

EC's priorities

Put your house in order

WITH elections imminent, it is disconcerting that the Election Commission, itself, is running at half its normal manpower strength. Precisely 1,104 positions, out of a total 2,371, at all levels, remain unfilled. The explanation proffered by the EC is that the Establishment Ministry has not approved recruitment rules that were submitted for its approval three months ago. We would like to know why such a fundamental prerequisite of employment namely, rules of recruitment, are in the process of being 'approved' at this late stage? And what is the ministry's explanation for withholding approval of this critical internal requirement? The ministry must expedite the matter so that the EC can appropriately and quickly fill all vacant positions within its organisation. The EC's priority must be to put its own house in order, forthwith.

Already, the EC has been found napping on the foremost task of printing the voters' list. The EC is fully aware that scrutiny, updating and approval of the available list would require a reasonable amount of time. But since October last year, when printing was scheduled to have been completed, the EC has been extending the deadline repeatedly. Last month it stated that the printed list would be available by mid-March. Now, with elections literally months away, the EC has disclosed that only 50 per cent of the list has been printed so far.

We have stated this before and we do so again. The EC must find solutions to this problem immediately. It may be a question of accelerating existing printing jobs or seeking alternative printers. Whatever the requirements, they must be met. The preparation of a satisfactory voters' list cannot be compromised because of inordinate delays and last-minute pressures brought on by time constraints. We urge the EC to take a firm grip on, and swiftly implement, its job priorities both within the organisation and with commissioned vendors, immediately.

Local Govt system

An unfinished agenda

ONCE again the World Bank has brought up something that normally should have been a matter of our own finding. The Bank in an evaluation report on governance and decentralisation covering 19 countries reportedly criticised Bangladesh's political leadership and bureaucracy for the country's failure to evolve any effective local government system. The members of parliament have looked at it as a fetter on their customary function to distribute resources allocated by the centre to their constituencies. The 'favours' distributed among contractors, youth community members and other influential elements have proved handy for the MPs or local political leadership to nurture their vote banks with. Besides, in our view, the NGO work having to some extent altered the mahajan (moneylender) based rural power structure there has been a two-some knock-on effect: just as the demand for effective devolution of powers has increased so has the threat perception acquired a new dimension with the traditionally powerful lot in the rural areas. Like the MPs bureaucracy have 'resisted' plans for devolution of real powers on to elected local government functionaries.

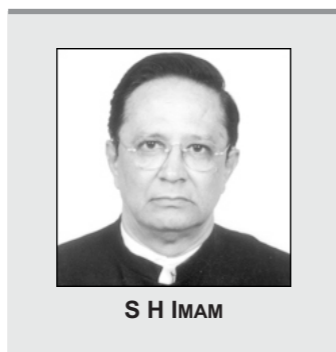
However formidable the opposition of the MPs and the bureaucracy maybe to an effective local self-government system there cannot be any second opinion about the stupendous need for the same. A democratic system at the top is but an anachronism minus the existence and functioning of duly elected self-governing tiers. The latter are our best guarantee for an effective association of popular will with the processes of governance and development.

The ruling party is chiefly to blame for the local self-government fiasco. They set up a commission early in the day for local government reform. The recommendations for a four-tier system were churned out a long time ago but nothing came of it in any tangible fashion. While laws and rules were changed to defer long overdue local polls one time too many, political vagaries have been also instrumental in giving them a roller coaster ride.

The major political parties in the country will have to get their act together on this vital question of building the right kind of institutions for the enrichment and sustenance of democratic polity. After the national elections the unfinished agenda should be taken up by the would-be ruling and opposition parties for its speedy implementation.

Political clouds lifting

Time to think and act positively



S H IMAM

ELECTION is a distinct possibility now. It is music to the ear after all the grating sound of agitational and confrontational politics thus far. This is sea-change from the bleak outlook of only the other day marked by a widely shared premonition for disaster. One might even call it a paradigm shift.

In a sense though, the superlatives are over-wrought, rather unearned, because the situation need not have been made so murky in the first place. The AL rule had reached the end of its tenure, and extremely well laid-out procedures were available to the Opposition to test its strength through the ballot box without taking any torrid detour they made.

The moral of the story should not be lost on us. The political parties have established a set pattern of behaviour in terms of conflict resolution, something they have to come unstuck from. There is always a tacit last-minute compromise as a face-saver contrived by the major contenders of power themselves, and notably unhelped by any third party, that clinches a deal after a long-drawn-out battle of egos. It may as well be said that good sense

ultimately prevails. As for the 1996 polls it is the unacceptable outcome of the farcical February 15 election which put the very legitimacy of the then BNP government on the line that was eventually utilised to pass the 13th Amendment to the Constitution by virtue of which we now have the caretaker government to conduct national elections as something of a model in the democratic world.

In the present scenario, a compromise has been unobtrusively

of the sake of the polls?

With the four-party opposition alliance wanting election in May and the ruling party saying it is prepared for polls on or before June 12, the time-frame seems all but set. How many days intervene between May 31 and June 12 to bother us about a fixed date just now?

Where do we go from here? The 13th Amendment to the Constitution lays down the sequence of steps. First of all, the Prime Minister

national elections.

As required by the Constitution, former Chief Justice Latifur Rahman, the last CJ to retire, seems set to head the caretaker administration. He has indicated his willingness to serve the country in that capacity, so that we do not have to turn to the next-in-line, namely the CJ who had retired before Justice Latifur Rahman, to fill the post. Also, there is no mental block about retired CJ Justice Latifur Rahman among the political circles

Striking similarities exist between the electoral issues figuring now and those that were actually handled by the caretaker government between March and June, 1996. In the run-up to that election nearly five years ago, the opposition AL had demanded that the caretaker government purge the administration of so-called 'BNP men' to ensure success of the arms recovery drive without which they felt free and fair polls were not possible.

Interestingly, the opposition AL demanded that the defence ministry which had been placed under the President of the Republic in terms of the 13th amendment be brought under the Chief Adviser of the caretaker government, which did not materialise though. A flavour of the time is caught in the then chief adviser's appeal to the political parties that they 'stop raising controversy on various issues.'

We should not raise a whirlwind of controversies before the Chief Adviser of the next caretaker government so that he is left to concentrate on the elections. His job is to carry out day to day affairs of the state and not to make any policy decisions. But, of course, he is definitely mandated to do all that is needed to ensure the conduct of free and fair polls.

Now that the elections are round the corner and the political parties are preparing for these, public expectations are pretty straightforward. They want the quality of political debate to vastly improve from the listless cacophony of cracked gramophone records, and their stock of old ammunition thus exhausted, the political parties have to break some new ground by way of agenda formulation.

Essentially, the major political parties need to seek mandate of the people on a specific set of issues encompassing distributive justice, basic needs, economic reform, foreign assistance, legal reform, law reform and the like, so that they can put their precepts into practice with confidence when in power. Mere generalised cataloguing of resolutions in the party manifesto without any mention of concrete plans to implement them may not go down very well with the electorate this time.

JUST ANOTHER VIEW

Now that the elections are round the corner and the political parties are preparing for these, public expectations are pretty straightforward. They want the quality of political debate to vastly improve from the listless cacophony of cracked gramophone records, and their stock of old ammunition thus exhausted, the political parties have to break some new ground by way of agenda formulation.

made on the principle of relinquishment of charge by the ruling party before the end of its tenure. While the opposition's sensibility is being respected on the agitational flair, the government can draw satisfaction from having very nearly completed its term of office. Neither the opposition nor the ruling party has, therefore, emerged a clear-cut winner from the situation. They have a level-playing field as they approach the elections. Whatever the sound and fury, it is the overwhelming attraction and irresistible appeal of elections that political parties are beholden to in the ultimate analysis. When that seems to be the final resounding outcome of the slugging matches why must the political parties take a circuitous and dangerous route to the precipice before hanging their gloves for

advises the President to dissolve parliament whereupon a caretaker government is formed within a fortnight of the parliament's termination. The caretaker administration has to hold the election within 90 days of the dissolution of parliament.

The Chief Election Commissioner declares the election timetable accordingly, albeit in consultation with the political parties. Going by the precedent of 1996 elections, the CEC announced the election schedules on April 27, 45 days ahead of the polls held on June 12. The date for filing nomination was fixed on May 12 and that of withdrawal of candidature on May 18.

Almost date for date, it seems, the same pattern of schedules might be repeated in the 2001

as far as we can tell, which should make his job easy for a start, if and when he enters upon the office of the Chief Adviser to the caretaker government.

Furthermore, on the important question of acceptability of the incumbent Chief Election Commissioner MA Syed the opposition seems to have withdrawn their previous reservations about him which is doubtlessly an inspiring development. One might recall here the resignation of Justice Sadeque as the CEC in 1996 under pressure from the political parties. The Magura by-election debacle proved to be his undoing. The opposition, in the present context, however, is likely to be insistent on the removal of Election Commissioner Shafiqur Rahman of the 'Janata Mancha' fame for self-evident reasons.

Then there was that news about BNP voicing protests against what they called 'massive transfers of DCs, SPs and TNOs' within two months into the caretaker administration. The then Chief Adviser of the caretaker government sought cooperation of the political parties in carrying out what proved to be a successful arms recovery drive which was to be also underpinned by a timely haul-up of the criminal elements or potential trouble-makers. Revision of the voters' list was demanded and made possible apparently to the satisfaction of all parties by opening it to new entries up to a cut-off point. A 27-point code of conduct was formulated and put into operation by the Election Commission through the consent of all political parties.

Sustainable development: Humanity's biggest challenge in the new century

Full text of address delivered by Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, at the International Conference Centre, Dhaka, on 14 March

It is a great honour for me to join you today. My wife, my team and I have received a very warm welcome, and we thank you all for making us feel very much at home.

It is especially moving to be here during the weeks when Bangladeshis observe two of their most cherished national holidays: Shahid Dibosh, the Day of Martyrs on 21 February, which UNESCO has also designated as the International Mother Language Day in recognition of the role played by Bangladesh on language issues; and, of course, your country's independence day on 26 March. Allow me to add my voice to those offering best wishes for these important commemorations.

This may be my first visit to Bangladesh as Secretary-General, but Bangladesh has always loomed large in my awareness, and in that of the United Nations. Bangladeshis are among the world's most willing and able peacekeepers. Your NGOs and entrepreneurs are known throughout the world for their innovative schemes to fight poverty and empower women. The UN-Bangladesh partnership is strong, ready for the challenges of a new century.

Sadly, today there is another reason why Bangladesh figures prominently on the world stage: it is expected to suffer, more than almost any other place on earth, the devastating impact of climate change.

The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change which includes some brilliant scientists from Bangladesh has just released its latest forecast. The Panel's portrait of a warming world makes for chilling reading. It warns of adverse consequences such as the melting of glaciers and polar ice caps, leading to rising sea levels. It predicts more extreme droughts, floods and storms, and significant changes in the functioning of critical ecological systems such as coral reefs and forests. Warmer and wetter conditions would increase the spread of infectious diseases such as malaria and yellow fever. And the inundation of low-lying islands and coastal areas could lead to the displacement of hundreds of millions of people.

Among those coastal areas is, of course, the beautiful and fertile river delta of Bangladesh the largest

delta in the world which is home to millions of people and to a wealth of biodiversity, and which is already under great stress from human activities. The climate Panel's report says that sea-level rise could cause the disappearance of vast swaths of this region, and along with them species such as the famed Bengal tiger. It suggests that crop production and aquaculture would be threatened, and with them the livelihood and food security of many of the delta's inhabitants. And it points out that the cyclones and monsoons that already bring such damage to the area could become even more frequent and intense.

Climate change brings us face to face with an uncomfortable fact about development as we know it: its unsustainability. In the industrialised countries, and in those parts of the developing world that are fast following in their tracks, the prevailing model of economic development is wasteful, short-sighted and hazardous for humans and the natural environment alike.

Unsustainable practices are woven deeply into the fabric of modern life. The burning of fossil fuels produces dangerous greenhouse gas emissions yet still accounts for 80 per cent of the world's energy supply. Almost 70 per cent of our oceans have been over-fished or fully exploited. Freshwater consumption is out-pacing the rate of population growth. World population will increase most in countries that already contain the largest number of hungry people, and the most stressed farmlands. Billions of dollars in subsidies perpetuate practices in farming, transport and energy use that make it harder for the environment to provide the life-sustaining services on which we depend.

Sustainability is in everybody's interest. One of two jobs worldwide in agriculture, forestry and fisheries depends directly on the sustainability of ecosystems. But it is the developing countries that will suffer most if the world as a whole fails to achieve sustainable development.

Bangladesh, for its part, has taken steps to address threats such

as air pollution and the contamination of ground water by arsenic. United Nations agencies are doing their best to help. But such efforts will not be easy. The poverty that afflicts Bangladesh and other developing countries simultaneously degrades the environment and inhibits their ability to protect it. Developing countries are further hampered by trade barriers, debt burdens and declining aid.

One thing we have learned over the years is that doom-and-gloom scenarios are not enough to inspire people and governments to act. The Rio Earth Summit in 1992 did indeed sound an alarm. But it also set out a positive vision of a sustainable future, as well as a detailed road-map Agenda 21 for integrating environment and development. Legally binding conventions on climate change and biodiversity were also adopted in Rio, adding to a previous treaty to protect the ozone layer. A treaty on desertification was subsequently added to the arsenal. Despite these achievements, we have gone on with business as usual in far too many ways. Moreover, some damaging myths have taken hold.

It is said that we face a choice between economic growth and conservation, when in fact growth cannot be sustained without conservation.

It is said that it will be too costly to make the necessary changes, when in fact cost-effective technologies and policies are available.

And it is said that developing countries should focus on development, saving the so-called luxury of environmental protection for later, when in fact the environment provides many of the precious resources and capital that societies need today to develop and sustain themselves.

But it is not enough to say that sustainable development can be achieved; we must make it happen with new technologies, with energetic North-South cooperation, and with smart policies that create incentives and send the right signals to business and industry. One key sector in which this effort is needed is that of energy, which lies

at the heart of both development and global warming.

Two billion people lack access to electricity. Two billion people not all the same two billion cook with traditional fuels which contribute not only greenhouse gases to the atmosphere, but also poisons to the household, which cause illness and several million premature deaths each year.

The picture is even grimmer when you consider that several hundred million women and girls spend hours each day foraging for, and carrying, fuel and water. This back-breaking work is a tremendous burden in itself; it is also a tragic loss of time that could be spent on more productive pursuits, such as educating, earning or simply caring for the health and well-being of one's family.

Helping these men, women and children to lift themselves out of poverty will necessarily require a bigger supply of energy. Our challenge is to do so in a way that does not pollute the environment or contribute to global warming. The answer lies in energy efficiency, renewable energy resources, and cleaner use of fossil fuels. Hundreds of technologies and practices are available now, and many more are being developed, that promise a brighter, less damaging energy future.

This is not a dream scenario, based on discoveries we hope will be made later this century, it is a "win-win" situation for today, based on the views of energy experts, including the World Energy Assessment, a report produced jointly by the United Nations and the World Energy Council, an organization representing major energy suppliers. The technical, financial and economic obstacles, which have denied many of the world's peoples access to the benefits of a high level of energy services and a better environment, are all rapidly disappearing.

What we do in the field of energy, we can and must do in other realms as well. Ultimately, we are talking about a new ethic of global stewardship. And this, of course, is also a political challenge.

of the new century.

Third, developing countries should prepare projects for the "clean development mechanism," a key element of the Kyoto Protocol that will allow industrialised countries to gain emissions credits by making climate-friendly investments in the developing world.

Finally, developing countries should consider their own contributions to the global climate strategy. Developing countries will be doing themselves no favours if they, too, pursue a path of industrialisation which before long proves unsustainable.

Sustainable development will not happen of its own accord. We need a break with the harmful practices of the past and a break in the political stalemate that prevails on too many environmental issues.

There is some good news to report. Public awareness has grown. Civil society is engaged. The private sector is beginning to seize the opportunities of green technology. Partnerships are being formed. The global machinery of policy-making and governance is moving in the right direction. We have the human and material resources to place our economies on more sustainable footing.

But the bottom line is that the challenges of sustainability are overwhelming our responses. In the past, we could afford a long gestation period before undertaking major environmental policy initiatives. Today the time for a well-planned transition to a sustainable system is running out. We may be moving in the right direction, but we are moving much too slowly. We are failing in our responsibility to future generations, and even to the present one.

The great majority of Bangladesh live in rural areas, on the front-lines of resource management, natural disaster and environmental awareness. For them the relationship between human beings and the natural world is a daily reality, not an abstract idea. Our biggest challenge in this new century is to take an idea that seems abstract sustainable development and turn it, too, into a daily reality for all the world's people.

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

The Daily Star and the Prime Minister

I would like to congratulate the Daily Star for publishing a critique headlined "The Daily Star and the Prime Minister" (February 25). The writer unsparingly accuses the daily for espousing a policy of appeasement towards the ruling party. Notably, this gesture of the DS to publish an accusatory critique that targets the very newspaper is the watershed in our print journalism perse.

Such dissenting pieces with diverse perspectives would increase readers' interest in the newspaper, help citizens to critically evaluate the performance of their current leaders (as Omar Karim did), and encourage open and vigorous discussion to enhance the quality of democratic governance beyond its stereotypical image. This novel gesture is no mean feat when viewed against our hidebound newspaper culture which is resistant to any change.

Without being judgmental about the validity or otherwise of the writer's views, his piece should arguably pass as fair comment, since it represents what he genuinely feels and is not moved by malice. And The Daily Star has rightly responded to it. But what comes out luminously from this

interface is the democracy in the fourth estate, a phenomenon that went by default so long.

It sends a message, however obliquely to the political parties who, draped with the flag of democracy, continue to stymie in-party democracy and, as a result, deny emergence of a new crop of leaders for the nation, not to speak bring a negative impact on the promotion of a democratic culture in our national life.

I am, however, not persuaded by the argument that "... from our hugely rising circulation and credibility, we think our readers find our position credible and trustworthy." Like Omar Karim there are many clients of this esteemed daily who more than often do not agree with the views expressed through its editorials or commentaries, but yet they find it worthwhile to buy it for its total accomplishment as a daily newspaper.

The DS deserves a big hand for presenting a vibrant English daily to the discriminating clientele who put a high premium on quality newspaper. Let more and more innovative ideas continue to grace the DS in days ahead.

Syed Badrul Haque
Dhaka

The Daily Star and

PHOTORIAL

We want more of the same!

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.



For once, the Dhaka City Corporation did its job. By mounting a blitzkrieg on garbage during the Eid ul Adha holidays, it proved that city dumps, like this bin in Bijoy Nagar, do not have to overflow and spread their foul stench all over the place. But will this be a short-lived respite? We urge the DCC to keep going. Give us this level of service all year round!

STAR PHOTO: SK. ENAMUL HAQ

the Prime Minister

Omar Karim's article is really excellent. As a regular reader, the "middle of the road game" of The Daily Star in general and of Mr Mahfuz Anam in particular has not escaped my attention. The problem with Mr Anam is on any occasion or event of national importance he talks too much and too fast. Interestingly, our Prime Minister is exactly what Mr Mahfuz Anam is. She talks and she likes to talk. She talks too much.

What is wrong in a newsman asking the Prime Minister a question regarding the possible resignation of the president? He has every right to ask the question. "I do not know. You go to the president and ask him the question" could have been the PM's answer. But she could not assess the importance of the question and its possible implications.

So, true to her usual style she blamed the questioner for her failure to give a statesman-like response.

However The Daily Star, amus-

ingly, disowned the question. The Daily Star, which by its own word is committed to the right to know, instead of defending the right to ask the question virtually begged pardon of the Prime Minister not to misunderstand it, like a college-going romantic lover. The truth must be said, boldly and specifically.

The point is that Sheikh Hasina is not a prime minister in quality and personality. She is a boring woman. This should be the language of the editorial of a newspaper which should estimate her mood and mentality. Finally, the 'Editors Response' seemed to be too fast and not-convincing.

Nazmur Rahman.
Manikganj

III

Mr Omar Karim has exposed the partisan role of The Daily Star in favour of the Awami league in no uncertain terms. The rejoinder by the editor was far from convincing. It very cleverly skirted the specific complaints raised by the writer and dabbled in generalities.

Ashraf Islam Khan
Dhaka