

Blood Screening Imperative

QUANTIFICATION aside, there is hardly anything new in the piece of information, divulged by a UNAIDS study, that the blood used at different clinics and hospitals for transfusion was not screened although it came from 'professional donors'. A substantial number of them might have been infected with deadly hepatitis B virus, syphilis and other transmittable diseases. We have known this for quite sometime now and, in fact, this paper has, in an earlier editorial comment (IV Bag Hazards, April 7 this year), expressed concern over absence of blood-screening mechanism at the medicare outlets. That only one-fourth of the annual demand of some 200,000 bags, supplied by the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society, is screened for HIV and other transmittable diseases shows the magnitude of the risk factor involved. Fortunately, the government seems aware of the telling inadequacy in our healthcare system. Its decision to embark on a crash programme including establishment of 97 transfusion centres at the district level and formulation of laws for "safe blood transfusion" certainly speaks of its commitment to decisively deal with it.

Time is certainly a big factor here, especially when we are talking of nearly 100,000 patients, mostly women, susceptible to the risk of being infected with HIV and other transmittable diseases. Admittedly, our response to the health alert has been rather sluggish. In all probability, many a patient in need of blood transfusion has paid the price for the absence of a screening mechanism. Therefore, it is imperative that the government plan is implemented as soon as possible. The district-level transfusion centres, as we understand, will start operations within a month upon receipt of requisite kits. Also, a National Blood Transfusion Centre, to be set up on a turn-key basis with financial and technical assistance from a number of funding agencies, is highly likely to come into being very soon. Besides, identification and rehabilitation of 'professional donors' infected with transmittable diseases are under consideration. Overall, the whole scenario looks positive but only prompt execution of the projects is awaited.

MOU with Australia

THE Prime Minister held fruitful talks with her Australian counterpart John Howard at the Parliament house in Canberra on Wednesday. The two leaders agreed to expand economic and trade relations for the benefit of the two peoples.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina placed a list of items during the talks that included readymade garments which could be imported by Australia from Bangladesh. She urged the Australian Prime Minister to take personal initiative for increasing import of Bangladesh-made garments and sought his good offices to convince developed countries to increase Bangladesh's garments quota and provide zero tariff access for our items. This in itself is a good move no doubt but keeping in mind that the quota system will be phased out by 2005 the prime minister could have sought Australian investment in developing some backward linkages for the garment sector. The need for Australia to allow duty-free access to Bangladeshi products can hardly be overemphasised because the balance of trade is tilted against us.

The areas of cooperation identified in the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) include poverty alleviation through food-aid programmes and assistance to agriculture, human resources development and capacity building in education, health, human rights and other related sectors. Beneficiaries from these projects will be the poor and underprivileged with a special emphasis on the women and children. The development of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) will also receive priority attention.

We strongly believe that those important areas will benefit immensely from an increased cooperation with friendly Australia.

Medical Inattention

PARENTS of Dhaka University student Monir Hossain have now nowhere to turn to. Their only son expired on Tuesday night after spending two hours at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital. First, as a widely circulated Bangla daily reported on Thursday, he was denied access on ground of seat-scarcity. Then, when he was admitted to the hospital he did not receive the care and attention he needed. When he developed breathing problem, his father notified the emergency department about it but to little avail. The gentleman ran out of patience and wanted to take his ailing son to a clinic hoping to get some treatment. They went out of the hospital, sat under a shed outside. The boy died there.

This may sound an every-day episode in this problem-stricken country but we look at it as an instance of gross neglect on the part of the physician concerned, and for that matter, the hospital authority. It is the government-run hospitals people of low income groups turn to. They could not afford the high-cost treatment provided by the private clinics. That is something the doctors at government hospitals need to bear in mind.

We feel that the authorities should develop an internal mechanism to take automatic cognizance of any negligence or dereliction of duty as and when this occurs without waiting for some outsider to report it.

Parliamentary By-election in Tangail-8 Constituency

A Political Race with Multiple Implications

by Nurul Kabir, back from Tangail

This time the EC should be more careful, especially because the parties concerned, having higher stakes, would leave no stone unturned to outsmart each other in the polls. Besides, any visible failure to ensure a free and fair election will provide the agitating opposition with additional "grounds" to justify their decision to boycott the up-coming elections of the city corporations and Upajila Parishads

BY all indications, the parliamentary by-election in the Tangail-8 constituency, scheduled for November 15, has become crucial for all concerned — recently expelled Awami League leader Abdul Kader Siddique, Awami League, chief and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the Election Commission, and even the main opposition BNP which has boycotted the polls.

In other words, the election has inherent potential to effectively influence the country's political course in the near future — given the political background of the by-election and present activities of the political forces concerned.

Background

Kader Siddique, Bir Uttam, who was voted to Jatiya Sangsad in 1996 on AL ticket, got engaged in a series of disputes with party high command over certain policy issues. He accused the party high command of autocratic practices and accommodating in the leadership those who served, directly or indirectly, the government of Khandaker Mostaque Ahmed after the killing of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975.

Besides, he accused the government of Sheikh Hasina of failure to meet an electoral pledge of scrapping the Atia Forest Ordinance, 1982 which is very crucial for some half a million people living in a few thanas under Tangail district.

But Prime Minister and Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina found Siddique's observations nothing more than "utterances of mad and goat".

However, following months of dispute with Siddique, AL leadership suspended his membership on July 28.

Subsequently, he resigned from parliament on August 29, while the Premier considered the resignation politically insignificant. Claiming that Siddique was voted to parliament as he was blessed with her party's election symbol — boat — she categorically said that his resignation would not even create a bubble inside the AL, let alone a political polarisation in the national politics.

Kader Siddique took the challenge.

Reacting to Hasina's comment that it was the boat that made him win a seat in 1996 parliamentary polls, he said that she 'blessed' 300 candidates with the AL election symbol, but only 140 came up victorious.

To prove his personal worth and ability, Kader Siddique announced his candidature in the by-election to the seat made vacant by his resignation. He also said that he would convene a requisition council session of the Awami League to prove that there is a large number of AL leaders and activists who still do not like to see the party being run undemocratically.

The Election Commission announced schedule for by-election to the seat on October 6 last, fixing the date for the polls on November 15.

Possible Political Implications of the By-election Results

If Kader Siddique gets defeated in the elections, held in a free and fair atmosphere, he has to wait for quite some time

to come to the lime light of national politics again. But if Siddique wins the polls, it would be considered by many, both at the local and the national level, as a political defeat for his former leader Sheikh Hasina.

In that case, the win would definitely boost his moral to make fresh political attempts to secure supports of a certain section of the AL leaders and activists who, according to Siddique, still want to play an effective role in a democratic political process. The section, according to many, has no creative role to play at the moment due to alleged dictatorial pattern of running the party by its present leadership.

Kader Siddique's victory would also encourage many in other opposition parties, including BNP, either to raise their voice against the similar autocratic attitudes of the high commands or leave the parties for a possible democratic forum.

Kader Siddique himself believes that his victory would 'inspire many who do not love to play the role of yes-man in their respective political organisations'. Besides, some smaller democratic parties might think of rallying round Kader Siddique, thanks to his reputation of a big organiser. (He organised an army of some 17 thousand freedom fighters against the Pakistani occupation forces during the country's war of independence in 1971, and earned the highest military award, Bir Uttam, for his extraordinary performance in the war.)

On top of that all, the defeat of AL's candidate in the by-election would politically belittle Sheikh Hasina, as she has publicly denigrated him as 'mad, goat, paper tiger' and so on.

The election has, therefore, become a fight between Abdul Kader Siddique and his former leader Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The activities the AL has already undertaken in and around the constituency also indicate that the party is determined to win the by-election.

Violation of Electoral Codes of Conduct by Prime Minister, Ministers

After the election schedule was announced on October 6, Chief Election Commissioner Mohammad Abu Hena wrote to the Prime Minister 'advising' her not to visit the Tangail-8 (Shakhipur-Basail) constituency of Jatiya Sangsad before the elections. The same letter also 'advised' the premier to ask her cabinet colleagues not to go to the areas concerned until the elections in the constituency is over.

Technically, the PM did not ignore the EC advice as far as her visit to the constituency is concerned. But she went to Tangail town, a few kilometres from the constituency, on October 12 to address a public rally,

while the local AL units took truckloads of voters to the PM's meeting venue, and the PM spoke elaborately on issues related directly to the interests of the electorate of the constituency in question.

In clear violation of the electoral code of conduct, the PM on that day made a lot of pledges to the people of Tangail in general and the people of the Tangail-8 constituency in particular. The voters who did not or could not go to Tangail to hear the PM, heard her on the state run electronic media that night, or read her pledges in the newspapers next morning.

Sheikh Hasina's promises included upgrading of the Basail and Shakhipur Union Parishads to municipalities, Taka nine crore budget for development of road communication in the constituency, grants for renovation of every school, college and madrasa of the constituency, setting up of a power sub-station at Shakhipur, digging of canals in the areas, and on top of all, amendment of the Atia Forest Ordinance, 1982.

Such promises, especially the one relating to the Atia Forest Ordinance that affected lives and property of some half a million people under five thanas of the district, have understandably been made to influence the minds of the voters.

Sheikh Hasina has now come up with the promise about the Atia forest only a few weeks before the by-election against Kader Siddique, although her government turned a deaf ear to Siddique's repeated demand for it over last three and half years. Banners and streamers announcing the PM's promise are now hanging at different places of the parliamentary constituency.

Thus, the purpose of the EC's advice to the Prime Minister has eventually been defeated, while the EC has been left 'quite embarrassed'.

To talk about her cabinet colleagues, they have consistently been ignoring the EC advice to refrain from visiting the constituency on the one hand, and breaking electoral codes of conduct on the other. Some half a dozen ministers have so far addressed public rallies in the constituency, while almost each of them made several promises to the voters since the election schedule has been announced by the EC.

Ominous Administrative Changes

The civil administration in Bangladesh is not famous for its neutrality in conducting elections — be it a national level poll or a local government one.

It has been seen in the past that the martial law regimes, or pseudo democratic governments for that matter, have sometimes secured more than eighty per cent votes, although less than 10 per cent of the voters visited the polling stations — thanks to administrative manipulations.

To check this phenomenon,

the state had its constitution amended a few years ago that provided the provision for holding parliamentary polls under a non-party caretaker government.

The provision, however, does not cover parliamentary by-elections. So the governing political parties usually do not fail to utilise, or at least make attempts to utilise, the administration in their favour in a by-election. With a view to doing so, what a party in power does first is that it replaces the heads of local administrations with their favourite officers.

The government behaviour in the present case is no exception. Deputy Commissioner of Tangail was changed when the by-election became a reality after Kader Siddique had resigned on August 29. Mollah Wahiduzzaman joined the office on September 21 last. To put it in other words, Tangail got a new DC so that a party in power does first is that it replaces the heads of local administrations with their favourite officers.

None would have raised any question on this issue, if a change in the Tangail administration was due. Mollah's predecessor, M Habibullah, was allowed to work only for two months. AL candidate in the election Sawkat Momen Shahjahan reportedly believes, Habibullah was a 'worthless guy'.

The case of the Basail thana administration is rather worse. A new TNO, Amdad Hossain, joined his office on October 13 last, a week after the election schedule was announced on October 6. The Election Commission itself was caught by surprise at the information, as no such transfer or posting is supposed to take place after the announcement of an election-schedule without prior permission of the Commission. In the present case, the EC was in the dark until the incident was reported in the media.

Given the records of administrative manipulation of election results, the irregular, if not illegal, changes in the district and thana level administrations immediately before the by-election do not speak of a fair motive of the government.

Visible Administrative Bias

The Deputy Commissioner of Tangail is the returning officer, for the by-elections, while TNOs of Shakhipur and Basail Tanas are assistant returning officers.

The print-media has regularly covered the ministers visiting the areas, while the DC said, over telephone, that he was not aware of the minister's paying visits to the constituency, not to mention the promises they were making. Same is the case with the Shakhipur TNO, while his counterpart in the Basail Thana could not contacted so far.

Two of the younger bothers of Kader Siddique — Azad Siddique and Murad Siddique, who are not reputed for politi-

ness — are absconding these days, especially after the Home Minister had announced in the second week of October a combing operation against terrorists across Tangail district.

But unruly supporters of AL candidate, especially three young boys called Rana, Bappi and Mukti who are wanted in a murder case, were publicly roaming about in the town. Local people told reporters that they were frequently seen beside AL leaders while addressing election rallies in the constituency.

Nur Mohammad, SP of Tangail who joined his office on August 8, rejected the allegation that the three boys were attending election campaign of the AL candidate. He, however, admitted that they appeared in the town twice recently. "First time, when arrangements were being made for the PM's visit to Tangail and then on the day the PM addressed a public rally in the town on October 12," the SP said. "But both the times, police raided the places concerned. They fled away."

Electoral Arithmetic and Prospect of Siddique

In 1991 general elections, Kader Siddique was defeated to the BNP candidate Humayun Khan Panni by a margin of 2307 votes. Out of 1,30,739 votes cast, BNP's Panni got 61,396 votes (25.92 per cent) and Kader Siddique received 59,089 votes (24.95 per cent). FEMa fact sheet on the polls.

In that election, Siddique had at least a couple of limitations: First, he returned home from India some 16 years after the killing of Mujib in 1975. So he had no contact with the younger generation of the constituency who play the most vital role in an election. Second, he contested from jail, while the imprisonment stood in the way of getting familiar with the younger section.

But in the 1996 national polls, it appears, he recovered successfully. Siddique won the election by a very big margin. Out of 1,32,775 votes cast, he bagged 1,00,303 votes (62.64 per cent), while his nearest rival Kamruzzaman Khan of BNP got 35,343 votes (22.07 per cent).

In the present election, Siddique has fresh advantages and disadvantages.

To talk about the prime disadvantage, he would not be able to secure a large number of party (AL) votes this time. None would, perhaps, disagree that a major party like AL has its own political supports everywhere in the country. There are supporters to whom party and politics come first, while the candidate — be s/he a competent one or not — matters little.

He has certain advantages too. Main opposition BNP and its partners engaged in the anti-government agitation have boycotted the elections, but already extended their tacit supports to Kader Siddique. It means, Siddique is almost cer-

tain to get a larger number of votes from anti-Awami League camps. Besides, the greater image of Kader Siddique, compared to Shawkat Momen Shahjahan of AL, would give the former some extra dividends in the elections.

Shahjahan, who took part in the war of independence under the leadership of Kader Siddique, presently teaches at a local college in the constituency. He contested the 1986 elections, boycotted by BNP and other opposition parties at that time, and won against Jatiya Party candidate bagging only 29,358 (12.39 per cent of the 80,116 votes cast.) His nearest rival JP candidate Moshed Ali Khan Panni got 27,085 votes (11.44 per cent).

So, if the polls held in a free and fair atmosphere and present equation remains unchanged, Siddique has a fair chance to give the last laugh.

Fair Elections and the EC's stake

The Election Commission, perhaps, needs to be extra-careful in conducting the by-elections, especially when the mainstream opposition parties have been demanding reconstitution of the Commission on charge of bias for the government.

Its true that the opposition has so far made no efforts to substantiate its allegations, while certain newspapers committed to objectivity have still not accused the EC of any major failure — except in the case of a Parliamentary by-election in Feni.

But this time the EC should be more careful, especially because the parties concerned, having higher stakes, would leave no stone unturned to outsmart each other in the polls. Besides, any visible failure to ensure a free and fair election will provide the agitating opposition with additional "grounds" to justify their decision to boycott the up-coming elections of the city corporations and Upajila Parishads across the country.

Under such circumstances, the EC, if willing to survive prestigiously, has no scope to consider it enough to ensure a peaceful atmosphere in the constituency just on the election day. If the Commission wants to take pride of ensuring a really free and fair polls, it has to ensure it at the phases of the polls: From the date of announcement of the election to the gazette notification of the results.

In that case, it has to take care of the PM and her cabinet colleagues ignoring the EC advice and breaking the codes of conduct, the Establishment Ministry that dared to send a TNO in the constituency without prior permission of the EC after the election schedule was announced, the DC who is 'unaware' of the ministers making promises to allure voters, the SP who fails to arrest the wanted criminals taking part in the election campaign of the ruling party candidates, and so on.

Understandably, these are very difficult task for the EC, especially when there are some inherent weaknesses in the country's electoral laws and rules concerned. In that case, the EC is only expected to speak out frankly to the nation.

Opportunity of a Lifetime

Gen Mosharrarf's predecessor rulers before him failed because to various extents they compromised their moral authority by selfish motivation and personal gain. They subverted their conscience for the sake of individual ambition or personal vendetta or were simply overwhelmed by circumstances.

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

AS Muslims we live with the strong belief that whatever happens to man is ordained by God, given the bizarre events of Oct 12, 1999 destiny has thus blessed Gen Pervez Mosharrarf and his colleagues, who now have a God-given chance to do good by this nation. Frankly one envies them this opportunity of a lifetime to correct the many wrongs in this country, to set this great nation firmly on the road to prosperity in the new millennium. At the turn of the century, our new military rulers and unequivocally at the crossroads of destiny, where will they take us? Will they rise above themselves to secure the nation's future or wallow in the type of petty selfishness and greed that has brought this nation symbolically to its knees? Going by Gen Mosharrarf's address to the nation, lightning seems to have struck him. A keen student of history, his message was to the point and carefully crafted, more important his body language was sincere.

The military hierarchy cannot make any excuses for inexperience, they have three distinct periods of military rule, almost 22-23 years of the 50 or so years since independence, to have learnt lessons from, they should be clearly able to distinguish right from wrong in the matter of governance of a nation. Over the years much emphasis has been given in the military to all-round knowledge, the present crop of generals are better educated than their predecessors, moreover military culture inculcates constant self-analysis. Plans for the country should thus be based on logic as well as pragmatism, spelling out clear aims and objectives. The Chief Executive's readiness to declare his assets by itself a momentous event; it sets a fine precedent for the future.

On Oct 12, 1999 circumstances were engineered that would have split the Army leading to possible civil war. That would have spelled doom for Pakistan as the country fragmented, first among warlords and then on ethnic and sectarian lines, a sure recipe for anarchy. Only two days earlier, in a news analysis for THE NATION entitled "THE ARMY AND DISCIPLINE", we had warned

that the difference between a mob and an Army was discipline and there was no substitute to the authority of the COAS, he was head honcho. In the vacuum that ensued because of the former PM's October madness, does the military have any real legal need to justify their existence at the helm of governance of the nation?

All this talk about constitutional lacuna is pure nonsense. What should they have done in the face of economic and political apocalypse, allowed more of the same to take over? The civil war scenario and the governance of the elected representatives that brought this country to this sorry pass justified the means that brought an end to so-called "democratic rule". In

the circumstances it was shocking to learn about the "Jadogars" of the world flocking to Pindi to render legal advice about surmounting (or circumventing) the "constitutional lacuna".

Let's be clear about it. No constitution in the world can make military rule legal, similarly no law recognises the individual's right to take another's life, unless it is in self-defence or sudden grave provocation. So what does one do when a constitutional government goes berserk, in whom does the concept of "lawful command" rest? The Army has taken an oath to guard the integrity and sovereignty of the country "even to the peril of the lives"; their conscience should be satisfied that they acted under the concept of the doctrine of necessity. The bloodless counter-coup by the Army did not bring even a semblance of protest from the masses from any part of the country, that dealing silence giving the Army the legitimacy it needs, sovereignty is vested ultimately in the people. No constitutional cover is necessary. The acid test of the military rule will lie in the sincerity of its leaders, in the maintenance of their primary aim they have proclaimed, restoration of the rule of law as envisaged in our religion and by our forefathers, most importantly the Quaid, and in the application of that law evenly to all the citizens of the State. As a constant critic generally of absolute rule and despite our history of the many unkept promises, one sees reason for hope.

The major thing wrong with the economy is the lack of government revenues. Fiscal deficit has to be made up with

borrowing, that puts us deeper in trouble. To shore up the fiscal base, we have to immediately generate revenues, viz. (1) make people pay their due taxes and (2) make loan defaulters to return their debts. This will tide us over for a couple of years, enough for the new revenue cycle to kick in. The third part of the exercise may be more long term, the return of ill-gotten wealth, locally and from abroad. Obviously all this falls within the purview of accountability which must be free and fair and across the board to include politicians, bureaucrats and also uniformed personnel, both serving and retired, as well as businessmen and industrialists who may have illegally profited, whether it be under-invoicing or over, transfer of illegal wealth abroad, kickbacks or commission on projects or defence purchases, etc. Laws must be enacted to ensure people do not escape on technical grounds.

As far as the present regime is concerned, the crunch will come in the matter of commissions against military purchases. Undeclared commissions are illegal and a fair number of the agents are retired servicemen. There is also the danger of jealousy and spite, it is so rampant in this country that the military hierarchy must always guard against those misusing their authority for personal vendetta or personal gain. Those indulging in making false accusations or bearing false witness must be liable to the same punishment as those they accuse i.e. if their accusations/witness are proved false. There is a tendency among our people to subvert the system by using it for their own selfish, material reasons, will the military be able to avoid that pressure?

All Defence Services officers take an oath to die for the nation if need be. In the narrow sense of the Constitution, no one can justify military rule but what is the paper the Constitution is written on worth if there

is no country for the Constitution to be exercised in? One may not agree with the Chief Executive on any number of counts but there is no doubt he is decisive, and he has convinced his colleagues and subordinates about his sincerity of purpose, the acid test of leadership. His legal status will be derived from that moral authority, something he exercises not only on behalf of a much-aggravated nation but also in the pure sincerity of his intentions. As a soldier he should be fully prepared to answer for his actions once his task is accomplished. Having the courage of his convictions, let him be judged once accountability is complete and the essential reforms carried out. A referendum on the regime's performance must be held simultaneously with the final electoral exercise which will lead to the transfer of power to the elected representatives of the people. Would the Supreme Court try Gen Mosharrarf and his colleagues in the face of a massive "yes" vote by the people in their favour? If the Chief Executive has been true to the aims spelt out and accomplished what he had promised to deliver, no court in the world will ever dare to try and convict him. And if they should so dare, the masses will lynch the members of that particular court.

Gen Mosharrarf's predecessor rulers before him failed because to various extents they compromised their moral authority by selfish motivation and personal gain. They subverted their conscience for the sake of individual ambition or personal vendetta or were simply overwhelmed by circumstances. We have been fed for over 50 years with a staple diet of promises that have never been redeemed. Even then the most hardened critic and/or cynic will give the Chief Executive the benefit of doubt in the circumstances availing in the country. Gen Pervez Mosharrarf has an opportunity of a lifetime to be able to avoid that pressure. He makes up this country, his citizens, if that should happen, and being an incurable optimist one has every reason to hope that it will. Pakistan has been blessed by Divine Providence going into the new millennium.

To the Editor...

Restricted areas

Sir, The Army, the Navy and the Air Force is fed, paid and maintained by the people's money. Is it not unfair that the general public have to go through so many questions, checking and harassment while wanting to enter Cantonment areas for meeting relatives, friends or attending weddings etc., whereas the military personnel have the right and freedom to go into any public area as and when they choose? Would they support a likewise arrangement getting into civilian areas?

Under the circumstances, it would only be fair that the government and the military authorities choose, earmark and develop areas suitable, only for their use where we, the civilian

and non-army do not mind obtaining whatever permission required to visit such areas.

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English books

Sir, As English is the international language, we should give utmost emphasis on English. And in order to make it easier, the government should establish libraries throughout the country where English books will be available. It is really unfortunate that the British Council Library is the only library where English books are available, but it is not enough to satisfy all. There are five to six libraries in the capi-

tal city but these libraries have wide collections of Bengali books only. People who are interested in reading English books need to visit the British Council Library. And many cannot afford to buy books from shops like NSU bookshop or from Bookworm, the two bookshops where varieties of recent books are available. Therefore, if the government establishes free libraries where English books are available then we can study more books than usual. This will not only improve our English but also can act as a source to increase knowledge.

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