

Back to Square One?

BEGUM Zia's abrasive call for resignation of the government, formation of a caretaker administration and all party consultations with that administration to select the new Chief Election Commissioner has had a jarring effect on the nation. For it is with her approval that former finance minister Saifur Rahman had engaged himself in a dialogue with the incumbent finance minister S A M S Kibria and the selection of the negotiators' team has been set afoot on both sides. The opposition leaders' change of tack is out of sync with the approach she herself had originally taken. This also runs counter to the mounting public opinion and media advocacy for appointment of the next CEC on the basis of consensus forged between the government and the opposition. Even a special meeting of senior BNP leaders chaired by her had affirmed their belief in a consensual choice.

Set against this overall background, her Bhurungamari statement must have confused her own partymen, to say nothing of the severe jolt it has given to the nation and the media. It could also be construed as impulsive politics on her part, quite unnecessarily bordering on flippancy. If she persists in giving a signal contradictory to her earlier gesture for a single issue-centred discussion with the ruling party to select a new CEC then she will be committing a grave blunder. As well as proving suicidal it will be courting chaos for all practical purposes.

We would, however, like to believe it was on the spur of the moment that she said those things, more perhaps as public posturing than a change of policy preference on the subject. We are earnestly hoping that on her return from Bhurungamari and after she has had a discussion with her party colleagues in a cool frame of mind she would have decided in favour of negotiations to arrive at a common choice for the CEC's post. Our belief is that Begum Zia's final and substantive position on the matter awaits her return from the outlying areas. She could not be entirely out of steps with the situational reality.

Meantime, the ruling party should not rush any propaganda offensive against the opposition to add fuel to the smallish fire. They have been spot on, absolutely on the track so far. They need not be provoked now into losing patience and spoiling a golden chance for striking consensus yet again on the selection of CEC.

Crusade against Arsenic

PARTICIPANTS in the just-concluded third international conference on arsenic were unanimous in their observation that fight against the deadly phenomenon in the country has not gathered the momentum it should have by now. A major reason behind that could be, as one speaker pointed out in the concluding session, the indifference the country's political leaders have shown to the question. It is indeed a "shame" that there hasn't even been a "debate on such an issue" at the parliament. Maybe, our political leaders have failed to fathom the magnitude of the crisis at hand. Some of them could be even of the belief that arsenic has not yet assumed crisis proportions as to set off an emergency alert. The conference and the subsequent Dhaka Declaration should wake them up to the dreary fact that it has.

In essence, the declaration resembles its predecessors, which may also be construed as our failure to step up actions against arsenic contamination. Speakers at various sessions have hammered on that point again and again. The declarations, the stakeholders, especially the government, must realise, are renewals of commitment, a pledge to engage in all-out effort towards mitigation, and eventually elimination, of the dreadful phenomenon. The process has to be top-down with the people in power taking the leadership role. Once the government lays out a comprehensive 'combat' plan, the other stakeholders could easily be drawn into doing their bits. Conversely, government inaction could result in frustration amongst not only the development partners but also people working at the field level.

The declaration puts special emphasis on research and patient management, which, once again, requires active government participation. A comprehensive water management policy is long overdue. Now that use of ground aquifers has been proved fatal, we must start contemplating a switch to other means, surface water treatment and rain-water harvesting to name the obvious two. At the same time, sensitisation campaign should be intensified. To that end, involvement of media is of utmost importance. Basically, therefore, the government must outline a far-reaching and forward-looking strategy in fighting the phenomenon. Time is of the essence here. Every second of indifference could well mean death of a few.

Tribute to Obuchi

THE unassuming former Japanese prime minister Keizo Obuchi who took office in July, 1998 and was to soon enliven a stagnating economy of his country died young compared to the proverbial longevity of the Japanese — on Sunday at age 62 only. Mr Obuchi, his heart fitted with a pacemaker, had suffered a stroke in April last and was hospitalised in a coma from which he never could regain his consciousness.

Many of his critics called him 'cold pizza' for his simplicity and thought he was much too soft for the harshness of the realities surrounding him. But the man of quiet strength proved otherwise as he pushed a difficult piece of legislation for economic reform through the parliament. He was known for his ability to forge consensus among factions in his ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

In the death of Keizo Obuchi Bangladesh has lost a sincere friend and a well-wisher who had been very helpful to our country during his short tenure as prime minister. As the foreign minister of Japan late Obuchi put in efforts towards according financial assistance to our Rupsha bridge project during our prime minister's visit to Japan. Overall, he evinced keen interest in strengthening the relationship between our two countries. He will be long remembered along with other Japanese figures who endeared themselves to us for their concern for the well-being of the people of Bangladesh and progress and prosperity of its teeming millions. May his soul rest in peace.

US Plays a Dangerous Game of Isolationism

It is no coincidence that the US has no diplomatic relations, or only the most superficial ties, with some of the countries that are causing the US problems. If the US feels threatened by missile attacks or terrorists emanating from North Korea or Iran, for example, it is partly because the US has no effective way of learning about these countries or influencing their behaviour.

MUCH has been written about the US as the world's last superpower. The wave of globalisation sweeping the entire world has further increased US influence worldwide. Americans are aware that their local economies depend on foreign trade; combined exports and imports total a quarter of the US gross national product. Hollywood earns sixty per cent of its box-office receipts in foreign countries. And just last year, about 25 million Americans traveled overseas.

But at the very time the country seems to have joined the wider world, the US government's participation in international activities — apart from reactive military interventions — is diminishing. Further, such participation in many international institutions is grudging and tight-fisted.

Nowhere is this indifference for the outside world more evident than in the halls of the US Congress. The lawmakers in Washington who look at the rest of the world with indifference believe that doing so has no harmful consequences. A few days ago, ultra-conservative Republican Senator Jesse Helms, the powerful chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, displayed his invincible ignorance when he vowed to block approval of any arms control treaty, good or bad, that Clinton might negotiate between now and the time he leaves office. Helms did so, no doubt, because he felt that the absence of such a treaty would be no skin off his nose. In fact, he indicated, if aborting an agreement disappointed or frustrated Clinton, the arms-control community and the diplomatic corps, so much the better. Helms has never made a secret of his disdain for these people or the causes they represent.



Connecting the Dots
Dr. A. R. Choudhury

The fact is, though, that lofty ignorance about the rest of the world does make a difference, and not just to the intellectuals, diplomats and policy wonks. America may succeed in ignoring the rest of the world, but it is as sure as fate that in the twenty-first century, the rest of the world will not ignore America.

Consider another case. It is very likely, that before the end of the year, the United States will commit itself to spending about sixty billion dollars in an attempt to build a national defence shield to protect itself against a missile attack by such countries as Iran, Iraq and North Korea.

The construction of this shield is strongly protested by the Russians, who wonder — as others do — why the US, the strongest and richest country in the world, should feel terrified by such a country as North Korea. The Russians and, to a lesser extent, the Chinese feel the US shield is actually intended to erode their own nuclear deterrents, and for this reason, the programme has eroded US diplomatic relations

with these two countries. For the last five months, Americans have been caught up in the saga of Elian Gonzalez, the custody of whom is fiercely contested by his Cuban father and a group of Miami expatriates whose hatred for Cuban President Fidel Castro seems to be far stronger than their respect for the laws of their adopted country.

Some members of the US Congress and others, of course, don't give a rap about US relations with foreign countries. They feel that if the foreign countries get their noses all out of joint over the US missile shield, then that's their problem. In fact, their hope is that the US should stick it to them once in a while, just to let them know who the world's only superpower really is!

It is no coincidence that the US has no diplomatic relations, or only the most superficial ties, with some of the countries that are causing the US such problems. If the US feels threatened by missile attacks or terrorists emanating from North Korea or Iran, for example, it is partly because the US has no effective way of learning about these countries or influencing their behaviour.

It is true, of course, that this diplomatic isolation, like most estrangements, is not the fault of one side or one country alone. At the same time, the US, especially under Clinton, has made no major attempt to break out of its isolation. Its dealings with Iraq, for example, consist of little more than routine denunciations and an occasional attack on one of Saddam Hussein's anti-aircraft batteries. The Clinton Administration believed, at some level, that ignoring these few countries, or at least keeping contacts with them at a minimum, had no harmful consequences. It believed that dealing with North Korea only when an emergency arose — as when an intelligence agency discovered evidence of a nuclear programme — was an acceptable policy. Now, the policy makers in the US should realise that ignoring countries, even small and seemingly obscure ones, works only when luck is on their side. Sooner or later, this invincible ignorance and indifference is going to break down.

It is hard to believe that the US would be poised to build a sixty billion dollar missile shield — one that many scientists believe will not work — if its diplomatic relations with Iraq, Iran and North Korea were even halfway normal. Under those circumstances, America wouldn't be surprised by a missile threat and would have a diplomatic way to deal with it.

But the US didn't have any open diplomatic channel, so the report of the threat came as a bolt from the blue, and the US responded by considering a hugely expensive and possibly unworkable missile shield. Burying your head in the sand doesn't work for ostriches, and it doesn't work for human beings, either.

There have been many talks of its significance. Some have said they ate in private; some have said that this is only a show. Call it whatever one wants, but this is certainly more atmosphere-friendly. It shows respect for all and above all it provides an opportunity for talks, for solutions and for betterment of society. These are the people who can sacrifice their meals, can also show the path for a better tomorrow. At a time when political disorder and violence have become the order of the day, such cases of sacrifice deserve applause. Let's hope our present leaders can take some lessons from the leaders of tomorrow.

Of course, this doesn't mean that we should put up a hunger strike at the drop of a hat. But, our brief encounter with such programmes shows that these are more meaningful. This is a healthier way to resolve disputes and express protest. Silent anger and determination makes their demand credible and justified. Moreover, it involves the authorities as well. Let's take President Shahabuddin's intervention at the SUST strike for example. Had the students instead gone for violence, let alone the President, no one would have paid heed. Had the Shibir and Chhatra League gone into further fights, then the CU situation would have aggravated even more.

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Sending Labour to Distant Lands

by David Whittlesey

First, strengthen the entire management of the labour migration process nationally; second, adapt the capacities of migrant workers to the demand and develop the corresponding training institutions and programmes; third, develop serious co-operation amongst the labour-sending governments; and fourth, develop serious co-operation between the labour sending states and the labour-receiving states.

THE export of migrant labour is vitally important to Bangladesh. Recent stories of abuse of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, corruption in the recruitment and placement of these workers, and dissatisfaction in the manner in which the Ministry of Labour has been able to respond, bring into focus a more profound problem in a sector which is critically important to the wellbeing of thousands of Bangladeshis, and the overall economy of Bangladesh as well.

Although there are no precise statistics, there are at least an estimated two million Bangladeshis currently working abroad. According to statistics provided by BMET, over the past five years 1,316,183 workers have left Bangladesh to work in distant lands with different cultures, languages, customs and food. They often have borrowed considerable sums to be able to do so. They have great expectations about the benefits they will gain for themselves and their families. Living and working under often very difficult conditions, these workers have sent back over 33,628.68 crore taka (almost \$7.5 billion) in remittances over this period, or 1.5 billion USD per year, second only to the garment industry in foreign exchange earnings. And this does not take into account remittances that flow into Bangladesh through "informal" arrangements.

Some contend that there is little that can be done to improve matters as the supply of labour is great and the demand limited, putting the labour-receiving countries in a position of total control. However, there are steps that can be taken (and are being initiated) to improve the situation for all concerned. First, strengthen the entire management of the labour migration process nationally; second, adapt the capacities of migrant workers to the demand and develop the corresponding training institutions and programmes; third, develop serious co-operation amongst the labour-sending governments; and fourth, develop serious co-operation between the labour sending states and the labour-receiving states.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has entered into an agreement with the Ministry of Labour to assist in strengthening the labour migration process in Bangladesh. The programme will look at the entire process: planning, recruitment, preparation, placement, processing, movement, support and protection, remittance facilitation and use, return and reintegration. We are currently conducting five studies of various aspects of the labour migration process, with support from UNDP, whose results will contribute to

the basis for the programme. An inter-ministerial working group, led by the Ministry of Labour, will review the studies which should be completed by early June, and develop with IOM the programme's plan of action. For such an effort to be successful, it will require the full support of the government, as well as that of the development assistance community. The labour migration process itself may provide a good portion of the resources required to make it strong and effective. Nevertheless, there will be a need for expertise, commitment and human and financial resources, especially in the early stages as policies and procedures are put in place to turn talk into action.

Intergovernmental co-operation on these issues is essential. India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Vietnam, Nepal — all wish to maximise the benefits of labour export. Without co-operation, the least well prepared workers will suffer the most. This is an area where IOM may be able to play a helpful role — to facilitate the discussion and exchange of information, and to help best practices and support mechanisms take root across the board.

Bangladesh participates in the APC (Inter-governmental Asia-Pacific Consultations on Refugees, Displaced Persons and Migrants), and will host the South Asian Sub-regional meeting of the APC later this year. That the Government of Bangladesh has designated the Ministry of Labour as the lead Ministry to organise this meeting, and that labour migration will likely lead the agenda, underscores the importance of this issue. Serious co-operation between labour sending and receiving states is a necessary goal, but one which may be a little more distant than strengthening the national process and developing co-operation amongst states with similar concerns. It may in fact not seem so distant, however, if these first two efforts are addressed forcefully and with commitment. IOM is committed to working with the Government of Bangladesh and with other partners concerned with these issues such as ILO and UNDP, as well as migrant support groups and research institutions, to strengthen the labour migration process in Bangladesh.

With the same commitment from all the partners in the effort, real changes can be made. Without it, migrant workers from Bangladesh will continue to run the risk of abuse and exploitation, and Bangladesh itself will be the poorer for it.

The author is regional representative of International Organization for Migration (IOM), Dhaka.

OPINION

Lessons from the Leaders of Tomorrow

Navine Murshid

The political future may not be too dark after all. Perhaps, we have learnt a few lessons from the meaningless bloodshed; the wanton violence over trivial matters. Perhaps, the time has finally come to show that we, as a nation, do not need violence to protest. May be, we finally understood that change may be brought about, not through aggression and hostility, but through more subtle, softer, yet profound ways.

The 'chain' of hunger strikes prove, at least to an extent, just that. It is difficult to say exactly when the trend started, for there were numerous hunger strikes, for both trivial and important matters in the past. But, all of a sudden, the nation saw

'fast unto death' programmes, first by some HSC examinees, who were not allowed to sit for the exams for no fault of theirs, then by students of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) for re-opening of the university and then by about 100 students of Chittagong University (CU) for the same reason.

The interesting part is that all of them were successful in their 'missions' to bring about change. There is certainly a message here. We should be proud that instead of creating a chaos, instead of trying to harm the ones who 'aggrieved' them, they had decided to suffer themselves. Their resolution not to eat shows their sincerity and

makes their demand credible and justified. Moreover, it involves the authorities as well. Let's take President Shahabuddin's intervention at the SUST strike for example. Had the students instead gone for violence, let alone the President, no one would have paid heed. Had the Shibir and Chhatra League gone into further fights, then the CU situation would have aggravated even more.

Of course, this doesn't mean that we should put up a hunger strike at the drop of a hat. But, our brief encounter with such programmes shows that these are more meaningful. This is a healthier way to resolve disputes and express protest. Silent anger and determination

For a Humanistic Approach to Management

Shahabuddin Mahtab

One of these days, I was talking to a senior friend of mine, who has been practicing management in the closing days of the British rule, the Pakistan times and now the Bangladesh era. The gentleman who now heads a large sized organisation, is now in his early seventies. He stated that none of the management principles applied to the Bangladesh scenario. The very essence of management was honesty, integrity, truthfulness, straightforwardness, humanity, motivation and hardwork, and these were non-existent here. People who were amassing piles of money here, were not the creative people, who had contributed to employment and welfare of the society, but they were wolves in sheep's clothing.

The good principles of management can be found in the teachings of Hazrat Ali (RA), as well as the management gurus such as Peter Drucker and Tom Peters. Islam teaches us the finer aspects of human relationships, in all spheres of our lives. In this year 2000 and beyond nations will march forward on the basis of superior knowledge in the high tech field and their management excellence. India has already made a breakthrough and is a force to be reckoned with. In the highly competitive technological age we have to move with top speed, or else Bangladesh will have to live with its absolute poverty and squalor.

In what stage of management are we? We are not very

far from the situation that prevailed in the manufacturing countries of the 18th and 19th centuries. Even at the dawn of the 21st century, we have a very small base of industrial enterprises, and even there the state owned enterprises are running at a loss. The privately owned manufacturing industries, which were earning huge profits in the fifties and the sixties, are now a huge burden on the national exchequer. Managements here are neither accountable nor transparent. In matters of corruption we are nearly at the top of the world scale. It is only through a wholly compassionate form of administration, that we can turn the present tide.

In our system of managing affairs, we are still near about

the feudal age. We are still in the very first stage of evolutionary management, namely the authoritative and dictatorial one. It is a top down management, where the middle/lower management and the vast work force have hardly any say. It is in the very nature of this arrangement that the workers are rebellious and non-productive. Democratic and participative principles of management have to play its assigned role in Bangladesh.

Furthermore we would ask for a humanistic/Islamic approach for managing our public affairs, and also all other human enterprises. There are many good people in our society, who can give us the lead, and the time for it is now.

To the Editor ...

Traffic congestion at Mirpur-10

Sir Traffic jam on the Mirpur circle-10 and its adjacent Rokeya Sarani has become an everyday picture for the residents of Mirpur. This unbearable traffic congestion occurs mainly at Mirpur circle-10, Kazipara and Shewrapara during 8:00AM to 9:30AM.

The Circle-10 is a junction of four roads from Mirpur-1, Mirpur-12, Mirpur-14 (Kachukhet Cantonment) and the Rokeya Sarani. For this, a huge number of vehicles cross the busy area during the peak hour. Traffic jam occurs at the eastern side of Rokeya Sarani near circle-10 mainly due to haphazard parking and stoppage of local buses playing on the Mirpur-Gulistan road. During the peak hour it sometimes takes 15-20 minutes to pass the circle-10. The on-duty traffic police seem to be helpless managing the unruly traffic at that time.

In this regard, I would like to suggest DCC the following steps to improve traffic congestion of this area.

- (1) Engage efficient traffic police and sergeants at the circle-10.
- (2) The round-about at the circle-10 can be reduced to get extra space for easy vehicular movement.
- (3) Last but the most importantly, traffic rules should be maintained strictly.

E. Raheem Mirpur, Dhaka

Machine Tool Factory and 2-stroke engine

Sir, Now that our brave jawans have displayed their ingenuity in finding a practical method of converting the polluting 2-stroke autrickshaw engine for use with natural gas (in portable cylinders); the good news is that the government is handing over to the Army the vast, complex Machine Tools Factory at Gazipur.

If this factory could be economically recommissioned after BMR, several export-based products (and defence equipment) could be produced, with international technical tie-up, under the guidance of perhaps UNCTAD. Conversion of 100,000 engines is big business.

A Citizen Dhaka

BELT programme of BOU

Sir, With a view to improving the standard of teaching English and making it effective at secondary level BELT programme (Bachelor in English Language Teaching) was introduced by BOU in the year 1997. In this programme secondary school teachers, college teachers or any graduate belonging to any discipline was enrolled. This programme was conducted

through the ten regional resource centers of BOU. Government college teachers who were selected through discreet scrutiny by the School of Social Science, Humanities and Language of BOU were assigned to hold classes. Being a cadet college teacher with some special training in English language I happened to be a tutor of this programme. As I used to serve at Comilla Cadet College I was assigned the duty to teach the students belonging to Comilla Regional Resource Center (RRC). A number of school and college teachers and even some housewives responded to the programme spontaneously but the management of classes was somewhat defective. This is because of BOU's dependence on government college teachers who could not dedicate themselves to the programme may be due to their personal or institutional responsibilities. Again, due to their transfer from one college to another the programme was greatly hampered.

In November 1998, I was transferred from Comilla to Mirzapur Cadet College, Tangail. Since then I tried to maintain communication with BOU to learn the progress of BELT but received no response from the authority. So far as I have learnt from other sources, no new students were enrolled in the second batch and the future of the first batch is rather uncertain. I do fear whether the programme has died prematurely. If it is then can't we re-

vive it?

The already listed tutors and some new tutors (except government college teachers) may be assigned for this purpose and given them training either at home or abroad to prepare them for teaching in the programme. The certificate of the BELT was envisaged superior to B. Ed. Course in the sense that B. Ed. programme does not compulsorily attach importance to English. But English is a prime need of the time. And we cannot neglect this praiseworthy initiative of BOU. In the greater interest of the nation and better future for our coming generation this kind of programme calls for much importance and consideration.

Md Masum Billah Lecturer, Rajuk Uttara Model College Dhaka-1230

Tilted security fence

Sir, The photograph of the tilted security fencing at the Bangladesh Jamuna Bridge (DS May 9) is a dramatic reminder of the quality of workmanship of the contractors, and the inefficiency of the designers and the inspection body (prior to take over). The shifting sandy soil could not hold the pillars. This poor work should be probed by the authorities for deterrent action.

A Husnain Dhaka

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

Fidel's Finest Hour

THIS country is divided over the Elian Gonzalez case. Did Janet Reno do the right thing? Was Elian's father entitled to custody, and should the Miami relatives keep suing?

The one person who seems to be having a ball is Fidel Castro. For several years Castro has been a forgotten man in the United States, except by tourists anxious to buy illegal cigars there. Long ago Castro was mentioned by old-timers as that man who lived 90 miles away from Miami, Florida. The Cubans in Florida were the only ones who mentioned Castro's name, but not in a very friendly way.

It has been no fun for Castro to be ignored all these years. Since the Cuban missile crisis in the '60s, which almost started World War III, Castro has become a minor figure in major world decisions. His warnings to the United States went unheeded, and his beard became scragglier as the years went by. It was a rare evening when he appeared on the evening news, and no one ever tuned to CNN just to hear him.

Then Elian came on the scene, and Castro suddenly had a cause with which a rev up his people. This included making six-hour speeches at the airport and all over the rest of Cuba.

So it tuned out that Castro was a big-time leader again. He started telling President Bill Clinton what he wanted done. Every news show, as well as CNN, had Fidel on the evening news. The Cuban people in Miami were as mad as Castro as any American citizen should be. There were suggestions from Little Havana to attempt another Bay of Pigs, since it didn't work the first time. Janet Reno turned the ideas down.

Then someone talked about poisoning Castro's cigar, which we had tried once before without success.

No matter what happens, Castro is back and we have to deal with him.

I have no suggestion except to trim his beard because it is getting awfully scraggly. I guess the thing that hurt Americans and Cuban-Americans is that Elian will be returning to Havana. If we had our choice, he would remain in the United States. It would be a happy ending to the story, and it would make Castro look bad. But we can't do anything to stop him or keep the refugee boasts from coming across the sea.

Personally, every so often I wish that Castro would stop being 90 miles away. By arrangement with Los Angeles Times Syndicate and UNB.