

Good News

WEARY of non-communication between the government and the opposition we are perked up at the slightest hint that they will engage themselves in a discourse on the law and order situation. Indeed we are happy to note that the Parliamentary Standing Committee on home affairs has decided to hold a full-scale discussion on the country's law and order problems. The fact that their decision is the outcome of a bipartisan understanding between MPs representing both the ruling and opposition parties on the committee makes it all the more welcome. But the only reality check that we would like to apply on 'our high hopes' for a comprehensive debate is this: it has the limitation of being held within the four walls of the committee room rather than those of a full-house parliament.

Nevertheless, the debate even in that microcosm of a parliamentary body can turn out to be rewarding for all concerned if positive attitudes are adopted to the demands for transparency, accountability and answerability in matters of governance.

The Jatiya Sangsad being in a state of paralysis owing to the opposition's abstention from it and the government's blinkered one-sided performance in it, the committee system has been virtually working as a miniature parliament.

Despite their boycott of the Jatiya Sangsad proceedings the opposition has maintained their presence at the standing committee meetings out of a bare minimum sense of obligation to their call of duty.

In all the parameters of law and order — law enforcement, security of life and property, surveillance, sabotage and de-stabilisation, administration of justice — the discussion ought to be factually-oriented and productive of corrective measures. A parliamentary standing committee is not a forum for politically acrimonious debate on any subject. On the contrary, it sits to get to the bottom of problems, send advisory notes to the relevant agencies of the government or demands explanations for omissions and commissions made by them.

As a matter of fact, we are looking forward to a kind of standing committee meeting on law and order that will be shorn of attempts by either side to steal a political march over the other. Our hope is that whilst the government party refrains from a propagandist self-eulogy the opposition party exposes the ruling party's failure not through any political rhetoric but by presenting material evidence, especially in terms of allegations of partisanship and repression on the opposition.

Still Busy with Basics

THERE seems to be a pattern in the government's response to the dengue dread. Initially, when the media set off an early alarm over outbreak of the potentially fatal disease, it was ostrich-like non-acceptance. Apparently, the government saw a link between acceptance of the news reports and admission of failure. What followed was a campaign against the newsmen which, at times, hinged on the ridiculous. Had it been an epidemic, the health minister claimed, the hospitals would have been crammed with patients. The mayor of the capital city, on the other hand, brushed aside media's concern, saying, 'had dengue infection spread at a rate newspaper reports suggest, we would by now have witnessed at least 10 to 12 lakh deaths.'

Then came grudging acceptance and concomitant anti-mosquito drive. Over-emphasis on preventive measures somehow pushed remedial concerns on to the backseat. For example, there was no stocktaking of available test-kits for dengue and thus no effort was made to replenish the public healthcare outlets' capacity. At one stage, there was a crisis of reagents required for detection of dengue virus and testing was suspended for a while. Also, the transfusion and electrolysis facilities in the capital city were not readied in case there should be a crisis. The prevalent dengue scenario, menacing as it is, one must say, is a result of delayed government reaction. In other words, it might not have assumed the crisis proportions it now has, had the health ministry reacted decisively and definitively to the first reports of dengue detection.

The fact of the matter is, while dengue keeps claiming lives — so far 14 people have been reported dead of haemorrhagic fever — the government is still busy with the basics. Lack of inter-ministerial co-ordination has left aerial spraying of insecticide to eradicate aedes mosquito shrouded in uncertainty. According to media reports, the Dhaka City Corporation is still in the wait for the go-ahead from the ministry of agriculture and the department of environment. Why so?

We want to see the DCC's planned aerial spraying of insecticide get underway. The ministerial dilly-dallying must not allow dengue to claim more lives.

Unbelievable Savagery

IT was a fateful dawn for Asia Khatoon and her two children at Pirojpur town. The mother of four was brutally killed by her own son Mahfuz who is known to be a drug addict. The young man had picked up a quarrel on the previous day with his parents who refused to foot the bill for his drug. The ruffian retaliated in the early hours when his father, a moazzin in a mosque, had gone to the mosque to call to Fajr prayers. Little did he know that on return home he would see the lifeless bodies of his wife and children left murdered by his eldest son. The three had been slaughtered by a homicidal maniac in apparent tantrums from absence of drugs. Withdrawal symptoms may have affected the young man but that does not condone his beastly and dishumanised action.

Drugs have had a destructive impact on the lives of millions of young people, rich and poor, around the globe. Youth in our country too are increasingly being exposed to drugs. Discipline has totally collapsed and we are faced with various kinds of contraband items selling in open markets and being bought by countless addicts. There are examples and instances of addicts being handed over to the police by unfortunate fathers and in more sophisticated societies addicts are sent to correctional homes, as a last resort to bring them back to normal life. The Pirojpur episode should strengthen the need for taking stern measures against people dealing in drugs. But a serial killing of kith and kin is the work of a diabolic maniac who needs to be hauled up at once and kept locked up. Stern punishment must be meted out to perpetrators of such crimes.

Voters Want More than Rhetoric and Diatribes

by M Rashiduzzaman

One would surely be eager to see leaders break the government-opposition stalemate, depoliticise the public service and restore the equilibrium of civil society vitiated by extreme partisanship. How would the parties ensure national unity and meet the long-term security needs? Do they have any concrete proposal to improve the economy and restore business confidence?

BATTERED by a terrifying crime spree and waves of grotesque political killings, Bangladesh is in more of a gloomy spell than in a euphoric hubbub expected in a country moving towards an election. What the leaders from both sides of the political aisle are spewing is little more than incendiary rhetoric; they are talking off-the-cuff without conveying serious policy messages. With the exception of the known camp followers, people are tired of cheap ploys, diatribes, unsubstantiated accusations and shallow promises. What the politicians often brag about verge on banality. The people, on the other hand, expected result-oriented proposals for better governance.

Many Bangladeshis expected a little more than what they got from the recently held special convention of the ruling Awami League; they wanted to know why they should put up with the burden of misgovernance raining down on them like a ton of bricks.

One redeeming departure was Prime Minister Hasina's partial admission that there were antisocial elements inside AL that she wanted to jettison. Better late than never! It was partly stock-taking of the ruling party; but more seriously, it was an endeavour to neutralise the rising discontent against the escalating lawlessness all over the country. Surely, it was a preparation for the anticipated election. Yet that hurriedly called AL meeting failed to kick off with a clear vision for the next election except for divulging what was already known: the AL wanted to win in the coming polls. Whatever Hasina said in that gathering was not a deliberation of future policies but largely a reiteration of the AL's well known 'Blame it on the BNP' posture. It was not the greatest political message since Sheikh Hasina became the Prime Minister of Bangladesh in 1996 except that she yielded to the urgency of shaping her party out of factional and personal strife. Yet she offered little delineation of her

programmatic goals although her political tactics were not difficult to decipher.

Behind the much-too-familiar hue, few could deny the snowballing dissatisfaction triggered by unchecked lawlessness periodically punctuated by flashes of blame floating at the highest places. Worse for the party is the dawning reality that Prime Minister Hasina cannot continuously legitimise her rule because of the historical claims and achievements of her party. Even her father's undeniable name recognition could no longer bulwark her reputation against the myriad of public enemies.

Sheikh Hasina feels that she must showcase those activities that she considers her significant achievements since she came to power. With elections not too far away, the highly emotive issues sparked by endless murder, rampant extortion, political assassinations, rapes, robberies and violent crimes cannot be quenched by controversial claims unfurled as an anti-opposition campaign. It is such disenchantment, perceived or real, that may cascade through the polling booths. No matter how pitched is the hyperbole, her government's best days, since Sheikh Hasina came to power, are behind her. For winning the next election, she has to campaign and convince that she has something better to deliver than what the people had experienced during the present Awami League government, to say the least. Considering what she confronts now and in the light of the piling discontent, Hasina will need qualitatively different messages, different from her ominous and allusive stumps including her open threats of revenge on the invisible

killers in Chittagong.

While the BNP-led opposition alliance is mobilising public demands, and while the average citizens are lamenting over governance failure, Sheikh Hasina cannot lull the people by her homilies of what she and her father had accomplished in the past. Voters are not really excited by a mythologised yore. Albeit with an eye on the future election, Sheikh Hasina has been trying to build a sense of strength among her party cadres — she has declared that she would like to win 200 legislative seats in the coming election. It's not just a benign expectation. It is known that the AL wants to capture about 50 more seats that had returned the opposition candidates in the 1996 elections, and the government is diverting its development activities to woo the voters in those areas. Without much of a public debate in the opposition-boycotted Sangsad, the government hurriedly passed the Zila Parishad Bill recently, and before that controversial appointments were made to the Election Commission both have been rejected by the BNP-led anti-government alliance. Meanwhile, it's unclear whether the AL government will go for the doubtful venture of holding the Upazila elections and the new Zila Parishad Bill will most likely be held in abeyance. Much to the discomfit of the AL, the ordinary voters cannot help conclude that the ruling party, without transparent objectives, says something but actually does something very different.

The manifest failure that Sheikh Hasina faces cannot be covered up by finger pointing at the opposition, casting aspersions

on the judiciary and declaring an open season to crush the "Islamic extremists". To convince people of her bona fide, Sheikh Hasina has to come out with more positive messages; accusations and even more accusations cannot halt her free falling credibility when the public mood is trapped in fear and distrust.

Khaleda Zia has been accused of failing to give the right kind of parliamentary leadership as she has boycotted the very Sangsad where she is expected to challenge the government with alternative ideas. But Sheikh Hasina has been less than respectful and imaginative in dealing with the opposition and its leaders. Seldom have there been debates on issues and consequently, voters are not fully aware of their stance on matters related to national and international interest. Hasina is driven by the belief that the BNP, if it runs on its own, can easily be routed with her command over organisational resources and patronage power of the ruling party. But beyond her unconcealed disdain for the BNP, she has not yet divulged how she would counter the opposition, and people want Hasina to respond to Khaleda's challenges without hurling abuses at her and without exploding rhetorical fireworks.

Is the BNP buzzing without any sting? The BNP will most likely be busy in putting its house in order, and in the next couple of months, Khaleda may not divulge much about her plan of activities. She has an incremental style of doing things. Khaleda has not accomplished a sudden paradigm shift although that perception cannot be summarily dismissed. She has recently moved to a new office in Banani where she is meeting new

faces and making plans for the future election. But, to me, the BNP is yet to find an operational phraseology to assert its new situation in politics.

While the AL is getting ready to fight the BNP tooth and nail, Khaleda has to give a new voice and an ideological face to the alliance she leads. It's an open secret that an internal bargaining is keeping the opposition partners busy. Reportedly, the Jatiya Party is asking for 100 (?) seats in the coming election, and the Islamic groups 50 (?), to be mutually worked out among the alliance partners. If such a deal is finally agreed upon, the BNP may be left with no more than 150 seats to contest that's something Khaleda may not venture to accept without displeasing many among old-time party loyalists.

Mutual sharing of seats among the political parties is not integral to parliamentary democracy but is only crafty wheeling dealing, not political gospels that herd the voters to polling centres.

Except that both the AL and the BNP are the strongest competitors of power, neither of the two main parties has, so far, seriously debated public affairs. The routine impulses to win power and the party manifesto on how they would use that anticipated authority are not the same. Inter-party and intra-party alignments and realignments are not the only keys to win elections. Presumably, Khaleda has a shadow cabinet. The comings and goings, especially at her new office in Banani, are making news, uncorking speculation and even sparking intra-party rivalries. It is obvious that the BNP is having a break from the *hartaal* bandwagon. Most likely, the opposition will return to the

streets to gain more visibility before the election but agitational politics is no substitute for sound thinking on public matters. Meanwhile, the bureaucrats-turned-politicians have not offered any new political light. One cannot help feeling that there are more new messengers from mainstream parties. One may also wonder who the party ideologues and policy strategists are, how they operate and how they prepare their policy scripts; and where the cutting edge of serious political thinking among the politicians is.

Evidently, Hasina has been relying more on the network of her relatives for political input, but such relative-brigades except repeating the usual support for their kin and, of course, blaming the opposition have delivered little policy software. No doubt, Hasina and Khaleda are toning up their parties but beyond polemics, both leaders are weak in their policy messages. Neither of them has really offered any clear picture about how they would restore law and order, eradicate terrorism, banish extortion and above all, reinstate confidence in public life. One would surely be eager to see leaders break the government-opposition stalemate, depoliticise the public service and restore the equilibrium of civil society vitiated by extreme partisanship. How would the parties ensure national unity and meet the long-term security needs? Do they have any concrete proposal to improve the economy and restore business confidence?

None of the parties would be able to sustain its organisational revamping and none of them would inspire public trust without clearer signals on the questions that affect the voters most.

People want to see some light at the end of the tunnel.

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Information Technology

Ardeshir Cowasjee writes from Karachi

Information technology and the Internet are controlled by the antiquated inefficient Pakistan Telecommunications Company Limited which is overstuffed, and is incapable of even publishing a telephone directory which lists current information.

countries put together is half that of Germany and a quarter of that of Japan in spite of the fact that in the birth of the country been the last on the lists of priorities of all our governments. The majority of the ministers who have been given the education and science and technology portfolios have not been unconnected, with either the field of education or of science and technology but have largely been uneducated men, the word 'uneducated' being here used in the profound sense of the word. For instance, in the last two governments, the second for both Benazir and Nawaz, Benazir's federal education minister was one Khurshid Shah, building contractor by profession, and Nawaz's, of all people, the proven corrupt and uncouth Ghous Ali Shah. And this in a land where the world's first university was established in 700 BC at Taxila, the ruins of which still stand at a few miles distance from the capital city.

By comparison, the government of General Pervez Musharraf has chosen an educationist as its education minister and the science and technology portfolio has been handed over to a scientist, Professor Dr Atta-ur-Rahman. Professor Rahman, in a speech delivered at Islamabad 21 July, told his audience that "good governance is not possible without there being a merit-based challenging education system." If Pakistan wishes to forge ahead, he rightly said, education must be the main priority. Worthy of remark is the startling fact that the total GDP of all the Islamic

Dean of LUMS: Asghar Dawood Habib, Chairman Habib Sugar.

These men have been asked to provide an undertaking one clause of which states: "I am not a defaulter in repayment of any loan amounting to Rs 1 million or more as adjudicated by a court of competent jurisdiction or a tribunal within the meaning of Section 187(1) of the Companies Ordinance 1984." This ipso facto means that if one of them is a defaulter to the tune of Rs 999,999 he is qualified to sit on the board. Another undertaking stipulates: "I shall, to the utmost of my capability, ensure and safeguard the interests of the government in PTCL during the tenure of my directorship. Any lapse shall make me liable to be proceeded against under the relevant laws."

With due respect to all, it is difficult to conceive of a respectable responsible individual putting his pen to either of these two undertakings. After all, there is no compulsive reason, no guns are held to any heads. Should they not be guided by the dictates of their consciences and what is good for the people?

More bad news. PTCL is establishing two National Access Points (NAP) in Karachi and Islamabad to block Internet telephony and pornographic websites. (APP, July 13.)

The NAP aims at directing all Internet traffic in and out of the country through two PTCL controlled gateways. Whilst this is still a proposal, it is increasingly

obvious that elements within PTCL, with the tacit support of our insecurity agencies and other government elements, are trying to push it through as fast as possible.

This must be vehemently opposed. It is fundamentally faulty and has the potential to cause catastrophic damage to the information infrastructure of the country.

One fundamental and obvious principle of network design is the provision of multiple pathways. The more pathways there are, the more robust the resulting network. To some extent we already have this redundancy in our existing Internet access, but rather than introducing additional pathways to the Net, the NAP proposal aims at reducing these to two choke points to be controlled by our very own PTCL, an organization renowned for its unreliability, inefficiency, incompetence, and zero-level customer service.

Within the next few years, global services will permit direct satellite access. If the NAP logic is followed, these services would also be illegal in Pakistan. Is this what a country endeavouring to leapfrog into the information age should be doing?

NAP also raises the question: are we serious about attracting foreign investment in information technology (IT) when we have an organization intent on controlling and dictating as to which pathways the people may use to access the net? Even the rela-

tively totalitarian UAE now allows direct rooftop-to-satellite Internet connectivity, completely bypassing the Etisalat Infrastructure. And here we are, pro-

posing the reverse.

PTCL itself admits that it has no way in which it can estimate the revenue lost to Internet telephony.

The number being thrown around is \$ 2.8 million per year which is at best an exaggerated guesstimate, and a figure which amounts to less than a fifth of one per cent of PTCL's total revenue. Is this minuscule loss sufficient justification to thwart and sabotage a national objective the swift expansion of IT in Pakistan?

With two years to go until PTCL's monopoly expires, is it not time that it started to experience the real world, where markets dictate tariffs, where better technologies replace the obsolete, where customers decide what services to use, where only the efficient and competent survive?

The ball is in the court of Minister Herr Doktor Professor Atta-ur-Rahman, in charge of information technology and of the dreadful PTCL. Academically, he was a First Division student, he has a PhD and a Sc D from King's College, Cambridge, of which college he was a Fellow from 1969 to 1973 when he was discovered by one of the greatest scientists of Pakistan, Dr Salimuzzaman Siddiqui, and brought to the HEJ Research Institute of Chemistry at the Karachi University.

At HEJ he was responsible for buying certain equipment from Japan. When the Japanese offered him a kickback of around Rs 25 million, he asked them to donate the amount to his Institute, which they did. He is a cousin of the people's barrister, Mohammad Gilbert Naim-ur-Rahman, and grandson of our good judge, Sir Abdur Rahman.

We can surely trust him to take the right decision as to NAP or no NAP. He would surely rather continue to merely direct the affairs of HEJ, which he still does, than to additionally remain a minister and do wrong.

mark time in the flow of life. I myself feel that 'Mothers or Father's Day often signal a culmination of one's trials and struggles; it is the touch of love returned, acceptance of obligations and acknowledgment of what is done for you.'

A Mother, from the conception of a little life to its bloom, works to nurture and protect it. She sacrifices many things and even loses something in order to give her offspring a contented, successful happy and healthy future. She may not voice her pain, or complain, for the many hours and days she may have spent in giving life and a future to her 'creations', yet she must yearn for a sign of a touch that whispers gratitude with love or respect.

Even a proffered symbol or token of acknowledgment can make a mother forget her pains and bask in the warmth of recognition.

The day I woke up to the loving smile of my daughter and son who stepped into my room with bouquet and smiled to wish me 'Happy Mother's Day', remains a memorable one for me. I still feel the warmth of love and recognition around me. I am enclosed in the wonder of the love of my children who remembered to say 'thank you' to me remebering the day which is set aside to honour mothers. It was a moment which filled me with a sense of achievement and reminded me that all the trials and sacrifice were worth it.

Inrana Shahidullah Gulshan2, Dhaka

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.

Dengue drive

Sir, Dengue fever which is caused by the infected *aedes aegypti* type of mosquito is taking a serious turn. Almost everyday we read news about deaths and an alarming rise in the number of patients being admitted in various hospitals and clinics. There have been many write-ups about how to diagnose and treat dengue cases. However, I feel one very important factor has been neglected and that is prevention. The key factor in any epidemic (or endemic) is prevention and control. But it is very sad that the government, in its endeavour to downplay the seriousness of the disease is providing misleading information. We know that it is not possible for the government alone to combat the spread of this disease, it has to be a whole-hearted united effort. Each and every individual should come forward to