

Lifeless Parliament

BAKLADESH Parliament is all a massive building today with little substance inside. Lifeless to the core, it seats late for lack of quorum; even the national health policy has to be unveiled to 40 MPs in place of the quorum requirement of 60; notice on matters of public interest get on to the deferred list as the concerned minister is unavailable; and even a presiding Deputy Speaker has to gloss over frequent pointers to quorumlessness during a 250-minute sitting just to go through the motions. So desperate is the situation that a blind eye is being turned to even inadmissible things.

The hollowness of the Jatiya Sangsad is an established fact now. That the ruling party cannot alone run a parliament is a proven reality today. But the Opposition which is principally to blame for this cannot take any vicarian pleasure from this. For, were it not for the opposition absenteeism in parliament the lifelessness of the JS could be avoided, regardless of their complaints that the ruling party were not giving them a level playing field there. Their presence would not only have ensured quorum on most days, the debates and interventions made by them could also have enlivened the proceedings, if not entirely rendered productive for them. The worst part of it is that the opposition's boycott of the JS sessions has had the concomitant effect of MPs of the ruling party losing interest in the parliament. All of this is a huge loss to parliamentary culture as a whole.

The tragedy of our political history since the restoration of democracy in end 1990 has been a nearly wholesale boycott of the JS by the opposition. Awami League did it during the first half of 90's followed by BNP from 1996 until today. If the JS were allowed to function during the last ten years, completely unhindered by opposition abstentions, we would have had a vast reservoir of parliamentary experience with a robustly positive political culture in place.

With the AL having shown the way and the BNP following suit in trivialising the JS, our hard-earned parliamentary democracy is in a shambles. In the present context however, the onus for a non-functioning parliament evidently lies on the BNP. The other way of looking at it would be that it is the BNP who can really put life back into the parliament if they so willed. The dire need for an amendment to revalidate the constitutional provision for the women's reserved quota in parliament provides an opportunity for the BNP to see the wisdom of returning to the JS to protect its stake in the vital matter of women's parliamentary representation.

New Direction to US-Vietnam Ties

US President Bill Clinton's four-day visit to Vietnam will certainly go down into human history as a living example of how implacable enemies can reconcile their differences with an eye on the future based purely on economic and welfare-oriented considerations for their peoples. At the welcoming ceremony in Hanoi on November 17, the first American President to visit the Southeast Asian country since the eight-year war in Vietnam ended back in 1975 pleaded to his host, "We cannot change the past. What we can change is the future." That actually embodied the tone and tenor of Clinton's visit to what was an enemy capital 25 years ago at the twilight of his presidency. The bitter memories of the civil war between the US-backed south and the communist north are still fresh in the minds of those who have lived with it. The last breaths of three million Vietnamese and some 56,000 US soldiers may be still waiving in air. Still, as both leaders have realised, only by paving the path for "a peaceful and prosperous future," the sacrifices of war can be honoured and a painful past can be redeemed. For that common vision, neither side has to compromise its respective stance or ideology. It is a convergence, and not contraction, of visions. That's where the beauty of a new beginning in bilateral relations between the United States and Vietnam lies.

In the face of rapid globalisation, interconnectivity is of the essence. The greatly changed reality in the last couple of decades calls for a look beyond nation-specific ideological considerations to the welfare of the people. The world has expanded in the sense of more people-to-people contact. No one has to shed his or her national, cultural and personal identity. At the same time, no one should remain glued to the past. There could be intense animosity topped off by bloody conflicts and thousands of deaths thereby. Nonetheless, grievances of the past by no means should result in isolationism, because isolationism could only bring about suffering for people. In recent times, we have seen the Koreans take the first step towards resumption of relations. There too, North Koreans have not been asked to shed their communist ways. The analogy does not fit there, the message does. It is commendable, especially in the case of Vietnam, that within the global parameter of free economy, egalitarian distribution of wealth has been religiously and successfully pursued.

To the Editor...

Zoom in or zoom out?

Sir, BTV's highly polarised national news coverage is boring, because it zooms in on party publicity and not on government performance and strong, unpalatable analysis is entirely absent (lack of moral courage; even in the parliament).

Political parties should zoom out, and leaders of the society (political and others) should zoom in for the analysis and solutions through master plans. Our leaders are not acting as master monitors, for neutral evaluation, for the greatest good of the greatest number. How the autonomous Planning Commission represent public interest, beyond economic and statistical goals? Reform mandates are not passed on to the PC, for reasons not explained to the public. The ponderous National Commissions are masterly examples of omissions. Even half truths are not faced squarely, to provide rounded perspectives. The right to face national problems and issues is lukewarm; but not the subjective denunciation according to political expediency. Will the leaders keep on using politics as a tool or to achieve some undisputed goals? There is many a slip between the political cup and the lip.

A Mawaz
Dhaka

Political rehabilitation

Sir, The local politics of today is weak as it finds consolation in pointing out the weaknesses in other parties and past regimes. President Clinton's recent address in Vietnam was carefully drafted (some human lessons have to be learned and unlearned; as also in the Korean peninsula).

Mandela, after two decades of solitary confinement, came out to head his country and induct his sworn enemies into the national cabinet, without rancour and malice. Hatred and viciousness were deliberately avoided, for the sake of the nation (not that of the party). He retired so quietly, that it is impossible to visualise such a situation in noisy and accusative Dhaka. Jyoti Basu's retirement was in similar lofty category. Why ordinary minds have to be thrust up artificially to lead the country? Deficiencies are introduced to teach lessons to the supporters, through placement of illusory leaders to undeserving post of dignity and honour.

Dhaka has experimented with various types of alternative leadership and modes of governance, but the situation today is no nearer to solutions and stability. Future general elections are hyped platforms for self-seeking politicians, for making infamous inroads into the noble cult of leadership.

PRIME Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee does not agree with my contention that the agricultural produce or the dairy products have suffered because of unfair competition from abroad. "This is a myth, not based on facts," he says. When I tell him that even Punjab Chief Minister Prakash Singh Badal has criticised the Centre on this point, Vajpayee says: "Badal too is wrong." If this is so, why the government does not explain how subsidised butter from Europe or subsidised foodgrains from Australia or the US pose no danger to a milkman or a farmer in the country? I request the Prime Minister that the steps taken to promote globalisation and economic reforms should be spelled out so that people can themselves decide whether their fears are unreal. Here Vajpayee agrees with me and says: "We should talk to people." But I have not seen any effort on government's part to explain how India will gain in the long run. People, increasingly feel that the economic reforms are against their interests. They see the conglomerations of multinationals as another East India Company taking shape to enslave the country, first economically and then politically. Foreign cartels are gaining muscles which will give them a clout. The Prime Minister laughs at the premise which, he believes, does not exist.

I narrate to him my travels in the country and warn him that more and more people are getting marginalised. Small units are going out of business and medium scale establishments are changing hands, from Indians to

PM Feels Let Down by Babu Raj

Mahatma Gandhi tried to change man but he failed in doing so. I share this thought with the Prime Minister. Is corruption the real problem? Yes, mostly. Corruption in the bureaucracy cannot go if it continues to be prevalent at the political level. The PM feels that the performance of his government would have been more marked and meaningful if the bureaucracy had cooperated with it.

foreigners. One does not feel like eating after seeing the destitution in Bihar, Orissa and the Eastern UP. Even the prosperous states of Punjab and Haryana have been affected. Vajpayee does not contradict me but points out that the number of people below the poverty line has come down. Probably so, but nearly 30 crore 34 per cent of the population are still poor. When I met Vajpayee at his residence a few days ago, I had not read the World Bank Country report which drew New Delhi's attention to the widespread poverty in India. It says that the gains the country has made from the beginning of the 1990s have not reduced poverty. The reasons, the report adumbrated, are the same ones which we have heard ad nauseum: "The nature of agricultural growth, poor human development record, weak governance in poor states, crumbling infrastructure and lack of anti-poverty programmes."

Has the World Bank ever discussed its own role? Why have its investments shown poor results? Probably, it has concentrated on more gigantic projects. Probably, there is a lesson in what Lal Bahadur Shastri told his colleagues at the first cabinet meeting: "I am a small man and believe in small projects with small expenditure

so that we get quick results." Again why the World Bank fails to report that foreign investors are making whopping profits and remitting them to their own country instead of reinvesting them in India? Profit motive is understandable but it hurts people in India when it is mere exploitation. The government should have taken some firm steps whereby

per cent. Of course, the dollar is 10 per cent costlier than last year's. Reforms are means, not the end by itself. If they fail to help India develop or make a dent in poverty they are of little use. In fact, it is time we took stock of the situation.

"Why don't you appoint a commission of experts and eminent people not politicians to

duced should be debated in public before they are implemented. He emphasises that reforms are for people, not the people for reforms. He feels that reforms should be debated publicly, not presented as a fait accompli, either in the shape of ordinance or some other measures. Why the development is not up to the mark or why it is so halting? We come to the conclusion that it is primarily the bureaucracy which has failed the country. The government's own servants put hurdles in way to progress. Unmindful of the public good they invoke archaic rules red tape to see that even the routine work does not proceed in a normal manner.

The Prime Minister should initiate measures which can make the administration quick, purposeful and clean. He agrees with me but asks, how? There is no doubt that the various administrative reforms commissions have done very little. It is no use covering the same ground again and again. Still we grope in the dark to find a way to make public servants accountable. In essence, it means doing away with the babu raj, which is ridden with rules and regulations that do not make sense. How do we make people in government offices and the public sector undertakings

conscious of their duty towards the people who pay their salary?

I really do not have any answer to this question. Mahatma Gandhi tried to change man but he failed in doing so. I share this thought with the Prime Minister. Is corruption the real problem? Yes, mostly. Corruption in the bureaucracy cannot go if it continues to be prevalent at the political level. I suggest the enactment of the Lok Pal Bill straightaway. "Yes," the Prime Minister says. We are back to the discussion on how to improve government machinery. He feels that the performance of his government would have been more marked and meaningful if the bureaucracy had cooperated with it. The best of proposals, he believes, have been stalled or slowed down by the abnormally large bureaucracy which is adept in putting impediments, not clearing them. This is not surprising. It is said that the administration in Pakistan worked well and fast initially. When the pace slowed down, a study was conducted to find out the reasons. The general impression was that the spurt of enthusiasm had slackened after the creation of Pakistan. But the reason turned out to be different. The study showed that when the government began its work at Karachi, there were no files since the duplicate ones prepared for Pakistan had not arrived from Delhi. The work slowed down when Pakistan built its own files and its own precedents which the clerks and assistants cited at every stage!

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

most of the profits earned would have been ploughed back, at least for some years. Worse, the multinationals have pocketed concessions without fulfilling their export obligations. They gave in writing to do so. Neither the government has pursued the matter, nor the beneficiaries have felt obligated. Of course, the World Bank's advice is to accelerate economic reforms. Too little, too hackneyed. It has nothing else on the agenda. People have begun to wonder whether reforms are the only way to fight poverty. Inflation is nearing seven per cent while the growth rate has fallen to five

assess achievements and failures on the economic front so as to know whether we are on the right track? I make this suggestion to the Prime Minister. He does not reject it but lapses into silence as if he is examining what I have said. I spell out my proposal. The commission should go over the reforms to measure the good or harm they have done and determine how we should proceed further. It has to be a quick job because the outside pressure to go to the next phase of reforms is building up. The Prime Minister has no hesitation in saying that the reforms sought to be intro-

Vietnam and US Attempt to Bury the Past

by Harun ur Rashid

Vietnam needs investment, transfer of technology and market for its goods in the US. Equally the US is keen to have its presence in Vietnam... Vietnam, the communist regime and the US, the leader of democracy in the world are in sharp contrast to each other and therefore the pace of bilateral relations would not be as smooth as "knife through butter". ..However Mr. Clinton's visit is a powerful symbol of reconciliation



Clinton in Vietnam: Historic reconciliation visit

US President Bill Clinton's historic reconciliation visit to Vietnam last week marks a new chapter in US-Vietnam relationship. It is interesting to note Mr. Clinton who in his younger days was a fierce opponent of the Vietnam war and avoided participating in it had to come to Vietnam to repair the relationship between the peoples of the two countries.

The last serving President to visit Vietnam was Mr. Richard Nixon in 1969 at the height of the war to rally US troops. The US was defeated in 1975 despite it had spent US\$350 billion in the war with casualties of 56,000 US servicemen and three million Vietnamese. It was a war that divided the American community. The visit is reported to have angered some US war veterans.

Vietnam declared itself as an unified state on 2nd July, 1976 consisting of both North and South Vietnam. Thereafter there was a pause in their bilateral relations. In the 90s both sides realised to repair their relations in the context of globalisation and new high-tech economy. The US established diplomatic relations in 1995. During March of this year the US Defence Secretary visited Vietnam and a new beginning has been ushered in.

During the visit President Clinton has not tried to dwell on the mistakes of history aiming instead to unite Vietnam and the US in global future. He did not apologise for waging a war with Vietnam. His primary goal was to reach the new Vietnamese generation with the message of human rights, religious tolerance and freedom of expression and information. In a way he succeeded in doing that. His message appears to be an indirect criticism to the Vietnamese communist regime. However Mr. Clinton was careful enough not to upset the communist leaders and said: "But we do not seek to impose these ideals

nor should we." President Clinton must have been satisfied to witness that massive young Vietnamese crowds waved and cheered him during the visit. The rapturous welcome accorded to President Clinton, his wife Hillary and their daughter in Ho Chi Minh city (former Saigon) appeared to have the Vietnamese Communist regime by surprise, although the host government allowed the President to walk freely in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh city, make a number of speeches including a live address to the nation and visit excavations for the remains of American servicemen (2000) still listed as missing in action (MIA).

However the response from the older Vietnamese generation was

not so enthusiastic. They could not forget the devastation brought by US bombing in the war. Many older people who fought feel betrayed and bitter. They find themselves a bit isolated because the cry in the country has now been for national unity, economic progress and prosperity. Although the Vietnamese government leaders were reported to be cordial with the President, the Communist Party General Secretary Le Kha Phieu demanded the US respect for the Vietnamese communist political system. He was reported to have said to Mr. Clinton that the system would not only exist but further develop.

There is a view that reconciliation with the US by Vietnam is a calculated move both political and commercial. Vietnam had to

live under the Chinese shadow for a long time. China and Vietnam have ill-defined border of 1,290 kilometres and a brief war erupted between the two countries in 1979 on the border issue.

The communist leaders in Vietnam, prompted by power politics in the region, have been forced to show olive branch to the US. It appears to suit the present political reality, a balancing act by Vietnam between the US and China. This policy could be compared to those of Yugoslavia under Marshall Tito and Romania under communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu during the cold war. But the communist leaders in Eastern Europe had maintained good relations with the US as a counter-weight to the former Soviet Union.

Vietnam needs investment,

transfer of technology and market for its goods in the US. The average growth in Vietnam in the 5-year period to 1999 had averaged 6.8 per cent and it is estimated that the country would need new disbursed foreign investment amounting to US\$58 billion during 2000-5. Vietnamese exports to US are worth about US\$800 million and the prediction by the government agency in Hanoi is that it may rise to US\$3 billion by 2005.

Equally the US is keen to have its presence in Vietnam. The US is well aware of the rise of power of China in the region and it is strategically important to spread its influence in Vietnam. Furthermore the US private sector is eager to invest in Vietnam. US businesses have reportedly put US\$1 billion into Vietnam since

1997. Its large market of 79 million is one of the biggest in East Asia and the US is enthusiastic to capture the Vietnamese consumers. The presence of the US Chief Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky in the Presidential delegation is an instance in point.

Vietnam, the communist regime and the US, the leader of democracy in the world are in sharp contrast to each other and therefore the pace of bilateral relations would not be as smooth as "knife through butter". It will certainly have bumps on the road to consolidation. However Mr. Clinton's visit is a powerful symbol of reconciliation and is a demonstration of Vietnam's desire to bury the past. One Vietnamese writer Bao Ninh summed up the mood of the visit by saying: "So many of our soldiers paid the price. As ex-soldier I think it's good Clinton came here finally to put a stop to the story of war. That's it."

The writer, a barrister, is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN in Europe, Geneva

OPINION

Oil and Energy Crisis

Altaf A Choudhury

I watched a programme on BBC on Petroleum Oil Crisis. I came to be aware of an alarming situation ahead particularly for petroleum oil and the needs of the world. It was interesting to know that 4 per cent people of the developed countries consume 25 per cent of the world's production of petroleum oil and that out of the 70 million barrels consumed worldwide daily the USA alone consumes 10 million barrels. The most disturbing piece of information was that fresh findings of oil reserves have turned out to be highly inadequate and dwindling. Compared to the increasing needs of the growing population and the productive activities worldwide the new finding of fresh reserves was total 660 billion barrels in 1960 while in 1999 it came down to as low as 141 billion barrels. Except Middle East, the existing oil fields are producing less and less year to year. Even the once considered great prospective areas like Russia and North Sea are no longer considered hopeful and the only hope now lies in the region of Northern America plus untapped off-shore areas. Of late it has been observed that there are many oil wells in the USA which are now producing as low as 7 to 8 barrels a day.

It has come as a stunning revelation that there shall be a huge gap between increasing demand and dwindling supply by 2020 when many wells shall dry up. The experts further commented that the renewable solar/wind energies shall not be enough by then and that their prospects do not appear to be good to salvage the situation because of the present high cost of production. Hydrogen energy holds up hopes but it is still at its early state of cost effective development and the future prospect is not yet determinable. Moreover, Hydrogen production shall itself depend on electricity to be produced with the help of petro-

leum oil, coal and/or natural gas. The availability of coal shall also be poor. The experts conclude that the only hope lies in finding plenty of natural gas.

There is already a discerning indication, as surfaced in recent days, of a growing gap between demand and supply of petroleum crude. This widening gap between increasing demand and dwindling supply shall push the price of oil up and up. The recent efforts of OPEC, particularly by Saudi Arabia, to pump more and more crude oil could not yield the desired results i.e. to press down the upward trend of price. Production of more quantities shall also not be possible because of inadequate installed capacity which is not possible to be enhanced quickly because it entails huge investment over a long period of time. Moreover, the producers feel no necessity for interest in making huge investment just to benefit others which in turn shall lower the price and cause loss to them.

In view of this energy situation to come about there shall be heavy pressure on Natural Gas and therefore the price shall surely go up by leaps and bounds. Perhaps it is time for Bangladesh to give a very close and cautious look into the situation and determine whether at all or how to export gas. Pipeline export shall no doubt entail huge investment, whoever makes it, and cannot be withdrawn at will and shall involve legal, financial and political problems. Maybe it shall be wiser to go for export of CNG, which will keep the thread of the kite, in our hands. Expected shortage of petroleum oil, and the corresponding increase in the price of gas globally, should make CNG viable. The pressure from various quarters to lure and intimidate Bangladesh to go for pipeline export of Natural Gas gives credence to the above assumption.

Improve their relations.

A Citizen
Dhaka-1203

Systems loss and electricity bill

Sir, How long would the genuine consumers be paying the compensation and damages to PDB/DESA worth several hundred crores take every year on account of systems loss?

Isn't it true that PDB/DESA are victimising genuine consumers and making them pay electricity bills at ever increasing higher rate of tariff? Isn't it correct that the price hike in electricity is due to systems loss?

It is alleged that a section of unscrupulous officers and staff of PDB/DESA are engaged in various types of irregularities, negligence of duties and corruption resulting in loss and drainage of colossal amount of money at the cost of sufferings of the people.

It is also alleged that some PDB/DESA employees are supplying electricity unlawfully on monthly contract basis and underhand dealings.

orientation schemes for the wayward leaders. Absence of good leadership is a drawback, but the presence of bad leadership breed undesirable weeds.

An Inquired Citizen
Dhaka

Improving ties

Sir, US President Bill Clinton has been accorded a warm welcome when he recently arrived in Hanoi, Vietnam. President Clinton has in the last few years taken several steps to recast and reconstruct the hostile relations between the two countries USA and Vietnam which is indeed a laudable step.

With this historic visit a new ear of friendship and understanding has dawn in USA-Vietnam relations. On arrival at Hanoi Airport, President Clinton has rightly said, "A painful past can be redeemed in a peaceful and prosperous future". We all welcome these golden words of President Clinton.

The people of the world have much to learn from US-Germany, US-Japan and US-Vietnam relations.

Let bygone be bygone. Let us forgive and forget the past. Let us build a peaceful new world, a blissful civilisation for the generations to come.

In this regard, we would highly appreciate if the USA also changes its hostile policy towards Iraq and both the countries