

The Daily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

Dhaka, Friday, October 15, 1999

Greetings to Vajpayee

THE induction of Vajpayee-led coalition government in India, born of an 'unholy parliament,' past three elections that had produced inconclusive results, must go down as a major development in the history of Indian polity. Much as we greet the event as a precursor of stable government in the neighbouring country after quite a while, our heartiest congratulations go to Atal Behari Vajpayee on his return to power in strength. It has been stated that he is the only prime minister, after Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi to be sworn in as the Indian prime minister for the third time. But his sense of achievement might be greater for the fact that while on the previous two occasions he had been skating on a thin ice he is on a much stronger ground today as a resurrected prime minister. Besides, it is a break with Nehru-Gandhi legacy that he represents rather palpably now.

A word about the composition of the coalition government. He has taken political heavyweights from alliance partners on board, struck a regional balance and inducted two state ministers from the Muslim community. There is no question of any party offering support from outside and withdrawing it at the drop of a hat to pull a government down. Any party prima donna is now a full-fledged minister, very much a government insider with inward-looking obligations.

While the Indian electorate gave a resounding vote for a coalition era it has also unequivocally ordained that there be balanced governance by the new leadership. If the BJP had returned with absolute majority and formed a government of its own it would have had a free rein with its ideas, a prospect which the Indian electorate apparently did not take kindly to. A democratic government could be autocratic as Indira Gandhi had once proved during her incumbency by clamping an emergency in India.

Vajpayee has his job cut out for him. Second time as prime minister he gave the Indian economy some strength and vitality. Third time around, he is expected to take it forward into the new millennium. He is regarded as a moderating influence not only in the Sangh Paribar but also within the National Democratic Alliance which he has led to a handsome electoral victory.

He has been given a real chance by the Indian voters to operate but at the same time what must remain a factor on his calculus is the counterweight of other parties to the BJP's 185 seat-strength in Lok Sabha.

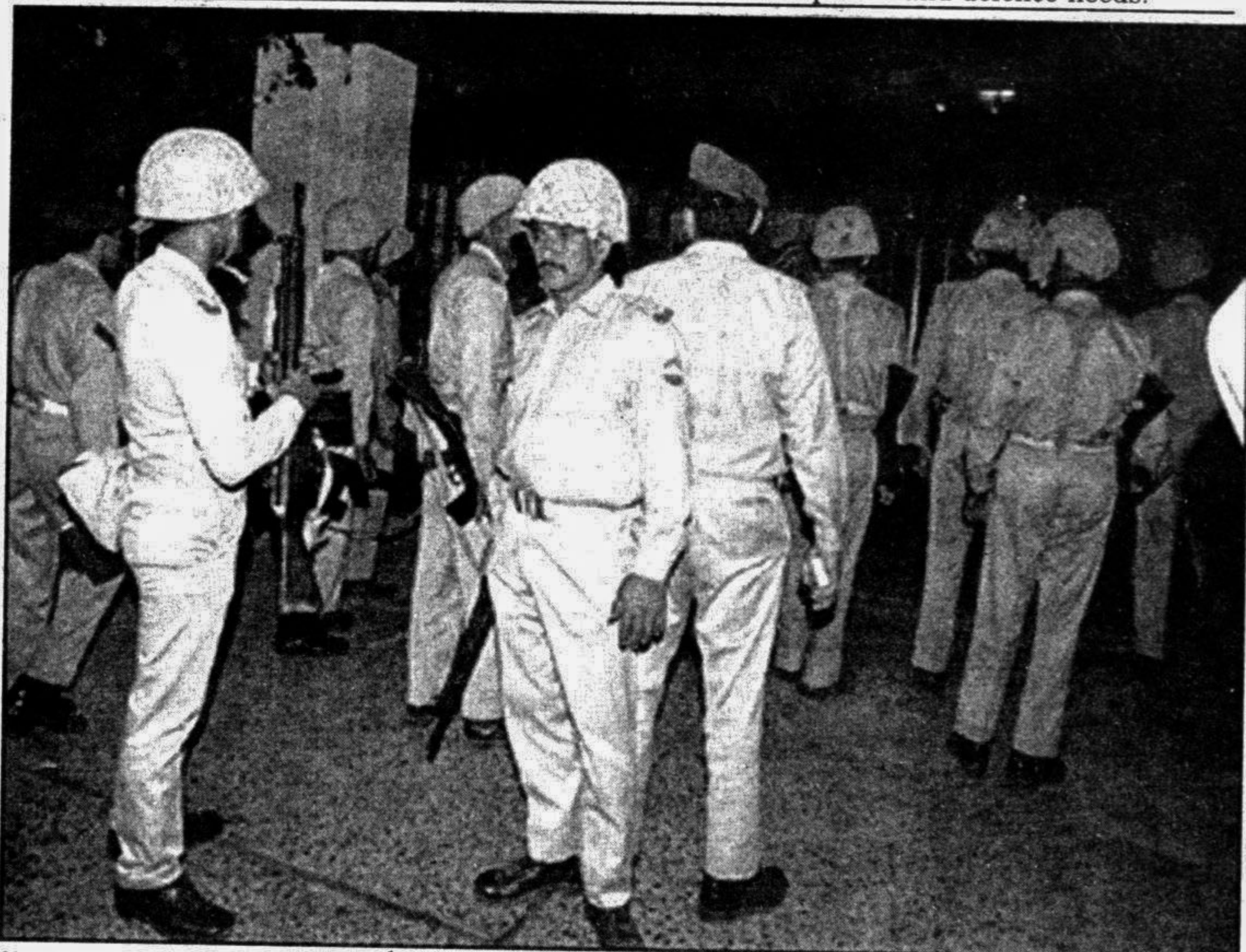
Atal Behari Vajpayee enjoys a high degree of acceptability in the SAARC region. This is because of his contributions to better understanding between neighbours dating back to his term as Indian External Affairs Minister in the Desai government of late 70's. Pakistan being in a state of flux after the military's ouster of a duly constituted elected government, Vajpayee has adopted a wait and watch policy towards that country but is likely to deal positively with them sooner than later.

As for Bangladesh we urge him to intervene, do something about the push-in that is taking place along the borders to create a powerful stimulus for better relations with us. The incidence of BSF's firing and incursions needs to be curbed much as we would like the inter-state trade to be balanced and the sharing of common river waters organised on an equitable footing as dividends of a stable government in India.

Military Take-over in Pakistan: Points to Ponder

by Taj I Hashmi

Suggestively, no Pakistani general would be that stupid to stage a military coup without any green signal from the West, especially when Pakistan is on the verge of bankruptcy and totally dependent on the West for both its development and defence needs.



Old habits die hard

MEMBERS of the armed forces have again staged a coup d'état in Pakistan and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, along with some other key ministers, is under "house arrest". General Pervez Musharraf, who recently lost his job as the chief of the army while visiting Sri Lanka, has reversed the table by sacking the Prime Minister, and installing himself as the new military ruler of Pakistan, albeit in the old, traditional "Pakistani" (read Third World) style — in the name of restoring order, eliminating corruption and establishing "true democracy" in the near future. "Possibly the average Pakistani is not at all surprised, perturbed or angry at the turn of the events. To him/her, since government officials (civil) and elected representatives of the people, along with traders and businessmen, are corrupt and inefficient — some of them are even said to have links with India and other "enemies of Islam and Pakistan" — periodic purges and changes in the highups of the administration are necessary. And what is the harm if the changes are brought about by the "patriotic" members of the armed forces? The average Pakistani might pose the question. Hence, as we know, there is legitimacy of military rule in Pakistan and other culturally, politically and economically backward countries in the Third World. This is what had been happening in the Third World in the post-colonial period up to the early nineties of this century.

Although the average Pakistani is not surprised or nervous at the state of affairs in his/her country, as one becomes accustomed to military rule when generals ran the show for about 24 years in the last 50-odd years of independence, one who has been monitoring world events and is aware of the changes that took place in the powerful capitals of the West, especially vis-a-vis military takeovers in the Third World, has reasons to be surprised at the latest military coup in Pakistan. One knows how dependent Pakistan is on the West for its sustenance as one knows how the US administration has been publicly condemning military juntas throughout the world and has been imposing sanctions on countries like Iraq and Libya for violating human rights and for having "unconstitutional" governments ever since the end of the Cold War. One knows that gone are the days of Eisenhower, Nixon and Regan, who militarily regimes of Batista in Cuba, Pinochet in Chile, Zia-ul-Haq in Pakistan, Marcos in the Philippines, Suharto in Indonesia and scores of other brutal regimes throughout the Third World. As we know, Nixon even justified rightist

dictatorships, preferring them to the communist ones, in his book, *No More Vietnams*. However, the post-Cold War era has witnessed the launching of the "Desert Storm" by George Bush in 1990-91 in the name of the New World Order and to "restore" democracy and human rights throughout the world. Francis Fukuyama has strengthened the Bush Doctrine by his book, *The End of History*, a sophistic, pedestrian piece of scholarship, declaring that the days of dictatorship are gone, gone for ever, and those of democracy have dawned to remain eternally inspiring for mankind in the future.

However, with some hindsight and common sense, one may perceive that there are oft-quoted assertions by Samuel Huntington that the world is possibly going to witness the "clash of civilizations" in the next millennium. One may be replete with "Huntington's" alarmist view point [as Huntington himself later revised his thesis in 1997] by arguing that Islam and the West are not natural adversaries to each other, yet one has every reason to believe that the so-called clash of civilizations is another name or euphemism for class struggle, both within the boundaries of a

nation state and beyond, at the inter-state level (read the West versus the Rest or the West versus the backward and exploited Muslim World). The recent chain of events in Pakistan and the neighbouring Afghanistan with regard to the rise in fanaticism and militancy in the name of Islam, strengthen the hypothesis that the US and its allies of the Cold War era have realised (albeit a late realisation) that they unwittingly created a Frankenstein by arming the Mujahideen to contain Soviet Union in the 1980s. Contrary to the Nixon Doctrine, events in the USSR and elsewhere in

eastern Europe during 1989 and 1991 have proved that communist dictatorships are subject to mass upheavals and hence reversible. Although the joint Pentagon, ISI and Saudi endeavour led to the successful installation of the so-called Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the Autumn of 1996, with a view to containing Shiite Iranian influence in the oil- and gas-rich Central Asia, the undemocratic removal of Benazir Bhutto from power a couple of weeks preceding the Taliban takeover has not brought stability in the region. While on the one hand, Iran has not given up its claim to establish links with its Cen-

tral Asian neighbours and has not been emasculated either. Pakistan, on the other hand, has become vulnerable to the manipulations by the Islamic militants of the Taliban genre, trained and armed by the ISI, the "invisible State", financed by Saudi militants and madrasahs, in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The upshot is the direct confrontation between Osama bin Laden and the United States of America.

Recently, Bin Laden has declared Jihad against both India and the US. The recent Kargil adventure by Pakistani militants, assumed to be sponsored by the ISI "without the knowledge and approval of Nawaz Sharif", to paraphrase George Fernandes, must have added fuel to the American fury. While the US had not fully recovered from the trauma of the embassy bombings in Africa, supposed to be done by Bin Laden's men, the fresh threats to destabilize the region by the Taliban and their patrons in Pakistan was too much for the US to ignore. A nuclear Pakistan, with a government having no control over the "invisible State" of ISI, which has been propping both the Taliban and the nuclear lobby in Pakistan, is the last thing the US can be complacent about.

The way Nawaz Sharif was compromising with the Islamic militants and yielding to the ISI and was eventually forced to appoint the ISI chief as the new army chief, must have given the "right" signal to the US to do the "right thing" at the "right" moment. The formation of the BJP-led "Hindu" government in India might have given the hawk and Islamic militants in Pakistan another opportunity to destabilize the Subcontinent in the name of Islam or Kashmir. It seems, Nawaz Sharif had hardly any control over these forces while his country was fast becoming bankrupt and ungovernable. As General Musharraf has told the nation and the world, there has been hardly any semblance of democracy, the rule of law or the so-called "constitutional government". Suggestively, no Pakistani general would be that stupid to stage a military coup without any green signal from the West, especially when Pakistan is on the verge of bankruptcy and totally dependent on the West for both its development and defence needs.

The author is the director, School of Liberal Arts and Science, Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB).

A Coelacanth of Crime

by Mohammad Badrul Ahsan

Someone said that if ichthyologists and fishes could talk, we could solve many mysteries of the riverbed. Now, we have a talking Coelacanth in the net and he wants to open his mouth. Let him tell us all about the hotbeds of crime and the conniving men who actually run them.

trusting place. He courted with women and condemned his enemies with an evenness of mind. But the most shocking thing about Ershad Shikhar is that he is a mortal like us who talked and looked like one of us while a monster worked up his mind. He was the Mr. Jackyill and Mr. Hyde of our times who could attend a social function with a smiling face, moments after he had taken someone's life or ravished someone's wife. And the wonder is that he could change his face in the broad day light without having to wait for nightfall. The moral darkness of our benighted times brought him nightfall round the clock.

When Pol Pot, the Cambodian strongman who is blamed for the death of at least one million of his countrymen, died last year, many people wondered why did this soft-spoken and even-tempered one-time teacher, instigate one of the most brutal reigns of terror in history. Pol Pot himself enhanced that mystery in an interview with US journalist Nate Thayer, "I came to carry out the struggle, not to kill people. Even now, and you can look at me, am I a savage person? My conscience is clear."

The only enviable thing about evil is how it looks harmless on the face of its havoc. When Hitler was at Berchtesgaden, he loved to see the neighborhood children and give them ice cream and cake. Stalin threw lavish parties for his

ministers, which started at 10 in the evening and lasted till dawn when his secret police NKVD often took away one of the guests never to be seen again. But this is not to raise a gangster to greatness, but to compare how evil often infiltrates and exploits the goodwill of innocence. When a husband in Jessore amorously called his second wife to his room at night, it had all the innocence of a conjugal cooing. She had no reason to believe that her husband and his first wife had hatched a scheme to kill her by suffocation with a pillow while setting fire on her genitalia. She hardly knew that the man she was living with for last ten years would, in fact, run out to be the enemy of her life.

Like most of us didn't know until his arrest that Ershad Shikhar was an enemy amongst us. Like many of us also didn't know until the show-downs at UCBL that Akhteruzzaman Babu had the bearings of a mafioso who wanted to take control of a bank by the flex of his muscles, not by the fecundity of law. Recently, a young film actress who gained popularity by showing her body shocked her fans by showing a piece of her mind. She allegedly appointed one of her goons to kill a fellow actor who had spurned her love.

What does the psychograph of a criminal look like? It's not always a steep curve connecting the dark blotches, which mark the unconscionable aberrations

of an evil mind. More than 30 years after his death, the world hears about the forgotten daughter of Albert Einstein during the youthful indiscretions between the great scientist and his first wife Mileva. Now Michelle Zuckheim writes in her book *Einstein's Daughter: The Search for Leiserl* that Einstein's unwanted daughter had died of scarlet fever at the age of 21 in the Serbian village of Vojevodina, never claimed by either of her parents. There have been other revelations as well on this great mind of the twentieth century; his flirtations, his dalliance with the daughter of the woman who would become his second wife, his estrangement from his two sons, etc.

Do these obliquities make Einstein a criminal? His indifference to the fate of Leiserl makes him an insensitive father who neglected his daughter. That he made sexual advances to his would-be stepdaughter shows his weakness for women. He was also a bad father who had alienated his sons. All of these were the shortcomings of an eccentric man whose mind traveled in the force fields of the universe, but fumbled at the human level.

If Albert Einstein the genius often forgot, Ershad Shikhar the gruesome seldom forgave. That is where a criminal is different from a cad or a coot, where moral failings are different from mental glitches. Crime

is when one violates our values of one's own volition. When Ershad Shikhar killed, he killed in the ecstasy of harm, his instincts relentlessly honed to zap anyone who threatened his goals. But idiosyncrasy is something else, when mind stumbles on its own hurdles but doesn't have a motive. Einstein may have forgotten his daughter in the manner he often forgot to wear his socks, his space-swirling mind occasionally faltering at its earthly routines.

Curiously, as my friend pointed out, Ershad never killed a woman. Even when his wife Khadija allegedly tried to elope with one of his helpmates, he killed the man but spared and continued to trust her. That forgiveness was unusual for a ruthless man like Ershad as Einstein's forgetfulness was for his rational mind. But these deviations only showed that they were flawed as human beings: the cruelty of one man punctuated by a flash of kindness and the intelligence of another blemished by an error in judgement or two.

Between crime and caprice, there is a moral swamp, which hides even more callous animals. Hannah Arendt, an American political philosopher, wrote in 1963, "Only crime and the criminal, it is true, confront us with the perplexity of radical evil; but only the hypocrite is really rotten to the core." The hypocrites are the ventriloquists of crime who pull the strings from behind the scene masquerading as politicians, businessmen and social leaders. Someone said that if ichthyologists and fishes could talk, we could solve many mysteries of the riverbed. Now, we have a talking Coelacanth in the net and he wants to open his mouth. Let him tell us all about the hotbeds of crime and the conniving men who actually run them.

The author is a banker.

Friday Mailbox

Boom goes the bomb

Sir, I am a member of the Ahmadiyah community, now doing my PhD at the Texas Tech University, USA. I really feel concerned about the recent incidents in the country. It has been a long time since we have been victim of politics. To be frank I don't know what to say except to ask: does not the society have any duty for these poor people of people in this situation?

Galib Bin Habib 2410, 10th street, Lubbock, Texas 79401, USA

Please take measures

Sir, Pakistani Ahmad Muslims express their great concern and grief about the sad incident that occurred in a mosque in Khulna on 8th Oct. 99. In this incident seven people died and many were injured while they were offering prayers. We strongly condemn this act of brutal terrorism against the most "Peace Loving" section of Muslims. We request the government of Bangladesh to take strong and prompt action against the culprits who are spreading hatred and terrorism.

Qamar Ahmed Pakistan

Ouch!

Sir, Just a few weeks back there was a news item in a local newspaper of Chittagong regarding diesel price to be increased a little bit and petrol/octane prices to be reduced substantially. The logic was that diesel consumption in Bangladesh was much more compared with petrol/octane and the reduction in prices of the latter could be covered by only a slight increase in price of diesel. The idea was to bring down the petrol/octane prices to such levels so as to discourage the widespread adulteration thus saving engines from ruination. But, this has not materialised. On the contrary, we learn from the DS of October 10 that the government is about to surprise us with a 30 per cent increase of petroleum products. The last time, in 1997, there was an increase by 60 per cent with petrol and octane getting almost the full brunt of it. The government, at that time, almost refused to admit it as an "increase" as they had not made any significant change in the price of diesel used by the people. Now, if this 30 per cent takes effect on all the petroleum products then it would mean that prices of petrol/octane will almost double within a space of two years!

Our question is: is the government trying to hoodwink the nation once again? Can it be denied that such increase will have adverse effect on the cost of living of the common people?

A Bewildered Observer Chittagong.

Good performance

Sir, I want to congratulate Bangladesh cricket team for their good performance in the Biman Millennium cup. Though they lost in both matches yet it seems that they improved a lot. Now their cricket is much more mature and smart. If you have watched the matches you can easily find the faces of infant tigers of the near future.

Good luck Bangladesh. Muhammad Saifullah Muraqpur, Comilla-3500

Onion's extra layers

Sir, Developed nations like the USA imports their citizens' needs from cheaper sources for national benefit. They also keep their own resources, oil and coal etc., reserved for future, till they get a cheaper source. But in our country,

we have hardly any such plans. We work only for crisis management.

The news "Duty on onion goes" (DS-Oct-01) has attracted my attention, because, over the last few days, the atmosphere in my house became pungent as onion price was jumping higher and coming closer to last year's accepted price (not over Tk. 60).

We have many sources of onion import from the neighbouring countries. Some countries grow onion even round the year as the climate favours them. And every country is eager to export their perishable surplus. So, we could easily monitor their bumper crop and price index, in their harvesting time, to select a cheaper source of import as is done by the USA and others countries.

Though we get our onions from Australia, India, Iran, Myanmar, Turkey and other Central Asian countries, I presume with cost insurance and freight (CIF), these are the cheapest onion sources for us. Earlier when we used to get onions from Pakistan, it was cheaper than the others. The CIF of this source could be cheaper than those coming from Australia, Iran, Turkey and other Central Asian countries.

Is it very difficult to verify the onion market (CIF value), through our missions in those countries? Besides, we have a huge trade imbalance with certain neighbouring countries. Can't we then tag our 70 per cent onion import with our exportables? It seems, we haven't learnt the lesson from last year's catastrophe nor have we done the required homework. Despite every effort by the government, has the onion price come back to normal (Tk 12 to 15 per kg or so), after the last year's price rise? Will this not encourage the private sector, for making extra profit, to over-invoice the export price, in absence of duty and fix a local price, slightly lower than what prevails now, by calling that a reasonable/fair price? Moreover, since Government doesn't have other sources of fund except revenue earning, then won't our government tax us for recovering the revenue loss (7.5% duty withdrawal from onion import) in this fiscal year onion import?

A R Choudhury Uttara, Dhaka.

Road in bad shape

Sir, An important road runs through the main town — in front of Sirajgonj pourashabha office. A good number of passersby use and buses, trucks, rickshaws and other vehicles ply on this road. But it is regrettable that it has been in a very bad shape for a long time. As a result, smooth movement on this road has become really difficult. To reach the other side of this road, one has to suffer a lot.

Nargis Parvin Masumpur, Sirajgonj.

Overseas voters

Sir, Existing electoral law does not provide for the enrollment as a voter of floating population and the Bangladeshi citizens living abroad. FEMA — a citizens' coalition for monitoring election — recommended to make provision in the law for enrollment of the said categories of citizens. It also suggested to bring the voters living outside the country within the fold of postal balloting. But some opposed the idea of enlisting expatriate Bangladeshis as voters on the ground that if they are registered as voters, the counting authority of votes may utilize this opportunity to manipulate the result.

But we believe if the authority can take initiative for enrolling the floating population and overseas Bangladeshis, then it would be really helpful and would improve the election process of the country.

Mostafa Sobel Dhaka.

OPINION

The Image of the Opposition in the Third World

A Husnain

THE politicians (the cynical and harassed citizens say that the politicians claim that politics is a profession, good or evil) enjoy a poor image in the under developed countries; and the concept of parliamentary opposition has practically no social status. It is ignored both by the janata and the regime, and these untouchable groups subjected to abject social and political discriminations take to the streets, not to earn their living, but to make their present felt. Their effect is like the mosquito bite, irritating, and hardly damaging, unless it becomes encephalitis (brain malaria), symptoms of which have now been detected in Bangladesh.

All political parties while in the opposition call for hartals, hoping for full cooperation of the golden-hearted masses, and

to ensure support from the homeless and starving poor; and employ mastaans and civilian terrorists who thrive as rent seekers (a new enhanced profession, perhaps an offshoot of the zamindari syndrome, and a typical middle-class attitude as seen in the tutorial commercialism sponging the student community).

This callous public attitude towards the opposition lands the latter into unfocused and undesirable activities, as a naughty child whimpers to get the mother's attention. This sort of political flippantous disposition is a huge wastage of time, energy, and money; roping in millions of others (citizens) not involved in political activities. The regime treat the opposition with scant respect, making the parliament a

batihak-khana (drawing room) of the like-minded. Democracy means more of give than take. The enemy or the bug is the insatiable love for power. Life is not worth living without power, good, bad, or unauthorised. Once power has been tasted at the proper level, there is no inclination to come down from the orbit to the sonar maati below. This term is coined by the politicians to divert attention from the other types of the golden opportunities lurking in the corners.

Power corrupts, and love for power corrupts absolutely. When some leaders are not in their right senses (sober), how can they provide service to the public? Corollary: when the politicians cannot control themselves, how can they control others and run the coun-

try? We are trying something which is theoretically and physically impossible. So the people, and the regime, have to believe in the rightful existence of the opposition, and put them on the right pedestal, for respectable recognition; and allow it to function in a way universally recognized. Who likes to a persona non grata for a while? Therefore the politicians in the LDCs to let us suffer from the 5-Year itch. Scratch the self or others — that is the question lurking under the political garment.

There is another psychological reason for the irritation of the different groups of politicians — the maternalistic jealousy in this business of politics. Politics is a highly profitable business in the Third World, and the investment returns are

very high; even with zero taka investment — there are many sponsors who are otherwise the hidden godfathers — taking good care of the years to come. Who says that the Bangladeshis have no business acumen? Look how our Stock Exchanges have been siphoned off. Study the art of How to become a Successful Bank-loan defaulter.

The political drinks are like water contaminated with arsenic; it is the slow poisoning which is dangerous. Who stops 'drinking' for the fear of getting drunk? Our politics will not improve (do not blame the poor opposition) till politics ceases to a lucrative business. There is an escape route: become a zamindar (esquire) or a Lord of the Knights' Table, and one need earn one's living through politics.

Views expressed in this column are the writers' own. The Editor may or may not subscribe to those views. The Editor reserves the right to decide which letters should be published.