

Filing of a case with the Teigaon police station in this regard, a regulation procedure it is though, seems rather ridiculous under the circumstances; for the stealing shouldn't have taken place in the first place, especially when such an important meeting was on. Given the restricted access to the venue, the scenario speaks of an inside job and more than one person could well have been involved in the offence. Therefore, the first step for the investigators should be to interrogate officials and workers present at the auditorium during the meeting.

Whatever course the investigation takes, top priority should be attached to the avoidance of such an incident in the future. If we fail to nab the perpetrator(s), recover the stolen articles and return them to their owners, we will surely lose our face to the development partners. Although the fact that the police could neither make any arrest nor recover the goods until late last night suggested otherwise, we are of the belief that the culprits can be ferreted out.

THE BNP and its political allies held a mammoth sit-in demonstration in front of the Secretariat in Dhaka on the 12th instant as a mark of protest against what was stated to be government's agreement in principle to grant transshipment facilities to India, mis-governance of the Awami League government, spiral increase in the prices of essential commodities, repression of opposition leaders and workers by the ruling party, etc. Preparations had been set for over a month and people from outside Dhaka were encouraged to come to the capital city to participate in the big show of resentment against government's policies and actions.

The Opposition high command declared that the sit-in demonstration would be a peaceful one and warned their supporters not to respond violently to any possible provocation. The sit-in was, in effect, a programme of *gherao* or blockade of the Secretariat, though no coercive action had been planned to prevent officials from entering the Secretariat premises. Those officials who wished or were obliged to attend did so, as during hartal, either by coming early in the morning or staying on the premises overnight. Armed and riot police as well as Bangladesh Rifles personnel were deployed in full strength to cordon off the Secretariat from places quite far away from all the gates of the Secretariat. The ruling party declared they would not stage counter demonstration or obstruct the opposition programme, but had taken 'due measures' that were considered necessary for them.

BNP demonstrators took their position on the principal northern gate near the Baitul Mukarram mosque, whereas the Jatiya Party, the Jamaat and the Islami Oikya Jote mustered their supporters in other

BNP's Sit-in Demonstration

A Turning Point in Political Movement!

Unless the opposition is allowed to exercise the ultimate and fundamental democratic rights to demonstrate peacefully and to take out peaceful processions, the opposition demands would likewise come out with tougher programmes, even with one point demand for resignation of the government and holding a fresh general election.

vantage points. Since morning, crowds poured in streams and the adjoining roads had been packed with people like sardines. Barricades had been put up on Dhaka-Chittagong and Dhaka-Sylhet roads by stalling deflated trucks, as had been done during BNP's first long march staged in protest of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Treaty, obviously by the ruling party supporters, to prevent participants to come from Chittagong and Sylhet areas. On Dhaka-Savar road and elsewhere, on other entry points to the city, series of roadblocks and barricades were erected to prevent participants from entering the city. The police played a silent spectator and did not take any action to relieve sufferings of the waiting and frustrated passengers by removing the barricades, except after the sit-in demonstration in front of the Secretariat was over in the afternoon. On the other hand, they aggravated the situation by harassing passengers on the pretext of checking against carrying of arms.

The BNP Chairperson arrived sometime about 1030 in the morning and took her position not far from the police barricade, quietly staying with her supporters. It was a few minutes after she started addressing the crowd at about 1 pm that a cracker was hurled on to a police vehicle much inside the police barricade. The cracker appeared as if from nowhere but, according to some of those who were present on front rows, it did not come from the direction of the demonstrators. Immediately, as if having got the signal or a pretext, the police started showering rubber

bullets and hurling a series of tear gas directly at the crowd, one shell reportedly hitting the car of the BNP Chairperson. The jam-packed crowd fumbled up, some clashed with the police but finally dispersed, leaving numerous people wounded, but fortunately taking no death toll. Police even hurled tear gas inside the Baitul Mukarram mosque where devotees were offering Zohr prayers. The government controlled Islamic Foundation denied this, but the press later published clear photographs of tear gas emanating out of the mosque itself. In the afternoon, numerous places in the city witnessed

small scale rioting and destruction of vehicles, ostensibly by both frustrated opposition supporters and gleeful ruling party thugs, who could easily pass the blame of their action on opposition hoodlums. Earlier, a number of opposition processions on their way to the sit-in had been obstructed violently by hoodlums and, occasionally, by police. The total number of people wounded numbered several hundred, but more opposition leaders and workers were apprehended and detained by police.



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

The combined opposition immediately called a hartal, a 3-day continuous one for 60 hours from the next day in protest against unprovoked po-

litical action on sit-in demonstrations. Sporadic cases of violence were reported on the first day of hartal all over the country and one BNP activist in the mofussil town of Natore was killed. The police went on top gear and combed the city threadbare, indiscriminately arresting almost all persons, including innocent passers by, found near the scenes of violence. It was reported that anyone passing by BNP headquarters in Naya Pallan was a suspect and generally taken into police custody. Important BNP leaders, members of Parliament and former Ministers were manhandled in the course

of their leading small peaceful processions on hartal day. On the second day of the hartal, police action became even more severe. They seized the BNP headquarters and allowed none, except members of Parliament, to enter the office premises and flushed out people in adjoining roads and lanes, indiscriminately beating them up and holding them in custody. BNP was not even allowed to take out peaceful processions unless participants were members of the Parliament. On the other hand, Awami League was not only allowed to take out anti-hartal rallies, but was accorded due protection and co-operation by the police. Even the Jatiya Party and the Ja-

maat were allowed to hold regular processions, but not the BNP. Why was this double standard? Does it conform to the democratic norm? If one seeks to analyse the incidents along with its background, it is not much difficult to surmise the objective of the real enactors of the entire episode. The BNP had pledged for some time that their political movement would be a peaceful one and that they would generally refrain from calling hartal, which entails suffering of people and causes enormous economic loss to the nation. This conviction gained ground when exceptional political success was perceived to have been achieved in the course of a series of road marches. The sit-in demonstration was also contemplated as an extension to this peaceful method of expressing political grievances and is an effective tool of legitimate political movement. The purpose was to manifest a gigantic show of popular support for their cause. They appeared genuinely determined not to indulge in violence even in the face of heavy provocation and made public declarations to that effect. If violence disrupted their sit-in programme, it would have indeed been detrimental to their own political interests. Furthermore, it would have been most unlikely for them to initiate violence, jeopardising personal security of their leader, Begum Zia, who herself was leading the movement from a vulnerable position near the police barricade.

The government was obliged to shoot and hurl tear gas only after they were attacked first. The

opposition believe that the initial attack was a sequel to a pre-planned ploy of the ruling party by planting agents provocateurs to go into action, thereby activating police and causing a multiplier effect. They could not disrupt opposition's road marches, but were determined to foil the sit-in programme, with the connivance of the law enforcing agencies. The ruling party, however, argued that the opposition had already planned a 3-day hartal and, therefore, themselves initiated violence. This allegation was dismissed by the opposition as absurd and ridiculous.

Whatever may have happened, the sit-in demonstration proves that the ruling party is determined to foil opposition's efforts to resort to peaceful and democratic modes of manifesting political protests. In this process, their strength becomes reinforced by the aid of extra-legal action of some of the members of the law enforcing agencies supplemented by the nefarious activities of thugs and hoodlums. As a result, the opposition succumbed to the demand of their cadres to embark upon tougher programmes, including continuous hartals. The nation slides rapidly into the vortex of chaos, confusion and conflict. Unless the opposition is allowed to exercise their legitimate and fundamental democratic rights to demonstrate peacefully and to take out peaceful processions, the opposition demands would likewise come out with tougher programmes, even with one point demand for resignation of the government and holding a fresh general election. It is for the government now to decide whether to be reasonable and democratic in its attitude or to choose the path of confrontation. The ball now lies in the court of the ruling party.

Of Issues and Agitations

by Kazi Alaaddin Ahmed

Opposition parties are trying hard to attain the desired momentum in the 'oust the government' movement. After a number of controversial remarks which roused doubts in BNP quarters about the bona fide of his participation in the opposition programme, Ershad now appears to have attuned his reeds in harmony with the main opposition...

about transshipment and that too, subject to its ultimate economic viability. A task force headed by the former Finance Secretary to the Government and Advisor in the Caretaker Government M Syeduzzaman, has been appointed by the government. This body has been asked to make an objective and fully neutral study of the issue of transshipment and make its recommendation independent of the government thinking. The Jatiya Sangsad have deliberated on the subject. Members of the opposition including the leader of the opposition Begum Khaleda Zia, had been requested to take part in the discussion. But they have already declined. Instead, they would continue their agitational programme on the streets to rouse the people, more precisely, the electorate against Sheikh Hasina's government.

And when talking of their street programmes, it shall instantly remind us of the dastardly act that the BNP processionists led by the Chairperson had perpetrated on the establishment of the vernacular daily Janakantha. Eyewitness account of the unfortunate episode revealed that the militant cadres brandishing lethal weapons were openly instigated by Anwar Zahid and others. The damage done to the property was estimated over Tk 50,000 lakh. Besides, an engineer of the press sustained bullet injury.

True to the tradition and abominable practice BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan had immediately discovered for could it be an inven-

tion? 'Awami goondas' making the raid on Janakantha office building, damaging a number of vehicles parked in front and were shifting the responsibility on the 'peaceful' processionists of BNP. He even cooked up a cock and bull story purporting to convey a message that the same 'Awami thugs' made gunshots on the person of Begum Zia but she escaped unhurt! Now, if his claims are taken logically he would instantly get a rebuff. If the mischief was the doing of 'Awami terrorists' what was the necessity for them to make two targets at a time, when one would have been strategically sound. Moreover, Janakantha has so far been on more or less neutral track and not, till now, proved itself to be anti-government. On the contrary, it is catering news of both the position and the opposition with emore or less equal importance. However, in recent times, some of its usual introspective news items or features might not have been relishing to BNP.

BNP decision not to participate in the Assembly session on the agenda of transshipment is as significant as was their absence during one of the last sessions when the abrogation of the infamous Indemnity Act was being mooted out. It is deliberate and motivated because they perhaps feared that, in the course of discussion the cat would be out of the bag much to their embarrassment.

But, Begum Zia's decision not to participate in the recently held Asian Parliamentarians' Conference on peace in Dhaka was not only self-abnegating of the stature of the

Leader of the Opposition, both nationally and internationally but also seen as a pitiable example of inferiority complex. And though unusual, the UNDP chief in Dhaka openly lamented her absence in such an international meet on peace. Former Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman, of course, sharply reacted to Mr Lockwood's remarks alluding to the so-called diplomatic practices forbidding an outsider making comments on the internal matter of a country. However, from the point of view of greater national interest his was a lame defence of one who has proven records of not being ever able to transcend the boundaries of personal considerations. The UNDP chief has seemed, though an alien, the sentiment of the whole nation saying that Begum Zia's absence in the conference didn't affect the government, rather, it did, the nation at large.

The parliamentarians in the 4-day conference successfully concluded their deliberations

and signed a unanimous protocol on the formation of Asian Parliamentarians' Association. Sheikh Hasina was elected the first President of this auspicious association with Prince Norodom Ranariddh of Cambodia as the first Vice-President. Dhaka has been chosen the interim seat of the organisation and Secretary of our Jatiya Sangsad Secretariat Monjur-e-Mowla has been selected as its first Secretary General. A 13-member Executive Committee was also constituted by consensus.

Opposition parties, led by BNP, are trying hard to attain the desired momentum in the 'oust the government' movement. After a number of controversial remarks which roused doubts in BNP quarters about the bona fide of his participation in the opposition programme, Ershad now appears to have attuned his reeds in harmony with the main opposition. But, when he publicly alludes to the conflagration in his 'home' (used in an abstract

sense for the truncation of his Jatiya Party at the instance of Awami League) foregoing identical fate for Awami League in consequence of Abdur Kader Siddiqui's expulsion, he assumes the role of no better than a simpleton. On this, everyone knows that breaking of his party was all due to his own undemocratic leadership and moral turpitude while Kader Siddiqui's departure from the party would have no such adverse effect.

The long march, re-christened road march, later has had quite a big mileage burning a million litres of imported fuel. Onlookers along the several routes have had the opportunity to have a glimpse of the imposing figure of no less a person than Begum Khaleda Zia. They must have had the pleasure of it and retain it as a souvenir in memory for long. But, when the truthfulness of her words comes on their agenda they might even shudder to give it any consideration. However, she is firmly convinced that the present government needs simply one 'd-hakka' to see its fall and flee the country to India — the lone refuge. If that ever happens there will be none to contest her until eternity! She has only to wait till the mass upsurge she has conjured up to her listeners becomes a reality.

OPINION

Nasim vs High Court, Terrorists and Others

I too was appalled at the irresponsible, and one wonders perhaps vindictive, remarks made by the Hon'ble Minister attacking the integrity and impartiality of our higher judiciary. I agree with the views expressed in your commentary of 8-9-1999 titled 'Press freedom under threat'.

As a lawyer I have seen that the judges of the High Court are extremely cautious and careful in granting bail either to those who have already been charged by the police or to those who pray for anticipatory bail. There is nothing 'indiscriminate' about it as alleged by the Hon'ble Home Minister. It is a judge's discretion whether to grant bail or not. Surely a judge with years of training in logical deduction and with all the relevant facts placed before him by the accused and by the State) is in the best position to decide whether or not bail should be granted. Furthermore is a terrorist someone who collects toll or maintains groups of armed mustans or is it someone who merely participated in a road march or was caught picketing during hartal hours? Why be vague about the meaning and scope of the word 'terrorist'?

The Hon'ble Mr. Nasim has acted rashly and immaturely in making viciously insulting statements about our higher judiciary without providing statistics that may be independently checked and verified. Why did the Hon'ble Home Minister, who has the entire armoury of the police department and the prosecution service at his disposal, not provide a list of the number and names of terrorists arrested by the police and granted bail by the higher judiciary? Why also not go further and provide a complete and balanced picture by stating (i) the reasons given by a judge of the higher judiciary for granting bail in a particular case, (ii) the atrocities committed by these persons after being 'patronised' by the higher judiciary and (iii) the number of such persons actually convicted on completion of trial? Why

make sweeping statements (without substantiating such statements with irrefutable facts) in a nation like ours where the overwhelming majority will accept such statements at face value and not inquire or ever learn of the actual facts? Was it a deliberate attempt to mislead the general public? Was it done to destroy the respect that the higher judiciary enjoys throughout the nation?

The mere granting of bail by the higher judiciary does not prevent the actual offender from being convicted. The police can and are indeed supposed to diligently carry on with their investigations and collect evidence (not manufacture it) so that the main trial in the lower court can proceed. Since the police are either given no proper education in evidence and procedure or because they simply forget about their training, a great number of accused persons would definitely be acquitted anyway because for e.g. on recovering stolen goods from the house of an accused the police have got hold of a witness who has not himself seen an alleged occurrence but heard the alleged details at a tea shop! Of course in such a situation courts of law, which are bound by certain rules of evidence, have no option but to grant bail to an accused person. Is the Hon'ble Home Minister truly unaware of all this or has he willfully shut his eyes to the widespread incompetence of the police?

It is general knowledge that the actual perpetrators of crimes enjoy the protection of the police allegedly on paying 'toll' and that innocent people are deliberately arrested so that the police may indulge in what verges on blackmail. Allegations abound that a person in jail is usually unable to even meet his/her parents and lawyers without paying a 'fee' for such a benefit! The horror and mistrust with which normal people have come to view the police in our country perhaps even surpasses the fear

that the mafia induces. Since our Hon'ble Home Minister is directly responsible and accountable for the acts and omissions of the police what steps has he taken to deal with such corrupt practices? To curb terrorism the first step should be to deal with the corruption of the police.

The Hon'ble Minister's comments do point to only one logical conclusion — that he is still engaged in a one-sided war of vengeance against the higher judiciary for supporting the slum-dwellers. How fortunate that such statements were made in a Parliamentary session whereby the defence of absolute privilege (and other immunities) may be availed!

The imminent threat to the freedom of the press has also shocked us and got us worrying. In a democratic country, why should important public functionaries be given extra protection through criminal law? If any newspaper has the bad taste to publish a false story about a VIP then such a VIP can complain to the Press Council, hold a press conference and clarify the situation and demand an apology or sue for defamation. Besides which, once it has been established that a newspaper, just for the sake of boosting sales or out of sheer laziness, has published a false story maligning a VIP surely the readers will show their disapproval and disgust by switching to a rival newspaper.

Lastly one hopes that our Hon'ble Prime Minister at least will give due consideration to thought to the harm that may be caused to democracy, perhaps irreversibly, if the freedom of the press is eroded in the months leading up to the general elections next year. How can we, the general public, form an intelligent opinion of whom to vote for if the misdeeds, if any, of people in the limelight are not unearthed and brought to our notice prior to the elections?

An appalled citizen

To the Editor

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

"Why This Violence"

Sir, This letter is referred to the editorial of 13 September published in the DS under the above heading. We fully endorse with the excellent written editorial and want to know why a peaceful demonstration was forced upon the violent? It was reported that the opposition called sit-in programme of 12 September, started peacefully and was proceeding in a disciplined manner. Then what went wrong?

Time and again, we have observed that the government wants to disrupt every kind of demonstration organized by the opposition. Is it because the present opposition did the same when they were in power? Then are we to believe that our so-called democratic government least care about the country and the people, and much about petty party interest?

Binna, Banani, Dhaka

Income tax return

Sir, I noticed a news item in your daily of 8/9/1999, reminding all concerned to submit

their general and self-assessed income tax returns by September 15. But those of us who have HBFC loans, cannot complete their forms unless the statement for the financial year is ready. Every year, one has to take several trips to the office to get the same. This year we were informed that they would not be ready until the beginning of the next month, as the date will be extended.

We would therefore like an immediate statement from HBFC announcing that all our statements are ready so that we can complete the formalities and pay our income tax on time.

Dr. Dilruba Huq Shamoli, Dhaka.

But the PM denied corruption!

Sir, In a recent letter entitled 'Thanks To The Press' (DS Aug 31), Mr. Waheed Alam lauded the PM's bold and decisive action in cancelling the controversial plot allotments. But the astounding thing is that the PM denied the occurrence of any irregularity in this issue! On the contrary, the PM said that the allotments had been cancelled

because of 'criticism'. That, to me, is the most extraordinary statement a PM could make. If there was ever a case of blatant nepotism and partisanship this was it. What's more, the architects of the scam got off scot-free. Can we call that 'bold and decisive'?

Syed Zainul Akmal Al-Mahmud Sylhet Medical College.

Charity begins at home

Sir, We are surprised to learn that our PM would be leading a delegation to New York, USA, to attend and address the 54th session of the United Nations General Assembly.

We wonder how far it is justified and right for a poor country like Bangladesh to attend and address the UNGA.

What aim or objective, prestige or honour, economic benefit or diplomatic victory would an underdeveloped country like ours earn from the visit to UNGA? Why are some of our political leaders and government officials interested in pretentious and ostentatious living? Why are they always ecstatic about luxurious and extravagant foreign tours when millions of people of our country are beset with hunger, disease and want? Does charity not begin at home?

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