

## Clinton's Day in Dhaka

SADLY, it was President Clinton's day only in Dhaka. With the cancellation of his trip to the National Monument and to the village of Joypura on yet unexplained security reasons, the first ever US President to visit Bangladesh saw nothing of our beautiful countryside but only parts of the city, which sadly were not its authentic ones. The lush green paddy fields of rural Bangladesh brimming with a bumper crop would have given the US President a far better personal appreciation of both the beauty and the struggle of our people in moving this highly populous but industrially disadvantaged country forward. If he had had a glimpse of rural Bangladesh, he would have understood better the true nature of our struggle, the enormous challenges that we face and why the US should extend far greater economic co-operation and assistance to us than it so far has.

The rest of the trip went as planned and produced the results that were expected. The US\$ 97 million food assistance and the US\$ 50 million fund for clean energy from which we are to receive the first chunk are extremely welcome news. We would have preferred something more concrete on the debt relief issue. On the very vital question of increasing Bangladesh's trade with the US, the President remained disappointingly silent. Our request for increased quota in the US market for our readymade garment export remained unanswered, so did the question of free access of our other exports to the world's biggest economy. In a separate meeting with our business leaders the US secretary of commerce made no secret of his interpretation of President Clinton's visit which was to increase US business in Bangladesh. While we understand his point of view yet his total unconcern for our economic and business interest no doubt disappointed the captains of our commerce and industry. President Clinton termed his visit as "only the beginning of a stronger partnership." We would like to underscore here that for us stronger "partnership" can and must only mean stronger economic ties, which in its turn must mean helping Bangladesh industrialise and expand its export market.

We want to command our Prime Minister for clearly spelling out her government's gas export policy before the US President, which is to export power not gas - based on our natural gas, and that also after ensuring 50 years of reserve for our future generation. We note with satisfaction the tribute paid by President Clinton to our democracy. It is our hope that through this visit the United States and the West will have a better appreciation of our country and its freedom loving people. We thank President Clinton for visiting us, and hope that he will continue to be a friend of Bangladesh as he has been.

## Water Vision

IT is a pity that in an age when the scientists contemplate inter-galactic space missions and human colonies on other planets in the solar system, one billion people, one-sixth of the world population, do not even have access to safe drinking water and two billion strive without water for safe sanitation. Put in another perspective, a huge chunk of world populace remains extremely susceptible to a wide array of water-borne ailments, while researchers dedicate themselves to inventing cure for deadly diseases like cancer and AIDS. The ongoing second World Water Forum and Ministerial Conference in the Netherlands has drawn global attention to an issue that for long evinced a peripheral interest. Adoption of the 180 million US dollar World Water Vision actually bears a testimony to the fact that the international community has so far not had any thought on an orchestrated effort to first address and then resolve the crisis. Encouragingly, it also heralds the beginning of an era of renewed consciousness about water.

Water crisis is indeed multi-dimensional in nature, demanding resolution at economic, environmental and political levels. As well as being diverse, its various aspects are interlaced. Any area-specific economic and environment-friendly water development and protection projects ought to be on a firm political footing, on domestic, regional and international fronts, lest they should give rise to any dispute. Farakka Barrage is a case in point. At the same time, according to some scientists, smothered flow may have given rise to an environmental disaster in the shape of arsenic contamination of ground aquifers in the Ganges basin.

So, as the World Water Vision envisages, the countries of the world should in a concert formulate an international water policy so that the deprived millions can have access to safe drinking water and meet their sanitation water needs. To that direction, the lingering water disputes across the globe need to be addressed and redressed. Every citizen of the world has the right to safe water. We are sure that, inspired by the World Water Forum, the government would step up efforts to ensure safe drinking water for the citizenry. Let us hope its renewed vigour in this regard would lead to the end of the arsenic nightmare.

## For Stability in Nepal

GIRJA Prasad Koirala has become Nepal's Prime Minister for the third time. He was also elected the parliamentary party leader of the ruling Nepali Congress (NC) on Saturday. Earlier on Thursday Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, the founder leader of the oldest political party in Nepal, was forced to resign as Prime Minister after 69 out of 113 NC lawmakers successfully moved a no-trust motion against him within the parliamentary party. This was the first time the NC tradition of choosing a parliamentary leader unanimously was broken. The NC has 113 lawmakers in the 205-seat House of Representatives, the Lower House of Parliament. However, if past events are any guide, then Koirala may find his continuation in office less easier than being elected to the position. The rift in the party simmering as it is, is potentially on a rather precarious perch.

Since the Nepalese democratic movement in 1990, inner conflicts have seen too many prime ministers riding to power and then toppled in too short a time. And this has set an unhealthy trend hindering economic prosperity and democratic flourishing of this small South Asian nation. The Nepali congress should bear in mind the fact that they have lost power due to inner-party politicking a few times over only to draw the right message from it.

As our neighbour, a close ally, as well as a member-state of the SAARC, we would like Nepal to settle down to an era of stability. The leaders in Kathmandu must put aside their factional battles and work for the collective well-being of the masses.

# Bangladesh Politics — an Inconsequential Process

*The leaders may find it expedient to take refuge in the past but the people are interested in the former's will and ability to deliver on the issues affecting them now. How to make them accountable and responsive to the people and their need is a question that warrants reforms, rethinking and innovation. After all, politics is for the people and their well-being and not vice versa.*

AFTER years of bickerings the country's two main political parties, the ruling Awami League and the opposition Bangladesh Nationalists Party, are now setting their eye on the general election — due early next year. The Prime Minister who is also the president of Awami League instructed her partymen to revitalise the organisation and work in their constituencies. The leader of the opposition as well as the BNP chairperson also asked her party workers to intensify an 'oust the government' campaign and at the same time prepare themselves for the next general election. While the brawl between the two will continue to rage inconclusively elsewhere the real battle is to be fought on the electoral turf. Obviously both will now earnestly get ready for the crucial test of strength and popularity next year — one to retain its hard-earned power and another to re-capture it.

In any democratic polity the election is a kind of festival which affords its people to exercise their democratic right in choosing men to govern them. In the past there had been visible spontaneity in our people's participation in its process. The general election of 1996 was not only sharply contested, there was record increase in the number of voters who cast their votes — two big indicators of a vibrant democracy. Even if the air is abuzz with the speculations about an impending election, those spirits among the people seem to be substantially dampened. After their unsavoury experience of a decade of democratic experimentation and what it has produced the election does not any more enthuse them. There is a growing cynicism at least among the concerned segment of the society as to the usefulness of the process unless the pitch and pattern of our politics, domi-

nated by the country's two top politicians are drastically changed. At the moment, any future election almost invariably conjures up the spectacle of another spell of wasteful time marked by political deadlock, dysfunctional parliament, street confrontations and venomous exchange of denunciations.

Because, in the coming election also, as one of the major political parties led by their leaders of known disposition and mutual relationship will climb the rampart of power pushing another to sit in the opposition the old feud between them is certain to resurface. It will be unmistakably followed by a fresh spate of agitation, street violence and haraqs disrupting civil life, stagnating the economy and administration and pushing — whatever little of law and order is still there — downhill. If the past trends are any guide, the winner of the election would contemptuously deny the opposition its due, turn imperious and shift all major activities of the state from the parliament to executive offices, while an oversensitive opposition would smell 'subtle rigging' even in a neutrally conducted, closely monitored and widely acclaimed election and embark on an anti-government tirade almost at once. If nothing, a disparate opposition would start a non-issue 'oust the government' campaign which makes no political sense. These may satisfy the ego, and eccentricity of the leaders but they in no way contribute towards national politics. Given this likely scenario, if any one of our ruling trio —

the Awami League, BNP and JIP — who ruled Bangladesh in rotation since its inception intend to repeat another cycle of its empowerment, people will be genuinely concerned over what would then be the shape of things in Bangladesh.

One of the basic problems with our leaders has been their chronic inability to catch up with the breathtaking developments that have taken place both in global and regional arena since the time that gave shape to our politics. Today even internally the politics has

minister availed of Ershad's crucial support in capturing power. Now in a bizarre twist of events he is in the camp of Begum Zia who once jailed him. Devoid of any political conviction or morality they are constantly on toes in their bitter struggle for power. As a result they can neither deliver nor inspire. Small wonder, that the nation has not yet been able to cross the bounds of square one.

Yet our rulers never held themselves responsible for any of our miseries. They blamed either their predecessors or the

disease and neglect. As a matter of fact their conditions have worsened according to all available socio-economic indicators. The changes in system are important but much more important is the creation of men who would make the changed system work. Over the years we got rid of old, decrepit systems but do not know how to get rid of the people with their greedy fingers stuck deep in national pie.

The Awami League has been more of nostalgists party devoted to rehabilitating the legacy of the party and reviving the heritage of Sheikh Mujib Rahman. It has link with the present to the extent of serving the interests of its supporters and rewarding the party stalwarts rather than addressing the hard issues of the polity. The BNP, on the other hand, is a firm believer in real politics and intent upon making the best of all opportunities for enriching its leaders although its *modus operandi* is same as that of AL with their sets of armed cadres, student activists, musclemen and street agitators. The BNP however has popular election planks like safeguarding some of our national interest vis-a-vis India. It is mostly forgotten as to how it performed to uphold those interests during its tenure in government. Between the two General Ershad and his JP enjoy its crucial position as power broker. But for them all, Bangladesh is a big 'zamindary' with a client-patron relationship with its people.

Where do we go from here? No simple answer is possible, but one thing is clear. If Bangladesh is to be salvaged and its people rescued the existing pattern of politics will have to be broken and its rhetorics replaced by some substance. The leaders may find it expedient to take refuge in the past but the people are interested in the former's will and ability to deliver on the issues affecting them now. How to make them accountable and responsive to the people and their need is a question that warrants reforms, rethinking and innovation. After all, politics is for the people and their well-being and not vice versa.



## PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

new issues and agenda. There are also changes in outlook and priorities with regard to statecraft and nation building. Despite these changes our political leadership continues to remain steeped in the politics of rhetorics and mealy mouthed mendacity. Instead of grasping the dynamics of today's politics they prefer to live in the past. In their blind pursuit for power both the major political parties are prepared to jettison their so-called principles as evidenced, for example, from their connection with the former President and JP chairman, Hussain Muhammad Ershad — the despot whom both had once despised. With total disregard to any moral standard Sheikh Hasina, the incumbent prime

system, although the same blunders or bunglings were perpetrated even by themselves or the failures repeated even after the revision of system. At one time we held centrally controlled economy responsible for our economic stagnation. We now have not only private sector boosted up, we have also opened up to the free-market economy. We also thought of parliamentary system to be most conducive for participatory democracy. We got it. During the decade of eighties we blamed authoritarianism for being at the root of all evils. In 1990 we pulled down its edifice. Amidst all these changes only what has not changed is the fate of our people. They continue to live in a state of poverty, fear.

## The Visit

*Pakistan will have a unique opportunity to present its viewpoint at the highest level of the US administration. Our disparate national interests can be mutually accommodated and may not necessarily be in confrontation. As sovereign independent countries we need to understand and respect each other's stance on various issues.*

## AS I SEE IT

**Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi**

ing for some time, is that US relationship with third countries in the region, more importantly India, is taken by Pakistan to be weighed against Pakistan despite Pakistan's service as a loyal ally during the Cold War. Similarly US may have a problem with Pakistan's approach to countries in the region, particularly Afghanistan and Iran.

In the '60s the US had a major disagreement about our friendship with China. It is that very friendship that served as a stepping stone for Nixon's historic opening to China, that in turn heralded the ultimate demise of the Soviet Union and helped no end by Pakistan's bearing the brunt of Russian retribution as a front-line State in the Afghan war.

During the difficult years of the Cold War when India was more or less a Soviet ally, Pakistan was a cornerstone of US policy — a stabilising force in the region. Even then nuclear non-proliferation concerns led the US to ostracise Pakistan and cease all aid in the '70s. Then a military dictator overthrew a democracy and became an international pariah on hanging an elected PM. If it had not been for Afghanistan, Pakistan would have remained out in the cold in deep isolation. In a pragmatic turnaround of policy to serve the greater US interest, Pakistan's "sins" were put on hold and we became the front-line State for the West in the fight against communism. While Gen Zia had been scornful about refusing the paltry \$300 million offered as immediate relief by President Carter as "peanuts", the fact remains that as reward for the tremendous effort we put in at great risk to our sovereignty, we ultimately got nothing more than "peanuts" and a handful of F-16s.

Gen Zia and his colleagues failed Pakistan in not driving a harder bargain, even though our interests coincided. Today the Kalashnikov and the drugs culture, unrestricted illegal

immigration and terrorism are all residuals of the Afghan war, let alone the smuggler's marts in every city and highways beyond repair because they were not designed to cater for the inordinate increase in heavy vehicles traffic. Most of the aid we got was debt and not grants. Very little investment took place. The increased economic activity gave a false sense of prosperity and was only because of the dynamism of a burgeoning parallel black economy. Whereas Egypt got all its debts forgiven, Pakistan, which had more troops in pursuit of the Gulf War, got nothing.

This failure to negotiate better terms is because those involved in the negotiations compromised the national interest (and security) to suit their own selfish motives. They sold out the nation so that they could be allowed to skim off CIA money meant for the Afghan War. When you sit down to bargain, you have to be clear about the bottom line, with friend and foe alike. Neither friend nor foe will give you something that you do not drive a hard bargain for.

Kargil was both a diplomatic and information disaster and gave a unique opportunity for the Indians to tar and feather us. Militarily we inflicted severe casualties on the Indians, many times more than ours. Despite Indian hyperbole and rhetoric to paper over their setback in men and material, the severest casualty was that of morale. The Indian troops on the receiving end knew the truth. The BJP Government will never forgive Pakistan for that, for nationalists there is nothing more demeaning than what affects them. Thereafter the Indian gameplan was clear, to isolate us in the world community and what better than to label us as a "terrorist State". The Kathmandu hijack was either a ploy or was taken over mid-operation for one end only, to label Pakistan adversely.

Before that Mian Nawaz Sharif had shot himself in the foot by trying to remove another Army Chief. What the Pakistan Army inherited was a country five miles to midnight, in deep economic, social and political crisis, with the administrative machinery having been politicised and corrupted into oblivion.

Unlike the period of the Cold War, when military regimes were the darlings of the western world, men in uniform at the helm of national affairs are not in fashion anymore. Nevertheless, the western democracies are not blind and they decided not to carry out an audit of the fire brigade (in this case the Army) while the fire brigade station (the nation) was itself burning. Having realised that proponents of democracy had brought the nation to ruin and its social fabric to virtual disintegration by institutionalising corruption, the western governments decided to give the US new type of military rule (free press, civilian cabinet, no martial law administrator) a chance, provided a road map for restoration of democracy was spelt out. In this manner, the international community has tacitly "legitimised" military rule in Pakistan. This acceptance was born out of the doctrine of necessity.

Democracy in Bangladesh has a long way to go. Every country starts off with problems. I think Bangladesh is moving towards a positive political direction.

Bangladesh should try to do its best to benefit the country from President Clinton's visit. India and US has a "science & technology exchange" treaty. India has benefited a lot from it. The Bangladesh government should also try to negotiate a similar treaty with the US government.

Bangladesh-American College Student USA

## To the Editor ...

### It depends on us...

Sir, Bangladeshi are not proud of having Mr. Clinton with them but they are happy to have him as a state guest. We are a country with a lot of problems. And Clinton's visit is not going to resolve all our problems, but we will get an extraordinary opportunity to come very close to a president of the USA.

It depends largely on our own attitude that how much we are aware of our own problems, how much we know how to resolve these economical problems, how much we know about US foreign policy, and how smart we are in dealing with US administration. We cannot of course resolve all our problems but we certainly can achieve a lot of favours from the US President. It depends solely on Bangladesh. And we are looking forward to Clinton's visit.

Sohail Ahmad  
Durham, New Hampshire,  
USA

### We are proud...

Sir, It is obviously proud for the Bangladeshi to have a US President on their own soil.

It is an irony that we have so many women's rights groups in a city where a girl cannot even celebrate the New Year without being molested.

Well, if we look at what the women activists are after, they would be:

- to get publicity;
- to earn a place in the so-called 'elitist' society; and
- to take part in international conferences with a subsidised return tickets.

And yes, the writer is correct saying that they are detached from the majority of the women. However, I thank the DS, and the writer, for this approach. I would expect more of these from the DS.

Ahsan Akbar  
USA

### Towards a positive direction

Sir, I am a student of the University of Pittsburgh, USA. I like your editorials. The editorials represent modern democratic values which is rare in the developing countries. The government of Bangladesh and

different political parties would be lucky if they listen to your advice.

I think what Bangladesh needs is to separate its Executive, Legislative and Judiciary branch. I don't understand why the politicians are not doing this. I think separating these branches will serve their and the country's best interest. One political party cannot stay in power forever no matter how hard they try. The history of Bangladesh bears testimony to this statement.

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the vision of its architects. It is still one of odd three dozen of the least developed countries of the world. The asymmetry in wealth and income is a way of life. But never before had there been gap wider between the rich and poor in this country. There are grim revelations that public money to the tune of thousands of crores of taka lie in the hand of a few who perhaps have an access to the corridor of power. The seats of higher education are in doldrums and the administration is in quandary. The country's economy is wobbly and frequently subjected to devaluation of currency. The corruption permeates each layer of the society and no one knows its depth and extent. The darkest dimension of the polity is, of course, a failed state of internal order. The security has now turned to be an individual responsibility. Murder, hijack and extortion take place in broad day light on the crowded street with onlookers helplessly watching the orgy. The rapes, toll collection and woman related crimes are rampant and have reached a new peak in spite of special Acts enacted by the parliament. This description is not however exhaustive and touches only the tip of an iceberg.

Where do we go from here? No simple answer is possible, but one thing is clear. If Bangladesh is to be salvaged and its people rescued the existing pattern of politics will have to be broken and its rhetorics replaced by some substance. The leaders may find it expedient to take refuge in the past but the people are interested in the former's will and ability to deliver on the issues affecting them now. How to make them accountable and responsive to the people and their need is a question that warrants reforms, rethinking and innovation. After all, politics is for the people and their well-being and not vice versa.

However, together these parties present us a Bangladesh which must not have been in rulers as the Indians would have us believe (their fallback position to sabotaging the visit) but to express US fears on their issues of concern and have Pakistan's first-hand response to them. Pakistan will have a unique opportunity to present its viewpoint at the highest level of the US administration. Our disparate national interests can be mutually accommodated and may not necessarily be in confrontation. As sovereign independent countries we need to understand and respect each other's stance on various issues. While we can understand US economic aspirations in the billion plus Indian consumer population, these need to be adjusted to Pakistan's concerns, mainly those problems stemming from being a long-term US ally in the region. We live in a very tough neighbourhood. A dialogue of equals is necessary and Pakistan will have home ground advantage in articulating its viewpoint effectively to someone who is a known friend of Pakistan.

The visit had to take place. Instead of indulging in euphoria over downing the Indians, let's do our own homework and make it useful for Pakistan.

Member of Parliament. Following a report in the Bangla daily Jugantar (12 March 2000) where