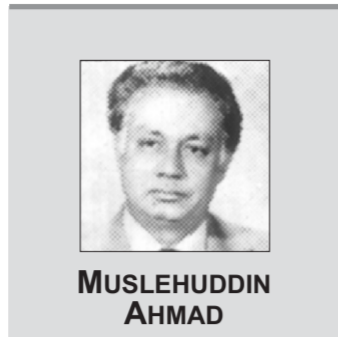


Sharon becomes Israel's Prime Minister

Peace process terribly uncertain



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

WHAT a disaster! Ariel Sharon has won a stunning victory (59.5 per cent against Barak's 40.5 per cent) over Ehud Barak in the special Prime Ministerial election of Israel. Even Sharon could not ever think of becoming the prime minister of Israel. He has not only won; he has, as I mentioned in my earlier comments, dumped Barak politically. Barak has not only lost, he resigned as the leader of the Labour Party of Israel and also from the Parliament (Knesset) thus closing his political chapter at least for some time, if not for good. Barak was an effective General but quite ineffective in his political dealings. He made several serious mistakes including his resignation as the PM of Israel. It was really not necessary. Indeed, he threw himself into the political gutter by resigning prematurely and thereafter handing the peace process not with enough seriousness. He should have worked hard to strike a peace deal which could be placed before the Israelis for a decision. Indeed, a peace deal with acceptable security measures could have made the difference and indeed could have been his saviour. Too much of self-confidence based on practically no tangible results except withdrawing from Lebanon was wrong.

His last mistake was his determination to fight the Prime Ministerial

election despite all valid indications of his losing the election. Even up to the last moment Shimon Peres had a margin, though a small one, over Sharon and Barak had the chance as late as on January 2 to stand aside and ask Peres to run in his place as the Labour candidate. Then the Israelis would have had real choice before them between "peace and war". Most Israelis knew what Sharon did that led to the Intefada. Unfortunately Barak could not deliver peace - not even a piece of paper on peace. Why should the

last four months because of his unholy visit to the Holy sites of Al Aqsa Mosque and which claimed over 400 deaths mostly Palestinians.

Sharon's victory has escalated the Intefada and it is likely to intensify in the coming days. Now the prospects for any peace in the region is practically zero unless Sharon takes a U-turn in his peace position. However, for Sharon, such a change of position is highly unlikely. He already said - Jerusalem will remain undivided and shall

Israel and achieve true peace and security."

Sharon's call for a unity government probably meant a government with Shimon Peres as the Foreign Minister. He also wanted Barak to join as the Defence Minister but Barak has already departed from the Israeli political scene at least for a while. It's unlikely that such a unity government could be formed under Sharon. Labour knows that Sharon himself did not agree to Labour's call for a unity government some two months ago. However, if Shimon

things are likely to be still more uncertain for Likud as violence is likely to intensify and continue.

The Israeli people say they are still interested in peace and indeed latest poll say about 70 per cent Israelis are for peace. But they voted for a man like Sharon who is a highly controversial man even in the eyes of Israelis. If they mean peace in Sharon's term and continued occupation of Palestinian land, then one wonders what sort of peace the Israelis want.

As expected the reactions of the

and sort out their problems. It would prefer not to influence the negotiations. President Bush reportedly even went to the extent of saying that the previous US administration influenced the last Israeli election; the present administration would not like to interfere with the democratic process of a country. Fair enough but the present US government remained committed to what the previous governments or administrations did - committed to providing full security to Israel. If so, that commitment entails obligations and those include asking Israel to vacate the occupied territories as per UN resolutions. As Israel is not doing it, the US has to step in and that probably obliged President Clinton to intervene. Undoubtedly, Middle East peace was Clinton's personal commitment too, but one sees his personal handling or even some form of intervention as a part of his effort to respond to his country's obligations towards the area. Therefore, the people would expect the US to even now discharge its own obligations in a fair and equitable manner once it has undertaken certain commitments for a state outside its own boundaries.

Israel recovered well from its isolation during the last couple of years because of the progress of the peace process. Now the peace scenario appears bleak to say the least. Let's hope that the US and the international community and particularly Europe would put pressure on the present Israeli government to continue to work on the peace process and start from where the previous government left it in Taba.

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SPOTLIGHT ON MIDDLE EAST

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Israelis trust Barak just in his words? Shimon Peres had a good track record of peace and a Nobel Laureate as a peace-maker; and that probably would have carried him through. At least peace process would have been saved. But Barak did not allow that to happen. Now he goes and with him the peace process and the possibility of peace in the region.

Ariel Sharon is known as a ruthless man. His record as a General is badly tainted. He was forced out of his Defence Minister's position 18 years ago after the Kahan Commission's report on the massacre of Palestinians in Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps in Lebanon. He was found individually responsible for the massacre. He is known in the Arab world as the "butcher" and "war criminal". He is the one who is solely responsible for the present Intefada that has been going on for

be the eternal capital of Israel. He says that he is in favour of peace but that peace has to be in his term undivided Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, only about 40 per cent (as against 95 per cent of Barak's proposal) of the occupied territories to the Palestinians. No refugees to be allowed to return and Israeli settlements are to remain in the occupied territories etc. These do not go with the peace.

Immediately after the election victory Sharon said as reported by *Jerusalem Post* "Citizens of Israel, My government will begin a new era of security and national unity... I call from here for the establishment of a national unity government, as wide as possible. I call on the Labour Party to walk together in true partnership on difficult path to peace and security. The government that I will lead will work to restore security to the citizens of

Peres is given the full power subject to the approval of Israeli Cabinet and not specifically of the Prime Minister to negotiate a peace deal with the Palestinians starting from where Taba negotiations left, it could be worthwhile to go for a unity government for the sake of the peace process. But unfortunately Sharon said only on February 8 that he would not even consider the offers made by Barak in his peace negotiations. In other words, Sharon does not feel bound by the agreements or commitments made by the previous government.

As Sharon is still what he was 30 years ago, there appears no chance of any unity government in Israel. Without any meaningful support of Labour, Shaas and Meretz parties, Sharon's government may not last long - may be a couple of months. The Knesset election may take place in about six months' time and

Arab world were strong and full of frustrations. The most important country in the conflict is Syria. It's reaction was that election of Sharon was a "declaration of war". The Arab world does not expect anything good out of Sharon's government. They obviously have to wait for Sharon's fall. Palestinians' general reaction was of course bitter, but Arafat said he respected the will of the people of Israel. Palestinian Authority spokesman said it would be prepared to negotiate with any elected government of Israel.

The international community including European Community reacted cautiously and hoped for continuation of the peace process. President Bush personally congratulated Sharon on his victory. Earlier statements indicate that the Present US administration would no longer do as Clinton administration did. It would allow two parties to sit down

It is true that debt relief is not a panacea for all of the economic problems of the poor nations. Even if, hypothetically, all of the external debts of these countries are cancelled, most would still continue to need concessional external assistance. The debtor countries must do their part in order to take advantage of the current situation. They must address the problems of governance, particularly as they influence investor confidence, such as the creation of necessary commercial code of conduct, functioning of judicial systems, and the effective application of the rule of law. Transparency in policy making, removal of bureaucratic red tape and the presence of an attractive rate of return relative to risk would help the debtor countries in dealing with the debt problem. The real danger with the HIPC initiative is that people in poor countries are gradually feeling cheated because debt relief under this initiative is not providing the improved services for the poor that was promised. For the poor countries, the only viable answer might be a complete and immediate write-off.

One problem with the HIPC programme is that the requirement to spend six years under IMF supervision before qualifying is far too

long. A send is that, while HIPC is designed to reduce debt to a sustainable level, the measurement is based mainly on the ratio of service payments to export earnings instead of taking into account a country's absolute poverty. The measurement of sustainability should be based on real government expenditures - looking at how much is spent on debt service as compared to what is spent on, say, health, education, and poverty alleviation.

changing parameters of the new millennium, has to change gear and the horizon to keep Americans well-fed during this century. The president of the most powerful nation in the world has to practice looking outward, beyond the domestic horizon of the consumer world of materialism.

The US has to stop beating about the bush and click with the Third World, where big business is waiting. The top spot is South Asia, and the next best spot is the rest of Asia, with a total of more than two billion consumers.

Earthquake alert

Build on recent initiatives

The government has woken up to the high risk of earthquakes in this country, only after India's tragic experience. Bangladesh sits on seismic active zones and is prone to tremors. Some eight tremors were reported last year and 13 in the previous year, but there is only one seismic centre in Chittagong with rudimentary equipment that cannot locate the epicentre, or measure the magnitude of a quake. Knowledge of seismological activity emerges from anecdotal evidence and damage assessment.

By being chronically nonchalant, the government has wasted much valuable time. We urge it to adopt a sustained earthquake alert programme. We must have adequate and modern equipment to provide vital seismological information. The Meteorological Department has been instructed to upgrade equipment in Chittagong and set up three more centres across the country, and this must be pursued as a priority. The centres must be up and running as scheduled this year.

Structural weaknesses in the city are of serious concern. Should a disaster even of moderate intensity strike, nearly 80 per cent of buildings in Dhaka would be vulnerable. The government has instructed the Housing and Public Works Ministry to collate and disseminate building code requirements and laws for enforcement. This step must be reinforced with a comprehensive survey to determine and rate existing structures on the basis of their vulnerability. Weak buildings need to be strengthened or rebuilt as far as practicable, or completely written off, as necessary. Safety standards must be enforced in all future construction and similar exercises must be undertaken for civil defence capacity-building including adequate provision for fire-fighting and earth moving equipment, with special focus on public buildings.

We urge the government to build on its initiatives. It must monitor and enforce safety codes, and ensure completion of projects undertaken now. For far too long, the authorities have demonstrated a chronic nonchalance towards earthquake preparedness. The Indian experience must serve as a warning that we cannot afford to ignore.

Gate-keeper as poacher

Calls for a probe

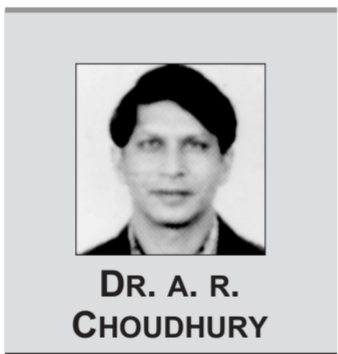
It has been common knowledge for quite sometime now that the high premium paid in toll money is increasingly becoming a factor in commodity pricing alongside transport cost and profit margin considerations. But just how much the extortionist uptakes are distorting prices and who the real culprits behind them are have been graphically portrayed in a report which Bangla daily Prothom Alo published yesterday as its lead item. A year ago, the government launched a law and order offensive against rampant illegal toll collection in the northern districts of Bangladesh by musclemen using signboards of feuding transport owners associations or the name of the ruling party. This proved effective; but the void left by the goons came to be quickly filled in by the police. For each of the 3000 trucks on daily duty carrying vegetables from the northern districts to Dhaka and Chittagong, the police are allegedly charging Tk 1500-2000 in toll money at more points than one en route.

The net result is the marked up prices we see in Dhaka's commodity markets with the consumers having to pay through their noses for their daily diet of vegetables at least five times the price at the grower's level.

When this is placed in a broader perspective of the benefits widely expected to be accruing from Bangabandhu bridge across the Jamuna, the frustration only deepens. Whilst the supply of vegetables has increased into the metropolitan market-place, the growers remain as deprived of the remunerative price as before and the price at the consumer's level, too, has not dropped as a spin-off effect.

We urge the home ministry to look into the allegations and take stern measures against those who prove guilty upon an investigation carried out by an appropriate authority.

Debt relief for poor nations



DR. A. R. CHOUHDURY

It is now routine for big economic summits - this time last week's World Economic Forum meeting in Davos, Switzerland - to pass with no progress on the debt relief initiative for the poor countries. Since the beginning of the debt crisis in the early 1980s, many developing countries have continued to find it difficult to meet their external debt-service obligations. The reasons are varied and numerous. They range from external shocks, such as deterioration in the terms of trade and adverse weather condition to the lending policies of many creditors, including the provision of loans on commercial interest rates and short repayment periods. The lack of prudent debt-management policies by debtor countries as well as a flawed management of the currency composition of external debt have also contributed to the crisis.

While every country in the world,

including the United States and Japan, owes money to someone, many countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America have struggled for years to repay only the interest on loans that are, in some cases, decades old. The total debt of the poorest nations in the world exceed 250 billion dollars, well beyond their capacity to service.

A UN report can be used to put the debt burden in perspective. In its 1997 report, the UNDP had said that governments in Africa alone, if relieved of their debt obligations,

public opinion in favour of greater debt relief suggests that faster and more substantial progress on the issue is inevitable.

The debts are mainly owed to three groups: western governments, global financial institutions, such as IMF, World Bank, and private lenders. As the volume of external debt has risen dramatically over the years, the lenders have initiated a series of rescheduling plans. But they have proved to be complicated and time-consuming. Despite several thousand resched-

movement. Not since the anti-apartheid movement campaigned against white rule in South Africa has a cause won such widespread support. This has forced international lenders to reassess their position. In 1996, the World Bank and IMF introduced a framework to provide special assistance for heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) that pursue IMF and World Bank imposed adjustment and reform programmes. Its aim, as explained by them, is to assist countries in attaining sustainable

economic growth. But experiences from the last few years have shown that the HIPC initiative has not been as successful as claimed. Only a handful of countries from the initial list of 41 have either received debt-relief or are scheduled to get one this year. By 2002, six years after the start of the programme, less than half of the countries will be selected.

One problem with the HIPC programme is that the requirement to spend six years under IMF supervision before qualifying is far too

CONNECTING THE DOTS

The real danger with the HIPC initiative is that people in poor countries are gradually feeling cheated because debt relief under this initiative is not providing the improved services for the poor that was promised. For the poor countries, the only viable answer might be a complete and immediate write-off.

could use the funds to save the lives of millions of children in five years.

Debt relief is not a panacea. However, it is a fact that many developed nations have already effectively written off debt owed to them, as they know developing countries simply don't have the funds to pay them off. Cancelling unplayable debts would provide an essential opportunity and foundation for development. It could end the downward spiral of economic degradation in many countries. The growing international political and

economic growth in real terms. The plea for debt cancellation for the world's poorest countries has now become the common cause of a rapidly growing international

external debt levels within a reasonable period of time and without additional external support. They included a group of 41 countries, mostly in Africa, in this initiative. Bangladesh is not in this group.

According to this initiative, a country would be considered to achieve external debt sustainability if it is expected to be able to meet its current and future external debt-service obligations in full, without recourse to debt relief, rescheduling of debts, or the accumulation of arrears, and without unduly compro-

long. A send is that, while HIPC is designed to reduce debt to a sustainable level, the measurement is based mainly on the ratio of service payments to export earnings instead of taking into account a country's absolute poverty. The measurement of sustainability should be based on real government expenditures - looking at how much is spent on debt service as compared to what is spent on, say, health, education, and poverty alleviation.

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

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.

Idle hands make hungry stomachs



STAR PHOTO: A K M MOHSIN

Able-bodied men sit patiently, waiting to be hired. Thousands make their way to the big city in search of work, ending up as manual workers. Work is difficult to find, and day wages are so low that they can barely eke out an existence. If they do not find work, they will go hungry. It is about time development planning took the needs the floating population into account.

Party politics

The ruling regime is paranoid about finding alibis when things happen against the party or government, and there are a lot of presumptions and assumptions thrown up in the air for public consumption. Now the regime is chasing the so-called Islamic fundamentalists.

Our politicians always mix party and government, creating confusion in the masses, and irritation in the well-informed independent camps. The regime should realise which movements are against the party, and which against the country, and separate the two, before opening its mouth.

It is very funny to note that whenever this party comes into power, the country is in danger! The country survived without this party being in power for two decades. How come? It is a fact that many do not wish the present ruling party to return to power; and these acts are not anti-national.

AMA
Dhaka

Judges' appointment

Some time ago, the President appointed two judges to the Appellate Division of the Bangladesh Supreme Court (SC). The President's action was preceded by the advice of the PM, which in turn was preceded by sending a list of four senior judges of the High Court

Division prepared by the Chief Justice (CJ).

The senior-most among the four enlisted judges was Justice K M Hasan and the junior-most was Justice M. Ruhul Amin. The second and third judges were Justice Golam Rabbani and Justice JR Modassir Hossain. The PM advised the President to appoint Justice Rabbani and Justice Amin to the SC. The learned advocates of the SC Bar did not agree to this appointment because the first and the third-most senior judges were superseded by the second and the fourth ones.

The advocates made an unusual move in the SC premises on the day of taking oath of the two newly appointed SC judges. Their movement was not made fairly and honourably, although their point was reasonable. A stalemate ensued in the SC and all hearings were withheld.

Five senior advocates came forward with a formula to break the stalemate. To our utter surprise, some ministers, and the PM herself failed to appreciate the efforts of the Group of Five. I think the executive should appreciate the good will of the Group of Five and appoint two more judges to the SC. There is no constitutional bar in appointing seven judges (instead of the usual five) in the Appellate Division of SC.

MAS Molla

A Husnain
Dhaka

"Missing Tawfiq Bhai"

Thank you for acknowledging the mistake of not mentioning on The Daily Star's 10th year celebration, the Executive Editor, fighting for his life in a clinic. You have really performed a pleasant and wonderful task by writing an article (Missing Tawfiq Bhai, February 7), showing your appreciation of his sincere and devoted work for your esteemed publication. Your article is really touching. Tawfiq Bhai's friends, admirers and well-wishers will be happy with your dignified and immediate expression of concern, and admission of your oversight.

Fouzia Haque
Dhaka

Dhaka.

Fair hand

We have made great strides in development. Even though we are still a LDC, we have eradicated many evils in our society and are making improvements daily. The NGOs have done the work that the government should have done for the people. The violence unleashed is very unfortunate. The Islamic zealots should be curbed, but it is up to the administration to exert a fair control on all those who encourage violence. This includes the government itself.

S. Mahmud

Death of a constable

I am shocked at the death of the police constable inside the mosque. It is really a terrible incident. We hope the government will find out more about the killing, including who is actually responsible. Why did other police officers not protect him? More important, we need to start having trust in the police. It is a sad reality of life that the police do not inspire trust from the common man. In any civilised country, common citizens rely on the police to protect them from harm.

Common citizen
Dhaka

Look at Asia

President Bush, facing the newly-