

BNP's Sensible Decision

IT is good to know that the BNP's preponderant political strategy at the moment is to prepare for the next general election. Primarily, their focus of attention seems to have shifted from hartals on to the agenda for electoral preparedness something that we have been persistently pleading with them for. Our argument has been quite straightforward: only a year or so being left for the general election, there is no point wasting the interregnum on activities antithetical to or even subversive of the prospects for that election.

Although BNP chief Begum Khaleda Zia's latest series of instructions to her party members and women are principally devoted to activating them for the next polls, there is a smack of a reference to 'continuing the so-called out-of-the-government movement.' Our position on this sort of a blended approach has been that the opposition was perfectly within their right to highlight government failures by rallies and demonstrations but simultaneously they must carry on discussion with the ruling party to thrash out the electoral details.

Now that BNP chief Begum Khaleda Zia has issued specific instructions to her colleagues and party workers to roll up their sleeves for the national polls, the perspective for do's and don'ts for her party has also changed. Agitational politics should now be the secondary agenda to electoral preparations, the latter meaning a lot more than a mere party-centred go-getting restlessness about the elections. Hartals are on hold during the month of March due to SSC exams, Eid festival and Clinton visit but because the opposition's central agenda is now electoral preparation and there is hardly any time for them to spare on side issues one should expect the hartal option to have been practically abandoned by the opposition.

Without a political understanding between the ruling party and the opposition alliance the deck will not simply be cleared for the next series of national elections. That is a stark reality, like it or not. BNP as the principal component of the political opposition cannot overlook it any more. So, let there be a dialogue on timing of the polls, reform of the EC, campaign expenditure ceiling and strict compliance with it, declaration and accountability of assets held by political party leaders and functionaries, use of black money and muscle power in polls and any other matter related to ensuring free and fair polls. This is the way to go about it.

Doctors' Truancy

CAPITAL city-centricity among doctors has effectively clouded their deontological dedication towards the nation, so suggests over 500 vacant posts at the district hospital and thana health complexes across the country. They are so beholden to the convenient life on offer in the metropolis that they hardly feel the compunction to pay back their debt to the state for the subsidised education received at the public institutions and specialised training imparted abroad on scholarships. Instead, they use influential connections inside the Bangladesh Medical Association and the relevant ministries for cancellation of their postings to outstations. What's more, according to the report front-paged in this paper on Tuesday, some opt to become 'deputy', a position with no defined responsibility, or an 'academic', which means being a medical officer or assistant professor at city hospitals.

Doctors' unwillingness to work outside the capital city adds to the ever-growing list of problems the Health and Population Sector Programme (HPSP) is faced with. Clearly, only development of physical infrastructure would not get the programme going unless there is ample human resource mobilisation. Therefore, alongside infrastructural development, the government must address this problem, too. Unfortunately, there is no definitive guideline for postings, according to the health minister. However, there must be some rules that hold truant doctors liable to disciplinary measures.

Until and unless the doctors get to work at the district hospitals and thana health complexes, the government plan to take quality healthcare services to the vast rural populace would remain a distant dream. Rules require that every doctor in public sector work at least three years outside the capital. Evidently, the provision is not enforced. Primarily, therefore, the authorities should make sure that each and every doctor on the government's payroll completes the stipulated tenure at the thana health complexes. Also, the problem posed by the 'deputies' and the 'academics' must be sorted out. The 200 academics and 124 deputies must be either sent back to thana complexes or assigned to stations at the district and thana levels.

Jacked up Cattle Prices

THE cattle traders of the country have been going through a harrowing experience since the beginning of the season leading up to Eid-ul-Azha. It all starts with the *mastaans* claiming membership of the Truck Sramik Federation and asking for toll money from the traders transporting their merchandise to the capital or Chittagong or to a place as far out as Sylhet. These sacrificial animals are mostly transported from the western border areas of Bangladesh. A truck load of animals eventually costs more than the normal cost because of the tolls paid at different points during movement. Though the federation president tried to legitimise the toll collection in the name of receiving subscription for the federation, the action of the members is tantamount to extortion which is thoroughly unlawful. To top it all, the traders cannot take their cattle to their desired destination without being stopped by hired goons of the lessees of various 'haats' who extract money for allowing them to go to their 'haats' of choice.

All these extra payments are actually paid by the buyers in the end. An interesting piece of statistics shows that had these extra payments not been made, sacrificial animals would have been ten to fifteen per cent cheaper on the market. And the traders would have been spared the hassle at various points. The sad part of the story is that police connivance with the members of various truck sramik unions is also alleged. This has gone on for years. The situation cannot improve unless the law enforcing agencies themselves distance themselves from the nefarious acts. Will it be too much to ask?

Live but Never Learn

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coordination in "specific actionable policies and programmes." One hopes that the assurance will not get lost in the bureaucratic jungle that the Defence Ministry is.

Malik is sore on this subject. He says that even at the making of the announcement that it would post officers from the three services in the Defence Ministry, the ministry has not done so. It would have helped civilian officers to understand and appreciate problems of the armed forces better. The same old questions are asked: Why such and such equipment was needed and why a substitute could not serve the same purpose? Every bit has to be explained. Files go up and down all the time. Had officers from the army, navy and air force been inducted into the ministry, the decisions would have been quicker and more meaningful. This is what Malik feels.

The Army Chief complains that certain equipment indented as far back as 1982 is still awaiting the ministry's sanction. The entire process is entangled in red tap and the clearance is too slow to come. He feels that the Kargil operation helped him acquire some weapons quickly but he does not find the sense of urgency which should have been there by now. How to push the ministry is his problem.

The committee has also criticised the government on this point. "Though the new

light rifle (5.56 mm) has been inducted into service, most troops are yet to be equipped with light rifles. Adequate attention has not been paid to lightening the load on infantry soldiers deployed on high altitudes." In broader terms, the committee feels that combat efficiency has suffered as has the modernisation process on the whole. Malik agrees with that. He says once he had to agree to the reduction of the army by 50,000 men to get money for modernisation. Otherwise it

on Bhagat Singh, the Prime Minister said that there was "enough evidence" to indicate Nawaz Sharif was aware of the operation when he met him at Lahore. "But I do not want to say more at a time when he is in jail," said Vajpayee. Malik does not think that the Kargil operation could have escalated into a full-scale war. Once the Indian forces began to push back the intruders, Pakistan realised that the game was up. Indeed, the Indian forces faced tough situations at times. But

believes, has to be defended from intruders from the other side. He considers it a theatre of war. But he does not want the army to be involved in operations in the north-east. That is a matter requiring political solution.

The army chief does believe that there is no likelihood of regular war between India and Pakistan. But he does fear occasional border clashes. He also rules out the use of nuclear weapons. The committee too is of the opinion that "with the passage of time, 'crying nuclear wolf' even if linked to Kashmir, would progressively lose credibility." Malik is confident that the report on Kargil will make the Defence Ministry and intelligence agencies rectify the deficiencies which have been pointed out. But as far as the army is concerned, he says, its own report by one of his officers, Reddy, is there and it has already begun necessary action.

It is unfortunate that Editor R.K. Mishra, who was brokering a settlement on Kashmir with Niaz Naik, Pakistan's former foreign secretary, did not meet the committee in view of the "current situation in Pakistan." Whatever it means, it blocks any information on the formula which almost gave the two countries a breakthrough. Vajpayee once told me in an interview that the two countries were "close to solution." Brian Cloughley has, however, put cold water on the

efforts by Mishra and Naik. He says: "Openings to dialogue were effected, but the moves resulted in internal criticism in both countries and, although valuable in establishing a modest approach to future personal contact, had no chance of success." His reading is that in the end Nawaz Sharif, failing to obtain support of any sort, even from China, had to "crave audience" with the American President to obtain "a fig-leaf that would enable him to order retreat with a semblance of dignity." Could India have avoided the Kargil-type situation?

The committee says, perhaps it could have been averted "if the Indian army had followed a policy of Siachenitisation to plug unheld gaps along the 168-km stretch from Kaabal Gali to Chorbatla." This would have entailed establishing a series of winter cut-off posts with communications and other logistic support.

This is what the government is doing now. Just as New Delhi has done an analysis of its plus and minus points, so must have Islamabad. One wishes it could be as frank as the assessment by Talat Masood, a top retired officer from the Pakistan Army. His comment in a Pakistani daily was: "The Kargil crisis has once again exposed the bankruptcy of Pakistan's national policy. Events in and around Kargil brought India and Pakistan dangerously close to an all-out war, dealt a shattering blow to the peace process, have done immense damage to the already faltering economy, isolated Pakistan internationally, and proved highly divisive internally."

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

was not possible.

Nawaz Sharif was at least aware of the broad thrust of the Kargil plan when he so warmly welcomed the Indian Prime Minister in Lahore. This observation of the committee is endorsed by Malik. He too has no doubts about former Pakistan Prime Minister's involvement in the Kargil intrusion. How much and how far, Malik does not try to guess. But he goes along with the observation by Pakistan Chief Executive Pervez Musharraf that "everyone was on board."

When I asked Atal Behari Vajpayee about this at a function on the release of my book

they were able to overcome them.

Once Malik was so exasperated that he almost went to the cabinet to seek permission to cross the Line of Control (LoC). However, the ground reality rapidly changed in India's favour. He says he has never yielded to pressure. Once he even threatened to resign when he felt he was being pressurised. This was, however, long before the Kargil operation. I had an hour-long conversation with Malik. He is frank enough to say that the armed forces should not be used for counter-insurgency operations. But he singles out Kashmir which, he

LETTER FROM AMERICA

The Blame Game and the End Game

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

For the last ten years we have seen what the two leaders atop the two major parties have to offer, both as Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. They have fallen woefully short. They are incapable of rising above small-minded pettiness... It is obvious they do not have what it takes to lift Bangladesh to the next level. It is foolhardy to appeal to the failed leadership to reform themselves.

als' advice, both sit in the parliament and call off the harts. While it will spell relief for the general population, will it resuscitate the country's moribund education system? I think not. If some educators believe they have all the right answers for the politicians, those educators should join politics and clean it up; for politics has to be cleaned from within — not by firing volleys from outside.

"Open letters" as opposed to the closed variety, do not alter the country's political landscape because although presumably written for the benefit of the addressee, in reality they are written for public consumption. The addressee gets to read the letter only after the public has read it in the Press first, thus demolishing any hope of an impact. Simply put, an "open letter" is another name for public scolding of the high and the mighty. When was the last time the high and the mighty heeded unsolicited advice anyway?

Instead of minding our own business, we Bangladeshis have a penchant for telling others what they should do. Perhaps we should rededicate ourselves to the dictum: "Physicians, heal thyself," first. Puffing, perched atop academic ivory towers, is an attempt at intellectual dictatorship. As the nation's watchdog, only the Press is duty bound to assess every aspect of the nation's life. The fact is, for the country to move ahead, every segment of Bangladeshi society has to shape up, not just the politicians. The politicians may be corrupt, but the teachers too are involved in numerous extracurricular (read power-grabbing, moneymaking) activities that have nothing to do with education. In Bangladesh education has become a business enterprise, business a loan defaulters' paradise, and the society a terrorists' heaven.

To appreciate the issues that confront the other side, a little versatility and multidisciplinary knowledge helps. The West boasts of several statesmen whose versatility aided their nations in time of crisis. One of the architects of America's independence, Benjamin

Franklin, was a first rate inventor and scientist (inventor of the lightning rod, Franklin stove and bifocals), printer and publisher, diplomat, and statesman. The late Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was a Pandit. President John Kennedy was not only a World War II hero; he also won a Pulitzer Prize for "A Profile in Courage." The greatest war hero of them all, Winston Churchill, was a Nobel Prize winner for literature (1953). Our encoding, decoding education system produces an abundance of smart people who are one-dimensional, tunnel-vision wonders!

Let me acknowledge some historical facts that our two main political parties find impossible to concede. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is the father of the nation. No Mujib, no Bangladesh. General (then Major) Ziaur Rahman is the one that declared Bangladesh's independence, "on behalf of Sheikh Mujib" from the Chittagong Radio station in March 1971, and is the nation's number one freedom fighter.

The present political impasse had its genesis in March 1991. In one of the freest elections in the history of Bangladesh, Bangladesh Nationalist Party won. From day one, Awami League refused to concede defeat. For the next five years, the Awami League dedicated itself solely to the purpose of bringing down the elected government before it could serve out its term, by every means at its disposal, especially hartal. After the Awami League came to power in an election overseen by a Caretaker Government in 1996, the roles were reversed, BNP deciding to pay back in kind. This time BNP refused to concede defeat and has been attempting to bring down the elected government from day one, before it could serve out its term, by every means at its disposal, mostly unending hartal!

This reminds me of two childish episodes the American Press indulged in. When Muhammad Ali fought the monster called Sonny Liston for the second time in Lewiston, Maine in May 1965, labelling Liston unbeatable, the Press

universally predicted a Liston victory. After Ali knocked Liston out in the first round, they screamed "fix." A Senate investigation followed and found no "fix." Twenty-two years later, in 1987, as Sugar Ray Leonard battled Marvellous Marvin Hagler, in their infinite wisdom the Press decreed that Hagler could not lose. When Sugar Ray won, the Press again called it a "fix." The Press had crafted an infallible win-win strategy. If their fighter wins, the Press wins. If their fighter loses, the Press still "wins" because they claim that the fight was "fixed!" In Bangladesh the two political parties behave the same childish way. If they win, the election is fair; if they lose, the election is fraudulent! According to this absurd logic, BNP won the 1991 election but did not lose in 1996! Awami League won in 1996 but did not lose in 1991! The truth is, Bangladesh is stuck with two uncompromising, sore losers!

It does not have to be this way. "Iron Lady" Margaret Thatcher lost her Prime Ministership, not in a general election, but in her Conservative

Party leadership contest, in 1990. When was the last time we had contested elections for the leader of our two major parties? If the leader is elected unopposed, that is the first stab at democracy. Remember, even the mighty Thatcher had to subject herself to, and was ousted by, her own party in an election. Someone who wields dictatorial power in his/her own party will do the same when at the helm of the nation. We have to rid ourselves of the notion that Bangladesh is the property of one or two families — it belongs only to the people. History has demonstrated that the enormously successful women leaders — such as Margaret Thatcher and Israel's Golda Meir — come up through the ranks and attain leadership on their own merit. Anointed leaders — who are daughters or wives of slain male leaders — are abject failures. A leader has to have a vision where he/she wants to lead the country. Staying in power cannot be the sole aim of a leader.

Bangladesh cannot march into the twenty-first century behind leaders with nine-

teenth-century mentality. The nation cries for new leadership. For the last ten years we have seen what the two leaders atop the two major parties have to offer, both as Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. They have fallen woefully short. They are incapable of rising above small-minded pettiness. Unable or unwilling to control the terrorists within their own ranks, they pass unilateral legislation to control terrorists belonging to the other parties. They have politicised the armed forces, the police and the bureaucracy. Crimes against women have increased several-fold during the tenure of the two ladies. It is obvious they do not have what it takes to lift Bangladesh to the next level. It is foolhardy to appeal to the failed leadership to reform themselves. How can one make the blind see the deaf hear or the dumb think? The end game is near in Bangladesh. If things proceed the way they are now, regardless of who wins the next election, there will be a blood bath in Bangladesh!

The writer continues to be encouraged by the sheer number of selfless Bangladeshis he meets at home and abroad, ready and able to do what it takes to transform Bangladesh into a modern nation. It is time the present leadership made a graceful exit and handed over the reins of the nation to a new breed of democratically elected, patriotic Bangladeshi Nelson Mandelas, who are equipped, yes EQUIPPED, to lead the nation from the depths of darkness into the brightly-lit twenty-first century that beckons.

OPINION

Gas Export

Engr M Shahjahan Khadem

On the eve of the visit of the US President Bill Clinton in Bangladesh on 20 March, the Multi-national oil and gas companies in the country appear to have been very active in lobbying the senior policy makers in the energy sector of the government for export of gas through pipeline to India.

Attention is drawn to some of the recent press coverages on the prospects of Bangladesh gas export through pipeline to India as suggested by Shell Bangladesh Managing Director Andrew Vaughan and the Unocal's Chief Roger C Beach.

Gas is the only vital natural resource of Bangladesh and we must be very much careful about its utilization and particularly regarding export to India through pipeline. Before we take such decisions, we need for making a correct assessment of gas reserve and the future demand in the country. In fact, actual demand, production and supply position are yet to be assessed. Since we have no other natural resources for export — e.g. oil and coal in particular — we cannot take a hasty decision for export of gas at such stage.

Both the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the leader to the Opposition Begum Khaleda Zia categorically stated on several occasions that there cannot be any export of gas without correct assessment of the country's needs. Moreover, the proven reserve of 9 TCF that we have can run up to 2012 meeting demands of power plants, fertilizer factories and domestic use. Under such condition, it is not advisable to consider export of gas to any foreign country without assessing the marketable surplus of gas for at least 50 years. On the other hand, if decisions are made on the assumptions that more gas will be discovered in future, it can cause great financial loss to the country if the assumed

quantity of gas is not discovered. I firmly believe optimum production of gas and its best possible use for economic development of the country should be our national strategy. We must study the causes of the failures in the energy sector by the multi-national oil companies in Nigeria.

The remarks of Shell Bangladesh chief 'failing to export gas may mean missing the bus' seems misleading. I suggest to concentrate on the existing terms of the PSC with the government and try to develop gas-based industries in Bangladesh as stipulated in the contract for the overall development of the country with the surplus gas.

Recently a PSC has been signed with Pangea, a small US company for block 8. As per the provisions of the PSC, the US oil company will conduct exploratory drilling in their contract area within the next three years. Besides, during the same period they will also conduct an 800-kilometer seismic survey to acquire more geological data of the block. For block 9, it is learnt government has already decided to award the block to an alliance comprising the Tallow of Ireland, Chevron/Texaco of USA and the BAPEX with equal stake holding, 30 per cent each except that BAPEX which will have only 10 per cent in our opinion the share of BAPEX should have been at least 50 per cent. The PSC is reportedly to be signed by the middle of the current month. As per terms of the PSC, the alliance will conduct three exploratory drillings in block 9 within three years and will also undertake an 1000 kilometer survey during the same period.

It is reported, attempts have already been made to initial the PSC on blocks 5, 7 and 10 with Shell Bangladesh and Unocal. Blocks 5 and 10 were awarded to Shell and block 7 to Unocal.

These blocks belong to onshore blocks. But the oil companies concerned have been demanding that these blocks should be considered off shore blocks. But the government side is firm to stand on adhering to the bid terms for finalization of the status issue. Further, even if the PSC is signed, it will not be implemented within the next five years. Both Shell and Unocal reportedly made it clear that they would take at least five years to start exploratory drillings in these blocks. They want to observe the situation before committing further investment in exploration.

The West is a Region Integrated Project (WRIP) amounting to US\$700 million for setting up of gas pipeline and three power plants in western and southern Bangladesh as proposed by Unocal. It may be reviewed by our own experts before final decision. It is learnt the project may be completed within an amount of US\$200 million by engaging our local energy experts.

In the above circumstances, it is advisable to stop awarding PSC to the foreign oil companies without assessing the situation by our own energy experts now serving in different oil companies all over the world. If necessary, government may float Energy Bond worth over US dollar 500 million from the Bangladeshi nationals at home and abroad. In any case, we do not like to see the condition of our country as that of once oil and gas rich Nigeria. We are also lacking in building up our own technical expertise in the decision making. There is lack of supervision of the activities of the oil companies in Bangladesh. This is unfortunate.

The writer is Chairman, Bangladesh 2000, and former President, Engineers' Foundation 66.

To the Editor ...

Our and President Clinton's interest

Sir, President Clinton, on his visit, like any good leader and a patriot would see the interests and well being of his people and their companies working here in our energy sector. This is quite expected of him.

But will our leaders too follow his example and see to the interest and welfare of our own people — the down trodden — who live in abject poverty and for whom the proper utilisation of our gas reserve is the only glimmer of hope? This only can improve their standard of living, which is one of the lowest in the world.

We implore our leaders to see our interest first and foremost before signing any deed. We also implore our distinguished visitors to be kind and compassionate towards these unlucky souls and to put their wellbeing before the wellbeing of the already rich and super rich oil and gas companies, which can

make a little less profit for the benefit of these needy people who need their help to get out of the distress they are in.

They don't want to live on aid forever, they want "energy" to stand on their own feet. Help them achieve that, please.

Dr. Sabrina Rashid
Dhaka Cantt, Dhaka

Slogans and patriotism

Sir, I respect Indians for one thing (among others) and that is the way they say, believe and maintain the ideal "Mera Bharat Mahan" (My India is Great). You don't hear them crossing the borders to publish books in Bangladesh. Whatever they need, they look at home first. If they can't make it they go abroad, but even then, they follow a strict policy.

In our case, we jump borders at the first sign of shortage or easy money. By jumping borders, I don't only mean India (being our immediate neighbour it is only natural that we do that) —

it's the whole love for foreign goods that is ruining us. How come we never came up with something like "Amar Bangladesh Mohan" or something more creative? We do have 'Bangladesh Zindabad' and 'Joy Bangla' but they were made to be party slogans. Even then, Zindabad is more Urdu than Bangla. Considering how Bangla has all this BIDESHI (foreign) words in it, there's no harm in using that too, it sounds good. So does Joy Bangla. In fact, the parties should let people use these slogans irrespective of party affiliation. My point is, if we keep drumming slogans (to our youth) representing the greatness of beloved country maybe they won't be so inclined to follow other cultures that practice that.

I don't see anything wrong going to my old school early in the morning and listening to all the young ones chant 'Joy Bangla, Bangladesh Zindabad' a couple of times before starting their morning lessons.

Sheikh Tehsin Ali
USA