

How Can a Government be So Indifferent?

THOUSANDS of news reports along with photographs have been published in the last few years regarding our traffic problem. Yet, after years the problem not only remains unresolved, in fact it has gotten worse. Millions of productive hours are lost everyday as people wait endlessly and helplessly in the traffic jams. The cost in monetary terms would easily add up to hundreds of crores of taka over the last several years. It is the law of the jungle that prevails on our city roads with no regard for the regulations and no power in the hands of the traffic police to enforce them.

The most frustrating aspect of the problem is that the government and the designated authorities within it do not appear to be bothered about this problem and are quite unconcerned about the suffering of the public. Yes, some ad hoc and totally superficial measures have been taken but they have neither had any impact on reducing the congestion nor on the flow of the traffic. If approached the official answer is that Dhaka city has too many people and not enough roads. The solution lies in building more roads and flyovers. The government, we are told, is looking into the feasibility of constructing either a circular train or sky-train system or some such alternatives as the long-term solution to the traffic problem.

While we await the long-term measures what about some short-term and immediate solutions? Are we to suffer these traffic jams for the years that it will take to construct the alternatives? Will not the problem grow to even more unimaginable extent in the five to ten years that will be needed to build the city trains? As we see it, the government has totally failed to address the traffic problem of the city. Not only that they have failed but, on the contrary, instead of solving anything they have allowed the problem to spread. Take the example of rickshaws. We know we cannot eliminate them in the foreseeable future, but we could have restricted their number to a maximum limit. But instead the government looked the other way as illegal bodies - we published reports and photos of 13 - started issuing rickshaw permit. Today nobody knows how many rickshaws ply on the city streets. In addition, unlicensed rickshaw vans have flooded our streets. Nearly twenty types of motorised and non-motorised vehicles ply in the streets of Dhaka.

A most lawless situation prevails on our streets and that is because our government is indifferent to our problems. Can anybody tell us who is in charge of city traffic?

A Lot More than Law and Order Breakdown

JUST think about it. Four persons in their late teens took a classmate of theirs for an outing at the National Park in Gazipur and strangled him with a *gamchha*. It was not a heat of the moment action. By their own admission, the four, including the hapless boy's stepbrother, had contemplated the killing more than a month ago. Little did Ammar Shamsi, an O-level examinee of the Naila Memorial Tutorial at Dhanmondi, know his friends would turn into his killers. The story didn't end there. The four got back to Dhaka, called Shamsi's parents and demanded ransom for the release of their already-dead son. Apparently, the motive was money. They wanted to realise the Tk 10 lakh ransom and slip away. However, according to the detectives on the case, the mastermind behind the whole sordid tale comes from an affluent family. What's even more shocking is the fact that none of the four has shown any remorse for the brutal act they perpetrated. Salahuddin, Bappi and Alamgir, arrested by the Detective Branch, were poise-epitomised even when they recounted in details the horrific crime. Zia, Shamsi's stepbrother, went out of the capital with a group of preachers from Kakrail Mosque after the killing.

We wish we could attribute Shamsi's murder to complete collapse of law and order across the country. It goes well beyond law enforcement failure, deep into the frighteningly metamorphosed individual and societal psyche. Years of political instability and steady law and order downslide appear to have started eating into the moral and ethical fabric of the society and the individual living in it. Crime has suddenly become a day-to-day affair. Death has become too easy. Money matters more than people do. What eventuality are we headed for? The time has come for to pause and find an answer to this very crucial question. Our failure now to address the crisis we are in at this moment could spell doom for us and our posterity.

Unrestricted Acid Sale

WHILE concern for welfare of the acid-burn victims rises among a few individuals, private clinics and non-governmental organisations, setting up free medical facilities for treatment of acid injuries, women continue to face severe disfigurement caused by acid attacks. Recent reports say, on an average 20 people are falling prey to severe acid atrocity every month. But the government, as it seems, is yet to put its control over import, storage, distribution and sale of acids, which are usually used in laboratories and by goldsmiths etc. Also, the recent concern and anger in society against this crime seem to have failed to cause any consciousness among the criminals and thus curb the crime to any extent.

In absence of adequate laws and monitoring of implementation of existing ones, this gravely injurious substance - acid - is falling in evil hands only to maim and disfigure a female face and frame for good. A *Prothom Alo* report on Thursday said that recommendations made by the technical committee of the government three years ago are still lying unimplemented. Introducing licences among all the legal users was one of the significant provisions, and if implemented, it would certainly have put a restraint on the easy availability of acids, thus reducing the risk of harm. We feel disquieted to see the authority non-responsive to agonies of the victims. Certainly, it doesn't take more than three years to implement a set of recommendations that carries so much social importance! We urge those in the Home and Women's Affairs ministries to pull up their socks and implement the recommended suggestions immediately.

Bullets against Stones: Palestinian Uprising

President Clinton should immediately ask Prime Minister Barak to stop talking to Sharon on the proposed national emergency government as the entire approach is terribly counter productive and indeed dangerous from the point of view of future peace in the area.. With Sharon in any form of government the peace process will be the main casualty; Barak's visit to Washington will be meaningless.

failed, behind the scene peace work was progressing in Washington. Reportedly on September 27 some good progress was reported by the negotiators. An administration official who was involved in the negotiations said, "Both delegates got to thinking that there was more hope than at any point since Camp David." One of the Palestinian negotiators said, "... he felt like that we could have a deal." As it seems, there were some concrete results that could lead to a possible "breakthrough".

Apparently, Likud leader Ariel Sharon was aware of such developments and being more sly than his body would bear, he decided to undertake the unholy visit to the holy sites, which, as expected, resulted in the protests and ultimately put the Palestinian area into flames. Sharon's plan to wreck the peace process worked very well and the two leaders Arafat and Barak who were friendly appear enemy to each other today. Unfortunately Prime Minister Barak failed to understand the deep-seated conspiracy and the result was Palestinian Uprising. Intifada which turned out to be deadly for the Palestinian people.

Arab summit took place in Cairo three days after Sharm-el-Sheikh summit. The general



Spotlight on Middle East

Muslehuddin Ahmad

expectation of the Palestinian people was that Arab summit would take a very strong and firm stand against Israel and may even call on Egypt and Jordan to break diplomatic ties with Israel. But the summit decisions did not go far enough to satisfy the Palestinians who have been facing the Israeli bullets and burying the dead. The summit was summed up as 'strong on rhetoric and weak on actions'. President Mubarak joined Jordan in pressing for a moderate stand against the radical Arab countries including Libya and Iraq. Both Egypt and Jordan have formal diplomatic relations with Israel. The summit, however, condemned Israel for its 'barbaric and gruesome activities' against the Palestinian people. The UN was asked to investigate the alleged war crimes by Israel and also put peace keeping forces directly into Israel to stop the ongoing massacre. However, on the diplomatic issues the summit resolution left the matters to the individual Arab

countries to take appropriate decisions. Tunisia announced closure of offices of the Israeli envoy and Morocco and Qatar suspended some low level contacts that these countries had with Israel. Libya was angry over the summit decisions and indeed walked out. The positive part of the summit decisions was the setting up of a billion dollar fund at the instance of Saudi Arabia \$800 for the holy sites and \$200 for the families of the victims of the uprising.

In the meantime King Fahd said, there would be no stability in the Middle East until Israel complied with UN resolutions. He also hoped for a solid and united Arab position. These words from the King indicate something very meaningful and far reaching. The Emir of Bahrain Sheikh Hamad whose territory is now being used by the US for its Fifth Fleet said, there would be no peace in the Middle East until Palestinian state is established with Jerusalem as its capital. He urged Presi-

dent Clinton to pursue the peace process.

Israeli reaction to the summit was obviously positive and they praised President Mubarak for his efforts for moderation. Israel felt that this was a 'victory of wisdom' as it retained the 'strategic choice of peace' and kept the door open for future peace work. But unfortunately, in the meantime, Prime Minister Barak decided to go in the opposite direction by taking 'time out' of the peace process. This obviously encouraged Ariel Sharon who agreed to negotiate on the Barak's offer for forming the national emergency government. It is not understood what sort of national emergency is there for Israel. No state has attacked Israel. Indeed, it's national emergency for the Palestinians as they are under attack from Israel.

Sharon being in a stronger position in terms of Israeli domestic politics laid tough pre-conditions for joining the proposed national emergency government. In such a government Sharon must have veto power on diplomatic decisions and security measures. Acceptance of such conditions would mean Sharon would be the second Prime Minister of Israel. The other conditions are in case there is an unilateral declaration of the Palestinian state which is likely on November 15, Israel must go for unilateral division between Israel and Palestinian state, stop all economic and political exchanges and also annex parts of West Bank including the Israeli settlements. Barak could agree to such conditions only if he is prepared to abandon the peace process altogether. The negotiations are continuing.

The US must be watching the developments carefully as its interests in the Middle East are very much at stake because of the belligerency of Israel against the Arabs. It has already suffered heavily in the port of Aden. More warnings are in the air for which the US army establishments in the Middle East are on the high alert. All the efforts done by President Clinton and his administration for bringing some form of peace and stability in the M-E have been reduced to practically nothing because of Israel's wrong actions. The world reactions are fairly clear on this long-standing

issue and also on the on going violence. The US cannot continue to give its 'blind support to Israel' just for domestic vote collection purpose. The alleged notion of 53rd state may revive old rivalry in the global context despite some changes in the East. These changes could be for economic and political conveniences; the real ethnic divide is still there to finally shape the future.

The same rule is applicable in the Middle East too. The friendly countries in M-E are under heavy pressure to change course for some valid reasons: slow death of a nation like Iraq, violent death of the Palestinians etc. They, indeed, may find it impossible to continue to side with the U S for an indefinite period. After all, they also have to adjust themselves progressively towards the current trends for their own survival. The next administration will do well to keep these in view while formulating its foreign policy for Middle East.

However, as expected, President Clinton has asked both Prime Minister Barak and President Arafat to fly to Washington soon to talk peace immediate peace and also possible lasting peace. President Putin has also urged President Arafat and Prime Minister Barak for restraint and to return to the peace process. President Clinton should immediately ask Prime Minister Barak to stop talking to Sharon on the proposed national emergency government as the entire approach is terribly counter productive and indeed dangerous from the point of view of future peace in the area. With Sharon in any form of government the peace process will be the main casualty; Barak's visit to Washington will be meaningless.

The present violence which is gradually tapering off has highlighted several fundamental issues. These must be kept in view during the next peace negotiation, if any. Firstly, the Palestinians and indeed the Arabs must regain their sovereignty over East Jerusalem including the sites holy to the Muslims. Secondly, the settlements must be relocated into Israel by giving land and financial assistance to the settlers. Thirdly, the future Palestinian State cannot be a demilitarized area; it must have adequate means to protect itself against possible attacks from Israel. There may be many Sharons in future in Israel even if there is peace. The enmity has been there for too long and thus is too deep-rooted.



Israeli soldiers arresting a stone-throwing Palestinian: Bullets against stones!

OPINION

Principled Position

by Ali Ahmed Ziauddin

AT a time when rational senses seem to have evaporated from our political leadership across party lines and independent thinking is almost considered a crime, it is indeed remarkable that someone has finally challenged the rotten status-quo. Knowing fully well he might lose his seat and all the privileges it entails, Major (retired) Akhteruzzaman decided to attend parliament defying his party ban. His previous attempts to bring reason to his party's policy-makers ended in fiasco either way. This time it seems they have closed the door on him for good. It is very rare in our political culture that a senior party activist disagrees with the wrong policies of the party and dares take a public stand, with the prospect of retribution instead of reward looming large round the corner. He may have many other faults otherwise but on this count he certainly deserves praise for act of courage and commitment.

Akhteruzzaman has not only challenged his party's moribund hierarchy but also perhaps unwittingly exposed certain undemocratic provisions of our constitution so readily agreed upon by both the major parties. He is being charged for discharging a responsibility he was elected to carry out in the first place! In

this case the particular provision empowers (presumably) a political party to seek cancellation of the seat belonging to its recalcitrant member who has dared not to toe the party line however irrational it may be. The drafting committee may have worried too much over floor crossing and incredible horse trading an alarming phenomenon in the sub-continent but did not ponder upon the probable paradoxical outcome of the provision that can ban a member from attending parliament.

If any part of the constitution prohibits an individual parliament member from acting according to his/her conscience, conventional wisdom and wishes of the constituents, then that particular provision goes against the spirit of democratic praxis and needs to be amended. So what? Our political leadership couldn't care less. They enjoy yapping about democracy while acting like autocrats! Ten years into 'largely non-functioning' parliamentary democracy has amply displayed our tendency for autocratic behaviour than grooming ourselves in democratic norms. Our capability in turning the parliament into a costly show-piece is several times more than making it relevant to our everyday need.

What after all is Akhteruzzaman's crime? He has disagreed with his party's policy-makers who think abstaining from parliament will make democracy more workable. Very strange logic, indeed. On what grounds do they claim so? BNP's stated position is: first, the ruling party has not implemented the agreements reached upon during first year of the current parliament; second, the opposition is not allowed to speak; third, the Speaker is not neutral and fourth, the ruling party has not allowed debate on major policy issues like Water and CHT treaties. Lastly, the ruling party is abusive to the extent that it does not stop at lambasting the opposition only, the leader of the house passes indecent remarks about the leader of the opposition on the floor of the House. Assuming all these accusations are true, even then can BNP justify its long abstention from parliament? Let us consider their reasons one by one.

Is BNP a political party or a trade union? Why must it resort to 'agreements' for attending parliament? It is not anybody's parlour. They are in there because a substantial number of people have voted for them, and not at the mercy of the ruling party. True, the people did not

give them majority of the seats and asked them to be in the opposition. They refused to respect people's verdict and act as the opposition. Their second complaint of not being allowed to speak is too rash a conclusion. How do we make out whether they were allowed to speak or not when they have refrained from attending the parliament over more than three years now? They should have let the people judge instead they let them down and decided to judge themselves. As for the Speaker's neutrality, there are so many ways of exposing and complaining inside the parliament instead of remaining out of it indefinitely. On this point, too, they should have let the people observe and judge.

Regarding concern of bypassing the parliament over major issues like CHT and Water treaties it was even more essential they remained inside and consistently raised it at every opportune moment. How could either the Speaker or the ruling party remain silent about it for months and years together? Two very important national discourses did not take place at all. As for using abusive and indecent language by the ruling party and absence of congenial atmosphere it sounds absolutely ludicrous. National politics is a serious

business and not a game of childish sentimentalism. If BNP, with all its experience has not learned to respond to abuses, neglect and arrogance with sophistication and elegance, they do not deserve to be inside, in the first place, and have no one else to blame other than themselves. Instead of remaining within the House and keeping the government on toe on every national issue especially alarming lawlessness, BNP decided to give them a walkover and walked into the wilderness themselves. What a pity! Instead of playing the role of a constructive opposition they embarked upon the road to political Harakiri. The first casualty is our nascent democracy.

BNP emerged in the political arena of Bangladesh as a reaction to Awami League's fascist tendencies. Despite more than two decades into power politics, it seems, very sadly, they have chosen to remain as they were. Instead of grooming themselves as a responsible alternative party to Awami League and help build a two-party system they enjoy resorting to gimmicks, rashness and rhetorics. Otherwise how would they explain their stupid, disastrous behaviour over the past three years? First boycotting the parliament proved a monumental blunder and did not reap

any benefit at all. Second, the 'oust-government' movement fell flat on their face. Third, to hold back internal disintegration and recover lost ground they had no choice other than hop on the back of foreign enemies of democracy like Ershad and Golam Azam. All these acts have contributed in exposing their severe limitation in both matured constitutional as well as agitational politics. Now they are seeking fresh mandate from the people. For what? Staying out of the next parliament as well?

If Akhteruzzaman has dared to question these self-defeating policies of his party then he rightly deserves admiration of at least free thinking people. In an atmosphere where politics of convenience instead of conviction seem to be the ground rule it is rare that somebody dares to take a principled position. What is more appreciable is that all along he has expressed his loyalty to his party while questioning its suicidal policies. Maybe these little outbursts based on reason and common sense will gather strength some day and develop into the main current. So congratulations Mr. Akhteruzzaman. Let us hope someone from Awami League gathers enough courage to question his leadership on the patronage of the goons in Feni and Lakshmipur.

To the Editor ...

Flood disaster: Lack of action

Sir, We have read with interest your editorial 'Flood Response still Tentative' of 13th October, commenting on the slow response to the flood situation in Sathkhira.

While we sympathise with the people of Sathkhira, may we draw the attention to the situation in the Sullia area, south of Dera, in district Sunamganj which has now been turned into a disaster area for no less than six months.

Because of its location in the haor area, the people there can manage only one crop of rice each year, normally harvested late April, early May. In mid April this year, early flash floods caused 90 per cent loss of the annual rice crop, just before harvesting. This was a major disaster for the area, the effect of which will continue up to April 2001, when the next annual rice crop is due. Other parts of Sylhet area were not affected. Therefore, the plight of

the 90,000 people in the Sullia area has gone unnoticed and they have received no aid from government and virtually none from other sources, although, we understand, the area was visited by Mr Suranjit Sen Gupta, adviser to the Prime Minister, in June. There are huge requirements for food and medicine in this flood affected area. Much of the animal feed was also lost, so people have been forced to sell their cows at low prices, but from December, they will have to purchase fresh animals at high cost so as to be able to plough the land for next year's crop. People need seed, fertiliser and agricultural instruments as well to be able to re-start their agricultural management.

Would the authorities concerned please consider helping these 'abandoned' people?

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Parking predicament

Sir, The only car park of Motijheel, by the side of Uttara Bank Head Office, no longer appears to be a car park.

The fancy railing that once encircled the place have all disappeared. Now, one by one the fancy bricks that formed the base of the railing are fast disappearing. The brick soling of major part of the ground too have gone.

While northern corner of the car park has been taken up by a makeshift chala, doing brisk business on waste papers; the open space before it are being used for parking purpose. In the process, the entire area is strewn with waste papers of different size, polythene bags and what not which pose a serious threat to public health.

The southern side facing the main road, has also been turned into a stand for thela (push car) and rickshaw van.

The drain running all around

the park are all choked with filth and dirty waters. All these have turned the place look like a veritable hell.

There must be someone from the municipality to look after this. Why then the place is forsaken and uncared for? Will the corporation look into this and try to return the respectability that the place deserves, being at the middle of Motijheel- the hub of economic activity of the country.

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Construction of new roads

Sir, We congratulate the Home Minister, Mayor Mohammad Hanif and MP Mohammad Selim for the construction of a new road demolishing a side wall of Dhaka central Jail and connecting Kamaldah and Umesh Dutta Road for the convenience of the city dwellers of old Dhaka.

We are also delighted to know that more new roads in old Dhaka

would be constructed through BDR Headquarters for comfortable public movement from Nawabganj, Hazaribagh and Kamrangchiar areas. In addition to those more new roads would be constructed in and around Dhaka City.

We would highly appreciate if the boundary wall on both northern and southern sides of Bangabhaban are removed and re-erected at least twenty-five feet inside the compound of Bangabhaban, and then the Dilkusha Road in Motijheel Commercial Area and Toynebe Circular Road in the center of old and new Dhaka on the northern side of Wari residential areas are widened in the crowd and busiest area of the metropolitan city in the interest of public service.

We strongly feel that for the overall development of Dhaka city, promotion of its civic facilities, improvement of its environment and streamlining the road traffic system the first and foremost requirements are to shift

the Dhaka Central Jail as well as Bangabhaban from their most messy and disorderly places to some distant uncrowded locations. In this connection Dhaka Central Jail may be shifted across river Buriganga in the South and a new Bangabhaban may be built at Savar, Ashulia, Joydevpur or Old Airport. Tejaon consistent with the requirements of time and situation of the ever expanding metropolitan city of Dhaka.

We would also like to state here that construction of new roads in and around Dhaka city would be an outright wastage of time, energy and public money and those would prove to be absolutely fruitless if the DCC and DMP fail to keep and maintain those public roads free from the encroachment of hawkers and vendors, illegal establishment of shops and workshops, hotels and restaurants and unauthorised parking of buses, trucks and rickshaws.

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