

Murder Cases on Back Burner

YET another spin has been given to the story of abduction and brutal murder of BNP leader advocate Nurul Islam, that took place last month at Luxmpur administering shock waves throughout the country. General Secretary Luxmpur AL unit and pourashabha chairman MA Taher, widely alleged to have been behind the incident has lodged a complaint with the local police saying that ten hired terrorists are after him and that he feels threatened by the attendant risks of abduction and murder. Going a step further he has even expressed incriminating apprehensions against such persons as BNP leader Barrister Moudud Ahmed, MP from Luxmpur Sadar, advocate Khairul Enam, ex-MP Nurul Amin Bhuiyan, district BNP president and general secretary Shamsul Alam and Anwar Hossain respectively, among others.

BNP leader Nurul Islam had been reported missing for 12 days before it came to be known publicly via a Prothom Alo report on September 29 that he was, in fact, chopped to death on the second day of his abduction. Principal suspects were named, basing on information gleaned from a variety of sources that were cross-checked as well. So the basic facts were all there to get to the bottom of the case, albeit without help from any mystery-solver of Sherlock Holmes's calibre. Yet neither the mastermind nor the butchers behind the murder has been put in the dock, full three weeks after the incident.

When an advocate was missing for those many days it ought to have stirred the hornet's nest. But more than that, it was a matter of an important local opposition leader being the victim while the alleged perpetrator happened to be a ruling party stalwart and pourashabha chairman of Luxmpur. Given the serious institutional implications of the incident the government should have offered at least some *ad interim* explanations to keep the public posted about developments in the case.

The list of unsolved murder cases, characterised by alleged police abetting and inaction or involvement of ruling party elements, is growing all the time. To cite only a few instances, Shipu, Rubel, the two juveniles in the old part of the city were all done to death in extremely unmysterious circumstances; yet their killers remain at large, and loud-mouthed as before. Each time a bigger sensational murder case hogs newspaper headlines, the earlier one pales into insignificance with the authorities elated to wash their hands of it. That the people's faith in the system can ebb away to a point of distrust of the government, under those circumstances, should dawn on the ruling party right-away.

We want a comprehensive status report from the government on the murder cases that put its credibility on the line.

Saifur's Good Counsel

FORMER Finance Minister and BNP leader M Saifur Rahman is admired as a plain talker. The doubts he expressed on Saturday about the next general elections being held peacefully in the country sound credible to many who feel that clouds have been gathering on our political horizon for sometime past. Saifur Rahman by articulating his concern over the issue has, by and large, reflected the thinking of the public. We think that he is the best person to do so because he can rise above petty party considerations to say things in a dispassionate manner. He has a mind of his own and as a man of wide experience in state craft he is well-qualified to give some appropriate bipartisan counsel.

Saifur Rahman has very rightly raised the question of law and order situation reaching the lowest ebb during the last ten years of democratically-elected governments rule in the country. His cautionary note on the law and order outlook is more than justified and his concern for the caretaker government to deal with this problem during its short tenure holds water as well. His views on corruption, misdeeds of politicians and bureaucrats, politicisation of the administration and god-fatherism in the crime world are widely shared in the civil society. It will be in the national interest to address these problems forthwith and clear the deck for a peaceful conduct of the forthcoming national elections. We share Rahman's optimism that there is still time for this government to check terrorism and toll extortion and improve the law and order situation so that the next election can be held peacefully and rewardingly. The bottomline is: unless the law and order situation improves by leaps and bounds within the short time at our disposal there is hardly any chance of a free and fair being held in the country next year.

Trafficking in Women

LAST Friday we carried a startling back page news item, based on a report by the Lawyers for Human Rights and Legal Aid (LHRLA) of Pakistan. Received through e-mail it stated that 150 Bangladeshi women were being trafficked to Pakistan everyday as 'human cargo'. While this claim has to be thoroughly verified at this end, one cannot help feel that even if the trafficking generally, out of this country, were on a lower scale it should be sufficient to call for immediate action against the rackets that operate to trade on human misery and gullibility.

The mass trafficking in women and children not only brings out women's imperilled plight to the fore; it also puts the country to embarrassment. We want the government to act on this issue as quickly as possible. It must make public what concrete steps it has so far taken in curbing human trafficking. Trafficking of women which involves prostitution must be regarded as a heinous crime by our social yardsticks. The resistance against it should grow from within our own society.

Since it is a regional issue in the operational sense, all SAARC countries should implement the convention on trafficking. A surveillance network can be established within the SAARC region to combat the problem. The regional approach is highly imperative.

However, some legal activists groups are doing a commendable job by recovering the hapless girls from various hide-outs. They should expand their legal surveillance; because we feel that the number of women and children they have been able to recover from the clutches of traffickers is only the tip of an iceberg. There are many more lives to be saved from the crooks.

WHILE most of the Palestinians, driven out of their homeland since 1948, melted away in Diaspora and have thus become irrelevant in any negotiation, it is primarily the Palestinians living in hitherto occupied areas of West Bank and Gaza strip whom the Israelis have been seeking to engage for any future peace settlement between the two.

Although the Palestinians had hardly been a match to Israel's military process in a series of inconsequential wars they fought against Israel, yet the Palestinians however proved to be hard negotiator since Oslo interim peace agreement was signed in 1993. The collapse of Camp David summit in July last points to the stubbornness with which they defended their causes particularly one relating to Jerusalem. This is in spite of the fact that with few bargaining chips in their hand the Palestinians are always at the receiving end and unlikely to gain much in the final dispensation of peace. Even if the Palestinians alternately blew hot and cold with the Israelis the latter discreetly kept them at bay, dictated the terms of the negotiation and decided the quantum of concessions to be extended to the Palestinians.

But the Israelis do face a problem from a different band of Palestinians the Palestinians who stuck to their home and hearth when Israel was created in 1947 and the first Arab-Israeli war erupted soon after. The handful of Palestinians who could not immediately flee the ravages of the war were organised under their clan leaders for their disciplined disposal. They, with the support of Jewish farmers who used to work in the land beside them, brokered deals that allowed those dislocated Palestinians to return to their scorched villages and live under harsh military control.

Despite all these, they preferred to be 'on ground zero of the conflict' than to remain as refugees forever. But for all practical purposes, they were the nation's second-class citizens and suspects in the eye of the authority to whom every Israeli Arab was a potential terrorist. They were always considered outsiders in Israel's Jewish state and hardly

Israel's Next Great Challenge

What unnerves Israelis is a series of bills in the Knesset that seek to nibble at the Jewish identity of Israel. One challenges the national authors and another proposes that Israel pronounces itself a multicultural state, or to use the phrase of "Azmi Bishara, a state, of all of its citizens."

counted in its public life.

The passage of time has changed all those although mistrust persists. Today the Arabs make up 18 per cent of Israel's population, a proportion that, given the community's high birth rate will inevitably increase. Right now, with almost a million population and 11-odd parliamentary seats in 120-member Knesset the Israeli Arabs have come up to be a force to be reckoned with. The Arabs asserted their way into Israeli politics even before the Labour party officially admitted Arab members in its fold from 1973. Nawaf Massalha, an Arab trade-unionist was drawn into mainstream Israeli politics when he became the first Arab to be a member in Labour Party's Central Committee in 1970. The Arab participation in Israeli politics did not come overnight. A great deal of confidence building had been at work for years to draw the Arabs in public life. In 1992, Rabin started his Arab Campaign for prime ministership in Kfar Kanna, an Arab township where he picked up Nawaf Massalha as his election manager. This is in spite of the fact that with few bargaining chips in their hand the Palestinians are always at the receiving end and unlikely to gain much in the final dispensation of peace. Even if the Palestinians alternately blew hot and cold with the Israelis the latter discreetly kept them at bay, dictated the terms of the negotiation and decided the quantum of concessions to be extended to the Palestinians.

But neither the Arab participation in Israel's national politics nor the latter's recognition of the nation's second-class citizens in public life could be entirely unqualified. Israeli Arabs were never oblivious of their inferior status in statecraft. Even a liberal like Rabin kept a tactful distance from Israel's Arab parties. He relied on them but rebuffed the Arab party that made an active attempt to join his coalition. It is in spite of the Arabs' unconditional support to Rabin during the crucial votes in the parliament. The message is loud and clear. The Arabs were not and still are not partners; neither are they equal in status with the nation's



PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

majority population. The majority obviously asserts the country's identity as the expression of the collective right of the Jews for whom the country was created.

Inevitably the inner contradiction of Israeli statehood in its being "Zionist and democratic"

has increasingly brought it in confrontation with ever growing political force of Israeli Arabs. The first large uprising of Arabs inside Israel came in 1976 when Azmi Bishara, an Arab legislator who made a symbolic run for prime minister last year, organised

protest against the government plan to expropriate 15,000 acres of Arab land in the Galilee. The protest that escalated into a violent confrontation with Israeli troops leaving six Arabs dead became a turning point for the defiant Arab community. The Arab defiance is further expressed through the Israeli Arabs' preference of identity. The people who were almost a nonentity in the beginning now demand to be identified as Palestinians. A recent poll by a peace institute found that 70 per cent of Israeli Arab's identified themselves as Palestinians compared with only 27 per cent in a similar poll five years ago.

Apparently, with a growing sense of Palestinians nationalism, Israel's Arab population has been becoming more impatient raising issues that threaten the identity of the Jewish state.

While Israel has struggled to make peace with Arafat's Palestinians it has ignored the genuine grievances of the Palestinians living inside Israel. As a result, the hitherto docile Arabs are now growing restive. Just how restive, became clear on Israel's last Independence Day.

Traditionally, Israeli Arabs had always felt obliged to swallow their pride on the nation's birthday tying Israeli flags to their car-antennas. In recent years most of them have dropped that pretence and began to mark that any as 'nakba', the catastrophe, which is what Palestinians elsewhere call it. This year some even went further by marching to the weedy remains of the Arab villages destroyed in 1948, waving Palestinians flag and even burning Israeli ones. The startling images of young Israeli Arabs, their faces contoured in rage momentarily diverted Israel's attention from its external peace problem to its long neglected internal ones the problem of a one million Palestinians who live for decades as second-class Israeli citizens.

So long, the Israeli Arabs remained in the periphery of Israel's national life to nurse their grievances as a distinct, often

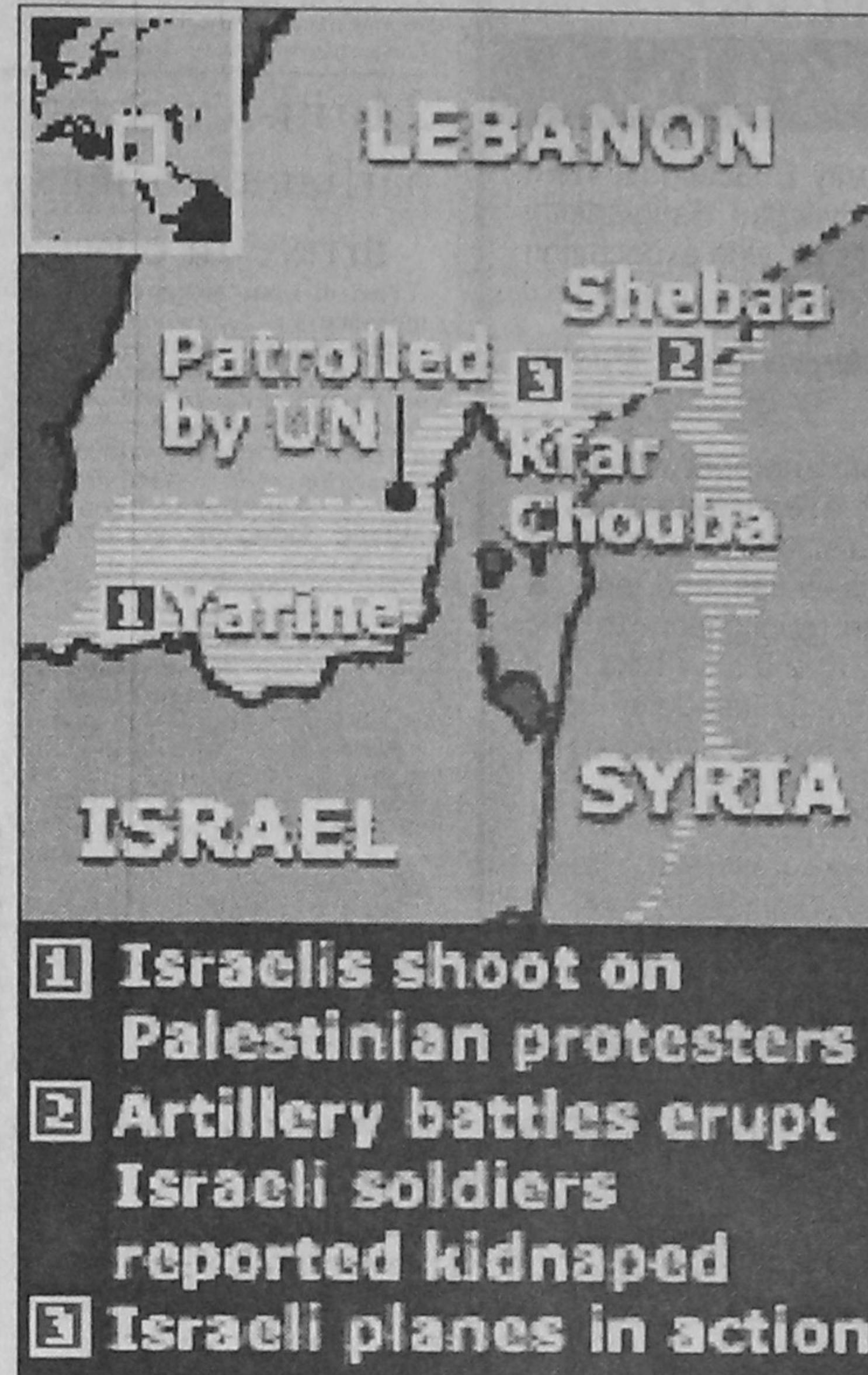
overlooked group with their needs and aspirations addressed neither by their status as Israeli nor as Palestinians. Their quietude was mistaken for quiescence. But now the question of their status seems to be coming in the open and there are few ways to shelve it any more. Should the Oslo process ever be concluded successfully the Israeli Arabs will quickly claim a new status and it will become Israel's next great challenge. The worried Israelis, like the integrationist Nawaf Massalha, already wince at the televised pictures of counter-Independence day parades in Arab villages and at the young Israeli-Arabs draped in the Palestinian flag or the flag of the Hezbollah guerrilla movement.

While the Oslo process is aimed at resolving the 1967 problems of the West Bank, Gaza, Jerusalem it also highlights that some aspects of 1948 are still unresolved. What is happening today inside Israel with regard to Palestinian's equation with the Jews is like reopening of 1948 files.

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What unnerves Israeli Jews is a series of bills in the Knesset that seek to nibble at the Jewish identity of Israel. One challenges the national authors and another propose that Israel pronounce itself a multicultural state, or to use the phrase of "Azmi Bishara, a state, of all of its citizens." To Americans, it sounds innocuous, but those Israelis who consider this the Jewish homeland, it sounds treasonous.



- 1 Israelis shoot on Palestinian protesters
- 2 Artillery battles erupt Israeli soldiers reported kidnapped
- 3 Israeli planes in action

'Rollback' Over 'Rollback' The Return of Instability

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

Ms Banerjee is no Jayalalitha. But she too could send Mr Vajpayee into panic with only half the AIADMK's 1998 seats tally. She has proved that the Vajpayee leadership is weak, and the ragtag NDA is fragile.

may back down or face isolation. But she did succeed in frightening Mr Vajpayee. She extracted a partial roll back promise, on which he reneged. She even bargained for higher ministerial representation for TMC.

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Two other important BJP allies, Telugu Desam and DMK, have sent identical messages. Mr Chandrababu Naidu interfered with the choice of the new Cabinet Secretary perhaps the first chief minister to do so in history. He also forced the Finance Commission to rewrite its final report by creating a special fund for better-off states.

Mr M. Karunanidhi has protested against the shifting the (Central) portfolio of a DMK junior minister. He also put Mr Vajpayee on notice over the BJP's moves to exploit the growing DMK-PMK rift.

This is all part of normal sparring within alliances. But things could change dramatically if the economy deteriorates, the BJP's electoral performance plummets, or Mr Vajpayee stops really leading the NDA. All three are distinct

possibilities.

Take Gujarat, Hindutva's stronghold and India's only state where the BJP rules on its own. The BJP enjoys a two-thirds majority in the assembly. It won 53 per cent of the vote in 1999.

Today, it stands mauling, having lost elections in 22 out of 23 districts, including 15-year-old bastions like Rajkot. It won't do to attribute this to the absence of the two individuals who built the BJP from scratch Shankersingh Vaghela and Narendra Modi.

The truth is that the Keshubhai Patel ministry pur-

sued an anti-poor policy. And the voter punished it. That is the result you reap when you bulldoze poor people's bustees to build shopping malls, ignore near-famine conditions, and substitute rank communalism for thoughtful social policy.

The BJP suffers particularly badly from the "anti-incumbency" factor witness Delhi, Rajasthan, M.P. and Maharashtra. It makes tattered claims that any other party of being "principled", "disciplined" and "idealistic".

Next in line, almost certainly, is



Mending walls?

pay attention to the traffic nightmare and take necessary steps to streamline the traffic flow.

Waseem Khan
Los Angeles, California

Caretaker government

Sir, A media analyst pointed out that there is no provision in the rules framed for the operation of the caretaker government in case it failed to hold the general elections within 90 days.

The society is in a violent mood with the law and order situation practically out of control, and black money and guns dominating politics. What happens if the elections cannot be held within the stipulated period? A large percentage of the voters

might seek some respite in letting the caretaker government continue to be in power for some more time, to enable the political parties to come to a working consensus how to run politics, if not the country. We must be equipped for contingencies. What are the options available?

Critical Voter
Dhaka

Detergent bar

Sir, I refer to a recent letter published in this column on detergent bar. It is a fact that our soap manufacturers are producing many types of washing soaps except quality 'detergent bar' which is available abroad. This type of soaps is good in quality and quickly cleans the clothes and thus saves much time. As the number of working women has

increased in our country, a quality detergent bar will indeed be very helpful to them, which will save their time and energy.

I suggest our soap manufacturers to start a joint venture with foreign manufacturers and produce such quality detergent bar locally. I am sure this venture will turn out to be a profitable one in no time.

F. Zaman
Apt#8, Eastern Housing
Maghbazar, Dhaka

More time needed

Sir, For the last couple of years, the final date of submitting income tax return had been on 15 September. But due to natural calamities and political unrest, the date had been extended almost every year. However this year, the finance minister has

expressed his unwillingness to extend the date and has declared the last date of submitting IT Return on 30 September.

Natural calamities and political unrest are our constant companion. As a matter of fact, the whole country at the moment is under the grip of flood.

Moreover, the taxpayers need to collect bank statement, salary statement, payment certificates, HBFC loan statement etc to prepare IT Return, which requires quite some time.

In these circumstances, I request the authority concerned to extend the date of submission of IT Return up to 30 October and declare this date as the permanent one for the years ahead.

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