

## Politicisation of BMA

ALLEGATIONS of favouritism and abuse of power labelled against top-notch leaders of the Bangladesh Medical Association (BMA) by a former joint-secretary reveal a couple of disquieting facts: the representative body of the medical practitioners in the country stands highly politicised and split on strictly partisan line. It could have easily been brushed aside as the view-point of a particular individual, had there not been many more of the same from doctors chiming in. Such a statement as the association "is nothing more than a cartel that acts on behalf of the ruling party" only betrays a growing dissatisfaction amongst many of its members — to them, the BMA no longer has the credibility to promote and protect their interest. The heart of the matter is, yet another association of professionals has fallen prey to politicisation.

Admittedly, the sign was very much there during the association's elections late last year and this paper in an editorial comment (BMA Polls, November 22, 1999) expressed concern over the strong political undertone in its electoral process. "Is it imperative to politicise an organisation of professionals?" we asked; for we have seen on many occasions how "politicisation makes way for indiscipline and works as a blanket cover for inefficient and corrupt professionals". Our worst fears seem to have come true. Regardless of the merit in the allegations that some of the association's leaders "receive special treatment and coveted posts due to connections with bureaucrats, politicians and key officials in the health directorate", one significant issue has surfaced from the controversy. It appears that there are some doctors, "seventy-seven" to be precise if we go by the former joint-secretary's claim, who have reasons to feel denied of opportunities for professional advancement, and that there could have been transfers made and fellowships awarded under dubious circumstances. Although the BMA president himself and another life member have categorically dismissed the allegations, there remains the dire need of a closer look at its affairs. The BMA should by itself launch an investigation into the charges brought against some of its leaders and dispel the controversy once and for all.

Such a controversy should never have arisen in the first place. Of course, in a democracy everyone has the right to political affiliation, and doctors are not excluded. But it should never get in the way of discharging their responsibilities to the society and also to the community they belong to. In other words, the BMA should rise above any political bias when it comes to promotion and protection of the interests of its members.

## No Lid Yet on Lethal Brew

FENI has fallen victim again to spurious liquor. Some 43 people have lost their lives consuming it, and it is feared the casualty figure might rise. Altogether fifty people fell sick after an intake of rectified spirit. Although the exact cause of their death cannot be confirmed until the viscera report on the autopsies done on some of the victims are received from Dhaka, it is generally believed their lives were taken by rectified spirit. Panic spread so swiftly across the town that some of the victims were buried without autopsy to avoid legal tangles. Rectified spirit is mainly used in homeopathic medicines and by carpenters to polish wooden furniture. Since there is no need for any licence to sell this liquid, it can be found even in village shops making it easily available to alcohol drinkers.

This is an old story that keeps coming back all the time, including the fact that the district administration has constituted a probe body to investigate the tragedy. This is the fourth such incident at Feni itself since 1985 in which year a big mishap took a toll of 26 lives. In recent times the incidence of such tragedies has increased and a lot of people have died from liquor poisoning. We have the Narsingdi liquor tragedy fresh in our minds. A number of measures were suggested by this newspaper following an earlier spate of occurrences to avoid future tragedies. But it is still not known what happened to the culprits who sold rectified spirit for human consumption beforehand. The probe body report on the Narsingdi tragedy has not been made public, let alone implemented. We are afraid the same fate may also await the probe body report pertaining to the Feni incident if the authorities do not make it a point to mean business this time. A continuing failure to act on this front will wreak havoc on the society with people dying in droves from the drinking menace.

## Burn Unit in DMCH

THE health and family welfare minister has indeed communicated a good news to the media on Wednesday. A 50-bed burn unit will shortly be set up in the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH). Necessary steps have got underway for completing the construction of the unit and providing it with necessary equipment and manpower. The announcement was made in the wake of a visit paid by a two-member British medical team of plastic surgeons. This area of treatment has been badly neglected in our country so far. Once in operation, this long-awaited unit will help hundreds of people with varying degrees of burn injury, especially the victims of acid burn, in receiving specialist care.

The extent of voluntary services that Bangladesh receives from foreign physicians, and of course governments, should have enabled us to create an indigenous capacity for the treatment of burn injuries. After completion, the burn unit could open up a possibility for developing some local expertise in treating burn injuries and acid burns. Attention has to be given to the fact that the number of specialists is not enough at the moment to cope with the increasing number of patients. Essential facilities have to be made available in the unit, otherwise better treatment would remain a far cry.

However, if past experience of implementing plans is any guide, then we need some special efforts to overcome bureaucratic bottlenecks that may delay the process of the construction of this important burn ward.

# What They are Looking for is Attention

*It is wrong to assume that the scourge of terrorism that blighted the state for some eight years went because of the police action. The Sikhs themselves revolted against militancy. They themselves shut the door on the terrorists to whom many among them had given shelter in the belief that they would articulate the community's feeling of neglect and economic hardships.*

does not speak well of the three sponsors. Gurcharan Singh Tohra and Simranjit Singh Mann, both Parliament members, and Gurtej Singh, who writes against his name IAS, even after having resigned from the service.

All the three have sworn to uphold the constitution and the country's integrity, the first two before contesting election and the third before joining the service. Still they are flouting the letter and spirit of the constitution by encouraging the separatists and fundamental forces.

Understandably, their fight is against Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal, who does not divide the Punjab into Sikhs and Hindus, but who has failed to perform. He is a political force to reckon with. Since they cannot defeat him in that field, they have resorted to playing the religious card.

Had Tohra and Mann the courage of their conviction, they would have resigned from Parliament and come in the open to preach secession. But they hide themselves behind the slogan of Sikh identity or yuddh (war) in defence of Sikh religion. They do not say what they mean nor mean what they say.

They have hailed Bhindranwala as "the great Sikh of the 20th century". Surprisingly, the revolutionary Bhagat Singh and the great Punjabi writer Bhai Vir Singh do not figure in

their reckoning.

Punjab and the Sikhs have suffered for one decade because of such persons who trade in hatred. In fact, the state has not yet fully recovered from the damage that militancy caused. There are already efforts to destroy whatever has been built so far. The Sikh community has got hurt because of the wrong impression created about it, not only in India but also abroad. It does not want Tohra or Mann. It wants to be left alone.

The family of Bhindranwala said on the eve of his birth anniversary celebrations: "It is

clear that militancy can revive.

That the Sikhs should have a feeling of their identity is not something reprehensible. All communities in India fancy the same idea. Also, the effort to make the country a federal polity is understandable. All states are clamouring for more say in their own affairs. The Constitution Review Committee has the devolution of powers on the top of its agenda.

But when the threat of militancy is hanging on the head, even genuine demands are doubted. They get pushed from the realm of discussion for

blighted the state for some eight years went because of the police action. The Sikhs themselves revolted against militancy. They themselves shut the door on the terrorists to whom many among them had given shelter in the belief that they would articulate the community's feeling of neglect and economic hardships.

Terrorists became oppressors and did not spare even the Sikhs. Political demands by the community were exploited to justify murder, loot and the like. When the popular support dwindled, the base of the terrorists cracked.

The real tragedy is that as soon as terrorism was defeated, the centre turned its back on Punjab's genuine demands. Even the killers of 3,000 Sikhs at Delhi in 1984 in the wake of Indira Gandhi's assassination went unpunished. Belatedly, the centre has agreed to constitute a commission to find out the real faces behind the 1984 rioting. Still there is no talk about the removal of other grievances.

In fact, the remnants of terrorist outfits have not yet reconciled themselves to the fact that they do not count with the public any more. This is clear from the alliance they are seeking with the militants in Kashmir. But this is ominous for Punjab. Both can one day pose a threat to the amity in the state.

Still it is unlikely that militancy will return to Punjab. The

reason is the sufferings the people in the state have gone through. It was a long, dreary winter of many years. Thousands of innocents were killed and businesses worth crores of rupees ruined. The young skipped their youth and found themselves adults in the midst of guns. They wanted jobs, not guns.

There is yet another point ranking in the minds of the people of Punjab. If the government had punished the police and other public servants, who committed excesses, the pain of the aggrieved would have lessened. There would have been a feeling that the guilty did not go unpunished. But politics of convenience had the better of the government. None has been touched. This remains a blot on the administration's face. It does not, however, mean that the ground is getting fertile for militancy. All it means is that Punjab's problems are yet to be solved and that there are elements wanting to disturb peace and amity on one ground or the other. The centre has to keep this in mind.

The controversy over the Sikh (Nanakshahi) calendar is an expression of accumulated grievances. That the dates of festivals and the birthdays of Sikh gurus will be different from those followed at present is a symptom, not the disease. The disease is that the mechanism for sorting out things is getting rusty. People want to air their differences and they use any method to do so. It may look as if they are washing their dirty linen in public. But what they are looking for is attention.

## BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

the habit of political persons to talk politics whether the occasion be the birth or death. We keep out of all political matters." Still so many persons have involved the family for their political ends.

Punjab's biggest problem is that its mainstay, the agriculture, has hit a plateau. In fact, the standard of living is coming down. Other avenues like industry have to be opened to provide opportunities for employment and development. Investors have not yet returned to the state. They would be scared if there is even a whiff of suspi-

solving problems. If they are kept pending, disruptive forces get a boost.

Thankfully, the attention of people at present is not focused on militancy. They want better governance and a cleaner administration. In their search, they may go from the Akalis to the Congress when the Assembly elections are held next year. But the elements representing Tohra and Mann will again be in the wilderness. They have nothing except fanaticism to sell.

It is wrong to assume that the scourge of terrorism that

# Superficial Friendliness

by Ardeshtir Cowasjee in Washington

*The superficial, as opposed to the concrete, in our particular case at this particular time, still reigns supreme. General Pervez Musharraf must realize that we have few, very few, friends and that nothing can be achieved by isolation.*

I am still in Washington. My health is recovering, but at the speed of a camel's measured plod. Nevertheless, it still seems, or appears, that my recovery is immeasurably speedier than that of the health of our nation.

Over here, the concern of this country is firmly centered around the question of who will be the next president of the USA. Former secretary of state and master of diplomacy Henry Kissinger's sights are set on the future as is evident from an article of his that has just been published entitled "The Next President's First Obligation". Others who have played similar or lesser roles in the political life of the country are following suit. Little thought is given to whether Bill Clinton visits Pakistan or not. It is of no apparent consequence.

Should Clinton's hesitation be caused by his apprehension of a meeting with President R. A. Tarar, or of making an overnight stop in Islamabad, we must excuse him. If he does not descend from the clouds and spend a few hours in our sanitized capital, the heavens will not fall, but he should perhaps take a chance, stop over, meet General Pervez Musharraf and assess for himself the leadership qualities he possesses. Does he present himself as a friend or not? Is he likely to be an extremist or not? Will he be able to deliver or not?

As for Kissinger, at this time, and taking into account the present rocky state of Pakistan's relationship with the US, we might do well to cast our minds back to the days when pastmaster Kissinger, on behalf of his president, was playing footsie with an earlier military dictator of the Republic of Pakistan, General Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan.

Firstly, to quote: "Ever since it had come into being, Pakistan had sought a sustained legitimacy. No government after the death of the founder of the state had served out its term.

Every change had occurred through some sort of coup; military and civilian governments alternated, with the military dominant." No, this was not written in February of the year 2000. Such was the state of Pakistan in 1970, as observed by Kissinger in his "White House Years". What has changed?

Neither has there been much change in US attitudes towards Pakistan. In fact, the military alliances armed way back in the days of the Eisenhower administration and the Eisenhower interest in Pakistan cooled noticeably after 1961 when verbal assurances of protection were substituted for military hardware. After the 1965 war, the US stopped the supply of military equipment to both Pakistan and India. When President Johnson became aware of the one-sidedness (since India received arms from its own armouries and from its links with Communist nations) all he did was to promise to transfer some obsolete American tanks to Pakistan through a third party, and even that transaction was not completed.

In 1970, Kissinger records: "Pakistan's leaders already felt discriminated against because a Harvard professor had been assigned as ambassador to New Delhi while Islamabad rated 'only' a career appointment." However, Richard Nixon was one American president who found the bluff, direct military chiefs of Pakistan, such as General Yahya Khan, to be congenial terms with the Indian leaders. But amongst the opinion-making groups in the US Pakistan had never found the sympathy that India enjoyed. There were also then, as there are now, headbashed reasons for the priority attached to US relations

with India. Nevertheless, the US did not balk then at using Pakistan for expedient purposes, as it also did not in the 1980s when Afghanistan was a problem, and surely would not balk at doing so again in the 21st century.

In September 1970, Nixon granted an interview to "Time" magazine in which he outlined upon China its assumption of a future world role and how he would like to be a part of it: "If there is anything I want to do before I die, it is to go to China. If I don't, I want my children to."

This was the era of Pakistan's budding flirtation with The Middle Kingdom. In October 1970, General Yahya Khan met Nixon in Washington shortly prior to a visit to Beijing. Nixon asked him to convey to China that the US regarded Sino-American rapprochement as essential and that he was ready to send a secret emissary to Beijing, mentioning Kissinger as a possible envoy.

General Yahya went to Beijing in November and three weeks after his return Pakistan's ambassador in Washington, Agha Hilaly, met Kissinger and produced a handwrittenmissive which he declared could not be handed over but could only be read out. It was a personal message for Nixon from Zhou Enlai who observed that though many messages had been received from the US via various sources, this was the first one to come "from a Head, through a Head, to a Head. The United States knows that Pakistan is a great friend of China and therefore we attach importance to the message." A personal representative of the president was invited to Beijing.

A reply was drafted by

Kissinger and handed over to Hilaly on December 16. It made it clear that the US was prepared for high-level talks in China. The Pakistani channel was not activated again until April 27, 1971, when Hilaly delivered to Nixon a handwritten message from Zhou Enlai in which he expressed his gratitude to Yahya and informed Kissinger that the Chinese government was ready to receive publicly in Beijing a special envoy of the US president, or even the president himself should he consider the time ripe, and that proper arrangements were to be made "through the good offices of President General Yahya Khan."

A formal reply to Zhou from Nixon was handed over to Hilaly on May 10 in which he proposed a preliminary secret meeting between Kissinger and Zhou on any date from June 15 onwards. This first meeting was to be "strictly secret" and would prepare the ground for Nixon's visit to Beijing. In a subsequent exchange of messages it was agreed that Kissinger would fly from Islamabad to a Pakistani Boeing to a Chinese airport not open to the public. The dates fixed were July 9 to July 11.

On the morning of July 8, 1971, Kissinger arrived in Islamabad after visits to Saigon, Bangkok and New Delhi. He lunched with Joseph Farland, the US ambassador, and dined with General Yahya, making much mention of a bad stomach. General Yahya suggested a trip to Nathiagali, away from the heat of Islamabad, where he could recover over the next couple of days, and Kissinger gratefully agreed.

At 0430 on July 9 Kissinger took off from Chaklala in a PIA 707 piloted by General Yahya's

personal pilot. At 0800 a dummy motorcade proceeded from Islamabad to Nathiagali. The next day, Kissinger's aides announced that he needed an extra day's rest in the hills and his onward flight schedule was rearranged. Kissinger flew back into Chaklala at 1500 on July 11, drove via a circuitous route on to the Murree Road and thence back to Islamabad as though returning from Nathiagali. By 1800 he was in his own plane heading for Teheran.

Kissinger writes how "boyishly ecstatic" General Yahya Khan was at having pulled off the secret operation. He had personally reviewed each detail of the clandestine departure and arrival and put the full facilities of the Pakistan government at Kissinger's

disposal. He asked nothing in return, contrary to media claims at the time; "he performed a great service for our country and it must be recorded that he dealt with us honourably." Nixon thereafter "adopted a somewhat warmer tone toward Pakistan. He and I were profoundly grateful for Pakistan's role as the channel to China. It was a service for which Pakistan's leaders, to their lasting honour, never sought any reciprocity or special consideration." But then "our relations with Pakistan were marked by a superficial friendliness that had little concrete content."

The superficial, as opposed to the concrete, in our particular case at this particular time, still reigns supreme. General Pervez Musharraf must realize that we have few, very few, friends and that nothing can be achieved by isolation.

The author is a renowned Pakistani columnist based in Karachi.

## OPINION

### 'A Black Law by Option'

Abu Imran

The newly introduced public safety bill voted through in the parliament on January 30 and enacted on February 14 by and large has been considered a black law and it's now being opposed vehemently. But the ruling party members are going around energetically trying to justify it. One such person is the Hon'ble Finance Minister SAMS Kibria who even came up with a write-up (DS, 30.1.2000) where he criticized the editorial of the Jan 28 issue of The Daily Star. He played down the rationality of the editorial and impudently censured it to be biased and gave a number of justifications for the validity and usefulness of the bill. He was, however, sincere enough to admit that he was not an expert on the subject. So it may not be too unjust to maintain that where the law is concerned, there is but rather not a whole lot of difference between him and a layman.

Hence, his opinion must not be treated as an expert opinion but rather a highly personalised one.

Now it may seem audacious for an ordinary citizen like me to counter the arguments of the hon'ble minister, but since we live in a democracy where people have the right to express their opinion, I felt encouraged to speak my mind on this crucial issue. Let me begin by saying that all issues have merits and demerits and could be argued over endlessly. But the wisest thing in all cases would be to accept or reject an opinion on the basis of its comparative merits, i.e. if it has more merits, it should be accepted and rejected if it has more demerits.

Not too long ago, the Government seemed adamant not to allow the opposition party to go ahead with their Long March (protest march) programme through the Bangabandhu bridge. The opposition too was bent on carrying out their programme. Apprehending a greater danger, the DS Editor then had commented on the issue, requesting the government to allow the opposition to march which was consistent with sentiments of the general public. Fortunately, sanity prevailed and the government allowed the opposition to march through the bridge. The sound decision of the government paid rich dividends in terms of peace and tranquillity at least for the time being.

The decision of the government to cut down hundreds of trees at the Usmay Uddyan to build the NAM conference centre was another example of irrationality and adamancy. That was opposed primarily on environmental considerations by a cross section of people including environmentalists and environment activists. Yet, the plea for protecting the trees was

rebuffed by the government and they tried to justify their stand by offering unreasonable explanations. However, pressure kept mounting. Only then did the government give in and spare the trees.

That was all very good and the government deserves appreciation for backing out from an irrational stand. But there are many instances in the past where the government had shown undue adamancy and unnecessarily brought in controversies. The eviction of slum dwellers and the Tan-bazar-Neematali inmates without proper rehabilitation options, the manipulations in the Tarapur by-election, the awarding of service contracts to chosen persons after retirement and discriminator practices in such matters, promoting juniors by superseding seniors in violation of constitutional principles and then defending these actions are a few examples of gross irregularities and unjustified actions and practices that had sufficiently tarnished the image of the government. These could have been avoided simply by being just and fair.

The list of irregularities and whimsical actions is too long to put in here. Last but not the least is the newly introduced Public Safety Bill (Act) which has perhaps crossed all the limits of irrationality, adamancy and self-contradiction. Speaking of self-contradiction, it was the Awami League who not only opposed a similar black law when they were in opposition, but even promised to scrap it when voted to power. But instead, now that they are in power, they themselves have tabled and passed such a black law inviting public wrath. This reminds me of a small relevant story. A woman asked her politician husband: "Dear, when are people patriots?" The politician said: "When they are in opposition, but even when they resort to violence, terrorism, strike, arson, blood-letting etc., then they are patriots!" Surprised, she further asked: "And when are they treacherous?" The politician said: "At others' call when they resort to demonstration, sit-in or any kind of protests and violence, then they are terrorists!"

This story very much fits in with the present day situation vis-à-vis the FSA (Public Safety Act). The bill has been highly controversial and protested against not only by the mainstream opposition but also by the people in the legal profession. This should therefore be withdrawn forthwith in the greater public interest in order to avert a catastrophe that seems looming over the heads of the people.

## 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.*

### Japanese investment in Bangladesh

Sir, Although Japan as a donor partner has participated favourably in some major projects in Bangladesh, its direct foreign investment in the country has been so far been generally at a low level comparatively. Recently a Japanese survey team visited Bangladesh for further appraisal of the investment climate. The Japanese are difficult to please, and rightly so, because they go for quality, and long-term investment.

Now with the coming visit of the US President to Dhaka, the American investment is likely to take a sharp turn upward. Naturally, Japan, with its expertise in assisting the developing countries, would not like to lag behind, and be left behind to choose from second available options on projects for investment.

Since the Japanese method of decision-making is based on consensus at the highest level, therefore it is a bit time-consuming, but sound, based on long-term assessment. After the political stalemate in Dhaka is defused, the country is poised to take off as a developing partner in this region, with good internal and surrounding markets in South Asia. The availability in abundance of human resources is an asset, which is likely to score a major point with the foreign investors. The government has taken pains to liberalize and consolidate the investment policy, and is learning quickly to fine tune the same for offering attractive facilities to the foreign partners in the development of the country.

It is hoped that Japanese investors would compete for a visible presence in Bangladesh. A Hushain Dhaka.

### Frustrating

Sir, The political impasse in our country is getting from bad to worse. There is no sign of any remedy what so ever. Ever since our hard earned liberation back in 1971, all we have procured for the past 29 long years is a title -- the Republic of Bangladesh. But we have not gathered independence in the true sense of the term. True, we have liberated ourselves from Pakistani brutal rule, but we have failed to free ourselves from those who have always been playing double standards. They claim to be patriots, but are always after their own advantage.

We claim to be democratic, but the opposite scenario has prevailed all this time. Democracy only exists among the police force and the politicians, who can make and twist laws. The opposition parties act childishly where as the ruling party turns often into a dictatorship.

The same happens when the parties switch power. It feels as if we are merely witnessing a drama, where after the interval all the actors simply change roles: the villains become heroes and heroes become villains. What is happening is that religious fundamentalists are creating havoc in Chittagong and Sylhet while the two mainstream parties are cutting each other's throats. Why are we so blind? At the moment what concerns us, the peace-loving people of the country, living both in and abroad, is to see an end to all this childish bickering, absurd accusations and backbites.

Dr. Deepika Middlesex, London.

On behalf of the guardians  
A K M Shahnuaz  
10/Gha, Shantnagar,  
Dhaka

And  
Mir Nasir Hossain  
House-20/A, Road-9/A  
Dhanmondi, Dhaka