

Leave the Students Alone

PRESIDENT Shahabuddin Ahmed leads a one-man crusade — from the top — against political criminalisation in any shape or form. In keeping with this overall theme on Saturday he reiterated his call for a consensus between the government and the opposition to abolish their student fronts on the campus and commit themselves to having no links with them in the future.

We fully endorse the President's suggestion and urge the national political parties to delink themselves from student parties as an antidote to campus violence and deteriorating academic standards. It is the goings-on in the universities that set the tenor for the lesser educational institutions of the country. If the national political parties disassociate themselves completely from the student organisations then the latter would be left to plough a lonely furrow with the ball entirely in their court to behave responsibly or invite premature self extinction if they did not. In other words, depending on how student politics fares on its own, the question of whether there should be a temporary moratorium on student politics till it is chastened or reformed can be squarely addressed as well. However, in forging a consensus on the subject the political parties ought to be seized of a possibility that even after the formal delinking between them the politically clapped student bodies might seek the indulgence of political parties with the latter giving it surreptitiously as well. Since the political parties will have a level playing field, when cut off from the student wings they should be only favourably disposed towards the presidential counsel.

A whole range of benefit is derivable from a compliance with the president's advice. The trafficking of money, arms and outsiders into the academic premises can be halted with a greater force when no student group will be able to claim any link to a political party. Feudings and fights on leases and contracts will diminish. In fact, it will have a salubrious effect on the entire law and order situation.

When the elections are nearing, the political parties may be somewhat averse to the idea; but again, this is the right time for them to prove their bona fides in the matter.

Traffic Police in Danger

IRONICALLY, the failure to act against polluting vehicles has started telling on the traffic department itself with 30 per cent of its personnel laid low with jaundice, allergic reaction, and renal, cardiac and respiratory complications. Two officials have already died, one of cardiac arrest, while on duty. The situation speaks of sustained dereliction of duty as regards enforcement of pollution control measures; and it forebodes not only an imminent environmental disaster but also a total collapse of the regulatory system. Intriguingly and, needless to say, unfortunately, even at this crucial juncture, the approach sounded perfunctory. Instead of taking definitive steps to minimise air pollution, the authorities distributed air-filter masks among on-duty traffic personnel, some 1,000 of them. Constant exposure to polluted air naturally has rendered the filters dysfunctional and in need to be replaced. What beats our sensibility is their failure to fathom the gravity of the situation. How can they be so myopic while mapping a redressal plan that goes nowhere near striking at the root of the problem?

When the government imposed a ban on import of leaded petroleum and outlined a plan to phase out two-stroke scooters, we welcomed the decisions with a reservation; for the latter was loose-ended with a five-year time-frame. However, as usual, the implementation got off to a stuttering start. Revival of the country's lone refinery still remains a far cry while import of leaded petroleum has not stopped. The rise in number of two-stroke scooters has not been arrested while faulty vehicles ply the city streets with impunity. Enforcement lethargy has now started taking its toll after the traffic regulators' temporary exit.

Basically, therefore, the authorities must first realise that the course they have taken is bound for further disaster. Stringent pollution abatement measures can be the only way out of the mire. An implementational hazard such as the partial strike of autorickshaw drivers should not distract them from achieving the greater goal of ensuring safe city air, for the dwellers and for themselves.

DESA in a Quagmire

THE parent body's warning has had very little effect on Dhaka Electric Supply Authority (DESA) so far as reducing its systems loss and arrears to the PDB are concerned. DESA has neither been able to reduce the systems loss of over Tk. 350 crore a year nor has it been able to realise Tk. 1400 crore from its users, mainly government offices and industries to pay up its dues to the PDB. The whole government machinery, notably including the Prime Minister and the donors as well have been critical of DESA's continuing inefficiency. The PDB has more than Tk. 2500 crore in outstanding dues with DESA and other clients which is equivalent to almost one and a half years' billings, according to a report in The Daily Star on Monday.

PDB has set a target for DESA to reduce its systems loss to 18-19 per cent from the existing 25-26 per cent which the latter has obviously to achieve. A lot of drainage in terms of revenue billing and collection occurs due to the dishonesty of a class of employees, mainly the meter-readers and supervisors. So the key to the so-called systems loss is the meter-readers. With a dishonest meter-readers and unscrupulous users in league reduction of systems loss is a far cry. Then again the government policy of discouraging users from consuming more power by increasing charges adds to the already depressing situation in the power sector. So, DESA needs to adopt a three-pronged strategy to shore itself up: computerisation, surveillance and some sort of an incentive scheme for its employees. Along with incentives, fear of punishment for dishonest employees should also be there. A balanced policy must be followed by DESA to come out of the impasse.

Syria-Israel Talks on Hold: Barak Turns to Arafat

Peace with Syria is likely to give Israel the needed security from Syria and particularly in the strategic Golan region and relative peace in northern Israel. Moreover, the good prospect of a peace agreement with Syria may make the negotiations with Palestinians somewhat less difficult.

SYRIA-ISRAEL formal peace talks for over ten days in Shepherdstown, USA during the very first days of the New Year faltered on many fronts despite repeated intervention by President Clinton himself. The very fact that President Assad of Syria decided not to sit face to face with Prime Minister Barak and talk reflected Syria's doubt about the progress let alone success of the talk. Moreover, President Assad was obviously not prepared to be present in the talk and remain under constant pressure from President Clinton to be flexible on various issues. Any way, the impression was, however, given that President Assad was not physically fit enough to undertake such a strenuous and long talk with young Prime Minister Barak. Apparently President Clinton made sincere efforts to fill up the gap and keep the talks going.

President Clinton himself conceded that there were differences of opinion on major issues that kept the parties apart. The issues are — Israel's full withdrawal from Golan Heights that it captured in 1967 war, security guarantees to Israel in the event of withdrawal, full diplomatic relation between Syria and Israel, sharing of water etc. Israel appeared to have reconciled with the idea of vacating the major part of Golan Heights against full security guarantees to Israel. This was clearly reflected in the statement that Prime Minister Barak made in the Knesset before leaving for Washington for the talk. He talked about the painful price the Israelis would have to pay for peace with Syria. But as the talk progressed Syria pressed for full

withdrawal but Israel wanted some limited sensitive areas to remain under joint control for the purpose of security. Israel indeed wanted to install early warning system in Hermon mountain and also wanted to set the border as was drawn by the British and French Mandate authorities in 1923. But Syria insisted on the border as stood before 1967 war. The difference seems to be on — who will control the Eastern Shore of the Sea of Galilee?

Golan Heights is extremely important for both countries but it belonged to Syria before 1967 war. However, the Israelis say it's a part of their 'Promised Land' which they recovered in '67 war. Golan is a strategic plateau from where Syrians can easily deliver rockets and bombs to Israel thus endangering the security of Israel. Therefore, Israel wants proper security arrangement in place before it vacates Golan and hence tough bargaining on the issue. For Syria it's the security as well as the sovereignty issue. It does not want any Israeli control over Golan. Golan is also a fertile water rich plateau that attracted many Israelis for the purpose of agriculture and particularly for fruit production. Recent figures put Israeli population in Golan at 17,000. It's not a big number that could resist the handing over of the plateau to Syria.

Thus Syria-Israel talk is on hold and January 19 has passed by. The White House is very concerned about the develop-

ments though Secretary Albright termed it as 'one of many ups and downs' of Middle East peace making'. She also said, 'the logic of peace has been compelling for Israelis, Arabs and Palestinians' and they all 'genuinely desire peace'.

Though the talk did not take place some low-level experts would be dispatched by both sides to Washington to work on the technical aspects of the issues. President Clinton's personal concern over the stalemate led him to telephone President Assad. The hour-long

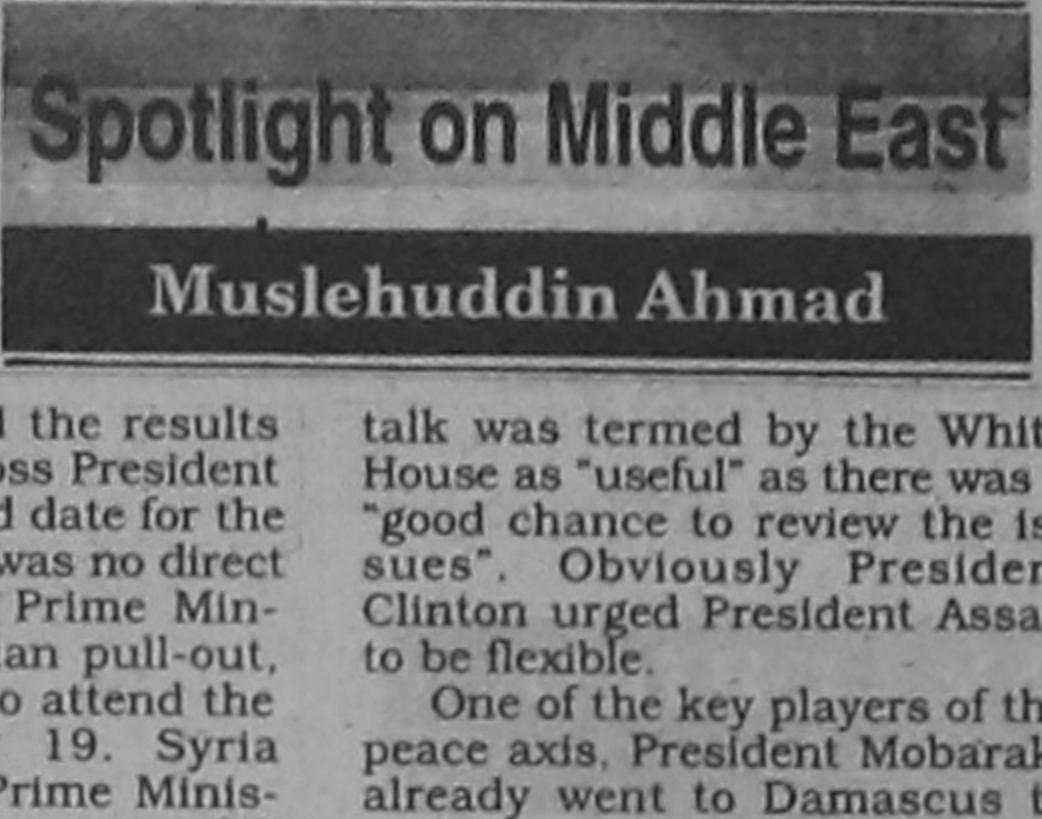
President Assad is apparently hopeful of getting Golan back as Prime Minister Barak was preparing his people for the pull-out. He also knows that he will have to give appropriate security guarantees to Israel against full Golan withdrawal, as otherwise there would be no deal. President Assad's strength lies in Lebanon and particularly in south Lebanon. Israel Prime Minister is promised to fully withdraw from self-declared security zone in south Lebanon by the middle of this year. President Assad will still have over 40,000 Syrian troops in Lebanon. The attrition war is, however, run by Hezbollah with the support of Iran. Thus Northern Israel continues to remain vulnerable. The situation could change dramatically in south Lebanon in favour of Israel if Israel can have the peace deal with Syria. President Assad could deal in his own way with Hezbollah. Prime Minister Barak, being the former Chief of Staff of Israel, knows the military situation very well and hence the need for full Golan withdrawal.

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However, to offset the present setback, apparently a temporary one, in the Syrian track

Prime Minister Barak immediately turned his attention to Palestinian sector. He hurriedly met President Arafat who already had some suspicion of being left out. The sudden announcement by Israeli Prime Minister of delay of handing over to the Palestinian Authority the balance 6.1 per cent of occupied land which is nearer to East Jerusalem — the site designated by the Palestinians as the integral part of their capital — also aggravated the already tense situation. Apparently, this has been sorted out and the land transfer would now take place in about two weeks' time.

Later President Arafat flew to Washington and met President Clinton in the White House and expressed his concern that February 13 deadline to work out the framework of the Final Accord may not be met if the sluggishness in the talk continues. Indeed all the major issues separating the two sides remain unresolved though it was agreed in Sharm-el-Sheikh that the framework agreement has to be reached by Feb 13 and final Peace Accord by September 2000. He sought President Clinton's 'personal intervention' to sort out the issues. President Arafat said, 'dates are important'. Though President Clinton said that issues are difficult, he apparently insisted that these are clear. He was optimistic about the M-E peace and added 'I am going to do everything I can every day I've got to try to achieve it'. Secretary Albright was still more optimistic; she said, 'We are coming close to settling history's longest dispute'. She must not, however, forget that this is Middle-East dispute. The world can only hope for the best.



Spotlight on Middle East
Muslehuddin Ahmad

Power Tussle in BJP: RSS on the Rampage

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

Government employees should not be allowed to join the RSS. Doing so is tantamount to liquidating the objectivity, impartiality and legitimacy of the state. And yet, Mr Vajpayee has brought matters to such a pass that he can no longer restrain the sangh.

THE message from the BJP's Chennai national executive is simple: the inner-party tussle between hardcore government supporters and organisational loyalists is not over. It took more than two weeks to finalise the text of the 'Chennai Declaration'. And yet, confusion still reigns over the relationship between the party's agenda and the NDA's.

This means the governmentals, with all their clout, do not yet prevail over the organisationals.

The original 'Declaration' read: 'Each and every activist... must fully understand that the BJP has no agenda other than the common agenda of the NDA'.

But this was amended to express 'confidence that every BJP worker understands that our agenda for governance is the national agenda for good governance' — clearly a retreat.

However, the original formulation mysteriously resurfaced in the document released to the media on January 13!

This indicates an uneasy stalemate and tension within the sangh-parivar. This is underscored by the RSS's strong criticism of the government's 'capitalism' to the IC-814 hijackers — publicly echoed twice by Mr L.K. Advani — sarasanghachalak Rajendra Singh's refusal to endorse the NDA's performance, and his vituperation on 'Hindu cowards' — repeating a Muslim-communal stereotype.

The Bill violates the freedom of religion guaranteed by Article 25 of the Constitution. This is a fundamental right, which cannot be abridged being part of the Constitution's Basic Structure.

Every citizen has the right to enjoy and practise religious freedom through, among other things, building places of wor-

ship and praying there. So long as their use does not violate the peace or municipal byelaws, no restriction can be placed on them. There is certainly no question of prior state authorisation for their construction.

In practice, the U.P. government will condone illegal temples — as it regularly does — but ban mosques, madrasas, and churches. This is majoritarianism, not democracy with its universal rights for everyone.

The proposed law would turn our minorities into second-class citizens, who must live in constant fear of being dubbed 'ISI agents' or surrender all rights to a whimsical state. That is a despotic communal thing to do.

In Gujarat, India's most communalised state, it is the RSS that rules. There is systematic anti-minority violence.

Today's targets are Muslims and non-tribal Christians, besides Christian adivasis in South Gujarat. The permission granted to the Hindu Jagran Manch to build a temple next to a church at Halmadi in Surat exemplifies the state's communalisation.

The Gujarat BJP's agenda is not confined to terrorising the

minorities. It is infusing communal poison into education, culture and the media — witness the wholesale appointment of pro-RSS vice-chancellors, harassment of non-RSS journalists — and to co-opting the upper crusts of different classes, including OBCs.

There is very little political resistance to this. As my recent visit to Gujarat showed, it is not easy for the minorities or non-RSS supporters to live there with dignity.

The BJP in Gujarat has now surpassed itself by lifting a 14-year-old ban on government employees joining the RSS. Now, all state employees, including policemen, can get communally indoctrinated with official complicity, and then discharge their duties — impartially of course!

The ban was imposed on 14 organisations in the wake of serious communal disturbances. Removing it only in respect of the RSS sends out a horrifying signal. The timing coincides with the 'sankalpa shibir' attended by 30,000 swayamsewaks, including chief minister Keshubhai Patel.

The RSS demands that the

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Air pollution

Sir, The extent to which the level of air pollution in Dhaka city has reached is alarming, to say the least. Anybody moving in the streets of Dhaka can easily feel the toxicity of the thick black smog — mixture of poisonous element like carbon-monoxide, sulphur-dioxide, lead etc. The polluted air that we're made to breathe is indeed poisoning us slowly and it can soon become lethal if the process of emitting noxious gas from automobiles is allowed to go on unabated.

We find no words to condemn those who are responsible for the air pollution of Dhaka city to reach this dangerous level. The charge of criminal negligence should be brought out against them. Decisions taken by the present administration, as we note from media reports, to overcome this problem seem one-and-a-half years ago also seem to be shelved probably under the influence of the vested groups.

As a last resort, we now urge and look upon the civil forum which is PARASH to consider a similar movement as it launched under the leadership of AMA Muhi and Prof. Serajul Islam Chowdhury to shift the location of NAM conference centre from Osmany Udayan to alternative site in order to save the trees. The air pollution problem in Dhaka can most certainly be termed as an equally important cause for another public movement. We owe this obligation to our next generation.

Tazeem Hasan

Toronto, Canada

The war in Chechnya

Sir, The fresh war in Chechnya is brutal. It is raging now for over four weeks. According to Medicins Sans Frontier, the conduct of the Russian Army in Chechnya amounts to war crimes; innocent civilians have been treated brutally and many are feared to have died or injured due to lack of discrimination.

The civilian population, mainly the children, women, and the elderly ones were not spared of fierce shelling and bombardment by the Russian army as they went after the rebels. There is no sign of change in military assault and the protests by the European Community and the USA have been mild and ineffective.

The acting President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, seems to have chosen the Chechen theatre as the stage to recover Rus-

sian honour and vowed to win this war whatever be the military and civilian casualties. Winning this war is important for Putin's own prospect of winning the presidency in the coming elections. While the compulsions are understood, yet to an outside observer, the ferocity and intensity of the conflict amounts to extermination of the Chechen people. Russia has lost its seat as a superpower but it seems it has chosen Chechnya as its opportunity to make a show of its prowess reminiscent of Czarist conquests of a bygone era.

The world has just celebrated a New Millennium with lofty promises and earnest hopes of an era of freedom and human rights everywhere. Then will the international community still remain a silent spectator regarding Chechnya? One wonders where is the famously moral outrage, the righteous indignation, and above all, the arm-twisting diplomacy by the Western democracies?

However, the question is, is that resoluteness, the characterised NATO's response to disproportionate use of force and terror by Slobodan Milosevic in Kosovo? Are the Chechens as dispensable commodity because they are somewhat removed from the regime that is not particularly applauded for its readiness to compromise national ego and sense of honour especially so soon after losing its erstwhile empire. Yet, that challenge cannot be muddled away; it calls for ingenuity and pragmatic reconciliation.

Let us hope that Russia will find a way out before further tragedies aggravate and a point of no-return is reached in Chechnya.

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Remote-sensing devices

Sir, The local print media appears to have missed this interesting news item which appeared in a recent issue of Asia-Pacific Satellite, a professional's magazine.

The Bangladesh government has undertaken a plan to install satellite-delivered Differential Global Positioning System (DGPSP), which will be used to determine the exact position of marine vessels, offshore objects and aircraft, according to at least two Asian news agencies. The US\$4.44 m project, financed by the World Bank, will be implemented by the BIWTA.

On the same page, there is a related news item, headlined 'A spy satellite for India?' This news is on the launching of this year's Indian surveillance satellite, Cartosat-1, which carries stereo cameras for, I believe, pictures of city aerial maps.

The existing IRS (Indian Remote Sensing) satellites could not detect alien military movements in Kargil in the Himalayas near Kashmir.

AZ

Dhaka.

Man is endowed with reason.

Which is an attribute of conscience that implies the existence of an inner cognitive agency which allows us to arrive at moral and ethical truths and to judge moral states of affairs which aided men to be a rational human being. In this setting modern political ideas as constitutional government, consent in political decision making, the right of political and legal representation, the power of adjudication and jurisdiction and so forth have been determined.

We in the present day world

constitute a variety of pre-

modern ideas about

freedom of expression, equality

and justice. Freedom of thought is the unequivocal pre-requisite

for a civilised society.

Faculty which leads the present

day world at the road for global

or universal civilization.

The notion of the present day welfare state rationally based on economic and political factors such as 'income' or 'class'.

State will secure the interests of each of its citizens irrespective of caste, creed and religion.</