

## Body-blow to Chittagong

LATELY Chittagong has been caught in a web of strikes, which even by her standard proclivity to shut-downs, looks more coiled up than anything she has had the misfortune of experiencing before. Rocked by five hartals in the month of August alone, the *de facto* economic capital and the premier port city of the country looked extremely vulnerable to trouble in the eye of foreign investors.

A close look at the stuff of which the hartals were made would prove the point. On August 7 a half-day hartal was enforced in protest against a terrorist attack on Jatiya Party city unit chief Jahangir Alam; on the 20th a transport strike took place in reaction to fuel price hike; on the 21st dockers abstained from work paralysing Chittagong port; on the 23rd there was standstill for half a day owing to opposition four-party alliance's countrywide strike in reaction to the killing of a BNP-leaning lawyer in Dhaka; and on the 24th SKOP dragged the whole city into a hartal just to highlight their demands for reopening the towel factories at CEPZ and reinstatement of 15 workers expelled from the industries earlier on. As if the spate of hartals in August was not enough we have seen the first week of the current month ending on a strike curiously called for 'the release of the convener, Chittagong Islami Oikya Jote unit'.

The pattern of strikes shows that Chittagong has become the prime target of all sorts of body-blows being inflicted by diverse quarters, political parties, professional groups and trade unions.

We do not have even a modicum of understanding as to the kind of negative signal all this is sending to foreign investors, EPZ exporters, importers and the shippers vis-a-vis our tall claim that Bangladesh is emerging as 'a favoured destination' of foreign investment.

Either the politicians and labour union leaders help repair this badly battered image of Chittagong by a hands-off policy or we face the backlash of reduced investment as well as declining prospects of future investment, both local and foreign.

## Mass Arsenic Poisoning

THE World Health Organisation (WHO)'s latest warning that Bangladesh faces "the largest mass poisoning of a population in history because of groundwater used for drinking has been contaminated with naturally occurring inorganic arsenic" comes with dreadful statistics. Between 33 and 77 million of the country's 125 million-strong population are at a mortal danger of taking in a high level of arsenic through the water they drink and use everyday, the study by a professor of epidemiology at the University of California at Berkeley, published in WHO's monthly bulletin, warned. We are looking into the eye of an environmental disaster "greater than any seen before." It is not that the WHO alarm should catch us unawares, although it must certainly have caught us unprepared to meet the exigency. We all know that people have died, are dying and will die of diseases caused by sustained exposure to arsenic-contaminated water. However, in the midst of conflicting reports, we have perhaps nurtured a faint hope that the threat has not assumed any menacing magnitude. Now, we know for sure that it has.

Popular perception is that the government has been sluggish to react to the alarm set off by the hydrologists in the neighbouring country way back in 1985. Thousands upon thousands of deep tube-wells were installed with the UNICEF's help in the rural areas to supply safe potable water, thereby eliminating the risk of widespread waterborne diseases. However, we should have anticipated the consequences of groundwater overuse. We may have crossed the stage of finger pointing. At this point in time, what we need is decisive and definitive action.

The only way to avoid arsenicosis is to stop using arsenic-contaminated water. We understand that UNICEF and DPHE have been on a comprehensive testing and marking campaign whereby tube-wells extracting 'poisoned' water are being red-marked so that people don't use these anymore. The World Bank and UNICEF have already channelled more than 34 million US dollars for developing alternative sources of water supply. Surface water treatment and rainwater harvesting have been two major options. There have been reports that despite warnings people still use water from contaminated tube-wells, primarily for convenience, which means they are not convinced of the danger such a practice has on offer. Therefore, alongside research and development equal, if not more, emphasis should be put on dissemination of information and sensitisation.

## No Compromise on Quality

TO the students' disquiet and immense tutorial loss, the primary school teachers are on a strike. The crisis is now said to be awaiting prime ministerial intervention on her return from New York. But then it could be only reactive to the political fact that opposition leader and some of her colleagues would have attended the agitating teachers' rally yesterday as per an earlier schedule. The primary school teachers who are drawing 60 to 80 per cent of their basic salary from the government are now demanding full payment from the national treasury. After the government signed an agreement with the high school teachers who observed a 45-day strike to get an assurance for the payment of 90 per cent of their basic salary from the government coffer, the primary-level teachers feel inspired to follow their footsteps. What is being affected in the process is the country's education system which is already beset with problems of declining standards and quality. The teachers don't seem to understand that young learners are being deprived of their help which is essential for their future. As it is, we average not even 500 hours of classroom instructions to the students in an academic year to the exclusion of holidays and vacations. Strikes make matters even worse.

If experience is any guide, nationalisation in the education sector has not helped improve the quality of education. On the contrary, what we have had is poor quality teaching leading to cheating at the examination halls. Our advice to both the teachers and the government is that their aim must be to upgrade the state of education in the country. Any compromise on the quality of education must be done away with.

## World Leaders Should Strive to Find Answers

UN Summit 2000 provided a forum for the members of the Security Council, including its five permanent members, to reaffirm their commitment to the noble principles on which the organisation was founded....The UN is finding it increasingly difficult to translate those principles into practice.

IN 1960 the Greatest Show on Earth and UN 2000—the Millennium Summit. These two great events of our times are truly revealing how the world has changed in 40 years. It is breathtaking.

In 1960 it was not even a structured summit at the UN. Nikita Khrushchev, the leader of the Soviet Union suddenly descended in New York in September 1960 at the UN General Assembly session and raised a veritable storm. The Soviet Union was one of the two superpowers along with the USA. Yet such was the attraction of the Soviet Union that leaders of the entire world came to the UNGA. Great leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru of India, President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, President Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia, Fidel Castro of Cuba, Ahmed Soekarno of Indonesia, to name only a few came to the UNGA. The western camp was dumbfounded by the show of strength of the Soviet Union and some western leaders attending the UNGA session including the President of the USA.

The Soviet Union had prepared the ground well. Shortly before the UNGA meeting she had launched the first man in orbit and Yuri Gagarin, the astronaut, had been paraded through the vast halls of the UN like a conquering hero. The Third World, which was a powerful force on the world stage, showered effusive praises to the success of the Soviet Union in the field of space travel. The world appeared in the palm of Soviet Union's hand.

Armed with the success of global diplomacy Khrushchev

launched his proposal that rather than a single Secretary General of the UN, the world organisation should be in the hands of a troika composed of world powers and of course the Soviet Union in the driver's seat. Falling to make any headway in the vast organisation,

Khrushchev launched a trade against the suave Swedish diplomat Dag Hammarskjöld, the Secretary General and as good as blackballed him from reelection. That became unnecessary because Hammarskjöld, died in a plane crash in the jungles of Congo, newly independent former colony of Belgium.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the UN Millennium Summit.

## The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman

Pakistan was represented by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, in his early thirties and the youngest Minister in the cabinet of Field Marshal Ayub Khan, the President. Young and enthusiastic Bhutto made it a point to visit nearly all the great leaders including Khrushchev. He was like a school boy hunting autographs of world leaders.

Bhutto was determined to make his mark in the world media. Since I was the Press Attaché of the Pakistan Mission to the UN in New York, Bhutto singled me out to launch him in the media. We were about the same age and he was determined to demonstrate that he was the boss. I had excellent contact in the media of the

UN and persuaded a journalist friend of the Herald Tribune to print a story on the front page concerning Bhutto's negotiations with the Soviet Union in the field of mining. Pakistan was one of the most loyal allies of the US and Bhutto's hobnobbing with the Soviet Union was frowned upon. This made news. Yet it did not satisfy Bhutto because his photo did not accompany the story! It was futile to explain to Bhutto that he was competing with the biggest newsmakers of the world.

The Millennium summit is a specially convened meeting of the world leaders. Whereas in 1960 the number of UN members did not exceed one hundred, in the year 2000, that number is approaching 200. The most remarkable development of the end of the 20th century is the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the US as the solo superpower. The tension of 1960 is totally absent and in order to make the event newsworthy, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan had to start the proceedings with the banging of a gong. The speeches are ritualistic. The important event of the summit is the Palestine-Israel dialogue. In fact President Bill Clinton dwelt on this subject and called upon all the 150 leaders present to bring to bear their collective weight in order to find a solution. He also insisted on the fact that 'time was fleeting away. Chair-

man Yasser Arafat of Palestine and Ehud Barak, Prime Minister of Israel did not budge from their respective stand on the question of Jerusalem. The only unanswered question is the announcement by Yasser Arafat of the declaration of Independent State of Palestine on 13 September. In the absence of a settlement of the entire Palestine-Israel dispute, it is difficult to see how it would advance the cause of the Palestinians.

UN Summit 2000 provided a forum for the members of the Security Council, including its five permanent members, to reaffirm their commitment to the noble principles on which the organisation was founded 55 years ago. The UN is finding it increasingly difficult to translate those principles into practice. Among very important reasons, one is the shortage of funds. Yet in the recent past the UN has been involved more and more in peace keeping operations and sometimes has been drawn into military operations.

In the age of globalization, the UN fulfils a useful role. Thanks to the fast spread of communications, the role of the UN is bound to grow. The great powers will have to eschew the tendency of bypassing this world body, when it is inconvenient. The gap between the technologically developed countries and those trying to catch up is widening dangerously. The world leaders will have to find an answer to this great challenge.

## Dynastic Rule in South Asia

# Are People Euphoric about Political Families?

Given the history and the nature of politics that one can conceive of in the coming days, politics in dynastic line will continue to be there in several south Asian countries.

Two not so important but otherwise significant developments have taken place in two south Asian countries in recent days. Both are related to dynastic politics of the respective nations. In India, the largest country of the region, a son was born the other day to the daughter of slain former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi and the enthusiastic supporters immediately saw in him a future leader and even a prime minister of the country! In the island state of Sri Lanka, an ageing political leader quit the prime ministership on health grounds and it was seen as the end of a colourful long innings by a lady whose family is firmly entrenched in the politics of the country since its inception. The two developments in India and Sri Lanka relating to political families attracted discussions and speculations in a region where two other main countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan also to a considerable extent fit in the context of dynastic trend in the pattern of governance. All these countries barring Pakistan at the moment are practising democracy and incidentally as well as interestingly, this trend of family politics largely centre on big political parties which generally enjoy popular support.

Priyanka, daughter and elder of the two children of Rajiv Gandhi, gave birth to her first child when her mother Sonia Gandhi, the main opposition leader in India, was present there to celebrate. Her son is the latest linkage of the famous 'Nehru' family that crept into Indian politics during the British days with Motilal Nehru playing a key role in the Indian independence movement and his son Jawaharlal Nehru took a more

active and eventually became the first prime minister of independent India and remained at the helm till his death in 1964. His daughter Indira Gandhi, already a Congress president, was a minister in Lal Bahadur Shastri's cabinet and later became prime minister after Shastri's death. She had two sons and both joined politics but met with violent deaths. Younger Sanjay died first in a stunt plane crash after Indira Gandhi staged a comeback to power in 1980. He was then a general secretary of the Congress but held no official position. Sanjay was considered as the heir apparent of Indira Gandhi but his sudden death brought elder Rajiv into politics. He quit his job as an airlines pilot. He became prime minister, lost power and was killed in a bomb blast in southern India by Sri Lankan Tamil separatists when he was campaigning as the opposition leader before elections. His death saw absence of Nehru family in politics for several years as his widow was Italian-born and daughter Priyanka and son Rahul were still not much grown up. Eventually, wife Sonia Gandhi joined politics, became the Congress president and now the leader of opposition in parliament having won elections in debut late last year.

But she faces adverse situation when the critics say, a 'foreigner' cannot adorn high offices like president and prime minister, although Indian constitution has no such bar.

Whether she succeeds in becoming a premier is a matter of discussion. But when her daughter Priyanka gave birth to a son,

the latest in the dynasty is believed to have arrived and it has even triggered such speculations as when he would join politics! An astrologer said he would join public life at the age of 22 and may reach the zenith of success. Congress supporters are exultant about the new-born as they are not much hopeful about prospects of Priyanka or her brother Rahul making much success in politics though they give support to mother Sonia. Sanjay's wife Maneka Gandhi is in politics but

first prime minister, was assassinated soon after the nation's independence, and was head of the government. Their Freedom Party was out of power for a long time until 1994 when it returned to the helm in coalition with others called People's Alliance (PA). She called it a day because of frail health but her estranged son, who is at loggerheads with sister President, alleged that the mother was forced to step down. Freedom Party will continue to rely on president Chandrika who is in her

countries often swapping positions between ruling and opposition parties. And this is more pronounced in a country like India where the population is almost one hundred crore! This is also often asked whether real democracy exists within such political parties. May or may not be. But the whole issue is sensitive in nature and normally partymen are shy of speaking on these. Some blindly support the dynastic tendencies, saying it is necessary because most partymen are emotionally involved with a particular leader or leaders of a family. They also argue others can come to the front but leadership quality is important which is the main criterion of a person regardless of having a dynastic legacy or not.

However, insiders in the party also give vent to their feelings in a muted manner at times disapproving the trend while critics come down heavily on the trend. For instance, critics of Congress in India wonder why the organisation fails to find someone to rely on from among many experienced and dedicated leaders other than from Nehru family? It is often said that inner democracy seldom exists in parties which depend on legacy politics. Some senior party leaders quit the organisation disapproving Sonia's leadership. Then again, there are strong impressions that legacy of top leaders helps a political organisation.

Arguably, there is nothing wrong if a political party in any country relies on the charisma of a leader and seeks to derive benefits from that image by bringing in

leaders from that family. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are such examples in the region. Whether it is Indian Congress, Pakistan People's Party or Muslim League (Kulsum Nawaz playing a role with husband being in jail), Bangladesh Awami League or BNP all fall in the pattern. What is the moot point if inner democracy is practised in an organisation or the leadership is imposed for all practical purpose. Former American president George Bush's son George W. Bush has secured the presidential nomination from the Republican Party but he had to come through a tough process and at times his nomination hung in the balance as he had to overcome challengers. Corazon Aquino made exit after she felt she accomplished an unfinished task left by her slain husband. Do the political family members in this region face such situation or the leadership matter is just a cakewalk because of inheritance? Undoubtedly, one cannot make a mark just by coming into the scene by dint of dynastic advantage unless the incumbent has his/her own qualities as well.

Progressive forces tend to believe it is the qualities and genius that should take precedence over other considerations. And ultimately, it is the people who decide the acceptability.

However, in the major countries of the region political family members are firm in the saddle as far as leadership of their respective organisations is concerned. Given the history and the nature of politics that one can conceive in the coming days, politics in dynastic line will continue to be there in several south Asian countries.

## MATTERS AROUND US

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

not in the Congress fold as late Indira Gandhi developed bitter relations with her daughter-in-law after Sanjay's death and Makena was virtually thrown out of her house with son Varun. She is not considered as part of mainstream Nehru family any more.

Two developments in India and Sri Lanka are contrasting in character in a way although both are linked with dynastic rule. In Sri Lanka Sirimavo Bandernaike gave up the primership a few days ago under a system in which her daughter Chandrika Kumaratunga is the all-powerful president of the country. Mother and daughter made up for two top positions first time in any country. Sirimavo was drafted into politics after her husband, the

mid fifties and also her children in the future. Chandrika's husband Vijay Kumaratunga, a popular politician, was gunned down before she took up politics. But it is her own identity as daughter of the Bandernaikes that helped her reach the pinnacle of political life.

Two developments in these two countries brought into focus a fresh discussion revolving around dynastic rule. The questions that often come to the fore are why necessarily family members should wear the mantle of popular leaders in their respective political groups? Are there no others who can effectively take up from the parting leaders? And these are happening in the parties which are democratic and popular organisations in different

## 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.

### Is BTB dead?

Sir, Do the people of BTB understand the necessity and importance of telecommunications system? Do they at all realise that they have great responsibility? Recently, I had an emergency and had to call Dhaka from USA. I tried to call my home for two hours from 10 to 12 (Dhaka time) on Wednesday (6 September) night. Each time I called I heard a computer message saying, "this is not any subscriber's number..." Or "this is invalid number." I thought my home phone is out of order (very natural for Bangladesh). Since it was an emergency I tried to call one of my relatives and unfortunately I heard the same message. Then I tried several other numbers and surprisingly got the same message. On that particular night I could not talk to anyone in Dhaka. It is hardly possible that all the numbers I called were out of order on the same day. If any mishap would have occurred due to this negligent act of our telecommunications service who would have taken the responsibility?

I tried to call at least 40/45 times and got the same messages. And I will have to pay for all the calls I made. Will BTB return my time and money? If BTB cannot handle the system let the private sectors deal with it.

Shumon Alam  
Oklahoma, USA

### Bangladesh back to zero?

Sir, Looking at the way things are going, it appears that the nation is going back to zero and the society has to be set up afresh, after controlling or eliminating the excess of evil.

The politicians have failed to run the country during the last one decade and this is perturbing, as third forces will take over, and history might repeat once again. The military also cannot run the country, as public consciousness has enhanced now. One alternative is neutral non-political caretaker government for several years, once the politicians decide to hand over the governance to this agency. This

failure of democratic political system is not being spotlighted by the intelligentsia, as the politicians will not point out their own weaknesses. The post-1975 cycle of experimental governance might come back with topical variations (assassination is not hinted here). Bad politics cannot be rectified by a poor and weak electorate, living mostly below the poverty line. That is why autocratic regimes are galore in history in all civilisations.

Pakistan is passing through a recruiting relapse due to strong hold of feudalism there. Now in West Bengal in India, the communist regime will be bowing out after two decades and the repercussions will be felt indirectly across the borders in the time to come. Both North India and Myanmar borders are not normal, with insurgency in one and different type of regime in the other. Therefore, Bangladesh is hemmed in with abnormal land borders on the East and West, and bounded by the Himalayas in the north and the Bay of Bengal in the South.

The activities of the politicians are delusive and unproductive and there appears to be lack of new leadership to save and prosper the nation.

Worried Citizen  
Dhaka

### Poor banking service

Sir, Why should it take three days to clear a local cheque? Formerly there used to be clearance twice a day; hence a cheque could be cleared the same day. Now clearance is done once a day, when the volume of daily transactions has leap-frogged. There is no justification for such delay when most of the banks are computerised.

Clearance twice a day may be reintroduced pending successful implementation of electronic services. Also the disparity in the quality of service between the public and private sector banks is increasing; which is one more reason why the government should operate less banks these days.

The Bangladesh Bank may like to review the current position and take necessary action for faster inter-banking services.

A Client  
Dhaka

### Responsibility of BB

Sir, Recently Bangladesh Bank has published a circular (in the DS and other leading dailies) regarding the illegal activities of some people or institutions who entice the common people to deposit money with them for handsome returns or profits. However, through this notice our

Central Bank has made an attempt to show that they are making the public aware of the matter in a responsible way. Now, the question is—how is the common people supposed to know who is authorised and who is not? What the Bangladesh Bank should do is to publish a complete list of such legal bodies (Scheduled Banks, Financial Institutions, etc.) so that everybody can get a clear picture.

A Distressed Observer  
Chittagong

### "Crime using cellular-phones"

Sir, On September 3, a letter under the above heading was published in this column. However, there are certain points to ponder about the issue. The fact is that the police/authorities can eavesdrop on wireless communication (as in some cell-phone usage) when the communication over the air is accomplished via the "analogue" communication system. It can be done by using simple "scanner" equipment (radio receiver), which is tuned to the analogue frequency the cell phone is using for communication, and listening to the ongoing conversation. This is somewhat similar to the conventional wire tapping on the landline (PSTN). However, the technology has leaped forward by many folds. Analogue technology is

outdated. Perhaps, Pakistan still uses the analogue technology. On the contrary, Bangladesh has moved forward with the rest of the technologically advanced world. At present, the digital (GSM, CDMA, etc.) technology is taking over the method of wireless communication. Several service providers in Bangladesh now have deployed GSM and/or CDMA wireless communication equipment (i.e. the method of wireless communication is fulfilled by using GSM and/or CDMA digital technology). In digital communication, the transmission (between the base station (tower) and the mobile (cell)) can be encrypted randomly by one of the four million available encryption values (as in CDMA). This encryption was introduced for the privacy of the wireless communication. An interpreter or decoding device for this "random" encryption does not exist. In this format of communication, the police/authorities will not be able to intercept wireless communication and listen to the conversation. Therefore, to provide the police in Bangladesh with analogue decoding equipment will be futile and waste of money/budget and resources. We need to focus and find other methods to combat the criminals and bring them to justice. I would request the police and law enforcement agency in Bangladesh to use their judgement on such issues.

Waris Sattar  
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