

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 Luxmipur administering shock waves throughout the country. General Secretary Luxmipur 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 Luxmipur 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 Holme'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 Luxmipur. 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.

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 Kfarara, an Arab township where he picked up Nawaf Massalha as his election manager. During the Rabin years, especially after Rabin shook Arafat's hand at the White House, there were waves of Israeli Arabs joining the Labour Party. Massalha became a deputy health minister in Rabin's cabinet. He is now Ehud Barak's deputy foreign minister, the highest-ranking Arab in Israel.

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



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

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 non-entity in the beginning now demand to be identified as Palestinians. A recent poll by a peace institute found that 70 per cent of Israeli Arabs 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 Palestinian 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 Israel 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 winces 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 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. Although Gaza city or Ramallah did not become Meccas for the Arabs of Israel after Palestinians Authority (PA) was established, but a cultural affinity began to blossom between the Arabs of Israel and PA. It could not but worry the Israelis profoundly when the Arab legislators of the Knesset like Ahmed Tibi left his professional post in an Israeli hospital to become a senior adviser to Arafat. Since last year, led by Bishara, Tibi and others, Israeli-Arab have grown more confrontational in the parliament. The double planks of their shared platform have always been peace and equality peace with Israel's neighbours and equality at home. But recently planks have developed new edges.

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.

'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.

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.

Two other important BJP allies, Telegu 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 mauled, 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 pursued 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 taller claims than any other party of being "principled", "disciplined" and "idealistic".

Next in line, almost certainly, is



Mending walls?

Uttar Pradesh with a horrible mess in everything from the civil service to primary education, tax collection to road maintenance, law-and-order to health.

Mr Ram Prakash Gupta has spent more time building his palatial house than in Cabinet meetings. He presides over an empire of corruption. In some ways, his misgovernance is worse than Mr Laloo Yadav's.

If U.P. becomes the BJP's Waterloo, Mr Vajpayee will be directly responsible. It is he who brought Mr Gupta out of the woodwork. Mr Vajpayee's leadership problem goes beyond U.P. It is comprehensive.

One aspect of it is summed up by a joke that's especially popular in BJP circles: "What knee problems does Mr Vajpayee have?" He has three: left knee, right knee, and Advani-knee. That's how low his stock has fallen in the parivar.

Why? Mr Vajpayee's interference in party matters has produced more dissonance than consensus. He has promoted loyalists everywhere. But he couldn't outmanoeuvre his rivals. He didn't want to reshuffle the Cabinet before his surgery, but did so under Mr Advani's pressure.

Mr Vajpayee has mocked at swadeshi with globalisation. If he wanted to marginalise the RSS,

he has scarcely succeeded. In New York, he prostrated himself before the sangh. The RSS is now back attacking western corporations, and demanding that foreign Christian missions be expelled. Mr K.S. Sudarshan even wants India to dismember Pakistan, no less.

Within the parivar, Mr Vajpayee can't assert himself consistently. His lack of self-confidence at the Cabinet level is signified by the paranoid moving of the core of the PMO to Beach Candy in Mumbai, rather than entrusting work to his Number Two. He simply doesn't want any Number Two!

Personally, Mr Vajpayee shows signs of exhaustion, despair and depression. He has told confidants he wants to quit it all. It's hard to say if this is a pressure tactic, or an honest urge. Mr Vajpayee may not last long physically and emotionally.

Should uncertainty arise over his continuation, the NDA will be hard put to find a successor. A vicious power struggle could wreck it.

The NDA's next big crisis could arise from an acute tension. Its acceptability among the elite, even the media, depends on agendas relevant to the top five per cent of the people. But for electoral-political survival, it needs the bulk of the people. The tension has grown greatly. The era of instability seems to be returning.

To the Editor ...

"Traffic jam"

Sir, I fully agree with Sabrina's letter "Traffic jam", appeared in your daily on October 4. The government needs to get involved actively in streamlining the traffic flow on the streets of Dhaka. I recently visited Dhaka. I was frustrated to see the traffic back-ups at every intersection, be it the main roads or the residential streets of Dhanmondi. The congestion seems to have worsened since my last visit there ten months ago.

I live in Los Angeles, which has considerably more vehicles compared to the streets of Dhaka. But, I don't encounter the senseless traffic jams here, like everyone does in Dhaka City. Most of the roads in Dhaka are wide enough to accommodate, at least, three lanes in each direction. If

people were educated enough in traffic rules, they would drive in the proper lanes. For right turns, there should be a single line, not six. Everybody completely ignores the traffic signals. People should realise that there is a purpose for which these signals have been installed. Drivers violate traffic rules right in front of the traffic police, but no action is taken. I was appalled to see that people even drive on the wrong side of the streets, just because it is convenient for them. How can this be allowed? Are the applicants tested for their knowledge of traffic rules before being issued their driver's license? Everybody seems to be in a rush to be in front. What is there hurry? Instead, if they obeyed the traffic rules, they would get to their destination much quicker. I hope the concerned authority will

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
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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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