

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 today 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 ruin.

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 environ. 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 Adarsha 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, defoliation 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 unliveable 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 sardine-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 epi-centres 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.

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 he 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 politics. With their mindset attuned only to agitational poli-

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

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

an inconsequential issue of CEC. Time has tremendously changed since Bangladesh came into being three decades ago. There are sea-changes in all domestic, regional and international scenes. New challenges have cropped up in a hyper-competitive world. The advance of science, new technology and the pace of globalisation have rendered a conventional approach to politics null and void. To get over our chronic inability to catch up with the global train we have to have a fresh outlook, a changed world view and a new set of leaders.

While a renewal, regeneration and renaissance of a sort are the needs of the hour we have been harping on the mundane arguments of small losses and gains when the whole future of the nation is at stake. 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. We must introspect on the issue and initiate an intense debate on how to achieve that kind of leadership.



by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

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.

covenant to restore an order in the country and ensure a rule of law. Both are in ruin today. Together the politicians under the labels of the AL, the BNP, the JP etc sheltered the prospects of those objectives. While the country bleeds in the grip of ever-escalating violence, lawlessness, and routine murders the AL complacently presides over its government and the opposition BNP scores political mileage at the cost of human miseries. The flipside is equally dismal and few could be oblivious of its leader's imperious conduct when the

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.

cotting parliament, but for vigorously participating in all its activities.

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. Against such backdrop the question that naturally crops up in everybody's mind is does the Jatiya Sangsad belongs to the ruling party alone as has been witnessed during all these years since restoration of parliamentary democracy? If parliament is intentionally made ineffective this way then what is the use of it?

The Awami League and its allies' prolonged boycott of parliament could not deter the BNP from completing its full five-year term and despite the BNP and the like minded parties' abstention the Awami League (coalition) government is likely to complete the term for which it has been mandated.

During the series of alternate boycotts by the major political parties, only the people, in general, suffered due to street agitations resorted to.

By each of them. The people, who voted for the opposition, can never genuinely ask who empowered it to turn Parliament into an all ruling party affair through its boycott? Could they protect people's interest by remaining outside the Sangsad? Despite their agitation, shutdowns, seize, blockades etc. could they prevent the government from unilaterally passing the draconian anti-people Public Safety Bill or

effectively censuring the government for the extreme deterioration of law and order in the country in general and in Dhaka city in particular by its own cadres, hoodlums and goons? The ruling party has been given the opportunity to behave in an authoritative manner and can pass any bill including the most important finance bill it likes since there is no opposition in parliament to point out the flaws and lapses.

According to figures released by the Speaker, the MPs belonging to the opposition are regularly drawing their salaries, enjoying other benefits and privileges as public representatives, participating in standing committee meetings and even regularly embarking on foreign trips as members of parliamentary delegations but are not participating in parliament session. This is sheer hypocrisy. Out of the 17 sessions of the 7th parliament the opposition parties have boycotted four and staged walkouts for as many as eightynine times. This is simply unprecedented in any democracy worth its name.

In Singapore the opposition once resorted to such boycott nearly three decades ago and the voters out of frustration almost totally obliterated its representation from which it is yet to recoup. In boycotting Parliament the opposition probably forgets that if parliament is not the property of the government party alone, but very much belongs to the whole nation, equally to all parties elected to it by the people. Any protest acquires added significance inside parliament rather than in the streets. Due to live coverage of parliament sessions by radio and television, which was introduced following the examples of all parliamentary democracies including India, the people can instantly know what is being debated and which party or parties are in the right side as well as assessing the

performances of their representatives and how best they are protecting their rights and serving the larger national interest.

Various opinion polls conducted by independent analysts from time to time showed that the vast majority of the country's populace do not approve opposition's boycott of parliament thereby giving a free hand to the ruling party in running the statecraft in an authoritarian manner.

They want that their representatives in the opposition should be more vociferous, should more earnestly project popular views. Even though the ruling party by its majority can ignore the oppositions clamour inside parliament the people can atleast hear its voices of protests and dissension. The Speaker or the Deputy Speaker might be partisan as they often had been in the past also. But in the name of protests against Speakers the opposition cannot forsake the interest of the people.

It has been learnt that many of the opposition MPs are in favour of ending the long standing boycott, but cannot dare to disobey the party leadership. These MPs can well gauge the sentiment of the people in their constituencies. Because they will have to face the people again who will hesitate to give them fresh mandate apprehending that there might be a similar boycott and their causes will not be duly projected in parliament. There are many forms of protests inside parliament. There are also many instances from other countries where members belonging to the two sides enter into brawl, shout at the top of their voices causing a pandemonium when the speaker refuses to give floor and even stage sit down protests on the floor before the speaker. There was one instance when during General Ershad's period AL leader Sheikh Hasina after staging a walkout held a sepa-

rate parliament session of her party's own on the stairs of parliament building. It had a novelty. The opposition can emulate this example and its impact will be louder than the blasts of bombs in so called hartals and shutdowns.

But what is to be done to sustain the last remnants of parliamentary democracy? The opposition should not hand over the Jatiya Sangsad to the ruling party through its boycott. The opposition should know that this way it is falling into the well laid out trap of the ruling party which feels happy without the voices of dissent inside parliament and acts in any manner it likes. Bangladesh is yet to develop a culture of accommodating each other's views or tolerance. Whatever may be the agreements, the ruling party is not going to honour it. So why bother whether the Speaker or the ruling party fulfils the opposition demand as a precondition of its coming back to

parliament? Opposition MPs should, therefore, end their boycott and participate in Parliament sessions just to show that the Sangsad is also equally theirs, and does not belong to the ruling party alone.

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. The people had seen the monolithic BKSAL, fifteen long years of military and quasi military rule and now has been witnessing for over nine years, elected authoritarianism or clan democracy in place of liberal democracy. The genesis of our War of Liberation in 1971 was the cravings of the masses for unalloyed democracy. The country and its people are yet to have the taste of the democracy they envisaged, which led them to take up arms to carve out an independent homeland. Probably the time has come for the people to put the politics of the two major parties in the docks for making a mockery of democracy and causing them untold sufferings.

WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY At the Hand of Man

by Navine Murshid

Let us conform to the principles of World Environment Day. Processions, discussions, speeches marking this day are futile unless we do something concrete for us. Let us keep the promises we make. The environment today is at the hand of man. Let us exploit the bounty of Nature prudently. We owe ourselves a better world to live in.

THE very essence of World Environment Day is, perhaps, lost in the Bangladesh context. Where more than half of the population lives under the poverty line; where people struggle to have two square meals a day; where squalor and disease is widespread; where safe drinking water is scarce and standards of living very low, environment protection and preservation are likely to be at the end of any priority list. While the Sundarban forests are being destroyed, the Bangladeshis are too exhausted from their daily struggle to find food to care about the destruction of their environment.

Yet, we owe the generations to come a healthy world to live in. Bangladesh needs to place emphasis on combating extreme poverty which is a result, as well as cause of environmental degradation. There is little time to reverse the damage. While population growth is still unprecedented, experts say that the growth rates will decline dramatically as arsenicosis (the disease caused by arsenic contamination) takes its toll and family planning becomes more widespread. The state of environmental-related issues stands in a complete disarray, and there seems to be no way out of the social costs that we are having to bear.

World Bank consultant, Kowsar Chowdhury said, "To prevent human existence from dying out, environment degradation, as is seen today, must stop."

Not many of us co-relate human existence with environment degradation. Perhaps it is time for that. Issues confronting Bangladesh are many. Along with poverty alleviation, empowerment of women, access to proper health care and education, environment protection and preservation should be among the higher priorities.

The Bangladesh that was once called "The land of rivers" is long gone. Most rivers today are polluted either by fertilisers, by chemicals, industrial wastes and the like. The Sundarbans and other forests, and their wildlife face extinction. Hills and trees in

Chittagong, Chittagong Hill Tracts and Sylhet are being chopped off for living, for fuel wood, for selling. All the lakes in Dhaka city, as well as in other district towns, are either heavily polluted or facing encroachment, or both. Identifying different types of pollutants in Dhammondi Lake, an officer associated with the reconstruction work said, "People dump their household wastes here on a regular basis. This is also a good place for washing cars for those who own driving schools. Starting from people to cows, everyone comes to the lake to bathe, to respond to nature's call and simply to use the lake as a garbage can. Over the past few months, such practices have lessened. But it would be very difficult to come out of such habits," he said, requesting anonymity.

The list of places vulnerable to degradation is endless. Every lane, every neighbourhood, every city of our country bears testimony to what ignorance and carelessness can take a nation. After all, it is because of our attitude, our numbness that we have allowed environment degradation to reach a level that many apprehend irreversible.

We blame the government, the different multinational organisations working here for not keeping a check on environmental degradation. And we forget that we too are citizens of the country; we too should have our welfare in mind; we too have a role to play in society to ensure a better world for our next generation. Perhaps, it is time to accept that it is our failure that we have not been able to protect ourselves.

Before we prove to be suicidal, we must join our development partners' efforts in ensuring a safe, friendly, green environment. A lot of damage has been done already. Let us conform to the principles of World Environment Day. Processions, discussions, speeches marking this day are futile unless we do something concrete for us. Let us keep the promises we make. The environment today is at the hand of man. Let us exploit the bounty of Nature prudently. We owe ourselves a better world to live in.

To the Editor ...

The image of CEC

Sir, Appointment of Mr Abu Hena as Chief Election Commissioner in 1996 appeared to be an exception, after long line of honourable judges who had held that post before him. But after the appointment of M A Syed, who is also a bureaucrat, it seems that the exception is gradually becoming the rule.

Efficiency in the running of the affairs of Election Commission might have been the criterion upon which this appointment was made. But for an organisation like EC, efficiency alone doesn't seem enough. The commission should also project an image of neutrality to become credible and acceptable to all. The presidency, at least under our present

President, the Supreme Court with its High Court Division, project that image and thus enjoy the confidence of the mass.

I have no doubt whatsoever about the personal honesty and integrity of Mr M A Syed, or Mr Abu Hena or any other CEC preceding them. But our civil bureaucracy as a whole does not appear to be, and never really was, a neutral body. From the British Raj to the present day, the tradition of serving political interest of the ruling class by bureaucracy has continued. In every country the ruling party has a little advantage over others in elections. Unlike free media coverage, campaigning during official visits and so on. But in our country, from the Basic Democracy elections of President Ayub Khan to the present ones, the civil bureaucracy has worked for the ruling junta or political party except on one or two occasions. Vote rigging that is so often alleged, particularly by the defeated candidates usually takes place at Returning Officer

level or below that. Under its present set up, the Election Commission cannot do much more than publishing the available results. The commission has to rely completely on the administration for conducting elections. While the bureaucracy has always remained subservient to the ruling party, the judiciary on the other hand, at its higher level at least, has asserted its independence from time to time.

Therefore, appointing CEC from the judiciary or from respected, eminent citizens, or at least from outside the administration cadre could have given the commission a more balanced non-partisan look. A CEC from the cadre, many of whose members climbed the "Janata Mancha" (People's Dias) during the faltering days of the last government, declaring themselves "Employees of the State" (which they really are, but very often forget) and behaved like political activists, cannot project a neutral image of Election Commission.

It is true in the present political climate of Bangladesh that even an angel, as CEC would have to be, cannot escape the four party main opposition might have rejected anyone out of habit or as a matter of strategy, but it is worth noting that members of the eleven party alliance, or even the partners of consensus politics could not welcome the appointment.

Therefore, the Prime Minister could have done a better job by nominating a Supreme Court or High Court judge for the post of CEC. Appointment of a senior judge to the post would have been in conformity with tradition and given the Election Commission a neutral image.

Choudhury Mushtaq Ahmed Sheikh, Sylhet

To the Leader of the Opposition

Sir, As voters and taxpayers, we have the right to know why last year's budget session went without any representation by the Opposition in the House. Why the same be repeated this year? We, as common citizens of this country have nothing to do with the scuffle going on between the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the House. All we know is if the Opposition remains absent, the forthcoming budget will be passed unilaterally. And the Opposition will be solely to blame as this poor nation has been paying through its nose to keep this Parliament going so that their representatives are able to vindicate the grievances of all section of people irrespective of any party affiliation. The business community, in particular, will be the worst sufferers if the budget is passed unilaterally. Therefore, we urge the Leader of the Opposition to join the forthcoming budget session so that it could be called a national budget not a partisan one as their criticism of the budget outside the pale of the legislature will be fruitless endeavour and a exercise in futility which the Opposition in this country often indulges in.

Al-Haj S. M. Khalid Chowdhury Dhaka

A team of jumbled jersey

Sir, The defeat Bangladesh incurred against Pakistan team in the Pepsi Asia Cup didn't come as a surprise. It was inevitable, I only wish the departure was

more honourable. But the reason I'm writing this letter is to make an earnest request. It is about the jersey of the national team. I really do hope that next time our team will be in smarter outfit when they represent the country. The national flag and the Royal Bengal tigers need not be jumbled in everytime. The array of colours wasn't very becoming either.

A frustrated fan Dhaka

Murder at Matrichaya

Sir, The recent gruesome murder at Matrichaya Pre-cadet Residential School has come as a terrible shock to all especially to the parents whose wards attend such residential schools. Abu Bayazid Mohammad Munit, a class VI student, was beaten to death by his fellow students in the dormitory room following a row over missing mangoes. Some senior students accused Munit of stealing those mangoes and later beat him to death.

In recent years, there has been a mushroom growth of such private schools in the country. However, ignoring their main duty, namely, taking care of the students' education, all these schools are busy of making a quick buck. And Matrichaya is an apt example such schools.

It is time the authorities concerned realise the fact and investigate into the 'activities' of these residential schools.

GA Hashem, Nayatola, Maghbazar, Dhaka