

## The Secretariat 'siege'

*We call for restraint*

IF the events of the past few days are any indication we will have a number of deaths of either innocent by-standers or of low level party activists. These deaths may be caused either by the police or by the ruling party terrorists. We cannot rule out opposition terrorists taking their share of innocent lives also. Regardless of who does what to whom, the opposition will call for more hartals, which in turn would cause further violence and deaths, followed by more hartals ..... and the sad story will go on. The spiral of violence that has been let loose by the ruling party's decision to 'occupy the streets' has gone a notch higher than the ordinary level of violence that we have regrettably gotten used to. To put it straight the city is in the grip of fear for tomorrow.

The opposition's decision to lay siege to the secretariat is a provocation which cannot be accepted by any government. It is obviously aimed at provoking the government to take retaliatory action, which would then be used to add fuel to the opposition's movement against the government. Unfortunately the ruling party is too drunk with the arrogance of power to realise that they would be far better off avoiding further direct confrontation with the opposition. To them it would constitute a sign of accommodation, which is an anathema to their way of thinking.

Thus both parties appear set for a show of strength in the streets of Dhaka. We write today to call for restraints on both sides for the events of tomorrow. The government's ban on processions around the secretariat should NOT be followed by police oppression or ruling party attack on opposition rallies as we have seen recently. Such actions will lead to violence. We categorically state let the opposition hold their peaceful demonstrations. Ruling party's policy of confronting opposition everywhere is wrong, undemocratic and unconstitutional. There are also elements in the opposition whose main aim is to spark violence and then use 'dead bodies' for further agitation. This is also wrong, undemocratic and unconstitutional.

We fear the loss of innocent lives due to recklessness on both sides. We also fear that political violence is getting out of control of both the parties and going into the hands of lower level players with agenda of their own. We fear that the spiral of violence is taking us further and further down a path from which we may not be able to extricate ourselves without a high cost of innocent lives. We fear that Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia may not be fully aware of the seriousness of the situation in terms of criminalisation of our politics. We further fear that these two leaders are so blinded by their dislike for one another that no action, however lowly, unlawful, unethical, undemocratic or down right evil will be beyond them, regardless of the cost to the country and its people. So we end with the question, how many more will have to die before sense returns to our leaders?

HARUN UR RASHID

THE decade of the 90s has been both lauded and criticised as the "decade of the NGOs" in Bangladesh. To many, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) provide alternatives to overextended and often overwhelmed government institutions. To others, they comprise a multitude of agencies operating in a somewhat "unaccountable" fashion, self-serving, occasionally undermining and sometimes even threatening the authority of the government.

### Relevance in the community

The setting up of NGOs is to be viewed by reference to ethical principles, such as, the notion that all rights have corresponding obligations and that members of society are bound together by a 'social contract' in which every one must do his/her part. By drawing upon this philosophical heritage, the enlightened and affluent members of society have an obligation to ensure that the vulnerable community does not suffer in an existing unequal society. Extreme inequality and poverty breed tensions in society which in turn foster crimes and poor social behaviour.

Another aspect of a prevailing unequal society is that existing institutions are far from just and for most disadvantaged people there are no real alternatives to improve their quality of life. In that respect, it appears that NGOs fill in the vacuum to some extent to deliver appropriate services to the disadvantaged group. In this connection it may be noted that since there are no safety nets for the vulnerable group of community in the country, NGOs have been making efforts to provide income support through various projects to that group.

The number of NGOs has soared in Bangladesh during the past decade largely because foreign donors have made funds available to them. Over the past decade donors have increasingly turned their attention to NGOs to provide funds to community-based programmes. They believe that NGOs can make significant contribution to grassroots development and this perception has been reflected in the disbursement of foreign aid to them.

The macroscopic socio-economic programmes are essentially laid down by the government in the official five-year plan and NGOs select programmes of their choice from the plan. The translation of government plan into reality depends on active collaboration, co-

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operation and understanding between the two.

It appears that the principal task of most of NGOs in Bangladesh has been to undertake various poverty alleviation and empowerment of women programmes in rural areas. Many NGOs have placed education and health as a top priority as it plays a crucial role in human resource development.

Bangladesh is predominantly rural and may continue to remain rural for coming decades. Most of the people live in rural areas and earn their incomes primarily from agricultural activities. The development of the country rests with the development of 86,000 villages. The rural economy is of subsistence type and hence any set-back due to natural or man-made disasters leads many people to live below the poverty line.

Rural development is a complex task. All planning must preferably be based on a full knowledge of local resources as possible. The identification of issues and the mobilisation of local resources appear to be crucial in making development programme in rural areas. NGOs have played a vital role in accelerating development by undertaking appropriate training and human resources programmes.

It has been the role of NGOs to study complex human responses in rural setting and to provide an understanding on which effective and equitable programmes/projects can be developed. NGOs make a major contribution to knowledge and dissemination of that knowledge is useful within the community. Many of the NGOs have been able to reach out to the poor and the needy in Bangladesh in a manner and scale that may not be possible by a government agency, bound by somewhat inflexible rules and regulations.

The availability of a steady flow of resources for NGOs is intrinsic to their successful operation. In many countries, local private sector and rich individuals contribute funds as donations to NGOs and they receive tax rebate in return. Mr. Turner of CNN provided \$1 billion to

the UN and it is believed that he would get substantial tax benefits from it. Tax rebate acts as an incentive for local donors to make financial contribution to NGOs and non-profitable organisations. The local mobilisation of resources is an important issue, given the importance and increasing relevance of NGOs to the community in the country.

### Critics' views

NGOs have made such a striking impact in the country that their activities are also not free from criticism. NGOs have introduced many novel ideas and projects in the rural community. But any change is likely to face opposition and given the wide-embracing role of NGOs in the community, the opposition to them is not surprising. Opposition is not to be feared but countenanced with tact and sensitivity. Many NGOs are smart enough to adjust their approach and strategies in order to make the method of service delivery culturally congenial.

Critics argue that although there have been rural development programmes to create employment to overcome the poverty situation but in reality many of the poorest live below the poverty line and have been missed by mainstream development activities. Many believe that NGOs have not been able to reach out to the poorest of the poor and their living conditions have not been improved. They suggest that efforts should be made to ensure that this section of vulnerable community receives tangible benefits from NGOs.

In recent times, there appears to be an increasing belief among commercial entrepreneurs, big or small, that many NGOs have departed from their social welfare 'core' activities. They have embarked on 'commercial enterprises' which do not play a levelling field with others in the market, which may result in monopoly of services and goods, defying fair competition in the market. A feeling of displeasure on the apparent 'unfair' advantage of NGOs appears to permeate within business circles.

This does not seem to be a healthy phenomenon for NGOs.

Another criticism appears to be directed against larger NGOs. Critics believe that the bigger the structure of NGOs is, the more remote the management is likely to become. As a result NGOs may lose touch with grassroots level.

A contentious issue in the wider debate appears to be the accountability and transparency of the activities of NGOs. It is argued that an important component of accountability of NGOs is to put in a mechanism where candid reviews of the work of NGOs are carried out by an independent body every two to three years. The reviews should focus, among other things, on the efficiency, cost-effectiveness of their programmes and the intended results.

### Conclusion

Despite all odds, it has to be acknowledged that NGOs have changed the lives for the better of hundreds and thousands of vulnerable men and women in the country. NGOs have become catalysts and initiators in many vital sectors in the community, creating conditions for the strengthening of grassroots democracy in the country. Furthermore they have generated employment for host of people from different backgrounds, from artisans to the educated section of the community (e.g. BRAC employs 58,000 persons within the organisation alone). There is currently an effort to maintain gender balance in the intake of employees by NGOs.

It is remarkable that within this 30 years of Bangladesh's independence, there have been considerable achievements by NGOs and they have been able to get recognition and praise from international leaders and institutions for their outstanding work. Through their work in social sectors, a link has been established between national and international scholars to their mutual benefits. Many international agencies view some of the activities of NGOs in Bangladesh as a model for other developing countries.

It would not be incorrect to say that NGOs have enhanced the reputation of Bangladesh abroad. Credit should be given to NGOs for their enthusiasm, commitment and dedication. It would be society's failure not to recognise the worth of NGOs in Bangladesh.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

# Let arguments be the only weapons

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

IN a usual morning, I crawl out of the mosquito net and clumsily walk towards the living room to pick up the daily newspaper. The second part of my morning ritual involves reaching for the remote-controller and switch on to the BBC news. I lend my eyes to the printed words and my ears to the aired ones. Seldom do these words correspond; the other day they did in the most shocking way.

The headline news detailed the street carnage and the killing of a police constable inside a mosque. It coincided with the TV report of a triumphant dance of some Jewish extremists in Jerusalem who were rejoicing over the death of two Palestinians in an explosion soon after Ariel Sharon came to power. There was a remarkable resemblance between those two groups of men, albeit active miles apart in their white *kurtas* and in black robes.

It is Dalai Lama who once said, "nowadays, important events which take place in one part of the world end up having consequences all around the planet. For this reason, we have to consider that every major local problem is of global concern as soon as it appears. It is no longer possible to invoke the national, racial or ideological barriers which separate us, without destructive repercussions. In this context of our new interdependence, taking care of the interests of others is the best form of selfishness." What it means simply is that we cannot afford to see things in isolation anymore.

I may feel safe under my mosquito net but in reality, I am not. Probably, what I think 'right' is not so for many. And someone out there is so zealous about her/his conception of right and wrong that the only way to right a wrong is to kill the other. I strongly feel that to kill an on-duty uniformed man is a heinous crime. But surely, there are others to feel the opposite. I ardently believe that violence cannot be the gateway to peace but surely, there are others to believe the contrary in Israel and Palestine.

The rise of fundamentalist forces is not a new phenomenon. In recent times, however, it has attracted so many adherents that it has taken a global proportion. It would be wrong to assume that it is only a religious thing; it is also a political movement and a state of consciousness. The pith of fundamentalism rests in a strong discontent about society, preoccupation with religious beliefs, assumption of a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil. This theory is put to practice in terms of actual groups of human beings, and the claim of divine authority to justify violence against the perceived

The government may think it timely and proper to continue portraying the fundamentalist forces as 'dark forces' as an electoral move but for the greater sake of the country it must take steps to understand their frustration and expectations. It must empower both the 'other' and the 'self' to engage in meaningful dialogues. Let arguments be our only weapons in democracy.

enemies. Like other totalitarian worldviews, it claims absolute righteousness for its own beliefs: "God is on our side!" Time is a witness to different shapes of fundamentalism that has appeared under the labels of Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and other varieties, and has resulted in genocide, crusades, *jihad*s, witch-hunts, tortures, inquisitions, deportations, holocausts, terrorist attacks, revolutions, *fatwas*, *coups d'état*, human rights violations, collective suicides, and wars.

Let's admit it. We have a situation of "us" versus "them," and the million-taka question is "who is right?" On the surface, both parties have opposite points of view. But underneath, these opposites are a mirror image of each other. This is a situation that is known in anthropology as "complementary antagonism." In this relationship each side is convinced of the righteousness of its own point of view; projects absolute evil onto the other; believes the other side initiated the injustice; attempts to modify the behaviour of its opponent by any means necessary, including violence; is inevitably frustrated when such attempts, in the long term, fail to produce the desired effect. In other word, it is a mutual siege.

As Shakespeare has shown us in his characterisation of the Jewish usurer Shylock, that even Jews have eyes, they laugh when tickled, they bleed when pricked. Civilization is all about rationality and it teaches us to take 'the other' into consideration. If a group is taking law into its hands, there should not be any compromise about it. Lawbreakers should be brought to the book at any cost. But then again, we need to understand the reason for the despair and frustration of the fundamentalist forces. The people who took the streets recently came from Madrashes or similar religious institutions. Questions need to be asked whether they are receiving the right kind of education, which would ultimately prepare them for the real world, the job market. We need

to point out the discriminations that our education system is making between general and religious education. True, these madrasa people have a spiritual objective but surely, they too need to quench their thirsts and fill their stomachs. Or, are we just leaving them with no option but to play with the religious sentiment of the mass? Why would a group of people want to turn Bangladesh into Afghanistan? Why would they want to become Taliban?

The Taliban who now run Afghanistan have interpreted Islamic Sharia Law to their own benefits. They have prohibited photography of living beings, possession of videotapes and recorded music, watching television, alcohol and social activities between the sexes. They have endowed local Islamic judges with legal authority to levy traditional punishments, including amputation of hands and feet, and public execution. They have stripped women of all their basic human rights including access to education and health care, the right to work and freedom of movement. They are largely confined to their homes, and are only allowed to go out if they wear the traditional purdah and are accompanied by a close male relative. They are also not permitted to "make noise." They have forced most UN agency personnel and all NGOs to leave the country. They have given bad names to Islam by resorting to act of terrorism. Consequently, the Taliban government is not recognised by the UN and has no diplomatic relations except with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

What caused Taliban to surface as a formidable force was the power struggle of two superpowers (US and USSR) and the corruption of the former government. The same is true for the rise of fundamentalism in India. BJP rose to power cashing on the widespread corruption of Congress. It also took advantage of Congress's 'moderate' attitude towards Pakistan and China. Moreover, Indian bourgeois and petty bourgeois disenchanted with quotas and reservations for disadvan-

tagged sections of society also contributed to its rise. Last, but most importantly, BJP exploited religious and ethnic tensions and resentments.

The situation is not much different here, excepting that the incumbent government and the main opposition parties are said to be secular forces. In the last two parliamentary elections, voters have outright rejected fundamentalist forces. This is due to the fact that the 'baby' democracy in this country has been more or less polarised, and it focuses on the rivalry between two bourgeois parties. Besides, encouraging participation of women in the election went against the fundamentalists, who have a restrictive view of women's rights. Moreover, fundamentalist organisations in Bangladesh are known for their anti-liberation role in the war of independence. Some even say that the supply of petroleum-dollars also subsidised for these extreme religious groups. Finally, the major parties, much to their discredit, have engaged themselves in a race of using Islam to attract voters into their fold.

The last point demands extra attention. Since fundamentalist forces are vying for a platform alternative to secularism, they probably feel intruded when others 'steal' their only trump card. They assert their position with an extreme authority of religion. They even take advantage of such situation in the name of political alliance.

It is probably easier to consider fundamentalist forces as the evil "other" when we are convinced that we are the good "self." But the reality is if we let this gap to widen, the board of our Titanic country will split into half smack in the middle. As much as I would like to see the culprits of recent events punished, I also feel that the government should bring their leaders to the discussion table and understand what they really want and we are ready to learn from them. I strongly feel that only a meaningful communication can bring the opening camps to a common platform. If this sounds unrealistic, think of South Africa and how the apartheid crises have been brought to a tolerable level. You may even think of the hill-tracts crisis, if you want.

The government may think it timely and proper to continue portraying the fundamentalist forces as 'dark forces' as an electoral move but for the greater sake of the country it must take steps to understand their frustration and expectations. It must empower both the 'other' and the 'self' to engage in meaningful dialogues. Let arguments be our only weapons in democracy.

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## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

### Good Photorial

Thank you very much for printing a photograph February 11 showing construction materials occupying a significant portion of Manik Mia Avenue. These construction materials will be used in a government project. So here the government itself is the law breaker.

This is not an isolated case. There are many examples of encroachments on public roads and thoroughfares without any consideration for passers-by. The footpath on Kabi Nazrul Islam Sarani to the west of Hotel Sheraton has been totally dismantled and erased and the space is being used for treating MS rods to be used for the Hotel's expansion project.

It seems that no body pays attention to the hardship which pedestrians have to undergo every day while using this portion of the road. And this encroachment is not likely to end shortly, because the construction work will continue for quite a long period of time.

So when the government itself does not show any respect for law how can we expect that ordinary citizens will be law abiding?

M Hafizuddin Khan  
Dhaka

### The real picture

Disparity between word and action is nothing new as far as political leaders are concerned, but the remarks made by Dr. HMB Iqbal after the atrocities on February 13<sup>th</sup>,

at Malibagh, are astonishing.

In an interview with Ekushey TV and later in a press conference he condemned the opposition parties for the killing of four people including a policeman. Home Minister Mohammed Nasim blamed "fundamentalist" forces for the incident.

But the real picture of the incidents can be seen in almost all the newspapers of February 14<sup>th</sup>. Dr. Iqbal is seen with a gunman standing right beside him and policemen creating a security fence around them. In another photograph, the same gunman is seen firing shots. *The Daily Star* reported that members of the infamous "Five Star" group were seen in the procession led by Dr. Iqbal. After this burning evidences, how and why in the world should we believe what Dr. Iqbal is saying?

Syed Saifuddin Hossain.  
Mohammedpur, Dhaka.

### Shortage of English teachers

It is really disappointing to learn of the shortage of English teachers in Faridpur district (The Daily Star, February 10<sup>th</sup>). I urge the government to protect our future generation from being deprived of learning an international language, and thereby being deprived of global knowledge. Global knowledge is a prerequisite for the next generation.

Dr. Lailun Nahar  
Dhaka

## 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.

### Who cares about wildlife?



PHOTO: AZIZ AMIRUL, UTTARA

Beautiful birds, meant to roam the wild, are caged and sold to the highest bidder. Birds like munia, parakeet, mynah and dove can be bought for a price, and so can mammals and reptiles. There is a ban on the capture and trade of animals from the wild, but no one cares to enforce it. The Ministry of Forests and Environment is too busy with other matters to care about wildlife.

### Mobile phone

I have joined the Grameen phone family recently. My phone number is 017868410 and I received my first bill invoice no: 0002211121 dated 17-1-2001 Account Number 00207350. Surprisingly, Taka 491.94 has been charged as rental and service charge whereas it should be Taka 250 only. Upon inquiry I was informed that this additional amount is charged as one month line rent advance. It would have been nice to have mentioned it in the bill, so that subscribers were not confused. I would also like to know when this advance line rent amount shall be adjusted.

Subscribers with mobile to mobile phone facility unfortunately are not able to call a hospital, fire service, police station in an emergency. Could Grameen set up an emergency service through which GP-GP subscribers could call emergency services? Also, I would like to suggest that Grameen provides more free inquiry numbers.

Abu Bakar Farhad  
Mirpur, Dhaka

### Sharon's victory

I am disappointed at the recent commentary in your paper by Arshad-uz Zaman (February 13) which in my opinion, lacks insight. Mr. Zaman gives Ehud Barak credit for "devoting his entire energies to finding a solution" with Yasser Arafat. That is an overly charitable contention. Barak is the man who continued to countenance the military onslaught against innocent

Palestinians while making the rounds of peace summits; sought to placate a hard-line, rightist public by, bellicose language regarding the peace process; obdurately declined to apologise till the end of his desperate campaign race for the police brutality on Israeli Arab citizens; talked of compromise and concession one moment and then turned around to talk of not "caving in" or "selling out" Israel the next.

Mr. Barak lost because of his duplicitous and disingenuous positions on peace. I would argue that Mr Barak's electoral rout cannot be the definite debacle for the peace process that Mr. Zaman seems to erroneously suggest. He mentions the question of the sovereignty over Jerusalem as the only critical issue on which final negotiations foundered. He fails to mention the "right of safe return of refugees" as another overriding Palestinian demand vote for

Mr. Zaman joins the bandwagon of unqualified praise and admiration that seem to come Bill Clinton's way. It is plainly fatuous to take at face value the peace-making credentials of any U.S. president or administration on the Israeli-Palestinian question. Opinions obviously differ, I fully concede that much, but surely facts and principles cannot be short-changed or substituted by what is merely popular or otherwise convenient to believe.

Sajjad Husain  
Dhaka