

DCCI's Justified Concern

With their backs to the wall as the boxing sack for terrorist jabs, the business community has voiced concern over the most serious deterioration to date in the country's law and order situation. The Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI) in a press statement which definitely sounded like an SOS call has urged the government at the top including the home ministry and the law enforcement agencies at the operating level to save the domain of trade and commerce from utter ruination.

We believe that an impassioned call to the law enforcement agencies for a 'fearless and neutral' discharge of their duties would be misplaced so long as the political government does not create an enabling environment for such a performance to be landed by the policemen.

Statistics speak volumes about the steep decline in the business-related security environment. According to a survey conducted by the human rights legal aid organisation, Institute of Democratic Rights (IDR), there were 259 murders in the country in the last month alone working out to nine murders per day. Abductions for the month totalled 53. Only on Saturday two businessmen were gunned down in the city, that being the latest in a series of murderous assault on members of the trading community in Dhaka, Chittagong and Narayanganj. Threat, intimidation, abduction and extortion stalk the footsteps of the business community. Transportation of goods by land and river is fraught with dangers of illegal imposition of all sorts, not merely by poachers but also by the gate-keepers themselves. There is nexus everywhere. The incidents centring around Adarsa market, which is adjacent to Bangabazar, brought to the fore a new element of extortionist behaviourism: if illegal occupation of the shopping complex was the worst form of expropriation of property the fees charged by those who helped the genuine retailers back to their shops were no better. Almost everyday we hear of gun-fights between goons in one area of the city or the other resulting from tendering for work or booty-sharing conflicts.

While fully sharing the incapacitating worries of the business community over their growing sense of insecurity we urge the government to deal with those people firmly who are apt to flaunt an immunity before law claiming proximity to the ruling party.

Environment Day Pledge

The rivers Buriganga, Shitalakshya, Karnaphuli etc. have been condemned to slow death. The Bay of Bengal has not been spared either. Industrial effluent, oil-spill and dumping of rotten goods from vessels may destroy the marine ecosystem and 'zoo-plankton and phyto-plankton', according to speakers at a recent seminar in Chittagong.

Environmentally, we are skating on thin ice, so to speak. The country stands extremely vulnerable to the potentially cataclysmic effect of sea-level rise induced by global warming. In this regard, though, our contribution is nearly negligible compared with that of the industrially rich nations. However, we are certainly blame-worthy for our failure to arrest the alarming pace of depletion of greenery and water body, deforestation of hills, pollution of air etc. In fact, such eco-hostile activities have been allowed to go on unabated, thanks to policy inadequacy and vigilance insufficiency. The result has been too telling to overlook. Major cities in the country have been rendered almost uninhabitable by endless emission of air-pollutants. Dhaka ranks top among the most-polluted cities in the world.

Environment encompasses all our development efforts. Mindless dash for industrial ascendancy coupled with environmental indifference actually nullifies the very reason for development as it endangers existence. Belated though, the affluent nations of the world have come to appreciate the fact. The Rio Convention, the Kyoto Protocol, the Bonn Conference, the World Water Forum etc are resultant of emerging eco-awareness. Unfortunately, we have not been able to extend our environment-friendly endeavours beyond being signatories of these conventions and declarations.

On the World Environment Day today, we implore the government to bring the environment ministry to order and empower it, where necessary, so that it can arrest the fierce pace of environmental degradation across the country. Let us direct our efforts to ensure safe environment for us and the generations to come. Let it be our World Environment Day resolve.

Trigger a Reverse Migration

A small news item on the front page of this paper on Sunday drew our attention to how terribly sardined packed we have become in certain areas of the city. A teacher of the Bangladesh University of Engineering & Technology has revealed through a paper he read out at a seminar that Sutrapur, a police station of metropolitan Dhaka has no less than 3.48 lakh population per square kilometre making it the most densely populated area in the world. This is not something to brag about, rather we shudder at the thought of how frighteningly dense the population is getting in places. This raises the spectre of rural migration which does not speak well of our financial management at the micro level.

According to Professor Shaheedul Amin, of BUET, every year there are 4 lakh newcomers to the city population, equivalent to the size of the population of Sylhet or Barisal. This happens largely because of lack of economic activities in the rural areas which propels migration to the metropolis. The pressure of surplus agricultural labour cannot be absorbed by the limited land available for cultivation. Besides, there is river erosion causing landlessness. We have been hearing about growth epicentres being created in the rural areas but this remains a tall talk of the government. Even if such tertiary growth centres had come up in and around the small townships a turn-around could be expected in the situation with a reverse migration from the capital to the rural areas. After all who wants to live in subhuman conditions leaving one's hearth and home? But would it be coming soon? If it does not then brace yourself for more problems relating to urban overcrowding.

The Syndrome of a National Amnesia

The issue of CEC is certainly important. But much more important are the issues of what will follow the CEC's primary function the election. It will bring to power the same old, outdated and decrepit leadership which failed to deliver in the past and brought the nation to its present sorry pass. Our anxiety and alacrity should centre on how to replace it with a more credible one.

EARLY last month when the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) appointed by the caretaker government in 1996 resigned his post, it at once sparked off a debate over who would be filling in the slot. A spate of wild speculation, undue anxiety and bewildering variety of canards swept the country. The print media was splashed with news and views on the subject. Centering on the CEC's appointment there was fresh mud-slinging between the ruling Awami League and main opposition, the BNP. It is incredible but at the moment Bangladesh politics revolves round this issue of CEC. Even the selection of a new incumbent by the government has not set the furor at rest. Although the political parties having stakes in the issue initiated the polemic, the chorus was later joined by myriad other neutral bodies and individuals. In the meantime a plethora of arguments and counter arguments have piled up on the subject and more still forthcoming. With the opposition political parties rejecting the new CEC and adopting an uncompromising stand against the government's move the newly brewed controversy thickens up with no sign of its abatement. In a mature polity the matter would have passed unnoticed as a routine but in the true tradition of our politics the issue-hungry politicians have apparently

jumped at this banality creating an impression that perhaps the nation's destiny is hinged to it.

It is however not to say that the subject is entirely without a significance. In our country where the principal purpose of the politics is to grab power the issue of a CEC assumes a disproportionate importance. Each political party in the race wants the office of the CEC to be impartial, neutral and upright if not favourably disposed to it so that its electoral dues are ensured. But disappointment creeps in when everyone sets his sight only on the person of CEC and not beyond him. What happens even if a non-controversial CEC acceptable to all is appointed to conduct an impartial election? One of the political parties who ruled this country to make a mess of it will return and their will be a replay of whatever it enacted earlier. The question of choosing an appropriate CEC is undoubtedly important and merits serious deliberation. But much more important is what lies ahead of an election that will conduct and that is what merits our utmost attention. But few seems concerned about that vital aspect of the debate now

turning almost into a frenzy. The plight of Bangladesh owes its origin to our political legacy. The country was, to start with, ruled by a set of leaders who were largely the product of pre-independence dynamics of our polities. With their mindset attuned only to agitational poli-

tics, these leaders could not prove themselves equal to the hard tasks Bangladesh as a free nation was to undertake. They seldom showed a responsible conduct of their leadership and took this country more as an inheritance of a real estate. To make things worse their politics soon aberrated paving the path for an extra-constitutional takeover of the country. The changed dispensation was equally bad. Two military rulers of the country bred a new brand of politicians who were essentially opportunists and sycophants.

They climbed up the ladder of their political career only by paying fealty to their military masters.

But nothing could be worse than what we witnessed after 1990 when the country was put back on constitutional track. It was like a covenant broken a

BNP was in power and an irresponsible attitude of its leader when the AL was in opposition.

The consequences of their politics either in the government or in the opposition are writ large on the face of the nation. It is an anguish to wake up every morning with the ghastly news of double or triple murder. The civic life is disrupted in a society each layer of which is riddled with corruption. One is in perpetual anxiety for his security in a state of lawlessness. The traders as well as ordinary citizens are unsafe with the extortionists stalking in their midst. Worse still, most of these crimes are committed with the knowledge, acquiescence, and patronisation of the politicians and often as a part of their party strategy. As a result, there is virtually none to turn to for justice, protection and safety.

Yet there is no anxiety, no debate and no apparent effort to reverse this state of things. No intellectual resources are diverted to address these hard issues of the society. While our megalomaniac leaders have been blasting each other with their frenzied diatribes we are stuck at

PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

Does Jatiya Sangsad Belong to Ruling Party Alone?

by Mansoor Mamoon

So long the culture of boycott persists the question will naturally be raised, both at home and abroad, whether Bangladesh is really fit for parliamentary democracy and what service an ineffective parliament is rendering towards strengthening democratic institutions in the country.

Even envoys of the European Union (EU) based in Dhaka during their meeting with the Speaker of the Jatiya Sangsad (National Parliament) on May 29 reportedly wanted to know whether the type of democracy that is being practiced with the opposition continually boycotting the Sangsad is rendering any good to the country. Some vernacular dailies even went a step further and reported that the envoys wanted to know whether Bangladesh is at all fit for parliamentary democracy. Such a query is but natural on the part of those, who are acquainted with the norms and practices of multi-party parliamentary democracy. Parliament is called the collective wisdom of the nation where the people send their representatives to voice their feelings and aspirations of the masses, initially there had been a good beginning. But then in 1994 the Awami League and its allies introduced the culture of boycott which subsequently boiled down to their en masse resignation. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its allies are now repeating what the AL did during the BNP's rule. In 1991 when the country switched over to parliamentary system with the consensus of all parties true to the aspirations of the masses, initially there had been a good beginning. But then in 1994 the Awami League and its allies introduced the culture of boycott which subsequently boiled down to their en masse resignation. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its allies are now repeating what the AL did during the BNP's rule. In 1991 when the country switched over to parliamentary system with the consensus of all parties true to the aspirations of the masses, initially there had been a good beginning. But then in 1994 the Awami League and its allies introduced the culture of boycott which subsequently boiled down to their en masse resignation. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its allies are now repeating what the AL did during the BNP's rule. 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