

Irreparable Loss

YESTERDAY, death overcame Sufia Kamal and left the nation bereft of a rare individual whose very presence, silent or vocal, had been a source of inspiration in times of trouble. We are simply at a loss of words to give an adequate expression to the void her death has created in our hearts.

In her, we had a rare individual who had dedicated her life and works to the cause of the down-trodden; an unrelenting champion of democracy, justice and secularism; and a voice that sang the paean of humanity, of equality, of emancipation from pride and prejudice. She was a poet in the true sense of the word, incorruptible, indomitable and indefatigable in her pursuit for greater goal of love and welfare to fellow-beings. Above all, she was a pristine spirit untainted, untarnished and untouched by the worldly vices of greed, hatred and pettiness.

In our political and socio-cultural spheres, hers had been a strong presence, scathing in attack against any kind of repression or discrimination, inspirational in mass movement for greater freedom, and ever vigilant to discern any degree of deviation in the liberation war values. As her views and judgement on different social, cultural and political issues were forthright, so were they unbiased and impartial and thereby revered and acceptable to people.

Her courage and forthrightness won her friends and made enemies too, the former heavily outnumbering the latter. In her, the deprived and repressed humanity found a guiding spirit steering them through trials and tribulations.

Sufia Kamal was a soothing presence in hardship, an inspiration in troubled times and the mentor in moral crises. Her death would not change that, for her pristine spirit would burn bright forever in millions of minds in the country.

Be Focused on Dialogue

WHATEVER kindles even a flicker of hope for a dialogue between the government and the opposition must be welcomed in a desperate political situation like ours. However, this is not to say that the basic pre-requisites for the talks to get under way can either be scaled down or wished away. These have to be fulfilled regardless of the sense of desperation. It takes two not only to make a dialogue but also to hold it in the very first place. This is something we can only ignore if we choose to be politically naive.

The prime minister has decided to take advantage of the opposition leader Begum Zia's likely presence at the Armed Forces Day anniversary in the cantonment today to invite her to talks. Without prejudice to what might happen to her proposed initiative hinging on the attendance of the opposition leader at the cantonment function we can say that this does not constitute a formal approach. In an earlier comment on the subject we suggested that playing to the public with a dialogue offer would harm the prospect for talks more than keeping passive over it. We stressed this point when she was making offers for talks to the opposition through public meetings. Granted, a cantonment function is not a public meeting; nevertheless, verbal informality and critical exposure would be involved in the PM's overture at a gathering of guests on the Armed Forces Day. If a dialogue is to be held at all, then there ought not to be even the slightest hint of point-scoring when mooted the idea for it. Because that will be regarded as a sign of insincerity even before the talks have begun. A talks offer must be made in writing and, at this stage, made with maximum discretion aimed to engage the opposition rather than disenchanted them with any negative vibe.

We wonder what keeps the prime minister from inviting the opposition leader over tea in writing to broach the matter of substantive talks to follow at the inter-party level. Alternatively, the initiative could formally and meaningfully originate at the general secretaries' level. If a formal, written invitation is sent to Begum Zia, she would think hard before turning it down. And if she did reject it, the ruling party could at least claim to have done its part.

While we urge the government to be serious, sincere and focused on the dialogue issue, our entreaties are with the opposition to seize the AL's offer for talks on any agenda, at any time and at any place."

AIDS Drug in Sight?

WE are delighted to know that a Bangladeshi scientist is leading a team of researchers in Australia which has been able to develop a drug that may provide a cure for the killer disease AIDS. Prof Ahmed Abdullah Azad, Chief Research Scientist, CSIRO Division of Molecular Science, Melbourne has done us proud by his work in a vital field of public health. The drug, which has not yet been named though, will be put to a clinical test for determining its full efficacy. If experiments prove successful, the drug is expected to be produced and marketed in about 10 years' time. This will be a much cheaper drug than the one being currently used for treatment of AIDS which works on about half the patients with severe side-effects.

The campaign against AIDS in our country has been in such a poor state that there are almost no statistics, authentic enough, about the number of HIV carriers and that of actual AIDS patients which can be relied upon. It will be foolish to believe that our religious or social taboos can successfully work against the spread of AIDS in Bangladesh when countries in the neighbourhood seem afflicted by it. Apart from direct body contact this disease can spread through the needles of the syringes used in hundreds of thousands everyday. Some recent newspaper reports said that used disposable syringes were imported causing alarm to health workers. So, it is basically a preventive strategy that must be put in place to ward off the pandemic scourge.

WHILE on an evening walk the other day, I came across one Abdul Halim (50) who was pulling his rickshaw slowly along the calm and quiet road inside Jahangirnagar University (JU) campus. He had no passenger at the time I met him. Seemingly not tired, but he carried the concerns of an uncertain future that dawned on his face. He looked much older than his age. It is said the age of the poor advances very fast — lack of proper food only makes it happen.

I went close to him to know about his well-being. From the noon to the dusk — I was told — he earned only Tk 13. The closure of the university cost him heavily he said. There are about 330 rickshaws inside JU campus and when the university runs in full-swing — and its campus full of teachers, students and fanfares — a rickshawpuller earns on average Tk 100/day. As the university is closed now, the daily income of 330 rickshawpullers with 1,625 family members to feed, has been drastically down to half or less. The food security question of these poor families is thus entangled with the question of whether JU is open or closed. In other words, when the university is closed *sine die*, their fate — to say the least — is also sealed *sine die*. Do we care at all about them?

The Jahangirnagar University — where I work — has been closed *sine die*. About two months back, the authority was forced to close down the institution following indubitably inflexible stances of a group of

Restoring JU's Tarnished Image

The students should seriously take note of what happens to rickshawpullers like Abdul Halim whose food security is seriously at a stake, of about 1400 poor students who earn their expenses from private tuitions and of few thousands whose parents can hardly bear additional expenses even for one month.

students to resist rise in development fees. Once upon a time, JU was well-known as a zero-jam institution but now, allegedly, the session jam rose to its peak. The university has to spend more than Tk 10 million per month and more than three-fourths of it underhead salary and wages. On the other hand, each of the students has to spend on average Tk 2000 per month from household kit to lead a life here. Therefore, an increase in session jam not only puts heavy pressure on families with fixed earnings but also costs the alma mater considerably. So, the movement that stood against the rise in fees in practice resulted in the rise of costs of education. In the meantime, the authority slashed down the asking rate of fees to almost half and given that fact one could hardly find any justification of raising a resistance and forcing upon the authority a closure.

Any educational institution is like family and, admittedly, a university is a bigger family. I have two daughters whose claims and counterclaims sometimes tend to annoy me. And enraged as I become, I rebuke them, exchange hot words. But when these tiny girls stay away from home — say for few days — I feel something missing in my house. I feel lonely in their absence. Inside the campus, the same thing

tends to happen. We appear to get irritated with students — their demands, meetings, processions etc. — but when they vacate the campus — but it is in normal or due to abnormal situation — every teacher feels lonely. We tend to feel something missing which should have been here at that particular moment. The relationship between teachers and students is as intense as the relationship between the fish and the water.

forced upon by hartals. An eight-hour long hartal costs Tk 300 crore/day depending upon some stringent assumptions. Twenty hartals like that could rob the nation about four per cent of its annual GDP. So, the economy and society bleed enormously following hartals but the government remains where it is to be. May be, one day there takes place a change in government but the incumbent tends to face an astound-

ing that when a referee abandons a game due to unruly behaviour of players, none appears to gain — neither players nor spectators in the gallery. The recent *sine die* closure of JU is a pointer to this effect.

But why do students suddenly roar and rise on their feet to create a havoc? This is the most important question to ponder on especially by teachers — myself and my learned colleagues. If we fail to diagnose the disease properly, we might end up without solution — no matter how valuable the medicines are. The theory of cumulative deprivation — if I am allowed to coin it so — suggests that it does not spark off from any single event but creates sparks through some cumulative negative attitude to students. For example, there are serious allegations that few of the teachers do not take classes and tutorials in due time and some tend to submit examination scores after 6-7 months of the examination. Once upon a time, the allegation used to come from three Ps — press, parents and pupils. But nowadays, even teaching community is evaluating and examining such sordid events in the academic councils. This is a good sign. When we blame "a few students" for creating troubles, then why should we save "a few teachers" who are contributing to the session jam?

Beneath the Surface
by Abdul Bayes

So, no teacher worth the salt (not only worth the name) would like to see his campus empty as no captain would like to see his ship in the dock. Even then, universities have to be closed *sine die* following unfortunate incidents.

There is a saying: Penny-wise found foolish. We notice acute implication of this adage in our resistance movements. For example, we continue to call hartals to oust a government although there is hardly any instance where a government had to quit power just

ingly high cost. The students of JU who led the movement against the newly imposed fees should recalculate as to how much they gained and how much they lost.

Does it mean that there should be no movement at all? No, that's not the case I stand for. There should be movements, meetings and if situation so warrants a demand for authorities' resignation too. But there should be a rule for the game. There should be a limit to the seemingly unlimited frontiers of their demands. Remem-

Chandrika's Challenges

The polls are important for President Chandrika Kumaratunga for a variety of reasons. In face of an increasingly vociferous opposition and reverses suffered in recent days in the battles against Tigers, she has to demonstrate greater control over the situation.

President Premadasa was assassinated in Colombo during a rally for his unrelenting fight against the separatists while Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated in a bomb blast. It was because of his support to the Sri Lankan government in suppressing the fighting of the Tamils. He had sent Indian troops to the island state at the request of the then Lankan president Junius Jayewardene and more than 1000 Indians soldiers died in Sri Lanka fighting the "Tigers" before New Delhi called off its troops.

The threats from the Tamil rebels, in the one hand, and the increasing signs of violence between contending political parties, on the other, are causing concerns. Obviously, security will be a big issue in the polls to choose a new president. The Tamils are expected to spare no efforts to target the presidential candidates of whom incumbent Chandrika Kumaratunga is certainly the most prominent.

Chandrika is seeking re-election on the ticket of ruling Peoples Alliance (PA) and her main challenger is Ranil Wickremesinghe of the opposition United National Party (UNP).

There are many other candidates in the fray and the race for Presidency has got off on a violent note. Gunmen opened fire at the opposition office shortly before a record of 13 candidates filed nominations for the polls on November 16.

The attackers wounded three activists of the UNP that accused the PA for the shooting. While violence from the rival political parties are a source of

task of injecting new life into her mother's political party — Sri Lankan Freedom Party which was in dire straits. She was elected chief minister of the western provincial council in 1993 and won the general elections next year. After briefly serving as the Prime Minister, Chandrika was chosen as the president of the country. Her well-known mother — and first woman prime minister of the world — Srimavo Bandaranaike was made the prime minister. Chandrika ended 17 years of uninterrupted rule by the United National Party.

Chandrika's term has been challenging. She has to live up to expectations for the party that she is leading, since people's hopes from it are enormous because of the long rule by the UNP. The intensity of the Tamil Elam for a separate homeland for an estimated 2.5 million ethnic Tamils undoubtedly poses a problem of severe magnitude. To find a settlement of this imbroglio is a Herculean task for any Lankan leader. Peace efforts floundered and only alternative appears a decisive military solution. But neither side is in a position to accomplish this task as both

are losing hundreds of men every week. The latest spate of success by the rebels puts the government on the uphill task in restoring the confidence of the armed forces and the people. The Tamil Tigers overran several military garrisons in one of their major victories in the protracted war for independence.

However, this in no way takes them to a position of ascendancy and their goal remains a long way off. President Kumaratunga also faces a determined opposition challenger in Ranil Wickremesinghe, who feels that he will win the December 21 presidential elections.

"On that day, we will take this country to the 21st century with new hopes for the people," he said after submitting his nominations recently.

Equally confident is the incumbent President who called for peaceful elections. Chandrika exhibited determination and a reasonably strong and pragmatic leadership during the last five years. However, these do not prove her worth to run the violence-torn nation to much length. She has advantages in many counts but challenges are immense as well. The election next month is a big test for her popularity and ability to govern a relatively prosperous, yet troubled country in South Asia.

normal concern, attacks from the Tamil rebels are large and their actions are fraught with dire consequences because the rebels target top leaders with a planned physical liquidation. Security has been tightened in the island state manifold ahead of the coming elections.

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political leadership. Chandrika married a dashing movie star Vijaya, who later became a popular politician and formed left-leaning Sri Lankan Peoples Party. In 1988, he was assassinated just four days before 10th anniversary of the marriage, and Chandrika blamed political forces for the murder. Fearing insecurity, she fled to Europe with her two children. Four years later, she returned to the country in 1992 and took up the

task of injecting new life into her mother's political party — Sri Lankan Freedom Party which was in dire straits. She was elected chief minister of the western provincial council in 1993 and won the general elections next year. After briefly serving as the Prime Minister, Chandrika was chosen as the president of the country. Her well-known mother — and first woman prime minister of the world — Srimavo Bandaranaike was made the prime minister. Chandrika ended 17 years of uninterrupted rule by the United National Party.

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During the Presidential campaign of 1988, the then Vice President and Presidential candidate George Bush, under tough questioning from CBS television's news anchor Dan Rather lashed out at the reporter: "Can you name the foreign minister of Mexico?" asked Mr. Bush, whose state borders Mexico. Taking a page from Dan Rather, Andy Hiller replied: "No sir, but I would say that I'm not running for President."

The other day, an American friend was lamenting his son's lack of good grades at school. "He is no Rhodes Scholar," the gentleman said. He should have said, "he is no rocket scientist," because that is a profession deemed beyond the reach of ordinary humans. Governor George Bush is clearly no rocket scientist. Neither was former President Ronald Reagan, who nevertheless turned out to be a very effective President and is credited with winning the Cold War and destroying the Soviet Empire. On the other hand, we have a very smart man, a Rhodes Scholar, William Jefferson Clinton, in the White House. And look how many scandals he has brought on himself and the nation over the last two years!

During the Presidential campaign of 1988, the then Vice President and Presidential candidate George Bush, under tough questioning from CBS television's news anchor Dan Rather lashed out at the reporter: "Would you like to be defined by your walking out from the anchor's chair when this year's US Open tennis was eaten into your network news time?" Dan Rather calmly replied, "Surely Mr. Vice President your conduct merits far greater scrutiny, because unlike you, I am not running for the Presidency of the United States." It is better not to tango with seasoned reporters. As a young reporter at a CBS affiliate in Texas, Dan Rather, a Texan like the Bushes, had made a name for himself by being the first reporter to announce the shooting of President Kennedy in 1963.

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