

Aviation Safety: Not a Plaything

IMAN Bangladesh Airlines, the national flag-carrier, has a very convincing catch-word: "Your home in the air." Given the hospitality trait of the Bengalees we could not have gone for a better, more winsome slogan than the one adopted by Biman. Home is where you feel at ease, snuggled in comfort but when we promise it in the air we set ourselves an aim going beyond mere hospitality. It is safety that we have to provide not merely to compare favourably with other airlines which do so but also out of a sense of responsibility towards human lives we carry on our planes, let alone the reputation of the country. In aviation matters, the very fact that a national airlines has got the licence to operate internationally means that it will abide by safety standards which have evolved over time and are universally applicable to all airlines.

Just because an airlines belongs to a developing country does not make it any less blameworthy for an accident than the one carrying the label of a developed country.

We are constrained to say all these things in the light of an expert assessment recently made of the risks Biman's international flights carry these days. The Cooperative Development of Operational Safety and Continuing Airworthiness of South Asia, an agency monitoring operational safety standards of national flag-carriers of SAARC countries, has warned the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh against serious breach of international aviation safety norms. It is not faulty aircraft but a severe shortage of pilots being faced by Biman that render its flight on international routes risky. They have identified 22 flights as 'hazardous' to lives of passengers because those are operated by insufficiently rested pilots working on taut nerves from long hours in flying. The number of aircraft has increased just as new routes have been opened but nobody has bothered to ensure a commensurate increase in the number of pilots to cope with the increased loads. Too few pilots are making too many sorties cutting across different time zones, the management hardly realising that air safety concerns do not admit of any superman prowess. We have to go by the rules of the book.

We thank the South Asian monitoring agency for its timely pointer to overworked pilots. Till such time as we have developed a new pilot strength of our own we should hire hands from overseas on contract basis as some airlines do. Since a process for this has got underway it needs to be expedited now. We cannot compromise on air safety standards.

Passing of a Stalwart

THE icy hand of death has taken away Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, one of the influential figures in the Middle Eastern scene for over a quarter of a century. He was 69. The demise of Assad comes at a critical moment in the Middle East peace process, with Syria early this week agreeing to work with America towards a revival of the stalled talks with Israel. Both his friends and foes mourned the passing away of a man they had known to be uncompromising on Syrian interests. Syria became a major regional power under Assad, who also dominated Lebanese policy and refused to sign a peace treaty with Israel minus the handing over of Golan Heights. His continued insistence that Israel return Golan Heights to Syria was the centre piece of his foreign policy. He was also instrumental in a way to have Israel withdraw its troops from south Lebanon.

Assad brought political stability to Syria, with an iron hand and turned the country into a major player in regional policymaking. He became the country's leader through a coup in 1970 having risen through the ranks of the air force and the socialist Baath party. He showed his ruthlessness at Hama, a former stronghold of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, and he contained a mass uprising against him in 1982, his army massacring at least 10,000 people.

Assad ranks high among Arab leaders who gave a liberal face to their Muslim countries. He was modern and forward-looking in outlook freeing the society from the bane of orthodoxy. He is succeeded by Bashar, his eldest son and designated heir who is likely to follow his footsteps. Assad leaves the scene with his son taking up his mantle, as if in continuation of a dynastic rule. As it happened in some Muslim countries under the shadows of a stalwart no successor gets groomed. As our heart goes out in sympathy with the Syrian people, we expect that the ongoing Middle East peace process would be carried forward by his successor Bashar al-Assad.

Crimes on Rise in Chittagong

MUGGING and other crimes are on the rise in Chittagong, according to a report frontpaged in this daily on Sunday. Around a hundred incidents of mugging were reported during the last two months alone. Many incidents must have gone unreported. Victims do not always feel inspired to seek police help because of their failure to arrest the mugger and recover the money and other articles snatched away.

If the trend continues then the alarm bells must be sounded now. Many of these incidents take place in broad daylight and the culprits make good their escape riding baby taxis. In certain cases baby taxi drivers are involved in the crime. One way to nab the culprits is to reach them through the help of baby taxi drivers provided the registration number had been noted. The most disquieting is the news relating to the highly protected Chittagong Export Processing Zone (CEPZ), on Friday last, some gunmen looted Taka sixteen lakh from a Korean factory. This does not speak well of the efficiency of the police. Not only the local people and organisations are suffering financial losses but they are also traumatised which takes a toll more than it can be counted in terms of money.

This cannot be condoned for an indefinite period of time. We hear the pious wish being expressed all around: 'none will be spared' but in reality most are going scot-free. People would love to have some real action instead of rhetorics and false promises. Perhaps the special measures launched by Chittagong police need a special drive and direction. Where there is a will there is a way and we believe Chittagong police, or for that matter, police in Bangladesh, know that.

Fledgling Democracies Increasingly Becoming Vulnerable

by Mansoor Mamoon

What made the fledgling democracies vulnerable? It is because of the fact that the mindset of the leaders in these countries remains autocratic even though they may be popularly elected. Rule of law, effectiveness of parliament, tolerance of opposition, decentralisation and devolution of power, independence of judiciary, freedom of press, assembly and speech are neglected and not properly cultured and cultivated.

before democratic polity could take roots, internecine religious and ethnic strife are destabilising the situation in both the countries.

Francis Fukuyama in his epoch making book 'The End of History' had predicted that at the end of human civilisation only liberal democracy shall prevail. His prediction came in the aftermath of the trituration of the Soviet monolithic empire and fall of the Berlin Wall. There was euphoria all over the world that the end of the Cold War era has paved the way for liberal democracy and that in future there will no longer be any army take over. But very soon the euphoria died down and the veracity of Francis Fukuyama's dictum began to be doubted.

What made the fledgling democracies vulnerable and what is causing the extra-constitutional way of usurpation of

power in one country after another? Firstly, it is because of the fact that the mindset of the leaders in these countries remains autocratic even though they may be popularly elected. Rule of law, effectiveness of parliament, tolerance of opposition, decentralisation and devolution of power, independence of judiciary, freedom of press, assembly and speech are neglected and not properly cultured and cultivated.

This is why it has been aptly stated that only elections do not at all guarantee democracy and that elected leaders can also be autocratic. Noted Harvard Scholar Samuel P. Huntington in his book 'The Third Wave' has said democracy and autocracy alternate in particular countries because of the inherent problems with the system as practised. After a period of democratic rule a country may relapse into the fold of military or autocratic rule. The twentieth century was termed the century of democracy. But with the advent of the twenty-first century democracy seems to be under severe pressure. There is once again a resurgence of military and autocratic rule.

In many countries such as in Fiji and the Solomon Islands a few gunmen can topple the elected governments by taking the Prime Ministers as hostage which shows the fragility and

vulnerability of these democracies. Ethnic or inter island strife are obviously lapses of democratic rules. Democracy is a rule by consensus. By open debates accommodating the views of all the parties involved in the process. When some sections of people are ignored or neglected, their pent up frustration takes the form of violence, and violence and democracy cannot go hand in hand. Bangladesh needs to take lessons from all these. The country was under a long spell of autocratic rules. After protracted struggle and at the cost of immense sacrifices parliamentary democracy was restored in 1991. But during the last one decade no party neither the BNP nor the AL behaved democratically. Their type of democracy is called clan or tribal democracy.

Against this backdrop, the question is now being asked by

quarters both at home and abroad whether Bangladesh is at all fit for parliamentary democracy. Such a question does not augur well for the future of democracy in Bangladesh. Some analysts in some vernacular dailies (Janakantha and Ajer Kagoj) are apprehending bigger strife taking cue from the confrontational politics of the two major parties, Bangladesh. It is said, Bangladesh goes through some sort of transition, good or bad, after every ten years. In 1971 there was the War of Liberation costing millions of lives. Then in 1981 Ziaur Rahman, who brought some semblance of stability, was killed by his own troops and the country once again took a U-turn. In 1991 parliamentary democracy ushered in a new era but failed to provide peace and stability. After ten years the situation is once again becoming alarming. Nobody can foresee what future awaits the nation while a showdown is also not overruled. Whether democracy can survive or not, is a million dollar question; but it is really painful when our leaders are blamed for the nonfunctioning of democracy in the country.

Unit Durbar, Circa 2000

A modicum of plain, straight talking was required from Gen Pervez Musharraf. A rough sampling of public opinion shows he achieved what he wanted to. Now he has to come through on his promises or his credibility will be as short as was late Zia's never-ending 90 days.

The CE started by taking issue with the notion of being "isolated" as a country, he was both right and wrong! We are not really isolated, however, neither do we occupy the same pedestal that we used to. Kargil brought negative dynamics into the situation, we are down diplomatically quite a few notches. However wrongly, the international perception have raised the Indians in the "moral high ground", some of it is simply crass economics, the west's commercial greed for tapping the vast one billion plus consumer market of India. It would be scary if we did not recognize this reality. One must agree that the CE had more success than failure on his 19 trips abroad. To dispel apprehension among the Jawans sitting cross-legged on the ground facing the CO with his ceremonial chair and table, the "officer lang" and "JCO sahiban" sitting alongside on chairs on both sides of the Assembly, ready to answer questions (and sometimes be taken to task by the CO) if need be.

With the gathering of "Editors, Columnists and Reporters" representing the Pakistani intelligentsia and masses, with members of his administration sitting on both sides of the assembled media representatives, Gen Pervez Musharraf made a blunt presentation of his government's performance as well as his intentions for the future. The intelligentsia may remain skeptical about the conduct and style of the event, the Chief Executive's (CE) aim was to get his message across. "The great silent majority" that provides the maximum viewers for the "World Wrestling Federation" (WWF) bouts on TV, was the target audience who had to be reached out to in words and actions in layman's language which they would be able to absorb, more importantly, to accept.

Since Oct 16, we have seen a number of Pervez Musharraf's on prime time TV as dictated by his media handlers. The real Pervez Musharraf finally stood

up on May 25, 2000, symbolically with his gloves off. The aesthetic sense may have been missing but it was effective, as befits a unit commander explaining hard facts to his Jawans. There has been an increasing apprehension among the masses about seeming inaction under military rule, not delivering the goods, such vacuum is fertile ground for rumours. The CE explained the time lag in the language the masses understand. To develop a "strategy" in each area of concern

lion is achievable, eventually as much as Rs 600 billion. The break-up of the list of 1000 to be fired from CBR was extremely disappointing. About 850 of those being sacked are virtual junior nonentities, sacrificial lambs meant as a diversion to protect the big culprits at higher levels, the real leeches who have sucked this economy dry. Even if the whole lot of 30,000 CBR personnel are sacked it will make no difference to the collection, if the Finance Min-

successive regimes. They were not picked up simply for tax and excise evasion of various kinds, involvement in making fake products, taking of spurious bank loans, etc, they were hauled up on serious charges pertaining to national security, charges that could not be ignored despite their "blue-chip" contacts. Give credit to the regime for not knuckling under.

The appointment of the virtually unknown Sher Afghan Malik as MD PIA is controversial. What raised doubts was his CV, all rhetoric and no substance. No mention of the organisations or appointments he has served in or the naming of the entities he is believed to have "turned around". Malik simply happens to be the brother-in-law of someone having extensive business dealings with PIA in a private capacity, and who coincidentally happens to be the father-in-law of someone who is a dynamic young entrepreneur according to one of our ministers. Coincidentally, this paragon of business happens to be a fellow franchisee in a major western food franchise of the businessman hauled up under national security reasons aforementioned. And one may well ask who recommended Sher Afghan Malik for the crucial PIA post to replace the much-replaced Arif Khan Abbasi? Abbasi was at least keeping PIA flying. Mr Sher Afghan Malik's credentials to perform miracles need to be looked at carefully before this experiment grounds PIA permanently. Of course if he has the necessary credentials, more power to him.

Talking about PIA MDs, some columns ago I was very unkind to former Governor

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

time was needed, a comprehensive analysis of the problems had to be made before coming through with effective solutions.

On one major issue there can be no compromise, documentation of the economy. For too long a large number of our businessmen have been taking a free ride, included are those who have accumulated wealth illegally. 1.2 million people make for a minuscule "Atlas" to bear the burden of 140 million people. There is a resistance to the tax net being broadened, those affected are trying to scuttle the documentation process. Thirteen cities being targeted, one believes that a interim target of Rs 150-200 bil-

lion (better a full-time Revenue Minister) were to send 90 per cent of CBR officials home and request the business community to pay 30 per cent more in taxes each year for two consecutive years without any check or verification, coordinated at most by the respective Chambers of Commerce and Industry, one believes that the response would be positive.

Client-Patron relationships seem to go on and even if new staff is induced, the problem is that the crooked soon find godfathers for "protection". One of the jokes at a play in Karachi made one cry for this country, it marveled at a couple of very influential businessmen being picked up despite their "jack" in

To the Editor ...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Budget

Sir, The budget for fiscal 2000-2001 is a colossal juggling of figures and finds immutable infrastructure for fragile economic bias to build the super structure. It is middle class oriented budget but certain provisions like income tax exemption is praiseworthy. The Finance Minister must be congratulated in one stance that he has not increased the burden of taxes but doctily is very much evident in the budget and being basically agrarian economy notwithstanding the need of the emergence of new class and their needs. The budget is progressive and in a way suffice the present need of the nation but not categorically farsighted.

Al-Haj S. M. Khalid Chowdhury Dhaka

Vehicular traffic management

Sir, If you live in Uttara or have travelled to Uttara in the last couple of weeks, you are bound to notice that the city planners have put up barricades made of bamboo at the Azampur and Rajlakhi intersections. The traffic police at one of these junctions tells me that they have placed these makeshift, unstudied, unreliable and not to mention unsightly and frowny fences to study their effects on traffic flow; the intention is to improve the quality of traffic movement in this vicinity. But it is my belief that their wisdom was ill-spent when they cooked up this incredible plan for traffic diversion. What they essentially managed to achieve at the inconvenience of many tourists is shift the 'mess' from one place to another, and create other new problems as well.

In fact, the intersections on either direction (north and south) of Azampur and Rajlakhi are now even more dangerous to negotiate, because

the crossroads at both of these junctions are not at perpendicular to the intersection points. So, you can imagine the newly created mess and tangle and the peril it puts the travellers in at these intersections. Only a couple of months ago a boy on his way to school was killed at one of these treacherous intersections at Jasimuddin Road.

Whoever comes up with these plans and why they are to be implemented should discuss with the locals with much care and thought; and should not formulate such plans that affect those miles away at some high-rise office building without the road map on their desk top. What we need here at Uttara and elsewhere in the city are a few well trained, well disciplined, hardworking, able and empowered traffic police, and at the same time the people on the road to follow the traffic rules. We can save lives, limbs, time, energy, money and a whole lot of aggravation. The visual media can play an effective role in educating the general public in this regard.

Ishitaqur Rahman Uttara, Dhaka

Non-political governance

Sir, Since political governance is not working for a decade it is time to assess alternatives by the non-political leaders of the society. The politicians have themselves provided for an interim form of governance, namely the concept of caretaker governance during the election period.

It looks like this CTG period might have to be extended to two to three years (or more) till the hot-headed politicians have time to cool down and not look down upon the imposed voters. It is strange to hear the charge that the preceding ruling party is now associated with anti-

national activities. Unless some drastic change in approach is made by the electorate to contain bad politics, the same political parties with similar mindset will continue to run the country alternately, without being able to get out of the bottomless basket of vindictive politics.

Let there be a campaign for CTG for an extended period because the political machinery and system has failed to get out of the vicious circle. The political leaders must admit their weaknesses publicly and not put on laudable alibis. Why we citizens cannot speak against the politicians without being labeled as anti-national?

A Husnain Dhaka

Hoping for a better tomorrow

Sir, The PM's stern warning to her party men to 'control their children' (DS, 6 June 2000) is indeed a responsible and commendable step and I hope that from now on the police can perform their duties without fear of any power being against them to maintain law and order in the country.

Every citizen has duties and responsibilities along with their right to live in a free democratic country. And the elected representatives have more responsibility and duties than the ordinary citizens. Let us start practising our democratic rights by adhering to those rights and responsibilities and make this country a better place to live in.

Akku Chowdhury Dhaka

Woes of the residents of Bara Moghbazar

Sir, The Bara Moghbazar area is a busy one consisting of at least ten Apartment Complex. The exit from the housing complexes is through Elephant Road. A particular portion of the road beginning from Welfare Mot to Ramna Police Station is the busiest where at least a few hundred vehicles everyday. The above mentioned road had water logging problem. And to resolve this problem

pipes were laid about two years ago. But that did not solve the problem. Again about six months ago the big pipes of the storm sewer system were laid. Not only the road was dug for laying pipes, it was also cut open several times to lay the digital telephone lines (though cable lines have been laid, we, the residents of Ramna thana area are yet to enjoy the modern digital telephone service). Since the road has been dug several times (and also repaired a number of times with poor workmanship) the foundation of the road has been severely damaged. And now due to monsoon the road bears a pitiable look. With a little rainfall water gets logged on the surface and although there are several covered drains, water rarely clears off through those. As a result big potholes have been created and it has become really difficult to move on this road. On the other hand DCC is collecting quite an amount of money through holding taxes from the apartment owners. But nothing concrete has been done so far to improve the shabby condition of the dilapidated road. We, therefore request the DCC authority to take immediate steps to repair the road. For the time being brick soling can be used and when the monsoon is over asphalt can be used to carpet the road.

Fahad Saleh

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The right to die

Sir, It is an unkind cut to expect our national assets, namely the MPs to undergo medical check-ups, as advocated in Letter to DS (June 1). Even compulsory mental check-ups should be discouraged. The right to die might be dying out in the technological West, but the Maker's noblest creature has the right to return to Him when the time comes, and the mundane parliament should have no control over it. But the various check-ups of the ailing nation must be made more stringent, and the players in the game must follow the statutory rules: right, left and at the centre.

A denizen Dhaka

Cricket is a hard taskmaster, whether armed with the bat or the ball, or watching both (fielding). Like life, cricket has many layers of innings. Since failures are the pillars of success, now, after Bangladesh's spectacular debacle in the Asia Cup, it is the hope of the majority that the new foundation of cricket in Dhaka will be stronger than available to the enterprising politicians of Bangladesh, who have also been trying for international status for long 30 years.

Now that the Bangladesh Society for Total Quality Management (BS-TQM) is campaigning for the introduction of TQM in the education sector (DS, June 3), it is the right time to tag on the cricket coaching scheme nationwide. Of course the finance and the technical apparatus and services have to be there as well (preparing cricket pitches is not simple).

The match against Pakistan should correct our perspective, while seeking peer company. Even if the Test status is announced in coming June, it is better to defer its effectiveness to a distant date, to allow the team some time to get the bearing. Zimbabwe test team (the babes)