

Pak Army Shows its Claws

FINALLY, the army in Pakistan has shown its claws. In a belated move the army chief Gen. Pervez Musharraf suspended the constitution, dissolved the parliament, declared emergency and appointed himself the supreme leader. In a sense all this was expected. Once having violated the established law and taken power the army had little option but to declare martial law and suspend the Constitution. We can now expect them to validate all the illegal actions through some special ordinance.

It is indeed sad for Pakistan and for democracy everywhere. As believers in democracy we cannot, and will not, support army's takeover of the reigns of government under any circumstance. Nothing had happened in Pakistan to necessitate the dismissal of the elected government and suspension of the constitution. The international community had already condemned the army for its previous action. Now the condemnation will be even sharper. How will the army respond to the international pressure will be a matter to carefully watch. We are gratified to note the anti-coup sentiment expressed by all the major powers of the world. We hope that the pressure is maintained to restore civilian government at the earliest.

However, it is also indeed sad to see the Pakistani opposition elements lending support to the army just because they hate Nawaz Sharif and his government. The logic is that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. As the army has toppled the Muslim League government therefore Benazir Bhutto, Imran Khan and the rest are jockeying for the former's favour to get a share of the power which they would not get through an election. Too often in the past Pakistani political elements have lent support to the army for very short sighted and partisan reasons. Such politics of convenience devoid of principle and commitment to democracy has brought the military to power in Pakistan over and over again to the detriment of normal growth of democracy.

Now that the army has taken full control of the country the thing to watch would be the policies it will follow. There will be the obvious attack on the politicians and the usual corruption charges against them. There could even be confiscation of property etc. That will gain them some initial popular points. But then what? The main issue is the revival of the economy for which the army will need international support which may not be forthcoming without a clear timetable on restoring democracy by holding a free and fair election.

Opportunistic Hartal

OUR plea for an end to politics of hartal has failed to register with the BNP-led opposition alliance, so suggests the call for a country-wide shutdown on October 21. At a Paltan Maidan rally, part of the four-party alliance's "Anti-aggression Day" programme on Monday, the BNP chairperson and Leader of Opposition in the House Khaleda Zia harped on the familiar tune of 'Indian aggression' and the demand for resignation of the incumbent government. We have previously sought to refute the rationale of frequent hartals on the ground that these bring only misery to the people and the country's fragile economy more than anything else. Also, we have failed to discern any tangible benefit in them for the opposition parties. Besides, the issues they have set forth as rationale for taking recourse to the last resort of protest appear to us as mere political rhetoric having no bearing on public interest. The BNP-led alliance pronouncedly hopped from one issue to the other, betraying thereby an unfocussed pattern of actions. This time around, added to the pronounced vacillation has been an opportunistic mindset manifest once again in the very timing of the hartal.

With the shutdown sandwiched between the public holiday for Durga Puja and a two-day weekend, in all probability, many would opt for an extended break from work, leaving the city for a quiet time on the countryside. A deserted look of the city, induced by this, would certainly lend credence to the opposition claim of "spontaneous participation of people" in its agitation programme. Apparently, that seems to be the four-party alliance's design. Sound strategy it may seem to the leadership; however, to us, it speaks of self-doubt, if not deception. The hartals, called and enforced frequently on nebulous issues, look set to eat into the goodwill the BNP has created through peaceful democratic means of protest like road march and sit-in demonstration. We would urge the opposition parties, especially BNP, to rethink their strategy, in the hope that this time they would pay heed.

JS Committee Meetings

THE main opposition in the parliament, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) stayed away from the meeting of the Parliamentary Standing Committee Tuesday that discussed and endorsed the Cabinet decision to hold expert level talks with India on a transhipment deal. BNP lawmakers, however, participated in the committee meeting on Civil Aviation and Tourism. The Standing Committee on Commerce Ministry has only BNP members among the opposition political parties in Parliament so that big responsibility devolved upon it to air its views on the subject. Given their strong reservation on the issue they could go on record with a note of dissent for the people to know. A BNP member claimed that even if they had joined the meeting and discussed the issue, 'the ruling party would not have listened to their opinion and taken a decision in their favour.' Though the BNP has been boycotting the sessions of Parliament on and off, yet their members are making it a point to attend the Parliamentary Standing Committee meetings on various government ministries. There too the decisions do not always reflect their opinions, yet they have been attending committee meetings anyway.

Home Minister Mohammad Nasim failed to show up at the Standing Committee meeting on his ministry at the Sangsad Bhaban the other day. The opposition members attending the meeting were naturally disappointed and questioned the effectiveness of a committee meeting with the minister concerned being not available to answer their queries. We would implore the ministers concerned to make it a point to attend the Standing Committee meetings without fail. The point we would like to make here is that opposition parties, especially the BNP, must remember that the Parliament belongs to the people, and not to the government or the ruling party. So how the latter behaves should not determine Opposition decision to participate in the Standing Committee deliberations or Parliament sessions.

FEW days back, I went to Modhupur, Tangail. The purpose of my visit was to have a first-hand impression about the newly launched "Village Computer and Internet Programme" organized by the Gramene Bank (GB). En passant, one needs to recall that GB had already initiated Village Pay Phone Services (VPP) spreading over about 700 villages in Bangladesh. The most successful GB member of a village is given a cellular mobile phone at a cost of Tk. 18,000 to be repaid in three years. The owners, in return, pay weekly installment @ Tk. 160-200/week and earn a net income of Tk. 300/ week from selling phone services. However, an evaluation on that project was done by the Centre for Development Research of the University of Bonn by A. Bayes, J. von Braun and R. Akhter. The positive impacts of VPPs in poverty reduction and rural development were spelled out in that report.

It's a gallant initiative by GB that includes computers and internets. Mentionably, the programme is at its very infancy and, reportedly, was kicked off from July 1999. I was told that the main objectives of setting up of such a centre are, inter alia, to acquaint rural population with the latest technologies; to create efficient human resources through imparting computer training; to help quick correspondence through e-mails etc. GB expects that at the end of the long tunnel — that seemingly is covered with clouds of smoke — the population of that area could be gifted with a developed human resource base, quick communication both within and outside the country and overall economic growth and development.

It would, perhaps, be unfair to reach any conclusions on the outcome of the events taking place there facing the shortage

Bangladesh needs to catch the train waiting at the station to take her to 21st century. In the course of the journey, ICT (information communication technology) should constitute her bag and baggage. In the meantime, half of the job had already been done by way of putting computers and e-mails at village level. The other half of the deed still amounts to a dream: fair price to farmers through ICT.

of facilities. Because, as I said before, the project has just begun. But like others, I also believe that the next millennium is going to be dominated by Information Communication Technology (ICT) and Bangladesh should shrug off anti-technology attitude, if there is any. And to this effect, of course, the question that has long been looming large is whether the advent of these technologies would help the economy at large and the poor in particular to lift them out of "vicious circle of poverty" syndrome.

Why then Modhupur first? It is possibly because the area is a major grower of pineapple, banana and some other agricultural crops. Much above the sea level as it is, the region is said to be one of the richest in terms of soil fertility, forest resources and communication network. The initiative was further ignited by the pervasive presence of middlemen in that area who, allegedly, rob farmers of a substantial premium by taking advantage of the information gap about market prices. Reportedly, the major suppliers of pineapple and banana tend to face tremendous price fluctuations throughout the season.

On the spot, we found that few trainees were getting computer training on some basics (e.g. Microsoft Word, Excel). They are provided with 40 lectures — approximately spanning over two months — and charged Tk. 2,550 for the whole course.

Some of them are unemployed youths, some are students and a few are already in jobs. The trainees strongly feel that there is a growing market for computer trainees and the

facility in the vicinity of their houses only helped easy access to it. More importantly, GB officials informed me that they would appeal to nearby schools and college authorities to use the centre as computer laboratory. Students would be provided training here and that would save institutions from having computers in each place. In other words, nearby village academic institutions and their students could have access to these facilities.

My interest mostly lay in the use of e-mail. Whereto and who

proker chinta korbenna...eti X' [God bless you. I hope you are well. Father, we got your money in due time. The works in the house is on. To day, we shall fix tins in the house... After getting salary, send money quickly. Because more money is needed now... Do not worry father... yours X].

I met Pervin Akhter (30) who came to send e-mail to her husband working in Kuwait in the UN peace force. She informed me that since the availability of e-mail facility in Modhupur,

before. The same sentiment was echoed by three other customers whose relatives are studying or working abroad. The e-mail service is also used by local correspondents of English dailies. On average, 25-30 e-mails are sent from the centre each month. However, the "fragile" telecommunication facility, more often than not, disturbs the exchange — an allegation made by the buyers and the sellers.

Do the farmers of Modhupur benefit from this? Not yet. In the short run, it seems to be only the middle and lower middle class population (with certain level of education) who would take advantage of the e-mail and computer facility. This is of course a no less an achievement that Modhupur can be reached from Gulf States or some other countries in seconds and vice versa. When I asked some of the users whether a rise in the cost of e-mails would discourage them from availing such opportunity, they categorically stated that even paying Tk. 100 for one page would not discourage them. They seem to consider the cost vis a vis telephones.

I met some pineapple and banana growers. The tales of exploitation by middlemen and the wide fluctuation in the prices of the produce dominated the discussion. I felt that, at that those farmers had very little to gain from the technology although some of them informed that they would send their children to learn computer. GB officials told me that

vis a vis telephones. Let us try to make hi-tecs (ICT) easily accessible to the disadvantaged through pursuance of pragmatic policies that support such ventures, not seize them.

I left Modhupur with some satisfaction. But a major question chased me all through the journey: why not we put our hands together to make such dreams successful? It would not be building a castle in the air rather building bases to face crises confronting us in the next century.

she has been sending 3-4 e-mails each month. Earlier, she used to talk on telephone once a month. GB charges Tk. 15 for a page outgoing e-mail and Tk. 8 for an incoming one. What about sending messages outside? Do the senders know how to write a letter in English? I was told that what the senders in fact do is to use English alphabet to write Bengali. For example, please see below a letter from a daughter "X" to her father "Y" working in a Gulf state:

"Dear father,

Assalamu Alaikum. Asa kari bhalo asen. Abba apnara taka amra jatha samaye payasi. Basar kaj cholse. Tin lagaonr kaj ajke shes hebo...Beton payaka taratar patia diben. Karon akhon khobob taka lags...Apni kono

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Russia's Longest War in the Caucasus

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

Given the region's geostrategic importance, the oil-resources in Chechnya, the oil pipe line routes and the influence of local warlords and the mafia the region makes for a heady mix of instability and international intrigue. This can once again threaten the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Russian Federation.

Daghestan to the Kuban. It lasted from 1779 to 1785 when he annihilated a Russian Army but was defeated and killed eventually. Imam Shamli led a second revolt that raged for twenty-five years from 1834 to 1859 before it was also crushed by superior imperial forces of Russia. But the failures of these rebellions could not fully subjugate the Chechens. The Russians however left loose the reigns of terror from time to time to pacify the rebels.

During the early part of nineteenth century General Aleksei Yermolov of Russia introduced for the Chechens a punitive system which consisted of building forts, forcing the native Chechens out of the line of communications, settling loyal Cossacks in their place and then resettling the Chechens in easily controllable areas. The Russians often starved the Chechen rebels into submission by destroying

standing crops just before the harvest. As a result of this and myriad other persecutions thousands of North Caucasian Muslims fled to Ottoman empire and by 1869 an estimated 39,000 Chechens escaped to Turkey.

The repression of the Chechens had been even more harsh during the Soviet period. A major rebellion shook Chechnya during 1921-22 which was brutally crushed by the Soviet forces. Nevertheless, the Soviet authority gave them a measure of autonomy by creating an autonomous Chechen-Ingush republic in 1936. But soon afterwards the Chechens were deported from their native land for alleged collaboration with the invading German armies and banished to Central Asia. The Chechen-Ingush republic was also abolished. The deportation could have been retaliation to another Chechen uprising in 1940 sparked by

Stalin's purges.

Only in the late fifties the Chechens returned to their land as their autonomous republic was restored after a series of heated debates in the highest echelons of the Communist party. But Chechnya they left was no more the same. It was already settled with the Russian who now monopolised the cities and the republic's oil industry and also controlled the government's plum jobs. After decades the Chechens returned to a hostile reception in their own land and their cohabitation with the Russians was far from easy. And an intermittent clash between the ethnic groups continued to rage.

After the collapse of August putsch in the fall of 1991 the Chechen declared their independence. But neither the USSR nor its successor, the Russian Federation, recognised Chechnya's independence. In December, 1994 after three

years of indecision Boris Yeltsin ordered the Russian Armed forces to move against the rebel Chechen state. After the fighting broke out, the continuing poor performance of post Soviet Russian troops and their brutal treatment of Chechen civilians only increased the Chechen resistance evoking the memories of two hundred years of Russian repression. However the Russians' Caucasian war of 1994-95 was ultimately followed by an agreement that gave Chechnya greater autonomy but not independence which was the Chechen goal.

The separatist fire that was ignited in Chechnya has now spread to neighbouring Daghestan. Interestingly, the separatists of Daghestan are also led by the Chechen rebels from their territories. Moscow has reacted to this rebellion by sending in Russian forces to bomb them in the mountains of Daghestan and in areas of Chechnya which are believed to be the hideouts of the separatists. The mounting casualties have set off streams of refugees from the strife torn villages of Chechnya and Daghestan. Now given the nature for the territories, the rebels' determinations, the ethnic and communal divide and the prospects of support from Islamic mercenaries, a large scale war is a distinct possibility.

The Daghestan problem is

complex for Russia because it brings in the issue of Chechnya where the rebels' ideology is based on Islam and an ultra chauvinist nationalism with a vision of greater Chechen nation — perhaps in combination with Daghestan. Although in 1995 agreement Chechnya was given a special status the Chechens accepted it only grudgingly. They will always try to avail of the opportunity for full independence. The internationalisation of the issue in another worry for the Russians. The use of SU24 bombers on the Daghestan rebels have caused civilian casualties. Some rebels have already appealed for the UN intervention.

But yet another dimension of the conflict has ominous prospects for the whole region. The European Community and the United States have expressed concern over the escalation in the levels of violence, the ethnic conflicts and the violations of human rights in the Caucasus. In 1997 the US had declared the Caucasus and area of interest. This coincides with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's new doctrine of intervention in key geostrategic areas citing alleged human rights violation.

Given the region's geostrategic importance, the oil-resources in Chechnya, the oil pipe line routes and the influence of local warlords and the mafia the region makes for a heady mix of instability and international intrigue. This can once again threaten the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Russian Federation. Russia has to rethink its strategy if it wants to hold on to its distant possessions and trouble spots such as Daghestan and rest of Caucasus.

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

Buck for President?

HOLLYWOOD is starting to be heard from on the presidential elections. First Warren Beatty stuck his foot in the water. Now rumour has it that Richard Dreyfuss might go for the prize, and there is even talk that Cybill Shepherd may decide to run.

Why the sudden interest by movie stars in our electoral system?

This might be the answer. Rock, Luck Buck, one of the film industry's biggest stars, meets with his agent, Fog Murphy, at the Polo Lounge.

"What have you got for me?" Rock asks.

"I know this is going to sound weird, but the only thing that is open is president of the United States. It doesn't pay much, but the perks are fantastic — you have your own plane, Camp David and the Marine Corps Band. It's a great opportunity for you until Steven Spielberg finishes his next script."

"Who else is up for the part?"

"Warren Beatty, Richard Dreyfuss and Charlton Heston. But I heard they want you. Rock, I think you should take it because it will give you tremendous exposure. You have charisma, and that is what it takes to play the role."

"I don't know. I think I can beat Gore, Bradley and Bush, but to offer the people that Dan Quayle doesn't?"

"An Academy Award-winning performance. Remember when you did a remake of 'Grapes of Wrath'? The people haven't forgotten that. And then there was 'Yankee Doodle Dandy' when you played George M. Cohan's sidekick. And the fans still remember you scene on the beach with Deborah Kerr in 'From Here to Eternity.' Any one of those will beat Pat Buchanan in Iowa."

Rock says, "It sounds good, though I would prefer 10 per cent of the gross from the US foreign aid budget."

"What I haven't told you is that Barbara Streisand has agreed to sing 'The Star Spangled Banner' for you when you announce your candidacy at the Shrine Auditorium."

"It's true they laughed when Ronald Reagan announced he was going to run for office, but the won in a landslide. He opened it up for other actors who were out of work."

Fog says, "The American people have a lot of respect for actors who want to be president."

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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.

A blow to Pakistan

Sir. The recent coup by the Army in Pakistan was a fatal blow to Pakistan's claim of being a 'modern democratic Islamic state'. Once more, a democratically elected government has been removed from office to assuage the injured pride of a group of officers. For nearly half its history, Pakistan has been ruled by the Army and this coup will surely open the eyes of those who thought this was a thing of the past.

General Pervez Musharraf was reputed to be a completely professional and non-political soldier. If so, he has committed the gravest of all military crimes, namely, to flatly disobey the orders from a legitimate authority. It is inconceivable that a professional soldier would act like that just to prevent himself from being retired six months ahead of schedule.

Democracy has once again been dealt a crippling blow in Pakistan. The situation now is akin to anarchy, where democratic principles have been thrown overboard. All eyes are once more on Pakistan, and once more, for the wrong reasons.

It appears that it is going to be a hot winter for political activities.

Masud Sohail
Dhaka.

BNP behind bomb planting incidents?"

Sir. The statement — "BNP behind bomb planting incidents" — made by the Prime Minister, published in the DS on 11 Oct '99 stunned us. The PM gave this statement after a bomb blast in a mosque in Khulna and another found in the Kadiani mosque at Bakshibazar, Dhaka. I think, the statement of the PM is not only unprecedented, but also wrongly said. When the investigations are on, such

is also got the right to observe their religious rights without any interference.

Power tariff

Sir. It refers to the news item published in the DS of