

Chance For Talks?

SPEAKER Humayun Rashid Chowdhury in a bid to draw the boycotting opposition into the Parliament's millennium session has promised to discuss any precondition that the BNP might set to her return to the JS. His expectations seem a bit misplaced if only because operatively it is the government that has to address the preconditions and meet them. So, the initiative should have come from the AL as a party. At any rate, any move coming from the Speaker, however dimmed it may be by his none-too-successful negotiatory track-record can be regarded as a positive development.

However, as for the Speaker's offer to talk opposition preconditions we have to say that these are right there on the table. Deputy leader of the opposition AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury has spelt out five conditions, to a point of absolutism, asserting that only upon fulfilment of those by the ruling party that the opposition could consider joining the JS session.

The five BNP preconditions are not substantial and do not seem impossible to meet; in fact it must be granted that they lack the caustic nature of BNP's previous sets of demands. Four of the BNP's preconditions have to do with the PM's withdrawal of 'indecent' remarks, her apology for the same, expunction of the remarks from parliamentary records and a promise not to repeat them. Now, there is absolutely no doubt that the PM overshoot the limits of minimum decency when she had referred to Begum Zia's academic records and more darkly when alluding to 'the circumstances' of the latter's arrest in 1987. While editorialising on this we had deliberately refrained from quoting her because we deemed the words she used to be unprintable.

We believe it is time she made good on those remarks for the good of the country, a retraction that is certain to earn her the nation's gratitude. She does not have to genuflect but just express her regrets adding that she recanted in the greater interest of the country.

As for the BNP's last sticking point, the onus for the lack of 'Speaker's sovereignty and his right to oversee the JS' has been placed squarely on the government. The BNP wants the PM to assure the nation that the AL members will not obstruct the Speaker's ability to conduct the JS business smoothly. This fits in with the Speaker's latest indirect admission of his failure to perform impartially in the House. This fifth precondition, therefore, is not also redeemable.

Police Predicament

INTERFERENCE from influential quarters has been a major impediment to effective and efficient police operations. There have been innumerable incidents where law-enforcers, despite nabbing perpetrators on the spot of the crime, had to release them under pressure from people in high places. Oddly though, whether for fear or favour, the police appear to have resigned to such unwarranted intrusion into their professional jurisdiction. In this context, Sub-Inspector Ziaul Haque's threat to withdraw his men stationed at the main entrance of the Nagar Bhaban to check incoming vehicles "if they keep asking me to release these people who defied our polite requests and tried to show their influence" comes as a refreshing change. In him, we may have one law-enforcer who possesses a certain degree of dedication to his duty.

The police have often been criticised for being biased, corrupt, inefficient, insincere and what not. The news media, while castigating the law-enforcers, decried politicisation of such a vital state apparatus. Unfortunately, there has not been any reversal of that trend. Successive governments have used police to meet their ends. Consequently, people in position have taken the police for granted, to be exploited and denied a due role. Tuesday's incident at the Nagar Bhaban, is symptomatic of a socio-political influence.

By exercising their 'influence' in this respect, the 'high-ups' have actually compromised security at the DCC above anything else. We would like to see Mr. Mayor himself look into the matter and make sure such interference does not recur.

Rescued Girls

A batch of ten girls, earlier trafficked into India, has finally returned home on Tuesday through the relentless efforts of Bangladesh Jatiya Mahila Ainjibi Samity. Their age ranging between 14 and 24, these unfortunate young girls were lured out of their homes on promise of better life by their so-called 'lovers' and the touts. Some of these girls are returning home as long as after eight years, strangely though they were recovered from the traffickers four years ago and kept so long at the shelter home of the Indian Juvenile Board. We warmly welcome these girls back home and commend the efforts of advocate Salma Ali and her team who fought a very hard battle to get these girls back.

It is really painful to note that bureaucratic tangles, not only in Bangladesh but also in India, delayed the process of recovery and repatriation of these hapless girls. To avoid such red-tapism we would like to suggest that (a) there must be Indo-Bangla understanding from now on to expedite the process of repatriation of recovered trafficked persons; (b) and our ministries of foreign and home affairs need to be the focal-point for handling such cases so that the process takes less time and recovery can be made easier, quicker and efficient.

The government must increase and improve vigil along the borders and neutralize the trafficking rackets at all costs. Given the will it should not be impossible for the authorities to give a body-blow to them with appropriate internal surveillance.

Syria-Israel Peace Talks "Got off to a Good Start"

The peace axis — Clinton-Barak-Arafat-hopefully Assad-Mobarak-Abdullah 11-sympathetic international community — that exists today may suffer irrecoverable break if any of the key leaders departs from the scene for any reason. Therefore, all efforts must be made to advance the peace process with utmost flexibility that can possibly be offered by each of the participants.

WHILE announcing the outcome of peace talks between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk Al Sharah in Washington on December 15-16, 1999 President Clinton said, "Syria-Israel peace talk got off to a good start." He did not elaborate. He looked reasonably happy as this was the first time in over three years that these two adversary states met at the highest level under the patronage of President Clinton himself.

The new turn in M-E peace process appears to have taken place at the intervention of some world leaders during the last couple of months. The initiative was taken by President Nelson Mandela in the month of October 1999. He traveled to several Arab and Middle-Eastern countries and spoke personally to the top leaders of those countries. The Sunday Independent published from Johannesburg in its report on October 31 mentioned that Mandela, on his recent trip, had "won the backing of key Arab leaders for three-point plan to achieve a comprehensive Middle East peace." The report also said that as a part of the deal Israel would withdraw from all occupied Arab land and in return Syria, which does not recognise Israel, would make a declaration recognising "the sovereignty of Israel." The report also talked about the cre-

ation of an 'International Commission to oversee "final status" issues. To be specific Mandela mentioned to have the support of President Assad of Syria, President Mobarak of Egypt, President Yasser Arafat and other Arab leaders in his effort to revive and reactivate the M-E peace talks. Reportedly, he then went to Washington to brief United States President Bill Clinton. According to the same report President Mandela spoke to the British Prime Minister Tony Blair, French President Jacques Chirac and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. He also met Israeli President Weizman and PM Ehud Barak and discussed the plan with the two leaders.

With this sort of initiative by such a renowned world statesman a new turn with some flexibility from the toughest man like Hafez Al Assad was not unexpected and apparently this made Secretary Albright's work somewhat easier when she visited Damascus to confirm Syria's interest in the peace talk. It is, however, known that the US Administration has also been making separate efforts for some time to make Syrian track work. Obviously President Clinton has been personally interested in

completing the M-E peace deal as his term will be over by the end of 2000. But the rock started cracking at the Syrian side as President Assad being in very poor health was preparing to hand over power to his son and he wanted to do it after having completed the land for peace deal with Israel. President Assad knows it very well that his departure from the scene would certainly complicate matters and having practically no ex-

perience to deal with Israelis his son may ultimately fail to recover Golan Heights from Israel. President Assad apparently felt that it was the right time to take the plunge and hence the "significant breakthrough" in the Syrian track as put by President Clinton.



Spotlight on Middle East

Muslehuddin Ahmad

So far as the Israeli side is concerned the presence of Ehud Barak at the helm of affairs with overall mandate for peace and security made some percep-

that the negotiations would be very difficult. He assured every one that Israel's security would be his main concern. He said the agreement "we aim to conclude with our Syrian neighbours ... does not reside in heaven. It is within our grasp, and today we have a propitious opportunity that must not be missed! Forfeiting this opportunity may even claim a price in blood ..."

To further assure the Is-

raelis he said that if real peace with the Syrians and the Palestinians could be achieved that will be "the pinnacle of fulfillment of the Zionist vision..." He categorically said that the peace cannot be attained "without a price". "Any Government in Israel that concludes a full peace treaty with Syria, as we all hope, will do so at a painful price including a painful withdrawal and a change in the existing border." Expressing his war-time sentiment as Israel's chief of staff he said, "I climbed the Golan Heights as a fighter in the Six-Day war... I am familiar with every gully and stone on the Golan Heights... I cannot tell you that an agreement can be attained without a steep territorial price." While giving valid reasons for the price that his generation will pay he said, "It is our supreme responsibility to history, as our children look on, to act today so that we shall not have to dig new rows of graves tomorrow in a conflict that could have been settled in a way that would also have strengthened Israel regionally and globally."

Finally Prime Minister Barak said he would do it in an overt and clear way and when the negotiations would be over he would present the peace

agreement to the Israeli people for a plebiscite. He, however, hoped that the people will approve the agreement by a "sweeping majority." His statement in the Knesset (Parliament) clearly indicated his determination to pursue the peace talks vigorously and he wanted to grasp the opportunity that exists today and may not remain in place for long. Prime Minister Ehud Barak is young but two leaders — President Assad and President Yasser Arafat — he has been dealing with are not only at advanced age but also in poor health. Being quite aware of Arab politics, Barak knows that the departure of any from the scene would plunge the Arab world into total uncertainty politically and militarily. The "enemies" of peace at both Arab world and Israel are only waiting in the wings to seize the opportunity to be lost by the present leadership. The situation is likely to be more complicated with the departure of President Bill Clinton from the White House in an year's time. The peace axis — Clinton-Barak-Arafat-hopefully Assad-Mobarak-Abdullah 11-sympathetic international community — that exists today may suffer irrecoverable break if any of the key leaders departs from the scene for any reason. Therefore, all efforts must be made to advance the peace process with utmost flexibility that can possibly be offered by each of the participants.

WTO's Botched Summit: Globalization or Not?

by Dr. Munim Kumar Barai

The trend of the time is for globalization and the WTO is the torch bearer of the process. The Seattle battle has not derailed or permanently halted the process. What the protesters have succeeded to do is to bring to notice the fact that trade issues can not be totally oblivious to the social issues.

Issues Controversial

A lot of issues were targeted to be brought into the new round. And many have been there in the air for quite some time. In most of the cases developed and developing countries are at the opposite side of the table. But there are some issues where some of the developed countries are with the developing countries. The interesting part of the entire episode is that the United States is a party to all of the controversial issues. Take the issue of standard and low cost labour of the third world countries. The US and the EU members are on the same side that the standards have to be enhanced in the third world countries so that it cannot threaten the jobs markets of the western world. Their argument is based on the theme that as the labour standards are low and the adherence of laws is minimal for the labour, so vast pool of workforce is available at a very cheap cost in the developing countries. This indirectly is threatening the high cost labour force of the developed countries by way of low priced products. Same is the case with the issue of environment. The third world opposes the 'enviro' restrictions on the plea that for their development, they cannot be cent per cent sensitive to the environmental issues as it would pose a great obstruction to the development agenda in many of them. The irony of the issue is that the multinationals of the first world origin are some of the biggest culprits of the environ-

mental disasters in the developing countries. Moreover, in their own countries they have done long ago what the third world countries are trying to right now. So their objections at the moment though have bases, do not seem to be that pious in nature.

Then comes the issues of agriculture subsidy and the market access of the agriculture products. The United States and the developing countries are asking the EU members and Japan to open up their agriculture markets and lower the level of agriculture subsidies they are offering right at the moment. A huge battle seems to loom large on several key industries including healthcare, banking, education, insurance and e-commerce. The United States wants to slash barriers to these industries while the rest of the world is resisting the US pressure as the fear of the onslaught of the TNCs is haunting the local industries in most of the countries. In recent time, many products of the developing countries are increasingly facing non tariff barriers of various sorts in the markets of the developed countries. These were supposed to be brought to the focus of the discussion of the WTO. But for the time being the opportunity has been lost.

Impact

It will take some time to assess the real impact of the lost summit. It may also be imprudent to figure out the winners and losers of the lost process. The fact is that the opponents of

globalization for the moment have achieved an immediate success in postponing the issues that could have been brought on the agenda for debate and discussion under the aegis of WTO. But the long term impact of the aborted trade summit could be less than what might be thought at this moment. Two incidents need to be carefully assessed. By the presence and the march of tens of thousands of trade unionists organized by the AFL-CIO, the labour group did draw the attention of everyone. The group has endorsed the presidential bid of Al Gore of the Democratic Party. The speech the US President delivered on the WTO said is seen to be attuned to the demand of the AFL-CIO protesters. Moreover, before the US President left the Seattle Summit venue, an interview with him appeared in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer that was unimpressive to most of the participants of the developing countries. He told the paper that he wanted a working group on labour to be established within the WTO to develop 'core' standards for wages, working conditions and other labour issues that should be part of every trade agreement. Ultimately, he said, they should be enforced through trade sanctions, the WTO's ultimate weapon. So the incoming election in the United States seemed to have affected the fate of the summit in a bigger way than anything else.

These cannot but send ominous signals to the developing countries, as the internal affair of a single powerful country

Conclusions

The trend of the time is for globalization and the WTO is the torch bearer of the process. The Seattle battle has not derailed or permanently halted the process. What the protesters have succeeded to do is to bring to notice the fact that trade issues can not be totally oblivious to the social issues. This could be a new dimension that is to be kept in mind when the negotiators sit down again to discuss the various tricky issues of multilateral trade. And here lies the biggest threat to the WTO as in the WTO's free-trade agenda there are so many issues where the members find it easy to disagree than to agree.

The writer is an Assistant Professor of Bangladesh Institute of Bank Management, Mirpur, Dhaka.

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.

"The Present Political Impasse..."

Sir, My attention has been drawn to the suggestion given in the article "The Present Political Impasse: The Way Out" by Enam A Chowdhury. As a means to avoid the necessity of holding by-election Mr Chowdhury suggested that in case any parliamentary seats or an elected office gets vacant during a term, the position may be filled up by the nominee of the political party whose representative has earlier won election for the seat. If the elected person, whose seat may fall vacant, happens to be an independent candidate and has remained independent candidate till the vacancy occurs, then the candidate who obtained the next highest vote in the general election could be declared elected in the vacant seat.

I think this is a dangerous line of thinking which would trigger politics of violence. If a candidate sees the prospect of being declared in a certain seat, then he might be inspired to make the seat vacant by resorting to way of killing and conspiracy. Moreover the very idea is not democratic in nature.

Instead, a permanent caretaker council could be established for holding by-election and other election in the country to fill up the vacant seats.

Mohammed Abul Kalam Chittagong.

To the Home Minister

Sir, Recently the Home Minister Mohammad Nasim asked his partymen in the city to list the names of terrorists in their respective areas. This has raised a few questions. How much is it reasonable to mix up party work with police work? Do all the terrorists belong to the opposition? Isn't there any terrorist in AL? Is the

minister sure that his partymen would not list the names of their opponents? And last but not most important question: how could the ruling party expect to reach a consensus with the opposition when the Home Minister himself issues such partisan instruction?

Turjo Mohammad Zia Hall, DU

Trade Unions in the EPZs

Sir, The debate between the US Ambassador, the Minister of Commerce and Industry and the investors in the Export Trade Zones (EPZs) is a lively and important one. The US contention is that the right to organise and strike are universal worker rights and therefore must be allowed in the EPZs also. The objection of the opponents is that the EPZs have had a good record of protecting worker rights in Bangladesh, while the trade unions (TUs) have ruined the industrial public sector. Therefore, if they were allowed in the EPZs, they would drive off investors, not to mention the possibility of ruining the existing private sector in the EPZs.

One question the US Ambassador has not been asked is: are all TUs worthy to enjoy the universal rights of workers? Workers indeed have these rights but does this mean that all TUs equally have the same rights? Or are there TUs, which by their very nature have renounced their rights because they ignore the correlative duties, which necessarily go along with rights? Most TUs of Bangladesh are associated with political parties and therefore are not free unions. The interest of the workers is not their only concern and, many would say, is not even their primary concern. Americans maintain that freedom is the only basic right (as is incorporated in the Universal Declaration of Human

Rights), so they should only recognise free unions as entitled to represent the workers in the pursuit of their rights.

Further, the USA was the only country in the UN that voted against the declaration of a right to development. Their contention was that development is not a right but a goal which a country should aim at and gradually pursue. If development were a right, all poor Americans could sue the government to recognise at once their right to development and fulfill it. Applying this to the present discussion, do local TUs have a right to immediate development on demand?

Father Timm Dhaka

For a Stable Political System

Sir, I occasionally read intellectually vibrant articles in the DS. It is quite heartening to know that there are still some sane people around. The sad part is that no one of these people will ever come forward and become politically active, at least not until fair politics comes into existence. In an article For a Stable Political System written by Mr. Ramzul Seraj, the portion that stands

out to be the ultimate truth is the vision of a leader of the country, once in the opposition, more or less reflects that of the general masses. But these visions change as soon as they come into power.

I hope this will be an eye-opener for our politicians.

Dr Nazreen Nizam 18/A Old D.O.H.S Banani, Dhaka

New treatment for Kala-azar

Sir, A study published in the December 9, 1999 issue of New England Journal of Medicine, the most prestigious US medical journal, showed all the potentials of bringing a revolution in the treatment of kala-azar. Kala-azar or visceral leishmaniasis is a life threatening disease and one of the major health hazards in our country. It frequently is associated with epidemics, particularly in the northern part of Bangladesh. Till now, the mainstay treatment of kala-azar is pentavalent antimonial compound like sodium stibogluconate. Apart from its side effects, the failure rate of this 60-year-old drug is up to 40 per cent in some areas. The other choices are pentamidine

isethionate, which has its side effects too.

Recently, Amphotericin B has been shown to be 95 per cent effective but it frequently causes renal dysfunction. A newer formulation called liposomal Amphotericin B has less side effects but its high cost precludes its use in the developing countries where this disease is prevalent. Moreover a major disadvantage of all these drugs is that all of them have to be injected.

The study published in the New England Journal of Medicine was carried out by Indian and German physicians. It showed tremendous success of a newer agent, Miltefosine, in treating kala-azar. Miltefosine, which was originally developed as an anticancer drug, has all the potentials of becoming the first ever highly effective treatment of kala-azar. The study showed 97 per cent cure rate of kala-azar with a four-week regimen of 100 mg of miltefosine per day. Even better finding was that cure rate was high even among patients in whom antimonial therapy had failed. Further trials are still being carried out.

I would like to take this opportunity to draw the attention of our physicians and health authorities, particularly, the (IEDCR) Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research in Dhaka to explore the possibilities of using this drug in our country.

Dr A Nasser Khan, MD, DTM&H (London) Resident Physician University of Chicago (Weiss Memorial) Hospital Chicago, USA

Everyday is hartal?

Sir, It seems that we are drowning in an endless string of hartals. Has everybody gone insane? I mean, the month of November had gone by in the wink of an eye because of so few working days. Now, even in the month of Holy Ramadan the common people are not being spared, especially in Chittagong, one whole week in December has already been lost on account of 36-hour hartal and government holiday. This week there was hartal on the 21st and again there was a call for hartal

by the Chhatra Shibir on the following day. So, practically everyday seems to be a hartal! Isn't there anybody who can do something to stop these mindless acts

A Bewildered Observer Chittagong

Y2K in Dhaka

Sir, The Dhaka Electric Supply Authority (DESA) continues to prepare identical electric bills for the past several months showing same units of electricity consumption because of computer problems. I went to collect no-demand certificate from DESA office at Green Road, Dhaka but they could give me the certificate up to January 99 since new computer programmed bill has been introduced from February 99.

The DESA office do not possess any record of bill payment since Feb 99 and in newly designed bills the account numbers of consumers have been changed. It seems Y2K has just engulfed DESA before the probable advent of Y2K!

I went to collect a bill book for Titas Gas but the officials asked me to produce relevant documents in respect of gas connection. On the following day, I produced all the documents but the official indicated that I am to pay some more money. He asked me to come again to collect the relevant voucher though I was the lone customer. The self-prepared gas bill is paid to relevant banks but ledger books are not up-to-date.

The WASA meter continues to give abnormal readings and thus I approached WASA office at Segun Bagicha. The official asked Tk 3000 as service charge but without a receipt. However, I could see at Tk 2500 instead of paying higher charges. The ledger book located at WASA Fakirerpool did not contain all entries of WASA payment and thus I had to spend some extra money to avoid probable disconnection.

Thus it is evident that Y2K has already reached our service sectors.

Mahbub Rahman Dagoni Villa P.O. Bagerhat