

Wise Counsel on CHT Accord

PRESIDENT Shahabuddin Ahmed has for the first time shared his thoughts on the CHT peace accord with the nation. While highlighting the concessions contained in the CHT peace accord for reconciliation the President said just as in Northern Ireland where some quarters are opposed to the Good Friday Agreement so have we got elements here who do not see eye to eye with the CHT peace accord. What he obviously means is that dissent happens to be a natural part of the process of peace-making, so that it need not be viewed as any serious impediment to it. In fact, we should not be discouraged by it.

The President is not being subjective with his argument. On the contrary, he has seen the dissent in an objective light suggesting that it does not have to be listlessly acrimonious and unproductive. He argues that the Chittagong Hill Tracts is 5,500 square miles in area with a population of 10 lakhs only, inclusive of both tribals and non-tribals, so that there cannot be any dearth of accommodation for anyone. Only the Land Commission will have to do its job properly and expeditiously to make that possible to the satisfaction of concerned. Secondly, the law passed through the Parliament to establish the CHT Regional Council and the amendments made to the laws on the three Hill District Councils are not the last words. These being 'general laws' can be amended by a simple majority, but such an amendment ought to be the result of a consensus forged in the true spirit of peace-making. Besides, this could help obviate reopening of any settled issue.

So, the President has, in effect, made an appeal to the tribals and the opposition for their cooperation in implementing the peace accord. The tribals need to close their ranks in an impregnably unified approach to its implementation. The opposition, for their part, should pay heed to the President's independent evaluation on the question marking a departure from the sweeping remarks they have been making about government's alleged sell-out. Let them mentally take a leaf from the pages of peace treaties signed elsewhere in the recent times to rationalise their stance on the CHT accord.

Why This Hartial?

WHEN this paper reaches the readers today, the opposition-sponsored dawn-to-dusk hartial will have been on. This time they are seeking to expedite the ouster of an incompetent, corrupt, fascist and autocratic government which is 'subservient' in terms of protecting the country's independence and sovereignty.

Vague and unfocused as their demand appears, we actually see no logic in this action. 'Hartial' should be a civic protest of 'last resort', which is being used as a protest of the 'first resort'. By taking recourse to hartial too often, we think the opposition is trivialising the very concept of it. Given the country's fragile economy and, more importantly, the pronounced vacillation among opposition leadership on the question of 'issues', this hartial, like the previous ones, is not simply justifiable.

This paper has always questioned the logicality of hartial, especially the way successive opposition parties have gone about it over the years, inflicting inconvenience on the citizens and colossal damage to the economy. The BNP-led alliance, at this point of time, appears to be clinging to anything and everything as a pretext for calling countrywide shutdowns. First it was for the CHT treaty, then for transhipment, then for the removal of the Chief Election Commissioner and now it is for the resignation of this government. Which issue are we to take seriously?

Once again, we would like to reiterate our opposition to hartial. We would like to believe that the opposition political leaders do want the socio-economic well-being of the country. However, the course they have taken, confrontational and destructive as it is, does not speak of good intentions. A strategy that benefits neither the people nor the country nor even the proponents themselves is obviously devoid of any virtue. We earnestly hope that the opposition leadership would realise that, renounce politics of hartial, and instead concentrate on issues of public interest.

Congrats to Guenter Grass

WE rejoice in the fact that Guenter Grass has received this year's Nobel Prize for literature. This brilliant German writer has to his credit the resurrection of German literature in the post-war era. The 71-year-old humanist litterateur has lifted the spirit of his nation like the phoenix from the rubble of Germany. But he is conscious about the devastations wrought by the Nazis and politely apologises for their misdeeds and at the same time takes the rap on the shoulders of Germans. Grass has tried to rejuvenate the whole nation as well as German literature. He is afraid that Germany may stray again and at the same time he is confident that 'It can't be that my children and grand-children will have to suffer under the stigma of being German.' He has hopes in the future generation and expects that 'these late-born children also have a share of the responsibility for ensuring that such things — even their strings — never happen in Germany again'. The Nobel academy said 'The Tin Drum' gave German literature 'a new beginning after decades of linguistic and moral destruction'.

We are particularly delighted at his success because we have seen this radical humanist from very close quarters when we visited Bangladesh in December 1986. He has done us proud.

We wish him healthy life and continuing creativity.

FOR decades, the United States government has been lecturing the poor nations around the world on what to do and what not to do. We ought to know! Bangladesh has been on the receiving end of such lectures almost since its independence in 1971.

The advice comes free with foreign aid and loans. Of course, small, poor countries — like Bangladesh — that depend on the money borrowed from the United States and other US-backed international organisations don't have the luxury of ignoring its advice. Otherwise, like tycoon dealing with a never-do-well heir, it will cut them off from any future aid.

But the question is, does the US government practice what it preaches? At least two recent episodes can point to the hypocritical nature of its behaviour. Take, for example, the case of the IMF. The United States is usually the first to insist that developing countries should toe the IMF line and follow its advice. For reasons known, these countries don't have the luxury of throwing IMF advice into the dustbin. Now, when it comes to the case of the US, does the government follow IMF prescriptions?

Every year IMF Chief Michel

CAMDDESSU meets with Alan Greenspan, the Chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank in the US, and coaches him on interest rate policy. Time and again in recent years, the IMF has asked the Federal Reserve to raise the interest rates in order to control inflation. Time and again, Alan Greenspan has simply nodded politely and, for most part, left interest rates alone. At key junctures over the past few years, the IMF has urged the US monetary authorities to move in one direction and the Federal Reserve Bank has headed in the other.

Again, in August 1998, when Russia devalued the rouble and defaulted on its domestic debt, sending financial markets into panic, the IMF insisted that a tight monetary policy is necessary to combat inflation. Time and again, the Federal Reserve Bank paid no attention. IMF prescriptions fell on deaf ears. As the article in *The Wall Street Journal* comments, "... Camdcessu to Greenspan to trash can".

But if US policy makers disregard the IMF's advice so often, why is it usually the first to insist that the poor countries should abide by any directive coming down from the IMF's Washington office? The perception among many US policy makers is that the steps that IMF recommends are almost uniformly bad. Now if IMF can't give sound advice to the US, what hope is there for the poor countries that count on the IMF's steady hand?

Another example of the

is equally abhorrent.

Ever since the mid-1980s, the US has been attaching strings to its UN payments or refusing to pay in full on account of various grievances with the world body. The UN calculates that the US owes the organisation some 1.6 billion dollars in back dues, interest and other assessments.

Withholding the payment of bills is an extremely ineffective — not to say unjust — way for the US or any other country to exercise influence at the UN. The new US envoy at the UN, Richard Holbrooke, is a diplomat of proven ability, but he's not going to have much clout at the UN if the country he represents refuses to pay its bills.

On the contrary, this defiant stinging generates resentment by nations — many of them much poorer than the US — that do pay what they owe even though they (like the US) may not like all the decisions the UN makes.

The irony is that, even as it continues to renege on its UN payments, the US is calling on

the UN to do more. Last week, in his address to the 45th meeting of the General Assembly, President Clinton urged the world body's member-states to strengthen their ability to prevent the kind of ethnic slaughter that has afflicted far away places like Kosovo and East Timor.

There are faint signs that the US Congress is facing up to its responsibilities. At the urging of the White House, the Senate has voted to send the UN a cheque for 800 million dollars, although several strings are attached to it. The House of Representative has yet to act on the UN funding bill.

It is neither unusual or unfair for organisations to expel members that, for one reason or another, refuse to pay their dues. Thus, the UN General Assembly would be perfectly within its rights to strip the US of its vote there unless it makes a good-faith payment on what it owes.

But it would be an ugly scar on the face of one of the world's richest nations and one that routinely calls on others to meet their international obligations. The US ought to pay what it owes to the UN. Completely, immediately, and without strings.

Practice What You Preach

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S TAGGERED general elections in India end today with last of the five-phase voting-casting that began on September 5 last. This possibly would be one of the most acrimonious war of words among leading political figures India. Seldom in the history of independent India an election has been fought so much mud-slinging and calumny. It is partly due to the fact that polls are being held quite frequently and these snap elections are putting tremendous pressure on political parties to score their points over opponents.

Additionally, the mid-term elections cause strain on the economy and result in public apathy towards the political system, and consequently, politicians seek to blame their rivals for the situation. Hence are the allegations and counter-allegations both at political and personal levels. The situation is further aggravated when experienced and elderly public figures are involved in it. The latest one brings three very senior politicians — Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, his senior ministerial colleague Lal Krishna Advani in one hand, and elderly opposition leader and chief minister of the left-ruler West Bengal Jyoti Basu on the other. They are engaged in a controversy which neither is keen to relent.

Mr. Vajpayee has sought apology from Mr. Basu for causing powerful home minister and an influential leader of the ruling BJP Mr. Advani a "criminal" linking his role to

campaign in India.

Evidently, nobody in his right mind can approve of this since political issues should have been used to pin down rivals, particularly before the polls. If the Vajpayee government succeeds to cash in on the success over the Kargil conflict and opposition alleging that government is unduly trying to extract benefits out of this, it is only a usual practice. Opposition's contention that the government might have also com-

Vajpayee is seeking votes from Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh, from where he won twice. He also lost here in the past, and also contested from other areas like Gwalior and capital New Delhi.

Sonia Gandhi is making her debut in the electoral fray and a candidate from two constituencies — Amethi in Uttar Pradesh and Ballari in southern Karnataka. Balloting has already taken place in the former. In Amethi, it takes place

promised security environment of the country to an extent by "ignoring" the "Kargil" crisis during the initial period just to gain electoral benefits. Mr. Vajpayee's denial also forms part of this pattern. The tendency of character assassination has certainly crossed all limits.

In other words, this could be a measurement of the bitterness and the belligerence with which the election is being fought. Today's last round of the polls, however, will decide the fate of two main players — the incumbent prime minister and main challenger Sonia Gandhi. Mr.

win is a foregone conclusion: but Mrs. Gandhi's case is different because she is fighting election for the first time and that too in an atmosphere generally believed to be favouring the NDA. More importantly, her own success is linked with the influence of India's most famous political dynasty. She may do well in both seats. It was earlier thought that the NDA, riding the crest of popularity over the "Kargil" issue and some other factors like opposition's failure to form an alternative government following bringing down the Vajpayee government by a single vote in April, would easily secure absolute majority which is more than 273 seats in the 543-seat Lokshabha.

But the Congress spared no efforts to turn the table on the opponents as time passed in the campaign, and in the process, the difference has been narrowed. Now it is assumed that the NDA will be able to secure a bare majority with around 280 seats whereas its tally was projected as nearly 300 or even more. The BJP, main constituent of the NDA, is expected to remain the single-largest party and its strength may remain more or less the same. The Congress's strength is expected to improve from previous 140 and it and allies like AIADMK and Rashtra Janata Dal may secure between 180-190 seats. Some of the allies of

the BJP like the DMK and the TDP — both in the southern India — may get more seats at last elections. If this assessment is broadly right, then it appears that both the main political parties — BJP and Congress — will gain. But at whose expense?

Clearly, the parties outside the two alliances led by two parties will receive a jolt and these, mostly the centrists and leftists, forming the "third force" may suffer by getting around 80 seats from nearly 100. Congress's position will certainly improve in states like UP where it drew a total blank in 1998 but it may suffer badly in Maharashtra. BJP will secure less seats in UP but may gain in the south and also in Bihar. The bastions of leftists in West Bengal and Kerala are likely to remain unaffected but centrist secular Samajwadi Dal and BSP will definitely see their strength coming down in the UP which sends maximum 85 MPs to the Lokshabha.

However, these are all within the realm of assessments and speculations, based on certain indicators. It is possible that the next parliament will be a hung one, if Congress recovery in the last rounds of the voting proves more than what was anticipated. The NDA could also be comfortably placed by sound majority if the late swing by the main opposition's bid to regain the ground remains less than expected. But an NDA ascendancy seems on the card despite the waning margin.

India's Last-phase Polls

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DAY in and day out, some knowledgeable experts both in Pakistan and in India, are holding forth on the stated Indian nuclear doctrine and what the Pakistani response should be. From the muted response it has exacted from the west, it is clear that the Indians have not stirred any hornet's nest, on the contrary there seems to be grudging acceptance of the reality that a nation that has five to six times more people below the poverty line than the entire population of Pakistan, will divert enormous resources to become nuclear in an increasingly de-nuclearised world. Unlike for North Korea, there is no hint of India being accorded the 'rogue nation' status for holding the world's cynosure in utter contempt.

Part of the fears of an "Islamic bomb" stems from the fundamentalist label accorded to the more conservative Muslims because of the tenacity of Islamists in battle in both the Afghan and later the Chechen war, mainly due to their unflinching faith in God and their religion, thus causing them to accept death in battle, Shahadat, as a blessing. The west particularly the US, is apprehensive about their capacity for harm if they should lay their hands on nuclear weapons. Frankly, the likes of motivated Shamyl Basayev, admirable though he is, is enough to scare anyone.

All religions have fundamentalists, the Hindu kind is

not only the most virulent but concentrated in a far smaller area, thereby maybe escaping attention, but not its potential for lethality. More than in any other religion of the world, its hatred for other religions is only surpassed by its brutal suppression of its own low caste. Such are these people that they could raise an Islamic icon like the Babri mosque to the ground with their bare hands on the plea that many hundreds of years ago a temple to Ram stood in the same given place. Given the fact that the only country in the world has ongoing conflict, whether openly or in clandestine fashion, with almost all of its neighbours, one can feel concerned about their capacity to do mischief in the region and even beyond to the extent of the range of their missiles. After all, when their stated enemy is Pakistan and it has developed the Prithvi as Pakistan-specific, why is Agni with a far more ballistic capacity, on the launching pad? Not only Pakistan but the entire region (and beyond) has reason to fear India's long-term ambitions to establish hegemony, the west is apprehensive about their capacity for harm if they should lay their hands on nuclear weapons. Frankly, the likes of motivated Shamyl Basayev, admirable though he is, is enough to scare anyone.

While Pakistan's nuclear doctrine is not difficult to an-

uncinate, what really matters is that we establish credible controls, in particular the projected Nuclear Command Authority (NCA) with not only adequate checks and balances against both adventurers and madmen but capable of an adequate nuclear response in the face of a possible attack. That credibility will act as the deterrent which can prevent nuclear war, not that one has any great confidence in the ambitions of the geriatrics who presently

hardly show remorse when their own untouchables, like the Dalits, come to grief at the hands of their fanatic followers.

In such circumstances, what is being done in military circles can hardly be discussed in newspaper columns but what can be done by civilian authorities should not only be discussed but also disseminated with great urgency to all the citizens of their country. At the moment our civilian population

know how to deal with nuclear radiation burns. Are there any medical teams pre-designed and equipped for any disaster, what to talk about nuclear holocaust? Which of our buildings have nuclear-safe bomb shelters, even the new much-touted "Mera Ghar" scheme has no built-in facility to handle disaster of any kind. Is there any contingency plan to check law and order situation leading to anarchy? For that matter even our Armed Forces have cursory knowledge of Atomic, Biological and Chemical (ABC) warfare, little more than at the rudimentary level. As such a nuclear strike will not create such damage and havoc as the chain reaction of devastation that it may trigger off because of lack of knowledge, equipment, training, etc to handle the situation.

Among the many worries that should affect this nation is possible nuclear holocaust and the capacity to deal with it. We must face up to realities sooner rather than later in the face of the knowledge that the geriatric Indian leadership is capable of adventure.

Today all eyes will now be set on the outcome of the elections which will begin to pour in from October 5.

Two main issues of interest, revolving the elections, are evident whether the NDA retains power as predicted by most opinion polls despite the fact that the opposition called such forecast as mostly designed to influence the voters. Secondly, will Mrs. Sonia Gandhi personally romp home with victories, and if so, whether from both the seats and with margin? That Mr. Vajpayee and most of the prominent leaders are likely to

win is a foregone conclusion: but Mrs. Gandhi's case is different because she is fighting election for the first time and that too in an atmosphere generally believed to be favouring the NDA. More importantly, her own success is linked with the influence of India's most famous political dynasty. She may do well in both seats. It was earlier thought that the NDA will be able to secure a bare majority with around 280 seats whereas its tally was projected as nearly 300 or even more. The BJP, main constituent of the NDA, is expected to remain the single-largest party and its strength may remain more or less the same. The Congress's strength is expected to improve from previous 140 and it and allies like AIADMK and Rashtra Janata Dal may secure between 180-190 seats. Some of the allies of

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