

Speedy Delivery is the Need of the Hour

THE cascading waters from upper riparian West Bengal are wreaking havoc on Bangladesh's western districts. The bordering West Bengal districts being still in the grip of the worst flood in a quarter century the adjoining Bangladesh territory must brace up to facing the run-off waters for sometime more. The flood situation in Bangladesh is not just serious, it looks desperate indeed. It may prove to be a short-lived deluge coursing through a swathe of land; but until it passes off we are up to our neck into water, the inundation level being unprecedentedly high. The water level is seven feet where once the croplands lay. In broad strokes, the overall situation is depicted like this: at Chuadanga marooned people face death from starvation; at Meherpur 2000 Indians have taken shelter driven by flood waters upstream; at Sathkira two protection embankments gave in; at Magura water flowed above the sluice gates; Jhenidah saw boat capsizes; and Rajshahi faces a cholera outbreak.

Although the international media were rife with reports of floods in eastern India and Bangladesh, we have been domestically slow in responding to the quickly unfolding situation. This happened because of the mental detour we took in accepting that even places that were not flood-prone could go under water as part of the gradual shift in the climatic pattern. Whilst that is where our set-piece preparedness formula needs to be fine-tuned as a matter of policy what we must roll up our sleeves to do right now is pretty easy to pin-point.

The Prime Minister after having visited the flood-affected areas set the tenor for emergency relief operations the other day. She has instructed the armed forces people to use helicopters, if need be, to evacuate the marooned and stressed the urgency for food hand-outs adding that the foodgrains stocks from successive bumper crops were a source of strength. Let's take the opportunity here to greet the promptitude with which the British government has announced relief assistance to Bangladesh.

Allocational announcements mean nothing unless materially succour reaches relief centres at the right time. But before that all marooned people should have been evacuated to safety. With the waters receding the threat of cholera grows, as it has at Rajshahi where more than hundred cases have been reported lately. All this conjures up a trodden path but we need to be sure-footed to traverse it successfully.

Comprehensive Plan for Urbanisation

LIFE in the capital city and other major urban centres in the country could well be compared with a recurring nightmare. Traffic is a mess. Telecommunication is highly inadequate and power distribution systems are in a shambles. Civic infrastructure, especially water supply and sewerage networks, is on the verge of a total breakdown. Pollution -- of air, water, surface, sound and what have you -- has assumed claustrophobic proportions. Steady influx of rural immigrants has had Dhaka, Chittagong and other city centres bursting at the seams. Hardly is there any breathing space left. Encroachment of open spaces, rivers and other water bodies has gone on unabated and with impunity.

A haphazard development metamorphosis, it seems, has stripped them of their essential characteristics and left them without a character as such. Domineering disorder at every nook and corner has induced what may be called spatial estrangement amongst the residents. Sense of belonging has made way for apathy, even antipathy. That's not all, however. Gradual disintegration of the society has resulted in unrest, and drastic downside of law and order.

That unplanned physical growth of urban centres can have devastating impact on the individual and societal psyche has been amply demonstrated in the case of Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi. Unfortunately, people who actually plan and execute urban policies have seemingly failed to notice the obvious. While in recent times there has been an increasing uproar against unplanned urbanisation, activism in this regard, however, has been largely confined to tall talks at seminars, roundtables and workshops. The government, on its part, has been happy to convene meetings, institute special committees and, then, leave it right there. Encouragingly, there is a growing concern amongst the conscious section of the society over the ills of unplanned urbanisation. The civil society members have already initiated public awareness movement, albeit to a limited extent, and started putting pressure on the government for immediate redressal.

Evidently, the vision is not there. We need to devise ways and means not only to tide over the problems at hand but also to bring our cities at par with other cities of Asia with similar demographic distribution. The first step in that direction should be formation of a national commission for future urban development. The commission would be high-powered, of inter-ministerial composition and, more importantly, with specific mandate to enrich, if necessary, and implement the master plans for Dhaka and other cities. It ought to be backed by strong monitoring and enforcement mechanism and have built-in provisions for continuity. The cities are in bad shape all right but there is still time for a turnaround. The question is whether we are ready to try.

Little Recreation for Children

THERE can be no two views on the fact that the parks in the city have become children-unfriendly. Even the parks which are exclusively designated for children are more of menacing joints than places for amusement. There's hardly any breathing space for children in the metropolis, let alone proper recreation spots. Indeed the city authorities are turning a deaf ear to this crying need for children's parks. The existing parks are in a state of sheer chaos without any worthwhile government initiative to preserve and maintain them. Because of the lack of sporting and recreation facilities, the children are taking to juvenile delinquencies, thereby adding to the already aggravated law and order situation.

Let's stress this point to the government that majority of the children's parks in the city have been either partially or fully lost to land-grabbers requiring an immediate drive to evict the intruders from them, so that these could be restored to the children. The exercise may be undertaken as part of the drive for demolition of unauthorised structures.

The government must also ensure that the private sector real estate builders compulsorily have children's parks attached to residential enclaves. While some of the educational institutions may have playing fields the localities are mostly devoid of the same. We must also try to cater to the need for new parks at suitable places to widen the children's access to recreation. In the face of land grabbing it is a lame excuse to say that there's little land to spare for the children. The government should consider this as a matter of the children's inalienable right to grow as healthy adults.

IN the recently held referendum in France, the voters have said overwhelmingly 'yes'. The question asked was whether they wanted continuation of the present seven-year term of the President or its reduction to a five-year term only.

The point that needs to be specially noted is that 70 per cent of the voters abstained from voting. Of the remaining 30 per cent of the voters nearly 70 per cent voters said 'yes' whereas nearly 30 per cent said 'no'. Thus from the year 2002 the French voters will elect their President for a five-year term.

The massive abstention of the French voters is an indication of their extreme apathy to the whole matter. This seven-year term, which has been on the statute books for 127 years, got a new lease of life with the advent of President Charles De Gaulle on the political stage in France in 1959. President De Gaulle has been one of the most colourful personalities of France of the twentieth century and has dominated the stage.

Charles De Gaulle fought the War of Liberation from outside France, which was occupied by Hitler's Germany during the Second World War from 1939-45. Following the surrender of Ger-

Powerful French Presidency Takes a Jolt Voters Say 'Yes' to Term Reduction

The question that arises is: is France returning to her bad days of extreme politicking like in Italy which sees a new government almost monthly? That appears unlikely. For stability in France has been so well established and there is prosperity, which the people would be most reluctant to sacrifice.

many, De Gaulle rode through Champs Elysees of Paris as the true saviour of France. Shortly thereafter political bickering started among the left and the right of France and De Gaulle withdrew from the political scene to his native village -- the picturesque Colombey les deux Eglises. By 1958 political horse-trading reached such a height that governments in Paris started falling like nine pins. France became the laughing stock of the world. It is at this juncture that De Gaulle responded to the call of the nation and made his appearance once again on the political stage of Paris. As a young diplomat posted in Paris, I recall the press conference addressed by De Gaulle, where he announced his decision to assume power. There was something regal about De Gaulle. He strode the stage like a colossus. He was close to two metres in height and he carefully set the decor to make the announcement of his return.

De Gaulle fashioned the constitution to his size. He would be the elected President. There

would be an elected Parliament with a Prime Minister, who would command a majority within the Parliament. There would be a

broken. In his memoirs De Gaulle

De Gaulle.

The present incumbent in the Elysee Palace is Jacques Chirac who belongs to a rightist party. The Prime Minister Lionel Jospin belongs to a leftist formation. During the long reign of Mitterand as President, frequently the Prime Minister was from the right, whereas Mitterand was a socialist. France does not suffer from any serious problem. The economy is working satisfactorily and even the Basque problem in south-western France appears manageable. There have been recent rumblings in the island of Corsica, the birthplace and the place of exile of Napoleon Bonaparte. At this point of time it is difficult to gauge how serious the problems is.

For France and for that matter for the members of the European Union (EU), the most important consideration is her relation with EU partners. So far France appears to lead the EU with her partner Germany. And this in spite of the fact of the union of Germany -- East and West -- following the fall of the Berlin

Wall. Germany has added enormous muscle to her power with her union but she is wise enough not to flex her muscle. The wounds of the Second World War have not totally erased from minds.

The latest referendum has failed to enthuse the people of France. In 1958 De Gaulle had started a tradition of a strong presidency. That tradition has remained although with less spectacular result since De Gaulle was an extraordinary leader. Reduction of the length of the presidency from seven to five years may be interpreted by political scientists as clipping the wing of the president to some extent. The question that arises is: is France returning to her bad days of extreme politicking like in Italy which sees a new government almost monthly? That appears unlikely. For stability in France has been so well established and there is prosperity, which the people would be most reluctant to sacrifice. In any event France, through history, has frequently led events in Europe and the latest developments in France would be followed with great interest. This will tell if within the result of this referendum hides the seeds of greater events.

The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman



division of power between the President and the Prime Minister. Since De Gaulle considered himself the incarnation of the nation, his would be the last word in all important matters. In the solar system he would be the sun, and the moon and the stars would gravitate around him.

De Gaulle ruled France till 1968. There was a referendum which he lost. Student unrest had reached a dangerous level and Paris, the city which had seen earlier revolution, was again rocking with revolutionary fervour. The loss in the referendum

speaks movingly of his life-long love with France and that love affair had come to an end. He withdrew to his Colombey les deux Eglises.

Since the departure of De Gaulle from the political scene of France power sharing between the President and the Prime Minister has been in vogue. Very often the President has belonged to one party and the Prime Minister to another. Often an adversary. Fortunately for France the President has remained above political controversies, although no one could reach the stature of

All that Glitters is Not British

I believe that both India and Pakistan discussed the distribution of India Office Library with the British after independence. The talks failed because they could not agree on a formula for the distribution of the material. It is time to resume the discussion. Pending that, the British government should arrange to send at least the photocopies of documents, papers, etc., to the three countries in the subcontinent India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

I NEVER imagined I would face so many difficulties in my own country to build a campaign for the return of Kohinoor. The BJP-led government has been positively unhelpful. It does not want to take any step which may even vaguely displease the British.

The Rajya Sabha chairman does not think the matter is important enough to come before the House for discussion. He has not admitted the call attention notice for the last two sessions. The Secretary-General of the Rajya Sabha has assured me, in reply to my protest note to the chairman, that I would get an opportunity to raise the matter in the winter session of parliament, some time in the middle of November.

The Indian media has been generally indifferent. I don't know why. The British have done far better. BBC broadcast half a dozen stories, apart from a couple of interviews with me. Leading newspapers in London have written about the renewal of demand for Kohinoor's return. Some NRIs have even constituted a group, Rescue Kohinoor, to project that the diamond belonged to India.

When I wrote to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee seeking his assistance for getting back the Kohinoor some eight months ago, I expected some positive response. Instead, I received a stock computer-printed reply: "I am having the matter looked into," with his stamped signature beneath it. How the matter is being looked into is still a mystery to me because I have had no letter from him after the printed one.

Three or four months ago, I located the PM at one of the functions. When I broached the subject, he said "we are doing some-

thing." Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh spelled out what they were doing: India's High Commission in London was in touch with the British government. But even that is vague. I have received nothing from the government in writing. A few months ago I sent to the Prime Minister another letter, signed by as many as 25 MPs of both Houses, to request him to take up with his British counterpart Tony Blair, the Kohinoor's return. The letter has remained unacknowledged.

The same letter formed the basis of a petition to the chairman of the Rajya Sabha. He admitted it as a motion but it did not come up for discussion till the end of the session. So the motion became now inoperative. I have sought the help of Jaswant Singh, the leader of the Rajya Sabha, and Venkiah Naidu, the BJP secretary-general, to focus their attention on Kohinoor. But they have done very little. That the government is dragging its feet is clear, but why it is doing so is not clear.

The BJP, which leads the government, is the party that talks about heritage day in and day out. It considers itself the custodian of India's culture. Why should it hesitate to take up the Kohinoor issue with the British? The diamond represents India's pride or, more so, its psyche. It also reasserts our belief in plurality of our past, so important to our present. This is not a chauvinistic call but a moral stand. Lord Dalhousie, the British Viceroy, took away the Kohinoor from

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

the eight-year-old Dalip Singh, son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, after the annexation of Punjab in 1849. How can Great Britain become its owner? What the British took away from India, when it was a slave country, belongs to us and must come back to us, however long it may take.

Kohinoor is presently in the British crown jewels. I saw it the first time when I was India's High Commissioner to Great Britain in 1990. There were many other diamonds from India kept in the Tower of London. The authorities who displayed them were apologetic. They told me: "We feel

ashamed to show them because they are from your country." Once more I saw the diamond in the Crown when the Queen wore it at a formal function. I raised the matter because one news item in the British press reported that Tony Blair had appointed a parliamentary committee to trace the countries of origin of the antiquities displayed in Great Britain's museums. The committee had been set up on the heels of a concerted demand by the Greeks to return the Elgin Marbles, which London had taken away from them hundreds of years ago.

The parliamentary committee is inclined to return Elgin Mar-

bles to Greece. But the entire exercise has been stopped after the demand for the return of Kohinoor began. The British government probably feels that the return of the Elgin Marbles to Athens might open a Pandora's box. Whatever London's compul-

sions, the response of the British High Commission in New Delhi is shocking. Its spokesman has questioned India's ownership of Kohinoor. He has said that it was doubtful whether the diamond came from India. How could he say that when Punjab, the Sikhs' empire was taken over, it extended to River Attock and even beyond? How is the British ownership justified? They physically took it away. In fact, much of museum art in Great Britain was acquired by dubious means, if not by outright looting. It is time for the British to realise that the artifacts of different countries should be returned to them.

There is a UNESCO resolution to say so. Apart from Kohinoor, there are thousands of Indian cultural objects which are lying in the basement of the Victoria and Albert Museums in London. They have been there for hundreds of years. I found to my horror that the Nehru Gallery, opened in 1990 with liberal contributions from NRIs, had displayed only the four per cent of what was down below and that too after 40 years. It means it will take us hundreds of years to see what is ours, part of our history and culture. The Curator rejected with a curt 'no' to my offer to take some of the objects on loan for display in

India at our expense.

London also has with it documents, papers, books, pictures, posters, paintings and the like, pertaining to independent struggle and the Raj. Once all of them were kept in India Office Library, which has been split and re-split to accommodate the demands by various libraries in Great Britain.

Scholars from India, Pakistan or Bangladesh want to consult the original material. But they cannot afford to go to London to do so. I believe that both India and Pakistan discussed the distribution of India Office Library with the British after independence. The talks failed because they could not agree on a formula for the distribution of the material. It is time to resume the discussion. Pending that, the British government should arrange to send at least the photocopies of documents, papers, etc., to the three countries in the subcontinent -- India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Ironically, all the three pay for the photocopies of any document they have to obtain from what was once India Office Library.

I am looking forward to the debate on Kohinoor in the next session of parliament. If the number of people who have contacted me is any guide -- the e-mail responses run into thousands -- all political parties are prepared to pursue the matter to the hilt. The discussion is likely to be followed by a vote in the House. I am expecting unanimous support. Both the Vajpayee government and the British should act now to avoid embarrassment. They can at least begin talks on the diamond. Both do not seem to appreciate the strong feelings in India on Kohinoor.

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.

What meat is that?

Sir, According to a recent news item, jackal meat was served in a hostel. Better check the menu and inspect the kitchen before eating outside.

Is part of the society becoming sadist, and the next stage is cannibalism? Is there any government in Sonar Bangla? This is the next question which naturally comes to mind.

The government seems to be indifferent towards everything. And for this the poor standard of politics is solely to blame. How to be tough with the politicians, as they appear to set the standards nowadays? We are getting deeper into a vicious circle (DS editorial, October 1). The leaders are supposed to be the rescuers of the nation. But where are they?

A Pessimistic Citizen
Dhaka

Appointment of lawyer magistrate

Sir, According to UN Human Development Report, 2000, "Bangladesh has 1510 cases pending per judge which is highest in the world. If one judge hears and

disposes of one case per day, working 218 days per year still it will take more than 23 years to finish the pending cases in their hands." This is the state of our judiciary which really seems to be in a shambles. Therefore, removing such backlog and provide our majority people with the facility of quick disposal of the pending court cases cannot be ignored. And it is indeed quite a timely decision of the present government to appoint lawyer magistrate for disposal of the pending court cases. Appointment of the lawyer magistrate through PSC is highly commendable yet I would request our Minister for Law and Parliamentary Affairs, officials of the Ministry of Law and other relevant authorities to ponder over the following criteria for selecting the lawyer magistrate:

1. Qualifications: Graduate with minimum six points and a degree in law or jurisprudence/2nd class honours degree in Law/LL.M.
 2. Experience: Three to seven years experience as practicing lawyer.
 3. Age: Should not exceed 40 years.
- It should also be ensured that maximum candidate can partici-

pate and PSC can choose the right man for the right job after necessary examination. For alluring bright and prospectus young lawyers to this special profession initial higher salary may be considered.

MHBari
Anannya, South Area Pukur
Khulna

NGOs and politics

Sir, One state policy has to be clarified for all concerned before the next general elections: whether the thousands of local NGOs be allowed to participate in political activity, actively or passively.

Should the issue be debated publicly? The government may like to make the position clear as official guideline for the NGOs in regard to the Terms of Reference, if the clarification does not exist at present.

A Citizen
Dhaka

Kowtow to Pakistan!

Sir, A section of the press and some pro-BNP intellectuals have been severely criticising prime minister Sheikh Hasina since her address at the Millennium Summit of the UN in which she condemned all forms of military dictatorship. According to these so-called intellectuals, we should not say or do anything which might "anger" the Pakistan government and jeopardise our

"friendly" relations with Pakistan. This point of view seems very ignoble to me. What these pro-BNP people seem to have forgotten that Bangladesh is an independent country, not a province or colony of Pakistan, therefore our government has every right to speak its mind.

Abul Hasnat
Azimpur, Dhaka

Materialistic mosques!

Sir, The DS editorial of September 23 on erecting mosques for personal gains motivates this resident to cite another example in his locality. A mosque has been deliberately erected some years ago by an influential resident of the area to block the Sher Shah Suri Road going from the Mohammadpur Town Hall wet market to Shahjahan Road towards the Residential Model School, forcing the heavy traffic to make detours through narrow twisting lanes. Similarly the mosque perimeter at Shahid Park near Town Hall has been expanded into a shopping complex (also reported in the press).

Are there too many VIPs in this locality to trample on public interest? Such illegal actions are not possible without political connivance and nepotism. There is gross misuse of political influence in Chittagong also, crippling the port and other development activities. Some politicians have the vanity to prefix the title of Hajj

before their famous names, and then be involved in public activities which no Hajj is expected to be linked with.

The political hypocrisy in our political leaders is simply abominable, considering the polls are round the corner, but the politicians never debate publicly their own weaknesses, but pick on individual defamations. How does such nefarious political parties expect the people to vote for them? The political epidemic is making the society sick.

Here is an humble proposal: place some of the political leaders on quarantine or bannaash (political exile)! There is some truth in the accusation that evil political leaders are the greatest enemies of the society, as they control considerable power and influence, and they use the national assets at their will.

Bangladesh has to pass through this difficult political formative stage. Perhaps the next general elections will turn in the right MPs to the parliament, if the voters are allowed to choose, and the right candidates offer themselves to enter the dirty political field.

Disgusted Citizen
Dhaka

Frozen food outlet

Sir, I refer to the two letters published recently in the DS, one by A Citizen and the other one by Rezia Rahman regarding the necessity of retail frozen food

outlets in the city. The two letters are indeed timely and deserve attention of all concerned parties.

With the gradual increase of working women, importance and necessity of retail frozen food outlets (at reasonable price) for daily shopping, needs no elaboration. And it is very much hoped that the concerned authority will ponder over the issue and take necessary steps to resolve the hardship of the consumers.

Abul Kalam Azad
Dhaka

Traffic Jam

Sir, The infamous traffic jams of Dhaka city will never decrease until and unless the baby taxis (autorickshaws) and rickshaws are decreased to their former number as it was few years back. The cause of this untold suffering namely traffic jam and of ill health has been brought on to the public only by our politicians as supposed to be their vote bank.

How can the politicians be so heartless that for mere vote they are causing endless misery and lead pollution to the people and children of their own country, and causing permanent damage to their health and intelligence? These autorickshaws are also responsible for increased number of hijacking and accidents. Will the streets of Dhaka ever be rid of these over numbered vehicles?

Sabrina
Dhaka