

Fuelling the Fire

IN the name of protecting democracy, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has uttered a veiled threat against the opposition in a gathering of partymen at the International Conference Centre on Sunday. The prime minister warned the opposition that her party would be on the streets to thwart any 'conspiracy' to disrupt democratic process in the country. In her own words, as reported by the agencies: "Awami League was on the 'Rajpath' (street) to restore democracy and will also be on the street to protect democracy and people's right to vote". But haven't the activists of her party been on the streets of Dhaka each time the opposition called a hartal and with what results? What we are really concerned about is that the area of confrontation is most likely to be enlarged dangerously to the thana and ward levels following her latest instructions to partymen. She will be, despite herself, fanning the concept and culture of intimidation and confrontation much to the detriment of democratic sustenance for which the prime minister claims to have been working so hard.

Hartal has become an almost redundant weapon as it is losing all support among the people of the country. When AL was in the opposition and on the 'Rajpath' they used the same weapon for quite a while in the name of securing people's rights and at one stage even resigned from the Parliament en masse. They had shown the way to the opposition who have been following the same tactic — maybe with a confused set of demands. Her accusation that 'Khaleda Zia and Ershad ganged up to destabilise the government' sounds funny because Ershad also ganged up with AL to destabilise BNP government, a point which the PM must have chosen to forget.

Whatever may be the cause of concern or strong reason for the ruling party to go for an all-out confrontation with the opposition we will earnestly request the prime minister not to unleash reprisals lest it backfires to destabilise not only the government but also the whole country. We fervently hope good sense will prevail and peace-loving, law-abiding citizens will be spared greater hardships.

BATEXPO Vision

THE opening day of Bangladesh Apparel and Textile Exposition, '99 on Sunday was featured more by realism tinged with novelty than rituals topped by a dazzle. Two concerns of entirely different texture and origin came under focus: hartal and slow preparation to meet the challenge of unsheltered market following the withdrawal of MFA in 2004.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in her inaugural address held out two specific assurances to the garments manufacturers and exporters: first, banking, customs and port facilities shall remain open on all seven days of the week for the sake of uninterrupted export-import activity. Secondly, she will see to it that an exclusive garments industrial estate, nomenclatured as Garments Palli, is set up along Dhaka-Chittagong highway so as to remain unaffected by any opposition political party's agitation programme, especially hartal calls. BGMEA president Anisur Rahman Sinha demanded that land be allotted along either the Dhaka-Chittagong or the Dhaka-Narsingdi highway instead of Savar which has so far been the chosen site.

While the prime minister's assurances would be translated into tangible realities going beyond the one-stop service fiasco we cannot fail to discern a certain escapist approach being taken to the problem of hartal. Use of ingenuity to circumvent hartal is praiseworthy, but only up to a point. Basically the nation expects her to take a bold initiative for an early rapprochement with the opposition so that everything falls in place, economy and all the rest.

We still remain a back-bencher in terms of capacity-building through the establishment of backward linkages to our knitting and weaving factories by the year 2004. Where is the time-bound plan for the backward linkages to be in place when the deadline is only four years away?

The emphasis on LDCs gaining zero-tariff access to international market could on materialisation have a good bearing on our garment exports. But it would be imprudent to put all the eggs in one basket holding off the local value addition process in the garments sector that would be a really durable answer to the post-MFA challenge.

Deeply Touched

THE people of Orissa have seen the cruellest face of nature in the last couple of weeks. The cyclone that hit the coastal region just 12 days back and killed more than 100 people was just the prelude to Friday's super 'cyclone'. With a wind velocity of 260 kilometres accompanied by colossal tidal waves, the 'cyclone of the century' simply obliterated human habitat along India's eastern coastal belt. There was no way of knowing the magnitude of death and devastation, for communications in the state have been severed. Conservative estimates put the death toll 'in thousands' and the affected in millions. As one 'Operation Hope' official put it upon seeing the satellite images, the trail of destruction left behind by the cyclone is 'right out of a horror movie'.

Down there, out on the roads on Sunday, there were hundreds of villagers begging for something to eat while 'relief helicopters and trucks waited helplessly for the weather to clear'. Some even looted shops and a mill, taking potatoes, wheat and flower. Seemingly, the central government of India, despite its intentions of reaching out to the affected with food and emergency relief materials, has been forced to wait in the wings by inclement weather. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has already declared it a 'national disaster' and announced federal assistance to the tune of one billion rupees (23 million dollars).

Our experience with natural calamities puts us in a position to realise the plight of the people in Orissa at this hour of their trial. Our prayer is for the deceased, sympathy to the bereaved and heartfelt condolences to the Indian government at the loss of life. At the same time, we urge our government to stand by its Indian counterpart with all the assistance it can extend to the latter.

Joshi's Educational Coups: India's Own Hindu Taliban!

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

Education minister M.M. Joshi is guilty of serious biases. If he had his way, he would censor out Marx, Freud, feminism, even liberal pluralism. This agenda is no different from that of Pakistani jihadists who too want to ban and "wipe out" secularism from that country. The common mindset is basically Talibanist.

prove unviable. What existed on this view in the USSR (or exists in China) was not socialism, but its bureaucratic distortion, with-out democracy. A brutal dictatorship got consolidated under Stalin, which was inadequately reformed later.

The point is not whether this theory is right or wrong, but that it belongs to the Marxist current. It won't do to argue that Marxism has very few followers, and so should be dropped. Gandhism has even fewer adherents. The Sarvodaya movement is dead. Some core ideas of Gandhism such as village republics and household production have no takers. But that is no argument for not teaching Gandhism as an original, major, ideology.

Whether one regards Marxism as valid or flawed, it is an immensely powerful theory and analytical tool, with profound insights into the way societies evolve, and how social relations impact on economic and political structures.

No one has developed as radical a critique of capitalism,

bourgeois values or the family as Marx—despite inadequacies. Marxism must be taught not because it is correct, but because it is an indispensable part of humanity's intellectual heritage, and a big influence in the formation of our own intelligentsia.

The BJP's anti-Marxist prejudice and its silence on Fascism reflects a bias typical of the Sangh. The RSS founders — whom BJP leaders, including Mr Vajpayee, have never disowned — were self-confessed admirers of fascism. Golwalkar lavished praise upon Hitler for his militant nationalism.

Education minister M.M. Joshi is guilty of serious biases. If he had his way, he would censor out Marx, Freud, feminism, even liberal pluralism. This agenda is no different from that of Pakistani jihadists who too want to ban and "wipe out" secularism from that country. The common mindset is basically Talibanist.

Mr Joshi is working to a large, gameplan. He tried (unsuccessfully) to impose

Saraswati Vandana. He tried (more successfully) to radically restructure apex institutions including the University Grants Commission, National Council of Educational Research and Training (which produces a majority of school textbooks), National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, Institute of Advanced Studies, and Nehru Memorial Museum & Library.

His latest victims are the Councils of Social Science and Historical Research, now hoist with Mr M.L. Sondhi and Mr B.R. Grover, both committed communists and poor scholars.

The NCERT has just recruited Mr K.G. Rastogi, who headed Vidya Bharati, which runs the Saraswati Shishu Mandirs or nurseries of Hindu rashtra. Mr Rastogi is a self-confessed murderer. He says he killed a Hindu woman in the 1947 communal riots to prevent her from being raped by a Muslim mob. He did not think of using the gun against the mob itself. His autobiography is dedi-

cated to the RSS, and has a foreword by K.S. Sudarshan.

Our top educational institutions are passing under the control of men who are vulnerable (being mediocre), or rabidly communal, or both. They will highlight India's contributions to the world (read, myths about "Vedic mathematics"), while running down all other cultures. This is the surest way of turning India into the coming millennium's intellectual backwater.

To historian Grover, the BJP owes a huge debt. He furnished "irrefutable proof" based on voodoo archaeology that a Ram temple existed where the Babri once stood!

Mr Sondhi has a record of extreme intolerance. Take my personal experience. I have addressed dozens of meetings against nuclear weapons all over India. The only place where I was heckled is Delhi. The heckler was Mr Sondhi — on May 16 last year.

The ICSSR and ICHR have under them the vast majority of our specialised social science institutes. Their heads are sup-

posed to be outstanding scholars who provide leadership. But the new chairmen are likely to spread communal poison, and leave devastation in their wake.

The BJP's agenda maligns some of the world's most creative schools of historiography, led by our scholars. Romila Thapar, Irfan Habib, Ravinder Kumar, Sumit Sarkar, Muzaffar Alam and D.D. Kosambi, who interpret history by questioning both colonial historians and nationalist-communal schools (which are a knee-jerk reaction to them).

The Hindutva agenda divides history into religious "periods". It lionises the caste elite and maligns the minorities.

As Prof Sarkar says: "The basic thrust of the BJP is to construct an enemy... For this, rewriting history, especially school textbooks, becomes very important." The BJP's main fight is more with history than with parties.

This prepares the ground for bringing up future generations on a diet of exclusivism, blind nationalism, hatred and revenge. This negates the very goal of education — to broaden minds, engage with ideas, and think rationally and ethically.

We must ask: do we want our children to grow up as semi-literate philistines and English-speaking Hindu Taliban? Or can we stop the BJP from wreaking havoc?

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Russian Bear Mauls Chechnya, and its Own Democracy

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

Originally, Adolf Hitler came to power through democratic means, and as difficult as it may be to believe, Slobodan Milosevic was democratically elected too. However, a few elections do not a democracy make. In nations whose people are historically forgiving of totalitarian authority, democracy does not take root easily. That is perhaps the painful lesson the world is beginning to learn about Russia.

THERE is this shameful and deafening silence from Europe, America and the United Nations as the Russians obliterate the people of Chechnya. The United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan was quick to tour and praise East Timor's independence. He then went to Kosovo and told the Kosovars that they had to remain a part of Serbia and could never be independent. Annan has said nothing publicly about Russian brutality in Chechnya. The Pope and the Vatican had characterized the suffering of the Catholic East Timorese at the hands of the Indonesians as "genocide," and yet the head of the Catholic church has remained remarkably silent about the real genocide of the Chechens by the Russians.

If anyone believes that the writer is overreacting, consider the following lead editorial in America's largest circulation daily, "The Wall Street Journal" on October 27.

"The Russian army and air force have already killed thousands of civilians in Chechnya and are gearing up to level what is left of the republic's capital, Grozny. But this doesn't seem to perturb Western leaders bent on 'cooperating' with the Kremlin. The much-abhorred East Timor bloodletting was a mere trickle by comparison."

To get a sense of how surreal the policy of 'engagement' with Russia has become, consider the little-noticed conference on combating international crime and money laundering held in Moscow this week and featuring (US) Attorney General Janet Reno and her counterparts from the other G-8 nations. What could they have thought when Russian prosecutor Vladimir Ustinov suddenly started to blame everything from international arms trade to petty theft in New York on the people his government has been carpet bombing in recent weeks? "In one region of the Russian Federation, Chechnya, have gathered representatives of the entire international crime world," he said in his opening speech. Neither Ms. Reno, who signed a bilateral crime fighting agreement with Mr. Ustinov, nor anyone else in

attendance chose to object to this wild rationalization of the Russian Federation's slaughter of its own citizens.

Chechnya undoubtedly is home to some unwholesome characters. But by now it should be clear that Russia's indiscriminate bombing of Chechen villages has little to do with fighting crime or terrorism. The military campaign is more likely political cynicism at its ugliest. The nationalist sentiments it has roused have boosted Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's popular support ahead of next year's presidential elections. But Russia's "punishment" of innocent women and children is hardly the work of a government interested in the rule of law.

The Russians have never treated the people of the Caucasus as Russians, which they are not. Russians invaded and infiltrated the predominantly Muslim region and have used its resources for the benefit of Russia. Muslim world is slow to realize that Russia is waging an undeclared war. The first attempt was in Afghanistan twenty years ago (1979), at the height of the cold war. After ten years of harassment by the Mujahadeen backed by the USA, Russia beat a humiliating retreat in 1989. Although Russia has supported Iraq in its attempt to have the UN economic sanctions lifted, critics have pointed out that it is self-serving — Russia hopes to recover millions of dollars it had loaned Iraq. Russia has never criticized the brutality its Slavic brothers, the Serbs, unleashed on the Bosnian and Kosovar Muslims. On the contrary, it has done everything in its power to strengthen the hands of the Serbs. Pretending to be neutral "peacekeepers," to this day Russian soldiers continue to create trouble for the Albanians in Kosovo, while

lifting the spirit and fighting capabilities of the Kosovo Serbs.

In the early days of the Chechen War Part II, Russia's military briefing room resembled that of NATO's during the Kosovo campaign, complete with maps and aerial photographs of the damage the erratic Russian bombing caused in tiny Chechnya. The only problem with that was Russia had vehemently opposed the bombing of Serbia! One has to hand it to the Russians; they pick fights with guys their own size!

In an article in "The Wall Street Journal" the same day, Paul Goble observes that while the first Chechnya War (1994-96) showed the Russian military to be a shadow of its former self, it also highlighted some positive development in Russia's political culture in dealing with the Chechens, its neighbours and with the West.

For the first time in Russia's history, the Moscow media provided relatively accurate and extensive coverage of the first Chechen war. The coverage horrified Russian politicians and people alike. Adverse public opinion ultimately forced President Boris Yeltsin to end his military campaign, seek peace and implicitly recognize Chechnya's independence. Moscow's willingness to talk encouraged Chechen leaders like President Aslan Maskhadov who argued that Chechnya could make greater progress through negotiations than by military means. This new Russian openness encouraged Russia's other neighbours to hope for a better future. This was responsible for the West's almost uncritical support of Yeltsin. Russia appeared to be moving towards democracy and cooperation with the West. All that is now unraveling.

The new Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's Chechen campaign has called everything into question. The new war underlines the unwelcome changes taking place in Russia itself. Russian forces may be in the outskirts of Grozny, but the Russian government and the people are now in a disorderly retreat from democracy. Says Mr. Goble: "Mr. Putin and his government have sought to whip up resentment against Chechens and Muslims by making broad charges against them without evidence. They have openly encouraged Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov and other like-minded local leaders who have stepped up efforts to expel people from their regions on the basis of their ethnicity."

Mr. Goble continues: "The Russian military is attacking more Chechen civilians as it seeks to minimize Russian casualties. In 1994-96, Russian losses were high but targets were more often Chechen military units. Now almost 200,000 civilians have been chased from their homes. Mr. Putin and his new media ministry have lied about what is going on and imposed strict controls on the media access so that the average Russian has a difficult time finding out the facts. Moscow at first claimed that the Russian army had not attacked the market square in Grozny with rockets, then blamed the Chechens for the explosions and then finally acknowledged the attack."

"All this appears to be giving Mr. Putin a bounce in the polls, a disturbing enough development for what it says about the values of the Russian population. But it also suggests that Moscow will have a more difficult time controlling the Caucasus or other Muslim regions without force. Predominantly Muslim Tatarstan, for

instance, refuses to allow its draftees to serve in the Russian army in Chechnya. And that is likely to imperil the future of democracy in Russia. The increasingly violent Russian air and land strikes against the Chechen nation as a whole — against people who have done nothing to justify Moscow's labelling of them as "bandits" or "criminals" — have destroyed the political base of those Chechen leaders who argued, often with success, that they could reach agreement with Russia through negotiations.

"Now no one in Chechnya trusts anything the Russian government says; no one believes that the Russian authorities are anything but racists; no one is willing to listen to words of moderation. (By invading Chechnya, Russia has violated the pact it signed with Chechnya in 1997 stipulating a referendum for the province's future in 2001.) Instead, more Chechens and North Caucasians have concluded that the only thing Moscow will recognize is force. Such radicalization of Chechen opinion and the probable Russian response appear to presage more violence and increasingly authoritarian measures by Russian authorities."

Mr. Goble concludes: "The Putin government's effort to control the media and to lie openly about what Moscow is doing is use of gratuitous violence against Chechen civilians, and its open exploitation of anti-Muslim and anti-Caucasian sentiments among Russians have reopened questions about Russia's future that many Western officials had thought were closed. Even those Western officials who were earlier

inclined to explain away virtually any of Russia's shortcomings are now openly wondering whether Russia is (really) on the way to democracy."

One theory why the West is so tolerant of Russia's erratic behaviour and why it allows the IMF to pump billions of dollars into the sinkhole — the Russian economy — is because of Russia's collateral — the nuclear weapons! Concludes the Journal editorial: "This is more or less the mindset that got us to where we are now, sustaining a governing establishment addicted to corruption. The fact remains that for all its huffing and puffing, Moscow is weak and highly sensitive to international sentiments. It is time for Western officials to begin expressing some opinions about Russia's steady degradation, rather than continuing with the pretense that they are dealing with a normal country."

The writer has been surprised at the unanimity with which Pakistanis living in America seem to have accepted General Pervez Musharraf's coup. "All of Pakistan's recent civilian Prime Ministers... are crooks," they say. They long for the days of Field Marshal Ayub Khan! The cliché, that the people of a nation deserve the government they get is absolutely correct. It is as true for Pakistan as it is for Russia. It is hard to imagine the people of the United States, or Bangladesh for that matter, tolerating as harsh and totalitarian communist regimes as the Chinese and the Russian people have endured for the better part of this century.

Originally, Adolf Hitler came to power through democratic means, and as difficult as it may be to believe, Slobodan Milosevic was democratically elected too. However, a few elections do not a democracy make. In nations whose people are historically forgiving of totalitarian authority, democracy does not take root easily. That is perhaps the painful lesson the world is beginning to learn about Russia.

OPINION

Whither Recreational Facilities?

Ali Hamid Khan

When it comes to recreational facilities and parks of the city, you can't help wondering why everything is so awry. There are many places for recreation and relaxation in the city where you find people flocking to get away from their work pressures and monotony, with their families or friends. One usually goes to such places for some space and serenity. I personally, along with my family, frequently visit such places wandering around trying to enjoy despite many irritants. Since, I want to express my opinion freely on this, I am compelled to say that these places are mostly in bad shape and fraught with conditions, which should not be found in places where people go for relaxation and some peace.

If we had options, we definitely wouldn't have chosen these places and would have gone some place else where we could truly relax without getting piqued unnecessarily. Sometimes, one has to get away from the feeling of claustrophobia which develops in the city and especially for the sake of the children to give them some space to stretch out and run around and have a nice time. Children need to get away more than any body else to where their inherent instincts are given the opportunity to come out free and soar without any restriction. In spite of the fact that Dhaka's air is badly polluted, we have to venture out of the claustrophobic apartments to feel free and breathe the "fresh" air, having no other choice.

But it is a shame that these places are so few in numbers

that they are overcrowded. To add to the plight of the visitors, there is no sense of waste management; consequently, the places are littered and the grounds are badly kept. The recreational facilities available are badly in need of refurbishment and replacement, not to mention that they are in acute shortage in relation to the crowd. Of course, how can one not mention the fact that the grownups who should be escorting the children cannot resist the temptation and end up occupying facilities which are meant to be exclusively for children, without showing any sign of consideration or rectitude. These poor children, who look forward, so eagerly, to weekends in these places, are left standing in the lines for hours while the grownups easily get away with their intrusion on their world. Their dismay and displeasure are unlimited but to no avail.

Parks and recreational facilities are places abounding with disagreeable elements, hanging around purposelessly, encroaching upon the privacy of genuine visitors, who, eventually start staying away from these places in order to avoid getting into any unpleasant and unwarranted situation.

As I mentioned, there is already a scant provision for such places of leisure for children and people, and even in near future there doesn't seem to be any solution to this problem. The population of Dhaka city is growing at an incredible rate and the authorities are apparently unable to keep pace with it and provide a getaway from the din and the chaos.

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.

"Transparency"

Sir, The kind attention of the Prime Minister is drawn to the trend of thinking revealed in many informed citizens by the opinion piece *Transparency* by A Citizen (DS, Oct 27). The 'Citizen' obviously hesitated to disclose his name, ironically, in a democratic governance set-up; thanks to the politically controlled police, who cannot or are not allowed to use professional judgement in the discharge of their public-service duties, due to political interference and institutionalised corrupt practices embedded in the systems (before the present regime came into power).

From the administrative and management point of view, blind reliance should not be placed in subordinate officials. Surprise checks and independent feedbacks are necessary, as the legendary Khalifa Harunur Rashid used to undertake incognito strolls in the city to have a firsthand experience of his governance.

There is more to governance and good administration than political sermonising, as is the habit of our outdated politicians. Unless corruption and nepotism are severely contained in a neutral manner by the government, without victimising innocent persons, the future development of Bangladesh is bleak. The public verdict may turn against the Administration, and the politicians in power will

suffer in the next election. We are all aware what is talked about in the drawing-rooms: condemnation most of the time with occasional nods of approval by harassed citizens who are not interested in taking political sides.

Tolerable governance means that each appointed person does his allotted piece of work and is held responsible for the negligence of his duties. But strangely enough, very few cases of disciplinary actions are reported in the press. Are we all that honest and sensitive about our duties? Now violence and toll collection have been added to corrupt practices. How many godfathers have been exposed? Only one: Ershad Sikdar!

The monitoring and regulatory branches of the government need to be overhauled, and the officials reshuffled every third year of posting (as was prevalent during the British regime). Government officials must have no local anchors, administratively speaking, for performing their public duties in a fair and impartial manner. Attachment clouds judgement, and encourages temptation.

Political policies have to work quietly in the background in low-key, like the air we breathe, and daily routine administration has to work efficiently to be quiet. Our loudness factor (noise) has to be decreased, starting at the very top. AZ Dhaka.

'Good' from the 'Bad' West

Sir, A fine example was set by the British Prime Minister Tony Blair the other day. While going to his office Blair's car got stuck in the London traffic jam. He and his companions got down from the car, walked to the nearby tube station and went to the office by train.

Now let's look at Bangladesh. When Khaleda Zia was the Prime Minister the roads were emptied so that her car could go uninterrupted and without any obstacles, while we the people got stuck in the traffic jam for hours.

Now Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is also doing the same thing like her predecessor. Roads are blocked and emptied for the smooth and uninterrupted movement of her car without any obstacles. Even, once, violating the traffic rules Sheikh Hasina's car took the wrong lane. Again we the ill-fated people are the sufferers. We request our political leaders to take what is good in the West and to shun what is bad in the West. Iqbal Ahmed Dhaka - 1000

"Terminator gene"

Sir, This refers to my recent letter published in this column on Terminator gene technology. It is heartening to learn that Monasanto Co., the largest biotechnology group of the United States has decided not to develop Terminator gene. In October 04, in a letter to the president of the Rockefeller Foundation, the Monasanto Chairman Robert Shapiro

wrote — "I am writing to let you know we are making a public commitment not to commercialise sterile seed technologies, such as the one dubbed Terminator". We are doing this based on input from you and a wide range of other experts and stakeholders including our very important grower constituency."

While welcoming the Monasanto Co's wise decision we would sincerely call upon the Food & Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations to constitute a surveillance team to keep strict vigilance on the prospective companies in the UN member countries so that they may not produce and market Terminator seed of any crop without proper approval of the international body.

M Zahidul Haque Associate Professor BAS, Dhaka.

A place in Bangladesh history

Sir, The late Dr. Akhtar Hamid Khan, the founder of the famous institution initially known as the Comilla Academy deserves a place in Bangladesh history. I was a visitor to the site during the early years of its inception, and could immediately sense that it was a different institution, with big potential. The official and formal indifference is not a sign of magnanimity. There is more to it than petty political stances and bureaucratic quibbles. We have to learn to be broad-minded.

A Husnain Dhaka