

Speaker's 'Third Letter'

WHY should the opposition take the Speaker's letter to Khaleda Zia seriously? Humayun Rashid Chowdhury slavishly carried out the ruling party's bidding during his tenure as the Speaker so far. There is not a single instance when he took a firm stand against the Treasury bench to uphold the position of the opposition. The nation watched with disbelief when after publicly promising time to Dr. Badruddoza he sheepishly surrendered to the insistence of the PM that he shouldn't. The four-point agreement reached earlier between the Treasury and the Opposition benches was signed under his initiative. Yet he did not lift a finger when the government side did not implement it. In fact there was a second accord to implement the first. Yet the Speaker did not insist on the government that his credibility would be greatly compromised if the latter would fail him once again. Was he too eager to firm up his OIC job and did not want to displease the PM in any way by pleading the opposition's case? He did nothing to earn the respect and trust of the opposition when the going was good. The Speaker's most shameless act of partisanship was not to refer to the EC the case of the two BNP members who joined the AL government. Later he was forced to do so under the order of the Supreme Court. By that time his credibility was in shambles. So he is now reaping what he himself had sown over the last three and half years — mistrust and disrespect of the opposition.

So we repeat the question: Why should the opposition leaders take Chowdhury's yet another letter to Khaleda Zia seriously? We think they should. Simply because the country and the future of democracy is far more important than any one person. Equally significant, the institution of the parliament should not be made to suffer because of the personal failures of its Speaker. We think the opposition has been able to make the point well that till now its demands were not taken seriously by the ruling party. But having made it rather effectively, the opposition should not go on an 'ego trip' of its own and feel that the government offers can now be ignored with impunity. There is an unfortunate tendency in our politics. At first the government ignores the opposition. But when under pressure the former relents, the latter feels that it has the upper hand and starts ignoring the government. This game of double folly leads to no where except to more follies. We have seen it when BNP was in power. And now we are seeing it when AL is running the country.

We urge the opposition to respond positively to this letter of the Speaker and start at least talking with him on what needs to be done to get the real talks going. Khaleda Zia, please understand that continuous NO to all offers of the government will get us NO WHERE. There is a time to stand firm. And then there is a time to be flexible. That is what good leadership is all about.

Hijack Scare

FORTUNATELY, fear of yet another hijack drama, this time involving a Bangladesh Biman flight to Dhaka from Calcutta, has proved to be unfounded. The eleven Dhaka-bound Israelis, detained in the West Bengal capital on suspicion by the CBI officials of a hijacking plot, have been released after interrogation, bringing to an end two days of intense speculation over their ulterior motive. The alarm bell rung by the Indian intelligence agency, albeit false as it has proved to be in the end, has been a blessing in disguise, nevertheless; for it has prompted the government into taking stock of the security arrangements on the aviation front. Security at all airports in the country has been beefed up and vigilance intensified. Also, international airports, worldwide where Biman aircrafts land, have been requested for extra vigilance.

These are certainly reassuring pieces of news; however, there is a probability that with the passage of time, especially with the after-effect of the Indian Airlines hijack drama dying down, we may lower our guard. In other words, what we need are not ad hoc arrangements but ones that are made on a longer-term footing. The point we are trying to make here is that primarily because terrorist activities across the globe have been on the rise that we should brace for the worst at all times. Hijack attempt on Biman flights may not only be driven by Bangladesh-specific interest, as speculated in the 'false alarm'; any militant group could use the national airliner for their ideological and political interest.

On more than one occasion in the past, there have been security breaches at the Zia International Airport. Death of a young man in the wheel carriage of a British Airways aircraft that took off from ZIA, is a memory of not too distant a past. The fact of the matter is: there may be too many loopholes in the security system that need to be plugged. The hijack scare should make us renew our commitment to greater aviation security. It may have proved false this time around but who knows the national airliner may be a target of some militants. Should we not therefore be ready for the worst to keep out of the harm's way?

JUST before the commencement of the new year, new century and the new millennium even the terrorists who hijacked the Indian Airlines plane to the Taliban territory of Kandahar came to their senses and decided to leave the plane on a token release of three Kashmiri militants. Still more unexpected was India's decision to move out of its earlier vow not to give in and take a sensible decision to release three Kashmiri militants which some say amounted to giving in to terrorism; but that obviously happened for a greater cause — saving the innocent lives of 154 passengers and crew. No less surprising was "mature" handling of this delicate and indeed dangerous situation by Taliban regime that allegedly harbours a man like Osama bin-Laden — "dangerous terrorist" in the eyes of many. The hijacking situation has shown that given the time and opportunity — and with tolerance — even the so-called "tough" states can also show political maturity and prove themselves to be a member of the global society.

Even before the clock struck midnight to bring the universe into the new millennium Boris Yeltsin announced his retirement from Russian presidency, which stunned not only the Russians but also the world community. He could have done still better if he had ordered, before retirement, the halt of the advance of the Russian troops into Chechnya and resolution of the political problem through open dialogue. Yeltsin was, however, hailed as "the Father of Russian democracy" by President Clinton though some say Yeltsin who serially dismissed his prime ministers —

Let the New Year Give New Sense to Bangladesh Politics

by Muslehuddin Ahmad

It's really unfortunate that the same two political leaders of the main political parties who got full respect and support of the people of Bangladesh and fought together only a few years ago to dislodge the dictator are now at each other and in the process risking the hard earned democracy itself.

each one in nearly every 30 to 90 days — did not even understand the meaning of democracy. Any way, it's a matter of opinion but what is more important is that Yeltsin finally dismissed himself before the beginning of the new year, new century and the new millennium — something totally unexpected.

We in Bangladesh also expected something unexpected to happen — our two political leaders to come out with their "Millennium Vow" to shrug off their personal revulsion to each other and announce their firm determination to save the country and the people by solving their personal as well as political problems through honest dialogue. Personal telephone calls by the Prime Minister to the Leader of Opposition deserved to be returned regardless of the outcome. Any way, it's not too late yet. The New Year, New Century and New Millennium have just arrived. Probably all of us and our politicians will live through the new year and probably none through the new century and certainly none through the millennium. At least our mortality should bring all of us to our senses. Let at least the new year be marked by some good deeds for the peo-

ple. Life is too short and political life is even shorter. Wasting even a day showing political haughtiness and intolerance is unpardonable and specially so when it relates people's life and their welfare and future. Politicians, irrespective of their party affiliations have absolutely no right to disrupt citizens' normal life and means of livelihood. Politicians are politicians because the people chose to make them so. The people being the ultimate authority may easily decide to dislodge them from such coveted positions. Therefore, whatever the politicians do they must realise that they will have to go back to the people.

Hartal? For whose benefit? The people are fed up with hartal which has been going on for years. It occurred during the earlier regime and also during this regime. Strike or hartal is a democratic right but by declaring strike or hartal certain rules and norms are followed — the consent of the people concerned (in case of industries the consent of the involved labour force) is necessary. And when one speaks of democratic right it refers to the right of the people and not of only political parties. If a political party decides to call hartal, and if this

is the overall decision of the members of the party concerned, it is free to do so and merrily repeat it as many times as its members want but it should be valid for, and restricted to, only the party members concerned. Others must not be forced to join. There must not be burning of rickshaws and beating of rickshawpullers and day labourers and denuding of women and men. Time has come to stop this. If we want to prove to the world that we are civilized people.

Let the politicians ask their own conscience whether they are doing the right thing — handling the politics of Bangladesh in the right manner and for the benefit of the people who voted them to the Parliament? The people have voted them to the Parliament to do their job and not to boycott the Parliament for weeks and months (they even reportedly draw remuneration for the days they deliberately abstain). This happened before and has been happening again. Parliament does not belong to the ruling party only. Please stay in the Parliament, fight the issues out there. The people of Bangladesh are politically conscious and wise enough to note which party/parties are at faults. If

necessary the opposition may go for peaceful street protests, demonstrations and protest meetings which must not be stopped or even obstructed by the ruling party. These may cumulatively be brought up to the people by the political parties concerned while going for the general elections and let the people decide. Trust the people and depend on their free decisions and allow the democracy to work. Now the "wind outside" is against democracy; everything is being manipulated to the advantage of certain political party/parties. The muscle power and black money are determining everything. Unless the political culture is changed dramatically even elections under the Caretaker government may become meaningless.

It seems pointless at this stage to go for "one point" agenda and in the process derailing the economy of the country. It was done before but the previous government did not fall. The election wind has already started blowing; it does not seem to be far off. As it seems, general election may take place by the end of the year or very early next year — may be immediately before or after the next Ramadan as May-June does not seem to be the right time for any general election.

The timing should be changed once and for all to avoid the monsoon. There has also been proposals for reduction of the duration of the next parliament — it could be four instead of five years as our political leaders soon get impatient to return to power.

The ruling party should also bear in mind that they will have to go back to the people as election cannot be delayed beyond certain date. Therefore, it's the responsibility of the ruling party to create congenial environment for the next election which the opposition parties have been insisting on. Chief Justice Latifur Rahman has rightly said the other day that "the wind outside is not very congenial to the growth and flourishing of democracy." All political parties concerned must note this valuable remark of the Chief Justice of the highest court of the land.

It's really unfortunate that the same two political leaders of the main political parties who got full respect and support of the people of Bangladesh and fought together only a few years ago to dislodge the dictator are now at each other and in the process risking the hard earned democracy itself. The members of the civil societies, the business community and indeed the people of Bangladesh have been appealing to them to rise above their personal problems and self or even party interests and clear up the "wind outside" so that the next general election can take place in a relatively calm atmosphere. This is important not only for the country and the people but also for the politicians themselves. The politicians can do politics only if the democracy survives.

For Kumaratunga the Priority is People

by A R Shamsul Islam

Conveying willingness to sit with Prabhakaran to bring peace despite disliking the person accounts for a specimen of classic leadership of Kumaratunga grounded on tolerance, foresight and commitment to people. It proves how she loves her country in preference to her own life that was almost taken away by an LTTE attack.

AFTER luckily surviving an LTTE suicide bomber's attack on her life on December 18 last Chandrika Kumaratunga said she was the only leader who had lived to "tell the tale".

When an atrocity is committed under special confinement some survivors are needed to tell the tragedy. In the historic "Black Hole Tragedy" nature left behind some survivors to let the world know of Nawab Sirajudowla's (or his men's beyond his knowledge?) perpetrating cruelty upon the English captives. But killing outside in open spaces does not warrant any such survivor as eye witnesses are found handy. Still, narratives from the captive targeted person have special novelties filled with characteristic personal emotions and reactions.

Happily enough, what she reacted is complete wisdom — wisdom that was not let to be lost in the depth of personal sufferings due to loss of a major bodily organ like right eye. In her first interview with the BBC since that suicide bomber's attack she herself told, "Medically I can carry on but probably I have lost the sight of this eye" pointing to her right eye that kept shut during the whole show.

Kumaratunga has so readily risen above this permanent mutilation of her own physique. Several factors may have contributed to this. First, while coming to power she had persistently committed to bring peace to the nation. Even in the last pre-election presidential campaigning on December 18 last which witnessed that suicide bomber's attack she repeated the vow. Second, she had clearly seen that there is no other way than a successful dialogue with the rebels that can end the battle and bring peace. She has said emphatically she detests the Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran but is willing to talk with him for the

sake of peace on the island. Third, she has been able to dispassionately read the rising mood and mentality of the rebels.

Of the country's 18.8 million people the Tamils constitute about 3.4 million. They have learnt to nourish a hardened belief that under Sinhalese domination they cannot prosper. So they cry for a separate land in the northeast of the island that they consider their exclusive home. The rebels are fighting for this cause with mounting determination and zeal. They have raised up suicide squads that are too hard to be subdued by Sri Lankan government forces. LTTE venerates, with almost religious conviction, act of suicide and its cadres felicitate it as a holy privilege to be chosen for that mission. They enthusiastically crowd to draw lots to decide who is lucky to be promoted to the suicide squads. Ordinary rebels are also taught to commit suicide, rather than be captured, by taking cyanide capsules that they lovingly keep hanging around their necks. As nothing succeeds like success the rebels have romped in. In 1987 an explosive-laden truck ripped into an army camp killing 40 troopers. The squads carried off their apex prize in 1991 by killing Indian premier Rajiv Gandhi. In 1993 Sri Lankan president Ranasinghe Premadasa was killed by a suicide bomber in Colombo. In 1994 Kumaratunga's chief presidential rival Gamini Desanayake was killed by a suspected Black Tiger female member.

Fourth, ceaseless armed confrontations with the rebels have put a constant drain on state resources impeding asking development projects of the government. Fifth, Kumaratunga is clear and specific that it is the government that is burdened with the prime responsibility of exploring ways of conciliation even in the teeth of grave provocations. Government's unwise adamancy and inaptitude can at best lead the rebels to be hardened and desperate paving the path to a state of no-return.

Sixth, bringing dialogues to a successful end, that is containing the Tamils with autonomy rights within their territory to save the country from being parcelled out, which apparently looks like an impossible task but may not be beyond achievement if the government can readily warm itself into Tamils' confidence by sheer sincerity and convince them that their autonomy will ensure their every right and well-being and it (autonomy) will never be interfered with by the centre.

Seventh, Kumaratunga's task of having negotiation with the LTTE is fraught with danger as suicide squads are prone to aim in on leaders like Kumaratunga. She has taken here the LTTE and purchased their wrath. This fallacy can be destroyed by offering an olive branch of the brand that even the suspicious rebels can take up as pure and original instead of being spurious and sugar-coated.

Eighth, Kumaratunga has alleged that in the recently held presidential election the LTTE

has espoused the cause of her arch presidential contender Ranil Wickremasinghe of UNP. She has continued that its cadres have visited villages after villages frightening inmates to vote for UNP falling which they would cost their lives. Kumaratunga feels an urgency to come to terms with the rebels to forestall the opposition to cash in on the situation. Wickremasinghe has, however, denied the charge and further offered to join his hand to establish peace in the country.

Kumaratunga instead of softening her anger has sobered it to a benign weapon to performing peace agreement based on mutual trust and respect. Probably there is no dearth of sycophants around her to lure her to intensify counter attacks on the rebels to wreak vengeance. But her wisdom well guarded her against those foolish counsels. She could realise that gone are the days of Hitlerian paranoia of annihilating a rising people. In this regard she has probably shown a better practical tact and accommodation than what Russia has applied to the Chechens.

Meanwhile tensions in Colombo have steadily heated up as the government has hardened security measures. House to house search, searching and interrogating hundreds of Tamils, clamping down curfew have come in the wake. LTTE has gone amuck with guerrilla way of grenade throwing, shooting etc on men and installations of the government. Suicide bombers' attacks on the President, the Opposition public meeting, Prime Minister's residence have rocked the country

leaving many dead and injured. Such tit-for-tat actions can only distance real resolve. Prabhakaran should realise that Kumaratunga is re-elected as President of Sri Lanka capturing over 51 per cent of people's vote. Her desire to sit for solution hardly affords to be left out as unnoticed. To clinch an independent Tamil land by harassing the government appears a far cry.

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OPINION TV Broadcasting : Market Competition

A M M Aabad

The Star reports (latest on Dec 18) on Bangla private television channels, and the comparison with the state-controlled BTV, is informative, as such data was not presented before. Here are a few more allied observations by a viewer (private and independent).

BTV is facing an in-draw and viewer-draw and the official propaganda technique will not give BTV the market edge to operate competitively. Financially it does not matter, because public broadcasting will be heavily subsidized from the public exchequer for "national" propaganda and interest, at least in Bangladesh, where democracy has yet to take root or flower.

In the USA, the NBA (the National Association of Broadcasters) channels are not the public rage, but it is an essential public service, to provide a window to public-interest broadcasting, without competition. DDD in India is in the thick of tagging market forces, and several structural and policy changes have been brought by the ministry in New Delhi. The question (not problem) is how to keep alive the mass interest, to continue to keep tuning in to the public channels in Bangladesh. The bureaucracy has to face the market and compete where necessary for audience-attention (not advertisement revenue), not only in broadcasting or other mass media outlets, but also in trade, commerce and craft-generating business (SOEs).

In the developing countries, there are transition periods from the public sector to the private at sporadic intervals; and unless the government is mentally prepared to face the situation and the implications to be generated in the near future, the political decisions cannot be translated into useful public service. The technical (includes other than engineering) brain drain in the BTV has already started, with the best technical staff getting better offers in the private sector, on contract terms quite different than offered to the civil service (the degree of contrast may be guessed from one exceptional example: a footballer in England will be getting eighty thousand US dollars a week). Soon BTV may be running a second-class service with third class personnel, with one-fourth the previous audience. This is an example of global village shrinkage, metaphorically speaking. On the other hand, the government has hardly any control over the independent viewers, who can change channels just by pressing a button. The government might not be inter-

Towards an Effective State

Dr Amrik Singh writes from New Delhi

L K Advani has coined a new phrase. So far we used to call it 'Better Governance'. He however has chosen to call it 'Effective Governance'. Both of them mean the same thing and one need not argue about it. Ever since the present government was sworn in, the focus has been on economic reforms. Indeed certain steps have already been taken in that direction and others are likely to be initiated soon. What Advani has said indicates a new emphasis. In my opinion, it is the right kind of emphasis. While economic reforms are important, and have to be put through, it would be simplistic to assume that, by itself, these reforms would lead to a situation where the country would get launched on what is called the path of development.

Development is a complex process. It has three vital components. The first one is appropriate economic reforms so as to remain in touch with international developments and national trends. Its second requirement is, to quote Advani, effective government. This implies that whatever is done should be done effectively and neither effort nor funds are wasted. For instance, if a canal is built and the distribution of water to individual fields is either not provided for or those small distribution channels are not actually built and made functional, the whole purpose of building up the canal would be defeated. This is only one illustration but scores of such illustrations can be given.

action has yet been taken. To be more specific, everyone talks of the need to amend the 1861 Police Act. That Act of course needs to be amended. But before any one rushes to blame the Home Minister for not doing what he is expected to do, it needs to be recognised that law and order is essentially a State subject. The law concerning the enforcement of law and order is certainly a Central subject. But the actual job of the enforcement of law and order has to be done by the police which is by and large under the charge of the State government. Senior officers who belong to the Indian Police Service (IPS) are certainly recruited and posted to the State cadre by the Centre. These transfers and most other things concerning them are within the power of each State. If nothing is happening on this front, the fault is as much of each single State as of the Centre.

For instance, it is open to any State government to carry out amendments in the regulations governing the functioning of the police service. Some initiatives have been taken here and there but the basic problem of the politicisation of police administration has not only been neglected but is the singular contribution of the State governments. To put it another way, while L K Advani as the Home Minister certainly has to play a role in respect of several matters, it would be unfair to blame him and say nothing about the State governments. Even the CPM which has been in power for over two decades in West Bengal has done precious little to regulate the conduct of the police. The police in that state is hardly better than any similar service in any other state. As a matter of fact, West Bengal is

somewhat notorious for the large number of custodial deaths. This only goes to underline the fact that improving the police is not as easy thing so as to simply coin the phrase and leave it at that. Secondly, while it is certainly the job of the Centre to amend the 1861 Police Act and several other things that go with the functioning of the police, essentially it is the job of each State government to see that the task of improvement is undertaken in such a manner that the police becomes a servant of the people and, truly speaking, it does not remain the lawless body that it generally is.

Advani's remarks mean two things. One is to indicate that he is someone who believes in strong governance. Whether this objective can be actually achieved or not is another thing. Secondly, this remark is a recognition of the fact that at least in one state — Andhra Pradesh — the ruling party has been returned to power with a thumping success. Whether rightly or wrongly, the TDP was able to convince the local electorate that it believed in progressive administration. Not only did it successfully put forward this point of view, even in terms of actual performance, it gave some evidence of some good governance. Therefore, this much has been established that good governance is something which the people genuinely desire. If Advani has talked in terms of an effective government, it only goes to show that he too recognises the feelings which most people have, not only in Andhra, but everywhere else. — Mandira

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