

Human Rights Violations

Basic institutions missing

THE US State Department's adverse portrayal of last year's human rights situation in Bangladesh hardly comes as a surprise. The reason is twofold: first of all, the US' standard criteria for evaluating HR records of various countries are too sensitive to miss out on anything, even low-intensity violations. Within Bangladesh's overall democratic framework aberrations are bound to stand out. That's the exposure we risk. Secondly, our own media reports have been rather scathingly critical of human rights impingements within the country, so that all of these could not be simply swept under the carpet. In fact, the test-case human rights violations have been too much in public knowledge to be ignored by any quarters. These get routinely mentioned as examples in any HR evaluation report. Needless to say, shaming us a good deal thereby.

The US State Department's report, among other things, highlights use of police for political purposes, repression on political opponents, 'filing of false cases against opposition activists, attacks on opposition with the cooperation of police' and intra-party clashes within political parties. Then the police themselves draw flak on several counts ranging from widespread corruption and lack of discipline to extra-judicial killings and deaths in 'safe' custody. The public outcry over rape incidents in police custody in 1999 might have had the effect of reducing the incidence in 2000, thus surmised the HR report for a change.

With police abuses going unpunished by the government a climate of impunity, even invincibility, is fostered among them inviting commission of further excesses by the police.

Nothing short of police reform, an independent human rights commission and an ombudsman's office will improve matters. Political parties need to make a common cause of this absolutely pressing set of agenda.

Deaths from poor air

Enforce rules to rectify problem

THE alarming disclosure that approximately 25,000 people die annually from diseases caused by poor air quality, coupled with an immovable haze or smog over Dhaka this week, has given proof positive that we are caught in a serious air trap. Experts at a seminar on 'Eco-Transport Assistance in Dhaka' also reported that 70 per cent of the total air pollutants are the result of daily emissions from motorised vehicles, with two-stroke vehicles belching noxious gases nearly 30 times more than other vehicles.

The growing ill effects, as well as the root causes of air pollution have been irrefutably identified. What is lacking is commitment on the part of the government to solve the problem. A ban on the import of two-stroke engines aimed at obtaining a 'natural' end to the auto-rickshaw and tempo, over five years, is proving to be ineffective in practice and illusory in conception. While the ban is being circumvented by 'unofficial' imports from neighbouring countries, emissions from an estimated 40,000 or more two-stroke vehicles already plying are continuing unabated.

We urge the authorities to rectify the lapses immediately. Cross-border infringements must be blocked. Two-stroke engines must forsake the use of unsealed lubricants as per a recent government ban and all vehicles exceeding 20 years must be taken off the road. Diesel fuel must shed its present high sulphur content and minimum maintenance checks must be enforced on all public and private vehicles. The authorities must apply penalties across the board, without regard to vested lobbies.

The government must bring out of hibernation all proposals for alternative energy sources, such as the Compressed Natural Gas plan, enlisting cooperative ventures with private sector initiatives. We urge it not to ignore these warning signs of deteriorating health. Unless this challenge is met in time, we could have a health disaster of unimaginable proportions on our hands.

MANZOOR AHMED

THE Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), the premier think-tank of the country, has launched an initiative to prepare policy briefs on important national issues for the next government, which is to be chosen in the upcoming general election. This laudable effort needs to be buttressed by a people's manifesto and a grand alliance of citizens to protect and promote the rules of the game of democracy. The record of a decade of elected governments has shown that a policy agenda for national development will have no willing ears in the corridors of power and no possibility of being implemented unless the tenets and practices of accountable and responsive governance are stronger than what they are now.

The initiators of the policy briefs, through a series of consultations in Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi, have attempted to identify the critical issues for the country's development. Taskforces on each of the issues will assess existing policies and problems and propose immediate and medium-term actions.

Sixteen areas have been identified to be examined by the thematic taskforces. These include: (a) budgetary discipline and fiscal policy, (b) development and governance of the energy sector, (c) financial sector, (d) overcoming agricultural stagnation and revitalizing rural economy, (e) trade and industrial policy, (f) poverty eradication and employment generation, (g) gender equality and women's empowerment, (h) governance of the health sector, (i) education policy, (j) administrative reform and local government, (k) urban governance, (l) environment policy, (m) transport and communication, (n) information and communication technology, (o) general

governance issues, and (p) land administration. As CPD Executive Director Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya explained, "These policy briefs will be completed before the elections and our main targets are politicians, media persons, the voters, and other civil society forces."

The themes identified are worthy ones. Incoherent policies and priorities, lack of accountability, mismanagement and corruption afflict all of these areas critical for the country's development. The sectoral and technical issues in these areas need to be discussed and debated in order to have a better understanding of the options and to help shape respect for democratic accountability, it is unlikely that well-argued and erudite policy prescriptions on sectors of national development will be of much consequence.

The prerequisite for effective policies in development sectors and their implementation is revival and strengthening of the culture, values and practices of democracy. The key institutions of our fledgling democracy must be nurtured and upheld. These include fair elections for representative bodies, primacy of the parliament as the forum for political debate, a democratic code of conduct for political parties, the rule of law, protection of human

rights, and free flow of information. One can understand the reluctance of an academic think-tank to take on an activist role in no less a task than the mobilization of the citizenry for bolstering democracy. But this task cannot be neglected as the nation passes a decade of lost opportunities for democracy-building and ventures into the future that holds both new possibilities and predictable hazards. The delicate sapling of democracy needs protection from our predatory politics. The civil society as a whole must come together to form a grand alliance of citizens to formulate and mobilize support for a people's manifesto to protect and strengthen democracy. This people's movement must have as principal actors human rights organizations; election and democracy-watch bodies; forums of development NGOs; business and trade organizations including chambers of commerce; women's and youth

organizations; workers' unions; cultural groups; professional bodies, such as those of lawyers, doctors, engineers, teachers and journalists; media organizations and all others concerned about protecting and promoting democracy. The alliance of citizens for democracy should strive to build a nationwide network with affiliated or associated groups in all districts and upazilas.

Some key elements of the people's democracy manifesto should be: —Fair elections of public representatives: The existing election laws must be enforced, the Election Commission must be given suffi-

legal means. They must pledge to forego hartals and other such means of political protest that cause large-scale disruption of the national economy and citizens' lives. They must undertake to work together in good faith on the "business rules" of the Parliament to make it an effective national forum. The working procedures and resources of the parliamentary committees should be enhanced to allow public hearings on important issues.

—A democratic code of conduct for political parties: Parties taking part in the election must pledge to have a democratic charter and organizational structure and follow

uphold the international instruments to which Bangladesh is a party, review and modify national laws in the light of universal human rights norms, establish an independent human rights commission with statutory authority, and appoint human rights ombudspersons at district and national levels.

—Freedom of information: The parties must pledge to free the electronic media from government control without further delay, guarantee citizens' right of access to information, and take steps to make government decision-making transparent and subject to public scrutiny. Equal time must be ensured for major political parties during the election campaign. The head of the government must establish a tradition of frequent press conferences with minimal restrictions, which are broadcast live to the nation.

The grand alliance of citizens for democracy must challenge political parties to state their position on the people's manifesto. The alliance must demand that the parties begin to live by the precepts of the manifesto, starting with selection of candidates and running the campaign for the upcoming election. Under the auspices of the alliance, the nominated candidates should be reviewed and those who do not meet the standards should be publicly identified. The election campaigns of different parties should be monitored and violations of rules should be publicized.

It is said that a people gets the government it deserves. Let the people speak and make it amply clear that they demand and deserve a better government than what they have endured

Manzoor Ahmed, formerly senior education adviser in Unicef headquarters and its representative in China, Ethiopia and Japan, is currently a visiting professor at the University of Pittsburgh.

—Protection of human rights: All parties must pledge to promote and

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—The rule of law: The parties must pledge a time-table to take concrete actions, including amendment of the constitution, to establish the separation of the judiciary and the executive; allocate sufficient resources for an independent judiciary; and make the police force an arm of the law that touches citizens most directly and frequently a true protector of citizens. The parties must promise to undertake a thorough reform of the police to root out corruption, improve its training and incentives, and establish public review boards to handle citizens' complaints at district, metropolitan cities and national levels.

—Parliament as the principal political forum: All parties taking part in the election must pledge to make the parliament the main forum for debating national issues. They must pledge to honour the outcome of the general election conducted by the Election Commission under the care-taker government and pursue any election complaints through

demand of getting the secretary general's office in the ARD for making its grip strong in Punjab, observers pointed out.

In a meeting of ARD held recently in Peshawar, both PML(N) and PPP insisted on securing both the positions of secretary general and president of Punjab. But in order to avoid any controversy, the ARD leadership agreed to a compromise. According to it, a repre-

second highest after Saudi Arabia with \$189 million. Bankers and financial experts marked a general upward trend in the inflow of foreign exchange through home remittances. What has helped is stated to be a progressive improvement in the delivery of the amount sent back home. Banks claim that they have cut the time in the delivery of remittances in 24 hours in the cities and 48 hours in the rural areas, State Bank of Pakistan statistics showed, according to a story in Friday's 'Dawn'.

In the first seven months of the current fiscal year, remittances from Dubai and USA have shown significant increases. Remittances from Dubai went up from \$58 to \$95 million. Overseas Pakistanis based in Canada, Norway and Abu Dhabi also sent slightly higher amount. Home remittances averaging around a billion dollars are the second biggest source of foreign exchange earning for Pakistan, after exports. Bankers estimate that overseas Pakistanis send back home 8 to 10 billion dollars ever year.

The freezing of forex account in May 1998 had resulted in the fall of home remittances from \$1.2 billion in 1997-98 to only \$875 million in '98-'99. In '99-'00 home remittances rose to \$913 million after partial revival of confidence. Bankers estimate that the figure may cross the billion dollars mark in the current financial year.

representative of each component party of ARD would be secretary general for two months, on the pattern followed by parties in MRD. For the maiden term, PML will be given office of the secretary general to be followed by other parties after the PPP. It may be recalled that PPP had lost the ARD presidential contest in Sindh to PML(N). But party leaders do not consider this as a threat to its vote bank in the province.

Forex account
PAKISTANIS resident in the UAE sent home the second largest amount of foreign exchange during the July-January period of 2000-2001. They sent \$137 million,

Option of new leadership for old parties

M.J. ZAHEDI

A RECENT statement by the federal Interior Minister, Mr Moinuddin Haider, seems to have raised new hopes among the leaders and followers of the political parties, now in a state of hibernation. It must have specially cheered up the supporters of the PML and the PPP because the minister referred to these two parties as national assets with roots in all the four provinces, having relevance to national stability. Of course, he also said that both the parties needed to be provided with new leadership. There is no gaining saying the fact that the two major parties have well-developed presence in the provinces and should be able to play a vital role when democracy is restored. The well-developed democracies of the world have found through centuries of experimentation that while the two-party system may be imperfect, the alternatives are far worse. But the Nation feared that the manner in which the leadership issue is being tackled by the government could only create splits in the mainstream parties. The paper said that this was a public perception and, however misplaced, this perception has gained strength from the fact that several invitees to the Chief Executive's political consultations have later assumed dissident roles in the existing party structure.

Creating fresh leadership, according to 'The Nation', would imply that it is thrown up by a process of in-house elections, which

would merely give impetus in the splintering of experienced parties. The PML and the PPP whose role, the minister said, the government values, should be encouraged to hold elections through which fresh leadership can emerge. The paper also pleaded for the government to consult the existing leadership on major international issues like the CTBT, the Kashmir and Afghan policies as well as such pressing

premature to predict which group will finally win the contest. Much will depend on how long Nawaz Sharif remains isolated from the political process in the country. It will also depend on whether the new party succeeds in getting near the corridors of power from where it can dole out favours. 'The Nation' thinks that Ch. Pervez Elahi and his supporters have given the struggle a principled run by criticising Nawaz Sharif for

stronghold in Punjab and its ranking in the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy will decline. Observers think that the PML(N) would do well to hold a general council meeting of its own now. Also there will be no harm if it has fresh elections for its office bearers. It could at least get the nominations made by Nawaz Sharif confirmed by the general body.

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marks a creditable change in the culture of the Muslim League that it has remained one for more than a year after its government had been overthrown. It will indeed set a healthy tradition if it were to abstain from mudslinging on each other's leaders and restricted itself to matters of policy rather than on personalities.

internal matters as the Devolution Plan and the mechanics of restoring democracy. Meanwhile, the tug of war that has been going on for more than a year between rival groups within the Pakistan Muslim League has finally reached its logical conclusion, at least as far as Punjab is concerned. The groups are now formally divided into two separate parties. Recently, the dissidents, if they can be given this label, have elected Ch. Pervez Elahi as the party's Punjab provincial chief.

Observers however feel that Mr Elahi's group, that is the rival group, has not been able to create a sizeable dent in the loyalist, i.e. the Nawaz Sharif, camp. It is however

ignoring party members and of running the party in an authoritarian manner. Ch. Pervez Elahi has promised to respect the opinion of the workers, of formulating policies only after debating these in the party and thus strengthen the party. One has to wait to see how far these promises are turned into realities.

The Chaudhri maintained neutrality while the party was electing its provincial chapter. It is yet to be seen whether the same spirit prevails during the election of the party president. There are numerous claimants for this position, including several in the same group. If the election widens the rift within the party, it will suffer a setback in its

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LETTER FROM KARACHI

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

No security of life

Where is the security of security? There is no guarantee of safety. It seems that it is high time one added another important job to one's daily-routine and that is to be ready for death! It seems that, like all other things, 'security' is a show-piece of the VIPs. I become panic-stricken because of the lack of safety. Examples abound all over the place: assailants attack houses, ordinary people become caught in political battles, innocent women are burnt by destructive acids for refusing an offer of marriage. To swallow in silence such increasing conditions of prosecution-terrorism has depressed me. I wait for the day when I, too, might become a casualty of the day.

Shamim Ansary Sumon
Jahangirnagar University

Save the plant kingdom

It is a cause of deep sorrow that some people are mercilessly destroying our plant kingdom, which plays an important part in providing us with fresh air. They cut down trees for personal gain, knock heavy nails into tree trunks to place advertisements, thus injuring the living cells of tree and ultimately causing the whole body to dry up.

Our Forest Department and City Corporation Offices allow these illegal practices that are destroying our plant kingdom day by day. A tree should be allowed to grow freely without encumbrances on its body. Recently one noticed that several trees cracked during gusty winds. This indicates that cells inside the

body of the tree had died and it could not bear even a moderate pressure. The authorities should immediately remove those signboards which are fixed or hung by nails on trees, and penalise the culprits.

Al Masrur Khan
Dhaka

Dismal comments

The Prime Minister's comments about the possibility of the President's resignation have hurt us deeply. The real attitude of the PM towards the President has been unveiled. We have not forgotten that it was Sheikh Hasina who first alleged that the 1991 general election held under the first caretaker government in Bangladesh headed by President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed was unfair.

Subsequently in the 1996 general elections when her party came to power she nominated him president to strengthen her party's reliability and transparency through his name and fame and honesty. The PM succeeded. The image of President Shahabuddin increased her party's goodwill. But it could hardly make her please. Perhaps, she wanted further more from him. Does she want the President's resignation so that she could replace him with someone loyal to her party in order to make her dream of reigning for another term come true?

We urge the President not to pay heed to provocative comments for the greater good of your country. This country needs him for another free and fair elections.

Asraf Zahir
University of 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.

Whither civic sense?



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

When the Bangladesh Mukti Juddha Sangsad Kendrio Council elections were held in Osmany Memorial Auditorium yesterday, the entire road in front of the Secretariat became out of bounds for public traffic! Our photographer got this shot of Abdul Ghani Road at mid-day. The road was totally blocked for the entire day. We wonder what kind of an example this would set for others? Is a civic sense totally absent from our national psyche?

Keep the library open

The central library of Jahangirnagar University is the centre of study for students. But the library often remains closed on some trifling pretext or another. For example, during a hartal, the library is closed and students are left to fend for themselves. For those students for whom the library is a part and parcel of their regular study, this causes a lot of suffering. It is especially difficult for those students who face imminent examinations, or who have assignments or thesis papers that require library work. On behalf of the students of JU, I would like to draw the attention of the authorities to this serious impediment to the pursuit of academic work and urge them to keep the central library open for all the days duly required by the government.

Quazi Saleh Mustanzir
Jahangirnagar University
Savar, Dhaka

Fatwa issue

A Pandora's box on the fatwa issue has been opened; and that too just before the general elections. It is a risky and sensitive game because it involves faith. Both parties to the dispute are aware of the escalating and confrontational nature of the issue, and must have preplanned the strategy. A time might come when AL will be left stranded politically, and all other political parties will combine to form the all-party opposition alliance a pattern seen in 1990 and earlier.

The Bengali psyche has to be analysed: Subjugation for 200 years under British and Hindu domination;

Muslim-Moghul rule in Bengal was extremely limited, and Dhaka knew only the influence of the Nawab family and the Hindu feudal classes. Today the city has a mixed population, which is changing with each generation or every decade. Under the circumstances, it is extremely difficult for any regime to tackle the social problems of the day.

The politicisation of ADAB has done serious damage to the NGO movement. How will different regimes handle the issue? Secularism has become a big issue. Can the Bangalee swallow it? Not likely, because to the impoverished masses it does not appeal it is for the intellectuals and those economically secure.

ETV's interview of the communist party chief on Sunday January 4 was welcomed by my family and others who are not interested in high flown political analyses. The people are looking for honest people during the next movement. The established set of gurus have to go. AL is facing a tough time with the secular issue and while the latter cannot be preserved in a water tight compartment, the media has to point out that secular principles can co-exist with Muslims. Otherwise how could the Mughals rule millions of Hindus for 700 years? Religion cannot be separated from politics but tolerance and goodwill are possible so that no citizen of any community has any fear or insecurity in following his faith and culture in an atmosphere of empathy.

Abd
Dhaka