

Show Some Action

WHEN action is all we need to save Dhaka from an imminent-looking environmental disaster, talk of committee formation and study plan is bound to sound out of date.

There have been studies sponsored by the Asian Development Bank, UNDP and World Bank into the vital aspects of urban life with useful recommendations emanating from time to time making up quite a repository of knowledge on the subject we can fall back on in case of any need.

We are not trivialising the need for study, especially when eminent citizens are likely to be associated with the endeavour. Nevertheless, the point we would like to drive home as far as the government, the ministries of environment local government and public works and the Rajuk are concerned is that they better show some action now after their unparadonable, Rip Van Winkle sleep.

Regulate Acid Supply

DESPITE the provision for capital punishment against acid throwers incidence of the crimes, especially on women, is alarmingly on the rise. Only in the month of July 2000, there were as many as twenty-five such reported cases according to statistics provided by the human rights organisation named 'Odhikar'.

The acid throwers could be proceeded against for violation of law there is hardly any effective rule against or control over the sale of acids in the open market and as this dangerous chemical is easily available, miscreants can always use them at will on their targets.

Disaster Management

GIVEN the reality of recurring disasters visiting her Bangladesh by now should have had a disaster management plan in hand capable of meeting any exigency. But obviously we are yet to have one.

A day-long consultative workshop on "Disasters and Livelihoods" was held on Monday by representatives of some non-government and private organisations, who emphasised the need for creating awareness among rural people in mitigating disasters like arsenic contamination, flood and river erosion.

The most immediate step, in managing disaster, should be to bolster the forecasting system and mapping the vulnerable areas. This will go a long way in minimising the loss of life and property incurred every year.

After the Kashmir Ceasefire: Reviving the Peace Process

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

The ceasefire has been aborted. But the whole episode is still a gain. To build upon it, New Delhi must adopt a conciliatory stand and Islamabad must sincerely welcome a dialogue. It would be premature to demand Pakistan's participation today. The Vajpayee government is not yet ready.

However, the "16-day wonder" showed:

* Many people in the Valley now see a ray of hope in peace, not war.

* A new divide is opening up within the azaadi movement between those with a pan-Islamic, Jehadi agenda and those with a political agenda.

* Even the meaning of azaadi (from greater autonomy within India, to full nationhood) is open to discussion.

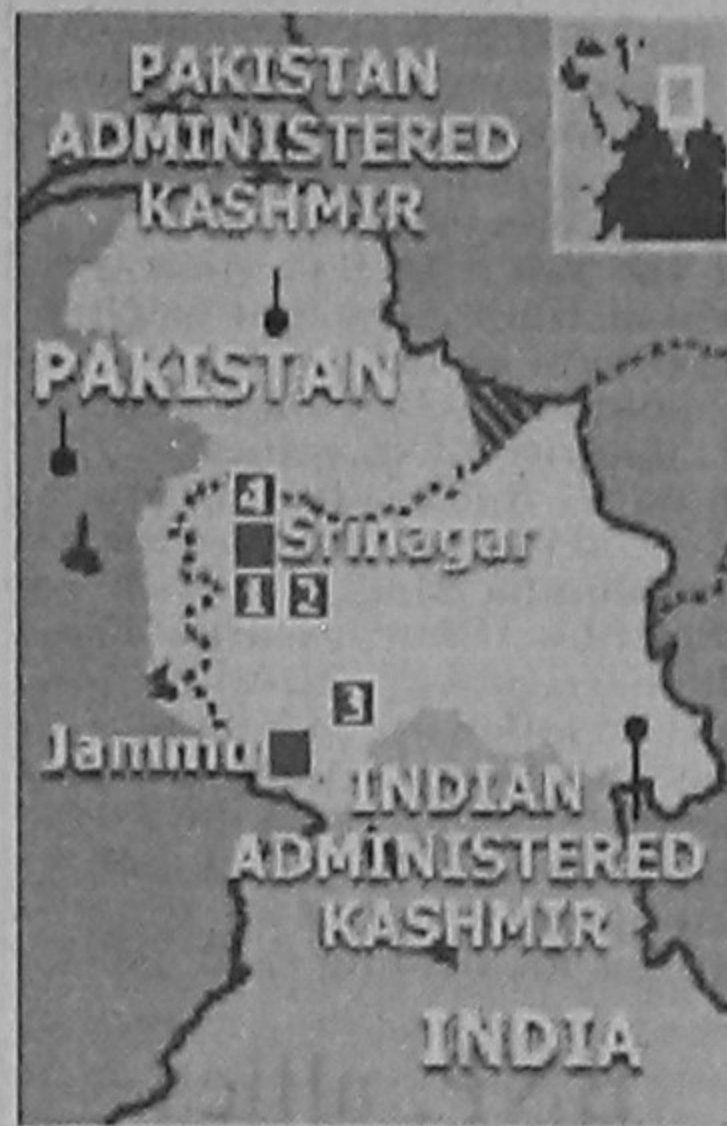
* There is a wider political-level consensus on a dialogue with HM than even on the National Conference's "autonomy" demand.

* The great symbolic importance of Messrs Vajpayee, Mulayam Singh and Somnath Chatterjee and Ms Sonia Gandhi all showing up in Pahalgam should not be lost.

* Even hysterical elements in the sangh parivar did not condemn the dialogue outright until August 8.

* People welcomed the cessation of violence while it lasted. Army and HM personnel even played a cricket match in Kupwara.

True, some of these developments were symbolic. But



symbols do matter e.g. the Lahore bus. Symbols of peace and reconciliation now have a chance to replace symbols of war and confrontation.

This could hopefully produce the aman (peace) people crave for. The time is ripe for a de facto ceasefire. If the government goes the extra mile, it can regain the initiative HM lost by unrealistically insisting on Pakistan's involvement in the

talks at this stage.

HM's ceasefire didn't come out of the blue, but followed Track-II level contacts over six months between Hurriyat leaders, militants, Vajpayee-appointed mediators like R.K. Mishra and M.K. Rasgotra, and US-based Kashmiris like Farooq Kathwari, Ghulam Nabi Fai and Mansoor Ejaz.

By all indications, the US played a crucial, if quiet, role in nudging all concerned towards a dialogue. As did Pakistan through Jamaat-Islami's Qazi Husain Ahmed. Islamabad's support didn't reflect a change of heart, but a hard-nosed strategy to overcome the Kargil stigma.

India too probably reckoned that a "reasonable" posture would help Mr Vajpayee's Washington visit. New Delhi today lacks a well-conceived J&K strategy. But to its credit, it has explored multi-pronged approaches. It stepped beyond its declared agenda. The Hizb too opted for the ceasefire probably impelled by popular exhaustion with violence in the Valley.

These calculations may be cynical, but they created a thaw which can loosen the 11-year-long J&K gridlock. One welcome result is the de-linking of the Kashmir militancy from the ISI

founded on "fear and suspicion" alone.

A change in such attitudes can only come gradually. But within its multi-pronged approach, the government must open up a sincere dialogue with all currents of Kashmiri opinion. What matters today is less the product, more the process.

However, New Delhi must accept three premises. First, the Kashmir problem's roots lie in messy decolonisation, enormously complicated especially by New Delhi's repeated betrayal of its own Constitutional and political promises.

Second, it is imperative for Indian forces to reduce their offensive operations and respect human rights which they brazenly violate. Today, a quarter-million troops confront less than five million civilians in Kashmir. This is the biggest cause of popular alienation.

Finally, the strategy of doing devious deals and "buying peace" in Nagaland now stands exhausted. The government must stop toying with J&K's trifurcation. It shouldn't play off Kashmiris against one another or try to split HM.

Good faith has never been more important. New Delhi can best demonstrate it by re-establishing a ceasefire. This Herculean task will need extraordinary generosity and statesmanship.

Anatomy of a Coup: A Journey of a Quarter Century

The morning Mujib and much of his family were killed, the figure installed by the young majors as President was Khondakar Mustaque, generally considered to be the representative of the rightist faction within Mujib's Awami League. After the putsch, Mustaque remained impeccably reticent about any part he personally might have played in Mujib's downfall. He neither confirmed nor denied his prior involvement. He simply avoided any public discussion of the question and desperately attempted to stabilize his regime.



Ziaur Rahman, more than six months prior to the actual coup.

Of course, these were not the only crucial meetings taking place during 1974 and 1975. According to our senior American Embassy source, officials at the American Embassy were approached by people intending to overthrow the government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. This source stated that a series of meetings took place with Embassy personnel between November 1974 and January 1975. These discussions were held with the purpose of determining the attitude of the US Government towards a political change in Bangladesh if a coup d'etat were actually to happen.

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Continued from Tuesday

THE "official story" that emerged at the time was that six junior officers with three hundred men under their command had acted on their own in overthrowing Mujib. The motives for the coup were attributed to a mixture of personal grudges held by certain of the officers against Mujib and his associates, together with a general mood of frustration at widespread allegations of corruption among elements within the Mujib government.

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In June 1976, nearly a year after Mujib had been killed and eight months after Mustaque had himself been thrown out of the presidency by another military upheaval, I interviewed

Mustaque for three hours at his residence in old Dhaka. He denied to me any knowledge of the coup plan or prior meeting with the army majors who carried out the action. Mustaque claimed that he was as surprised as everyone else on the morning of the 15th, and had acceded to the major's request to assume the Presidency only to avoid further bloodshed in the country. "When they came to my house that morning," Mustaque told me, "I thought they had also come to kill me. I was completely surprised when they asked me to become President." The man was lying.

The Majors and their associates ultimately told a very differ-

ent story which was at wide variance with Mustaque's account. In a series of interviews conducted from exile in London for British television in August 1976 by The Sunday Times journalist, Anthony Mascarenhas, the Majors claimed they were in direct contact with Mustaque in the weeks prior to the coup.

Major Rashid told Mascarenhas, "I had the first contact with him [Mustaque] around the first week of August and subsequently met him on the 13th and 14th." However, Rashid's public statements to Mascarenhas about his contact with Mustaque was itself only partially true. Prior meetings between Mustaque and the

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.

Executive jets!

Sir, I was shocked and aghast to read the DS news item of 13 August that the 'PM and President' of one of the poorest countries "may have private exclusive jets". What an irony of fate, the flag carrier Biman could not procure a brand new jet for its normal and commercial flight, and instead someone could propose jets for the executive of the state!

Thus the politicians are cooped into a fence from where they simply cannot deliver. Politics has now to be technologically oriented and the politicians have to think of the people through the technical essential services, without concentrating on the sentimental hearts of the people. Keep the heart in its place, and jog the marathon chasing the projects, not the people.

A Citizen Dhaka

Weak political system

Sir, The glaring and lingering human systems losses in the two major public sectors, namely the electricity (inadequate transmission system and corruption in billing) and telecoms (new telephone connections and data services), are a cue that weak political systems cannot operate the public services efficiently (the weak is defined by the people, not the party itself).

Secondly, in the global village concept, the foreign donor agencies have stopped, or will not sponsor BMRE projects without

private tie-ups. The North control the finance and the technology, and the political dilemma is how to be in tune with the sharks and face the Janata (mass).

The only super power is hell bent on stripping materialistic capitalism of every ounce of meat, when the growth rate in the industrialised countries is bowing down steadily (the gesture is not a peace overture). The first world is prospecting for its markets in the third world; and Dhaka only knows too well how strong is the arm twisting by the power and energy MNCs, with the powerful backing of western foreign policies.

Lack of accountability in public sector in administration, management and balance sheets is a recurring image in the third world. Add to this political instability and lack of political will (also add lack of consensus) and the negative behaviour pattern of the CBAs.

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The politicians have to depend less on slogans and the civil service, and get down to solid foundation reforms. This cannot be done if the political parties (with glorious past histories) are weak, and surrounded by sycophants, opportunists, hidden godfathers and vested groups. Charisma is neither an exchangeable commodity nor investment.

A Frustrated Citizen Dhaka

Funny leadership

Sir, The ruling party is a funny party, in that it believes in 'ruling by substitution' transferring the accusation to the opposition time and again. There is no human party in the universe which cannot commit any mistake, as, to err is human.

The giant IBM, with half a dozen million-dollar consulting firms, made silly mistakes in

reading the market in the early 1980s and lost the PC market to clones. What it lost on profit was a gain for the mass penetration of computers in the home front a revolution, hastening the advent of the IT Age.

Political leadership should display marginal oversights and not severe symptoms of inferiority complex, which is not enhancing the image of the party leaders. This type of proxy governance will simply not do, and the voters can see through the game.

What has happened to moral courage in this nation? Are the future generations being reared in an environment of cowardliness? Admit your mistake and face it; before others force the issue. Bangladesh has always been betrayed by its weak leadership.

Dense Citizen Dhaka

Whither Palestinian State?

Sir, It is indeed unfortunate for the Palestinians that the Middle East Peace Process has reached a crucial stage at a time when President Clinton is about to end his term of the US presidency and he would not like to take any measure which might be construed as pro-Palestinian. Not only that he would very much like to leave a pro-Israeli action programme as his legacy. Probably that is why he has already announced his decision to move the US Embassy from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem, adding to the resolve of the Israeli government to keep the entire Jerusalem under their control. Further, he has threatened the Palestinians to cut off aid if they went ahead with unilateral declaration of Independence by Sept 13, 2000.

The fact that the Israeli government of Ehud Barak is surviving on a day to day basis and may be replaced by a more hard-line government in the next election which may take place within the next three months or so, is a matter of grave consequences for the Palestinians. A new President in the US and a hard-line government in Israel would probably delay the Peace Process at least for a couple of years. In the meantime, there will be more settlements in the occupied West Bank and more resistance to giving up any territory for peace deal!

It is all the more unfortunate that the Palestinians are entirely dependent on the whims of the US government and the US Congress in realising their cherished

dream of a Palestinian state. But United States has ceased to play an objective role in this case. During the tenure of Secretary of State Warren Christopher, Israel was given assurance that US would never pressurise it to cede any territory to the Palestinians for the peace deal. Thereafter, sometime ago while speaking before a Jewish audience, the present Secretary of State Mrs Albright told them that US would continue to support and defend the interests of Israel "as long as the sun rose in the east." Such unconditional and blind support has made Israel all the more arrogant and intransigent in their dealings with the Palestinians. Despite the fact that Israel is the strongest military power in the region, it would not allow the Palestinians even the basic weapons to maintain law and order in the areas where they have autonomy. They even decide the strength of the Palestinian security force! Such is the plight of the Palestinian authority in the autonomous areas. But this must end and the Palestinian deserve a sovereign state of their own.

It is ironic that whereas Israel itself was created by the UN in 1948 after evicting thousands of Palestinians from the then Palestine, it should now object to the establishment of a Palestinian state in their own land! Lest we forget, those evictees are still surviving in the refugee camps of Lebanon, Jordan and elsewhere. In such circumstances Israel has no legal or oral authority to object to the creation of an independent state for the Palestinians.

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"A Hidden Agenda"

Sir, Attention of the authorities is drawn to the analysis "A Hidden Agenda" (DS Aug 10) on the debatable issue of natural gas reserves in Bangladesh, which is linked to the feasibility of future gas export.

While the presence of US Geological Survey Team is welcome as an observer, and for studies in the office, independent non-US agencies may be directly involved in the field survey on gas reserve assessment. The US big name business operators will be dominating in the later bidding, when such offers are invited by the GoB.

AMA Dhaka

OPINION

India and Her Neighbours

Abul M Ahmad

Most Bangladeshis will appreciate Mahfuz Anam's write-up which appeared in The Times of India on Aug 3 (reproduced in the DS of Aug 6). Now the Indian readers will get a representative view of how Bangladesh looks at the big neighbour India. This review is necessary on priority basis to improve the stalled Indo-Bangladesh relationship, based on pride, prejudice, traditions, and misconceptions. The after-effects of the Partition (1947) are still generating tremors of the wrong kind, now compounded by the independence of 1971. Change has to be mentally accepted in a flexible manner, not through rigid stands decade after decade. Sometimes the hoary oak has to be willowy.

But New Delhi is too obsessed with the Pakistan (and China) bogeys, to be able to divert sufficient attention to the small neighbours. This patronising and dismissive attitude is not liked by the citizens of the smaller neighbours.

SAARC cannot take off, unless India, the biggest and the most powerful member, is more accommodating; and the initiative has to be generated from New Delhi. The region cannot develop and prosper with the present mindset of the members. India has to take the lead in finding a solution, and she is hesitating, decade after decade. There are reasons for the insurgency in NE India; as nothing is isolated.

Now, there appears to be an inclination to thaw the Kashmir issue, certainly due to some kind of diplomatic pressure (on both Pakistan and India) from certain powerful global quarters, perhaps to create seamless borders in South Asia for encouraging international and regional trade and other business relations. The Kashmir issue has to come down from a prestige and face-saving issue to that of a pragmatic regional diplomacy,

beneficial to one and a half billion people. Four parties are now required, to solve the Kashmir carbuncle: the Kashmiris, India, Pakistan, and international cooperation.

India has to live with the reality that two of its neighbours have Muslim majority populations, and that both of the nations are separate and independent. The bogey of a 'second Pakistan' in Bangladesh has to go, in the minority lobbies both in Dhaka and New Delhi. The second point to remember is that the global powers would like to contain future super-power India indirectly through buffer independent and 'neutral' states around India. It is an open secret that the US is looking for a base in South Asia and the Bay of Bengal; and had earlier earmarked Tricomalee; and how far the insurgency in Sri Lanka is linked to that issue is anybody's guess. The US needs Bangladesh, for more than one reason.

Bangladesh, in the years to come, will be developing fast, and its presence in the region cannot be ignored and brushed aside by the neighbours, big or small. The economic approach is likely to dwarf the background religious issues, as economic freedom comes first in this poverty-stricken region. The politicians and the political parties and leaders have to be more outward-looking, for establishing more benevolent regional ties. Some believe in 'survival politics' the global village will not allow it.

At present Islamabad is in a rather helpless position; New Delhi has too many loose ends to tie up; and in Dhaka the influence of bipolar politics may diminish in the near future, encouraging the entry into the take-off stage; while Colombo is desperately trying to come up with alternatives.

Once all these man-made knots are untangled, the sun will rise in South Asia once again.