

IJO Needs Revving Up

THE International Jute Organisation (IJO) in its 50th year is literally at a cross-roads. After fifteen years of somewhat bumpy existence, for one thing, it awaits an UNCTAD conference, likely to be held on March 27-31 to have its assignment re-mandated beyond the year 2000, a matter which should be treated as a formality given the imperative necessity for an organisation like the IJO. For the other, at the time of the renewal of its agreement with UNCTAD, in all likelihood, there will be a no-nonsense stock-taking of the IJO role in terms of research on and development of jute, both as a commodity and an industry.

That jute is a versatile product of basically unrealised possibilities is something which must be recognised by the jute exporting and producing countries in that order. When that is done, the IJO on a new lease of life will be truly productive; otherwise it would be the repetition of the same old story — funds constraints, policy discords, doubts cast on its efficacy and all the rest. In the minds of researchers, environmentalists and users, jute ought to be the in-thing back again — a natural winner — over synthetics in terms of costing, durability and environmental friendliness. We believe that it is on the psychological level that the grounds will have to be prepared first.

Next comes the question of strengthening the efforts from within the organisation, a task which is being addressed efficiently, we think, by the International Jute Council (IJC). Significantly, India which had left the IJO has returned to its fold. Thailand, another country which too had delinked itself from the organisation is said to be on a comeback trail. We urge all the member-countries of IJO to make sure that fund shortage does not hinder the follow-up on research projects already undertaken. Hearteningly, the European Commission looks poised to be interested in enhancing the effectiveness of the IJO, so have we been assured by EC Commissioner Paul Nielson who visited lately. The IJO must be helped to perform to its full potential with the cooperation of all concerned.

We welcome the shift of emphasis from the public sector on to the private sector in matters of promoting the diversified use of jute world-wide. This is a strategic decision that could unlock newer possibilities in the field.

Eating Up Waterbodies

INFLUENTIAL quarters are alleged to be grabbing waterbodies in the metropolis with the help of a section of Rajuk and some ministry officials. Defying a High Court order and the standing instructions of the Prime Minister to keep at bay from the Gulshan Lake, a developer has been allowed to trespass into it, so to speak. Interestingly enough these vested quarters are also conspiring to grab land on the Dhanmondi Lake area by filling up a large portion of the waterbody in the name of a lacifit for quite some time now. The High Court in 1998 directed Rajuk to uphold the master plan of the city and stop any sort of construction in the Gulshan Lake.

The latest attempt by a developer, according to a pictorial report in The Daily Star on Friday last has been termed as a mysterious deal between the developer in question and a section of Rajuk officers. Rajuk chief has denied knowledge of this, but doesn't it sound like someone smoking through his hand and yet he was not aware of it? The real estate company and Rajuk are blaming each other for the demarcation of a wide area of the lake measuring around 12 acres, though the workers of the company told The Daily Star correspondent on the spot that Rajuk's Land Department gave the permission to demarcate 'their' land in the lake.

High Rajuk officials are threatening action against the person responsible for taking such a decision who happens to be a deputy director of Rajuk's Land Department. But he has purportedly been transferred to the sports ministry and some powerful officials allegedly involved in the shady deal are trying to make him a scapegoat.

The entire episode goes only to prove that corruption and highhandedness have made some officials so powerful that they can even dare violate the orders of the High Court and flout directives of the Prime Minister. And the most abhorrent aspect is that they can get away with it. Even though the minister in charge of the department made himself somewhat controversial on an earlier issue of plot allotment, we have to draw his attention to this gross violation so that he acted swiftly and before he damage is done to the lake and its environs.

Wind of Change in Iran

THE reformists' surge in the Iranian elections may well have pointed to the electorate's choice for a break with ultra-conservatism. The poor showing in the polls by ex-president Hashemi Rafsanjani's hard-liners — they have secured 44 seats with their leader only avoiding a run-off by a whisker — amply displays a popular verdict for a change in the country's political make-up. However, it is still too early to say whether the heavily changed electoral equation would have a dramatic impact on the way the country is run, especially since the conservatives still weigh heavy on the legislative council. Moreover, they are the ones who have total control over Iran's armed forces, judiciary, radio and television. Also, for a nation which practically isolated itself from the world community for the most part since the clergy assumed power through an Islamic revolution back in 1979, it is difficult to imagine things will change radically on the societal level.

Admittedly though, Iran has recently shown an appreciable degree of inclination for opening up to the outside world. President Mohammad Khatami's visit to the United States last year was interpreted as Iran's step towards normalising its ties with the 'enemy'. However, the country's relations with the West, meaning principally the US, looks set to hit another rock with the Senate's passage of a bill that "directs the president to identify foreign persons or countries that transfer weapon materials or technology to Iran and authorises him to impose sanction." Already, the bill has invoked sharp reaction from the Iranian leadership, Khatami included.

When the Iranian people have expressed their support for the reformists, America's reservations in certain matters could only delay the process of transformation in that important West-Asian country.

PRESIDENT Clinton's planned visit to South Asia in March, in which the visit to Islamabad has not yet been included, has heated the already-heated environment of this region. Whether the President would, at least, make a stopover in Islamabad or not, has now taken a dramatic turn. As a matter of fact, the whole issue is now being debated not only in the capitals of India and Pakistan but also in the US capital. According to media reports, both the countries are spending millions of dollars in order to have their respective influence on the presidential visit.

India has successfully isolated Islamabad regionally by postponing the Kathmandu summit of the SAARC. And internationally to an extent it has suspended Pakistan from the Commonwealth for the latter's deviation from the path of democracy. Now India wants Washington to do the same. Its lobbyists in Washington argue that even a 'technical half' in Pakistan by the US President would condone army take over in the country and its alleged involvement in Indian air-bus hijacking as well as its promotion of terrorism. It's something a country like the United States with democratisation at the top of its foreign policy agenda cannot afford to do.

Previously New Delhi's endeavor to persuade Washington to declare Islamabad as a terrorist state has had limited success with India and the United States simply agreeing to form a joint working group to counter terrorism giving the former a slight edge over Islamabad. Thus New Delhi is now prepared to do its best to convince Washington for accepting its own assessment of the situation in Pakistan.

Pakistani lobbyists, on the other hand, have based their plea on the ground of US's responsibility in easing the regional tension and on the dire need for peace in an area where two nuclear capable adversaries face each other. They argue that the US President should play a proactive peace role like did in Ireland, Kosovo and Middle East. At the heart of all these high-level diplomacy lies in New Delhi's attempts to persuade Washington to have a 'tilt toward' Indian South Asian

Is there a Paradigm Shift in the Offing?

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policy by replacing the one which treats India and Pakistan equally. But those were cold war realities. The situation, according to New Delhi, since then has changed dramatically. What New Delhi is now hoping for is a definite 'paradigm shift' in US's South Asian policy. In New Delhi's assessment, dropping Islamabad from President Clinton's scheduled visit would be a right step in the right direction.

A paradigm shift is something which India has been trying to achieve for a long time. It bitterly resented Washington's cold-war policy of treating both on equal terms (which Washington pursued for strategic reasons), and preventing India from becoming what it ought to be. Despite both being democracies, Washington was allegedly insensitive to New Delhi's concerns due to cold war dynamics, which constricted potential closer relations between the two. The 'balance of power' pursued by the US for the maintenance of peace and stability was, thus, an anathema to New Delhi. What New Delhi refused to recognise is that the prophesied US South Asian policy was in line with American interests that were frequently demonstrated through US's unwillingness to de-link its relations with India from US-Pakistan and India-Pakistan relations. Now, however, a number of things have taken place in India's favour. Pakistan has lost its strategic importance with the collapse of the Soviet Union. That removed the only irritant between India and the US. Along with it came gradual and steady convergence of interests between the two, which came to a head with New Delhi's wide ranging economic reforms providing wonderful opportunities for US investment and burgeoning markets for US goods. Fast apathy is being corrected by rebuilding political and economic ties and by attempting to reconcile the differences on India's nuclear programme.

Exchange of visits of high level officials is taking place. India has lifted the trade barriers which for nearly five decades blocked US products in

key Indian markets such as textiles, agriculture, and consumer and manufactured goods. Environment for US investment in India's software industries are being explored by Treasury Secretary Summers — highest ranking US official visiting India since India detonated nuclear explosives in 1998. Besides Indian analysts feel that US strategic interests in Asia in the coming decades would also converge with those of New Delhi, especially in the backdrop of its potential to be a balance of power in wider Asian region.

US will find India extremely important in pursuing its policy like countering terrorism and constraining Chinese power in Asia. The current thinking in India, thus, points that Washington is now ready and willing to deal with India

vent, since the so-called peaceful nuclear explosion (PNE), subsequent ambiguous nuclear postures of India and Pakistan, the potential spread of nuclear weapons in the region, through a policy mix of sticks and carrots. It's endeavours to cap, freeze and eventual roll up of South Asian nuclear programmes faced a severe jolt when New Delhi conducted five nuclear tests, a suit followed by Pakistan with six that changed the strategic environment of the region and posed a formidable challenge to US security interest.

India's and Pakistan's declaratory stands on the development and deployment of nuclear weapons in the backdrop of New Delhi's ambitious nuclear doctrine have all the ingredients of a dangerous arms race in the region bringing

Pakistan have been using one excuse or the other in deferring the treaty from coming into force. At present, Pakistan has softened its stance to sign CTBT. India, however, is not impressed. It has linked the issue with that of China and most likely will not sign CTBT and eventually ratify it without Beijing's willing to do so and the latter would link it with US ratification of the Treaty. On this pretext India would probably not oblige Washington but its underlying reasons and motivations will be no secrets. The fact is that signing and ratification of CTBT would tantamount to agree in giving up New Delhi's nuclear ambitions. It's something India is not ready to reconcile with. India's ambition to become an established nuclear power — along with its nuclear doctrine — would, thus, go against US strategic interests and remain a major irritant in Indo-US relations. Linked with it is the question of Kashmir, which according to US strategic thinkers still remains the most dangerous source of conflicts between India and Pakistan and regional instability. Obviously, if Washington wants to maintain peace and stability in the region, at some point, it will have to pay attention to Kashmir problem that would definitely displease New Delhi. But despite such potentials of negative response from India the US desire to play the role of peace-maker is discernible from President Clinton's recent statement.

President's offer of mediation on Kashmir despite New Delhi's stand against third party intervention, is an indication that the US considers it to be a disputed area and wants India to resume high level talks with Pakistan. De-linking Indo-US from US-Pakistan and Indo-Pakistan is obviously difficult as long as Kashmir continues to be a nuclear flash point and New Delhi remains embroiled in regional conflicts. Lastly, a definite 'paradigm shift' in the US South Asian policy will probably remain in the horizon due to Washington's reluctance to write off Pakistan, which remained a trust-

worthy US ally in the region for more than four decades. Besides, despite the loss of its strategic utility a link with Pakistan is still important. First, for regional peace and stability as viewed by many analysts that a presidential visit would go a long way toward easing tensions with India and thereby paving the way for peace. It is also needed for counter threats of terrorism and rise of extreme fundamentalism. Moreover, Islamabad's strategic location continues to be important for US's political and economic interests as evidenced by the statement of Mr. Karl F. Inderfurth, the Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs, at a hearing before the House International Relations Committee on October 20, 1999. After evaluating the entire post-military coup in Pakistan, he stated, 'despite our deep disappointments with this latest setback to democracy in Pakistan, we have no choice but stay engaged.'

We cannot walk away because Pakistan is important. It is important because stability or the lack of it in Pakistan will have an impact on Pakistan's neighbors, the region, and beyond. Pakistan is important because it can serve as an example of a progressive Islamic democracy, because it is a link — both economic and political — between the Indian Ocean and Central Asia.

One, thus, can easily discern why there are so much debates and analyses on the part of the US policymakers. The setback of democracy and army takeover in Pakistan and Chief Executive's refusal to give a timeframe to return to democracy have made US President's visit difficult. But in the context of the above mentioned reasons the US President would have to weigh all the pros and cons of his decisions based on what he stated as the long-term interest of Pakistan. A 'technical half', in this context, cannot be completely ruled out. Washington still has stakes in Pakistan and despite perceived Indian notion of its emergence as a serious strategic partner of the US, a definite 'paradigm shift' is not likely unless, however, Islamabad remains completely insensitive to significant US concerns like providing a timeframe to return to democracy.



Dilara Chowdhury

on its own instead of making Indo-US relations a hostage of Indo-Pak conflicts. Indian elite and policy makers feel that the 'tilt' is a natural ramification of India's rise as a potential economic, military and strategic power. These are developments, which the US cannot ignore. So the 'paradigm shift' would be natural. And Washington can make that clear by dropping Pakistan from the presidential visit, which would give legitimacy to New Delhi's claim to be the only power in the region to be reckon with. The perceived 'paradigm shift' in South Asia would have, in that case, a lot of substance.

But such a shift in US South Asian policy, no matter how much desired by New Delhi, would not be so easily forthcoming. First and foremost is the issue of nuclear non-proliferation. Nuclear non-proliferation has been at the top of US's South Asian policy. For years Washington attempted to pre-

China into the fray. Containing the nuclear proliferation in the region, thus, is considered to be vital for the peace and stability in the region.

Prevention of a nuclear arms race, thus, as stated by President Clinton, is imperative for US's long term security interest. Washington's challenge would be to restrain both India and Pakistan from their weaponisation programme, more so in case of India. It started the potential spread of weapons of mass destruction by deviating from New Delhi's long-standing nuclear ambiguity by going overtly nuclear. This is where the stumbling blocks lie. There are fundamental differences between the two in this arena despite a series of discussion between US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbot and Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh.

First is the CTBT. It is interesting to note that all three governments of USA, India and

All's Not Well for Vajpayee

The government should run and the opposition is unlikely to provide anything better - this is the impression that analysts have drawn from the poll outcome. The results will come as a boon for the government of Vajpayee, but also a damper since Bihar did not meet the expectations of the NDA.

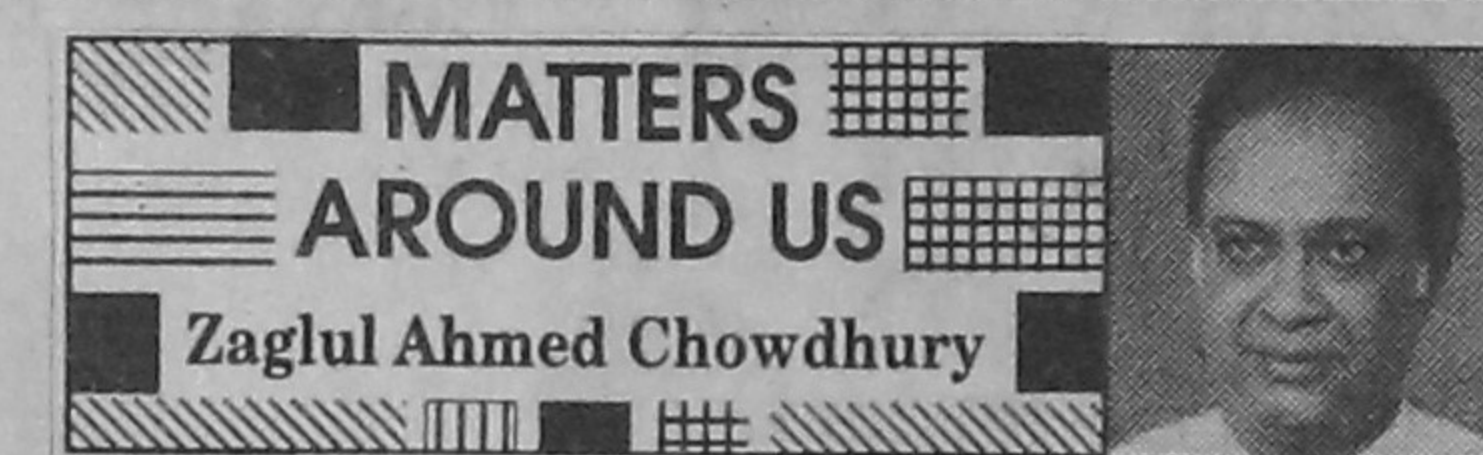
THE results of the elections in four state assemblies in India are seen as a mixed fortune for the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The alliance wrested power in one state, retained in another while failed to capture power in a crucial state where a popular opposition leader who lost much of his clout in recent times says that the polls results have shown that he and his party cannot be written off. The comments came from former Bihar Chief Minister, Laloo Prasad Yadav who had cut a sorry figure in the last national elections when he personally lost and his party — Rastriya Janata Dal (RJD) — saw its tally come down substantially in the Lok Sabha.

It was predicted that in the state assembly election in Bihar which is ruled by the RJD for the last ten years, Laloo's party will lose power and the NDA coalition of Vajpayee will form the new government. But the NDA has not that lucky as no one came out outright winner there but the RJD seems retaining much of the hold in the crucial state. Definitely, the wrestling of power from the Congress in Orissa is a big boon for the alliance and it also retained government in a small but important state Haryana, near capital Delhi. The outcome

of the polls in the tiny north-eastern state of Manipur is not of much consequence but the results of Bihar — the second biggest state in India in terms of population came as something falling much short of expectations for the NDA.

The election in four states was the first major test of the popularity of the NDA government headed by Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee since it came to power following the general elections last year. The alliance secured an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha bringing an end to instabilities that had been haunting the Indian political scene in recent years. But the character of the NDA, which comprises divergent political parties ranging from the main partner Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which is widely looked at as a communal organisation by several secular parties like the Samta Party of Bihar, the DMK of the Tamil Nadu and the TDP in the Andhra Pradesh.

Despite occasional bickering on certain issues, the NDA has succeeded in maintaining the unity because a collapse in the coalition may result in losing



Zafar Ahmed Chowdhury

power and may trigger fresh instability in the country. Conscious of this situation, NDA leaders are keen to see that the unity is maintained lest the government struggles with survival, in a short time, of returning to power through last polls. It was in power in India but could not hold it since the coalition broke up due to internal differences. Now the combine is not facing much problems and an acceptable and liberal leader like Vajpayee as the Prime Minister is a big strength for the 16-party coalition that wants to remain in the helm.

When this column goes to print, all the results of the voting in four states were not announced but a picture of the trend was more or less available. The outcome of the polling in Bihar is a matter of great in-

terest for many because the NDA was widely expected to win the polls there by replacing the RJD government. Laloo Prasad Yadav was the Chief Minister of the state which sends 54 members to the national parliament — only after the biggest state Uttar Pradesh. Laloo had to quit after being tainted in a financial scandal and his wife Rabri Devi took over as the Chief Minister. The RJD was thought to be losing ground in Bihar very fast and it was reflected in the Lok Sabha polls. But the outcome of Bihar state assembly election belied all these assessments since RJD was emerging as the single largest party in the 334-member legislature although no one was winning an absolute majority. In the process, the important state in all probability will end

up in a hung-parliament and political instability may rule the roost in the state. But the very fact that the RJD has clung to ground and not vanished largely, has come as a shot in the polls.

Orissa, one of the backward states of India, has chosen the NDA this time abandoning the Congress of Sonia Gandhi. The combine of BJP and its regional ally 'Biju Janata Dal' ousted the Congress, which plays the role of main opposition at national level, from power. It is mainly because the people voted against the establishment which is accused of failing to run the state efficiently. One main allegation is the mismanagement of relief works on the aftermath of the devastating cyclones last year that killed nearly 10,000 people and left millions in terrible condition. The Congress administration was also accused of corruption and the people wanted a change in the scene.

The success of the NDA is underlined by retaining power in Haryana where its constituent Indian Lokdal led by Oam Prakash Chautala returned to power and Congress

failed to make much impact although its leader and former Chief Minister Bhajal Lal has won. In Manipur, the Secular Democratic Front led by Congress was leading and maintained its influence. The results of the elections have shown that the NDA is living up to the expectations of the people but has not improved its impression much as it was evident from the outcome in Bihar. It has won in Orissa mainly due to the failure of the Congress government while the return to power by its ally in Haryana demonstrates that people are willing to continue with the NDA despite the fact that its achievements in the last few months since coming back to power may not be seen as anything spectacular.

The government should run and the opposition is unlikely to provide anything better - this is the impression that analysts have drawn from the polls' outcome. The results will come as a boon for the government of Vajpayee, but also a damper since Bihar did not meet the expectations of the NDA. And this may encourage the opposition to feel that all is not well for the government of Vajpayee. Both sides are expected to learn lessons from the state assembly polls which provided mixed fortunes both to the government and the opposition.

To the Editor...

New laws, new acts

Sir, When the nation was demanding withdrawal of the Special Powers Act (SPA), a new law named Public Safety Act (PSA) came into force. However, every law, I believe is good for the country as long as it is not abused or misused. But in a society like ours where 'democracy' is still considered a pipe dream by many, laws like SPA or PSA would not be able to yield a positive outcome until and unless the implementing agencies are turned into a truly democratic institution as a whole.

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Solid waste — prevention fist

Sir, The 1994 plague that hit the cities of India should be a lesson for our people who indiscriminately dump their garbage on the roadside (next to the bin) and into the open drains, encouraging the breeding of rodents. It is also time for the municipal authorities to look into the option of starting recycling plants for the growing amount of solid waste generating with the expanding Dhaka city. Besides keeping the environment clean it will also introduce a source of income generation.

The solid waste in Bangladesh is mainly organic, besides the used plastic bags that have been encouraged over the years, without looking into other options. If the issue is ignored further, soon the green golden Bay of Bengal (the sea) we all like to think and call our country will turn into a plastic

country. The plastic-containers, mostly used by average urban families, made from recycled plastic materials, are fast entering the rural households where 80 per cent of the Bangladesh population lives. Moreover, they are unaware of the difference between food-grade plastic (as used by the upper middle class families, purchased from home and/or abroad) and the cheap plastic containers that causes severe health hazards in the long run. We should look for solutions in advance and not wait until another Arsenic — like problem arises and the GOB and the donors pour in thousands of dollars in earnest to find alternatives. Though a cliché, but we must say, "A stitch in time saves nine".

Zara Azra
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Terrorist or freedom fighter?

Sir, An off-repeated statement aired by the Russian government for a long time is that they are fighting against the terrorists of Chechnya. But how a fighter can be termed terrorist when he is fighting for the independence of his motherland is a mystery to us. We, Bangladeshis have fought against the Pakistanis in '71 and that is how we have gained our independence after a bloody war of nine months at the cost of thousands of lives. Should we then term these martyrs terrorists?

In 1994-96, the Russians launched a war against the Chechens and were miserably defeated. In 1997, the then president of Russia Boris Yeltsin signed an agreement with pres-

ident Aslan Maskhadov of Chechnya accepting the Chechnya government. Then wouldn't it be appropriate to term the Russians as outsider terrorists when even after signing the agreement they resort to war against Chechnya again in 1999? It seems that they are trying to annihilate the entire Chechnya through this war. As a former KGB agent, Vladimir Putin has extremely vicious tactics in his mind, which he is applying against the Chechens. His behaviour is not at all democratic — only bellicosity is his recourse. Therefore, none other than Putin should be denounced as a patron of state-run terrorism and be treated as a war criminal along with his mentor Yeltsin for the ongoing genocide in Chechnya. In this regard, the international community, especially the OIC should come out protesting this heinous atrocity of Russia and help Chechnya attain its independence.

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Waiting for changes

Sir, Our political leaders should take some cue from the recent Iranian general election, where the younger reformist voters swept into overwhelming power. Those born after the revolution of the late '70s dominated the scene. Iran, with its old culture is coming out from isolation. It is a quiet revolution. But the mighty thrust is unmistakable.

Looking at Dhaka, it seems that some major changes are in the offing as the country's two

major political parties fight out the ideological war for supremacy (enjoying two thirds of the votes). This fight will weaken both the parties, and the new leadership will change the character. A time will come when charismatic leadership has to give way to accommodate the topical trends.

In Iran, the turn came after two generations of clerical domination. The latter was a swing from the royal dynasty reigns. This age may sweep soon through the sedate and conservative Middle East, and the sheikdoms have to be on high alert to face the changing tides of the music. Iran is coming out, so the other Muslim nations should also come out and face the global village trend. Today the weakest point of the Muslim world is its disunity, to face the declining West.

Information is a resource asset, energy and technological lead, but it can be given away or shared without depletion of the resource at source. There lies the power of information and communication, and its subtle hold over the competitors. It is a harbinger of changes, and changes cannot be resisted because it is a natural phenomenon, having to do with the eternal cycles of creation.

Bangladesh's vicious cycles for three decades are long enough morally or politically, and changes are overdue. There is a meaning in the stagnation — to learn the lessons, and become matured enough for further adventures in the surging path of civilisation. The basic pattern of history has a recurring theme underneath the changing panorama of the ages.

Abdul M Ahmad
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OPINION

"The Public Safety Act 2000 as the Money Bill"

Md. Sirajul Islam writes from Chittagong

OUR attention has been drawn to points 3.4 and 5 of the comments of Mr. Javadul Karim, the Press Secretary of the Prime Minister, on the Daily Star commentary on calling the PSA as the money bill.

First of all, why should the PM's PS, not the PS to the President, reply? At best the PS to the Speaker may speak to defend the certification of it as a money bill. In fact, we would welcome and appreciate if the PS to the President defends the President's decision to accept it as a money bill. If the President of our country is clear to his conscience on the issue, he should instruct his office to respond to such criticism. He is the President of the state, not of the Government. His position and responsibility is more understandable to him than to any reader like me. Who would stand courageously, selflessly and objectively for what is legally correct?

Now, the rejoinder of the PM's PS has exposed the hollowness of his position because his explanation in para 5 belies his own argument. He quotes Article 81(1)(e) of the Constitution where "the receipt of moneys" is written, but in para 6, instead of using receive, the verb form of the noun, receipt,

he uses the verb, require and that defeats his purpose once for all. If the implementation of a bill requires or, to use a word used in clause 82 of the Constitution in this regard, "involves" expenditure from public moneys, then it cannot be treated as a money bill. The Article 82 says: "No Money Bill, or any Bill which involves expenditure from public moneys, shall be introduced into Parliament except on the recommendation of the President..." A bill which is not a money bill but involves expenditure, has to be recommended by the President for introduction in the Parliament and this is what the Government did at the beginning and what the press release from Bangladesh on 9 February 2000 says and means. Till then, apart from the merit or demerit of the PSA, the procedure was all right. It is just left for the Government to see what or who made them ask for certifying it as a money bill. Apart from certification, nothing was procedurally wrong.

The Government has lost its face and the readers are bound to opine that the rejoinder from the PM's office has been self-defeating and has gone against itself. One would just wish that there were no such rejoinder.