

Welcome to Bangladesh

WE would like to extend a hearty welcome to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on her return from the three European nation tour. Now that she is back we hope she will take stock of the situation of the country she has been elected to govern. We start by drawing her attention to a simple traffic problem. Riding in her SSF guarded long motorcade she is not likely to realise the near impossible situation that the common citizens now face. However well rehearsed the PM's urgings to the European businessmen may have been, no investor will even think of coming to Dhaka because of the jungle that our roads have become. It takes hours to reach any destination in the city, and that if you push, shove, break lanes, honk incessantly, and overtake dangerously to get there. There is nothing called courtesy in our streets anymore. In addition to the continual jams the smog, the noise, the indiscipline on the streets make Dhaka out to be one of the most unattractive destinations for FDI

We draw the PM's attention to two stories in Sunday's newspapers, one published in The Daily Star and the other in the Manab Jamin. The stories deal with how the traffic police have set up an alternative system that bypasses all legal institutions and deprives the government of hundreds of crores of Taka of revenue. If one buys Tk 500 monthly 'token' then he can operate a commercial vehicle such as a bus, mini bus, and the like without any papers or licence either for the vehicle or for the driver. On the other hand a vehicle having all the legal documents but not the Tk 500 'token' is stopped at almost all the traffic lights of the city and made to pay. Earlier we published a news item quoting DC Traffic saying that more than 94 per cent of the city's vehicles and drivers ply without authentic documents. The papers they carry are forged and given out for a fee, by people having connection with the traffic police.

Recently some roads have been made one-way and in several turnings right-turn and U-turn are prohibited. In the one-way streets rickshaws are charged Tk 2 by the traffic police for the right to ply in the opposite direction. As for the prohibited turns, cars are allowed to do make them for a fee, varying from Tk 2 to Tk 4. The situation inside the secretariat is no different. Practically nothing can be done without a 'service charge'. During the PM's former trip we heard about businessmen in Chittagong sitting with the street criminals and 'buying' protection from them for a fee as the police have failed to provide it. In Dhaka shopkeepers in the various business districts have raised their own vigilante groups to protect themselves.

What we describe is but the tip of the iceberg. The above description of the situation indicates that the state law enforcement machinery is gradually collapsing at the street level and is being replaced by private groups. Does our government realise what all these mean? This is the beginning of the collapsing of the State in a functional sense. This must be stopped, and only the government can do it. The Prime Minister must take the task of governance more seriously than she has done so far. Speech making and crowd raising may have their value but they are extremely dangerous substitutes for hard-nosed policy implementation.

Vajpayee's Irresponsible Comment

WE are deeply concerned that a dangerous communal issue is raising its head, once again, in India. The Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee is reported to have described a plan to raise a Hindu temple on the site of the former Babri mosque as an "unfinished national task". This 16th century mosque was razed to ground by Hindu militant mobs eight years ago, setting off country-wide riots in which nearly 2000 people were killed.

Vajpayee's remarks have hurt Muslim sentiments and provoked an outcry in the country. The Muslim contribution to India, whether in the past, the present or in the future, cannot be denied nor can it be emphasised enough. Muslims number nearly 200 million in India and are an integral part of the fabric of the country. To ignore the significance of Muslim sentiment in India would be a tragic oversight for any party, more so for India's ruling Hindu fundamentalist party, the BJP.

Indians may not always co-exist in communal harmony, but there is no denying the secular efforts of this nation of a billion and more people. If communal violence were to break out again, India would lose a great deal of its image as a secular nation. As a result of Vajpayee's remarks, tensions have escalated already and one Muslim has been stabbed to death and two Muslim shrines have been attacked. We are concerned that matters may go even more out of hand and we therefore urge Vajpayee to move to diffuse the situation, immediately.

We are aware that Vajpayee's remarks may be because he is courting the Hindu vote in anticipation of state elections in the UP scheduled next year. But this is most unfortunate. Vajpayee has established a track record of even-handedness and consensus building that has surprised and silenced critics of the right wing BJP. He, himself, has gained considerably in image not only nationally, but also on a regional level. His recent initiative to declare a ceasefire in Kashmir at the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan is a case in point. After taking these positive steps in the right direction for so long, we urge the Indian leader not to surrender to the forces of narrow communal interest now. That would be a big loss for India and for the region as well.

Dolly Democracy and Growing Despondency

This was also so when the present opposition BNP was in power. During the present Awami League regime this has simply burgeoned, spread branches and has taken deeper roots. This is bound to happen when the political parties try to bypass people's interest and hoodwink them raising the hullabaloo of non-issues and the outdated bogey of sell-out of the country which are symptomatic of dolly democracy.

THE late lamented statesman and Tanzania's founding President Julius K Nyerere in one of his celebrated political memorabilia referred to what he called 'dolly democracy' meaning that democracy is not a child's talk or blabbering, neither is it a doll-like plaything. Democracy is something much more serious, much more concrete and tangible in nature. Talking about what in essence constitutes democratic leadership Nyerere said, "Leadership ... is very much about water, food, jobs, shelter, education and community. It is about organising (the) communities and rallying the people to the kind of action which will increase the supply of these goods and services for the people all of the people. The people are no fools." The great Tanzanian leader said that to be meaningful democracy must concentrate on vital and urgent economic issues alongside grappling with the political ones. Otherwise, democracy becomes hollow signifying nothing and consequently, the people, in their turn, become disenfranchised with it.

During the course of its thirty years of independent existence Bangladesh missed two great opportunities of emerging as a viable democratic state. The first one was immediately after Bangladesh came into being when people's rising expectations could have been best utilised for building the country's economic moorings on a sound footing. Instead, the leadership failed to gauge the realities existing at that time and deviated from the course mapped out by the spirit of the War of

Liberation. The result was the inevitable slipping away of the country into the abyss of retrogression. The second opportunity came after the ouster of autocracy through protracted mass struggle. Once again the people thought that this time Bangladesh would be able to make it and stand firm on the road to real people's democracy, progress and prosperity. But unfortunately that was not to be. When after ten years they take a stock of what the country has really achieved the people get frustrated. To their utter dismay they find that only the brand has changed, but the bottle and its content remained the same. The wood has once again been missed for the trees because of the myopic vision of the leadership, which successively came to power. The country is, as if, in a blind alley and there is no light at the end of the tunnel.

The leadership on both side of the divide, instead of behaving in a responsible and rational way and working in close concert for the welfare of the masses demonstrating their real concern for them as in a democracy, are now engaged in mud-slinging and character assassination, unending bickerings and feuds. If the ruling party has failed, so has the opposition. They are exactly resembling the two sides of the same coin. Leaving aside the core issues confronting the nation, both sides appear to be

busy with non-issues, instead of looking to the future, they feel complacent in digging the past. To them the country is, as if, a commodity. Otherwise, how could they accuse each other of what they term as hatching the conspiracy of selling the country. This shows that both the ruling party and the opposition are pursuing moribund politics and have gone bankrupt and isolated

and their parliamentary standing committees, quarrels between SSF and civil administration on the issue of Prime Minister's security and protocol duties, unprecedented debate in the press over the extension of the term of the incumbent Chief of Staff of the army and other related defence matters, dissatisfaction among different cadres so on and so forth, such as award of

ment (DFI) has nose-dived despite the much trumpeted economic diplomacy. This was mainly due to unending bureaucratic tentacles and the accompanying hassles as well as for the high cost of investment due to rampant and unbridled corruption. The situation has been further aggravated by the extreme deterioration in law and order situation due to low morale and inertia among the lawenforcers mainly as a result of highhandedness and dictate of the ruling party leaders and activists, and opposition's long boycott of parliament turning it into a largely one-party affair. The people, by and large, have therefore every reason to be disillusioned.

This was also so when the present opposition BNP was in power. During the present Awami League regime this has simply burgeoned, spread branches and has taken deeper roots. This is bound to happen when the political parties try to bypass people's interest and hoodwink them raising the hullabaloo of non-issues and the outdated bogey of sell-out of the country which are symptomatic of dolly democracy. The great poet and sage of the East Rabindranath Tagore said it is indeed a sin to lose faith in the people, and this sin the major political parties have committed. Julius Nyerere has rightly said 'people are no fools'. They are well



HEART OF THE MATTER Mansoor Mamoon

from the people. Inner-party rifts, fissures and contradictions are now galore in both the camps. Consequently, they have become crises-ridden with its glaring fault on the body-politics of the country.

Crisis in the government is, in fact, everywhere. The Executive branch is having rift with the higher judiciary, the judiciary is in conflict with the legislature the Election Commission has become further controversial with the making of public the feud between the Chief Election Commissioner and the three Election Commissioners, lack of co-ordination between the minis-

try and their parliamentary standing committees, quarrels between SSF and civil administration on the issue of Prime Minister's security and protocol duties, unprecedented debate in the press over the extension of the term of the incumbent Chief of Staff of the army and other related defence matters, dissatisfaction among different cadres so on and so forth, such as award of

ME: The Tragedy Deepens

by Edward Said

The Al-Aqsa Intifada is an Intifada against Oslo and against the people who constructed it, not only Dennis Ross and Barak, but a small, irresponsible coterie of Palestinian officials. These people should now have the decency to stand before their people, admit their mistakes, and ask (if they can get it) for popular support if there is a plan. If there isn't one (as I suspect) they should then have the elementary courtesy at least to say so...

NO one really knows whether the Al-Aqsa Intifada temporarily subsided because Yasser Arafat expressed his public disapproval of it on 17 November or whether the lull was only a short-lived one that was generated out of fatigue or a search for new positions. Despite the enormous cost in lives and property to Palestinians, however, the essential problems remain, and the Israelis continue their blind and finally stupid assault on Palestinians with the strangulation, economic blockade, and bombings of cities and towns continuing without respite.

Every Arab leader who welcomed Barak's election a year and a half ago should now be asked to repeat his declarations so that their hollowness can be demonstrated again and again. I find official Arab attitudes virtually incomprehensible, having spent most of my life trying to decipher them according to the laws of reason and elementary common sense. Did they seriously believe that Barak was the saviour of the peace process, and if so weren't they aware that to save the peace process was nothing less than to prolong the Palestinian agony? Did they think that he was any different from the great 'war hero' who has devoted his entire career to killing Arabs, and if he wasn't why did it take them so long to find out? Does subservience to the United States require so much subservience, so many acrobatics, such a complicated twisting and turning and so profound a prostration? How long and for what do they cling to a repressive, basically rejectionist status quo with neither the will nor the capacity to wage war nor to live in peace, simply to please a distant and arrogant superpower that has shown contempt, inhumanity and utter, unspeakable cruelty?

Can they not do anything more substantial than what they are doing when Israel is using helicopter gunships to kill Palestinian civilians and destroy their homes, while the United States supplies Israel with the largest ever order of attack helicopters during the past 10 years and Israel has added \$500 million to its budget for settlements? Not one word of official protest against US policy that has brought such catastrophe to our people. It is this timorousness that allows US policy-makers, of whom the unregretted Dennis Ross the mediocre individual who has done more single-handedly to advance Israel's interest than anyone but one, to say that the Arabs trust the US and its policies and remain close friends and allies of the US. Surely the time

has come to speak frankly of a hypocrisy and brutality without parallel, instead of standing silently by cap in hand as more and more Palestinians are killed with arms paid for by US taxpayers.

But the core of the tragedy is what is happening to the victims themselves, the Palestinian people. Here one must speak and think rationally, not letting emotion and the passions of the moment sway the mind too much. My general impression is that Palestinians everywhere feel the absence of real leadership, a voice or an authority that can speak both of the present and the future with some sense of vision, some articulation of a coherent, inclusive goal beyond the usual platitudes that repeat what is obviously designed to postpone decisions and visions with mere rhetoric. No one has any doubt that Palestinians are struggling against military occupation and have been doing so for 33 years. But there are four million refugees struggling against exile, in addition to the one million Palestinian citizens of Israel who have been living under a regime of racial and religious discrimination that has too long been hidden under fatuous labels like "Israeli democracy." One of the many problems with Oslo has been that Palestinian negotiators focused exclusively on the occupation, to the neglect of the other two dimensions. But it should finally be clear that in all three instances it is Zionism that we fight against, and until we have a leadership that can formulate an integrated strategy on all three fronts, we do not have leadership. The tragedy is that the Intifada goes, lives tragically lost every day, in a political setting or framework that deepens the differences between Palestinians instead of bringing them closer together. We need a new vision, a new voice, a new truth.

Isn't it now clear that old slogans like "a Palestinian state" or "Jerusalem our capital" have brought us to this impasse? Shouldn't we expect a real leader to speak to all Palestinians, honestly, fearlessly, without duplicity or winks at the US and Israel, and to chart a course forward that links together opposition to occupation, to exile, and to racial discrimination? Why continue to delude people with the empty



Intifada: Friday has become a standing day of rage for Palestinians

hope that "struggle," a word which seems to mean that others should do the dying, will get the Arab world generally and the Palestinians particularly what all have so long wanted? It is nothing short of alarming that after more than half a century of blustering, of expending blood and treasure, of militarisation, of abrogating democracy and the most elementary requirements of citizenship in the Arab world, we find ourselves facing the same enemy, the same defeats, the same tactical shifts and hypocritical about-faces with the same tired arsenal of threats, promises, slogans and cliches, all of which have been proved more or less worthless and have produced the same failures from 1967 to Amman to October 1973 to Beirut to Oslo?

No one can deny that Palestine is an exception to nearly all the colonial issues of the past 200 years. It is exceptional, but not removed from history. Human history is full of similar, if not absolutely the same, instances, and what has surprised me, as someone living at a distance from the Middle East but close to it in all sorts of ways, is how insulated from the rest of the world we keep

ourselves, whereas, I believe, a great deal can be learned from the history of other oppressed peoples in the Americas, Africa, Asia and even Europe. Why do we resist comparing ourselves, say, with the South African blacks, or with the American Indians, or with the Vietnamese? By comparing I don't mean mechanically or slavishly, but rather creatively and imaginatively.

The late Eqbal Ahmad, who was certainly one of the two or three most brilliant analysts of contemporary history and politics that I ever knew, always drew attention to the fact that successful liberation movements were successful precisely because they employed creative ideas, original ideas, imaginative ideas wherein other less successful movements (like ours, alas) there was a pronounced tendency to formulas and an uninspired repetition of past slogans and past patterns of behaviour. Take as a primary instance the idea of armed struggle. For decades we have relied in our minds on ideas about guns and killing, ideas that, from the 1930s until today, have brought us plentiful martyrs but have had little real effect not so much on Zionism but on

our own ideas about what to do next. In our case, the fighting is done by a small brave number of people pitted against hopeless odds, i.e. stones against helicopter gunships, Merkava tanks, missiles. Yet a quick look at other movements, the Indian nationalist movement, the South African liberation movement, the American civil rights movement tell us first of all that only a mass movement employing tactics and strategy that maximise the popular element ever made any difference on the occupier and/or oppressor. Second, only a mass movement that has been politicised and imbued with a vision of participating directly in a future of its own making, only such a movement has historical chance of liberating itself from oppression or military occupation. The future, like the past, is built by human beings. They, and not some distant mediator or saviour, provide the agency for change.

It is clear to me, for example, that the immediate task in Palestine is to establish the goal of ridding ourselves of the occupation, using imaginative means of struggle. That would necessarily involve large numbers of Palestinians intervening directly in the settlement process, blocking roads, preventing building materials from entering, in other words, isolating the settlements instead of allowing them, containing a far smaller number of people, to isolate and surround Palestinians, which is what occurs today. It is still true, for instance, that the labourers who built the Israeli settlements on a daily basis are in fact Palestinians; this should give some fairly simple idea of how deeply misled, misguided, under-mobilised and unpoliticised the Palestinian people are today. After 33 years of building Israeli settlements, Palestinian workers should immediately be provided by the Authority with alternative employment. Can't a few dollars be spared from the millions spent on useless security and unproductive bureaucracy? This is of course a falling of the leadership, but in the end it is also those individuals who know better professionals, intellectuals, teachers, doctors and so on—who have the power of expression and the means to do so who have

aware of the real motive of the party in power and the contender of power. The motive is to cling to power or to crawl to power by hook or by crook. Nothing else matters to them more. Let the law and order situation further deteriorate, let there be romping of goons, killers, muggers, rapists and extortionists, let the unholy alliance of politicians and bureaucrats continue to rob the people and let the process of pauperisation of Bangladesh coincide with the process of globalisation. All these ills and their possible solutions do not figure with any degree of prominence in the agenda of the major political parties. The law of nature, however, says nothing should be taken for granted. Change or constant metamorphosis is the law nature. If the major political parties think that such a sorry pass through which Bangladesh is now passing will continue in perpetuity then they will be grossly mistaken.

Changes were there in the past and changes will be there in future too. But the upheavals of the changes may not be to the liking of the major political parties. This is bound to happen in dolly democracies where people are not trusted and taken into confidence. Hemingway has aptly said (and I am not) can never be defeated, and Chairman Mao Zedong has experienced that people try and fail, they again try and again fall till they finally succeed. The people of Bangladesh will also be eventually victorious. They will replace dolly democracy with real people's democracy where the people are trusted and where their interest will remain uppermost.

still not put enough pressure on the leadership to make it responsible to the situation.

And there at once is the greatest tragedy of all: a people is giving passionately of itself, losing the flower of its youth and all its energies in a valiant confrontation with a sadistic and implacably cruel enemy who has no compunction about choking Palestinians to death, and still Mr Arafat is silent. He has not truly and honestly addressed his people since the crisis began, not even a 10-minute broadcast to give it strength, to explain his policies, to tell the people where we are, how we got here, and where, after all this bloodshed and suffering, where we are going. Not one minute of time spent telling the truth to his own people, even as he tours the world from France to China, meeting with presidents and prime ministers to no avail whatever. Is his heart made of stone, is his conscience completely anaesthetised? I find this astoundingly incomprehensible, and this after 30 years of leading us from one catastrophe and ill-considered adventure to another, without respite and without even a whispered "thank you for bearing with me and my appalling, blundering mistakes and miscalculations for so long!"

The Al-Aqsa Intifada is an Intifada against Oslo and against the people who constructed it, not only Dennis Ross and Barak, but a small, irresponsible coterie of Palestinian officials. These people should now have the decency to stand before their people, admit their mistakes, and ask (if they can get it) for popular support if there is a plan. If there isn't one (as I suspect) they should then have the elementary courtesy at least to say so. Only by doing this can there be anything more than tragedy at the end of the road. Palestinian officials signed the agreement to partition Hebron, they signed many other agreements without getting prior assurances that the settlements would end (and at least not be increased) and that all signs of military occupation would be effaced. They must now explain publicly what they thought they were doing and why they did it. Then they must let us express our views on their actions and their future. And for once they must listen and try to put the general interest before their own, despite the millions of dollars they have either squandered or squirreled away in Paris apartments and valuable real estate and lucrative business deals with Israel. Enough is enough.

Courtesy: Al Ahran

To the Editor ...

Barbarism let loose

Sir, The way the garment owners in Bangladesh guard their business interest by keeping all the gates of entry and exit locked with hundreds of workers working inside is just barbaric. They give a damn to the security of life of the workers so much so that in cases of emergency, especially when fire breaks out, the poor workers have to run helterskelter for safety, but in vain.

The latest mishap at Narsingdi causing death to scores and injury to hundreds should be an eye-opener for the authorities—the law enforcing authorities including the police and civil administration. Why are the garment owners not caught for all these forthwith and tried for gross negligence, irresponsibility and failure to ensure security of life to so many people? Dose it need an arrest warrant to nab these culprits causing endless

threat to human life? What could be a better case for application of the Public Safety Act? After so many mishaps during the last few years what the concerned authorities have done in this regard is a question that is arising in every sane citizen's mind.

F Ahmed Dhaka

To the railway authorities

Sir, When intercity train Mahanagar came into service and it ran on schedule, the compartments clean, everything in tip-top condition we felt very happy. But it was short lived and did not take much time to turn all into shambles—the compartments became dirty, the toilets unfit for use, the train started to stop at many places, people without tickets boarded the train and beggars, peddlers invaded the compartments.

Recently, when Subarno

Express came into operation, we were very delighted with its service. But in no time the train started to run late, now-a-days it has become almost a routine to be late for one or two hours sometimes even much longer than that.

Though Subarno Express is scheduled to arrive at Chittagong station at 10 PM, it arrives usually much later. It is indeed very inconvenient and risky for the passengers to go to their destination at dead of night.

We would like to attract the attention of Bangladesh Railway to this station and request them ensure the comforts of the passengers.

Hope the railway authorities will not sit idle and take appropriate actions to alleviate the sufferings of the passengers.

Nur Jahan Chittagong

OPINION

The US Election: Florida Hand Recount

Omar Karim

THIS business of Florida hand recount in the US Presidential race is a total hoax and a charade. If people with over 200 years of rich democratic practice, heritage and history behind them, and ample ballots and ample instructions, spoon-feeding, prodding, persuasion and beseech, cannot cast a simple vote correctly in arguably the most important election in the world, their votes do not deserve to be counted. As for hand counting, we are talking about a slew of didactic mathematical geniuses that need a couple of calculators and access to Microsoft Excel to add two plus two or multiply two by two! Average Americans are notorious in their downright inability to hand count anything, perhaps even their own children or pet chickens. If you saw bored,

surfeit time at hand, old fogies with horn rim thick glasses trying to discern voter intent with squinting eyes, you would guess what a sham and how capricious this whole exercise is.

The use of machines for precise count of votes, instead of blunder-prone mere mortals is a major technological break through. We know they hand count votes in Bangladesh; need I say more? Machines are preferable for vote counting for exactly the same reasons for which mechanical robots replaced human labour in assembly plants in most advanced innovative countries. A properly programmed machine is vastly superior and more accurate than even a mathematical genius. For the same reason even a chess maestro like Kasparov or Anand

cannot beat IBM Blue in a chess contest.

Two salient reasons Gore wants to be President despicably desperately are: (1) He has played this exalted Presidential game in his mind, like some people play the doctor and nurse game since early childhood; and (2) Democrats are extremely unkind to their fallen Presidential contenders (examples: Mondale and Dukakis, two inept and ineffectual candidates like Gore). He will be put out to pasture. An ambassadorship to Benin at a future Democrat administration is the best Gore can hope for.

Then again I may be totally wrong. Through the maze of lawsuits and counter legal actions, Gore may actually ascend the Presidential throne.