

Dhaka, Thursday, December 30, 1999

Little to Do with Serving People

THE Cabinet expansion by an induction of nine new faces at the approaching fag-end of the AL government's tenure has very little rationale behind it. That does not, however, mean it is inexplicable.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has lately made it clear that the next General Election which falls due in June, 2001 will have to be brought forward to facilitate voting by avoiding the rainy season which sets in at that time. In other words, we have much less than one and a half years to go before the next polls. If Sheikh Hasina's Cabinet expansion and the concomitant reshuffle had come about at the half-way point of her tenure we could regard it as a customary thing done, and easily attach a governance motive to it, too. But obviously that is not to be. Her move to increase the size of the 45-member Council of Ministers by a broad sweep of 26 per cent has been prompted purely by her party's interests with an eye to the forthcoming elections.

She has only tried to be placatory to the party stalwarts who had not been given ministerial berths earlier on, to do good turn to some of her relatives as well and finally to raise Cabinet representation from the north where the BNP and Jatiya Party, after their alliance, look poised to throw a formidable electoral challenge to the AL. Under such circumstances of tenurial limitation and electoral compulsion, the considerations of public service and better governance could not be the most among her objectives. Through the cabinet expansion though, Sheikh Hasina may have tried to project before the opposition that, well, she remains unruffled despite their demand for her immediate resignation.

Yet cabinet expansion may have already got off to a wrong start because allocation of portfolios, in our view, has very little to do with the known capabilities of the persons concerned. She can be endlessly stuck with this bad reshuffle as the pressing issues of governance and better inter-party relations recede into the background.

Death on Highway

US collision kills 30 on Dhaka-Ctg Highway. So read the headline of a report front-paged in The Daily Star on Wednesday. A major mishap it was, indeed; one of its kind it wasn't, however. Sadly, such accidents have become a familiar phenomenon in our daily life. We have seen and read and heard about similar incidents in the past and would do so in the future as well. Frightening frequency of crashes on the motorway has formed in us a rather fatalist view of them; so much so that we cannot think beyond the sad sentiments these invoke into figuring out remedial measures. Perhaps, that is one of the reasons why the country does not have any road safety measure in place as yet.

Reckless driving, sometimes induced by alcohol consumption, and novice drivers at the wheel have often been major factors leading to these accidents. At times, technical failure, such as dysfunctional brake, plays the devil. Besides, flawed road engineering contributes to the tragedy, too. Unfortunately, these deviations are often accommodated for want of effective and efficient vigilance and enforcement. Often there are allegations of vehicles plying the highways without proper fitness clearance and driven by people without licence. Yet, despite extant laws, such deviations go unabated, eventually resulting in loss of lives.

Bangladesh has the dubious distinction of having one of the highest rates of traffic accidents in South Asia — out of every 10,000 vehicles 70 meet with fatal accidents. According to a recent count, made by a former Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) chairman, more than 5,000 people got killed last year. That such a frightful revelation got lost on the authorities was accentuated by occurrence of a series of accidents on the highway this year, Tuesday's tragedy being the latest. Basically, therefore, we urge the people concerned to put these accidents in proper perspective and find out the systemic flaws that may have caused them.

Our sincerest sympathy goes to bereaved families of the victims and best wishes for those who have survived the crash and are now under treatment.

Royal Combination!

COLLUSION between cops and criminals is a recent phenomenon. It is proving to be popular day by day as well. Those days are no more when the relation between these two species was like the one between a cat and a mouse. Times have changed and so have their equations. These days we often come across intriguing stories and photographs of a cat being breast-fed by a dog and vice-versa or a cat and mouse setting an example of peaceful coexistence. When the animals can progress so much in terms of relations, why can't human beings, the best among God's creations, live in cooperation with each other, be that a policeman or a criminal? But the predicament is that while the animal draws the appreciation and exclamation of the readers the *homo sapiens* only evokes wrath and indignation from the sufferers.

A Daily Star report, published on the back page on Wednesday, described how an innocent entrepreneur named Mizanur Rahman became a victim of disguised collaboration between the cops and a gang of criminals at the New Market. His crime purportedly was that he did not buy phone cards from a gang because he possessed them anyway. The goons roughing him up he approached a police patrol party for help. They advised him to contact Lalbagh police station which, like a good citizen he did, but only to be told that he should hold his ground till their arrival. The police did not turn up. Finally, it is a traffic policeman who advised the victim to 'gang up with the gang' for a compromise. What a novel solution!

Kader Siddique's Convention and Storm Troopers

No judicial enquiry or fair investigation has yet been conducted on many incidents from which neither the government nor the police can exonerate themselves. The people need an answer to these questions and the government must provide this answer.

THE incident relating to the conference convened by Bangabir Kader Siddique in Uttam on 24 December imparted a new dimension to the current political culture and democratic norms prevalent in the country. The purpose of the conference was to announce the floating of a new political Party by Kader Siddique after having resigned or been expelled from the ruling Awami League Party. The venue of the conference was the Engineers Institute of Dhaka located in the heart of the metropolitan city.

Soon after the commencement of the conference and in the midst of the delivery of speech by Kader Siddique, some troubles started by a group of people masquerading as participants. Then shortly after restoration of order a group of armed hooligans appeared from outside, started indiscriminate shooting, terrorized the participants and physically destroyed the conference. The police on duty, as in connivance, remained a silent spectator and came into action only after the hooligans had completed their mission of vandalism and destruction and left. The police action took place as a sequel to the wrath and frustration of participants of the conference on the deliberate inaction of the police force to allow such open acts of terrorism, as if in police

protection. Kader Siddique, chief guest Dr. Kamal Hossain and others hurriedly left the scene and held the meeting in the Press Club to complete their work.

Kader Siddique's speech has been well-known and going on for some time. Siddique's role as a valiant freedom fighter is legendary. Yet, the Prime Minister disliked the outspoken utterances of Bangabir in and out of the Parliament against government's policies and actions and also against Ministers. The last straw on the camel's back fell when he questioned about the personal wealth of the Prime Minister and her family. He was expelled from the Party, despite his having practically severed connection with the Awami League. It may be recalled that following formation of government by the Awami League, all the Ministers were asked to file reports about their assets and property from which even the Prime Minister was not exempted. But one does not know about the fate of these statements and many think these would be utilized, if and

when necessary, for partisan purposes. Then came the by-election to Tanguar parliamentary seat, which had been vacated by Kader Siddique himself. The Awami League appeared determined to teach the recalcitrant a lesson and through unpreceded rigging deprived Kader Siddique his legitimate seat.

What now one should surmise about the incident of this blatant terrorism? Firstly, it speaks ill of the present state of lawlessness in the country. While the government is taking steps to apprehend and punish such criminals like Ershad Shikdar, it is denying citizen's legitimate rights to hold a peaceful indoor meeting. It is impossible to sell the idea that the government could not allow this meeting to complete peace-

fully, had it sincerely wanted it. Secondly, it implies that the government has been indiscriminately using members of the law enforcing agencies to resort to unlawful and partisan purposes, specially directed against political opposition's lawful and democratic activities. Thirdly, armed cadres of Chhatra League are continuing

ing committed have surpassed those in the past. This again justifies the postulate that government's words and actions on many issues are diagonally apart.

Fifthly, the incident substantiates the fact that the nature and strategy of the Awami League to use hooligans and armed goons have not changed since its formation. It may be recalled that the convention held by Maulana Bhashani to announce formation of the National Awami Party in Rupnagar in 1957 had also been foiled by armed hooligans of the Awami League. Subhrawary was then President of Awami League as well as Prime Minister of Pakistan who wanted parity between the two wings of Pakistan and formation of one unit in West Pakistan both of which were detrimental to the people of the then East Pakistan. And finally, the terrorism witnessed in Kader Siddique's conference is reminiscent of Nazi storm troopers, who would not hesitate to strike and annihilate anything at the command of its superiors. This, unfortunately implies the contention that the



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

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Tale of Two Leaders and a Nation

by A M M Shahabuddin

With the advent of the 21st century and the new millennium, let us take a solemn vow to discard the politics of hatred and destruction, the politics of counting dead bodies to accelerate further agitations...

OUR political leaders, particularly belonging to the major parties, are orbiting our political space, creating great stir and consternation at home and abroad. We have already made a name and fame? around as a brave new nation that doesn't bother to kill each other just for the 'promotion' of democratic values and that institutionalises violence in every way of life. Purposely I have not mentioned the names of the actors and actresses as they have already become household names by leading the nation, successfully, since achieving independence 28 years ago from the yoke of the Pakistani rule.

Now our march is towards a jungle culture of 'might is right', indiscipline, dishonesty, lack of sense of proportion and so on and so forth. The list will multiply like growth of bugs if not checked. But none of them would admit that what they are doing is symbolic of watering the plants and cutting their roots at the same time. The world community must be laughing at our abnormal behaviour with a big question mark. Our country deserves to be called a land of most volatile democracy. 'You self-deluded fools, how we pity you.'

Let me elaborate the point a bit further. Four women, belonging to the subcontinent, and one from Sri Lanka, had inherited 'leadership' either from their dead father or dead husband. The reference is to India's Mrs Indira Gandhi, Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto, Bangladesh's Begum Zia and Sri Lanka's Chandrika Kumaratunga. But none of them had a rival woman leader, except for Bangladesh. Unfortunately, Bangladesh had to pass through and is still in a turmoil under the menacing 'twin' leadership. Is it not shameful to hear from a distinguished foreign envoy, representing a donor country that 'it seems to outsiders that there is intolerance on both sides (ruling party and the opposition) which is damaging the country very severely'. How funny it is when the *outsiders* could see how the two quarreling parties are 'damaging the country severely', our patriotic leaders who are shedding crocodile tears all the time for the poor people do not realise the damaging role! And the last word of wisdom of the envoy was like the last straw to break the camel's back, when he bluntly advised the two party leadership 'to step back and consider the national interest'. Will this 'mild *lathi-charge*' help our wrestling leaders to come to their almost lost sense of patriotism? Let us hope for the best.

Root Cause?

The tragedy is that the two leaders, incidentally both women, now holding the reins of their respective parties and after having ruled the country alternately, seem to be opposed to the principle of coexistence and cooperation and amity. It is difficult to say whether it is the outcome of a sort of feminine weakness or not, but it is an exceptional case. As they say, ten *sadhus* (saints or hermits) can share one blanket, but two kings (queens?) can't live in one country, just as 'two swords can't be kept in one sheath' (let the assumption prove incorrect for the good of the country). But the message is there, right or

wrong, and enough for the wise.

Let me elaborate the point a bit further. Four women, belonging to the subcontinent, and one from Sri Lanka, had inherited 'leadership' either from their dead father or dead husband. The reference is to India's Mrs Indira Gandhi, Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto, Bangladesh's Begum Zia and Sri Lanka's Chandrika Kumaratunga. But none of them had a rival woman leader, except for Bangladesh. Unfortunately, Bangladesh had to pass through and is still in a turmoil under the menacing 'twin' leadership. Is it not shameful to hear from a distinguished foreign envoy, representing a donor country that 'it seems to outsiders that there is intolerance on both sides (ruling party and the opposition) which is damaging the country very severely'. How funny it is when the *outsiders* could see how the two quarreling parties are 'damaging the country severely', our patriotic leaders who are shedding crocodile tears all the time for the poor people do not realise the damaging role! And the last word of wisdom of the envoy was like the last straw to break the camel's back, when he bluntly advised the two party leadership 'to step back and consider the national interest'. Will this 'mild *lathi-charge*' help our wrestling leaders to come to their almost lost sense of patriotism? Let us hope for the best.

Truth is always bitter. It is better to be open-minded to admit that we as a nation stand bankrupt, politically and socially, before the world. We have lost all our sense of proportion. What scene we had enacted on both sides (ruling party and the opposition) which is damaging the country very severely'. How funny it is when the *outsiders* could see how the two quarreling parties are 'damaging the country severely', our patriotic leaders who are shedding crocodile tears all the time for the poor people do not realise the damaging role! And the last word of wisdom of the envoy was like the last straw to break the camel's back, when he bluntly advised the two party leadership 'to step back and consider the national interest'. Will this 'mild *lathi-charge*' help our wrestling leaders to come to their almost lost sense of patriotism? Let us hope for the best.

So far so good. But an end to these destructive practices, aimed at the elimination of an alien government, should have been put decisively, so that such agitation aimed at the ruination of national wealth, waging a sort of holy war against an elected national government, was banished for good. So what our new generation has inherited from the old school of thoughts is anachronistic in the national context of things. The earlier we are exorcised of these thoughts the better.

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So without just blaming the police or the courts let us give some thoughts on the issue with a wider vision as follows:

1. How about making the magistrates and judges accountable directly for deterioration in the law and order situation? Do they not have anything to do with it? If necessary, we must go for legal reforms to make all in the field responsible for failure on their part. Just the threat of contempt of court should not be a shield. The law should also be repealed making every citizen in the society subject to law and leaving none above law.

2. The police from constable upto the Addl IG's need training, refresher courses and tests. Once trained in an institute or the Academy at Sarda does not make a man perpetually fit for all assignments without repeated tests and trials. As such every cop must undergo fresh training for at least three months every five years. This training should be accompanied by benefits like T/A & D A family allowance as well as special Training Allowances so that the cop concerned doesn't feel like being punished while being sent for training.

3. All policemen from constables to I G should be called upon and constantly reminded that they are public servants and not masters of the people. While they need to be firm and even tough with the criminals, they have to be nice to the people at large and specially good to innocent people, not to speak of harassing them. It should be remembered that restoration of the image of the police is most important at the moment. Why should a member of the public think of a policeman as a friend when he finds him otherwise? So utmost care must be taken to ensure that while dealing with the public no master-like attitude and no unfriendly gestures are shown.

4. At present all the police training institutes including the Police Academy at Sarda are providing routine physical training and there are no moral suasion which are a must to keep the spirit of a force high in national interest. For this again very honest officers

ruling party would not brook any obstacle to perpetuate its rule and has therefore resorted to such fascist actions to stifle and destroy political opposition on the way to formation of a de-facto one-party BKSAL rule.

Hon'ble Prime Minister in reply to a question at the recently held meeting of OCAB did not have a ready answer on this incident but commented that she would look into the matter. But many such breaches in the law and order situation have taken place in recent times. In addition to what happened in this convention, there are photographic evidences of criminals, apparently acting at the behest of the ruling party, shooting at and beating up journalists and opposition workers, but no fruitful action has taken place to apprehend them. Even the police firing on political leaders leading a procession charged the latter carrying guns, bombs and animal blood to smear themselves on. No judicial enquiry or fair investigation has yet been conducted on many such incidents on which neither the government nor the police can exonerate themselves. The people need an answer to these questions and the government must provide this answer.

Only the young leadership would be ready to accept defeat as a defeat and victory as victory not only for its own party but would learn to reciprocate the same with rival parties. Can't we show the same spirit and magnanimity as was boldly put up by the British Conservative party leader, John Major, who on the floor of the parliament, conceded graciously the defeat of his party and congratulated the new victorious Labour Party leader, Tony Blair? Let our much abused and misused democracy and our party leaders follow the way shown by the mother of parliamentary democracy for our future guidance to give a new life and true spirit of an independent nation to stand high in the comity of nations. If we still fail to catch our 'national problems' by their horns, then our future is bleak. Let the darkest hour before dawn be over soon.

With the advent of the 21st century and the new millennium, let us take a solemn vow to discard the politics of hatred and destruction, the politics of counting dead bodies to accelerate further agitations... Let us create more killing fields, more *sheheds* and more *Shahid Minars*, we have got enough of them. Let us refrain from digging our own graves by cutting each other's throats. Let the new leadership be bold enough to call a spade a spade and run the country towards peace, progress and prosperity.

The writer is a retired UN official.

OPINION

Police and the Public

F Ahmed

There has been a lot said as well as written with regard to the role of the police in maintaining law and order in the society and creating an environment congenial for steady socio-economic growth. There is no doubt that people are fed up with the behaviour of some members of the police force taking law in their own hands, sometimes committing murder themselves whereas they are supposed to deter and bring to book such crimes. There is no doubt that the role played by some members of the police force in tackling public unrest has not been appreciated by many. It is also not untrue that the manners of many of the cops including some officers need to be drastically improved.

As for excesses committed by the police force, departmental as well as normal legal actions are a must as they are, like any one else, citizens of this country and subject to the law of the land. In fact, they deserve being punished exemplarily because they are supposed to catch the law-breakers and not play the role of the latter themselves. But what about a scenario where cops even risk their lives to apprehend notorious criminals whom they find are enlarged on bail by the courts the moment they are produced for trial. In many cases, the same criminals caught a number of times is seen to be out on bail forthwith. Without generally criticising the courts or doubting their integrity one simple example is possibly enough — the case of the killer who was reportedly bailed out by the Supreme Court and who killed sergeant Ahad within weeks of his enlargement on bail. A pick-pocket became so big a shot in the world of crime that he could move the highest court for bail which to us ordinary citizens implies that after being refused bail by all courts he went up the highest rung of the ladder and got it!

This is what we read in many of the newspapers and none contested it. Another case of the brave Sathkhira judge is what we all know through the media. He risked his life refusing bail to some miscreants who were granted bail by a higher court in no time. Let us think of Ershad Shikdar. The police, despite being what they are, caught him over a dozen times and charged him with various offences and the courts, lower as well as higher, let him off all the time. It is just unimaginable how he could go on committing all

sorts of crimes and get away with it. Risk allowance, extra duty allowance and special awards should be considered to keep the morale of the police force high. Besides they should be given all protections needed to face the challenges boldly. Just asking them to meet challenges and failing them while in risk is the extreme case — the one that happened while Sergeant Ahad died fighting unarmed against armed miscreants, unsupported while in action, a mishap that should awaken us all. It has to be remembered that while the bad ones have to be punished, the good ones need to be encouraged and supported to any extent.

Since the whole nation's welfare and augmentation of economic development is directly dependent on good law and order situation for which the police is situation for which the police is

not a vast metropolis where a criminal of Shikdar's dimension could perpetrate crime beyond the knowledge of police and other government agencies.

It is interesting to note that all those agencies were in place and must have no good reason to have not known Shikdar's mind boggling deeds of dark world. It has become a fashion to nab a criminal on 'tip-off', as if they slept over their duties till nudged by the so-called 'tip-off'. What then were they doing to earn their salaries from government exchequer if nothing can be done on its own? Big hauls of gold and contraband items do take place in our airports on a 'tip-off', so are the stories of hardened criminals make headlines when 'tip-offs' lead to their arrest. Our officers wait for the 'tip-off' to break their slumber.

According to a survey report, 700 deer have been killed this year. The meat of killed deer are sold in local market. This number is the highest in many years. Not only deer but tigers, birds and many other animals are being killed every year illegally. Unfortunately, some officials and local political leaders are also involved with this. And thus the eco-system of the Sundarbans is deteriorating.

To our discontent, dishonest officials, political leaders have engaged themselves in tree felling. The group is so strong that the Sundarbans-loving officials can't go against them. Oddly enough, the ministry concerned maintains a snail pace to take any action against them. Last year, some nine crore taka was illegally earned by this group, selling trees. But so far, no action has