

President's New Year Thought

PRESIDENT Shahabuddin Ahmed's new year address to the almost half-empty Jatiya Sangsad on Saturday, with the opposition boycotting it, was a regulation annual speech of the head of state in the form of a review of governmental activities in the past year. What was sought to be mirrored thereby is the direction of events in national affairs tinged with the President's insights into how things had gone in the preceding year.

It was important for the Opposition to have heard at first-hand the President's new year address to the parliament, more because of the fact that it coincided with the dawn of a new Century. It is one thing to read it second hand from newspaper reports or even go through an officially printed copy of the same, and it is entirely another to serve public interest by critically analysing the speech on the floor of the House itself and pointing out where the government had failed. And that is where the opposition has faltered showing little sensitivity to a routine requirement, not to speak of the special public expectation for their version of things into the new millennium. And there was so much for them to say on the President's address to the Parliament.

We would like to be extremely selective with the contents of the President's speech to make our observations on. First of all, in an oblique reference to the exacerbated state of political polarisation in the country, the President urged the leaders of political parties and the people to forget individual and party interests for the sake of greater national good. He has reasoned quite powerfully as to why must the national interest be kept uppermost in our minds. We have collectively sacrificed much too much for the establishment of Bangladesh and preservation of democracy to be self-centred and bitterly partisan now in our approach to what fundamentally are social or national concerns and problems. Secondly, the political culture has become so self-serving that all kinds of institutions, political, administrative, social and economic, have been weakened by it. Thus democracy faces a wider institutional distortion than the mere fact of the parliament working ineffectively. Last, but not the least, proliferation of petty political squabbles has been a stumbling-block to the effort for strengthening the foundations of democracy which is indispensable for achieving economic freedom, an agenda that remains unaddressed even after 28 years of our attaining political freedom.

Threat to Press Freedom

IT is known to all that in a democracy freedom of press is as important as freedom of thought and freedom of speech. Democracy cannot function without these basic liberties. In the last twenty-eight years of our independent existence, press in Bangladesh has gone through various phases of freedom as well as repression during different governments — elected or otherwise. Since the toppling of the autocrat in 1990, the print medium in particular has had better operational freedom under the elected governments in spite of stray incidents of intimidation by party musclemen and law enforcing personnel.

So far so good. But the recent incident of shooting at a newspaper office at Tejgaon by unidentified gunmen and the threat delivered on the life of the Dhaka University correspondent of the Bangla daily concerned were a bit too much to go without protest. The daily reported Sunday that a group of students belonging to Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student wing of the ruling party, led by the DU unit president and general secretary of the party allegedly barged into the news room and threatened the DU correspondent of the paper with dire consequences for publishing a report relating to the 'manhandling' of the DU unit president of BCL by another group. The same news was purportedly published in some other newspapers and the DU correspondent of another leading Bangla daily was manhandled at the DU campus for the same reason.

We believe this is not the way to protect a news item. The aggrieved persons could send a rejoinder to the newspapers concerned in an attempt to redeem their position. We strongly condemn this belligerent attitude of ruling party student cadres and urge their mentors to teach them tolerance and rein them in. They are not supposed to take the law into their own hands and go about threatening newsmen in their offices. This is a dangerous trend being set by the ruling party which may backfire on them. We shall continue to protest and condemn such acts of indiscretion.

Thoroughly Condemnable

A group of youngsters indulged in the orgy of pushing, shoving and stripping a young woman, something that sounds more like a raunchy sequence of a mainstream commercial movie than reality; and it should. Unfortunately, it did occur in reality and, that too, on the campus of such a prestigious educational institution as Dhaka University. Sadly still, it happened in the early hours of the New Year's Day when the whole world greeted not only a new year but also a new century and a new millennium. Last-minute intervention of the police may have prevented further indignity and injury to the hapless woman's person; but the incident certainly leaves a dark stain on our collective sensitivity and sensibility. It points at the fast-waning moral fabric of our society.

Similar incidents of assault on young women and attempt at disrobing them during New Year celebrations had taken place in the past. Only last year, a woman was harassed in the Mahakhali-Banani area. So, why must some girls always risk it out on new year nights? We wonder.

It appears to have become part of some perverse minds' perception of fun. This sordid syndrome is not New Year celebration-specific either. There have been reports of harassment at concerts and other functions, not to speak of the shopping places. On the whole, respect for women appears to be dwindling fast in the society.

As for the incident on New Year's night, we are at a loss of words to express our condemnation. Although doubly cleaving, different news dailies have carried pictures of the incident with a view to helping the authorities identify the culprits. We hope they will act on that, trace the perpetrators and mete out severe punishment to them.

The Middle East Peace Process: Now the Endgame?

THE Middle East peace process as envisaged in Oslo Accord, after being stalled and even stopped more often than not, seems to have picked up new momentum. An interesting combination of factors have started to propel it forward although the Accord's stipulated timeframe has since been rendered null and void. When the peace provisions were secretly hammered out in Oslo before 1993 declaration of principles in Washington by the PLO and Israel the basis of the peace worked out at Camp David — the land for peace — was very much in the back of the minds of the peace brokers. If had a great lure for the Arabs who were smarting under the insult of the loss of their territories conquered by Israel — their arch enemy. As expected, Israel's Arab neighbours eventually fell in line, one after another, to bite the bait.

Anwar Sadat, credited with creating second United Arab Republic together with Syria and Libya in 1972 and inflicting first initial defeat to Israelis in 1973 Arab-Israeli war succumbed to the temptation in 1979 and was the first Arab leader to sign a peace deal with Israel after 1967 war. Egypt was joined by the Palestinians in 1993 and the Jordanians in 1994 both of whom signed separate agreements with Tel Aviv that — in case of PLO — gave back control of Gaza and some parts of the conquered territories in the West Bank to the Palestinians. Jordan had to settle for a somewhat more modest gain. But both Jordan and Palestinians pledged peace to Israel by recognising, like Egypt, its right to exist as a sovereign bonafide entity in their midst.

As a result, while a peace and security regime in West Asia — however fragile it could be — was shaping up, there was one

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exception. Syria remained adamant that 'only a complete withdrawal to pre-1967 frontier' and compensation for evacuation of the Arabs from the conquered territories would ensure peace. Israel, unwilling to give up Jerusalem, complete West Bank or Golan Heights balked at this price. But Israel has never been wanting in its awareness that peace will be elusive even if only one of the neighbours sharing border with her remains hostile.

Based on this awareness, the electoral victory of Ehud Barak, as the country's new prime minister has portended the beginning of a fresh assessment of the peace prospects in the Middle East. The Barak government seems to have resorted to soft options in handling relations not only with the Palestinians but also other Arab neighbours. Mr Barak does not want to up the ante during negotiations as his predecessor Mr Netanyahu did.

Without waiting for reciprocity in terms of security, he displayed a positive gesture by allowing a long-awaited 'safe passage' between West Bank and Gaza Strip — a significant step towards full statehood for the Palestinians. The passage will connect up Palestinians divided between the patches of West Bank and Gaza apart from having its positive effects on other peace clauses. Barak's government has also permitted the return of hardline Palestinian opposition leaders from exile in Syria.

Earlier, Prime Minister Barak sprung a surprise by announcing an army pull back from South Lebanon. All these moves suggest that the government of Yehud Barak is guided by greater sense of pragmatism and, enlightened self-interest than that of his impulsive predecessor. After having clipped the wings of both Palestinians and Jordan by obtaining their recognition Israel's eye must now be fixed on Syria — the last



PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

of Israel's thorns. In the meantime, President Clinton in the last year of his presidency wants to wind up the most ambitious of his peace missions — a comprehensive peace in the Middle East to a point of friction. The peace brokers are convinced by this time that it is Hafiz Al Asad of Syria with whom lies the key to wrap up the peace process in the Middle East. Only he has the power to give green signal to any agreement in Lebanon which is virtually a Syrian protectorate and convince the Syrians brought up on a fanatical anti-Israeli rhetoric that there can be peace between the two countries. It was not thus surprising that in a flurry of animated diplomacy the people

like Nelson Mandela and Ms Albright recently flew peace missions to Damascus. Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy indicated at the same time that secret contacts were 'taking place with Syria'. Even if Israel was reluctant to return all occupied lands to her Arab neighbours she seems prepared to hand over strategic Golan Heights to Syria. Because peace with Syria is overwhelmingly important to Israel at this

stage. Not only it closes the net, without peace with Syria her peace with other Arab neighbours also is not workable. Therefore Israel is ready to pay any price for it. Prime Minister Barak has already been preparing the Jewish settlers of the Golan Heights to evacuate the plateau eventually.

Syria also on her part was unexpectedly responsive to Israeli overtures. During his 28-year rule Hafiz Al Asad put up the toughest resistance to any effort to make peace with Israel. But now in Damascus where the focus has belatedly shifted to economic development from the dreams of Arab resistance there is near unanimity on the need for peace provided lands taken over from Syria by Israel

are returned. Certainly a peace pact with Israel with attendant economic benefits will also help ensure a smooth succession which has reached a crucial stage with President Asad now in poor state of health. Asad wants to be succeeded by Bashar, his son, who is opposed by the hardliners.

Indeed Israel's window of opportunity hinges on the continuance of Hafiz Al Asad regime and its hand over to a fresh set of social moderates led by his son. The extremists in Syria are however keen to ensure that one of their men succeeds Asad. To this end they have sought to create rift within the Alwis sect to which the President belongs by propping up Rifat, Asad's brother who has been running a campaign against the regime from abroad. But that is only one side of the succession problem. Recently the Muslim Brotherhood brought out a leaflet asserting that Syria was not a monarchy and the President could not impose his son as the country's ruler after him. Such sentiments perfectly blend with the anti-royalist crusade of Osama bin-Laden and his cohorts. The Islamic Jihad' a recently-floated organisation also has vowed to continue the war against Israel if there is a peace settlement with Damascus. Some of 70,00,000 Palestinians now living in Syria are its members. To forestall these possibilities Asad is now in hurry as much as Israel would like to complete its circle of

peace around her. However any long-term settlement in the Middle East will need to address the question of a viable Palestinian state which is still far from reality. Till it comes into being — perhaps with an effective partitioning of Jerusalem, handing over more lands for peace to Palestinian authority and a gradual dismantling of Jewish settlements in West Bank — the peace process will remain fraught with the chances of subversion. There are still hardliners in the occupied area of West Bank who would avail slightest opportunity to disrupt a fragile peace now in place in the region. If Barak is able to strike a deal with Syria, it will leave Israel free to concentrate on the security threat posed by the elements within Palestinian diaspora unreconciled to the absorption of what was Palestine into the Jewish homeland. Without backing from Syria — and Iran to an extent, such elements will find their ability to hit the Israelis largely circumscribed.

After their first formal meeting in Washington in November both Damascus and Tel Aviv — West Asia's most amicable foes — indicated that the reaching of peace between them was now a matter of months only. With the return to Golan Heights agreed in principle the only obstacle now is Syrian demand for compensation for shifting the Arabs displaced in 1967 war which, according to observers, will not constitute an insurmountable problem. Ironically however the problem is more acute with Barak who has been finding it difficult to convince his own hardliners about the virtue of the deal. Barak has already made giant leaps and according to Middle East watchers he can now dash up to the finish point.

Anti-corruption Commission: How Effective Will it Actually be?

by Salahuddin Ahmed

A very recently published book entitled "Combating Corruption" by the World Bank recommended fundamental changes and categorically stated performance of Anti-Corruption Department in most of the developing countries had been nothing but an ignominious failure.

A knowledgeable reporter of a leading daily brought out an article recently, the core part of which was that the existing Anti-corruption Department was going to have a sea-change: a complete metamorphosis, hopefully, would be able to combat corruption more effectively than ever before and this would bring a substantial improvement in the economic development of the country, among many other socio-economic malaise, that is plaguing the nation. One very important bottle-neck or threatening stance has been the prevailing state of corruption in the country because of which genuine investors from within the country or from without, have been hesitating to stick out their neck by investing their scarce or hard earned resources. Knowledgeable persons or regular newspaper readers must have observed the virtual absence of a real cleansing activity or drive in the affected body politic of the Anti-Corruption Department on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the earmarking of only those belonging to the opposite political camp or brandishing its biting teeth almost exclusively against senior high-ups in the bureaucracy who have fallen from grace of the top brass or of the ruling party.

Who would not want a thorough overhauling in the way the

Anti-Corruption Department has been functioning for most of the period after our hard earned Independence? Many would think that while a few may have the misfortune of being run down by the bounds of the Anti-Corruption Department, in general the victims or the affected persons have been almost invariably the political opponents. Whether the Anti-Corruption Department was indeed conceived as an instrument against the political high-ups or not, the way it has conducted itself or has been forced to conduct itself by the top brass to most thinking people it has indeed been a machinery of not a great significance in the realisation of our national goals. Perhaps it was, for all intents and purposes a political instrument in the hands of whosoever happened to wield the political power. With this backdrop, in our mind, would it be too much to treat with scepticism the proposed Administrative Reforms Commission's reported recommendation to the Government for converting the Department into an Anti-Corruption Commission, to be

headed by a serving or recently retired Justice of the High Court/Supreme Court? This high or highest powered Commission will be kept on track by inclusion of very eminent persons from within the civil society, top academicians or representatives of the ministries concerned and some others of high eminence in an institution called the Anti-Corruption Council.

Is the proposed change fundamental or really profound or revolutionary or just cosmetic? This is the question. Otherwise who would not want some significant changes, which is the prime need of the hour?

A very recently published book entitled "Combating Corruption" by the World Bank, while voicing the above sentiments, recommended fundamental changes, has categorically stated performance of Anti-Corruption Department in most of the developing countries has been nothing but an ignominious failure. In the last analysis, the Department was nothing but an instrument of oppression in the hands of the political power or an instrument of running down their po-

litical opponents. This has been voiced in no uncertain terms. The autocratic environment prevailing in the body politic or in the culture in spite of many elements of democratic facade in the fundamental law or in the constitution of the country, the top brass wielding political power has had no difficulty in running after only those whose removal or harassment helped its political goals.

The book has focused on the significant way the administrative machinery in the island states of Singapore or Hong Kong were able to achieve their goals. This was mainly because the chief political powers were able to maintain their track enabling the administrative machinery to function independently. There was also their political commitment to prevent corruption or bring it down to the minimum barest bone. Because of their political commitment, not merely tall talks, these two small island city states have been able to establish themselves at par with other most developed countries of the world. The book also brought out the fact that many countries in Africa and Latin

America copied the Hong Kong or Singapore experiments without being able to replicate political, cultural and civil democratic environment of Hong Kong or Singapore with little beneficial results. Such was the case in the Nigerian experiment because of the fact that the above real democratic postulates could not be replicated in these countries, especially in Nigeria.

Under the circumstances whether we call it a Department or a grand eloquent National Commission, how is it going to be any different if the final sanction to go ahead in the anti-corruption case of a person is to be obtained from the Prime Minister or the President in a given situation? With the final selection of the Head of the Commission or members of the Commission eventually resting on the likes and dislikes of the head of the government or of the state, will they also not bear within their heart a predilection, real or not, conscious or sub-conscious, to please their selectors? Will the head of the Commission indeed be able to work not merely autonomously, but independently and go, if sit-

uation demands, against the possible likes or dislikes of the authority in power? Will this Commission be given a blank cheque in this respect?

Assuming that such a Commission is going to be established, sooner or later, it goes without saying that there will have to be subsidiary bodies to be functioning at the division and district level, or at least at the district level. Will they also not be just a photo-type of the national Commission? This part of the world inherited a bureaucratic setup which delivered goods after all at least for a century in the past. They were of course tailor-made to the requirements of the colonial imperial power. One may suspect that the bureaucrats, under changed circumstances, could not have fully transformed themselves to the need of the civil democratic society. If they did fail to do so, are the bureaucrats alone to be blamed for that? Would not the political power, for at least in the past two decades, share the blame for the failure to convert them according to the need of the hour? Perhaps the different political powers may have fully converted them into their subservient tools. Whether that was as per national requirement or not, that is beside the point.

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OPINION

Of Pride and Prejudice

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina has plunged herself in utter distress. She appears to have earned it not by any misdeed but by her contribution to the cause of peace, to poverty alleviation, human rights and empowerment of women. Besides, her great efforts at augmenting good production has also moved the world body on food, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations. She was awarded the coveted CERES prize of FAO. This was preceded by the great honour bestowed upon her by a number of highly placed universities in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, Japan and India with the honorary degree of Doctorate of Law. And last, not the least, the University of Dhaka conferred upon her the same degree on December 18, 1999. Besides, she has so far been showered with words of praise by the world leaders like President Bill Clinton of the United States of America, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and others. All these combined together have augmented the prestige and image of Bangladesh in the comity of nations. And indeed it had been a matter of pride for all of us.

But, to our dismay and consternation the leaders of the opposition and their die-hard followers would despise to share with the nation the abstract wealth of such splendid achievement. None could set a single example like the one often observed in the Western democracy where such national achievements are usually and universally acclaimed shedding

partisan antagonism. They would rather treat the foreign awards as of no material consequence and the one at home conferred on such a person who would not deserve it. In fact, ever since the decision taken by the Dhaka University Syndicate in favour of conferring honorary degree of Doctorate of Law on Sheikh Hasina they had been pleading against it. Some had even compared it with the teachers holding Ph.D. from Dhaka University and considered the decision as an affront to them. Pursuing such a ridiculous and frivolous stance, the student front of BNP, supported by the parent body, called a 6-hour hartal on the day of convocation seeking to foil the whole programme on December 18, 1999. However, their pursuit was literally aborted for the forehand intervention of the security intelligence and the law enforcing agencies.

On the core political front the 4-party alliance appears to have been brushing up their strategies with more vigour and enthusiasm. In the name of 'Itar' the topmost four have met for the second time. Meantime, Speaker Humayun Rashid Chowdhury, had taken an initiative, all of his own, requesting the Leader of the Opposition to attend the next session of the Jatiya Sangsad. But the news appearing in the dailies on December 23, 1999 already confirmed that they would not attend the session. There was, however, no reference to the 5-point conditions given earlier by the Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Parliament Professor Badruddoza Chowdhury. The decision not to attend the

JS session would, therefore, have superseded Dr Chowdhury's plea providing no further room for the government to negotiate on them. The matter would now stand as a fait accompli. The scope for any rapprochement on the issue between the position and the opposition turns out now a remote possibility.

Parallel to such ominous development fraught with the danger of an unsalutary confrontation in the near future, the BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia appears to have been engrossed with an embarrassing interparty rift in Chittagong. She was to have made a visit to Saudi Arabia, ostensibly to perform Umrah, but had to cancel the journey for addressing the imbroglio in Chittagong which might precipitate a crisis eventually. She must ensure this time a complete unity among the feuding leaders there once for all.

And with Ershad things have been none-the-less muddled. His recent remarks on the personal integrity of JSD leader Hasanul Haque Inu and that of the Workers' Party, Rashed Khan Menon, have triggered off bitterest criticism. In fact these two leaders provoked Ershad to make some awkward observations that they used to receive financial benefits from him when he was in power. The immediate reaction of these two leaders and their respective parties was vented through universal condemnation across the country. The Rangpur unit of JSD went to the extent of declaring Ershad persona non grata in Rangpur besides burning effigies of the former president.

In the metropolis yet a more interesting episode was enacted around the Dhaka University campus by some young activists claiming themselves to be members of a front organisation of BNP under the banner 'Aamra Zia' Shaikh'. They made a public protest against BNP chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia for her joining hands with 'autocrat Ershad' and 'Rajakar Golan Azam' in the name of a united front to oust the government. In condemnation they burned the effigies of Begum Zia, Ershad and Golan Azam. But the trio appears to have ignored such demonstration while actively framing and re-framing their out-the-government strategies meeting each other in Iftar parties.

Curiously enough, if the demands or conditions in Dr B Chowdhury's statement were supplemented then that would be a positive and significant departure from their one-point programme of ousting the government or seeking latter to resign immediately and to call mid-term election under a caretaker government. Would they risk such a desirable alternative that could diffuse the tense situation obtaining now?

They would or would not be their own prerogative. But one cannot ignore or overlook the grim concern being expressed by the US Ambassador Holzman and the British High Commissioner David Walker. They thought that the present political stalemate was seriously impeding the prospect of any further foreign investment here, particularly from the United States and the United Kingdom. In their considered opinion all other donor coun-

tries and agencies were also upset and plunged in uncertainty about their investment in Bangladesh. The British High Commissioner, however, added that the dimension of the political difference between the government and the opposition was still in a manageable proportion and could be solved given the goodwill from both. Both the diplomats urged upon the contending parties to settle their differences as early as possible or else neither the Americans nor the Britishers would make any further investment here.

Commerce and Industries Minister Tofail Ahmed didn't however consider the situation so volatile as to invoke so much concern now. He hoped that things would soon settle down even though the opposition alliance was trying to create a law and order situation. And yet some of the politicians, as usual, considered the words of the two diplomats as uncalled for and interference in our internal affairs. The suggestion by US Ambassador John C. Holzman that President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed takes an initiative to settle the difference between the government and the opposition towards an investment-friendly environment, has also been criticised on grounds of 'intrusion'.

BNP Standing Committee member Barrister Moudud Ahmed expressed his appreciation of the anxieties of the two diplomats which he described as 'quite natural'. On hartal he observed that it was a part of the movement against the government, and that it wouldn't be necessary when the opposition objectives were achieved.

He had also added that the foreign missions, donor agencies, all other partners of our development were equally concerned about the obduracy of the party in power. This he said to justify the movement of the opposition and the mortal stake it was having.

In any case, and irrespective of what the diplomats have said or have been trying since long to bring home to the contending political parties and their leaders, the indispensability of a stable environment, we have got to realize ourselves the importance it has for our economic development. And in this particular context, the specific promise that the 4-party alliance has made in its post-summit declaration will largely depend upon an absolutely stable situation within the country. If, on the contrary, they want to gain by creating chaos and law and order situation with the sole objective to grab power anyhow, they shall be pitifully mistaken. They should rather prepare themselves for the next general election commanding patience and allowing the present government to complete its term. It is foreseen that such a gesture (even if not born of any goodwill) will not only ensure an equally full term if they can come back to power but also set a unique example of tolerance — the most insuperable essence of a parliamentary democracy. And Begum Zia on her part may allow herself a serious rethinking if her present rendezvous with Ershad and Golan Azam has been a veritable trap to ostracise her vast personal popularity which would enable her partners to capitalize at her cost.