

## Chittagong International Airport

We don't want a repeat of Dhaka

WITH the official inauguration of M A Hannan International Airport at Chittagong yesterday, the formalities are over. It is time to realise the hopes that have been pinned on this Taka 540 crore project. The government is urged not to repeat the bitter experience of Zia International Airport in terms of management nightmares.

The country's premier gateway to the world was built on great promise and still holds immense potential to become a regional hub, but before reaching this level it must at least achieve bare minimum standards of order, security and efficiency required of an international airport. ZIA has become a major embarrassment for this country. It is poorly managed, inefficient, over-crowded, prone to exploitative practices, confusing and daunting to travellers. The critical problem faced by ZIA, raised by us time and again, has been the absence of a transparent and powerful central authority that would be ultimately responsible for it. Unfortunately, the government has allowed matters to slide for so long, that ZIA now requires a massive reform package to cure its ills.

We urge the government to heed these pitfalls and adopt a focused plan for Chittagong right from the start. The airport has been built with impressive, modern facilities which must be properly managed and maintained. The adoption of an 'open skies' policy must be backed up by consistently satisfactory services in order to establish a reputation that would attract increasing international traffic. As at ZIA, the key to success lies in establishing an empowered and accountable airport management authority which must be given a clear mandate and equipped with a definite chain of command.

With its strategic location at a sea-port, Chittagong offers a useful entry point to the country, especially for business travellers and a convenient transit stop between key destinations in the region. The potential to develop Chittagong itself, as well as to strengthen economic growth in the country, is immense. Let us not squander this opportunity. Success at our second international airport must not be derailed for any reason.

## Tehelka scandal rocks BJP

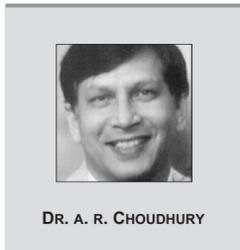
Vital role of independent media

THE tehelka revelations in India are turning established norms upside down. A little-known, reputedly maverick dot.com company called tehelka.com has managed to mount an incredible 'sting' operation implicating senior officials in a ring of bribery and corruption, largely connected to defence procurements. The impact of a few video shots showing officials accepting cash bribes has been so powerful that it has shaken the ruling BJP coalition. The defence minister George Fernandes has resigned, coalition partner Mamta Banerjee of the Trinamool Congress has pulled out of the government, the defence ministry and the armed forces have been placed under a cloud of suspicion and proceedings in both houses of the Indian parliament have been disrupted in an unmitigated uproar for a week.

We hope that the crisis will be resolved in the best interests of the country. The BJP has been hanging on, but with more evidence being aired on satellite television, it is anybody's guess what the ultimate outcome will be. Already, there are shaky signals in financial circles and, according to *The Times of India*, a cost of nearly \$9 million to taxpayers since the scandal broke.

Whatever the outcome, the tehelka revelations have reinforced the immense strength and responsibilities that investigative journalism must shoulder. They have also shown the unmatched power that is wielded by electronic media. Tehelka has raised the Indian nation's awareness level, made the government accountable for its actions, and shown that it is not impossible to get to the heart of a matter, provided there is dedication and patience. It has exemplified the strong, independent and democratic characteristics of the media in India. Journalism is duty-bound to continually forge new frontiers of independence, because without institutions such as the media to stand up to government excess, democracy would become a hollow term.

# Foot and Mouth disease and our response



DR. A. R. CHOUDHURY

BRITAIN is at war. Foot and mouth disease, among the most feared viruses in the world, has devastated the English countryside, brought rural tourism to a standstill and threatened to ravage the country's agriculture. The disease began its invasion in northern Britain less than a month ago, announcing itself in the blistered mouths of about three dozen animals brought to a slaughter house in London. The disease harmless to humans but devastating to their rural economies, political structures and international reputations has since spread north to Scotland, west to Ireland, and south to France. Latest reports have also confirmed the presence of the virus in the Netherlands and Belgium.

By last count, the virus had been confirmed in several hundred animals. In order to prevent its

spread, authorities in these countries are slaughtering both infected as well as disease-free animals including, cattle, sheep, goat, etc. More than 200,000 animals had already been slaughtered, and the number is expected to increase to as many as one million over the next several weeks. And while the British tourism minister has announced that the countryside is not closed for business, the truth of the matter is that the English countryside, much of it, is not open for business, either. The message being circulated by the English Tourism Council come and visit the countryside, but mind where you go hasn't helped either. In fact, it has confused many tourists. The cities are fine, but areas of the countryside are closed one day and opened the next, and there's no telling what will be opened or closed, in the days, even weeks, to come.

The tourism industry in Britain, just weeks from the start of its busiest season, is said to be losing

## CONNECTING THE DOTS

If the disease were to enter Bangladesh anywhere, it would surely spread quickly and would be devastating not just to our farming economy, but our entire economy since we rely so heavily on agriculture. So it wouldn't hurt to be extra cautious in this regard.

more than 200 million pounds a week. Other countries in the region are also reporting a downward trend in tourism. By looking at the response of the British and other European governments, it seems that a biological apartheid is in place. And though its purpose is to separate the sick from the well, its effect has been to divide the nation, putting members of the same communities at cross-purposes.

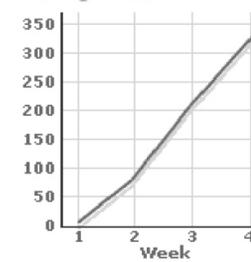
For instance, in Britain it has pitted farmers with healthy animal stock against farmers with ill. Farming-dependent businesses against tourism-dependent businesses. Business groups against environmental and animal-rights groups. The private sector against the government. Local governments, eager to limit the devastation, against the national government, eager to bring the virus to its knees in time to welcome tourists and hold national election in May. Schisms abound. Britain is indeed at war, with a disease and with itself. This is not the first outbreak of the foot-

and-mouth virus in Britain. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, foot-and-mouth disease was an endemic feature of the English countryside, though it had been all but eradicated by the turn of the century. It is also believed that Germany was developing a foot-and-mouth biological weapon to deploy against England during the final months of World War II. The project was abandoned for fear

that it would backfire should bombers equipped with the weapon get shot down before reaching Britain. The last outbreak on the British mainland, in 1967, was a catastrophe with about half a million animals destroyed. Many fear the current infection will surpass the 1960s epidemic.

The foot and mouth virus are distinguished by their ability to replicate quickly, invading cells and destroying them in a matter of hours. This virus is highly contagious. This disease is not a threat to humans. Nor is it usually fatal to animals, though those that come down with disease suffer horrible blisters in their mouths and around their hoofs. In time, they recover, but not before spreading the disease throughout the herd. Hence farmers have no choice but to destroy the sick animals immediately. And not the sick ones. The entire herd is slaughtered because any animal, even one not yet showing symptoms, could harbour the virus and continue its spread.

### Foot-and-mouth: At-a-glance



SOURCE: Maff, figs relate to UK

# For us the voters, nobody cares

COMMENTARY BY MAHFUZ ANAM

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

OBVIOUSLY the BNP chief wants an action replay of that event conveniently forgetting how severely she and her party criticised - and correctly so - that action as an act of politicisation of the bureaucracy which was dangerous for the functioning of any government. It was wrong when the AL did it, it remains wrong now when the BNP is calling for it. It is this type of political opportunism that makes our political parties so devoid of ethics, principles and morality. It is our considered view that the opposition's ultimatum and the accompanying threat of mass disruption in the form of first a 48 hour hartal to be followed by ones of longer spells cannot be supported and must be condemned.

Let us examine some of the relevant facts of the present crisis. We assume here that election in June is still a possibility since the PM has not categorically withdrawn it, though she has hinted at it.

1. The Opposition wants early election.

The Prime Minister has offered to hold one.

2. The opposition wants the election to be held by 30th May 2001.

The head of the government has declared that she is prepared for election by June 12, 2001. (A mere 12 days separates the positions of the two sides).

3. The opposition wants the government to resign by 30th March 2001.

Sheikh Hasina has declared that she is ready to resign anytime after 17th April. If we assume she will

resign on the 18th then a mere 18 days separates what the opposition wants and what the ruling party is offering. Now, can any one in his or her right mind expect us, the voters, to be persuaded to suffer 48 hours of hartal and the prospect of longer ones just because our opposition is too impatient to see the end of its rival's rule? Are we to acquiesce to regular disruption of our civic, educational and work life and accept the disobedience of our government servants for a difference of timetable between our political rivals whose maximum extent is 18 days?

Our answer is a big no. We think that the hatred between our political rivals and the unrealistic aspiration of the opposition is pushing the latter towards goals, which cannot bring any good to the people in whose name they do politics. We cannot see any rationale for the opposition's plan to subject us, the voters, to all the civic and political unrest that they are planning for which may probably include the loss of innocent lives and destruction of public property.

On the other hand we think there are many significant gaps in the offer of the ruling party. There are several areas in which the government appears to have plans that are fundamentally unacceptable to us as voters. These are the areas where the opposition's energies should be focused. We think the Prime Minister should be more precise about the day when she plans to resign. Anytime "after the 17th April" is not good enough. She must be more precise.

We think the ruling party's recent demand that it will resign and hand over power to a caretaker government only after a general agree-

ment with the opposition on issues like election date, formation of the caretaker, etc. are not acceptable. By trying to impose these conditions the ruling party has unnecessarily complicated an already confrontational political situation. These demands have raised further the suspicion of the opposition that the ruling party is trying to 'arrange' things towards its favour. As for the election dates, it is only the CEC who is empowered to fix it, which has to be within 90 days of the dissolution of the parliament. He may wish to, and usually does, consult with the leading political parties. The present government has nothing to do with fixing the dates of the next election, and its attempts to do so is not only unwise and beyond its power, but also unconstitutional.

Here we would like to raise the point that the PM's offer to resign after the 17th of April and having the election by the 12th of June leaves only 55 days (assuming she resigns on the 18th of April) for the EC to hold the election. Whereas it has 90 days to complete the task. It may be mentioned here that in '91 election was held after 83 days of formation of the caretaker government. In the case of '96 it was 72 days. This emphasis of election by 12th June has also caused the opposition to be suspicious of the ruling party's intentions. It appears that AL does not want to give sufficient time to EC to accomplish its task in a satisfactory manner. In our view, if the PM resigns on the 18th of April, then end June should be the ideal time for holding the election. In fact 29th or 30th June, being Friday or Saturday-both government holidays-could serve as the election day without further loss of any working

day.

As for the formation of the caretaker government it is again the prerogative of the Chief Advisor and the present government or the opposition has very little to do with it. The Chief Advisor may consult all sides but the decision is his alone. To simplify matter and allay the fear of both sides as who should or should not be in it, we suggest that the Chief Advisor may consider forming his cabinet from the members of the two previous caretaker cabinets. There are a total 27 'veterans' of our unique political experiment (nowhere in the world is there a Constitutional provision to form caretaker governments to form elections) 17 from the Shahabuddin cabinet and 10 from Habibur Rahman's.

Deep suspicion of both sides about each other and unclear knowledge about the Constitution as to what can and cannot be done is also complicating our political scene and fuelling confrontation between the two opposing groups. For example there is a deep suspicion in Awami League's mind that once it resigns BNP will start making all sorts of demands on the caretaker government which will make it virtually impossible to hold the election. This will force the EC to postpone the election by another 90 days resulting in all sorts of new complications and political uncertainty. It is because of these suspicions of possible dilly dallying by BNP that AL leadership wants that all possible demands of the opposition should be brought out now and resolved before it relinquishes power. It is especially concerned about fixing a definite date of the election.

BNP and the opposition, on the

other hand, feel that they cannot expect any fair deal from a government which has used all the levers of the government to 'fix' the coming election in its favour. Whatever demands it has it will make only to the caretaker government which is the only body that can solve them. Its main intention is to give as much time as is possible to the caretaker government to enable it to recover the huge quantity of illegal arms that is now spread all over the countryside and to 'cleanse' the administration, the police and other related government institutions of the 'political elements' that the present ruling party has deliberately placed to influence the elections. This, for BNP and the opposition, is absolutely vital for holding a free and fair election. They are not averse to the EC taking more than 90 days if need be to accomplish these tasks before holding the elections. Little else is of as much importance to them as the neutrality of administration conducting the elections. This is why they are so anxious to see the AL government resign.

On the AL side, it is here that the root of suspicion lies. It feels that BNP will not agree to an election date before it is satisfied that the above tasks have been accomplished to its satisfaction. This will jeopardise the holding of the election. Hence the AL's insistence for a fixed date without which it is reluctant to resign.

Both the AL's and the BNP's positions can become simpler if there is a greater understanding of the Constitution. First, there is no chance of the election being postponed other than an Act of God or War. An Act of God will be an Act of God and only God can foresee it, and hopefully no war will disrupt our

A large number of countries around the world has already stepped up efforts to prevent the disease from coming to their respective countries. Several Asian countries including Singapore and Malaysia have taken precautionary steps in this regard. Given the increasing number of Bangladeshis travelling to the European nations that are infected with dreaded disease, our government should issue stringent guidelines for our citizens who are travelling to those countries to be careful about their clothing and be wary of visiting farms or zoos. Moreover, visitors from these countries should also follow strict codes that can be enforced by the Customs at the airport.

Although the disease does not pose a health threat to humans, people can carry the disease on their shoes, in discarded food or on clothing. That means anyone who recently visited areas where the disease has been confirmed could have picked up the ailment without getting near an infected animal. If the disease were to enter Bangladesh anywhere, it would surely spread quickly and would be devastating not just to our farming economy, but our entire economy since we rely so heavily on agriculture. So it wouldn't hurt to be extra cautious in this regard.

election. So AL should rest assured that once it resigns the 90-day clock starts ticking and no amount of BNP dilly-dallying can hold the polls back. BNP and the opposition alliance can and definitely will place many demands before the Election Commission and the caretaker government, which it has every right to do. In fact more complaints the better because the caretaker government will have a chance to meet them and make the polls satisfactory to all sides. In case of unreasonable demands the caretaker government will refuse to comply. The BNP and its allies can make all the objections that it wants but the EC and the caretaker will and must go ahead with the elections. No party can desist from following the ruling of the EC and the neutral caretaker government.

The point we want to make here is that neither party can push back the election which must be held within 90 days and all the talks about uncertainty under the caretaker government is based on unclear understanding of our Constitution.

We conclude by expressing our deep regret at the developments of the last few days. We want to emphasise that the PM's decision on holding polls should be based on the best interest of democracy and the people of Bangladesh and NOT on what the opposition says, does or demands. We see no reason for this 'tit-for-tat' game and attempts to reduce our politics into a tussle between the "Go before I throw you out" and "Topple me if you can" gangs. Please give us, the voters, the respect that we deserve.

(Tomorrow's commentary on: What can the President do now?)

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

## Degrees and awards

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been awarded honorary degrees and certificates of recognition by many academic institutions and reputable organisations around the world. I do not begrudge her for being so excessively honoured. On the contrary, most of us should justifiably be proud of her achievement and recognition by world bodies. But then, one would like to draw a line somewhere. When she accepts an honorary degree from the Dhaka University, an institution of which she is technically the head, we feel constrained and bewildered. Recently she was conferred the honorary D.Sc. degree by the B.S.M.R. Agricultural University at Gazipur. This excessive public display does not speak well of the members of the Senate and the learned Vice Chancellors of the University of Dhaka and the Agricultural University.

DR. Mominul Hoque

When a Prime Minister of one of the poorest countries in the world attains a record number of awards and honorary degrees, is it not time for the Guinness Book of Records to update its records? The Prime Minister got a doctorate degree from her own country's university along with a Nobel laureate in a special convocation. Now at the age of her tenure she has received another degree for her contribution

in agricultural science.

Could there be any other Prime Minister who might match these credentials to claim an entry in the Guinness Book of Records for achieving a record number of degrees?

AR Choudhury  
Uttara, Dhaka

## The election game

The Prime Minister wants to resign on or around April 17 and hold general elections by June 12. It would seem she has suddenly become a picture of understanding, compromise and sagacity. But there is more to it than meets the eye. It seems that the ruling party wants a tiny gap between resignation and elections because the process of putting foot soldiers in all key positions to influence the election outcome is just about complete. It is up to the Prime Minister to resign whenever she desires before July 12 but it is not her calling to fix the election date. That is the purview of the Caretaker Government and the Election Commission. Sensible people ought to be able to see through this and do their level best to make the elections free and fair. But then the main opposition party generally lacks in prudent and judicious people. It may be that such persons exist in the BNP but are not in the limelight or forefront and those who are, may well be devoid of good sense and political acumen.

Omar Karim  
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.

### Live wires threaten common people



STAR PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Telephone cables and electric wires hang dangerously throughout the entire Purbasha area as if embracing the houses and shops. Some lie scattered on the roads making it difficult as well as dangerous for passers by. Serious accidents may occur at any time. DESA must stop ignoring the safety of citizens and take notice of such a life-threatening hazard.

## End gun control?

We have seen political activists roaming around the streets in broad day light with arms, and in political processions or in the campus of educational institutes. Considering the rampant display of firearms all over the country, it seems that the availability of guns is not a problem at all. All it probably takes to own a gun to have enough money.

This easy availability of guns is an insult to the law we have for gun control namely, *The Arms Act*. This colonial era legislation is supposed to regulate the use of guns. We have Special Courts to try offences under this and other related statutes and we have our "ever-ready" law enforcement agencies to ensure compliance to the regulation. The easy availability of guns tells us that law enforcement agencies have failed to curb the supply of guns. Under these circumstances, what is the point of having gun control laws? Since our state is not capable of ensuring the safety and security of its citizens, it can at least allow its citizens to protect themselves. I suggest that gun control is deregulated so people can defend themselves.

Abu Mohammad  
Melbourne, Australia

## Death at Mina

Newspaper reports confirmed 35 deaths at Mina, Saudi Arabia, in a

stampede during the recent Hajj. In 1998, at the same place, 119 Hajjis had died. Such tragic incidents have become quite frequent and only the number of death seems to vary. It is about time the Saudi authorities did something positive to prevent such incidents. One way will be to cut down the total number of Hajjis. Instead of 2 million, the number could be reduced to one million.. In addition, the Saudi authority should do more to ensure safe movement of the Hajjis at every place. As the host country, it is their moral duty to do so. We do not want a repetition of the tragic incidents.

Khondkar Habib  
South Bishil, Mirpur

## Why added titles?

Is it necessary to refer to the President as President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed? Can't we just refer to him as President Shahabuddin? While he may have been a justice, he is now the President and this title should be sufficient. Besides, how many other President Shahabuddins are there that he could be confused with someone else?

And it is always necessary to refer to someone as Barrister so-and-so? Why do we have to make up titles like "educationist" or "literaturist"? Isn't it suffice to refer to someone as "Mr"?

M. M. Haque  
Gulshan, Dhaka