

Allotment Foul-play in Ctg

IT seems that the housing minister Engr Mosharrat Hossain has an uncanny genius for repeating the same blunder. As if the cancellation of allotment of 300 odd plots at Baridhara by the prime minister was not enough, he has again been accused of favouring his henchmen with allotments of residential plots — this time in his home town of Chittagong. The partiality is so stark that even the ruling party leaders of the port city have blasted it as outright 'dacoity'.

The city AL leaders have alleged commission of irregularities and termed the whole episode enacted under the chairmanship of MP Rafiqul Anwar as a "biased and heinous act of favouritism". The 4-member allotment committee turned a deaf ear even to the strong protests voiced by the Chittagong City Awami League for cancellation of the allotment orders. Reports in the national press exposed the foul-play behind such acts of nepotism, corruption and favoritism committed in violation of all norms of justice and fairplay which has albeited blackened the face of the government. People whose lands were acquired by the Chittagong Development Authority (CDA) and who were promised a plot of land each in the Chandrima housing project, were also deprived of the promised relocation. Breaking all procedural norms only 30 plots were allotted by lottery and the bulk 152 plots were allotted to the committee's favourites including the housing minister, the mayor, some other ruling party leaders and even an administrative officer of the committee who is alleged to have 'managed plots for his men'. It was, according to all indications, a free for all for the ruling party influentials of Chittagong. Once again it is proved, beyond any shadow of doubt, that the housing minister is incapable of discharging his responsibilities in an honest and impartial manner and that the ruling party is earning a bad name because of him.

We strongly feel that the government should constitute a powerful probe body to look into the alleged irregularities and suggest punitive steps against those responsible for the same. Meanwhile we suggest cancellation of the allotments through a personal intervention of the prime minister along the same lines as in the case of Baridhara scandal.

Labour Reform Imperative

WHEN there is such a disincentive to foreign investment as political unrest in the country, the last thing we need is a controversy over introduction of trade union rights in the EPZs. If it were a simple debate on the merits and demerits of workers' associations in privileged zones it would not have ruffled us the way it is doing now. Actually the worrying thing has been the inter-play of pressure and counter-pressure marking the furor over the issue.

The US position is Bangladesh gave Washington to understand as far back as in 1991 that the restrictions on trade union rights in EPZs would be withdrawn in due course. If Dhaka does not make good on that promise, so thinks Washington, she could risk losing the GSP granted by the US along with the chances in future of gaining a zero-tariff access to their market. On the other hand, the foreign investors are saying that if indeed Bangladesh had given such a pledge to the USA then it would amount to a breach of trust because they had put their money upfront on being convinced that they would be spared trade unionism in the EPZs. So they have held out a threat that if trade unionism were allowed they would have no alternative but to wind up business at the EPZs. Of course this controversy which is accentuated by the pressing of levers on both sides places Bangladesh in a tight corner. The Commerce Minister has admitted to being caught in a dilemma. It might still be of interest to know as to what pledge the government had precisely made to the USA in 1991 and that which it had originally promised to the foreign investors when they were headed for the EPZs.

Our stance on the subject remains unwavering. In principle, we are supportive of trade union rights as part of a just, democratic and egalitarian system of values. At the same time, we are entirely opposed to trade unionism of a kind that lives off the fat of politics, muscles into a management, takes over its decision-making powers and runs a parallel administration, all for coterie interest and none for the organisation or the workers. So, it is the dire need for labour reform which is crying for attention. We must have adequate safeguards against perverted trade unionism.

CU Under Siege

SUNDAY'S flare-up at Chittagong University is more or less followed a familiar pattern: one student leader got roughed up by rival activists; his infuriated peers launched attack on the assailants; and campus-wide armed conflict broke out, killing a few and injuring many others. The university authorities took recourse to a hackneyed administrative measure: closure of the halls of residence and suspension of all examinations until such time as tension got defused. The police was, as usual, passive throughout the gun-battle and became active when it was over. At the receiving end are general students with a big question mark over their future. The academic glitch will surely result in session jams, meaning thereby their stay at the university has been prolonged once again for no fault of theirs.

Despite their avowed commitment to root out terrorism, the mainstream political parties, neither the ruling nor the opposition, have apparently made any attempt to dissociate themselves from the terrorists under the student activists' guise. On the contrary, patronisation of such anti-social elements has been steadily on the rise, so suggests the frequency of such flare-ups.

We are not against student politics *per se*; in fact, our opposition is to the blend of politics now in currency on campus. There should be an end to such a political culture, to such an orgy of killing and getting killed. In other words, we would like to urge the politicians once again to delink themselves from students and not make the campus their battlefields. Immediately, however, we would like to see resumption of normal academic activities at the Chittagong University.

Two Jostling Strands of Bangladesh Politics

by M. Rashiduzzaman

TWO strands of politics are jostling against each other in Bangladesh: one played by the ruling Awami League (AL) that wants to sustain a single dominant party; and the second mode is reflected by the opposition's gravitation towards coalition not only among the homogenous but also between the disparate groups. The Awami League government has a solid majority in the national parliament, so it does not need to coalesce with other groups for survival, but it started as a coalition cabinet that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina contoured as the *Oikya Mater Sarkar*. Once the indirectly elected women lawmakers gave the ruling party an absolute majority, the mettle of the government changed drastically.

Now the AL government has the attitude of a single dominant party while the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has taken a turn towards alliance politics.

The political realignment issue has recently come to the fore since the BNP had a summit with the Jatiya Party (JP), the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and the Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ). What began as a loose co-operation among the opposition forces early in 1999 became a more structured alliance early in December. They have charted a new plan of action including an understanding of seat swapping among the opposition partners in the future election. On behalf of those four parties, it was announced that, after the anticipated victory in the future election, they would form a strong and patriotic coalition to face the challenges of the 21st Century. The united opposition front plans to have 'all party action committees' spread all over the districts and the upazila levels — those are the new fighting resources and institutional arrangements for continuing their anti-government campaign.

According to one report that I saw, the BNP agreed in principle to concede as much as 40 per

cent of the seats to the JP and the Jamaat. Spin doctoring is all over the country since that opposition summit! The newspaper columnists are gazing into the winners and losers in the political deal. More seriously, the AL supporters are castigating the opposition coalition as a threat to independence and democracy in Bangladesh. The hyperbole does not end there — one columnist warned that Khaleda Zia was only a short step away from an internal rebellion within her party!

The opposition summit has added some muscle to their partnership and according to

the new deal, the future government might include JP and Jamaat representatives. That's a reasonable deduction. But there is no convincing logic to back the fear that JP and Jamaat in the future cabinet would actually constitute a threat to democracy in Bangladesh. Politics brings strange bedfellows — it is a common phenomenon in party politics more now than in the 1960s and 1970s when single-party dominance was the thumping criterion of democracy in our big neighbour, and other parliamentary democracies. Bolstered by declining big parties, we are entering into the millennium of fragmented politics — we are watching a re-centring of political forces in most democracies. Even political theoreticians have lowered their conceptual sight from giant parties under mesmerising leadership to less-structured partnerships of smaller groups led by not so inspiring leaders. Quite a few academics and political leaders have dressed up the paradigm shifts as the quest for a 'Negotiated Polity', 'Third Way' or 'Vital Centre'. Mea-

sured against those conceptual rearrangements and the ubiquity of smaller groups catapulting themselves into power, the new Bangladesh political alliances are by no means a negative development. It is a cheap shot to claim that Sheikh Hasina remains a democratic and patriotic leader even when she openly works with the same leaders who joined with the BNP. Khaleda becomes the mother of all evils! Even well-regarded commentators seem oblivious of the double standard implied in their arguments. The Awami League

except power. Even with the errand of Mujibism, Bangladesh has never been swept by a storm of dogmatic beliefs since its separation from Pakistan. No matter who is at the helm of politics, the trend is unlikely to change; really, Bangladesh will be better off by de-linking ideological semblance from politics. Sheikh Hasina's political turn from the left to the centre, and her alliance with the JP and the Jamaat were pragmatic moves, which brought the AL back to power. For the future also, the AL would not hesitate to trash party although individuals or factions inside it might cherish

other inclinations. Sometimes, the BNP suffers from identity confusion, and demonstrates lack of confidence. I feel that the BNP should be the BNP in its posture and action — it will be suicidal for the party to do otherwise. What appears to be a loss to the BNP (anticipated concession of Sangshad seats to the JP and the Jamaat) will cease to be a loss if the new alliance wins — there is no better aphrodisiac in politics than winning! Yes, the JP and the Jamaat have made some political gains, but Khaleda's own party remains at the top — herding the opposition parties that really matter. That's no small achievement for Khaleda.

Now Khaleda's best hope is that Sheikh Hasina would not recover from her present political predicaments. There may not be any rollback of the tide of Hasina fatigue — something that Khaleda may relish but the AL will worry about. Hasina's language problem — bad-mouthing the Opposition Leader — will possibly bring some sympathy for Khaleda Zia. Needless to say, such colourful bubbles may explode!

vergent groups just for the sake of power. Notwithstanding all the historical claims that the AL makes, it is not a fully ideological platform. It is also a misrepresentation of history to assert that the BNP came out of the ashes of democracy — Bangladesh lost its pluralism earlier in 1975. The BNP was a centrist organisation from the very beginning, and that is its only path to remain a viable alternative political force. The JP has not shown off any ideological garb. Only the Jamaat maintains an open ideological commitment that it will have to jettison, in one form or the other, to be a successful partner in an otherwise non-ideological coalition. The left ideological parties are yet to exhibit their electoral strength; if and when they demonstrate their surge, they would be welcome either by the AL or the BNP depending on time, political circumstances and of course the price for such co-operation. Ideology will not stand on the way.

In all probability, political contest in the coming months will get ugly, and even danger-

ous. Can Khaleda get a clear political shot at Hasina? Will the alliance increase her striking power against Hasina? These are the critical questions. Through a reaffirmation of the alliance and an agreement of power sharing, the BNP has surely demonstrated its self-confidence. But Khaleda is believed to have inched more to the right as a result of the recent summit of the top opposition leaders. That prognosis has some validity but it misses the point that the BNP has always been a 'catch-all' centre-right party although individuals or factions inside it might cherish

other inclinations. Sometimes, the BNP suffers from identity confusion, and demonstrates lack of confidence. I feel that the BNP should be the BNP in its posture and action — it will be suicidal for the party to do otherwise. What appears to be a loss to the BNP (anticipated concession of Sangshad seats to the JP and the Jamaat) will cease to be a loss if the new alliance wins — there is no better aphrodisiac in politics than winning! Yes, the JP and the Jamaat have made some political gains, but Khaleda's own party remains at the top — herding the opposition parties that really matter. That's no small achievement for Khaleda.

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There are warnings for the opposition alliance also — people are developing hartal fatigue. Indeed, the AL government is shifting the blame of its own failures towards work stoppages brought upon them by opposition-led hartals. It is also easy to argue that the new deals are indications of the BNP's uncertainty of its own strength, and its inability in taking on the Awami League on its own.

All said and done, the opposition had no better choice than the concerted challenge that they have put forward. The BNP was in disarray after the 1996 defeat — it has been desperately searching for issues to rally public support. It was the Awami League government's missteps, rhetorical overkill, zero-tolerance for the opposition and perceptible mismanagement that offered the BNP a window of opportunity to hit back at the ruling party. But the acrimonious exchange between the AL and the BNP-led alliance has escalated, and the polarisation between the two sides will get worse, and Bangladesh will be quivering from more unrest, lawlessness and political violence.

Now the united front of the opposition has reinstated the political initiative with Khaleda Zia — she has re-powered herself by striking new deals with her alliance partners. On the other hand, Sheikh Hasina started as a coalition leader with the JP and Rab (JSD), but she is more isolated now although Rab and a JP faction still support her. No doubt the BNP-led realignment has introduced a new law of motion in Bangladesh politics — it wants a change. But the idea of single-party dominance promoted by the Awami League denotes a status quo seemingly unacceptable to the restive disposition of the nation.

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WTO Seattle Fiasco: Does Morning Show the Day?

by AMM Shahabuddin

Time has changed and the developed countries cannot dictate terms as they did in the previous rounds. Even some of the commitments made by the developed countries in the 'Uruguay Round' still remain unimplemented. Trade should, therefore, be kept free from the shady influence of 'labour standard' and 'workers' rights.' It is ILO's business to look after these issues and not WTO's.

eral stores, forcing the authorities to impose curfew! The life in the city was paralysed.

When the situation on the streets was no better than hell, what was happening inside the conference hall? No better either. The leader of the demonstration considered it to be their victory, making the large corporate leaders 'shaking in their boots' and also at the same time 'emboldening' some developing countries' representatives to take a bold stand before developed countries, particularly America. Actually, the vital trade issues before the WTO conference became highly tinged with political temperature that again played havoc.

Two Reasons for the Fiasco

Two main reasons actually led to the odd situation, one inside the conference hall, and another on the streets of Seattle. Inside the conference hall, it led to a big row between the developing countries and America, when Clinton insisted that the questions of 'labour standards' and 'workers' rights' should be included in the agenda. It was vehemently opposed by the developing countries as it would, in the ultimate analysis, be a direct interference by the developed countries in the internal affairs of the developing nations. The developed countries, led by America, thought because of the availability of cheap labour in the developing countries, they had an edge over the developed countries in trade competition in world markets. So the developing countries were adamant not to submit to any pressure from the rich countries to ac-

cept even a 'compromise' formula on the thorny issue of 'workers' rights' and 'labour standard' for inclusion in the new 'trade round' to be called the 'Millennium Round'. The Latin American, Caribbean and African countries threatened not to 'sign' any new global free trade talks unless they were 'fully involved' in the 53 nations of the OAU, in a statement echoed the same feelings. So Clinton's all efforts 'to have his cake and eat it' at the same time failed miserably. This was perhaps the immediate cause that created a dead-lock in the Seattle talks.

On the other hand, another factor (cause) that was working behind the scene since the US-China deal paying the way for China's entry into WTO, was brewing underneath and burst open on the Seattle streets, putting the city upside-down. It has proved that there may exist 'a volcano under the sea', which may create havoc when it reaches the bursting point.

It may be recalled here that despite the welcome by business leaders and human rights groups of the recent Beijing deal between China and America, the American labour unions and textile manufacturers bitterly criticised the deal, saying that it would cost them thousands of jobs and billions of dollars. So the deal was considered a 'job-killer' and the labour unions decided to fight the deal in the US Congress, which is dominated by the Republicans. In view of the upcoming US Presidential campaign, the Republicans would be too happy to exploit the Democrat President's 'sell-out' of US

interests to China, to its advantage, as Clinton has already become discredited for his failure at the Seattle talks. So the labour 'discontent' over the deal, which was brewing as under-current, became a God-sent 'boon' for the Republicans, putting the new global trade round into suspense, perhaps till the US presidential election is over. It is obvious, said European Trade Commissioner, Mr Lamy, that the US Presidential campaign would 'stall' the launch of any global trade round for months.

From Seattle to Where?

So, from Seattle to where? When the US trade unionists consider the WTO a 'killer', raising slogans like 'WTO killer: Kill WTO', and the developing countries think WTO is a 'hostage' in the hands of 'big business' of the west that 'puts the interests of the multinational corporations over concerns about ordinary people' what hope remains for the WTO? As a Western analyst has said that like all other UN-related agencies, WTO is also highly influenced by US interests. They had earlier dealt

with seven 'successful' trade 'rounds', the most significant being the Kennedy Round (1964-67), Tokyo Round (1973-79) and the 'Uruguay Round', concluded in 1993. The eighth one, the 'Millennium Round' was in the offing at the Seattle conference but the task remained unfinished, due to rather unexpected severe opposition. The coming events are said to cast their shadows before. But the Western developed countries, particularly America, failed to see the dark shadow over the Seattle conference. Perhaps they were sure that things would go their way as it had gone in the past, when the developed countries literally dictated their terms on the poor developing countries in the name of 'trade liberalization' and 'economic reforms'. Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir, perhaps the only outspoken leader in Asia, caught them right when he said on the eve of the last APEC Summit held in Manila in 1996, criticising the attitude of the developed countries towards the developing countries, that these countries talk 'too much of trade liberalization', rather than 'development and cooperation'.

'Wake-up' call for America

So the developed countries will have to make a radical change of attitude towards the concerns of the developing countries. America shouldn't think that it would rule the roost over the WTO driving a 'roller coaster' policy. They will have to be 'sensitive' to the needs of the developing countries, as said by Indian Prime

Minister Vajpayee. Indian Trade and Commerce Minister, on return home from the failed Seattle conference, said that the path ahead of the next Seattle round would be 'hazardous'. He further said that the developed countries, particularly, USA, would now launch 'guerrilla tactics' to 'scuffle' the interests of the developing countries. The People's Daily of China bitterly criticised America and other developed countries for using WTO to 'ride roughshod' over the demands of the developing countries. So the Seattle failure due to Clinton's insistence, has literally pilled the developed countries against the developing countries.

America should now realise that time has changed and the developed countries cannot dictate terms as they did in the previous rounds. Even some of the commitments made by the developed countries in the 'Uruguay Round' still remain unimplemented. Trade should, therefore, be kept free from the shady influence of 'labour standard' and 'workers' rights'. It is ILO's business to look after these issues and not WTO's. The world trade body needs a shake-up to make it more democratic, involving all member states in each and every decision-making, rather than reserving vital issues in the hands of a 'secretive' coterie, leaving the developing nations outside in the cold, as complained by the African countries. It is true that 'the weakest go to the wall', but they make bounce with a ferocious attack on wrong-doers for the sake of their survival. Seattle gives a 'wake-up' call.

So often the morning shows a rather hazy and hazardous day, unless wisdom dawns on the other side. To achieve maximum results to the satisfaction of all, the two 'worlds' — the developed and the developing — will have to march hand in hand as equal partners and not with hands in chains of the weaker nations. The writer is a retired UN official.

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.

Blame the political culture

Sir, The political hartals in Bangladesh may be viewed from a different angle. First condemn the abysmally low political culture cultivated by the politicians, and secondly condemn the hartal parties, who take advantage of the lax public attitude to impose hartal on the people. People's will cannot be imposed upon, even by the political leaders, (the shifting of the ICC for NAM is a minor example).

There is another point: the ruling party is all the time talking about it and condemning hartal (they initiated the culture a few years back), but not doing anything about it. They practice impractical agendas, which cannot be accepted due to lack of credibility — the politicians are wholly responsible for the adverse image they have created about themselves. They should not blame others.

Therefore the quick solution is for the people to rise against the politicians and force them to come to an accord amongst

themselves. There is no third party involved; and those who are implicated are the sufferers. An analysis of the public speeches by the politicians reveals that most of the time they talk about politics, and the major portion of this exercise is spent in abusing the opponents. The leaders do not know how to speak as leaders! A leader is more than a politician!

Question: why sometimes they cannot forget that they are politicians, and try to hide their identity, instead of inflating it? The standard of politics in Dhaka has reached the bottomless basket (fallacy: something bottomless cannot be reached). An innocent person can be spotted by a stranger as a politician within minutes of opening his mouth, and by his arrogance and look-down attitude. This false sense of superiority complex is actually an inferiority complex. This behaviour pattern is noticeable mostly in the Third World countries. It means they are overwhelmed by the political power and influence they wield, and become itchy to misuse it to personal advantage (the general

trends are pointed out here — the vicious environment of politics).

A Disgusted Voter
Dhaka.

Unsafe scene

Sir, It appears the government has failed to control the vice-like grip of mafia gangs who have virtually taken control of the different sectors of the society (the Ershad Sardars in the corrupted society), and the 'Authority' cannot match the cunningness of these vested groups, who control everything from onions to ministers and the 'elected representatives of the people'. The latter is a pompous sounding testimonial, viewed against further mafia atrocities to come, unless the law and order situation can be controlled in a way visible to the man in the street.

Of course Bangladesh is no exception to the general pattern of mafia rule and gangsterism prevailing in some other countries but here neither fact nor fiction is acknowledged. Are we living in a world of virtual reality, outside the computer screen? Perhaps we are the most lovable electorate in the world, offering no resistance to the powers that be! However, it appears that the tide is slowly beginning to turn: the construction of the huge NAM IGC complex has been shifted to the Second Capital (Agargaon). Day to day life has become

unsafe in Bangladesh, as the police and the monitoring and regulating agencies are corrupt and ineffective and the doors of redress are closed to the pedestrians, while the higher ups manipulate through the back doors and are operating a master network to get away with their nefarious activities. Parliament, democracy, civil service have ceased to have any meaning, as far as public institutions are concerned. The political pundits are fighting among themselves, while the country has gone to the dogs (including the Police dogs, duly imported).

Let us face the stark truth: as yet we have not learnt to govern ourselves. Self-governance is the first step towards democracy, the books tell us; but, since we are in a hurry, the standard has been slightly lowered, temporarily, to self-sufficiency and training exercises, on how to ungovern people and live happily.

The politicians in this part of the world have never displayed any acumen for administrative finesse, whether in or out of power (one reason is the lack of continuity in establishing the relevant cultures). They cannot work silently — as far as the public services are concerned, it is noise and fury all the time. Our leaders are cooing with visions of this and that, but the quality and quantity of delivery of goods and services are microscopic, (except one —

delivering speeches to the wrong crowds).

Alif Zabr
Dhaka.

Acid throwing

Sir, The DS published a letter on the 10th November that referred to report on ABC television in the US on the problem of acid throwing in Bangladesh. The writer pointed out that the report stated that acid throwing has been called 'the barbaric crime of the century.' However, the report also showed the positive steps being taken to overcome the problem. For example, the Government's decision to build a new 50 bed burn unit at Dhaka Medical College Hospital, the work of the NGOs and Women's organisations to help the survivors all showed Bangladesh in a positive light. The programme also showed the enormous courage of acid burned women in their struggle to come to terms with their situation.

It is dreadful that acid violence scars the face of such a beautiful country as Bangladesh. But with the support of the Government, the judiciary, the law enforcing agencies, NGOs and people of goodwill the problem of acid violence can be overcome. ABC television has indicated that they would like to return to Bangladesh in a year's time to

followup some of the cases shown on the programme. It would be excellent if, when they return, we could show the world that Bangladesh has made real progress on the problem of acid violence.

Dr J Morrison
Executive Director
Acid Survivors Foundation

Road surgery

Sir, Different roads within the Mohammadpur area are now undergoing open-heart surgery by the surgeons of the City Corporation. The purpose of this surgery is to implant drainage pipes. Meanwhile due to the negligence of the unskilled surgical workers, many underground veins (telephone cables) have been damaged which caused considerable loss to the T&T Board and caused telephone subscribers serious sufferings.

Would the authorities concerned please introduce 'Integrated Road Digging System' (IRDS) so that misuse of public fund could be reduced?

M Zahidul Haque
Associate Professor
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