

Focus

Conscience — a Heavenly Trait

Time has come for the civil society to identify the wrong-doers and press for suitable remedial measures. Otherwise wrong-doers will continue to multiply and bring the country to the brink of disaster. The political parties should also identify the wrong-doers and clean the party apparatus and aim at clean politics.

by Muslehuddin Ahmad

HUMAN beings are endowed with a heavenly trait — the Conscience and this is one of the most important gifts of Almighty God to human beings. Indeed, this gift enables the human beings to win over the evils and this makes them different from animals. Chief Justice Latifur Rahman, while talking about the accountability of the judges, very rightly said, (his delivered made in Austria was reproduced briefly in The Daily Star of April 27, 2000). "His (Judge's) first accountability is, of course, to his own conscience." It can safely be assumed that the human beings would largely be judged on the basis of this heavenly trait on the Day of Judgement. However, the Chief Justice also added, "But that in itself is not enough, because conscience is not always invulnerable. What is also needed is accountability to the Constitution...." If conscience becomes vulnerable to worldly greed and outside pressure and the human beings fail to determine the right from wrong, then they tend to assume the sub-human status. If conscience fail to guide, other considerations including the dictates of the Constitution may prove less compulsive and can hardly deter someone from doing wrong and giving wrong decisions and judgements.

The place of justice is a hallowed place, and the judiciary, despite the recent inroad of the worldly evils into this hallowed place, still enjoys the respect of the people. This is why the people do turn to judiciary to find justice which they fail to find elsewhere else. But unfortunately here also many "right minded go away thinking that the judge is biased." In his speech the Chief Justice himself was very critical of the judges and said, "The judges of the higher courts in many countries are also not above board. As a policy decision it is time to single out those corrupt judges who have not maintained the highest standards of integrity." To earn more respect

and confidence of the people, the Chief Justice may decide to start the process of cleaning up of the houses of justice in Bangladesh itself. It is "not only the bench, but the foot places and precincts thereof" must also be cleaned up. The present court environment and particularly that in the lower court is generally unhealthy and that needs to be addressed forthwith. The office of the Chief Justice, in such an important drive, shall certainly need the cooperation and full support of the Bar Council and the Associations of Lawyers as these bodies know the wrong-doers who are responsible for the present undesirable environment in some courts of the country.

This happened before and has been happening now. Democracy seems to have very little meaning when there is practically no communication between the leaders of the ruling party and the opposition. Considerations other than people's interest seem to influence and guide the decisions of the political parties. This sort of political process does not bode well for democracy. The elected members of the Parliament belonging to the opposition often boycott the Parliament for months thus making it a one party parliament. Then how does the democracy work? Who takes care of the problems of the people who elect them? In order to strengthen democracy the people expect the political parties to assure the electorates in clear terms that they will not boycott the Parliament nor will they resort to the destructive Harjats. They will, however, use other democratic means to ventilate their grievances. Though the country stands almost at the bottom in terms of economic position, it is doing extremely well in terms of corruption and it is ranking probably as No. 1 or 2 in the world map of corruption. Indeed, corruption, like a disease, has been spreading through all levels of the society — youths very much included. It is feared that a generation would be lost in the process. Horrifying is the extent of copying in the SSC and HSC examinations. Even some parents, teachers and local political leaders are directly involved. This type of exams are meaningless. Better would be to abandon this type of mass exams conducted by different Boards which are often accused of corruption and poor handling of the exam affairs. Indeed, the individual schools and colleges should be given the responsibility to take the exams and award certificates. If so many universities including private universities are allowed to award degrees, then why not the schools? Once they are in

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Is IJO's Exit a Death Knell for Jute Economy?

We may not have any remorse or cry for the premature and unceremonious exit of IJO which was created to help get HYV jute seeds, remove the bottlenecks of the jute industry, fight quota and other protective barriers against the entry of jute in the polypropylene fibre producing countries, help invent many other jute goods by-products like jutton, woolenised jute etc. IJO failed to live up to any such promises.

by Salahuddin Ahmed

A very recent news-item announced an unceremonious exit of IJO, i.e. International Jute Organisation with its headquarters in Dhaka. Not only unceremoniously, but also it is a very premature death of the only unit in Bangladesh belonging to the United Nation's family, which was ushered in with a bang in 1982 — but only to die by 2000 AD, after a very sickly, shabby, colourless existence for 18 years. Let us recall its origin, birth and shortlived existence to brush up our memory, as proverbially public memory is very short, isn't it? Some four decades ago, with so much exuberance, enthusiasm and a sense of urgency, the Jute Industry was carved out in this part of the world, now Bangladesh. The then Bengal Presidency till August 1947 was practically the monopolist producer of nearly all the raw jute of the world, including the finest "Golden Fibre" as well as the coarse raw jute, white and Tossa variety of it. Even after the partition of Bengal Presidency, almost 80 per cent of the entire jute as well as the finest quality of golden fibre came within the jurisdiction of what was then known as East Pakistan.

Nearly 120, i.e. all the existing jute mills at the time of partition fell in the share of what is known as West Bengal in India. The two parts of the then Pakistan had hardly any noteworthy commodity, minerals, or industrial goods to be able to earn substantial quantity of so much needed foreign exchange. Quickly came the realisation to the deciding authority in Karachi, Lahore, Rawalpindi and Islamabad that production of jute goods in the quickest possible time could be the saviour at our critical moment of shaky economic existence. Thus between 1950 and 1961-62 in 10/12 years the migrating affluent Muslim refugees from India, the Bawas, the Bawanis, the Adamjees and the Ispahanis etc. started establishing jute mills one after another at an unbelievable speed in the proverbially marshy land of the Adamjee, Platinum. People's and many others. East Pakistan became a very proud owner of 76/77 jute mills producing sacking, hessian, CBC and jute carpets. Bangladesh/ East Pakistan not only fed the rest of the world with raw jute including about 120 jute mills

located in Howrah, Calcutta, 24 Pargana, Diamond Harbour in India, but also another 100 jute mills located in UK, Western Europe, some even in USA and Canada. The undersigned, the author of the write-up in his capacity as Chairman of Jute Mills Corporation between 1976-78 and Secretary, Ministry of Jute between 1980-82 got a unique opportunity to visit some of these mills outside the subcontinent in a very moribund state. As referred to earlier between 1950 and 60/61, the then East Pakistan came to possess a very formidable jute industry enough to take the lion's share in the international jute export trade, snatching away a good bulk of it from India which was the pioneer in the industry for about 100 years during 1969-70, we produced 50,60,507 tons, consuming 34.22 lakh bales of raw jute and exporting almost 90 per cent of the jute products. Because of the War of Liberation and chaotic aftermath its total production gradually declined to 3,15,322 tons in 1972 consuming only 18.50 lakh bales of raw jute. The jute industry was in a mess, indeed!

Then came the glorious phase of nationalised industrial sector when 11 big or medium size corporations were born. BJMC was one of them. From hardly three lakh tons in 1972, Bangladesh produced its highest quantum of jute goods, 6,07,000 tons, in 1981-82. For couple of years with the exception of a few well-known sick mills, the industry as a whole including Adamjee Jute Mills made profits and the mill employees and workers got the benefit of production and profit bonus! In quick succession jute marketing offices were set up in Melbourne, Singapore, Kenya, Brussels and also in Atlanta in USA. These 5/6 jute marketing offices became the watchdogs and liaison offices and thus in 1981-82 Bangladesh succeeded in exporting 5,60,000 tons of jute goods — an all time high — leaving its biggest rival India wondering for a while. Our General Managers (Marketing) located abroad were indeed very dynamic; one or two of them later on became Secretaries of different Ministries. Then, unfortunately, a very myopic short sighted and quixotic decision was taken by the government, the then Minister of jute to be precise, in the name of economy and saving of foreign exchange and all these offices were abolished with the

Ehud Barak and Peace Talks: A Failure?

Barak seems to be a big disappointment not only to the people of Israel who voted him to power but also to the international community. He got stuck where Netanyahu did in the past. The people all over the world ask: Do we see a change of old wine in a new bottle in the last Israeli election?

by Harun ur Rashid

WHEN Ehud Barak was elected as Prime Minister with a landslide victory in May last year, his poll rate was 59 per cent among the Israelis. He was the most decorated soldier in Israel and he spoke right kind of words about bringing peace in Israel with the Palestinians and Syrians. His V-shaped smile that adorns his face was considered to be one of confidence and trust to the Israelis. Almost a year after his election, the poll rate dropped to 40 per cent and Bibi Netanyahu's support is rising only 3 per cent behind the declared support for Barak. The question is: Why did it occur? There is a saying that everything changes, nothing changes. It applies in case of Ehud Barak. He came to power with a big bang. People expected change for the better. What do they witness? Failure. He failed to produce peace settlement with the Syria and the Palestine Authority. His single-mindedness appears to become the root of problems. Some say he is a victim of his

image. He wants peace but on his terms. As in the case with most human endeavours they do not conform to the neatness of mathematics. There is a view that Barak needs to take his head out of the clouds long enough to think of all consequences of his actions. His goal should be to seek a common ground that means each side must appreciate the concerns of the other and then he will be able to build bridges and not barriers. History has a bearing here. The creation of Israel is considered as history's poisoned gift to the Middle East during the last century. It had injected volatility and uncertainty in the region. War after war was fought between Israelis and Arabs to claim the Palestinian land. Millions of Palestine people were uprooted from Israel in 1948 and had been living in Lebanon and Jordan. They have no right to return to their homelands. Barak appears to remain in entrenched position on the fundamentals of peace — such as the status of Jerusalem,

the expansion of Jewish settlements in West Bank, the fate of Palestine refugees, the amount of land of the West Bank to be returned to the Palestinians and the return of Golan Heights to Syria. Although Barak is expected to withdraw the troops from the Southern Lebanon with UN Resolution 425, there is a view that without the peace deal with Syria, it might run the risk of further destabilising the area and by definition the wider region. What we are witnessing is the rule of the strong and not fairness and justice. Barak refuses to compromise on Jerusalem and is committed to expanding Jewish settlements in West Bank and Golan Heights and expects further concessions from the Arab side. One Palestinian Cabinet Minister Hassan Asfour was reported to have said: "We have nothing new to add. There is no more room for flexibility." The US Administration has been trying hard to make a comprehensive peace deal by

September this year and negotiations have resumed this week between Israelis and Palestinians under the watchful eye of US Special Envoy Dennis Ross. The US Secretary of State Madam Albright intended to travel to the region to ensure 'intensive work' in the next six to eight weeks. The danger appears to be twofold: first the peace talks with Syria had collapsed and does not seem to be any move for its resumption. Second, the timeframe of peace deal with the Palestinians by September appears to be impossible unless Barak intends to compromise on the fundamentals. Barak seems to be a big disappointment not only to the people of Israel who voted him to power but also to the international community. He got stuck where Netanyahu did in the past. The people all over the world ask: Do we see a change of old wine in a new bottle in the last Israeli election? The author, a Barrister, is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

McKinnon Thrown in at Commonwealth Deep End

The Zimbabwean parliament has passed legislation fixing responsibility on Britain, the former colonial power, to compensate white farmers for land confiscated by the government. President Robert Mugabe has agreed to go ahead with elections at the end of May but relations with Britain are worsening. Gemini News Service reports on an early challenge for the new Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon.

Derek Ingram writes from London

THE moment the 61-year-old New Zealander Don McKinnon stepped into his new job as Commonwealth Secretary-General he found himself plunged into a major crisis. Violence in Zimbabwe. President Robert Mugabe's bitter quarrel with Britain, and the prospect of a May parliamentary election that could herald the end of his long reign — which began as prime minister in 1980 — are matters that have begun to preoccupy McKinnon. A foreign minister for 10 years, he is likely to find himself centre stage in the first months of his new office. McKinnon took over as secretary-general from Chief Emeke Anyaoku on 1 April. As he did so, Britain's Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, Robin Cook, was confronting Mugabe at the Africa-European Union summit in Cairo. White farmers in Zimbabwe were under siege from groups of angry squatters, and anti-Mugabe demonstrators were being beaten up in the streets of Harare. It was as if the clock had been turned back 20 years to the days when the British government of Margaret Thatcher was trying in vain on the eve of independence to keep Mugabe from power in favour of a coalition led by his late rival Joshua Nkomo. Nkomo lost the 1980 election and eventually became vice-president. Mugabe effectively cemented white-black re-



Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon: Brewing crisis

lations, but in the historic three-and-half-month Lancaster House talks in 1979 a crucial issue had been fudged — land ownership. At the recent Cairo summit, the former Zambian leader Kenneth Kaunda blamed Britain for this lapse. He was right. At Lancaster House, it had been proposed that a fund would be set up to compensate white farmers if their land was acquired by Zimbabweans. When Zimbabwe settled down to independence, the fund

was quietly forgotten. Twenty years later, 11 million hectares of prime land are owned by 4,500 white farmers. One million black farms share 16 million hectares — much of it poor soil. No one disputes the need for land reform, but Zimbabwean negotiations with Britain and other donor countries broke down because land was being allocated to ministers and party officials rather than to needy African farmers. What is happening in Zimbabwe now is plainly against the spirit of the Harare Declaration approved by the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting of 1991, which was presided over by Mugabe. This laid down the accepted political principles for member states, such as democracy, good governance and the rule of law. In a new biography — Eye of Fire by Phyllis Johnson — Chief Anyaoku is quoted as saying after that summit: "Zimbabwe occupies a special place in the history of the evolution of the modern Commonwealth. The crisis in Rhodesia (the pre-independence name) posed the most serious threat to the continued cohesion — indeed at a certain stage, the existence — of the modern Commonwealth." He added: "Zimbabwe moved to freedom... in a remarkable and continuing act of reconciliation."

But now, the British press is calling for the suspension or even expulsion of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth, and a racial element has crept into comments — reminiscent of the long years of Ian Smith's white Rhodesian regime. Mugabe has stirred the pot with Britain further by repeated intemperate remarks about Prime Minister Tony Blair's "cabinet of gays". Two African Commonwealth heavyweights, Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria and Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, are worried by events in Zimbabwe and actively trying to calm Mugabe. He can be a difficult man to calm. The Commonwealth mechanism for dealing with the kind of situation arising in Zimbabwe is scrutiny by the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) of eight foreign ministers, of which McKinnon has been deputy chairman. Its guidelines provide for suspension of a member in the case of military takeover or other unconstitutional overthrow of government or of "serious and persistent violations of the Harare Declaration. A set of tighter rules was deferred at last November's Commonwealth summit in Durban. In valedictory remarks in March, Anyaoku regretted this delay and said that if these further rules had now been in force, the case of Zimbabwe would become eligible for CMAG's scrutiny.

Chronic Hunger Fractures "Human Right to Food"

AT the 21st century's start, the most fractured human right is not liberty of expression or protection from arbitrary arrest. It is the right to food. One out of five, who live in the developing world today, are chronically hungry, says the Food and Agriculture Organization. That adds up to 790 million men, women and children. "Malnutrition is an exquisite form of torture and it vitiates other human rights," the late FAO Regional Representative Dioscoro Umali told a conference of Asian executives. "Businessman or beggar, man has a fundamental right to adequate food." But a headcount shows those imprisoned by hunger far exceed political prisoners, the Filipino National Scientist added. "What we have on hand today is a massive infraction of human rights." The ill-fed today approximate the population of over 61 Cambodias, FAO's State of Food and Agriculture report asserts. "This estimate captures the trend," the Worldwatch Institute agrees. But breaking down calories per person, as FAO does, "does not account for unequal distribution of food, found virtually everywhere." The disparities are bleak. Average food intake of a Canadian child, for example, is 3,058 calories daily. Compare that to an Indonesian kid's 1,859, a Filipino's 2,356 or a Vietnamese's 2,502. The malnourished also blur

by Juan L. Mercado

number of wasted children doubled. Hunger exacerbated by the AIDS epidemic has seen life expectancy nosedive. Barring agricultural breakthroughs, plus a "medical miracle, some African countries may lose one fifth or more of their adult population during this decade" the Worldwatch report foresees. Thus, the World Food Summit, in 1996, scaled back to a more "modest" target: reduce the hungry by about five Singapore (20 million) yearly. This would halve, by the year 2015, the over 831 million people, who went to bed hungry in the early 1990s. Since then, about eight million were lifted out of hunger zones annually, FAO reports. This decline is less than half of what the chastened Summit set out to do. Why? —DEPTHnews.

