

Dhaka, Tuesday, March 28, 2000

A Silent but Eloquent Protest

DR Humayun Ahmed's hunger strike on the Independence Day at the main entrance of the trouble-torn Shahjalal University of Science and Technology could have easily become politicised. Indeed, there was the scope, with the dispute over naming of some academic and administrative buildings on the university campus unfortunately overblown into a war between the pro- and anti-liberation forces. And, there were attempts, by different quarters, to exploit Ahmed's action for scoring some political points.

In the end, the programme in Sylhet turned out to be a conscientious intervention resonating with the protests of the civil society over deteriorating standards of education and blatant politicisation of educational institutions across the country. Certainly, Humayun Ahmed deserves full credit for not letting 'his silent protest' be used as a political platform. Success of his programme has proved that to be vocal against excesses one needs neither political cover nor support; and people will respond to a righteous call regardless of who it comes from. Most importantly, it was a reminder to the intelligentsia that people expected them to be vocal and active, not essentially under any political umbrella, on issues of socio-political interest.

Ahmed's programme has indeed evoked a good deal of public interest; however, now that all the anxiety, enthusiasm and excitement revolving around the hunger strike are over, it is probable that people might allow the message he has so forcefully sent across to drift into oblivion. If that happens, the very appeal of his action would be defeated. The students, the future generation, will have to be properly educated for the nation to survive in the global race for progress. Unfortunately, our political leaders refuse to accept that reality and continue to use the student community to achieve their own partisan and personal goals, thereby turning the educational institutions into a veritable battleground. The situation has to change and, in our view, people like Humayun Ahmed can be a catalyst for it by being vocal against the self-destructive blend of politics. The popular novelist has set a precedent for men and women of his stature and accomplishment to launch a social movement against political aggression on education.

Judicial Training

CHIEF Justice Latifur Rahman put judicial training at the centre of our concern for ridding the judiciary of a huge backlog of cases the latter creaks under. The CJ portrayed the gravity of the situation by saying that the long-pending cases are eroding the very foundation of the judicial system. The cases that hang fire spell out the diction of justice delayed being justice denied.

In a refreshingly inward looking analysis marking a departure from any customary recital of the extraneous factors, the chief justice made some highly cogent suggestions for a speedy improvement in the backlog situation.

Addressing a seminar on *Curriculum Development for Training of Judges* at the Judicial Training Institute the CJ laid emphasis on effective court administration and case management at the level of subordinate judges. These ought to form the rock-bed of the judicial training programme. The delivery of 'quick, qualitative and inexpensive justice' hinges on skill development which would be a far cry without a radical update of the curriculum for judicial training. Indeed the officials of the subordinate judiciary need to be conversant with the procedural laws so that they are able to reduce the backlog, but it will be equally important for them to pay heed to the CJ's advice for a judicious application of their discretionary powers. The curriculum could be modernised with the inclusion of such subjects like constitutional law, human rights, consumer protection, environmental concerns and the Arbitration Act. Besides such adaptations, we should be obliged to make full use of the computer in the judicial field.

Our bottomline suggestion, however, is that the subordinate judiciary be placed under the administrative control of the Supreme Court by delinking it from the executive. The system of check and balance in a democracy warrants this.

Are These Accidents?

A chain of fire incidents in a number of slums, some in broad daylight, gave rise to the speculation that these might not have been mere accidents but a well-orchestrated exercise to evict their residents. On Saturday last fire broke out at five places affecting around fifteen thousand residents of Mohammadpur, Motijheel and Gulshan areas. Some of the organisations which had protested the eviction drive against bustees earlier on suspect that there is a connection between the efforts to eradicate slums in the city and the outbreak of fire incidents. Their apprehensions may have been strengthened by the pattern of incidence. They contend that fire could not have broken out at a number of points simultaneously, the locations being so wide apart except by design. The late arrival of fire fighters was surmised to be another indication of the authorities' 'diffidence' to control and extinguish fire promptly enough. Though these people are mortally afraid of being evicted by the government, they are so desperate to fend for themselves that despite tremendous hardships in the absence of a roof over their head they are clinging to whatever possessions they could salvage from the fire and are firmly stuck to their dwelling-places. They don't want to lose their 'homes' and be destitutes once again.

We strongly condemn and abhor any move by the vested quarters to force people out of their abodes for the satisfaction of their lust for land-grabbing. We urge the government to deal with these elements very strongly in accordance with the law of the land sparing the poor slum-dwellers the physical harassment and mental agony they are being subjected to.

The Furore over a Political Right Turn in Europe

Joerg Haider resigned from the leadership of his party on 28 February last. Whatever might have been the motives behind his resignation the EU remains firm in its decision adopted earlier on Austria. Their bilateral sanctions brought in a month ago would remain in force. They consider the resignation of Joerg Haider — a man intent upon taking over his country as its Chancellor — only a tactical retreat.

URING the past one decade when the member-countries of European Union had been turning left one after another, it hardly caused a stir in European politics. But the ascent to power of a right-wing party — that too in a coalition — in one single member-country, Austria, has elicited unprecedented reaction from European Union and beyond conjuring up an ominous spectre of political instability and social unrest which characterised Europe between the two world wars. It was the right wing politics whipping up ultra-nationalism and xenophobia which subjected Europe to one of the worst holocausts of the history during the last century. The European Union was created, in part, to ensure that extreme right-wing nationalism would not again find place in the continent's politics.

This explains the shocked response in European capitals to the entry into Austria's government of the far-right Freedom Party led by its demagogic helmsman, Joerg Haider.

The observers described Haider as a racist and neo-Nazi and his party's entry into government as a threat to Europe's unification craftily built over last fifty years. Not only he is sympathetic to Austria's Nazi past, Haider is also known for his anti-EU positions. Out of 12 ministers in incumbent Chancellor Schussel's cabinet six holding the crucial portfolios including those of Finance and Defence are from Freedom Party — a fact that serves as a wake-up call to European leaders.

As the domestic political uncertainty of Austria since October last ended early last month with the swearing in of a coalition government comprised of conservative People's Party.

and Haider's far-right Freedom Party it however triggered the country's worst diplomatic crisis since World War II, putting Austria on a collision with its EU partners and the United States. The European Union declared a series of sanctions against Austria. Prime Minister Antonio Guterres of Portugal, currently the President of European Union, announced that fourteen other EU members would suspend bilateral political contacts with Austria, downgrade relations with Austria's ambassadors and refuse to support any Austrian candidate for post in international organisations.

Israel has withdrawn its ambassador to Vienna and the US temporarily recalled its envoy to Austria and said that it would reduce its diplomatic contact with that country. Madeleine Albright, the US Secretary of State, abhorred a (Freedom) party "that does not clearly distance itself from the atrocities of Nazi era and politics of hate."

Individually, the reactions were strongest from the governments of Germany, France and Belgium where the far-right politics with their blatant anti-immigration and anti-integration clamour are a potential threat. They feared that the Vlaams Bloc in Belgium, the National Front in France and neo-Nazi forces in Germany could all get a boost from what Haider has achieved. Germany's Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer played a leading role in

EU's decision to isolate Austria as did French President Jacques Chirac.

In addition, a bilateral process of cold-shouldering Austria is also in the offing. The reactions in Austria itself was violent with thousands of demonstrators waving banner, shouting slogans and clashing with riot police outside the presidential place in Vienna early last month.

Haider. His rise to power can be attributed more to his ability to exploit the situation created by a decadent ruling establishment.

Even if the Freedom Party had been steadily rising under Haider's leadership since 1986 it was kept at arms length by Austria's two established parties: the Social Democrats and People's Party. However, in the wake of an inconclusive election results of last October President Thomas Klestil failed to stop the Freedom Party after he unsuccessfully persuaded the country's established political parties to sustain their governing alliance. They together ruled the country since the end of Second World War; but this time the differences between the Social Democratic leader Victor Klima and the People's Party leader Wolfgang Schüssel were too large to bridge. That made the advent of the Freedom Party inevitable in the government ostensibly to avert another election. The President while making his anguish over the developments known asked Haider and Schüssel, the new Chancellor, to undertake a pledge to respect basic democratic values, and also to repudiate explicitly Austria's Nazi past. In an attempt to placate EU's anxiety the President also made them sign a declaration that they would distance the new dispensation from Haider's earlier leanings towards Hitler's legacy.

However, the EU was not convinced. In an uncharacteristic

bold move, it almost at once acted to isolate Austria. The news of EU's action angered many Austrians including those who found Haider's policies abhorrent. The questions are raised if the EU is right to challenge the democratic verdict of the people of one of its member-countries. Even if the rest of Europe disapproves Haider's ascent to power what can be done about the Freedom Party winning as large as 27 per cent of popular votes. In case of a re-election they would win 33 per cent of the votes, according to an opinion poll conducted recently. It is, therefore, a moral question if the people who voted for the Freedom Party can be penalised for freely exercising their choice particularly before they have broken any rule.

Europe is clearly worried at the rise of Haider and his party, as are many Austrians. But it is not quite clear what the rest of Europe can do about him. The EU action has already caused backlash among many Austrians who seem to disapprove of the EU interfering in their internal politics.

The EU's policy of isolating Austria will also be difficult to implement. Many key EU decisions require unanimity and Austria can effectively bring EU's functioning to a halt by refusing to cooperate. In the meantime, Joerg Haider resigned from the leadership of his party on 28 February last. Whatever might have been the motives behind his resignation the EU remains firm in its decision adopted earlier on Austria. Their bilateral sanctions brought in a month ago would remain in force. They consider the resignation of Joerg Haider — a man intent upon taking over his country as its Chancellor — only a tactical retreat.

PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz



This is not the first time that the potential rise of right-wing politics in Europe created an international furore. In mid-1980s there were widespread protests against Kurt Waldheim, the former UN Secretary General running for Austrian presidency because of his Nazi past concealed earlier. Again in 1994 Italy's National Alliance with its roots in Benito Mussolini's Fascist party drew protests from all over Europe when the alliance became a junior partner in media baron Silvio Berlusconi's government. The reaction was then somewhat muted because the EU was not, at that time, a strong entity as of now. But today the EU has strength to de-

pend to aspects of Hitler's Third Reich.

But to Austrian analysts how the EU countries have behaved with regards to Austria's new coalition government is an over-reaction and the former's fear of Haider's rise is an exaggerated one. They do not consider the Freedom Party leader a cause for panic because to them Joerg Haider is unlikely to metamorphose into another Hitler. They insist that the world media has, in fact, over-simplified Haider phenomenon by unnecessarily demonising him. It is certainly not more than the fact that Austria's government has succumbed to the worst level of opportunistic politics of a wily leader like

India As a 'Virtual' Superpower

A Dissenting View of Clinton's Visit

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

The Vajpayee government's agenda is to elevate the US into a de facto arbiter of South Asian security especially on Kashmir, while itself refusing to engage Pakistan. It has succeeded in getting the US to move towards accommodating India as a de facto, albeit third-class, member of the Nuclear Club.

THE Indian elite has at last had its two pages of glory and Mr Vajpayee his 10 minutes of ecstasy while meeting Mr Clinton in the shadow of one of Kashmir's worst massacres, which clinched their one-to-one meeting.

It seems rude to break the media reverie over "Big B's" visit. But we must do some soul-searching. Going by the 2-page Vision Statement, India and the US are entering into a "qualitatively new relationship..."; "in many ways, the character of the 21st century... will depend" on its success. They "seek a natural partnership... with... responsibility for... international security... and... strategic stability".

India has arrived! This great "civilisation" has joined the ranks of the greatest nations. We'll soon be talking about India joining the G-7, and why not, form even a G-2! This is the steroid the Indian elite needs to feed its huge Ego.

This is a craving the *bhadralok* has long nourished: to be equated with the Master Race. Even since William Jones discovered similarities between Sanskrit and European languages, our elite has felt assured it is related to the world's "Aryan" ruling class. It goes to absurd lengths to prove its "Aryanness".

It is irrelevant that for the US public, this is Mr Clinton's 62nd visit abroad, and one

likely to be overshadowed by the Pope's "pilgrimage". What matters is that the US and India are... allies.... We will share our experience... [and] launch an international Community of Democracies....", even hold biannual "summits".

Lest it be thought that this is mere rhetoric, there are some reality checks. Take nuclear weapons: "The US believes India should forge nuclear weapons. India believes that it needs to maintain a credible minimum nuclear deterrent... Nonetheless, India and the US are prepared to work together to prevent... proliferation..." India has done this.

Most Indian policy-makers are not particularly bothered by this or by the BJP's monopolistic claim in defining the Indo-US relationship. That is because they don't undertake honest introspection of the potential and limits of Indo-US cooperation.

Amidst the hype about "shared values", there is complete elision of India's most important reality, i.e. poverty and inequality, and of America's overbearing power. There is talk of "an unrelenting battle against poverty in the world," but no mention that India has the most poor people in the world!

Mr Clinton celebrated India's diversity and plurality. Ironically, this was done under an Indian government that hates that very diversity. The BJP's vision is driven by a search for homogeneity: One Nation, One People... Mr Clinton has legitimised an ultra-conservative right-wing current. Remarkable ignorance is at work in this huge concession to the BJP's partisan appropriation of India's foreign policy and security discourse.

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Similarly, there is hype about "shared values", there is complete elision of India's most important reality, i.e. poverty and inequality, and of America's overbearing power. There is talk of "an unrelenting battle against poverty in the world," but no mention that India has the most poor people in the world!

The US applause for India's "success" in the economy, in S&T, and "its determination to bring the benefits of economic growth to all its people" may be music to some ears, but it is altogether fantastic. "Benefits to all"—when 50 million-plus Indians have sunk below the poverty line in a decade? Ms Albright's Asia Society statement that India's economy is the "great unreported success story of the 1990s" is certainly news to India!

The greatest massage for Indian egos will come from the line that India and the US are both "leaders in... the new high-technology economy". "Leaders?" With a domestic IT sector less than one-half of one per cent of GDP? And a crumbling infrastructure?

Similarly, there is hype about Indians and Americans cooperating at the "frontiers of knowledge" to unravel "the mysteries of time and space" and eradicate "human suffering, disease and poverty". Regrettably, the new Indo-US S&T "Forum" has a meagre Rs. 30 crore corpus — a PL-480 left-

To the Editor ...

"In an Antique Land"

Sir, This is in reference to the letter published in the DS issue of 24 March 2000, under the above heading. I can feel the anguish of the writer, Mr. Liqat Ali over the editorial titled "In an Antique Land" of March 6 issue of India Today. However, I do not find any hard basis for comparing Bangladesh with Bihar in an economic sense. The Human Development in South Asia 1997 Report by the renowned Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq quotes the real GDP per capita of India, Bangladesh, and Bihar as 1290, 1240, and 640 dollars respectively.

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cannot we produce local olive oil, as secondary or tertiary market?

Bangladesh is a fertile country, with a large variety of raw materials, many of which could be made available in finished form, progressively. Our agriculture department has a fairly good network, but the bug is marketing. Private investment has to be encouraged by the facilitators, (which is normally the government in the developing countries).

Once again, it is noted that the recurring problem resurfaces: due to the lack of smooth and well-established agricultural marketing network, the small rural producer finds it difficult to market their products readily and systematically. The cooperatives cannot work efficiently due to corruption and lack of technical know-how. The government has been

harping on the development of the agroprocessing industries, but so far, it has remained stuck at the rhetoric level.

Abul M Ahmad Dhaka

"A Few Hours of Unexplained Reasons"

Sir, Navine Mursid's article "A Few Hours of Unexplained Reasons" was a very clear-sighted dissection of Clinton's trip. What I especially liked was the skepticism with which the writer treated the whole thing. There has been a lot of ballyhoo over the trip, but the writer did not sound like she was taken in by the bluster and hype too much. Instead, in the concluding part she really tore into the government for

K. A. Azam Dhaka

Marketing of sunflower oil

Sir, The staff report from Kushtia (DS, March 21) indicates that 20 per cent of the edible oil requirement in the country is met by the local sunflower oil. However, I cannot get the latter in any retail store in the markets for the last two years. There appears to be a huge communication gap between paper data and market display.

Although the volume of production of sunflower oil is small, the marketing has to be streamlined for easy and quick availability to the households. The agricultural extension centers may mount a media publicity campaign, followed by opening retail outlets in different districts. The soya oil repacking industry is well established in the country with a spate of alluring advertisements in the electronic media. Why some of these companies are not interested in marketing local sunflower oil? The latter available in the market is of foreign origin and very expensive, and come in large containers, unsuitable for middle-income families. Another point: why

cannot we produce local olive oil, as secondary or tertiary market?

Abul M Ahmad Dhaka

Sir, When I read the noted writer Humayun Ahmed's article on Sylhet in the daily *Prothom Alo*, I was impressed by his honesty coming from his personal involvement because of his brother Professor Muhammad Zafar Iqbal. In the write-up Mr Ahmed was not taking any political stand nor was he trying to eye for a leadership position. He was committing himself and his family to a cause... which he felt was being ridiculous sidetracked by narrow-minded political opportunists. And also as an elder brother he felt that it was his responsibility to stand by his brother who was fighting for a just cause. This stand by Mr. Ahmed appealed to a lot of people from all walks of life who cherish patriotic feelings and are not guided by ambition to gain something. I was impressed by the responses coming from my younger friends who were willing to be a part of this individual protest. In a democratic country, this is an ideal form of creating awareness and responding with self denial rather than violence. Mr. Ahmed made a statement which goes further beyond the fiasco of naming few halls in the Shahjalal University of Science and Technology. It portrays the socio-political and economic vacuum in our country due to lack of right direction and leadership.

We have wasted the last 28 years trying to serve personal interests without bothering to think about the nation and the people. We even compromised ourselves to the extent that we forgave those who acted as the accomplice of the Pakistan Army that unleashed a reign of terror in 1971.

When Humayun Ahmed took a stand for SUST on our independence day, I felt as a Bangladeshi, I could also stand beside him with my cause of justice for the millions of martyrs who laid down their lives for my country. And when the day before yesterday thousands of people like me joined Humayun at the hunger strike, I realised if we stand together no obstacle would seem difficult enough to be overcome.

Akku Chowdhury Dhaka

Mugged evidence

Sir, The problem with the PSA 2000 is that the victims of mugging and extortions are afraid to name names and identify the culprits, as their lives are at risk subsequently. Therefore, the police have to build up the cases on circumstantial evidence. The laws have to be practical, to suit the environment.

Another question: how many terrorists under cover of the ruling regime have been prosecuted? The majority takes advantage of such covers. The Feni blitz was to be made transparent by the authorities; as also the 10,000 alleged political detentions.

Firmness must also be transparent.

A Husnain Dhaka