

The Daily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali
Dhaka, Friday, January 28, 2000

This Bill is Dangerous

IN tell-tale haste, the government has tabled the infamous Public Safety (Special Provision) Bill on the floor of Jatiya Sangsad. Only last Monday, the Cabinet had decided to refer the draft bill to the Law Ministry for further scrutiny...

The timing of the presentation of the bill is suspect because it coincides with the Opposition's decision to intensify its political movement against the government. The list of offences attracting the mischief of the law in question, among other things, includes car-bashing, raising road, rail or riverine blockades, bomb-blasting and spreading terror or panic.

These will be basically non-bailable offences triable in special tribunals within 90 days from the date that the case will have been prepared which means that the period of effective detention could be longer than three months. This 90-day period is extendable by a maximum of one month, which together with the carry-over of time taken to prepare the case itself must lengthen the overall time of detention that much more.

This is giving sweeping powers to the police. Can the Prime Minister, the Home Minister or other leaders of the government or the party guarantee that somewhere down the party hierarchy, there won't lurk a vicious plot to abuse the law for the satisfaction of someone's personal or political vendetta? Will the higher officials in the police force be able to always stand guard over misuse of the law by their subordinates? So, basically, the AL is laying a trap for itself not only in terms of the present times but also for the future because they are not putting any limit the law's duration.

Evidently, the AL has refused to learn from the discredited Terrorism Act of 1992 which the then ruling BNP had authored only to abandon it after two years in the face of a severe public censure. The AL government would do the country and itself a world of good if it does not press on with the law anymore.

Democracy in the Region: Fighting a No-win Battle?

In India itself democracy is only up to the polls. There is no transparency in governance and the ruling National Democratic Alliance does not consult the opposition in taking decisions.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

Nepal may not come into the category of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. But the opposition's, primarily the communists' actions only aggravate Katmandu's economic problems. The fact is that the government in power spends a substantial amount of money on curbing the Maoists' insurgency in the north and finds little money for the anti-poverty programmes.

tary establishment had fielded. But after the defeat, the junta went back on its undertaking. It did not restore the assembly, nor did it part with power. Instead, it unleashed repression against Suu Kyi's supporters, many of them still languish in jail.

The atmosphere is that of the days of the emergency in India. High-handed and arbitrary actions are carried out with impunity. Tyrants have sprouted at all levels. Desire for self-preservation has become the sole motivation for action. The ethical considerations inherent in public behaviour have become gradually dim.

And what should Suu Kyi infer from close relations between democratic countries and the ASEAN? The later has admitted Myanmar to its fold. Thailand has even officially sponsored the trip of General Than Shwe, head of the military junta. There was not even a whimper of protest from any one, including the Vajpayee government. Surprisingly, New Delhi has still been talking to

the military junta. For trade or other purposes, the people of Myanmar should not be betrayed.

In India itself democracy is only up to the polls. There is no transparency in governance and the ruling National Democratic Alliance does not consult the opposition in taking decisions. It was clear in the recent Indian Airlines hijacking case. The opposition was castrated when the government had decided to swap some 160 passengers and the crew for the three terrorists. The opposition should have been associated from the beginning. Then it could have felt involved.

Our government — the Vajpayee regime alone is not to blame — has a tendency to keep things under wraps. I asked in the Rajya Sabha why the Henderson-Brooks report on the India-China war had not been made public even after 38 years. The reply was that it could not be done in the public interest. The Subramaniam Committee report on Kargil looks like going the same way. Sharing information with people is the essence of democracy.

Another developing trend in India is to constitute independent committees, whether for the appointment of judges or for the selection of persons at high places, because the institutions are not considered independent. Then why have them at all? The remedy is to make them independent and vibrant so that they function efficiently. By ignoring them the Centre is only ruining the little that we still have.

Beyond 100 Days

A 100 days are enough to confirm that the regime is sincere in interest and is not trying to sell the Eiffel Tower to the people of Pakistan. Let down by the experience of three martial laws, the public is necessarily cautious about giving time to the rulers to redeem the promises made.

POLITICIANS make for natural infantrymen.

When under fire, they know it is prudent to keep their heads down. Now that things seemed to have ease down plus/minus, a few days of the 100 since Oct 12, 1999, "the natives have started to get restless" and talk about the restoration of the Assemblies "so as to restore the democratic image of Pakistan".

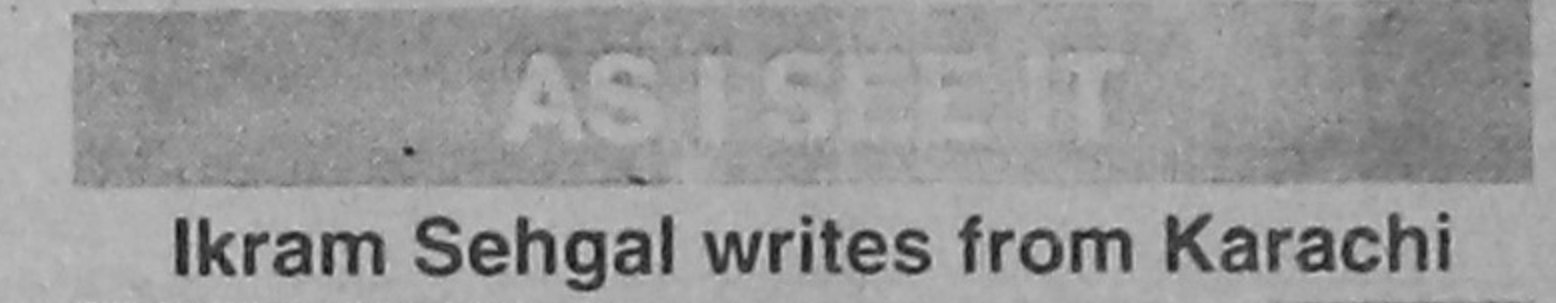
accountability to weed out the corrupt of this Earth must take place.

Let's face it, reforms are in the works that will not only restore the constitution but also will make them far more pragmatic in future. It is a slow process that does not cater for the impatience of the masses. On the contrary, it requires them to trust in the credibility of the military regime to do the right thing by the nation. A 100 days are enough to confirm that the regime is sincere in interest and is not trying to sell the Eiffel Tower to the people of Pakistan.

The Chief Executive (CE) accompanied by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Finance and Commerce, made a short and worthwhile trip to China. Over the past decade, China has shrugged off the trauma of Tiananmen Square, and with great maturity, it has taken its due place in the comity of nations as an emerging superpower.

The old guard has given way to a new generation of leaders seemingly more interested in economics than geo-politics that is a perception not a reality. There has been some apprehension in Pakistan, duly stoked by India's attempts to deepen their relationship with China.

Kargil was a dangerous watershed in our relationship, annoyed by the fundamentalist support within Pakistan for the Muslim Uighurs of Sinkiang Province and mindful of being even-handed as being an emerging superpower.



Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

schedulings.

For the CE, this was a personal vote of confidence from Pakistan's traditional and closest ally, a re-affirmation of the bond that stands us in good stead when dealing diplomatically with the US and Europe and militarily with belligerent India. Pakistan badly needs a self-confident China to back us with both word and deed if the war of words unleashed by the associates of Nathuram Godse escalates into the real thing.

History was quietly made on Jan 14, 2000 by the Police Reform Group's second meeting chaired by Lt Gen (Retd) Moinuddin Haider, the Federal Interior Minister. It is vitally necessary to make police independent and answerable to the law instead of politicians, bureaucrats, special interest groups, etc., that used them as an instrument of torture rather than being the apostles of peace that law-enforcing agencies should be.

The group decided not only that there should be a National Public Safety Commission to look after Federal Affairs and policies, but as law and order is a Provincial subject, to set up a Provincial Public Safety Commission and for major cities, to start with the Provincial capitals, the long standing demand for a Metropolitan Public Safety Commission. The group went on to agree in minute detail of how the members of the neutral commissions would be chosen and their mandate to make them effective.

The functions of the commission were almost all agreed. Some administrative points remained to be settled. Gen Moin Haider is an exceptional selection by the CE for the post he is holding, a man for all seasons, an activist type of person very much result-oriented. Despite the healthy debate, which as a member of the group, one is ethically bound presently not to discuss, the Interior Minister guided the group to a decision-mode rather than keep it pending it forever in limbo in committee sessions. The draft of the working paper as well as the Ordinance (prepared by eminent lawyer Liaquat Merchant) was put together by the representatives from Karachi led ably by

Jameel Yousuf, Chief of CPCL who made a forceful presentation, the proud sub-group saw very few (but meaningful and pragmatic) amendments in the suggestions.

On Jan 29, the group is meeting to finalise the proposal for the Federal Cabinet for approval. In his quest to establish the rule of law, such reforms are high on the CE's agenda. The rule of law is what gives any nation the dynamics of being a firm and just society, that in turn goes towards making the nation great. Only leaders who are confident about their sincerity and intention can afford (or allow) such discussions, and the CE scores heavily on this point.

Pakistan has always been a paradox to the US mainly because of the changing geo-political objectives of the superpowers. In the late '70s, Kissinger, the then US Secretary of State and President Ford, warned of making a "horrible example" out of Pakistan if we persisted with our nuclear policy. Afghanistan changed all that as the US saw an opportunity to "Vietnamise" the Soviet Union down to size, in the process the Soviet Union disintegrated. At the cutting edge of the guerrilla war, ISI personnel worked closely with CIA throughout the '80s but as the Afghan war wore down, the nuclear bogey was brought out to haunt Pakistan again. Our then military leaders, mainly for personal gain,

did not take long-term economic or military advantage of Pakistan's strong bargaining position at the start of the Afghan War, seeing that showing the political plus points. We tried to get the type of benefits Egypt and others got out of the Gulf War (in Egypt's case waiving off of all its \$15 billion debt).

On the contrary, this upon-a-time "front-line State for the free World" is always in danger of being declared a terrorist nation whereas India which has voted and schemed against the US in all social, political and economic forums as a frontline member of the NAM, became a tempting economic flesh pot that began being politically supported by the US and the West because of the potential one billion consumers in its population. Pakistan needs US understanding and support in dealing with problems inherited from the Afghan war. The statements and body language in the visit of the US senators as well as US Under Secretary of State Karl Inderfurth, to Pakistan, suggests that the CE and his colleagues have got grudging US support for their agenda (first built in her second stint for Ambassador Ms Maleeha Lodhi). A democratic road map has been asked for rather than a commitment about a timeframe, that distinction is important as it accepts the CE's argument that there was no democracy in Pakistan, only a sham that camouflaged outright nepotism and rampant corruption.

While the US side expressed concern about their nuclear force and terrorism (a la Osama mainly), there was none of the strident criticism that marked Kargil. Gen Guthrie, the Chief of British Defence Staff, had set the tone by his short visit a week earlier. The western stance is clear, to caution Pakistan mildly but refrain from condemning it as demanded by India in all conceivable forums, not excluding cricket (if one takes into account the vicious statements of sportsmen Kapil Dev and Tendulkar not so long ago NOT to play with Pakistan anymore). US President Clinton would like to visit South Asia for both economic and political reasons during the last year of his office, to use his good offices to calm the most dangerous nuclear flashpoint — Kashmir. If anyone can tell me how this can be accomplished by forsaking our goodwill by excluding Pakistan from Clinton's itinerary, one is more than willing to listen.



Socialisation?

Friday Mailbox

Obstacle to progress

Sir, I was astounded by the statistics given in the newspaper. During the past 28 years, since our independence, Bangladesh has experienced over 1000 days of hartals. Incredible as it may sound but it appears that in the last 28 years, the country was totally inactive for almost a period of three years — with no road communication, no production and no trade. How are we to make progress in such a competitive world? It is no wonder that we are still such a backward nation, struggling with poverty, lacking behind in economic, technical and scientific fields.

Hartal is the greatest impediment on the way to progress. Alas our political leaders are failing to understand this fact, or perhaps, are ignoring the issue of their own accord, for their own personal or partisan benefit. Hartal seems to be an idiosyncrasy exclusive to our society. Used in the name of democracy, it serves to actually mock or undermine democracy. If people were asked for their judgement, they would no doubt vote against hartals.

Why do we then continue with our tradition of hartals? I strongly believe that if the people were given the option of continuing with their daily life on any given hartal-day, overwhelming majority of the people would choose to do so. But hartals nowadays are not enforced through public support but through terrorism. If the opposition has a strong case and a just cause, the general public would no doubt support it — they would not have to resort to terrorism to enforce hartals. That is rarely the case today. Is it not a flagrant violation of democracy when such actions are carried out against a strong and almost unanimous public opinion?

The question arises, then, how good is democracy in a country where people lack education (leading to a lack of awareness and knowledge), where propaganda can be used deceitfully and effectively, where people can be easily led and where the political leaders are lying in wait to prey on their ingenuities? The key lies in education. With education, comes awareness, the recognition of their rights, the ability to distinguish between good and bad, and the faculty to voice their opinions. What we need is radical change in our society that advocates stability and peace. These improvements achieved the rest are certain to follow: foreign investment, increased production, technological advancement, economic growth and ultimately a better standard of living.

Saad Noor Quayyum Dhaka

Air pollution

Sir, Air pollution is taking its toll on us says a DS report of January 24, 2000. Thirty per cent of the traffic department are suffering from jaundice, allergic reaction, revile cardiac and respiratory complications. Two officials have already died while others are reportedly under threat due to constant exposure to pollution. Although this alarming news shocks and terrifies us, the authority concerned seems completely unmovable. Distributing air-filter masks and that too among only 1000 traffic personnel will not serve the purpose. What about the other officials? What will happen to the millions of commuters who move around in the city street everyday?

The authority concerned should realise that

air pollution is killing everyone slowly including their near and dear ones, and no number of air-conditioned cars would be able to protect them.

MR Rahman Guleshan, Dhaka.

Save us

Sir, When will the government wake up to the fact that air pollution is killing us? The pollution level of our metropolis has reached to such extent that no one is safe.

The city of Dhaka is now considered one of the most polluted cities in the world. Doesn't it concern the government at all? Why aren't they taking any constructive measures to minimise the pollution level? Weren't they elected to power to do so — create a safe environment for us?

Rana Dhaka

Two-stroke automobiles

Sir, "Air pollution and traffic jam in the city have drastically decreased as most of the estimated two-stroke vehicles and illegal rickshaws kept off the road to escape the ongoing police crackdown." (DS 25 Jan, 2000)

This is enough to prove the main objective causing air pollution and unbearable traffic jam. When the government decided to ban the import of two-stroke scooters, everybody welcomed the decision. However, as usual, the decision hasn't been implemented. Now when the police crackdown is on, isn't it the appropriate time to ban two-stroke auto-rickshaws? The authority concerned should consider the matter seriously.

Samia Sharmin Lalmitia, Dhaka.

"Evanescent Greenery..."

Sir, I noticed an article on 21st January, 2000 written by Dr. A. H. Jaffar Ullah, a senior Research Scientist from New Orleans, USA, captioned "Evanescent Greenery and Brand New Reconditioned Car". I wish to divide his article in two parts. In the 1st part, the author has very nicely described his views about the greenery and pollution in Dhaka. I must congratulate him for his nice description about Dhaka vis-a-vis undivided Bengal of Rabindranath Tagore and Jibananda Das. But second part of his article deserves some comments. What he has written about pollution from second hand and new reconditioned Japanese cars is far from reality. He has not seen two-strokes Bajaj auto-rickshaws in thousands or reconditioned diesel mini-buses or so-called new diesel trucks or buses from India which are emitting a huge amount of black smokes from the exhaust pipes day and night. On the other hand, reconditioned Japanese cars have given the taste of modern life to the middle and upper middle classes.

The author should know that the nouveau riche in Bangladesh buy luxurious Pajero, Nissan Petrol, Lexus, Mercedes etc. It is possible that their 3rd or 4th car may be reconditioned one. They earned their money from dodging the banks, etc. I really don't understand why the author is bias to the Japanese auto manufacturers.

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OPINION

Should We Help or Humiliate a Victim?

Shabbir A Bashar

Following the despicable incident at TSC on New Year's eve involving the public molestation of a woman, I was puzzled to read an article titled "Condemnation by some women is intriguing" in the internet edition of The New Nation, 7 Jan, 2000. It amazes me that anyone should find the protest against the publication of the victim's disrobed photographs intriguing. In my opinion, the views and actions of those organizations that reacted against this irresponsible and insensitive act by the three newspapers are fully justified. It is every citizen's democratic right to protest against any publication they consider indecent or hurtful — provided, in this case, the burning is done in a safe manner and not at the cost of any innocent third party such as the newspaper vendor. As Aint-O-Salish-Kendra pointed out, the role of the police in Bangladesh has always been questionable; putting it mildly the institution is bleached with such acts as rape of women in custody, extortion and a host of other crimes and disorderly conduct.

As the eyes of a democratic nation, it is indeed the duty of

independent media to report crimes and incidents as they occur. But newspapers also have an equal if not more of a moral obligation to treat people with the minimum dignity and respect — be they old, young, male, female, swadeshi or bideshi. The victim herself has complained, according to the report in the Daily Ittefaq (7 Jan, 2000), that by virtue of the publication of her unclad pictures in national newspapers, she and her family would become social outcasts. The prime consideration should be the victim because if we fail her we fail our society. Would we have allowed one of our close relatives to be dragged through the proverbial mud and have her indecent pictures plastered in public if had she been the victim of that dreadful night? I think not.

Stripping of men and women in Bangladesh is unfortunately no longer an alien culture. As the media reported — Awami League women stripped naked a male civil servant for defying their call of hartal when they were in opposition; recently a BNP female activist was stripped in public for participating in an anti-AL demon-

stration — and now this — again by the so-called associates of AL. This particular victim, however, had nothing to do with politics. She was a young woman trying to have a good time with her friends and be part of the global party, fun and festivities that night.

Therefore, I am more concerned about the dubious section of the media which indulged in indecency in the name of "action photography". The press photographers should however be praised for risking to take those photographs, but copies of those should have been handed to the victim, the court and the police in order to help prepare for an unbiased legal action against the goons. If identifying the molesters was the sole objective, then why were the pictures of the victim published in a way which only added insult to her injury? Why couldn't her face be hidden? In this day and age of advanced digital photo editing software at our fingertips this would have taken seconds. I would have expected the newspapers to exercise some degree of prudence and blacken out anything that exposes her body or identifies

the victim. Too much exposure of the molestation victim in newspapers unfortunately crossed the line between journalism and sensationalism. In the process, they rather became oblivious to the need of the dozens or even hundreds of similarly oppressed women, which again sends message to such victims that justice requires them to suffer further at the hands of the society at large. Victims must be prepared to be totally humiliated, even by our legal process, before they can be compensated. It is little wonder that with attitudes like these, crimes against women are hardly reported and eye-teasing public stripping and acid throwing have become the norm in Bangladesh.

The newspapers should have taken into consideration the profound psychological trauma it will have on the victim for the rest of her life. I do not believe for a moment that publication of revealing photos of the victim — not the alleged culprits — was anymore beneficial at convincing a corrupt police force or lethargic Dhaka University authority in taking meaningful action

against the goons for this primitive act. Here, for example, at Cornell — one of the top Ivy League Universities — there are hundreds of blue lamp-posts equipped with crisis phones scattered across the campus at a few hundred yard intervals to help would be victims from assaults. Merely picking up the receiver ensures a police vehicle on the spot within a few minutes.

Subsequently, Ithaca is a near zero crime city. Back while I did my Ph.D. at King's College, University of London, a male student was expelled from my hall of residence without hesitation for merely harassing a female student. These are just two examples of how western universities view crimes against women and what expense and extent they are prepared to go to prevent it.

There is nothing intriguing about condemning those who humiliate a victim instead of helping. It is the moral obligation of every civilized citizen in a democratic country.

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