

We Back the Government on This

THE teachers of the country's non-government primary schools, currently staging sit-in and hunger strike at the Osmany Udyan to press home their demands for nationalisation of their schools, have taken the matter too far for anyone's comfort. While their principal demand itself is self-serving, to say the least, their call for resignation of the education minister is simply outrageous. We strongly condemn their action and back the government's stance on the issue.

Unfortunately, our political leaders, of both the ruling party and the opposition, are solely responsible for letting the issue grow out of proportion. Especially the BNP's shift of position in this regard is simply infuriating. While in power, did it not hold firm on their anti-nationalisation stance in the face of intense agitation by the teachers? We wonder what compelling development has taken place since then to induce such a dramatic policy turn-around.

The primary school teachers' demand should by no means be catered to, and we lend our full support to the government's plan to leave management of the non-government primary schools to local communities and the NGOs. We would urge the opposition to refrain from fanning a situation that has already assumed untenable proportions.

Bravo, Pak Judges!

IT is profoundly heartening to note that six judges of the Supreme Court of Pakistan led by the Chief Justice Saaduzzaman Siddiqui refused to take a fresh oath of office on Wednesday defying the orders of the military ruler Gen Pervez Musharraf. The refusal meant automatic removal of the judges from office. We salute the judges for their courageous act in defence of the country's Constitution.

The sudden action by the General may have stemmed from the fact that cases filed by the deposed politicians challenging the army rule are set for hearing in the Supreme Court on 31 January. This might have been a preemptive action by the military to remove the judges who risked taking a negative view on the legitimacy of the government.

Antidote to Cheating in Exams

THE education board authorities' decision to take punitive legal measures against students caught cheating in public examinations, pursuant to the Public Examinations Offences (Amendment) Act, 1992, does not come as a surprise given the high incidence of the malaise. But what certainly is baffling is the way the board authorities are keeping the abettors out of sight.

The authorities have also decided to implement some more measures like changing the type of question papers that induce cheating or copying from note-books smuggled into exam halls. To rectify the rot in public examinations the authorities need to take some comprehensive measures including improving the standard of class-room instructions.

BACK to square one again. There is 'thesis', and there is 'anti-thesis'. But, unfortunately, there is no 'synthesis' in Indo-Pak relations which has recently nose-dived to the bursting point again. India and Pakistan are again at loggerheads. Sharpening their horns, and spitting fire and hatred against each other.

Now comes the stormy news of a serious clash between the two armies in the Chamb sector on the line of control (LoC) dividing Kashmir between India and Pakistan. Each claims that they had inflicted casualties on the other, but each admitted that two of their soldiers had been killed.

Earlier, India had accused Pakistan of masterminding the plane hijack and Pakistan had alleged that the whole drama was stage-managed by Indian Intelligence (RAW) to discredit the present military regime and win sympathies of America to accept their request to declare Pakistan a terrorist country.

Naturally those who wish to see peace and stability firmly established in South-East Asia region, have been worried to see the gradual deterioration of relations between the two newly-emerged nuclear powers of Asia.

Fallouts of Plane Hijack Drama Indo-Pak Relations on Fire Again

by A M M Shahabuddin

It is time for President Clinton to act as a peace-maker as he has been doing in Ireland, Bosnia, Kosovo and specially in the Middle East where the arch rivals, Palestinians and Israel, and now Syria and Israelis, have been brought together.

implemented for some reason or other. But the fatal cancer has never ceased to sprout. Meanwhile, India and Pakistan had fought three wars, specially two on Kashmir. Under new development, India gained an edge over Pakistan by striking a new deal, known as Simla Accord, which shows a new track to solve the issue through bilateralism, by-passing the UN resolution.

Where Lies the Rut? Undoubtedly, it can't be denied that the root cause of Indo-Pak troubles lies in Kashmir which is still on UN agenda crying for solution since the forties when Prime Minister Nehru took the issue to the UN for necessary action against Pak militants who were then literally knocking on the doors of Srinagar.

Turn Down Heat It is heartening to note in this context, the flurry of diplomatic activities both in Pakistan and India by members of the US Congress, both Democrats and Republicans, and cabinet secretaries and other high US officials. These activities seem to be giving out a very meaningful message to both the countries — 'turn down the heat'.

Of course, India's opposition to the third party involvement to resolve the core issue of Kashmir will be there to thwart any move by any country or countries in this respect. But such a stance of India no longer holds good, since India has already broken to get third party involved in two recent events. First, when the Kargil war was at its peak, and tension between the two countries was running high, negotiations took place between Delhi and Washington before Clinton could 'blind' Nawaz Sharif to pull out the 'Pakistan-backed intruders' in Kashmir, that resulted in India's 'victory' and thereby boosted the morale of Vajpayee and BJP to fight the last general elections.

Brightening While, on the eve of President Clinton's visit to India (and he may drop Pakistan from his itinerary for the satisfaction of India), encouraging signals are coming out from Delhi. America seems to have already made substantial progress in establishing its equation, of course, economic, with India in recent times, particularly since the days of Kargil war when the US President performed miracle by forcing Pakistan to withdraw its militants from across the LoC.

Particularly since the days of Kargil war when the US President performed miracle by forcing Pakistan to withdraw its militants from across the LoC. Perhaps as a good gesture in return, Indian government had already lifted trade restrictions that nearly for five decades blocked US products in key Indian markets, such as textiles, agriculture and consumer and manufactured goods. This is undoubtedly forging better ties between India and USA, opening not only the so far 'sealed' Indian markets to America, but also showing a great transition from the 'socialist economy' of Nehru-era to a new open market policy.

So America, rather Clinton (the credit goes to him, no doubt), has already made substantial inroads into the hearts of the Indian people. Perhaps it would make easier for President Clinton, as the leader of the only superpower in today's world, to persuade as a peace maker, the Indian leaders to follow a democratic approach for the solution of the much vexed Kashmir problem. It may be mentioned here that Pakistan's military ruler Gen Musharraf has also urged US and Clinton, to play a role to promote peace in the region by addressing the core issue of Kashmir.

Time is short and the art is long. The situation in Kashmir is running too fast to get out of control, as the reports from both sides of the LoC indicate. The situation there is like a spewing gas field, waiting for a match stick. It would be too late for the world leaders to act if the 'match stick' makes a conflagration out of it.

President Clinton: Role of Peace-maker So it is time for President Clinton to act as a peace-maker as he has been doing in Ireland, Bosnia, Kosovo and specially in the Middle East where the arch rivals, Palestinians and Israel, and now Syria and Israelis, have been brought together.

The writer is a retired UN official.

Let's Talk Peace, Sri Lankan Minister Tells Rebels

An assassination attempt that wounded Sri Lanka's president and its justice minister has not shaken their determination to find a solution to the island's civil war. A Gemini News Service correspondent speaks to the minister and points to the formidable hurdles that stand in their way.

WITH his shattered right arm heavily sheathed in plaster, Sri Lanka's justice minister, Justice Mahipala, speaks calmly of his brush with death. Lakshman Peiris was badly wounded when a suicide bomber set off an explosion in an assassination attempt on President Chandrika Kumaratunga on December 18.

But Peiris is not thirsting for revenge against Sri Lanka's separatist Tamil rebels, declaring instead he is keen for the peace process to be resurrected. He believes talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam should be held without preconditions. Colombo should not insist on its earlier demands that the rebels must first surrender their arms, he says.

Peiris was speaking during a trip to London for medical treatment in January. The former law professor was largely responsible for drawing up devolution proposals which would give the minority Tamils a substantial measure of self-rule. The package has been dismissed by the Tigers, who have been fighting for an independent state in the north and east of the island for 17 years.

Both he and Kumaratunga, who may lose the sight of her right eye because of the bombing, say they are determined to press on for peace. The attack, at a campaign rally three days before December's presidential election, killed 26 people and is likely to cost Peiris at least some use of his arm. He may have to live with a metal pellet embedded in a lung.

"I realised later how close I had been to death," he recalls.

Neville De Silva writes from London Sri Lanka: the assassins' toll



The injury in the lung was particularly serious. If the pellet had veered half an inch it would have penetrated the heart. The shrapnel that shattered his upper arm just missed a vital nerve. Damage to this could have caused paralysis.

For the president, the attack would have brought back horrific memories. She was in her early teens when her father, Solomon Bandaranaike, then prime minister, was assassinated by a Buddhist monk in 1959. Almost 30 years later, her husband, Vijaya, a film star and politician, was shot dead at his home — apparently by extremists from the majority Sinhala community as a punishment for trying to negotiate with Tamil militants.

Kumaratunga, 54, who visited London two weeks before Peiris to seek specialist treatment, told journalists she believed that she had survived the assassination attempt because she was meant to be a 'messenger of peace'. Peiris said: "Even after all that has happened, the president is quite unwavering and resolute in her determination to pursue negotiations in order to achieve a viable and durable solution."

tacking naval vessels in the eastern port of Trincomalee. The Tigers, who started out as a small hit-and-run guerrilla outfit, have grown to be the most feared rebel force in the world, commanding a virtual army — with its own naval unit — that has inflicted humiliating defeats on government forces over the last seven years.

Using a combination of terror tactics and conventional warfare, the Tigers have set out their own preconditions: for the army to pull back and for food and other goods to be supplied to Tamil areas. In the current circumstances, Peiris believes that the assistance of a third party is vital to achieve progress.

The pragmatic approach favoured by government members such as Peiris would envisage the setting aside of preconditions by both sides — the question now is whether those advocating peace can carry the hard-liners both inside government and across the political spectrum.

Clearly, Kumaratunga faces formidable hurdles despite winning a second six-year term in the December poll. She has not been helped by continuing violence in Colombo in January — another suicide bomber killed 13 people near the prime minister's office and a Tamil separatist politician was shot dead — or by vague allegations in the state-run media of a plot to overthrow her. The reports seek to implicate everyone from the Tigers to the opposition United National Party and may end up alienating potential partners in the peace process.

Kumaratunga currently remains secluded in her barricaded residence, but she cannot remain there for ever. She wants to enact devolution legislation, despite opposition from the separatists, and has to call parliamentary elections by August. She will be seeking to boost the slim majority of her ruling People's Alliance to help her push through devolution. But she will be hard-pressed to campaign from behind closed doors.

Happiest Government in Germany

by Harun ur Rashid

Mr. Schroeder's often distracted look of last year as he struggled to bring a sense of order to his chaotic first year in office has been replaced by beaming smiles and public wise-cracking.

DURING his 18 months in power, German Chancellor (Prime Minister) Gerhard Schroeder has every reason to smile at the political misfortune of the country's main opposition party — the Christian Democrats. The Christian Democrats are reeling as the secret donations to the party accepted by the mighty former Chancellor Dr. Helmut Kohl during his 16 year rule are laid bare. Dr. Kohl admitted that he had accepted secret donations but was not prepared to disclose the name of the donors. He promised them not to reveal their names and it was a word of honour for him.

Virtually the entire opposition leadership has been tainted by this illegal affair. Last week, the Christian Democrats sacrificed their long standing leader Dr. Kohl to the scandal, when he had to quit as the party's honorary chairman. The affair is still unfolding every day by the claims of secret bank accounts, money laundering and kickbacks. This scandal relating to party donations is unprecedented.

The opposition seems to be paralysed and its biggest supporter, the big business in Germany has fallen in behind the Social Democrats-Green Party coalition government of Mr. Schroeder. They were once the strongest critic of the government. Mr. Hans-Olag Henkel, the president of the federation of German industry said: "The early frustrations with the government are gone. It is a big boost for Chancellor Schroeder."

Other things have also been going surprisingly well for the Chancellor. German economy is rapidly picking up speed, business confidence is growing and unemployment is falling.

The Chancellor came to rescue last year of the giant construction firm, Holzmann AG, when it was heading towards collapse with the projected loss of 70,000 jobs. The result was that Mr. Schroeder obtained the support from the employees and social welfare groups. He also silenced his left-wing party critics.

Mr. Schroeder wants to modernise his party programmes along the lines of British Prime Minister Tony Blair's New Labour Party. Germany's economic reform is seen as critical to shoring up international investor confidence in the Euro. In addition, changes to the health system and the lumbering state pension scheme have been flagged as well as cutbacks in public spending. By 2001, Mr. Schroeder wants to cut the corporate tax rate to 25 per cent from 40 per cent and reduce the lowest personal income tax rate from 23.9 per cent to 19.9 per cent.

The opposition scandal has significantly improved the Chancellor's chances of winning two key upcoming state elections. He has seen state electoral defeats since his election in September, 1998. That mood has been changed. Mr. Schroeder's often distracted look of last year as he struggled to bring a sense of order to his chaotic first year in office has been replaced by beaming smiles and public wise-cracking.

One Social Democrat official captured the mood when he said: "This is the happiest government we have ever had in Germany."

The author, a barrister, is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

To The Editor...

"The TSC Saga..."

Sir, I fully agree with Dr. Deepika's implicit condemnation (The TSC Saga - Millennium at its Best 26/1/00) of the horrific molestation of a young woman on New Year's Eve. But it is her analysis which I find most disturbing. She justifies the actions of the molesters by suggesting that it is due to the inherent sexual repressive nature of our Bangladeshi society. Once the men lose control, they are no longer responsible for their act. I am instantly reminded of an Old Bailey Judge, Mr. Pickles who is renowned for a verdict along the lines that if a woman wears too short a skirt, then she is asking to be raped. If the young woman was molested while walking a dark alley by herself in pitch darkness, it would be a different matter. But she was out with her friends in a large festive crowd in an atmosphere I imagine not too different from those of the all night street party on New Year's Eve at London's Trafalgar Square or even the summer Notting Hill Carnival. Yet, when was the last time there was a flasco like this in London?

don't Rome? Paris or New York's Times Square? Are the young women of Bangladesh then to remain indoors because our men folk cannot control themselves? I am saddened to see such views. I fail to see how the top brass of the police cannot be held responsible when it is part and parcel of their job. I am sure the Dr. Deepika is aware of the British Home Secretary, Mr. Jack Straw's offer to resign after he himself took his son to the police because the youngster had taken drugs. So responsibility always lies at the top and we expect to be led by example. Making statements like "Men will always be men" and "police will always be dumb brie sucking rats" is a defeatist attitude for a society which is in dire need of progressive change in our attitudes and our actions. I would also like to point out a possible influence of videos depicting similar illicit crimes. Two young boys in the UK murdered a baby named Jamie Bulger and left the body by the railway tracks: it was an exact copycat murder from a video that was released shortly before this heinous crime (it was subsequently banned).

Forced disrobing of women is a common feature of certain Bollywood videos. Even if there is a proven connection, it is very hard to control dissemination of such material in Bangladesh where the policemen can be "bought" to turn a blind eye for as little as Tk. 50. As president and subsequently sub-warden of one of the largest inter-collegiate halls of residences of the University of London, I have come across young women who were molested in lone dark streets. They were neither drunk nor "provocatively" dressed at the time, but yes they were unfortunate. It scarred them for life, shook their self-confidence and trust.

I don't believe anyone ever "asks for it" as Dr. Deepika seems to resign herself to. Let's stop making excuses for molesters and rapists and condemn all the evil who sought to gain at the expense of the victim including a section of the media which published her disrobed photographs. Shabbir A. Bashir, Visiting Scientist, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, USA.

Restore law and order

Sir, There was a different news in the DS and I cannot help reacting on that. This is a new phenomena that the policemen are being hit by the muggers and recently there have been more than one instances. I cannot imagine the state of law and order in my country now. I used to have high hopes about the policemen in Bangladesh that they can trace anybody out if they want to. I cannot accept the fact that they die chasing the muggers. How dare these criminals fire at the policemen? I think this is a high time the police personnel to take stern measure and prove their worth. It is my strong belief that they can restore the law and order in no time.

Dr. Rahmat A. Sweden

Political dissent and our PM

Sir, I fully endorse the views expressed by Mahfuz Anam in the commentary captioned "The

PM Bear Responsibility for this Vandalism" published on 26.12.99. He referred to the AL hooligan's armed attack on Kader Siddique's conference. As Mr. Anam very correctly commented "If the ruling AL does not understand and respect political dissent then we will have to conclude that it is not fit to be a political party of the 21st century and as such not fit to rule us."

Will the AL government realise this fact? M A S Molla Dhaka

Appointment of Returning Officer

Sir, The role of the Deputy Commissioner as Returning Officer and Thana Nirbahi Officer as Assistant Returning Officer has become controversial in the Election Process. To put an end to this controversy, FEMA a citizens' coalition has recommended that the responsibilities of Returning Officer and Assistant Returning Officers should be assigned to permanent officer of the Election Commission. In case of death of such officers, the District Judge should be appointed as Returning Officer and Sub-Judge or Assistant Judge as Assistant Returning Officer. Besides, non-partisan members from the civil society should be engaged in conducting polls.

Mostafa Sohel Dhaka

"Canned date juice"

Sir, This is in reference to the letter under the above heading published on 22 January. I fully endorse the writer's view and invite BCSIR to take initiatives to market our very own natural drink, khejurer rosh. When different countries are successfully marketing and exporting canned fruits and fruit juice there shouldn't be any difficulty marketing ambrosia. By exporting our different natural delicacies, we could also strengthen our economy. All we require is a positive outlook, enthusiasm and successful entrepreneurs. Tapash Rahman Dhaka