

Need Not be a Fait Accompli

THE highly charged controversy over the Public Safety Bill is at the centre of the torrid political situation at the moment. It has occupied the minds of the opposition political leaders in such a way that they are directing all their political resources towards its annulment. In a way, their refrains one-point demand for the 'ouster' of the government has gone in a limbo momentarily; although they might like to argue that they are spearheading it by their resistance programme against the safety bill. At any rate, their recourse to the insufferable 36-hour hartal call is patently unjustified.

The media, the civil society and the human rights groups have also been plentifully negative in their reactions to the Public Safety Bill. Why does not the AL see the point that they are receiving no adverse publicity on account of another tough bill concerning women and child repression which they passed in the Parliament alongside the safety bill? The rather contrasting reactions to the two legislative measures should be an eye-opener for the AL government to the acceptability of one relative to the other. One is readily suspected of having a political fang while the other is not.

It has now come to our knowledge that the government may have circumvented the Law Commission's advice for a reform of the penal code to speed up the process of trial relating to a certain category of crimes. The commission reportedly did not suggest that a new law be made for this purpose.

President Shahabuddin Ahmed has been meeting top opposition leaders to hear their views on the Public Safety legislation. To the opposition's plea that he refuse to assent to the bill, the President reminded them of the Constitutional stipulation: "After 15 days of presentation of the bill, it becomes automatically an act if the President does not assent to it."

It need not be a *fait accompli* if we consider that there cannot be anything called 'inexorable or irreversible' in constitutional matters which are but a mirror-image of civilised human affairs. If the party which brought the legislation comes to believe that it will be 'impolitic' in the long run to go ahead with it, they will be visualising a correct step forward. The AL knows better than any party how the Anti-terrorism Act of the BNP government died its natural death.

Cheating the Poor?

BAKLADESHI workers have been made victims of fleeing and cheating by the manpower recruiting agents in a number of cases in the past and the vile game continues unabated. The Prothom Alo, an influential Bangla daily, on Wednesday frontpaged a poignant story of cheating and deprivation of 200 hapless people recruited by an agency owned by a ruling party MP, Dr H B M Iqbal. This item was lifted by the local paper from The Saudi Gazette that had highlighted the plight of Bangladeshi workers living in subhuman conditions at a small Jeddah town tenement, preparing their food in a gruel kitchen and sharing it for subsistence at their own expense. Each one of these workers has claimed to have paid as much as Tk 1.20 lakh to the recruiting agent for a job that was supposed to pay them 700 Saudi Riyal, in addition to provisions for food and shelter. All these people were promised work in a factory, which obviously they did not find in reality to their utter disappointment.

A number of the jobless workers have narrated their harrowing tales to The Saudi Gazette. The workers were kept in total darkness about the terms and conditions of the contract which, according to the sufferers, were being changed according to the sweet will of the agent till the last moment; and to top it all none could read what was there for them before they paid up the full amount of money. One of them was made to sign the contract only two hours before his flight from Dhaka.

These are grave allegations against the recruiting company owned by a people's representative. Dr Iqbal has denied all these allegations when contacted by the Prothom Alo which carried the story but did not care to send any rejoinder to The Saudi Gazette that originally published it. His arguments cannot quite set the matter at rest. We strongly recommend to the manpower ministry and other relevant authorities to investigate the allegations brought against Dr Iqbal's company by these poor people and take appropriate action against it if proven guilty.

Ban on Polybags

BETTER late than never, the Environment Secretary has disclosed the government decision to ban countrywide the production and marketing of black polythene bags. Even the import of raw materials for any further production of the same will be forbidden. This development follows Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's approval of the recommendations of the Steering Committee on polybags last week. It is believed to be the first step towards freeing the country from the scourge of polybags. It is common knowledge that polybags are not environment-friendly and that their baneful effects are enormously pronounced already. The non-biodegradable nature of this substance is all too known. It causes soil degradation, water logging, drain congestion and a frightful decrease of the soil fertility. Polythene, according to experts, takes 125 years to get dissolved in the soil. Fearfully, the six million polybags currently in use in the capital city per day add to those that have been in the soil from past use.

This latest initiative, however, aims to remove only the black polybags, which are a tiny percentage of the overall supply. The rest would still be actively polluting the environment. Considering how dangerous it can be in the future, the phase-out plan leaves a question unanswered. What specific actions would be taken against the polythene goods which would still be in circulation during the phase-out period? The resolve to promote environment-friendly jute products and paper bags as alternatives is encouraging, but certainly needs more committed efforts.

Public Safety Act 2000: A General Assessment

Eminent citizens and legal experts expressed the opinion that measures for punishment for all crimes do exist at present — what is most direly needed is speedy administration of justice as well as just and impartial application of the provisions of law to all. The track record of the present government, unfortunately, suggests otherwise.

THE highly controversial Public Safety Act was passed by the Parliament on the 30 January. The government had been planning to enact this law for some time, but vacillated due primarily to the adverse reaction and strong resistance manifested by the political opposition and also on account of negative attitude assumed by several members of the ruling party itself.

The Prime Minister finally decided in favour of enacting this law and spared no time to bulldoze the bill in the half-empty opposition-free parliament to pass it. The Parliament was scheduled to have been prorogued on Thursday 27 January, but continued its session till 30 January, for this purpose. The unprecedented haste in which the bill was prepared and passed in record speed sprang surprise to most people, including diplomats, and made the real objective of this legislation a veritable suspect. A legislation of such grave national significance should have been backed by a popular mandate generally obtained through the concerned political party's manifesto published before general election. The government not only failed to fulfil this requirement, but also denied any opportunity to elicit public opinion on the bill, rejecting vociferous demand for it and requiring the Law Minister to break his promise on it.

In its preparation stage, the bill went through the scrutiny of at least four Ministries in one day. The relevant government officials and the printing press worked round the clock and through the week-ends to complete the task. The formality of sending the bill to the parliamentary standing committee on Ministry of Home Affairs was completed on the very day it had been introduced in the legislature. Even the records of discussion of the opposition legislators in the parliamentary standing committee, ignoring the existing rules and practices, were deliberately excluded from the dossiers with which the bill was sent back to the parliament. And the Prime Minister stated in her press conference that the bill was not passed in haste! But, it is crystal clear that her statement was not factual.

People wonder why was this indecent haste? Was it because of the need of passing the bill prior to Prime Minister's departure from the country on one of her frequent tours abroad, lest there be any unauthorized changes taking place in the bill during her absence? The apprehension was ill-founded, as no Awami League would dare to lose his or her political head to act against the wishes of their leader. Then, was it because political developments in the coming days could warrant a change in the decision to enact this law, which appears to be close to the heart of the ruler? Or, was it because of the need for immediate application of the stringent measures provided in the legislation? The real reason may have been a combination of all these and more. It is not clear.

The moot question appears to ascertain the real objective of enacting such a legislation in the teeth of severe opposition by all other political parties, the general public and the sober elements of the ruling party. On the other hand, almost all in the intellectual circle towing government line maintained strange and incomprehensible silence. Or, was their silence well-comprehended, people wonder? Nine categories of offences and crimes have been incorporated in the Act and rendered punishable by severe terms of imprisonment of varying duration upto 14 years and by monetary fine. The Prime Minister defended the bill in

the way as if it was the first time that punishment was to be provided for such offences or crimes. It is not true. In fact, all these acts had been made punishable under the existing laws. Major parts of her statement in the parliament appeared to be an exercise in playing to the gallery and to the television and radio audiences. However, some of the less severe offences like posing obstruction to vehicular movement and damaging cars and property have been mischievously bracketed with more severe and heinous crimes like terrorism, kidnapping and extortion. The 5-member composition of the loyal Jatiya Party

had enacted a similar legislation. The opposition political parties, in contrast, contend that the new law is a black law and constitutes an anti-people and unconstitutional legislation. This severely violates human rights and negates fundamental rights of citizens. In their opinion, the real and underlying purpose of enacting this law was nothing but suppressing the political opposition and thwarting their anti-government movement by way of enhancing the degree of political repression through one-sided, unjust and false application of the stringent measures of the Act. As for a similar leg-

islation during their rule, the measures were less stringent, offences were bailable, detention was for shorter period, validity of the legislation was brief and application of the law was much limited.

The four-party opposition alliance immediately condemned the Act and called for a 36-hour long hartal on the 3rd and 4th February in protest. The 11-party Left alliance also joined voice in condemnation and staged a hunger strike. BNP stalwarts under their leader, Begum Khaleda Zia, went to the Hon'ble President to request the Head of State, who was also a former Chief Justice, not to assent the bill, which severely curbs fundamental rights of the citizens and restricts authority

party BAKSAL rule in early 1975. She has now gone a step further by enacting even a more stringent law to suppress political opposition and perpetuate her rule by force.

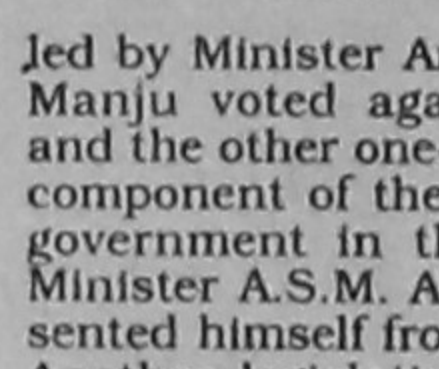
Eminent citizens and legal experts expressed the opinion that measures for punishment for all these crimes do exist at present — what is most direly needed is speedy administration of justice as well as just and impartial application of the provisions of law to all. The track record of the present government, unfortunately, suggests otherwise. The fascist attack on Kader Siddique's convention, numerous photographs published in journals of Awami terrorists killing and attacking opposition activists, bombing of opposition meetings and demonstrations, manufacturing of explosive devices in Awami League parliamentarian's house, raping of students in Jahangirnagar University and so on and so forth have not been properly investigated, despite widespread and continued demand, let alone meting out punishment to the criminals.

The blatant way the government has been using members of the law enforcing agencies in suppressing peaceful, democratic and legitimate political movement of the opposition political parties leaves little doubt in popular mind that the real and inherent purpose of this draconian law is evil and ominous. It was designed principally to serve unlawful and undemocratic interests of the ruling party by preventing exercise of the legitimate rights of the people. But, the general public are aware of Awami League's game plan and the opposition political parties, which now represent more people than the ruling party, appear determined to go ahead with their political movement to attain success, irrespective of the heavy sacrifice it might entail.

The author, a former Ambassador, is a member of BNP's Advisory Council.

Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim



Jed by Minister Anwar Hossain Manju voted against the bill and the other one-member JSD component of the "consensus" government in the person of Minister A.S.M. Abdur Rab absented himself from the House. Another legislation as Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, prescribing maximum sentence of death penalty, was also enacted at the same time.

The government argues that the new Safety Act will help reduce rampant crime and improve the deteriorating law and order situation by way of filling up the loopholes of the existing laws, preventing unreasonable granting of bail and ensuring speedy trial. They asserted that the past BNP government also

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Monday, 31 Jan, started with a Plenary Session on the "Internet race", moderated by Nobuyuki Idei, President Sony and participated by Chairman AOL (or should I say AOL-Time Warner) Stephen Case, William Gates Chairman Microsoft, and Rupert Murdoch, Chairman News Corp. The merger of AOL and Time Warner had made it the biggest business conglomer-

ation in the afternoon about the US geopolitical and economic views respectively at a Plenary Session. Dinner Sessions focussed on leadership, cost/environment, global marketing, consumers, etc. Monday, 31 Jan, started with a Plenary Session on the "Internet race", moderated by Nobuyuki Idei, President Sony and participated by Chairman AOL (or should I say AOL-Time Warner) Stephen Case, William Gates Chairman Microsoft, and Rupert Murdoch, Chairman News Corp. The merger of AOL and Time Warner had made it the biggest business conglomer-

Davos in the New Millennium

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had among the speakers Professor Nasr, Head of Islamic Studies, George Washington University, USA.

The two key questions addressed were viz. 1) what are the new beginnings shaping the global agenda? and 2) what will make a difference in our new century?

For the first time the participants had an electronic interactive voting system to obtain instant reactions on key issues and what needed to be done, an overwhelming majority decided "climate change" was the most concern on Jan 27 night there were independent dinner sessions with academics, experts, leaders, etc., at various hotels around Davos. "Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and its impact beyond the US" was chaired by Erik Peterson, Senior VP and Director of Studies, Center for Strategic and International Studies, USA, very enlightening in the context of future wars and a privilege to hear Professor Paul Kennedy of Yale and Edward Luttwak air their views.

Friday brought with it sessions on economy, society, biotech/genetics, health and nutrition, geo-politics, education, religion (including one in Political Islam) chaired by Gerbran Tueni, a Publisher from Lebanon, participated by Vice President Ms Masoumeh Ebtekar of Iran) environment, e-commerce, human rights, etc. British PM Blair gave an excellent presentation on the responsibility of business in support of governance. He spoke eloquently for the need of a "third way".

A dialogue between a host of leaders and Members WEF took place in panel discussions on Friday afternoon. The "India Evening" had all the top Indian fashion designers and dance troupes from various States, though some of the Indians were gracious in their invitations, the overall attitude focussed their outrageous maligning of Pakistan in international forums and persuaded most Pakistanis not to attend. Dinner sessions had alterna-

tive medicine, family and civilization, imagination, philanthropy, etc., as themes. "Money laundering" was chaired by Peter Eigen of Transparency International which is hosting a seminar, in which I will be participating, on "Corruption in Arms Trade" jointly with the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, SIPRI and Cambridge University, in Stockholm on 4-5 Feb, 2000. It was a great privilege to attend the Hungarian reception in the evening courtesy of the Hungarian Ambassador Janos Barabas. PM Orban made an excellent presentation for

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Naidu of Andhra Pradesh and Indian Finance Minister Sinha, George Soros of Soros Fund, President Akayev of Kyrgyzstan, President Kocharyan of Armenia, PM Tokayev of Kazakhstan, Foreign Minister Kharrazi of Iran, Nobel Prize winner professor Elie Weisel of Boston University, Taizo, Nishimoro President Toshiba, US Senators Hatch and John Kerry, Gerd Christiane Todd Whitman of New Jersey (who broke her leg on the Sports Day last year while skiing), Finance Minister Paul Martin of Canada, Minister of Trade Alec Erwin of South Africa, US Under Secretary of Treasury Stuart Eizenstat, Canadian Minister for International Trade Pierre Pettigrew, Professor Jeffrey Sachs of Har-

vard, PM Dmoysek of Slovenia, a Foreign Minister, Papandreu of Greece, PM Zeman of the Czech Republic, Finance Minister Arizaga of Ecuador, UN Deputy Secretary General Louise Frechette, Editor Foreign Affairs Magazine James F Hoge, President Schuster of Slovenia, Industries Minister John Manley of Canada, Chairman Makihara of Mitsubishi, President Pastrana of Colombia, President de la Rúa of Argentina, Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt of Belgium, Finance Minister Eichard of Germany, Stanley Fischer Deputy Managing Director IMF, Senior VP Joseph Stiglitz of the World Bank, Finance Minister Manuel of South Africa, Deputy PM Balcerowicz of Poland,

Deputy PM Figaredo of Spain, Former Irish PM Mary Robinson UN High Commissioner of Human Rights, President Mbeki of South Africa, Robert Hormats of Goldman Sachs, PM Aznar of Spain, Fresco Chairman Fiat, US Senator Bill Frist, US Secretary Commerce William Daley, Deputy PM Panitchpakdi of Thailand, Minister Trade Yeo of Singapore, President Boeing Company Philip Condit, Professor Rudi Dornbusch of MIT, Deputy PM Jorritsma-Lebbink of Holland, President Kuchma of Ukraine, Foreign Minister Amre Moussa of Egypt, Vice Premier Bangguo of China, William Safire of New York Times, Nicholas Oppenheimer Chairman de Beers, President Yasser Arafat of Palestine, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata, President Hewlett Packard Carleton Fiorina, Michael Bloomberg of Bloomberg, President Bouteflika of Algeria, Professor Lester C Thurow of MIT, etc to name only a small fraction of those who participated in one or more discussions.

Davos gives one of the best opportunities in the world to solicit investment for one's country in a networked atmosphere and while one can understand why in the present environment the Chief Executive did not make the journey in support of his Finance Minister, Davos is a must event for the Head of Government every year without fail. As one of the participants once said, "where else in the world can you get so many captains of the world in so many fields under one roof in an informal, congenial environment for several days?"

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

potential investors. On Saturday, subject matters were the "Economic re-shaping of Europe" with Corporate Performance, Islam outside the Middle East, Water Resources, Illegal Drugs, Ethnic Divisions, Internet Entertainment, Defusing the Pension Bomb, NGOs, Labour Unions etc. The high point was US President Clinton's plea to the assembled businessmen for responsible globalisation and a shared vision to spread the benefits thereof. In an unrelated question, the US President brought Kashmir into focus before this elite gathering, he exhorted all nations to get India and Pakistan together to resolve the problem. This made Kargil worth the sacrifice. The US President got a standing ovation and put the stamp on the first big event of the 21st century.

Saturday ended with the usual gala Soiree for all the participants. Sunday was mainly a Sports Day and members were encouraged to participate in skiing, sledding, etc. US Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright and Secretary of the Treasury Lawrence H Summers made an impressive presenta-

ate in the world. Later Sessions took in small wars, mergers and acquisitions, creativity and innovation, wireless revolution, going global, e-culture, cancer, brain-drain, media, stock exchanges, complementary medicine, business diseases, women leadership etc.

On Tuesday the Plenary Session was on "worldwide web" with subsequent Sessions on technology, internet business, global governance, peace imperatives (participated by King Harald of Norway, Shimon Peres of Israel, President Martti Ahtisaari of Finland, Cardinal Arinze of the Vatican and Grand Sheikh Tantawi of Al-Azhar University). After honouring world artists at a Crystal Award ceremony followed by a reception in the evening the WEF Summit came to a close.

Other than those already aforementioned, there was a virtual who's who of notables who took part in the Summit, among them Kenneth Courtis of Deutsche Bank, Abby Joseph Cohen of Goldman Sachs, Rick Menell of Anglovaal Mining, Orit Gadiesh of Bain & Co., Chief Minister Chandrababu

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

Smoke Gets in My Eyes

YOU may have noticed that there is a tremendous promotion going on for cigar smoking.

All over the world rooms are being reserved for people to smoke \$10 and \$20 stogies, and photographs keep popping up in all the swell magazines showing women smoking up a storm. As a born-again non-smoker I am appalled that this is happening. I lit my first White Owl when I was 16 and only dropped the filthy habit 15 years ago. There's nothing worse than an ex-cigar smoker who is now clean.

In my time I experienced all the joys of smoking and also suffered the slings and arrows of friends who disapproved of my habit but didn't have the nerve to complain.

In the golden days of Cuba I blew smoke in people's faces and ruined their clothes, driving hundreds of people to the dry cleaners.

One of the reasons I could get away with it was that the movers and shakers of the world, such as Winston Churchill and Fidel Castro, always smoked cigars, and they had created an image of power.

I was so closely identified with cigars that I was once made "Cigar Man of the Year" by the manufacturers. This was the equivalent of a knighthood and guaranteed me a year's supply of Romeo and Julietts from Cuba.

So what happened? It was not a human being that made me give up smoking. It was God.

One day as I was puffing away, He grabbed me by the chest and said in a booming voice, "Knock it off!"

At first I thought He was kidding, but He wasn't. He tightened His grip on my chest and said: "This is the last time I'm going to tell you, put that thing out. If you continue to smoke, I'll do terrible things to you."

I said, "I'll quit next week, I promise." He thundered back, "Today! Now! This minute!" I put the last cigar I ever smoked into an ashtray.

It was one of the best moves I ever made, because I am now accepted in social circles wherever I go and people don't turn green in the face when they talk to me.

Based on the people I know, the new cigar craze won't last. As soon as God hears about people trying to sneak a puff, He'll start holding people by their chests until they get the message.

The word on the street is that the Almighty is no longer fooling around.

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To the Editor...

Rickshaws in the traffic system

Sir, Rickshaws seem to be a big issue. It should not be. This is an acceptable mode of transportation. It underwent process of evolution for a few hundred years, perhaps. In these days of employment-crisis this contraption provides some relief. And nobody argues with its environment-friendly characteristics.

But like all good things, rickshaws should also have some control. Being an important component of the traffic system, the rickshaws must conform to the traffic rules which are applicable to all other road users. The rules become meaningless if those are not applied to the occupiers of 60 per cent or more available road surface. Hence, rickshaws must be given due recognition as the legitimate road-users on their own right. There should not be any restriction on their number. Unless the same is applied to motor cars, i.e., person-alised carriers taking more space per person and being more damaging to the environment, if rickshaws are restricted on main thoroughfares,

motor cars should be banned on narrow lanes during busy hours.

If rickshaws are thus recognised, they must carry registration papers. In original, to be shown to authorities when demanded. The pullers must be trained in the traffic rules in week-long programmes conducted by regulating bodies.

Certificates of training also should be carried by the authorised rickshaw-pullers. This measures will eliminate the skirmishes, misbehaviours, wilful flouting of traffic regulations which are so evident nowadays on the road.

These measures may enhance the fare. A cheaper alternative can be introduced with slow-plying frequently-stopping buses operated by BRTC on the main avenues of the cities. If buses stop at every stoppage at, say a 500-meter distance, city dwellers will find it convenient to use those during short journeys.

Under any circumstances the motorised three-wheelers should be eased out of the system as soon as possible.

A Concerned Citizen
Dhaka

"Bangla Bhashar e-mail"

Sir, The idea of using Roman alphabets for the use of foreigners is in practice for many years. It is just that we do not have enough of those signposts to be noticed at every corner of the block. But by any means I would not buy a software that tries to write the menu bar in Bangla using Roman alphabet.

As for using in the official purpose, you would be interested to know that our government still uses English in the most interesting way. All of the official circulars and top pages of the documents are in Bangla and the rest including the comments of the officials are mostly in English. Perhaps the most erroneous thing we did is that we tried to force feed Bangla into the system and successfully got rid of the English in BA class. But that alone did not contribute greatly to the large-scale inefficiency in speaking English. It so happens that we are a class of elite who use computers for our valued expression of thoughts in a large illiterate nation.

As for Bangla and its inadequacy to express scientific

terms, a language is a flag of a nation that changes its colour and patterns depending on what that particular nation wishes to communicate within itself. Now we use words like 'chair', 'bus', 'economics', 'market', 'L/C', 'government', 'lever', 'switch', 'EFI engine', 'hard disk', 'network', etc., as part of regular vocabulary. It is the use of 'technology' and other more advanced thoughts that dictate what will be the contents of a certain language in a time. And I tell you, there has been, and there will be, the case of many such acceptances. And until then we can simply use Roman alphabet to write the words that we find is absent in Bangla although linguistically it is possible to write the pronunciation of every pronounceable word.

It is true that not all fonts are readily acceptable in all machines. But in general people use 2 to 3 fonts for most of their tasks. In English 'Times New Roman', 'Arial' and 'Courier' is commonly used. As time passes, I am sure we will see fonts like 'Suttony II' or 'Sulekha' is going to be the standard.

Asif M. Toudid
Dhaka.