

CEC's Much Ado

About very little

CHIEF Election Commissioner M A Sayed found everything wrong at Kolchhari Government Primary School polling centre. He was examining the voting process as part of the inspection tour he undertook on Monday in connection with the by-election to Pabna-5 constituency. What he stumbled against was a glaring instance of someone standing in the queue for a second time as an impersonator to cast an absentee voter's ballot. The other thing he detected was the flawed voters' list. There is no reason to make light of such indiscrepancies; for, if these could occur in a by-poll wholly boycotted by the opposition political parties, then what would happen if the stakes were higher with their full participation in it?

Flanked by journalists on an important inspection mission to a by-poll venue in a close proximity to the national elections, the CEC was all a reactive dynamo. He himself interrogated the impersonator at length, got him arrested and made sure a case was instituted against him. Not content with these, he even ordered further investigation under the leadership of a superintendent of police to find out if any organised gang was behind it all. For, he viewed it as 'a rehearsal' to rigging bigger polls in the future, such as the general election. While the CEC reprimanded the officials he was clearly heard casting doubt on the veracity of the turnout at the centre. By hindsight, even the credibility of the outcome of the by-election to Khulna-5 constituency was put under clouds as, in the words of the CEC, "a 40 per cent turnout had been shown in place of what others had thought it was 20 per cent only."

After all those pronouncements flowing torrentially from the CEC one would have expected the voting at the Kolchhari Government Primary School Centre to have been cancelled forthwith. Alas, this has not happened! The CEC perhaps owes the public an answer as to why so.

Mishap at rail crossing

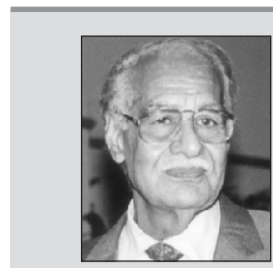
Provide safe passageways

THE death of an auto-rickshaw driver and his sole passenger at a railway crossing in Dhaka reaffirms the dangers that lurk at railway crossings. The accident took place at the Mohakhali level crossing when an auto-rickshaw trying to cross the tracks was hit by a Dhaka-bound train. The driver took an uncalled-for risk, for which he has paid with his life. But traffic police are supposed to ensure order at intersections and especially junctions that are potentially hazardous. We would like to know, where were the law enforcers?

The wrecked vehicle has been seized, but this is tantamount to locking the stable door after the horse has bolted. The mishap could have been prevented, if proper measures were in force. Law enforcers are rarely seen at railway crossings. On rare occasions when they are present, they can be 'persuaded' to look the other way. Vehicles can be seen crossing the tracks at the last minute and often by squeezing past level-crossing bars. The authorities must post adequate personnel at all points of hazard. They must also rid their ranks of rampant and petty corruption and ensure that lawbreakers are penalised fairly, as a deterrent to the devil-may-care attitude of some drivers. Pedestrians must also be discouraged from taking risks.

We urge the authorities to take note of this accident and look into the question as to whether railway tracks should be allowed to run through populated areas, especially across busy city thoroughfares. City planners and communication experts should find long-term alternatives, such as the construction of over-bridges to by-pass dangerous crossings. It is incumbent on the authorities to provide safe passageways for all. To ignore this would be a serious breach of their most basic responsibilities.

The price(less) factor



KULDEEP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

POLLLSTERS have not yet begun the exercise. Assembly elections in the five states Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Pondicherry are still a few weeks away. But straws indicate the direction in which the wind is blowing.

There is no likelihood of sweep by any party. People are becoming either apolitical or cynical. Since the living conditions are increasingly hard, they blame the party in power. The incumbency factor will count at the time of voting. Parties out of power may gain if they are viable.

Farm prices will be the major poll issue. New Delhi is too distant to get the blame. State governments will have to bear the brunt. What may, however, lessen their odium is the combination of castes and communities they can cobble together. It will be parochialism in pure terms. Still this may influence the voters to the extent that they may put their economic problems on the back-burner and follow appeals in the name of religion.

This is nowhere truer than in Assam. The ruling Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) is in a shambles. Its performance is nil and law and order record dismal. But if it were to align

itself with Muslim parties it would retrieve the ground because they command some 40 per cent of the electorate. But the problem is that of AGP's credibility.

The Congress too is wooing Muslims by affirming its support to the IMTD Act, which puts the onus on an objector to prove that the person he has named in a petition is a foreigner, not an Assamese. Most Muslims stand behind the Act. This gives advantage to the Congress. Since it has ruled the state for several decades, it is considered a viable alternative. Its main strength,

do so, the election may turn out to be a four-cornered contest. The AGP may be decimated. The Congress looks like emerging as the single largest party but missing a clear majority.

In Kerala too, the Muslim vote will be crucial. During my recent visit to the state, I got the impression that the Congress had the victory sewn after winning over the support of both Muslims Leagues. Still, as Chief Minister EK Nayanar told me, the ruling combination of communists would get some Muslim support because his five-year rule had

the communists. The Congress too is blaming New Delhi. But it suffers from one disability: the party had initiated the economic reforms. The Centre is unwittingly helping the communists in West Bengal by adopting a threatening posture. The Home Ministry's advisory notes, asking the state to tackle violence are increasingly regarded as "farmans by an emperor." They are hurting the pride of the Bengalis, who have seldom favoured New Delhi. Chief Minister Buddhadev Dasgupta, the successor of Jyoti

Minister K. Karunanidhi has shrunk in Tamil Nadu in size. He has done little to improve the lot of common man. This will adversely affect his DMK. He has played the card of federalism and the state's autonomy. But it is too late in the day. The move lacks credibility because the DMK is a partner in the ruling National Democratic Alliance which is headed by the BJP, which is a staunch advocate of strong Centre.

The Muslim factor is not important in the state. The Coimbatore riots have destroyed whatever the support the DMK had in the commu-

not. The Tamil Maanila Congress of GK Moopanar, to the disappointment of the Congress, is declining. Sonia Gandhi is said to have suggested to him to merge with the Congress. Whether Moopanar accepts the proposal or not is not so important as is the decline in his image. His plus point is that the communists like him. The left support is important for the Congress, if not for the numbers, at least for the image sake. The Congress, the AIADMK and the communists, if they manage to pull together, can wrest power from the DMK. Pondicherry, a small state, appears to be going the Congress way. The DMK has not made much dent into the Congress hold. The DMK leadership itself is also lukewarm to the Pondicherry developments. It does not want to divert its attention from Tamil Nadu. In fact, Pondicherry is the safest bet for the Congress from among the five states, if Jayalalitha, the party's ally in Tamil Nadu, does not sabotage the Congress candidates.

The situation may not change much in the next few weeks unless the present equations take a complete turnabout. Even then, Kerala and Tamil Nadu will continue to be a toss up. The Muslim vote will matter more than ever before because the contests are going to be close and a few hundred votes here or there can make all the difference.

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BETWEEN THE LINES

The Muslim vote will matter more than ever before because the contests are going to be close and a few hundred votes here or there can make all the difference. The BJP does not expect the Muslim vote. But it derives satisfaction from the fact that votes will be divided between the Congress and the communists. How the anger against the tumbling down of farm product prices find expression during elections is not yet known. Political parties may be in for a surprise.

however, is the AGP's failure. The incumbency factor will also come into play. The BJP has a limited base in the state. But the fact that both the AGP and the Congress placate the Muslim vote helps the BJP to be acceptable to the increasing number of disturbed and disgruntled Hindus. Muslim militancy, still in its infancy, may give fillip to the Hindutva elements. The BJP, even with the tacit support of the All-India Muslim Students' Union (AIMSU), till recently a secular set up, may not win more than 20 seats in the 120-member house. But this number may prove crucial in a hung assembly, a situation which stares at the state because of a triangular contest. If Muslims go it alone, as their representatives are threatening to

be free from communal riots.

What the communists have to fear most is the tilting of Christian vote towards the Congress after Sonia Gandhi has assumed the party's leadership. The state is delicately poised and even Congress leader AK Antony admits that it can go either side. One factor which the political parties are ignoring is the state of farm products. With the crash in prices of coconut, rubber, coffee and such other commodities, there is distress and uneasiness among people. They blame the state government for not doing much to give them relief. If the communists can convince them that it was New Delhi's doing and that they would defy if they were returned, then the anger might help

Basu, has hurled the challenge: We dare the Centre to dismiss us." This is spreading the mood of defiance on which the Bengalis thrive.

The Muslim vote, 12 to 14 per cent in the state, is important but it may split between the communists and the Congress. The former may lose some of it because of the action it has taken against Muslim extreme elements in some border districts. The Congress' advantage is that it supports the ITMD Act, the stand which the Muslims in border districts like those in Assam do. The biggest handicap of the Congress is lack of leadership in the state. There is also infighting. Jyoti Basu remains flat even after his retirement and this will multiply the problems of the Congress. In contrast, Chief

Ministry, Hindus have been disappointed over the government's 'weak action' in Coimbatore. The incumbency factor is working against the DMK.

Still, the party is depending on the fractured image of AIADMK chief Jayalalitha. It believes that people 'dislike' her so much that they would vote for Karunanidhi and ignore the non-performance of the DMK. What has weighed with the Congress to go with Jayalalitha is the impression that her base in the rural areas is intact. Indeed, she still basks in the glory of MGR who, even after five years of his death, remains a legend. But it is yet to be seen whether the court's sentence against Jayalalitha on corruption charges has hurt her electorally or

Libya and the Lockerbie

Justice came up to the crime

M SHAFIULLAH

AN audience was asked about chances of an Indian cow being killed in the Third World War in Moscow. The gathering laughed away the hypothesis. A diplomat among them however could not say no instead said that it was probable. Libya was caught in the game of probability in the Lockerbie episode.

An American Jumbo jet was blown off the sky over Lockerbie hamlet in Scotland in UK on 21 December 1988. On board the Pan Am flight 103 was 259 passengers. When the flight came down in flame it took another 11 Scottish lives on the ground. The toll of the tragedy was 270 innocent souls. Libya thousands of miles away on the north African shore of the Mediterranean was accused of masterminding the murder. Two Libyans stood for trial in the Camp Zeist off Amsterdam in the Netherlands. The camp site was declared Scottish territory for the duration of the trial.

The trial commenced on 3 May 2000 according to the Scottish law presided over by three Scottish judges. The verdict was delivered on 31 January 2001 convicting Abdel Basset Ali el-Megrahi for life term while co-accused Al-Amin Khalifa Fhima was acquitted. It was also reported that the court found evidence of el-Megrahi being a Libyan agent and awarded to pay US dollar 700 million as compensation to the families of the victims.

More melodramatic was the

process of handing over the two suspects. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan visited Tripoli in December 1998. Col Gaddafi kept him waiting several hours refusing to meet. Later on he was taken to Sirte desert several hundred miles away from Tripoli where Gaddafi was sitting in a colourful tent. Next came legendary personality Nelson Mandela flying all the way from Pretoria on 18 March 1999. He, in presence of Col Muammar Gaddafi,

Libya to accept responsibility of the Lockerbie bombing by her agent and to pay the compensation amount to the affected families. Until it does so, there can be no question of any further rehabilitation through, for instance, the lifting of sanction, commented Robin Cook, the British Foreign Secretary. Washington echoed the strong feeling of the new American administration for not allowing Libya to walk away from responsibility for the

sky. In an arrangement a French magistrate questioned the suspects on Libyan soil and the trial was held in absentia in a Paris court. Six Libyans were convicted including Abdullah Sannusi, security chief and brother-in-law of Col Gaddafi. They would serve prison term whenever caught outside Libya but no warrant of extradition was issued. Libya paid US dollar 31 million as compensation to the families of the victims. An undis-

British Tripoli stopped arms and cash supply to IRA. Libya cooperated with the British intelligence in spite of her multifarious IRA links. British Aerospace was awarded lucrative contract to repair, renovate and upgrade the Libyan airports. Libyan airlines placed order for 24 Air Bus to which London holds a big share. And the family of the slain constable was compensated with an undisclosed amount from the Libyan Police Welfare Fund. After

or to re-impose it. Some permanent members are likely to oppose both. An embargo on oil would be fought tooth and nail by the Europeans who largely depend on Libyan crude and gas.

The other dilemma is who would take responsibility for the crime committed by Abdel Basset. Libya is governed under Jamahiriya system the state of the masses. There is no king, president, prime minister or head of the State or Constitution in the traditional sense of the term. Col Gaddafi is the leader of Al-Fateh Revolution. He says he does not hold any official position of the State. The leader as he is called denied many a time that Libya was sponsoring terrorism instead he has been supporting liberation movement around the globe.

Col Gaddafi had already declared that the Libyan convicted in the Scottish court was innocent. Probably he was correct but it reminded me the story of a condemned man who pleaded innocent of the murder for which he was taken to the gallows. The hangman replied that everybody before him said so. The condemned confessed that he killed two in the past but was acquitted in the court due to lack of evidence. A retired district judge in a private conversation once remarked that human judgement is subject to error. Divine justice is proportionate to the crime and lawproof. Divine justice often takes on the criminal in his life time.

M Shafiqullah till recently was Ambassador to Libya, Tunisia, Malta and the State of Palestine.

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Prince Bandar, the envoy of the Saudi King and Ambassador to Washington and the Diplomatic Crops in the General People's Congress in Tripoli announced the intention of Libya to hand over the two accused on 19 March 1999.

Hans Carrol, Legal Adviser of the UN Secretary-General took the most valuable cargo in an Italian airliner painted in UN colour and flag from the Tripoli airport on 5 April 1999. After the plane landed in Amsterdam airport UN Security Council announced suspension of its seven years old sanction on Libya.

The judgment has profound effects on Tripoli, London, Washington and for the UN, London and Washington immediately asked

act of her official.

As expected Libya asked for quick lifting of the UN embargo since the Scottish court rendered the verdict. It was reported that Libya's UN Ambassador Abuzed Omar Durda who once served as Gaddafi's Prime Minister, denied involvement of the government in the crime but would honour any decision of the Scottish court on compensation to the families of the victims. He was also reported to have appealed to US to turn a new page in their relations.

Indeed in the recent past Libya got off the hook in two cases on pain of handsome compensation. A French UTA flight was blown off over Niger in 1989. Libyan agents were accused of the mass murder in the

closed amount was paid for the aircraft and related expenditure. The French oil conglomerate TOTAL was awarded huge concession.

The British episode was more classic in the sense that no trial was held for the murder of police woman constable Ian Fletcher in the St James' Squire in London in 1986. The fatal shot was suspected to have been fired from the Libyan embassy. She was on duty while an anti-Gaddafi demonstration was advancing towards the embassy. Margaret Thatcher immediately severed diplomatic relations with Libya and joined ranks with President Reagan who had already broken all ties with Tripoli in 1982. Libya came under UN sanction in 1992 and in a bid to placate the

14 years UK restored the diplomatic relations leaving USA along and sent her ambassador to Tripoli in December 1999.

In the cases just mentioned Libya did not take any responsibility as a State but paid the compensation. If the immediate past record is any guide it would not pose any problem for Libya to foot the bill of the Lockerbie episode on behalf of her convicted citizen. However, the court reportedly found evidence that el-Megrahi is an agent of the State. Washington and London were insisting on Libyan authority to take responsibility for the action of her convicted national otherwise Libya would continue to be under UN sanctions. Security Council would be in dilemma in either to continue with the suspension of the sanction

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

Winning hearts

Major (Rtd) Akhtaruzzaman may have lost membership of Parliament but he has won the hearts of all good citizens. What he has done so far is wonderful and other major political parties should learn from him. The younger generation like us appreciates his boldness, strength of mind, attitude to politics and ethics. He must keep it up and we shall always be by his side. We thank him for initiating and helping Dr Kamal Hossain to file the petition to stop or withhold payment for the Mig-29 by the government.

Syed Sajjad Zoha
Chittagong

US Embassy incident

Reference the letter on January 23, 2001, 'US Embassy incident', I am shocked and outraged and wonder why we have not heard of any steps being taken against the embassy staff who allegedly misbehaved? We just cannot believe that the staff of the embassy of the United States of America, a country which people look up to, would behave like this. Will the US Embassy investigate this matter and see to it that visa applicants are not harassed in the future?

An anguished citizen
Dhaka

Advent of the 21st century

We wrongly observed the new millennium last year with much fanfare. At midnight on December 31st 2000, when the 21st Century and the 3rd millennium really arrived, a few people in Bangladesh duly celebrated this event on Saint Martin's Island. They were members of the Bangladesh Astronomical Society. One of the organisers was Dr Rezaur Rahman, Chief Scientific Officer of the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission.

Dr Rahman is an entomologist but also a fan of astronomy. I am happy that he happened to be one of the supervisors of my M.Sc. thesis. I congratulate Dr Rahman and the whole team of astronomers for their correctness in counting time and also for the excellent sense of celebrating the rare event.

MAS MOLA,
Dhaka.

Dhaka's white elephants

The administrative problems of running Dhaka cannot be sorted out unless a top-level review is carried out by the government on DCC and Rajuk, two outdated management systems, not at all geared for the 21st century.

There are many problems due to overlapping of responsibilities; and many gaps which are grey areas, encouraging passing of the buck. These have to be identified through modern management analytical tools, sorted out, and new mechanisms set into place. The pace of development has increased, resulting in a large number of projects being operated simultaneously by different agencies. Slow communication, and communication gaps at the official levels cause harmful delays in decision-making and implementation.

With increasing office technology, the day-to-day administrative hassles should come down to manageable levels. We talk about the lack of infrastructure in underdeveloped countries, but the first point is that the administrative structure is itself outmoded.

The problem is that the political masters are not keen to improve routine level activities. Our politics is old, and the bureaucracy older; but all the time we are loudly talking about new projects!

Abul M Ahmad

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.

Let them pass!



STAR PHOTO: SHEIKH ENAMUL HAQ

This is a familiar sight: pedestrians trying in vain to cross a busy road. Vehicles refuse to give way, compelling young and old to dice with danger. Where are the police? They must install zebra crossings and train vehicles to stop for pedestrians. We should have traffic cops to help pedestrians across busy thoroughfares, at the very least. People's safety must be a priority.

Dhaka

Time for change

The problem with the government is that it thinks of the party first, then about governance. This is a weakness at the foundation level. People have become victims of circumstances and the environment is showing no sign of improvement, even after a decade of democratic rule by two elected regimes. Our politics is not developing, while we talk about development all the time! The verbal mileage exceeds the political mileage; and there are no check-post on the routes. Our politics is like our rickshaw driving. The Paltan bomb explosion is a new trend in the metropolitan shape of things to emerge. Our politics is suffering from a lack of options.

There is too much focus on the two major political parties. It is time for a change. Why is a change considered illegitimate by the fossilised politicians?

AH
Dhaka

Fare deal for students

About 12 years ago, students could travel by bus, train, launch and by Biman on payment of half the fare. This practice has been stopped and students are deprived of fare concessions on public transport. The main cause of the abolition of this facility is a lack of co-operation from the authorities concerned and misuse of these facilities by non-students. Student unions should come forward to obtain their legitimate right. In every country in the world, students are given special facilities.

Will our government ponder over this matter seriously?

MH Bari

Khulna.

Two Home Ministers?

Considering the law and order situation, perhaps we need two Home Ministers to tackle the overtime situation, to bring about a sense of security in peoples' minds. Instead of one minister doing the job so badly, why not have two of them?

ZA
Dhaka

Safety on airport road

The police have consistently failed to ensure safety on the long and lonely road to the international airport, located outside the metropolis. There are recurring cases of hold-ups and muggings on this road. The latest victim is a newspaper reporter who lost his passport, foreign exchange and travel documents at midnight.

The danger spots are known to the police, and the methods employed are also known. It is not difficult to identify and arrest the culprits, who have been operating in the circuit for several years. There should be better lighting arrangement and installation of public address system at more check-points. Several years ago, at Dum Dum airport, Calcutta, I noticed that the police noted down the numbers of the taxis and other public vehicles leaving the airport with passengers.

Lack of adequate security arrangements on the roads and highways all over the country (and on the rivers) has become an issue of public concern, and reflects adversely on the government's image. It is in the interest of the ruling party to undertake these measures in the public interest.

A Husain
Dhaka