

Phone Calls and After

OUR early morning advisory note to opposition leader Begum Zia, in view of the PM's abortive phone calls to her on Sunday, would be this: please give Sheikh Hasina a return call if you have not done so already. Apart from the expectation of a courtesy begetting courtesy, both of you must know that the whole world is watching you with a bated breath for an early resolution of the stand-off between you two.

That said, we cannot help commenting on the informal, somewhat impulsive style in which the PM tried an ice-breaker with the leader of the opposition and the equally tentative, even whimsical manner in which the latter withheld her immediate response to it. The Prime Minister in her meeting with the OCAB on Sunday said that she dialled Begum Zia after the latter in a meeting with the same correspondents' association the day before had indicated she was open to a dialogue offer if made in a formal manner.

It certainly amounted to a half-hearted attempt by the PM at engaging Begum Zia in a telephonic conversation when she had publicly stated her requirement for the dialogue to be a written letter. If the PM had indeed sent a formal proposal for talks to Begum Zia she would have placed the opposition leader's credibility on line because of the latter's public declaration about awaiting a written approach from AL to be able to respond. We wonder if the PM did not go black and white about it in first place! The matter could be carried forward as much as a letter faxed by the AL Secretary general to his counterpart in the BNP.

Equally disquietingly, we have seen the leader of the opposition being hung up on protocol and prestige etc. at the expense of what needed to be done urgently. Her refusal to attend the Armed Forces Day function with the advance knowledge that the PM had decided to request her for a dialogue is a case in point, let alone the latest handling of the PM's calls.

The incurable penchant for trivialities on the part of both the major players in national politics gives testimony to their lack of seriousness and sincerity in resolving the grave political crisis that faces the nation today.

The election is constitutionally ordained to be held in one and a half years' time but the PM has hinted at an earlier election to avoid the rainy season coinciding with the normally due dates for the next polls. The opposition should rethink their position and go in for urgent talks with the government on three specific agenda items: how to make the next general election truly free and fair; and what will ensure their participation in the pourashava polls coupled with their attendance in the sessions of parliament.

Why Repeat a Bad Remark?

REPETITION of an indecent remark does not necessarily change it into a decent one nor does defending it makes it acceptable. The PM's unprintable insinuations against the opposition leader on the floor of the House has already evoked negative reactions among decent, free thinking people. We thought that we had seen the end of such aspersive comments. But no, we heard a repetition of the same at a recent public meeting and what's more she has justified her remarks again in her meeting with the Overseas Correspondents' Association, Bangladesh (OCAB) at the Jatiya Press Club on Sunday. When people feel the remarks were indecent and abhor them why doesn't the prime minister feel the same way and keep from repeating the mistake again and again. Why should she pick on such an important political leader with whom she will have to deal as part of the requirement of her office? This newspaper does not know of a single person who has defended the PM's remarks. On the contrary there are many mid and high-level leaders of the ruling party itself who admitted to feeling embarrassed by the remark and its repetition.

The PM must particularly realise that she was denigrating a person with whom she intends to sit for a dialogue, at least that is what she is trying to make the people believe. She is casting aspersions on the moral integrity of the leader of the opposition which is too serious a thing to be casual about. If seems the PM has a unique logic which is only understood by her. The systematic tirade against the leader of the opposition by the prime minister only goes to strengthen the belief that she does not want to establish a rapport with the former. This does not bode well for the people of the country. We, in all earnestness, wish to see the government and the opposition sit for dialogue in a congenial atmosphere and break the stalemate for a better future of the country and its people. We, therefore, urge the PM not to repeat what everybody considers to be a bad remark.

Keraniganj Fire

THERE is a familiar tinge about Sunday's fire at a slum in Keraniganj that left the shanties in ashes, six people snuffed out and scores of shops in the adjoining areas gutted. From the outbreak of the blaze — it all started from an earthen oven at one of the shanties — to the havoc it eventually wrought, it was an action replay of many such incidents that we have seen and read and heard about beforehand. Early this year, several hundred shanties were obliterated in an inferno at Islambagh in the old part of the capital. There appears to be a pattern here in terms of place, nature and victims of such incidents. It's inevitably the slums and the dwellers who get caught in the middle of such an all-devouring blaze.

Given the 'housing' materials used, the proximity of one shanty to the other, use of fire so close to inflammable object, the slums are extremely vulnerable to fire. The tiniest spark of flame can lead to an all-engulfing blaze and cause death to quite a few of the hundreds of people crammed inside these slums. With the parents out in search of jobs, it's the children who fall victim and in Keraniganj that has also been the case — four of the six killed were minor children, one of them aged just one and a half years.

Basically, therefore, there is no way of minimising the chances of fire breaking out in some other slums at some other part of the city other than sensitising them about the safe use of fire. As for the bereaved families of the deceased and now homeless, we extend our sincerest empathy. We urge the authorities to stand by them at their hour of distress with emergency relief materials and medicine.

THE advent of a new century of the 21st has been talked about for years now — around the world and in this country. The themes addressed include challenges and opportunities in the forthcoming century and how to manage them for optimizing the benefits for the people. This new century is now upon us. Preparations are afoot, around the world, particularly in the West, for celebrating the beginning of the century on 1 January 2000. But one would have thought the century should start on 1 January 2001. How can a unit of time begin at zero? Although the concept of zero was not known to the adherents of this Gregorian Calendar until they got it from the Arabs, the anomaly could possibly have since been removed. It would appear that if the new century is to begin with 2000 as the first year, there must have been a century in the past in this Calendar which had been of a duration of 99 years. Be that as it may, but why should one be excited about the 21st century? Time ticks by. The future as we conceive it at this instant becomes 'present' and, then, 'past' as the wheel of time revolves untiringly, inevitably. The relevant issues at any point in time for the concerned people are: how were their circumstances in the past, what are the conditions in which they live at the present time, how have these conditions evolved, and how might the future be shaped? But the present juncture on time's path, as the 20th century gives way to the 21st, is special in many ways because of unprecedented achievements of the human race, particularly over the past several decades, and the challenges that underlie the ruling international order as well as the national orders.

The 20th century has been extremely successful for humankind in terms of unprecedented technological advancement and wealth creation. Over the past decade or so, the internet and information superhighway have revolutionized communications in such a manner that at the click of a mouse one can reach anybody anywhere from anywhere else or move billions of dollars from one part of the world to another.

But this phenomenal progress achieved through human ingenuity and endeavour has brought in its wake many

Bangladesh in the 21st Century

Challenges in Shaping the Future

The water shortage challenge needs to be faced squarely and with total political and intellectual commitment. In this regard also, awareness exists and is increasing, globally, regionally, and nationally. But there is little concerted action as yet. This challenge needs to be urgently addressed early in the 21st century to build a sustainable water world, to avert the threatening serious water crisis, even likely 'water wars.'

challenges. These challenges the world is poised to face as the 21st century enters and progresses. The basic question is: can the international community call upon the reserves of human ingenuity to meet the challenges in a manner that will enable the global society to march forward in an orderly fashion? For that to happen, the process will need to be charged with human consciousness focused on caring and sharing, and not given to only excelling and conquering as has been the case in the 20th century.

A major challenge has to do with the sheer size of the world population, which has just crossed the 6 billion mark and is still growing quite fast. Moreover, it is the developing countries which account for the large majority of the current population and will also account for the large majority of future additions to the total. Population control and human capability development are the key areas of focus in this context.

A related major challenge arises from the widespread and deep-seated poverty and deprivation in the developing countries. There are also pockets of poverty and deprivation in the developed countries, usually among ethnic minorities. The genesis of this distressful state of affairs lies in the ownership, control and access structures governing the technological regime and the wealth of the world. Although human progress in all fields has been phenomenal in recent decades, a large proportion of the world's 6 billion people still lives a life of drudgery in conditions of ignorance and abject poverty, well below a minimum level of human dignity. Some 20 per cent of the world population, belonging mostly to the developed world, controls about 80 per cent of the world's wealth. Also, the wealthiest 20 per cent is now as much as 135 times richer than the poorest 20 per cent. Moreover, the disparity between the developed and the developing countries in fact continues to increase in economic and human development

terms. It is this paradox of wide and deep deprivations in the midst of monumental material progress that makes the present time marking the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st of so much significance for so many around the globe and in this country.

The issues raised above relate to social and political sustainability of development globally and also in individual countries, within which disparities and deprivations are glaring just as in the world order. Another set of challenges relates to anthropogenic climate change. Human interventions in harnessing natural resources, particularly the profligate use of non-renewable resources, have caused environmental degradation already of a degree that is threatening not

decades or so ago, the world was bipolar and the Cold War was still raging. Socialism was a serious option for certain countries in the developing world. However, the paradigm of public control and ownership began to be pushed back by the mid-1970s, and country after country started adopting free market reforms with the initiative coming from the World Bank and the IMF. As the 1980s gave way to the 1990s, communism as a governing and economic system finally collapsed, and a unipolar world order emerged, with the USA leading the way. Following that, the World Bank and the IMF took to spearheading the thrust for establishing a free-market-based world order, urging, cajoling and pushing the developing countries to introduce or strengthen standardized stabilization and structural adjustment reforms. These reforms were often thrust upon the poor countries dependent on foreign aid as aid conditionality, regardless of the dynamics of their socio-economic realities. Of course, many reforms relating to governance and financial discipline, for example, need to be carried out in these countries anyway, without prodding from the donors. But, even such reforms cannot be accomplished overnight. Accomplished they must be as fast as possible, but it should be made sure that there is orderliness in the process so that the gains are solid and a momentum is generated.

Indeed, the prospects of Bangladesh to benefit from the evolving globalization appears to be disconcerting. Aid climate has been becoming increasingly bleak, and the trend is likely to continue. Market access of developing countries to developed countries will likely be problematic in the coming years as has been the case in the past, if not more so. The main reason is the persisting, even deepening inward-looking stances of the developed countries, as reflected in their failure to fulfill obligations agreed under the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade negotiations and their insistence to include new issues in the 'Millennium Round' of trade negotiations which may begin in the course of time under the auspices of the World Trade Organization (WTO), despite the breakdown of the recent Seattle conference which was expected to launch it.

Another major challenge for the developing countries in particular, arise from the kind of globalization that has been forced upon them via aid conditionality. Many poor developing countries, as they globalize, face heavy social costs in terms of, for example, unemployment and increasing disparity, while their economic growth has also failed to accelerate. The glaring, growing inequalities that characterize the world order (as between developed and developing countries) are also characteristics of national orders in the developing countries which have been implementing World Bank/IMF-induced free market reforms.

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decade ago, the world was bipolar and the Cold War was still raging. Socialism was a serious option for certain countries in the developing world. However, the paradigm of public control and ownership began to be pushed back by the mid-1970s, and country after country started adopting free market reforms with the initiative coming from the World Bank and the IMF. As the 1980s gave way to the 1990s, communism as a governing and economic system finally collapsed, and a unipolar world order emerged, with the USA leading the way. Following that, the World Bank and the IMF took to spearheading the thrust for establishing a free-market-based world order, urging, cajoling and pushing the developing countries to introduce or strengthen standardized stabilization and structural adjustment reforms. These reforms were often thrust upon the poor countries dependent on foreign aid as aid conditionality, regardless of the dynamics of their socio-economic realities. Of course, many reforms relating to governance and financial discipline, for example, need to be carried out in these countries anyway, without prodding from the donors. But, even such reforms cannot be accomplished overnight. Accomplished they must be as fast as possible, but it should be made sure that there is orderliness in the process so that the gains are solid and a momentum is generated.

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Another challenge is the critical and increasing shortage of fresh water in many parts of the world, given that the supply is finite but demand for water has been fast increasing in response to ever increasing population and ever expanding economic activity. Water is needed for life (for drinking and household uses), for food (for agriculture including crop and fishery; food security) and for nature (for ecological health), besides other purposes as hydroelectricity generation, industrial uses, and navigation. In other words, water is absolutely critical to people's life and living. The water shortage challenge needs to be faced squarely and with total political and intellectual commitment. In this regard also, awareness exists and is increasing, globally, regionally, and nationally. But there is little concerted action as yet. This challenge needs to be urgently addressed early in the 21st century to build a sustainable water world, to avert the threatening serious water crisis, even likely 'water wars.'

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LETTER FROM AMERICA

The "Butcher" of Chechnya

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

To mollify America, according to The New York Times, Russia offered to let America have its way with UN sanctions against Iraq, if America would only desist from criticising Russia's actions in Chechnya! America refused. Unlike Russia, America and the West do care about human rights. The West may not be in love with "Islamic militants," but the safety of civilians everywhere remains a major Western concern.

Russia alone finance its adventures in Chechnya."

Mere condemnation not having worked at long last America is beginning to tighten the screws to modify Russian behaviour. Last week, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright stopped a US bank from loaning 500 million dollars to a Russian oil company, ostensibly for corruption but in reality for Russian brutality in Chechnya. America knows that Russia understands and respects force. Any time America confronted Russia — in Cuba (1962), Afghanistan (1979-89) and in the Balkans recently — Russia has always backed down. Now that Mr. Putin's allies have won the majority of seats in the Duma in this week's Russian elections (because of the popularity of the Chechen war) and the distinct possibility of Mr. Putin succeeding Mr. Yeltsin as Russia's President next year, America realises that it has to send the right message to Mr. Putin.

To mollify America, according to The New York Times, Russia offered to let America have its way with UN sanctions against Iraq, if America would only desist from criticising Russia's actions in Chechnya! America refused. Unlike Russia, America and the West do care about human rights. The West may not be in love with "Islamic militants," but the safety of civilians everywhere remains a major Western concern. American criticism of Russian brutality is steadily on the rise. A NY Times reader wrote: "Chechnya is as much a part of Russia as India was a part of Britain." Or Algeria was a part of France, he could have added. Even the Harvard University sage Samuel Huntington, who predicts a "clash" whenever he sees two civilisations side by side, weighed in with the opinion that Russia has no business being in Chechnya, and although it may claim victory now, eventually Russia will be forced to leave Chechnya.

The Daily Star," Take a Bow!

Last week the writer received a phone call from the news division of America's premier television network, ABC television. "Read your article in The Daily Star" entitled, "What's in a name?" he began. The reporter then proceeded to ask the writer whether he had a second source on "Muhammad," being the most popular name in the world.

The writer replied that his sole source was a question in the quiz show, "Jeopardy." "I have already spoken to 'Jeopardy,'" the reporter replied. The writer did not ask why ABC wanted the information. The guess is that perhaps they will use it in connection with number one in everything the millennium.

Although the writer composes the Daily Star pieces for the benefit of the folks back home, he knows that expatriate Bangladeshis read the Internet version. He was not aware that the readership included the non-Bangladeshis as well. Notice also how meticulously American news media check out multiple sources before airing a piece of news.

To the Editor...

Et tu, Brutus!

Sir, We all know that the pirs or saints preach religion in peaceful ways. But when bombs and ammunition are found in the darbar sharif of Dewardagh peer; when the disciples of Charmonai and Dewardagh pirs create havoc and damage property, then what can we say?

We thought that our politicians use terrorists for power, and now terrorists are used by the pirs as well. There are some so-called pirs doing business in the name of religion and their aim is not only to hoodwink the people but also to distort and insult our religion.

Iqbal Ahmed

Dhaka 1000

Arms and the students

Sir, I am deeply shocked at the recent outburst of violence by the student wings of the ruling party and other political parties. It is a shame how students are being ruthlessly exploited by the political parties to intimidate and attack ordinary people. The student wings

of the political parties really do not represent the students. These organisations are patronised by leaders of the major political parties who provide cash and arms to thugs to order to win elections: for posts in university and college student bodies. The student wings of the major political parties are harming the genuine students.

Instead of punishing terrorists, the ruling party and other major parties continue to support the miscreants. These miscreants are destroying the institutions of higher learning in this country through their routine and systematic crimes with active support of the major opposition parties.

Women are assaulted

Sir, Forty-seven per cent of adult women in Bangladesh are physically assaulted by an intimate male partner in any relationship. The UNICEF in its annual report *The State of the World's Children 2000*, launched across the world recently disclosed the women's predicament quoting a database of the WHO.

This is enough to make us upset.

Nezbat Maswood

USA

Repair works of buses and trucks

Sir, Time and again we have heard announcements of the authorities concerned prohibiting repair works of motor vehicles on the public roads. But who cares? Hundreds of motor workshops have been set up in different busy and crowded places in the city. Wherein every day hundreds of buses, trucks, and scooters are being parked indiscriminately, repaired whimsically, bodies of the vehicles painted, vulcanising and welding works done on the public roads at the very nose of the authorities concerned, DCC, traffic police and law enforcing authorities.

We wonder why the government

orders and announcements are made on the one

hand and on the other hand the same government orders and announcements are openly violated and left uncared for?

O H Kabir
6, Hare Street
Wari, Dhaka-1203.

Insufficient transport facility

Sir, Transport facilities are quite insufficient in Bangladesh. But in Chittagong city it's worse. People here have to wait for a long time in a queue to avail a bus and when a bus reaches a bus-stop, passengers rush into it. Some hang from the windows and some take shelter at the back.

As a result buses are overloaded. Many passengers miss buses for overloading.

Chittagong City Corporation and the government should take proper steps to import or to manufacture sufficient number of buses for the increasing population. I draw the attention of the authorities concerned to look into the matter and solve this problem immediately.

M A Rahim

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