

Public Must be Told Everything

IN a stupefying sequence two huge bombs were discovered within three days of each other at Kotlipara, the designated venue of Prime Minister's public address — since cancelled for self-evident reasons. As for the first explosive device, we have it on the authority of no less a person than the chief of Bangladesh Army that nothing like this was seen in our country before. The second one, yet to be unearthed at the time of writing this piece, was suspected to be of a similar kind. Whichever way it resembles with or differs from the first one the stark fact is that any place in Bangladesh has now seemingly become a happy hunting ground for big-time bomb planters.

Going by the live nature of the device as revealed by experts and its destructive potential to raze even an airport to the ground, the prime minister's life, thank goodness, has been providentially saved.

Much as we feel relieved over this, the callous surveillance lapses nonetheless surface in bold relief to make us worry about the physical safety of not just the Prime Minister but the Leader of the Opposition as well. For that matter, VIP security in general comes under clouds really.

All of this breeds a sense of destabilisation, if not destabilisation as such, which needs badly to be rolled back by getting at the bottom of the whys and wherefores of the galling incidents. First of all, the suspense over bombs must be put to an end at the earliest so that rumour-mongering, speculative theorisation and attempts at political capitalisation are promptly stopped on their tracks. Secondly, in probing the incident political bias of any sort has to be avoided. And finally when the truths are revealed these must necessarily be shared with the public not with any propagandist tinge but as unalloyed facts.

Between the agencies of the government charged with the responsibility of ensuring the PM's security there may be a tendency towards buck-passing or belittling their respective lapses. The investigations have to be steered clear of these possible snares. But most importantly, both the government and the opposition must refrain from mutual finger-pointing because that could cripple any quest for truth before it got off to a start. Why must the opposition call it 'cooked up' without waiting to see the results of the investigation that has been already launched? The ruling party leaders should not try to take political mileage from this incident.

How Dare?

NO sooner had the investigation into the planting of explosives near the site of PM's rostrum at Kotlipara been started than MP Narayanganj Shamim Osman and his followers declared the BNP responsible for the incident. This is condemnable as work of overzealous synchophancy. But what sounds even more outrageous is his temerity to 'declare' the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament and the chairperson of the largest opposition political party in the country 'persona non grata' in Narayanganj. How dare he? Is the place and township his paternal property? We demand that he tender an immediate apology from the leader of the opposition for his highly disproportionate act of impudence.

But basically we are dumbfounded by the inaction of the ruling AL which has not even deemed it fit to reprimand the wayward MP for kicking up a row between the major political parties at a time when they have the least need for it. This is the time for them to close their ranks and cooperate in unfolding the mystery. Instead, irresponsible statements are being made by renegade members of the ruling party much to the detriment of peace and order in the society. Bangabandhu had warned about the 'chatar dal' (lackeys). People like Shamim Osman do remind us of the absurd level to which synchophancy can be taken. We hope the PM is intelligent enough to differentiate between good and bad and take her own decisions accordingly. Discretion is the better part of valour.

New Forex Rule

BANGLADESH Bank's new instructions on sale of foreign exchange to travellers evidently come as a reaction to widespread allegations that some intending or fake travellers were buying dollars from the Bank and selling these in the kerb market 'at a premium'. That the allegations are not baseless has been aptly substantiated by the sudden surge of dollar sales at the informal market over the last few days where the rate is, needless to say, substantially higher than that at the banks and licensed money exchangers' end. There has been a sharp rise in smuggling in recent times, which suggests the forex sold at the kerb market may have been used to procure contraband items. On the whole, the earlier leeway for the purchase of foreign currency in excess of 500 dollars upon production of passports and air tickets at the banks could have been facilitating flight of forex. Against this disconcerting possibility, it had indeed "become extremely important to be extra cautious" which is why the BB now demands that valid visas be also shown at the banks to prove bona fides as travellers.

We appreciate the central bank's concern and its promptitude as regards coming up with a 'safety valve'. However, our fear is, injudicious application of the provision could result in harassment for the true travellers. Over the years, the number of people taking overseas trips on academic, professional and personal reasons has increased at a fantastic rate. Almost in every case, time is of key importance. The requirement of a valid visa to be presented with the air ticket could prove quite inconvenient. Hopefully, embassies would not insist on endorsement of dollar beyond \$500 before they issue visas.

Therefore, our suggestion to the central bank would be to find a formula that keeps a check on flight of foreign currency and at the same time saves travellers from any hassle.

None is Above the State

The NDA, ruling the country, should realise that if Thackeray gets away with his posture by threatening to disrupt trains, flights and normal life, many more demagogues will take birth. They too will assemble private armies to dare the established governments.

MANY Indian newspapers had front-paged the same day a photo of a woman prostrating before Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray and the news of looting and stoning shops by his *sauiks*. This is the Jekyll-Hyde countenance of politics in Maharashtra where people have lived in fear since the advent of a party called, the Shiv Sena.

They kowtow to Thackeray to be left alone because he has an army of hoodlums to beat up any community, sect or a set of persons he does not like. And his 'activists' as he calls them, are on the rampage whenever they feel that the law is catching up with his mis-doings.

They have indulged in violence this time because Thackeray faces arrest following the indictment by Justice Sri Krishna Commission. It inquired into the riots during December 1992 and January 1993, in the wake of Babri masjid's demolition. The commission said how frenzy was whipped up by the "writings and directives issued by the Shiv Sena pramukh Bal Thackeray."

The recorded evidence showed that the killing of Muslims was well-planned. Their houses and shops were marked and all those engaged in the orgy knew the part they had to play. Thackeray's men were the main force behind the carnage.

Normally, he would have been hauled up long ago. But the Shiv Sena-BJP government in Maharashtra and the BJP-led coalition at the Centre managed

to protect him. When I asked Home Minister L K Advani in parliament a year and a half ago why no action had been taken on the Sri Krishna report, he had a ready-made alibi: since the state government had not accepted the report, the question of the central action did not arise.

Probably, even now, the Congress-led Democratic Front government in Mumbai would have left the matter at that. But the Shiv Sena pressed for action against Samajwadi leader Abu Asim Azmi for his 'inflammatory' speech. It did not realise that it would reopen the pending case against Thackeray. Both had committed a similar offence, one a few months ago and another a few years ago.

Perforce, the state government had to make the decision. It gave the assurance that the police would prosecute both of them, Azmi and Thackeray, under 153 (a) of the Indian Penal Code, offence for promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, etc. However, after making the announcement, the state government developed cold feet. The fear of the Shiv Sena made chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh explain that there were no immediate plans to arrest Thackeray. The state

police chief said that it was not necessary for them to take action against Thackeray straightaway. By the time, the lord and the master, Thackeray was so furious even over equivocal authorities that he declared: should he be arrested, "the entire Hindustan" would be "up in flames." The

Those who have read books on the rise of Hitler would find similarities in the way Thackeray is being lionised. But the state is not alone to blame. Advani called on him only the other day in Mumbai. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, according to the press, phoned him up when told

could have done was to ask Industry Minister Manohar Joshi, belonging to Thackeray's party, to quit the cabinet. It would have sent a message. People would have known that none was above the country. Advani's silence is understandable because he himself is facing prosecution on the demolition of the Babri masjid and he does not want to stoke the fires at this juncture. Moreover, he is hard-liner, sharing most of Thackeray's philosophy of Hindu *rashtra*. George Fernandes, Ram Vilas Paswan, Nitish Kumar, Mamata Banerjee and Sharad Yadav all the five central ministers have no past to suggest that they have love for fascism. That they are blind to the BJP is understandable because they want to stay in power. Discretion is the better part of valour. Still the fact that there has not been even a murmur from their side is a shame and a blot on their credentials.

The Shiv Sena chief has thrown down the gauntlet: you dare to arrest me. Is there anyone from among the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners to pick up the gauntlet? What about Andhra Pradesh chief minister Chandrababu Naidu, who is considered a strong man of the South? Will he dare to tell

Vajpayee to bridle Thackeray? Naidu has voice, with 29 Lok Sabha members. If nobody has courage, at least Jammu and Kashmir chief minister Farooq Abdullah should register his protest because Thackeray has called him a "traitor." It does not come as a surprise when the BJP says that "Thackeray should not be arrested under any circumstances." The thinking of the BJP tallies with that of Shiv Sena. But the party makes a mockery of the law when it says that it is against "taking up an old event which is best buried and forgotten." Does murder cease to be murder if it is old? Ask the families, whose members were butchered, whether their wound had been healed.

The NDA, ruling the country, should realise that if Thackeray gets away with his posture by threatening to disrupt trains, flights and normal life, many more demagogues will take birth. They too will assemble private armies to dare the established governments. Nobody is above the state. The government should be seen to be acting.

Thackeray's men have said that they will "take the issue to the streets and meet the challenge." The challenge they are talking about is the overthrowing of the democratically-elected government through violence. Any soft-peddling will tantamount to compromising with such forces. They want to prove that power, not the law, is the ultimate arbiter. The Nazis in Germany began in the same way.

Everyone knows what happened to them.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

threat worked. The chief minister got so scared that he had to flash on Doordarshan that people should not panic as there were no orders yet to arrest Thackeray. To pressmen, it was explained that the police would examine the implications of the case and consult lawyers before taking the next step. A lawful action got fiddled out by a single bark from Thackeray. The chief minister did not realise the price he was paying to buy peace. Nor did he care about the demoralisation of law-abiding citizens. The chief minister's timid response had an effect on the authorities. They slowed down the action, although they went on putting up a brave face.

that Thackeray had complained that the PM had never rung him up. What is decisive in the philosophy of persons like Thackeray is their attitude on the basic issue of respect for man. They have contempt for him. It is a caricature of democracy if someone is considered more than equal. Both Mumbai and New Delhi are guilty.

There is yet no explanation why the centre has kept quiet on Thackeray's challenge that the country would go up in flames if he was arrested. At least Vajpayee, who is not looking beyond the current term, should have spoken out against such an ultimatum. The minimum he

The Invisible Cost of Doing Business in Bangladesh

by Mansoor Mamoon

Bangladesh is probably the only country where corrupt elements and known extortionists and terrorists go scot-free if they enjoy the blessings of their godfathers in the political party as well as in bureaucracy.

PALM greasing, kickbacks, shady deal, exertion of political influence and extortion it is no longer possible to do any business worth its name in Bangladesh. From a footpath hawk or vendor to the top traders or business magnets and investors are subjected to all sorts of hassle so as to compel them to keep a portion as invisible cost, the burden of which is ultimately shifted to the common man.

A Daily Star report, published in its issue of June 26, 2000, claimed that business circle has alleged that increasing incidents of extortion and terrorist activities are taking a hefty toll on business in the old part of the Dhaka city. The traders are reportedly fed up with the prevailing situation and as a result sales at different wholesale market have fallen by 10 to 15 per cent. Incidents of extortion take place in front of the law enforcers, who prefer to play the role of mute witness as the extortionists, in most cases, reportedly, enjoy blessings of political leaders, particularly belonging to the ruling party. In some cases the police themselves indulge in extortion or have links and connections with the extortionists.

The situation is true not only in case of old part of the capital city but of the whole of Bangladesh. Each day the extortionists realise billions of taka from bus and truck owners, shops and business establishments, real estate owners and property builders, investors, hawkers, traders and business circle alleged different chamber bodies. Another lucra

tive money making device is the tendering business in which very often the ruling party student activists take part in gusto and make quick bucks. Refusal to pay extortion and inlight in tendering have resulted in killings. Apart from such extortions, kickbacks at different levels of bureaucracy and state functionaries, payment of commission for getting the award of a project etc have assumed a dangerous and galloping proportion. Noting that corruption and weak administration are the main impediments to progress and development the World Bank, Transparency International and the World Economic Forum have identified Bangladesh as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. The World Economic Forum has rated Bangladesh as the most corrupt country in Asia. The World Bank has made an assessment of how much money changes hands annually through below the table arrangements or illegal gratification. The estimate, according to the World Bank, is as follows:

*Through NBR and Customs from five hundred crore taka to one thousand crore taka.

*At the Chittagong port, from two thousand five hundred crore taka to five thousand crore taka.

*Through government purchase from one thousand five hundred crore taka to two thousand five hundred crore taka.

*Through power pilferage five

hundred crore taka.

*Through Commercial power connections five hundred crore taka.

The World Bank has also given an estimate of how much money is to be doled out by way of kickbacks

*For commercial power connection from ten thousand taka to one hundred thousand taka

*For commercial gas connections from fifty thousand taka to five lakh taka

*For telephone connection from ten thousand to twenty thousand taka.

*For getting a trade licence from one thousand to ten thousand taka

*For NOC of the Environment Ministry from ten thousand to fifteen thousand taka

*For bonded warehouse licence from fifty thousand to sixty thousand taka

*Custom officers are alleged to be paid from one hundred twenty-five thousand to one hundred fifty thousand taka

*Taxation officers allegedly receive in their turn fifty thousand to one hundred thousand taka

Just imagine, with this huge amount how many Jamuna bridges or power stations could be built in a year! If this amount could be saved, business would have been cheaper with its benefits reaching the people and investments from home and

abroad would have literally flooded Bangladesh. But then the leaders of the state are indifferent and apathetic to the country's plight. Their main concern, seemingly, is the interests of their kith and kin. The estimate does not include the commissions to be paid to political high-ups for getting their patronage. If this be the situation, neither domestic nor foreign investors would not honest way will not naturally feel interested to invest and do business in Bangladesh. Looting and hijacking even in the precincts of Chittagong Export Processing Zone have recently become frequent. This way a large sum money is filtered down into the hands of the criminals.

Even the Education Ministry

and different departments and boards under it have allegedly become dens of corrupt elements. Thus allegations are rife that results in public examinations can be tampered, admission in higher education (also in schools) require kickbacks and donations, foreign scholarships require pleasing officials rather than individual merit (due to which many a foreign country is now reportedly ignoring the recommendation of the Education Ministry). The people thought that with the replacement of autocracy by democratic governments things would improve. But in reality the situation has worsened and reached the nadir. The mindset of the ruling class has not underwent any change with

the change of situation. Otherwise the Prime Minister would not have summarily dismissed the need for an independent anti-corruption body. As in the past she wants to keep it under her control. Why? So that she could dictate its terms, use it the way she pleases? This gives rise to many a speculation.

The public demand for appointing an acceptable Ombudsman to investigate into state corruption was never fulfilled despite the provision for it was made in the country's Constitution in 1972. Bangladesh is probably the only country where corrupt elements and known extortionists and terrorists go scot-free if they enjoy the blessings of their godfathers in the political party as well as in bureaucracy.

If this be the situation Bangladesh would not hope to come out of the whirlpool of stagnation, underdevelopment and poverty.

OPINION

Direct Election for Women MPs

Munira Khan

On March 9, 1997 a Bengali daily headlined a news that direct election for women's seats in parliament was being arranged. The news item disclosed that in the next national Parliament elections, one woman would be elected directly from each district changing the current system of election to 30 seats reserved for women in Parliament which is held through the electoral college consisting of 300 already elected MPs from the general seats. The news also stated that the higher authorities concerned discussed and decided positively on it. Anyway that was in March, 1997. Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA) while trying to strengthen the electoral process in Bangladesh since 1997 held 46 district level and five divisional seminars and workshops on electoral law reform concerning women's seats in Parliament and recommended 100 reserved seats for women through direct election to be continued for another 10 years after the expiry of the present system on 4 April, 2001.

Earlier I wrote in the Opinion column of The Daily Star on 27 November, 1997 in favour of 150 seats for women through direct election as it seemed to me a reasonable demand and a practical way of conducting and running an election for a woman and for a party. A woman candidate nominated from a party or individually could be a common candidate in two neighbouring constituencies and every voter would cast two votes. I opined that for an effective participation in politics, women need some more time and opportunities to be involved and need some concessions. That is why the issue of reserved seats cropped up repeatedly. I also thought that these 150 women MPs could be better in strength to focus their attention and raise the issue on gender inequalities, other developmental activities and echo the voices of women of Bangladesh in Parliament. But ultimately direct election for 64 reserved seats for women from each district was agreed to by the women activists and other democracy-loving citizens of Bangladesh. With regard to the opinion and demand of women representatives, FEMA in its recommendations also suggested 64 seats from 64 districts through direct election, met the leaders of different political parties, discussed the issue as one of the many other reforms. Although some of the

political leaders gave their opinion against indirect election, none of them gave FEMA a positive answer on 64 reserved seats. Some of them even avoided the issue.

While all of us were hoping against hope, on 17th June, 2000 Law Minister of Bangladesh Government introduced a Constitution Amendment Bill before Parliament asking continuation of the old system of 30 reserved seats for women for another 10 years.

Women activists were perplexed, rather I would say all of us were jolted. Within days, Mahila Parishad held a seminar and this time demanded 150 seats for women through direct election. I personally was very happy with the proposal as I always considered that to be the most reasonable number of seats for women who constitute 50 per cent of the population and also make up half of total voters in the national election. But I was dismayed to notice the reaction of many NGOs and women activists over this issue. It seems to me that the whole thing has started again. Although everyone agreed to direct election, the number of seats again became a topic for discussion, argument and research.

In my opinion, at present, we should not be concerned that much about the numbers of seats, but rather insist on direct election. Proper representation of women should get priority in our demand as it is absolutely necessary for any real democracy. We need representatives directly elected by the voters who would be accountable to us, the taxpayers, and play a meaningful role in the Parliament for the development of the female community in the political sphere.

But the big question now is how to get the support of the politicians. We all know that to reform the law we need the cooperation of the members of Parliament and the political leaders. From our experience it is realised that seminars, workshops, human chains and representation to the authority concerned could not bring any positive result. We could not influence and convince them at all. Is it that we failed to put enough pressure to realise our demand, or could we not make them understand properly that the matter is not only a women's issue? It is an issue concerning 50 per cent of the country's population (also half of the electorate) who should be empowered with absolute and direct right to participate, act

and share in the governance of the country. The politicians must understand that a nation cannot progress until and unless all the components of society and nation progressed at the same time just like a person who cannot walk properly, let alone run, when even one of his/her major organs does not function well. For the nation of prosper it is necessary for the stronger section of help the weaker section with goodwill and determination.

By this time the politicians should have realised that they should place the issue above party interest. This is a national issue. At the same time we must find positive and effective ways to mobilise enough public opinion in favour of this electoral law reform to put pressure on the politicians to come out of their typical mind-set of downgrading women as weaker section of the community. The women activists and leaders first of all should lobby with the leaders of all political parties and meet all the MPs, try to convince and draw their attention to this issue. Somehow they are to get cooperation of one MP to introduce the Bill and enough MPs to pass it. April 2001 is not far away. To reach 300 MPs and other leaders who determine the politics of Bangladesh, women activists would need pace and immediate collective effort, they are to be united and sincere in their commitment to achieve the desired goal. Together, I am sure, they would be able to convince 300 MPs first and then the other leaders about the seriousness of the issue.

At the same time the voters should be made aware of their rights to choose their representatives (MPs) who are paid from public exchequer and who should be accountable to them directly, and be elected directly. Women no longer want to remain as toys in the hands of those members (men or women) who elect them indirectly as members of parliament. In no way would women compromise the issue as their leaders are committed to restore the position of women in the Parliament and restore the norms of democracy that has been damaged by the existing system. With impressive, forceful action programmes and wise negotiations, I am sure, all of us together would be successful in effectively bringing women to the Parliament of Bangladesh where they would be able to play a meaningful role as efficient, sincere and committed parliamentarians.

To the Editor ...

Plot to kill the PM

Sir, 76 kgs of bomb found near Prime Minister's rostrum was the headline in most of the national dailies on July 22. Every peace-loving citizen must have been really shocked to hear this news. Though such incidents like bomb planting are often heard in the neighbouring countries, it is very rare in this country. Such an attempt has really left us in depth of fear and anxiety. The attempt was made in the wake of the brutal killing of six BCL leaders in Chittagong. Regardless of the differences among the politicians, we don't want to see our leaders threatened with life. We demand that the culprits should be nabbed and the minds behind the evil design punished.

Enayetur Raheem
Dhaka

Gas export and the PM's visit to US

Sir, We cannot but be apprehensive of the outcome of the visit of our PM to the US when gas export is likely to top agenda in the Hasina-Clinton talks (DS, July 21). Although our PM has repeatedly declared that Bangladesh would consider exporting gas only after being sure of its total gas reserve and after meeting its domestic demand, some foreign oil and gas companies seem keen on gas export to India. Interestingly, the departing US ambassador Holzman has indicated that gas could lose its value if kept reserved for as long as 50 years as agreed both by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition (DS, July 21). Why will the gas lose its value in 50 years' time? Is it because of the possible invention or discovery of any alternative and cheaper source of energy? Will more gas fields be discovered all over the world? Will more petroleum be available in the international market? Or, will the mostly US-held oil and gas reserves in the

reach to higher production level to depress the world energy price?

Meanwhile, one cannot but note that the foreign gas companies have been able to muster support from a number of local economists, technocrats and trading interests on the issue of gas export and they in turn are trying to mould public opinion.

Unfortunately, they all tend to forget the Nigeria case of petroleum boom in the 1960s. This country did not reap the best out of its national resources and the Western oil interests in fact plundered the reserve before leaving the country in political and economic turmoil in the following decade. Secondly, why do our foreign friends seem so keen to export gas only to India, and not to other neighbouring countries such as Nepal, Bhutan, China and Myanmar? India is not yet tolerant or reciprocal about Bangladesh's interests on trade and tariff, transit facilities with Nepal and Bhutan (not to speak of China through Nepal), and even issues related to enclaves and related border problems. Laying a gas pipeline to India will only contribute to another political issue and might even pose as a constant security problem for both the countries.

We have come to know that a survey is being going on to lay gas pipeline to Kushtia and Khulna (the route preferred by the foreign gas companies) from the Sylhet region, and that the planned gas supply line to Rajshahi, Rangpur and Dinajpur has been shelved. Will the concerned official body provide us with a clearer picture about the actual situation?

In view of the above, we would expect that during her visit to the USA the PM will not ultimately succumb to the US pressure of gas export.

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Port problems

Sir, I have gone through the DS report on The Daily Star-BGMEA

Chittagong and Mongla Ports. The speakers have put forth short-, medium- and long-term recommendations to solve the problems of the Chittagong port. However, I am surprised that none of the speakers has said anything about the culprit that hinders smooth port operations, that is the Dock Labour Management Board.

In my opinion, the only practical way the port can regain its efficiency is by abolishing the Board, instituted during the BNP rule which allows the stevedoring firms to appoint their own dock labourers.

I would therefore appeal to the authority concerned to take this point seriously for the nation's greater interest.

Salahuddin Ayubi
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TV seminar on the print media

Sir, The BTV seminar on July 17 left me, a viewer, unmoved, and unchanged. Firstly, credibility was wanting, as BTV is fiendishly controlled by the state. Naturally, the questions arise: why is this seminar at this time? And, why no exchange of views was allowed?

The objective was diffused and generalised, and the presentations avoided the sensitive media issues of the decade (since 1991). The issue how the government, as a facilitator, was allowing the media to run independently? was not clarified at the viewer's level (the level of professional insiders is different and more technical and complex).

The next presentation may be a discussion programme, with independent and neutral co-ordinator, no holds barred, without pre-recording and live. The critical element was missing: it was all goody, goody!

A Maavaz
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