

Opposition Must Sit for Talks, PM Must Not Rush

ONCE again the Prime Minister has written to the Leader of the Opposition and once again we state that she has done the right thing. The opposition cannot have it both ways. On the one hand they will accuse the ruling party of trying to appoint the Chief Election Commissioner without consulting them and on the other hand they will refuse to participate in the discussions to find a common choice for that crucial post. We cannot find any justification for the opposition's refusal to talk to the ruling party on this issue, except the personal equation of the two top leaders. But shouldn't the affairs of the state and of democracy be justification enough to persuade leaders to rise above their personal considerations? We can understand that Khaleda Zia may harbour very deep wounds for the insulting — even vulgar — things that Sheikh Hasina said about her in the recent past. But public interest must come above personal feelings, and the public wants both sides to talk to each other and mutually select the next CEC. If Khaleda Zia is unable to rise above her personal feelings at this crucial stage of our national politics then it will stand out as a crucial failure on her part.

There is another vital reason why the opposition, especially the BNP, must come to the talks. It is they who have created this crisis. It was in response to their demand that the CEC resigned. Therefore they, the opposition, are morally obliged to do their bit, if not more, to solve the problem. But instead they are refusing to live up to the minimum demand of democracy, which is talk to their opponents. We must warn the BNP that it will lose out on the public opinion contest on this score. People want a consensus CEC and for that both sides must talk to each other. As it now stands, AL wants to talk and the opposition does not. Which side the public will side with is obvious.

As for the other side, our earnest suggestion to the PM is that she should not rush with the nomination of a CEC. While we insist that the opposition must cease its stand-off, we equally insist that the ruling party must not act unilaterally. The goodwill and public support that lies behind her offers of talks will turn against her if it is perceived that she did not give sufficient time to the very process that she started. While we should not allow the opposition to waste time, at the same time we cannot permit the ruling party to unnecessarily hurry the process. We repeat THERE IS NO NEED TO RUSH. A lot will depend on WHO the next CEC is, but equally, a lot will depend on HOW that person is chosen.

Swindler of Kotchandpur

KOTCHANDPUR, an otherwise sleepy village, has now become tense as armed gangsters are moving around freely to protect their mentor of a fraud Faruk Ahmed Kajol. The 'hundi' (hand note) business that Kajol launched in the area attracted a large clientele falling for the lucre like the burning candle drawing insects to their fiery death. The illegal business flourished under the nose of the local authority who from the sideline were watching people headed for ruin. The high rate of interest offered by the 'syndicate bank' was never questioned by any authority nor was any investigation launched by a competent body from the capital city despite numerous reports appearing in the national dailies on the going on. The business prospered as the locals invested in good faith. According to reports, more than a hundred crore taka were pooled until finally the bank burst.

It is rather intriguing that with muscle and money power and an almost unchallenged capacity to travel across the border Kajol still did not leave the country in the face of an impending official action against him. It is also interesting how in the name of a government registered cooperative society he could carry out such illegal operations. The Daily Star report on the subject quoted an influential leader of ruling party student organisation as saying that almost 99 per cent of the local people put up their money in the cooperative society but they are all broke now because the bubble has burst. Local people allege involvement of local officials, police and gangleaders in the clandestine operation.

Now that Kajol has been taken into custody, every effort should be made by the local administration to realise every paisa he has swindled from innocent people of Kotchandpur. Legal action against him should not be delayed in the humdrum of 'protective custody'. A thorough investigation should also be conducted into the area of 'investments' by Kajol that very nearly brought him Aladdin's lamp.

Congratulations to ETV!

TELECAST of Ekushey Television, the first-ever private television channel of its kind in Bangladesh, was formally inaugurated by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Wednesday. ETV enjoys the privilege of being the first terrestrial satellite television in the South Asian region. The entire initiative has certainly been a boost for electronic journalism in the country in this fast-moving, technology-driven world where electronic media is being digitised from the existing analogue system. The growing popularity of IT-based media raises the level of expectations about it.

People's expectations will be high, especially when private channels in countries have fared well in the recovery of the audience. Although Bangladesh Television can be applauded for its initiatives for information dissemination regarding some development and social issues, for example highlighting the needs for children's education, use of birth control, and immunisation etc. including sensitisation programme about domestic violence, malnutrition and the like, it leaves much to be desired, especially in terms of entertainment creativity. Given the fact that free media is a precondition for democratic success as the prime minister has mentioned in her speech as well, we are looking forward to a truly professional performance by ETV.

The media's role is to provide accurate, balanced, fair and timely information and analyses to the viewers. We hope the ETV will live up to the expectations of the people and serve as a vibrant medium of news, views and documentaries. It should be able to fill in the void felt in terms of objectivity in reporting, and it must ensure fair treatment while giving coverage to both the ruling and the opposition political parties. We wish ETV all success.

The IT Bubble is Bound to Burst

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

India needs to develop low-cost IT access by replacing costly PCs with cheap network computers, and promote Indian-language interfaces and low-cost Internet-based educational material that ordinary schools can afford. But for this, the focus must turn from expensive technologies to low-cost ones, from 'Hitec Cities' to village schools (many of them without blackboards), i.e. to promoting literacy, basic healthcare, food security, shelter and education.

eracy, education, health and employment, as well as agriculture and industry. The current IT hype is a hot air balloon driven up by reckless speculation, in which price-earning ratios of 300 (against an average of under 30) are considered natural for IT companies, and their market capitalisation can be higher than that of established blue-chip brick-and-mortar companies which have 20 times their turnover and profits.

This is not to deny that India's IT has burgeoned at a rate five times higher than the country's industrial growth as a whole in recent years. Software exports have zoomed from \$150 million in 1990 to \$4 billion. Computers are making inroads into small cities. The number of Internet connections has rocketed from under 100,000 four years ago to about 800,000 today. The hardware market has crossed the one-million-PCs-a-year mark. There is some real IT entrepreneurship too. Most

important, computer-based services are providing mobility to some young people from underprivileged backgrounds.

However, despite all this, the turnover of the domestic IT industry is less than one per cent of India's gross domestic product (compared to, say, eight per cent in the U.S.). That is not all: Indian software exports are just about 1/70th or less than 1.5 per cent of the world software market. India's share is growing slowly in a sector which has recorded 15 per cent-plus growth worldwide.

India has just been ranked 54th of 55 countries in an IT survey by International Data Corporation-World Times. Its score is 871, compared to China's 915 or the U.S. 5,041. (The highest is Sweden's 5,062, the lowest Pakistan's 719.) The penetration of Indian households by PCs is under one-fifth the world average. Today, it stands at three machines per 1,000 people.

When it comes to Internet

access, India firmly remains a backwater -- 0.1 per cent household penetration, or the same as sub-Saharan Africa's, as compared to Taiwan's 14 per cent. A computer costs the equivalent of the average Indian's income for two years, but only a month's American salary. More than 90 per cent of India's IT transactions are in English, which is spoken by five per cent of the population.

This IT penetration is extremely uneven, more than two-thirds in western and southern India, mainly in the big cities, with the Hindi belt lagging behind and with a high gender bias. Hyderabad has been hyped up as Cyberabad. But its software exports account for just nine per cent of the national total and are a mere one-third of such exports from Chennai and less than one-seventh of the volume exported from Bangalore or Mumbai. This too is typical of the hyper-

India's status as a minor Internet player is unlikely to

change unless the income of the bottom two-thirds of the population increases substantially and the infrastructure develops.

The upper limit on the number of Internet users will be set by the infrastructure. The number of telephone lines in India is 30 million, a drop in the ocean. Even if everyone who has a phone gets a computer, India will lag way behind most developing countries. Further, India's software exports are primarily in the low-end segment. 'Body shopping' accounts for about half such exports, a ratio that has not changed much over two decades. What is growing rapidly now is data entry, medical transcription, airlines ticketing and call centres. This segment lacks strong links with the upper end of the market. It is part of a global division of labour based on low-paid work in the periphery and value-added work at the centre.

Leading IT researchers, who met at an international conference on high-performance

computing in Calcutta in December felt that despite possessing world class talent, Indian computer research and development (R&D) has not really impacted in any domain. "Our R&D had produced exemplary results way back in the '60s and then again in the '70s and '80s. But it stopped there," says R.K. Arora, director of Pune-based Centre for Development of Advanced Computing.

None of these difficulties is likely to be redressed by the new Rs. 1 billion IT venture capital fund, or by the government's resolve to take all measures to replicate a Silicon Valley in India. India needs to develop low-cost IT access by replacing costly PCs with cheap network computers, and promote Indian-language interfaces and low-cost Internet-based educational material that ordinary schools can afford. But for this, the focus must turn from expensive technologies to low-cost ones, from 'Hitec Cities' to village schools (many of them without blackboards), i.e. to promoting literacy, basic healthcare, food security, shelter and education.

Leading IT researchers, who met at an international conference on high-performance

outside the Court. He argued that Lipstadt's accusation had been made at the urging of powerful and Jewish individuals and institutions that were seeking to destroy Irving's reputation as a historian. On the other side Richard Rampton Q.C. appeared and produced expert witnesses to prove that Irving was distorting history for his ideological beliefs.

Judge Gray dismissed the libel case and awarded the cost to Irving. He upheld the accusation against Irving who has lodged an appeal against the judgment.

This case ostensibly dealt with episodes of human depravity and suffering of an unimaginable kind and on an unimaginable scale. Irving was offering 'real history' to the world and when Irving goes around spreading such views individual Jews naturally feel threatened. But he defends himself as a historian who tells the 'truth'. The libel case attracted the attention of many countries, such as the US, Canada, Germany, Israel and Australia.

The author, a barrister, is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

A Tale of Two Cases in Britain

by Harun ur Rashid

TWO cases — one criminal and one civil — have lately become the subject of heated discussion among the public in Britain. The first case involved a teenager burglar who was shot dead by a farmer Tony Martin and the second case was related to a libel action brought by a historian David Irving against publisher of Penguin Books. Tony Martin was jailed for life and David Irving lost the libel case against the publisher. These two cases have aroused deep passions as they seem to have touched raw nerves in some segments of the British community.

Tony Martin's Case

An aged farmer Tony Martin had been living alone in his farm-house in Norfolk and a teenage (16) burglar intruded into his house at night. He shot him dead. The farmer was charged with murder and was found guilty. He faced a mandatory sentence for life for murder of a teenager.

The questions that agitated the minds are: Do all murders weigh the same in the scale of human wickedness? What type of action one can take as self-

defence? There is a view that Tony Martin had not committed murder but manslaughter, a lesser offence. Some go to the extent that he acted in self-defence and should not have been charged with any crime at all. They take the view that punishing Tony in this way is an outrage. Some have pointed out if it had occurred in Germany and the US, Tony Martin would not have gone to jail as his action would have been treated as a legitimate self-defence in the circumstances.

The plea of self-defence in criminal law is a tricky one unless there is a clear stipulation in law as to what type of action would constitute self-defence. The yardstick in most legal regime of self-defence is reasonableness. That is whether it was reasonable for Tony Martin or any person in that circumstance to shoot the teenager burglar. This involves both subjective and objective test. Tony Martin would be required to demonstrate a subjective fear of his life so as to support his action of shooting and objective facts, such as teenager's actions or words which would support

his claim of self-defence. Another issue is that Tony Martin got the life sentence because the judge had no option but to impose it. In Britain since the abolition of capital punishment life sentence has been mandatory for murder. By lumping together all murders, it appears to reduce recognition of what is truly heinous and what is not, such as, a desperate act of self-defence. Had it not been a mandatory sentence the judge would have used his judicial discretion in sentencing Tony Martin. There appears to be a demand that the power of a judge should be restored so as to consider all the circumstances while sentencing the convicted person.

The Conservative leader of the opposition William Hague jumped in the debate and pledged to change the law in Britain to give greater protection to people who defend their homes against intruders. He said that a Tory Government would introduce into the law a 'strong presumption' in favour of people such as Tony Martin who was defending his home against burglars. That means

that under the changed law, Tony Martin could be acquitted or at worst would be tried for manslaughter.

David Irving's Case

David Irving is a British historian who has written books challenging the death of Jews by gas chamber during the Nazi regime, although he does not deny death of Jews by other means. He has been delivering lectures on this subject for some time. He claims to have his books on bookshops worldwide. He also claims to be the first person to penetrate on a hand-written document of 600 pages in German language that he had read it twice to arrive at the conclusion of denial of the death of Jews by gas.

The question that arises is: Is Irving exercising his freedom of expression? Does the freedom of expression include distorting history? Many consider him not a 'historian' but an anti-Semitic and an associate of neo-Nazis. He has been barred from entering Canada and Australia.

A lady American author Deborah Lipstadt wrote a book published by Penguin asserting

OPINION

Haj : Some Reflections

by AMM Shahabuddin

IT was a strange feeling, a unique and unprecedented experience on my part as I lost my entity in the midst of a vast sea of humanity of some two million pilgrims who had gathered at Makkah from different parts of the world to perform this year's Haj. They were from Asia, Africa, Europe and America — black, brown, white and dark. There was no distinction between one and the other, as if all of them belonged to one world, 'no first world', 'second world', 'third world'. Such a global gathering was a class by itself.

Millions of words have been written on Haj in its historical perspective and spiritual values. So I am not going into details of that. In short, Haj is an annual pilgrimage to Makkah in commemoration of the spirit of sacrifice that Prophet Abraham had shown to fulfil the wishes of Allah — to sacrifice his dearest one, the only son — Ismail, which was later given a concrete shape by Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) to make it an annual feature in the life of those Muslims who are financially and physically able to perform it. Haj now stands as an institution — one of the five pillars of Islam.

Haj has its certain formalities and rituals set by our Holy Prophet when he performed his last pilgrimage in the Islamic month of Zil-Haj, from 8th to 13th. Coming from Madinah, he stayed in Makkah first four days, performing Umra (a combination of circling the Kaba

for seven times and the running between the two mountains — Safa and Marwa seven times, as was done by Bibi Hazera, mother of Ismail, while in exile, in search of drinking water which was ultimately provided by God by creating an eternal spring, now known as Zam Zam, which has been accepted through laboratory tests as the purest mineral water in the world. The Prophet then visited, one by one, Mina, Arafat and Muzdalifa, to perform other rituals to complete the Haj. At Arafat, the Prophet delivered from a near-by mountain-peak to one lakh Muslim pilgrims his historic sermon, known as his 'Farewell Pilgrimage Address'. It is considered as a historical document, establishing principles which were unknown in those days, for peace between different religions and people, different tribes and nations. The custom of blood for blood or taking revenge was banned, distinction between black and white and Arab and non-Arab was abolished, and equal human rights of men and women were defined saying that a wife has got the same rights on her husband just as the husband has on her.

Submission to Will of Lord

The process of pilgrimage or 'Haj' begins with the putting on by the pilgrim two pieces of unstitched white cloth, one to cover the lower and the other to cover the upper part of the body.

But no cap or head-cover is used by the pilgrim during the Haj period, why such a simple but strange dress for all pilgrims? That's the summum bonum of the whole philosophy of Haj. It is an essential part of the spiritual purification of body and mind of the pilgrim. It makes all of them equal before Allah, when they chant in chorus after reaching Kaba or even at the very sight of the Kaba from a distance, 'I am here, oh Lord, I am here.' It's significant on the part of the pilgrim to put on this simple dress, killing his egoism, by discarding all earthly pleasures that money can buy. It gives a sense of dedication and submission to the will of God.

Islam stands out with all its clear manifestations, through the institution of 'Haj', with the largest and widest possible global assembly. They sleep or pray, all together under tents provided at Mina and Arafat by the Saudi Government but without any such tents at Muzdalifa, as part of the rituals. In this context, however, the tremendous developments made and facilities provided by the government to lessen the hardships and difficulties of the pilgrims must be appreciated.

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This year, the number of pilgrims from Bangladesh was less than 70 thousand, although their population-wise quota was much higher. Accordingly, Bangladesh could send over one lakh pilgrims. Perhaps, foreign exchange restraint compelled government to control the number. Hope the number will be gradually increased with better financial performance in years to come. The largest number of pilgrims came from Indonesia and they seemed to be the most disciplined of all. Pilgrims of other countries, like Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia and India were all well over one lakh each.

Some Side-strokes

Accommodation Problem:

Now I come to some 'anecdotes' or, I better call them 'Side-strokes'. The first thing is the Bangladeshi Hajis, particularly the so-called 'ballot-hajis' themselves whose entire responsibility was supposed to be carried out by the government, including their food and accommodation for which a package deal was made, covering all relevant expenditures.

And the first thing these 'ballot-hajis' had to face was their accommodation problem. On their arrival at Makkah, they were simply shocked to find that their accommodation was reserved by the Bangladeshi officials, particularly the so-called 'ballot-hajis' themselves whose entire responsibility was supposed to be carried out by the government, including their food and accommodation for which a package deal was made, covering all relevant expenditures.

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