

Khaleda's comment

Reprehensible indeed

TRADING of charges between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Opposition Leader Begum Zia on anything untoward happening in the country has been a routine affair in politics. While at times these have jarred our sensibilities, what's perhaps more to the point is, they have almost always proved unhelpful to any serious search for truth.

But it is the latest bombshell from Begum Zia that has slid off the pattern quite steeply. Bangla daily Dinkal has quoted her as saying at the four-party alliance's mass rally in Rangpur on Sunday that it was the government which had first killed police constable Badsha Mian and then put his dead body inside the mosque; but they were now blaming it out on the opposition.

To the best of our knowledge, all that Sheikh Hasina has said about the dastardly killing is this: "Those who commit murder inside a mosque are not devotees of any religion, rather they are only using religion as a political weapon to grab power." So, her accusation is not party-specific, it is generalised in nature, in contrast to Khaleda's aforementioned remarks.

We are critical of the blaming game itself in which both sides trade accusations, not to mention how terribly distraught we are of the absurd and irresponsible innuendo Begum Zia has hurled at the administration in this case.

Those who were taken into police custody after the dastardly murder have themselves narrated how the murder took place, who were present and what circumstances were prevailing in the vicinity of the mosque on the day of occurrence. Imputations cannot certainly help investigation.

It is at a very critical juncture, an extremely sensitive moment in our history that Begum Zia has chosen to miss the heart of the matter here. A group of fanatics is playing around with the religious sentiments of the people to snatch the political initiative from the hands of major political parties. They are out to destroy social equilibrium, change the pattern of political discourse and set the clock of progress back.

Let the key players in Bangladesh politics today rise to the whirlwind and put it down, rather than allowing it to grow into a tempest.

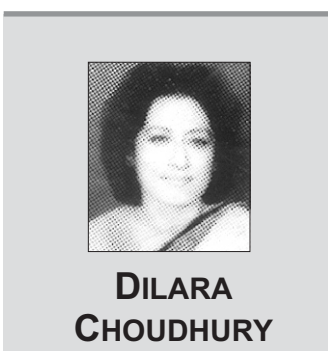
SAARC economic meet

Summit must be on the front burner

AS A SAARC conference in Kathmandu this week has advanced the platform of economic cooperation, and at the same time has placed the long overdue SAARC summit on the front burner. Experts have been deliberating on the significant objective of forging partnerships between the government and the private sector across the board as a means of boosting regional and sub-regional cooperation. In order to reach its full potential in the global economy, South Asia must overcome regional challenges. Many of these challenges could be overcome by establishing strategic alliances between the public and the private sector. This will be a step in the right direction and should provide the basis for mutually beneficial strategies within and between the SAARC nations.

While endorsing this economic agenda, we are encouraged by the group's intent to focus on the factors, largely political, that have virtually derailed the SAARC Summit since October 1999. The holding of the SAARC Summit must be pursued as a top priority. The leaders of India and Pakistan have raised hopes by talking to each other this week. India's reported refusal to participate in a cricket tournament in aid of the victims of the Gujarat earthquake has dampened the nascent cordiality, particularly as the event was inspired by purely humanitarian concerns. But this is a hiccup both the countries should quickly put behind them to warm up to each other in their principal areas of concern. And it is for this reason as well that we commend the aims of the economic conference. It is to be hoped that pragmatic considerations and economic exigencies will prevail and pave the way for the SAARC Summit to be brought back on track.

Plea for a critical mass of women parliamentarians



DILARA CHOUDHURY

It is for more than a decade now that the women's organizations in Bangladesh are demanding women's meaningful representation in the National Legislature (Jatiyo Sangsad). Women population and concerned citizens have, time and again, expressed their dissatisfaction about the present constitutional provisions that provide 10 per cent indirectly elected reserved seats for women. Because so far all available sources indicate that the existing arrangement instead of enhancing women legislators' efficacy has, on the contrary, reinforced the myth of women's 'natural' (both private and public) dependency on and subordination to men. In order to rectify the situation constitutional amendment is being called for to provide genuine opportunities for women as legislators. Right now the demand (which can be negotiated) is for an increased number of sixty-four, one from each district, directly elected reserved seats for women. Their demands have fallen on deaf ears and our male dominated political parties are "blissfully" unaware about the need and urgency of having a critical mass of women parliamentarians. Instead, with the expiration of the present unsatisfac-

tory arrangement (that expires on April 4, 2001) all indications are that the number of women parliamentarians in Bangladesh would take a nose-dive and drastically fall. This would indeed be very unfortunate. As a signatory to the United Nations Beijing Platform for Action at the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995) Bangladesh should have appropriate strategies in place so that women's position in society can be advanced. But if women parliamentarians' number actually decrease, rather than ideally increasing, how can the State

both of which adversely effect the women most, are vital in ensuring good governance. To ward off the negative impacts of globalization on women their effective inclusion as parliamentarians is essential in order to enable them to develop leadership, gain expertise, knowledge, and tools so that they can "play a brokering role for change through a synergy of partnership with government (states) and with civil society so that the marker forces can be shaped to work in favour of women and gender equality" (Achola Pala Okeyo: 1997).

women's special skill in maintaining social relations in very adverse situations like armed conflicts and insurgencies, skills in complex negotiation and tendency to compromise, do raise the hope that an influx of women legislators, especially in the context of Bangladesh's confrontational politics, would help transform the very style of politics pursued in our country. And their so-called sense of morality, which allegedly make them unsuitable to govern, can, in most likely hood, would bring a modicum of sanity in a society where the politics has gone

admitted that she is frequently complemented on her looks by her male colleagues while her impressive performance in the House is routinely undermined. Her husband is viewed to be the man behind all her success and obviously she finds such behaviour and connotation demeaning. Presence of a large number of women parliamentarians would hopefully reduce some of the parliamentary postures and aggression that women find infuriating, and set an example for other work places where women are confronted with similar situations on

including all constituents of the state women being the most formidable one. That is why both 1995 United Nations Beijing Platform of Action and 1997 Edinburgh Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting set a minimum target of no less than 30 per cent women in all fora of decision making bodies by the year 2005. And many Commonwealth countries have targeted to attain that goal by the stipulated time period.

In Bangladesh we are on the threshold of that time frame but till now there is only rhetoric about democracy and no actions. Those who treat the issue of women's effective representation in the Parliament lightly are not true democrats. Genuine democrats act and adopt strategies to make it function because democracy cannot consolidate by itself. It needs constant nurturing and replenishing, especially by those in power and who prophesize about it in loudest possible terms. The hiatus between the declaratory statements and action is dangerously self-defeating. Thus those who really are in charge of social engineering must now wake up from their self-created mire and take those historic steps by bringing women into the highest decision making body of the country in a meaningful way. Our pleas are directed towards the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition so that they take those historic steps that would change the political landscape of this country forever. Peace, stability and development cannot and would not be attained without women's inclusion into the system. Why should we lag behind by not acting right?

PANORAMA Our pleas are directed towards the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition so that they take those historic steps that would change the political landscape of this country forever. Peace, stability and development cannot and would not be attained without women's inclusion into the system.

Plot against the press?

M. J. ZAHEDI

THE publication of a letter to the editor in a Peshawar daily has become a big issue, a threat to peace in the north-western city of Pakistan, may be even the entire country.

The newspaper in question is The Frontier Post (FP), an English language daily. Last Monday it published a letter from a reader that is the cause of all the trouble. It irked the daily's readers because it contained blasphemous material; it immediately invoked angry protests from the people. Statements were issued, demonstrations were held and protest processions were taken out.

On Thursday angry protesters attacked the newspaper's office and set ablaze the printing machinery, despite the presence of police guards. The fire gutted the printing machinery, newsprint rolls as well as other printing material kept in the building. The federal cabinet in its weekly meeting in Islamabad on Wednesday also strongly condemned publication of the letter and said that the NWFP government will form a judicial commission to probe into its publication. The police have arrested five people (all members of the FP staff). However, one of them (in charge of the editorial page) has since, it is stated, confessed his mistake. He is, according to a report in Sunday's Dawn, stated to have said that he did not realize how sacrilegious it was. He thought the

letter targeted the Jews. The reaction is not unexpected; the emotions are running so high that apologies and explanations from the owners of the newspaper have had no impact. The authorities, the provincial Home Department and even the military, seem to have been put on the back foot by the backlash, particularly in the NWFP. Indeed it needs extremely careful handling.

Against this background a statement of the Home Secretary given in

could be part of a larger conspiracy to breed feud and cause chaos in a country "where religion has acquired a new centrality to social discourse, political issues and government policy." The sensibilities of the people are hurt, naturally and rightly.

The paper concerned, apparently keeping this in mind, has tendered an unqualified apology taking the plea that it was the victim of a deep plot meant to close it down. Investigation will determine

Society, representative body of newspaper publishers, has pointed to this possibility and warned that it would be wrong. The paper also warned against starting a debate on how to regulate the Press. The point to keep in mind is that this incident has nothing to do with freedom of expression; in fact is a total negation of the concept and that is useful only when it recognizes the difference between the sacred and the profane. For the media itself, The News

as The Frontier Post has done? The News editorial concluded, "It is the abiding, unbending faith of every Muslim and every Muslim Pakistani that the person of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) will remain unblemished for so complete and pure is his personality. Just as strong is our belief that his detractors will remain forever without peace and will perish in their own pettiness." *****

computer programme was an irritating thing that the brothers found nauseating. But an American software company that subsequently marketed it the world over illegally copied this very software. So they put their heads together and created the 'brain' bug. The eldest of the three brothers, who is a medical doctor, said that the spirit behind developing the 'brain' virus was 'highly positive'; there was no wicked motive behind it.

He said that it was developed for an Afghan refugee hospital in Quetta. The system diskettes were stolen from a computer exhibition in Lahore. They found that it was later sold by an American company under a brand name. Following the extensive copying of the programme, the virus crept into millions of diskettes and computer across the world. The brothers have now formed a computer and internet service company in Lahore, by the name of 'Brain'. Dr Alvi said that the 'brain' was a boot sector infector, approximately 3 KB in size. It infects only a floppy diskette whenever the latter is referenced.

Giving example, he said, a directory command, executing a programme, copying a file from or to any other access will cause the infection to occur. The virus stores the original boot sector, and six extension sectors, containing the main body of the virus, in available sectors that are then flagged as bad sectors.

LETTER FROM KARACHI Some people suggest that it could be part of a larger conspiracy to breed feud and cause chaos in a country "where religion has acquired a new centrality to social discourse, political issues and government policy."

response to protests lodged by the Committee to Protect Journalists that no harm would come to any one unless found guilty, is indeed reassuring.

Of course, no one can deny that publication of the letter is unfortunate, sad and serious, especially in a Muslim country. It is the typical creation of unhinged minds that derive perverse pleasure from such evil and vain indulgences. Such perversities of course abound in the e-mail circuit but they do not find their way into print as, to the paper's misfortune, this one did.

Some people suggest (as an editorial in The News said) that it

the truth of that matter. But it can be argued that no one in his right mind, and knowingly, let a blunder of this nature take place. Therefore, it is safe to speculate that there have to be exceptional circumstances that led to the publication of the letter, argued The News editorial.

It further said that it is important that the incident must not be politicized or categorized as a case of abuse of freedom of the Press. It mentioned that there were lobbies, which would like to do just that; they would like to use this regrettable incident to derive sweeping but erroneous conclusions about the Press. The All Pakistan Newspaper

reminded, what is needed is to strengthen its professional guard against such incendiary material. Such material, The News said, is circulating in the information market in various strange garbs. But these can be trashed through a careful process of vetting something, which did not happen in this particular case. The country's ulama and religiously enlightened classes must also discuss the issue of what should happen when something like this happens by sheer mistake and the carelessness of someone and not by design. Moreover what should be done when the perpetrator apologizes with profuse regrets,

Computer virus THREE brothers from Lahore have claimed that a computer virus named 'Brain' was their creation. The birth of this virus was celebrated the world over, especially in the United States, last month. Brain is possibly the only virus that does not damage any hard disk or data stored on the hard disk of a computer. Instead, it left a warning message for the computer user. The brothers are Dr Shahid Farooq Alvi, Amjad Alvi and Basit Alvi. They told the local daily The Nation that it was actually a technical bug. It was intended to check piracy of their software. Piracy of

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Inviting readers

On the occasion of The Daily Star's 10th anniversary, I extend my warmest felicitations and best wishes to it and all those who are associated with it in upholding the voice of independence. To mark the occasion the newspaper held a host of activities, including bringing out an enriched special edition. The Editor, on behalf of the newspaper, hosted a reception at a city hotel. While addressing the gathering, the Editor reiterated his unshaken respect and value for the readers of The Daily Star. He said that readers are the main source of strength for the newspaper. I would like to know if any general readers were invited to this reception? Newspaper reports suggest they were not. I am fully aware it is next to impossible to invite all readers, but the some could have been invited symbolically -- say five to 10 readers.

Captain MS Helal, psc, BN (Retired) USA

We invited a cross-section of our readers, belonging to various professions, age groups and social standing. Regrettably, we could not invite as many as we would have liked to. Editor

Who is responsible?

At the end of the editorial "Playing a dangerous game: Stop them on their track" (The Daily Star, February 4) you wrote: "We want this abuse of religion stopped and the society rid of the new tensions the zealots seem hell-bent upon breathing into it for their own selfish gains." This conclusion gives rise to a very basic question: what is the source of such destructive and defiant power of the zealots?

If we look at our recent political history, the answer is obvious. The major political parties have always treated the fundamentalist groups as their close allies whenever it has

suited them, i.e. when it came to elections. The ultimate goal of elections has been to grab power, not to serve the people. The power-hungry politicians, for the sake of a 'majority' in the parliament, have always set their political ideologies aside and taken support from fundamentalists.

Ahmed Tazmeen Illinois, USA

Earning respect

One cannot buy prestige and honour with money, one has to earn it. A leader earns honour and respect through actions and behaviour. No one can force people to show their respect to a particular leader through threats or by enacting a law. In a democratic country it is the democratic as well as the fundamental right of the people to criticize a leader for his or her mistakes or wrong doings. It is not a crime. Those who think it is a crime are living in a different age.

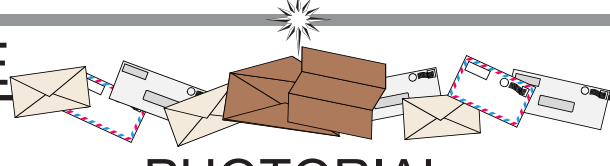
Iqbal Ahmed Dhaka

Don't blame fatwa

I'm a regular reader of your daily. I appreciate your new layout. Your paper has taken a strong stand against all types of fatwa, and this is not appropriate. The fault lies with the so called maulanas who give a wrong fatwa at will or to suit their own interests. But the rule of fatwa is a part of Islam. It means giving explanations of the Quran and Hadees for everyday life. So, please do not blindly blame fatwa, but blame faulty maulanas. In your anniversary issue there was a picture of Jesus Christ. I deeply condemn such an act of favour.

Fakhrul Islam. Dhaka

The religion of peace



PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.

Give them public toilets!



STAR PHOTO: A. K. M. MOHSIN

We snapped these men in the act of relieving themselves just a stone's throw away from the DCC building in Gulistan. This is a common sight all over Dhaka. The practice is offensive and unhygienic, but how do we stop it? The answer is obvious: build adequate public lavatories all over for men and for women. Will the authorities wake up to the acute absence of basic amenities in this city?

The behavior of the so-called Islamic activists is shocking. Islam is all about peace and giving respect to others. The so-called torch-bearers of Islam are not practicing what Islam preaches. Their disrespectful attitude towards the NGO workers, and the killing of the constable inside a holy place like a mosque can never be justified in the name of Islam. It is my fervent request to all the Islamic scholars that if they really have the true spirit of Islam within them, in this crisis they should come forward, enlighten those who are portraying it in a wrong way, showing Islam as a religion of violence instead of the religion of peace.

Rehuma Karim Dhaka

Role of lawyers

A few months ago, contempt of court charges were brought against the Prime Minister. The aim was to undermine the image of Sheikh Hasina who has earned an image as an unparalleled leader, having defeated the anti-liberation and reactionary forces in the 1996 elections and having brought the liberation forces into power. Finally, the judges of the highest court resolved this matter. Recently our highest court has passed a decision on a fatwa and noted that all kind of fatwas are illegal. A so-called religious group has made a comment about our honourable judges as being 'murtad'. These offensive comments are more than enough to constitute contempt of court charges. I would like to know why lawyers are silent about this landmark decision. Lawyers have also acted questionably in the matter of the appointment of two judges.

Certain lawyers and politicians cannot digest the leadership of Sheikh Hasina because she represents the liberation forces of the country. She wishes to uphold the image of the liberation war.

M. A. Zaman Pakundia, Kishoreganj

Sirajul Haque Sydney Australia

Don't cry wolf so often

The CPB leaders have sensibly appealed to political leaders to refrain from comments blaming any group for the bomb blast at the CPB rally. The bomb blast is the latest example of the failure of the government to maintain law and order, in spite of its declaration that it would eradicate terrorism by passing the PSA.

It has been the tradition of several political groups to blame fundamentalists for any violence. But the investigation is not yet over. I request them not to try to smell fundamentalism in every incident. The real culprits might escape and repeat their deadly crime. The Home Minister should be told the story of the boy who called wolf repeatedly and frightened the villagers so much, that when a wolf actually attacked him, no one would believe his cries for help.

A citizen Dhaka

An appeal

The government declared its decision to pay the money of the Kalyan Trust of the non-government secondary teachers to the teachers who had retired within the period defined by the government. I am one of the retired teachers and I had submitted the relevant papers to obtain the due funds. I have not yet received the money.

I appeal to the government to kindly expedite payment to all the retired teachers concerned, who are 'paraparer jatreer' and some have perhaps already crossed the river, that is, have passed away, unpaid.