

Lessons to Learn

NEED we be indifferent to the fact that the country's disease control and warning mechanism, if there is one that is, is in total disarray? It appears that the lesson of the recent dengue onslaught that claimed some 50 people and afflicted thousands across the country over the last three months or so has been lost on the government. There seems to be a definitive pattern in the government response to any health emergency. It begins with summary dismissal of the very possibility of a health crisis, then come the grudging acceptance and some ad-hoc measures thereby before it fizzles out into sort of a hibernation until similar situation occurs the next time. In other words, the government's intervention in health matters is restricted to knee-jerk measures more often than not.

What's even more frustrating is its reluctance to act even when intimated beforehand of frightful possibility of some infectious diseases assuming pandemic proportions. Take for example, the World Health Organisation (WHO) warning about 12 contagious ailment, namely kala-azar, filaria, dengue, jaundice, diarrhoea, hydrocephalus, Japanese encephalitis, malaria, tuberculosis, gonorrhoea, syphilis and AIDS. More than three years have gone by since the WHO tipped off Bangladesh government on the frightful prospect and advised it to glean as much information as possible on the dreaded dozen. There was an initial spurt of activism all right. The whole country was segmented into six regions as part of a decentralised information collection campaign. Ultimately, however, the whole exercise stopped with preparation and printing of a set of questionnaires, which lies in stacks at the state-run Institute of Epidemiology Disease Control Research (IEDCR).

Ours is a poor country hugely over-populated. The facts that the majority of the population is illiterate and well below the minimum subsistence level makes her all the more prone to pestilence. Dengue should be a rude awakening for the government. The potentially life-threatening disease cruelly exposed our inadequacy in times of emergency. At one point, according to media reports, the public health outlets ran out of reagents for detection of dengue virus. Also unveiled was our miserable blood transfusion and electrolysis facilities. Increased influx of people from other countries, foreigners on different reasons or locals on completion of jobs and studies overseas, has augmented possibilities of deadly diseases sneaking in.

Ominously, the Zia International Airport doesn't have any screening facilities, according to a front-page report in Saturday's *Prothom Alo*. There used to be a health-checking counter there. It was closed down way back in 1987. Also, the quarantine ward for suspected carriers of contagious diseases has been inoperative for over four years now. It's not the end of the sorry tale, however. Passengers heading for North African countries used to be vaccinated for yellow fever, like dengue a potential killer disease. That too has been discontinued for want of vaccines. One can very well imagine the risk we are exposed to.

Evidently, we are not giving enough emphasis on disease control and monitoring mechanism, which is made all the more crucial with infernal spread of AIDS and the fact that Bangladesh is flanked by some heavily-affected countries like India and Myanmar. We need to up our guard now; or else, we have to count lifeless bodies to be reminded of the fatal failure.

Police Operations at ZIA

ANOTHER 34 troublemakers were rounded up by police at the ZIA on Friday which include a few 'dollar beggars'. The latest haul pushes the total to an impressive 277 during the month of September. Harassment of incoming passengers has assumed embarrassing proportions in recent times. Police operations to get things to order have been few and far between, naturally allowing the harassers grow in number and confidence. Encouragingly, the scenario is poised for a change, it seems. When the police began the drive, arresting 78 people from the canopy and parking lot on the first day, this paper welcomed the move and commented in an editorial (*Fringe-touching at Zia*, September 17) that it 'would be made into a sustained operation to flush the airport premises of hanger-on.' The authorities do appear determined to continue with the drive. It is indeed a welcome change.

We have in recent past suggested creation of a unified authority for ZIA, which will co-ordinate and initiate security and disciplinary measures at the airport. We understand at present there are a number of security organisations working there and each of them has a different chain of command and reporting authority. We suggest all these organisations, particularly the security wings of this important installation, should be brought under one authority for better and efficient management. There are countries around us where this type of authority functions most efficiently and effectively. We welcome the establishment of a police station at the airport and expect the policemen to discharge their responsibility without fear or favour. We also urge politicians not to interfere in the people for the greater interest of the country.

ON Prime Minister's recent remarks in an interview with the BBC on High Court's granting of bail to terrorists, firstly, the president of the Supreme Court Bar Association; secondly a group of 339 pro-opposition lawyers; and thirdly, 110 BNP legislators filed in quick succession three contempt petitions with the High Court against the PM, alleging that she had defamed the judiciary. The reply from the pro-government lawyers was not long in coming. A group of 568 lawyers lodged with the High Court a petition demanding for quashing all the three above petitions terming them as absolutely political and asserting that the PM had not stated anything derogatory to the judiciary.

The controversy has not remained confined to the lawyers. It has quickly penetrated into other communities of the society across the country. Meetings, processions, statements for and against the remarks of the PM have rocked the length and breadth of Bangladesh.

Significantly enough there was no suo moto by the court against the PM. The former stood in dignified silence and graceful tolerance. This is the brand of greatness that edifies the judiciary.

Every nation has had problems to face. Opinions are very likely to differ as to how those (problems) can be resolved. But if a sizeable percentage of a nation get accustomed to take sides readily at the instigation of a person or party, irrespective of the merit of the cause, it is ruinous. It is not that disquieting that known faces keep on known tracks on questions that a nation encounters in its march. But what ails most is that the ominous one-track mindset is making great inroads into both the qualitative and

Saddled with Divisive Politics

by A R Shamsul Islam

The two major political parties, which seem destined to rule the country for a substantial period of time in near future, are getting embroiled more and more in mutual acrimony and anguish. Even on vital national issues, where consensus among them is the only answer, they are poles apart.

quantitative population of our country. This is the point and pitch where real danger lurks in.

As a nation we can talk loud of transparency and accountability but have poor delivery. Access to information is our recognised right. So is our obligation to take a correct view of things. But do we get all required information to base our inference on? Aren't we sometimes kept off our view by vested interests to subject us to hold a wrong opinion? As for example, let us examine the much talked about case of granting bail to notorious terrorist Subhra of Moghbazar, Dhaka. The Home Minister asserted in the Parliament that one day some people of Moghbazar came to him and informed that notorious terrorist Subhra of their locality had come out of jail custody on bail and they could not live in peace in fear of him. The Home Minister phoned the Inspector-General (IG) of Police and ordered him to arrest Subhra. But the IG replied that Subhra could not be arrested as there was directive from the High Court against his apprehension.

There is quite a different version of the above incident. It is learnt that Subhra was arrested by the Police under Special Powers Act (SPA). Upon a writ filed in the High Court by the detenu the government failed to maintain the case of detention and as such the High Court ordered for his release. But as Subhra was coming out of jail after being released by the High

Court he was again arrested by the Police from the jail gate by SPA. The detenu again moved to the High Court and the government again failed to maintain detention order and he was again given release order by the High Court. But the same incident of arresting Subhra from jail gate as he was leaving the place was repeated for the third time. When the same act of arresting Subhra from the jail gate used to be repeated for the fourth time it was only then that the High Court issued an order upon the government not to arrest Subhra on the ground that the Police was frustrating the course of justice.

We do not know if there are still more new and substantial information regarding the arrest-cum-release-cum-arrest episode of Subhra. But the above-narrated two sets of versions are a fine specimen of how fictions are mixed up with facts to mislead the public.

In recent years a new phenomenon of forging 'Opposition alliance' has been added to the culture of politics. Though not new in form it is somewhat novel in substance in as much as political parties without minimal common ideologies have flocked together. Obviously it is Power Politics' that has struck a bond between them. The then opposition leader Awami League led an 'Opposition Combine' to oust the BNP government. Taking cue from the predecessor's present opposition leader BNP has cobbled up a Four-Party Opposition Alliance

to dislodge Awami League from power. Desirable differences among the parties have degenerated into devouring division. Starting from the activists of the respective political parties this division has reached out to the unsuspecting masses through unethical party propaganda.

This feeling of division has steadily worked up among the lawyers, journalists, teachers, businessmen, bureaucrats, policemen and where not?

Some newspapers have ranged themselves with either the pro or anti-blocs thus not only stains the ethics of journalism but also compromises the excellence of news items. Both sections of such newspapers have great number of readers in their fold. Fed by their sharply-divided angles the ordinary readers may get lost in the wilderness of propaganda.

Some teachers, particularly many among those of the highest echelon, seem to stand divided. The university teachers sometimes boastfully identify themselves as members of white, yellow, pink groups that are reportedly linked to national political parties. Can they do justice to what they deliver in the class on the need for national integration?

The business community bodies, most of them, including their apex organisation FBCCI have shown sharp division on the basis of their members' pro- or anti-government stance. Reportedly this year the FBCCI president is elected with the blessings

of the PM and other hot contenders, some belonging to the opposition, for that post have practically conceded the contest. This has trickled down to the lower tiers of the merchant organisations in districts, thanas, unions resulting in division among the members.

Division among the bureaucrats is no less glaring. All the governments, as alleged, have more or less wanted the bureaucrats to serve their own parties' interests in preference to those of the people. Posting, promotion, service extension etc. are held out as baits. It cannot be asserted that no bureaucrat has stooped to these temptations. Further, the increasing tendency of the retired bureaucrats to join the ruling and chief opposition parties has enlarged the scope of division.

While addressing the striking teachers of 22,000 non-government primary schools as chief guest the BNP chairperson has declared that if she was voted to power she would fulfil the demands of the teachers by nationalising all non-government primary schools provided the striking teachers did not come to terms with the government and joined hands with the 'Four Party Opposition Alliance' to oust the government. This is how BNP chief attempts to bring the striking teachers on her side of the class.

Division has also reached out to the overseas Bangladeshis. That is why often both Awami League and BNP chairpersons

had to encounter pandemonium, resulting from clashes between the pro and anti, in the overseas conferences they attended as chief guest.

Difference is the spirit of democracy. Division is its killer. The former saps the vitality of a nation. Division emanates largely from injustice, intolerance, foul and flawed political, economic, social conditions. Democracy in Bangladesh, like many other third world countries, could not take roots. Of the country's life-span of 29 years a significant portion was eaten up by military and quasi-military rule. Even when elected governments are seated they could not be much better than elected despots. The two major political parties, which seem destined to rule the country for a substantial period of time in near future, are getting embroiled more and more in mutual acrimony and anguish. Even on vital national issues, where consensus among them is the only answer, they are poles apart.

Moreover this malignant spirit of division as existing between these two prime parties has been made to infiltrate into the masses spurring off anarchy of which phenomenon the world bodies and donor countries have made repeated warnings in their reports. Many think that a new political force beyond these two chief political parties needs to emerge as a balancing and saving factor by way of whipping these two parties back to sanity. The civil society has started raising its voice on various national problems and against deadly political impasse. A lot of dazed eyes are on to see would it (civil society) be able to meet this historic need?

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The NDA Dilemma

Many feel that dismissal of the West Bengal government may be counter-productive as it can be seen as a move contrary to democratic principles. If it happens, this may go to the advantage of the left front in the next polls.

CURRENTLY, a simmering tension is palpable between the federal government of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and the leftist state government in West Bengal. Hardly a day goes by without key persons of the two mutually hostile political authorities exchanging tough words. The multi-party National Democratic Alliance (NDA) at the centre is at loggerheads with the state governments, not headed by the same or allied political forces. In such a political system, it is not unusual, though. But what brings the centre-state tension to the fore this time around is that relations between the governments of Vajpayee and Jyoti Basu have hit the rock bottom in recent times. Speculations are rife among the political circle, press and others that the government in West Bengal could be dismissed and the President's Rule instituted. The issue has sparked of raging controversy in the country and outside. Although the constitution empowers the federal government with the authority, the debate is on whether the harsh decision, if taken at all, would be justifiable. It is particularly important because West Bengal is the only state where a government has been in power for more than two decades without any interruption and whether a decision to dismiss it would be regarded as democratic.

The federal government may feel that they have compelling reasons for such an action, but the state government has already dismissed those as pretexts to topple an administration that enjoys unassailable majority in the legislative assembly. The NDA is traditionally not a force to be reckoned with in West Bengal political scene; but, of late, is making strides mainly relying on one of its allies, namely Trinamul

Congress. Its leader Mamta Banerjee, who is the railway minister on the NDA government, wants removal of Jyoti Basu's administration with the enforcement of article 356 of the constitution. She says that law and order in several districts of the state has collapsed, thanks to the Jyoti Basu government's misrule, and the situation warrants direct intervention from New Delhi to save the state from further downside. Mamta, whose aversion for the leftists and the state government is well-known, is pressing the federal government for immediate actions and even threatened to reconsider her support for the NDA administration unless her demand is taken seriously. Obviously, she enjoys tremendous clout on the NDA and, needless to say, her demand won't fall on deaf ears. But the federal government has to weigh carefully the possible implications of imposition of President's Rule since the action may put it in poor light in addition to running the risk of greater rupture within the coalition. Some of its components may not see eye to eye with the measure, no matter extent of anger and frustration that are likely to come from Mamta unless the demand is met. The situation is deal with politically hostile federal administration. The leftists like the CPI (M), CPI and others were part of the United Front (UF) government that ruled earlier for a brief period under two prime ministers H D Deve Gowda and Inder Kumar Gujral. The Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the driving force of the NDA, are considered as political foes for the leftists but the Congress is in a way relatively

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closer as it believes in secularism like the left front. Of late, two forces have come closer since both consider the NDA and mainly the BJP as 'communal' and make no bones of their mutual enmity.

Interestingly, Mamta's Trinamul is known to be secular but it allied with the BJP on strategic reasons centring the political milieu of West Bengal, where BJP has a very weak presence but the 'Trinamul' is gaining grounds. Mamta's party is essentially a breakaway from the Congress which has lost its influence in the state in recent years and the decline has come slowly after it lost power to the left front 23 years ago to be able to stage a comeback. The 'Trinamul', having found both Congress and the left front as its adversaries, was left alone in national politics despite its good showing in

where the front is not in control particularly in the Calcutta city. So, it aligned with the BJP evidently to have an ally in national level and is supporting the BJP-led NDA government. Mamta has been made a central minister with important portfolio and another leader Ajit Panja is the state minister for external affairs. In turn, BJP is also benefited by this alliance as it won federal parliamentary seats in last two

elections for the first time in West Bengal and this was possible because of understanding with the 'Trinamul'.

Now the issue of possible dismissal of the state government originates from Mamta's strategy on politics in the state. Although a federal minister, she is eyeing on forming of the next government in West Bengal and her intentions have been reinforced by recent success in Calcutta municipal polls. Her party is now controlling the city administration wresting from the leftists. With the main Congress being in doldrums, the fight is now between the left front and the Trinamul in the state which is going for elections early next year. She is trying to defame the ruling left front by bringing charges of misrule and corruption and seeking to create a condition before the assembly elections

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The federal administration sent important ministers like home minister L K Advani and defence minister George Fernandes to West Bengal to investigate the allegations of political mayhem and misrule levelled by Mamta against the Jyoti Basu government. Both the ministers found credibility in the accusations as they found law and order in bad shape in Midnapore and some other districts where they said the leftists are creating serious problems for the political opponents.

But the federal government is still lukewarm to the idea of dismissing the government in West Bengal since democratic forces may feel that it was done on flimsy ground only to placate Mamta Banerjee. Some components of the 18-party ruling alliance may not like the idea while President K R Narayanan himself may disapprove the action although his powers are limited in the constitution as a largely ceremonial figurehead. The action may also give a handle to the opposition for a campaign which may not prove wise for the government. Vajpayee did not entertain a similar demand by Jayaram Jayalalitha in the earlier NDA government when as she had called for dismissal of the DMK government in Tamil Nadu although the DMK was then an adversary to the NDA. He did it weighing the pros and cons

meticulously. Besides, removal of the West Bengal government would also mean insulting a respected politician like Chief Minister Basu who has announced that he is quitting active politics. The left front appears to have retained its hold in the rural areas despite some setbacks in the urban areas and mainly in the capital city Calcutta. However, the NDA can not ignore Mamta who has provided valuable support to the government and also a foothold to the BJP in the secular West Bengal. Mamta is pressing hard and said she has other 'options' in politics if the federal government fails to respond to her demand. The NDA is walking a tight rope on the issue. The situation has delayed the retirement of Jyoti Basu who was earlier expected to quit the scene in September but now appears poised to continue till the next elections mainly because of the spectre of dismissal of the state government.

The federal government has already given strictures to state authority and also warned it. It may go further but actions may fall short of removing the government immediately. On the other hand, it may try to convince Mamta on the need for not dismissing the Basu government now. But if the pressure is high, it may go for early dismissal, which, however, looks remote. The issue is raising storm in the Indian political scene and observers are keeping their fingers crossed about the shape of things to come. Many feel that dismissal of the West Bengal government may be counter-productive as it can be seen as a move contrary to democratic principles. If it happens, this may go to the advantage of the left front in the next polls.

OPINION

Speaker's Accountability

One who knows

procedure applicable to other ministries and agencies including those constitutional functionaries whose expenditures are charged on the Consolidated Fund of the state. But the Parliament, in pursuance of the said Article, passed the Parliament Secretariat Act, 1994, assuming full powers in respect of budget in as much as no scope exists for the Finance Division to examine the budget proposals of the Parliament Secretariat. The Act stipulates that the Speaker will get budget prepared and sent to the Finance Minister for inclusion in the national budget. Further, the Act provides that the Speaker is the final authority to sanction expenditure from the Secretariat's budget. The Parliament Secretariat Commission constituted under the Act will tender advice concerning preparation of budget and incurred expenditure therefrom.

The above quoted Article of the Constitution is very clear both in its content and intent. This is all about creating a separate secretariat for the Parliament and enabling the Parliament to regulate recruitment and conditions of service of Parliament Secretariat personnel. This Article has not given any authority to the Parliament to regulate its own budget and finance independently and has not exempted the Parliament from the normal

proper. Assuming of almost unlimited financial and administrative powers by the Parliament Secretariat has created opportunity for improper and unnecessary expenditure.

Clause 9 of the parliament Secretariat Act, however, provides that the Parliament Secretariat shall remain responsible to the Parliament through the CAG for expenditure allocated to it in the budget. There is no instance that the Parliament has ever reviewed the expenditure made by its Secretariat. It also needs probing if the CAG has been able to conduct free and unfettered audit of the expenditure of the Parliament Secretariat.

As per 4(iv) of the Rules of Business of the Government, the Secretary is the Principal Accounting Officer with the responsibility to ensure that the allocated funds are spent in accordance with rules/laws for the time being in force. In the case of Parliament Secretariat, the Speaker being the sanctioning authority of all expenditures and in charge of all administrative responsibility in terms of clause 18 and 50(1) of the Act, the question arises as to who is the Principal Accounting Officer for expenditures incurred by Parliament Secretariat and who is accountable to the Public Accounts Committee? This is another serious incongruity in the Parliament Secretariat Act.

To the Editor ...

Tact and diplomacy

Sir, The PM was tactless and undiplomatic in annoying Pakistan at the recent UN millennium meet. The Bangladesh Foreign Office has been shoulder most of the blame for being indiscreet. The Western powers have a game plan for the SAARC region, and Bangladesh has a major role to play in the near future. The country has to take off smoothly, without much flapping of the wings.

We make too much noise in politics, and cannot handle it at low-key level. Our foreground is always too much in the limelight.

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