

Vanishing morality in politics

The despicable game with Ershad

WE know that there is no permanent friend or enemy in politics. But we never knew that there is nothing called values, morality, principles or ethical norms in politics. We also did not know that history could be so tailor made, facts could change so expeditiously and yesterday's 'night' could be called today's 'day'. This is the despicable game that is being played with Ershad in our politics.

For nine years both Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina told the people that Ershad was nothing but a curse to the country. We believed them and brought Ershad down. Then we saw the first shameful turn around. In order to bring Khaleda down after she won the '91 election the AL chief teamed up with the same person that she spent nine years in bringing down. Then came the second opportunistic somersault. The very man BNP put into jail and kept there for five years and one they suspected to be involved in Ziaur Rahman's murder, they now teamed up with to dislodge the AL from power. The final act is being played out now. Both the two "votaries of democracy, rule of law" and repository of every virtue under the sun, are now desperately trying to ingratiate themselves with the very man who was once known as the "most corrupt politician" that Bangladesh ever saw.

Where we feel most sad is the way the whole legal system has been exploited by the present government to protect or do favour to Ershad. Now it appears that even the sacred chair of the Speaker is being used to do favour to him. The Speaker's remarks to Roushan Ershad concerning her husband's parliamentary membership have raised serious questions in the mind of legal experts who see no ambiguity about his loss of seat.

It is true that we have restored democracy and have been able to stabilise it over the last decade. It is also true that we have held two internationally credible elections in succession and are about to hold the third. We are extremely proud of this achievement. But at the same time it is also true that our political values, morality, ethics and norms have suffered enormously, negatively affecting public faith in our politics and politicians. We are ashamed of the rot we see in our politics and warn our politicians that they are eroding the very ground of public confidence on which democracy and decent politics must be based.

Trapped gas pockets in city

Take action before disaster strikes

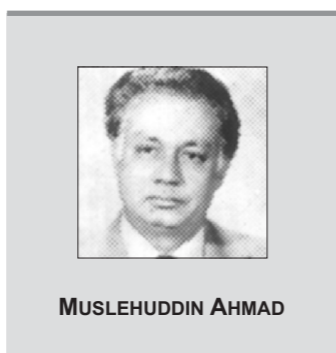
ADangerous build-up of trapped underground gases in the capital has been evident for some time, but city authorities have pushed the question of safety in waste disposal to the bottom of their list of priorities. The death of four people in a 12-foot sewerage manhole this week has added to the list of fatalities and mishaps that have been occurring under similar circumstances in the city. Workers and residents alike have been complaining of the simmering hazards that exist in underground waste channels and even water reservoirs have manifested noxious gases bursting out from pockets below ground level.

There are complaints that funds for the upkeep of sewerage pipes are insufficient, but this is only part of the problem. Dhaka's sewerage system has become unmanageable because of the growth of new and unauthorised connections for industrial, human and other wastes, congestion caused by non-biodegradable substances such as polythene bags and a failed maintenance system.

We would like to know exactly what the authorities are doing to deal with this problem? Are they waiting for the trapped poisonous gases to melt away miraculously? If so, they are deluding themselves and exposing this city to an uncalculated risk. Trapped gases could lead to explosions at any time. We need a massive effort to rectify mistakes and establish safety norms. The system must be cleaned up, ventilated and maintained.

Another flaw also has to be rectified. Several major urban blocks have mushroomed on former dumping sites, aiding the entrapment of gases below. Measures must be taken to ventilate these former rubbish pits, monitor new dumping grounds and ensure that waste is sorted before being dumped. Polythene bags and other non-biodegradable items must be phased out of usage. The authorities cannot afford to ignore the waste disposal issue any longer.

Sharon's first visit to Washington



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

PRESIDENT Bush appeared quite enthusiastic in welcoming Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to the White House. The President said, "It's my honor to welcome the Prime Minister of our close friend and ally to the Oval Office". He even went to the extent of cutting a joke saying, "He (Sharon) got 66 per cent of the votes. He did a little better at the polls than I did, if you know what I mean". One feels that it was not necessary for the President of the United States to remind the world that he won the election by only a couple of dozens of votes in Florida. However, if the President had meant that Sharon was the popularly elected leader under democracy, then many should have serious problem with that kind of democracy.

Nothing worthwhile seems to have come out of Bush-Sharon meeting. Sharon repeatedly talked of "no surprises". Apparently both agreed not to surprise each other. But Sharon as usual came out with whatever was in his mind. He asked President Bush "not to be surprised" if he hits back the Palestinian terror-

ists. He has told the President that he would try to keep the roads of the territories open but "don't be surprised, we will punish the terrorists and those who send them". He only did not warn President Bush that he should not be surprised if he (Sharon) creates another "Sabra and Shatilla" episode in the present Palestinian territories. However, US Defence Secretary reportedly told Sharon that 'Israel is a small country. It should not make big mistake'. One would have preferred to hear those words from the President himself.

such vital matters.

In any case, the present Administration's hands off policy in the M-E peace is fairly clear. President Bush said - the US "will not try to force peace, that we will facilitate peace, and we will work with those responsible for peace." If the US wants to work for peace, it has to talk to President Arafat as he is the one from the Palestinian side responsible for peace.

Ariel Sharon cannot "surprise" the US anyway as it watches world's political developments and particu-

larly M-E developments like a world watchman. The US must not allow free hand to Sharon to deal with Palestinians in his "Sabra-Shatilla" way. It is not simply an issue of 'cooling down the nerve', effective steps would be necessary to stop violence and initiate peace-talk. The US must be fully aware that Sharon and peace do not go together. The US may not like to 'force peace' upon the parties but because of Sharon who has a long history of anti-peace and anti-Palestinian behaviour, the US has to remain actively engaged in the peace process along with the UN and particularly the European Union.

Peace has not been an important item in Sharon's agenda. Sharon is committed to providing security to

the Israelis this was his election commitment, but he cannot deliver it if he continues his aggressive policies towards the Palestinians. Arafat alone cannot end the violence. The causes are to be removed, but unfortunately Sharon has been opposed to all the measures that could cool down the already hot environment. Sharon in his talks with the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, opposed the idea of UN observer force. Sharon's argument is that Palestinian terrorists would take

trying to put up massive street demonstrations against "change in the government in Israel...". Strategy has indeed received good response from the Palestinian civilian population including students, academicians and particularly women. Unfortunately such a demonstration which was peaceful was attacked by the Israeli forces the other days on the plea that the demonstration was too close to the Israeli security forces. This exposed the Israeli forces' highhandedness against a peaceful demonstration in the Palestinian territories. One can only hope that Mitchell Commission which is now working in the area would take serious note of it.

On return from Washington, Sharon told the reporters at Ben-Gurion Airport that he had sent a message to Chairman Arafat saying "that if he does not rein in the terror activities of his force, 17 personal guard, Israel will take matters into its own hands". It was a blunt message that blamed Arafat personally for the ongoing attacks. He said, "Unfortunately, the element disrupting security and also blocking the way to diplomatic agreement is the Chairman of the Palestinian Authority, Yasser Arafat". This clearly reflects the status of relationship between Sharon and Arafat two leaders who are expected to engage in the peace negotiations. Peace is certainly not anywhere near Palestinian-Israeli horizon. It is all violence killings and counter-killings. The same is unfortunately expected to continue as long as Sharon remains in charge. If it is too long, Israelis may have to regret their election verdict.

SPOTLIGHT ON MIDDLE EAST

Peace is certainly not anywhere near Palestinian-Israeli horizon. It is all violence killings and counter-killings. The same is unfortunately expected to continue as long as Sharon remains in charge. If it is too long, Israelis may have to regret their election verdict.

One, however, understands that Defence Secretary's warning does reflect the serious concern of the U.S. over Israel's present position in the Arab World.

On the issue of whether President Bush should invite Arafat to the White House for talks, Sharon Said, "I told Bush that I don't want to intervene in the decision (as if he could do that). But I did say that it could be interpreted as a sign that terrorism pays". President Bush simply said, "I have not made up my plans on who I am going to meet with yet" One would tend to read President Bush's reply as if he (President) himself was not sure whether he should invite President Arafat to the White House. Sharon is not the right person to advise President Bush on

shelter behind UN observer forces and continue their attacks against Israeli people. The argument does not seem to be convincing at all as this suggests that UN forces will be only silent spectators. They may not have authority to fight the alleged attackers but they can always work to stop such attacks and can certainly expose the attackers. If these are only the Palestinians, then Israel could very well tell the world that it is not Israel which is at fault, the Palestinians are. But as it seems, Sharon is afraid, UN forces would indeed expose Israel's atrocities against the Palestinian population.

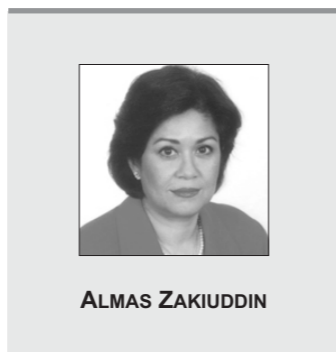
The settlement issue did not come up for discussion with President Bush. Sharon probably felt that he might not get support from Presi-

dent Bush as President's father former President Bush was opposed to Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. Sharon's rabid ideas on settlement are well known. He raised the most sensitive settlement issue of Har Homa with the UN Secretary General. Palestinians know why Har Homa settlements are being constructed but Sharon made it quite clear. As *Jerusalem Post* reported, he (Sharon) said the idea behind this is to 'prevent the merging of Bethlehem with East Jerusalem neighbourhoods, some-

thing that would make it impossible to ever draw a border there. Thus Sharon is creating the physical barrier between Palestinian town of Bethlehem and East Jerusalem the part of the city that Palestinians want to make the capital of future Palestinian State. This would undoubtedly ignite further riots.

There is, however, some reduction in violence in terms of attacks against Israeli forces and civilians because of relative easing of closure of the Palestinian areas. Apparently, Palestinians are, in the meantime, trying to change their tactics of political agitation. They apparently do not want to allow the stone-throwing kids into the streets any more. And also instead of sporadic attacks on civilians, they are now

The emperor's new clothes



ALMAS ZAKIUDDIN

and a hard place, are undermined because time has caught up with them.

But by far and large, dishonesty and deception are allowed to go unpunished. More so in this part of the world than in others.

What goes round, comes round. Thus goes a saying that a western friend of mine often throws at me by way of consolation. I am never satisfied. My frustration and anger are inexplicable to this friend who comes from an environment in

so we were told.

Finally, just one month later, we woke up to discover that the hostages had been released. Bravo, said the world and its mother. Soon, pictures appeared of the three men, consultants from Britain and Denmark, arriving at Dhaka by helicopter, looking virtually unscathed as they waved to waiting reporters.

Naturally, everyone was delighted that the crisis had passed. But everyone also wanted to know what had happened. A vital question

tags had been 'rescued' as a result of an army operation involving an exchange of fire with the kidnapers and heaven alone knows how many insurgents, that began in the early hours and ended as the sun rose over the Hill Tracts. Interesting details, such as the claim that 100 rounds were fired by the army, were duly provided in this Bollywood version of the hostages' release.

With due respect to the armed forces and the civilian authorities, the second story was highly ques-

effectively demolished the Bollywood version. According to one of the hostages, who spoke directly to the reporter, soldiers did not go in with guns blazing. They appeared, somewhat unexpectedly at that, after the hostages had been abandoned. Yes, gun shots were heard but because the soldiers fired into the air, after they had 'rescued' the Europeans.

The fact that no one has reacted to the implications of these conflicting stories is astonishing. I have

powers of inviolability and which can invoke, at a moment's notice, a range of justifications in the name of national security? It is daunting, to say the least, to ask the civil and military authorities would they please explain exactly what went on there, inside the Hill Tracts?

But do you know what scares the bile out of me? Not just that no one has reacted, nor that one may have to bear the brunt of someone's wrath. What scares me silly is that people really believe that I ought not to even ask. That is the most difficult part of the situation.

Some people might recall a story told to children. I am not sure if it is one of the many Aesop's fables that one read as a child, but it now seems to me to be terribly appropriate for adults. The story is about an emperor who lived in a land of such incredible make believe that although he wore no clothes, no one had the courage to tell him the truth. Everyone in this domain had been so successfully indoctrinated into the system that no one had the remotest notion that anything was wrong. Or if they did, they did not have the courage to say so.

Until one day, everything changed. On this day, a little boy who happened to be visiting the domain from a neighbouring land, saw the emperor appear without any clothes in public. Everyone praised the emperor's new clothes. Except the foolish boy who had not been properly indoctrinated. Before anyone could stop him, the boy blurted out the truth. Why is the emperor not wearing anything, he cried out. The emperor was terribly ashamed. And everyone was astonished that they had heard the truth.

IF YOU ASK ME

But do you know what scares the bile out of me? Not only that no one has reacted, nor that I may have to bear the brunt of someone's powerful wrath. What scares me silly is that people really believe that I ought not to even ask. That is the most difficult part of the situation.

which articles such as this that I am writing would be considered quite confusing and nebulous. I often tell this friend of mine that an outsider can never fully comprehend the level to which deceit and deception have infiltrated the soul of this region to which I belong.

It has, you know. Examples abound, but let me give you a recent one. Remember the hostage drama in the Chittagong Hill Tracts? In mid February, three Europeans were kidnapped several miles outside Rangamati, allegedly by tribal insurgents unhappy with the Peace Accord. Four weeks went by as the government tried to negotiate, or so we were told, and the kidnapers eluded them and kept asking for an impossible ransom of Tk 9 crore, or

that they asked was how the hostages had been released. I don't know if you have noticed this or not, but to this day there are two versions of what happened.

Initially, it seemed like a fairy tale. The news wires sang out with an incredible story saying that the hostages had simply appeared out of the bush near an army camp. They had evidently been abandoned by their captors. I, myself, found this a little hard to swallow, but for the first few hours that morning, nothing else was offered as an alternative and so the fairy tale had to be believed.

But then came a news flash. Just a few hours after their release, an 'official' account was provided. According to this version, the hos-

tionable. There were a host of loose ends that nobody could tie up. The ransom, for instance. Had it been paid? To whom? If so, why did the army have to engage in a gun battle to 'rescue' the hostages? If not, why had it taken so long for the offensive to be mounted? And so on.

In the euphoria of the hostages' release, these questions seemed to be silly, perhaps even bad form. A senior official told me that the problem with journalists was that they were never happy with a happy ending. Why question something when it is over? The hostages are back, everyone is pleased, let it rest.

But a report by one of our intrepid reporters, that appeared on the front page on March 23, several days after the hostages were released,

voiced my concerns to friends and while some have laughed at me, others have warned me to keep quiet. Do you have a self-destruct button inside that silly little head of yours, said one mature individual when I asked him to comment on the matter.

Is there something wrong with my thinking, I wonder. What bothers me is that something so obvious and blatant has passed virtually unquestioned. After all, the truth must exist, somewhere. Either the hostage or someone else has not told us the truth.

I won't deny that it is a little daunting to bring up this topic. Who in their right mind would wish to tangle with a powerful force that is protected by who knows how many special

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

PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.

Fake smell



STAR PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

These shiny bottles look alluring and come very cheap. But buyers, beware! These are all counterfeit goods. Empty bottles that once contained the genuine product are collected by an underground manufacturing industry that fills them up with adulterated substances that may be hazardous to health. People should stop selling or discarding empty bottles intact. The authorities must put a halt to the counterfeit business.

Chittagong airport

It is a matter of pride for us that we now have a second international airport in the country. The M A Hannan International Airport in Chittagong has recently been completed and made operational. It has very modern facilities and technology. I am concerned about the upkeep of the airport. It would be a most unfortunate loss for this country if this international airport became as run down and disorganised as Zia International Airport in Dhaka. I wonder what steps the government is taking to make sure that Chittagong does not become another ZIA?

Concerned citizen
Chittagong

Hasina's candidature for UNSG position

I take strong exception to certain sweeping remarks of ranking officials in Dhaka in connection with the candidacy for UN Secretary General ("UNSG position: Dhaka brushes aside report on Hasina's candidature", March 25).

It is well within the purview of the Press Secretary to the Prime Minister to term the Associated Press (AP) news release mentioning Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina as one of the contenders for UN Secretary General as 'baseless'. However, his attempt to equate the coveted position of UN Secretary General with that of a Secretary in

Bangladesh and the smelling of 'malicious motive by vested quarters' behind the circulation of Sheikh Hasina's name clearly betrays the notion of a supposedly seasoned media man. The Press Secretary surely needs to know that uneducated remarks and archaic phrases are not befitting his position.

The AP news item, a copy of which its UN Bureau in New York has provided me with, at no time suggested Sheikh Hasina was running for the post of UN Secretary General. It only mentioned a few persons who in the UN circle are considered highly successful in their own right. Each of them is considered to have potential to head the world body. Sheikh Hasina's name came up with another head of state, President Kumaratunga of Sri Lanka. A separate news release by Reuters on March 22 mentioned former Foreign Ministers Domingo Siazon and Ali Alatas of the Philippines and Indonesia, respectively, along with Bangladesh and Singapore's permanent representatives to the UN. Our so-called ranking officials, however, wrongly inferred this bracketing of our Prime Minister with others as an affront! We expect our 'ranking officials' to be able to distinguish between speculation and fact. We expect them to be able to develop a little finesse.

Nayeem Jaffar
New York
Constitution of

Orthopaedics Society

I'm pleased to learn of the constitution of an Orthopaedics Society in the country. It will surely be helpful for disabled people like me. However, I am not clear about the objectives of the society and would like to suggest several steps which the society may consider. The society should establish a chemotherapy department. It should also ensure outdoor physiotherapy and occupational therapy for disabled patients. Including indoor and outdoor service will be real helpful for the disabled persons. This facility is absent in the country and it should be introduced by the society.

Dr. Lailun Nahar
Dhaka

Women in Bangladesh

It is really unfortunate that though the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition are women, the pathetic state of women remains unchanged in the country. They are prone to all sorts of crime like murder, rape, acid throwing and so on. Be it urban society or rural, women are deprived of their rights. They are not even safe in police custody, rather they are often violated by the law enforcers.

To bring a change in this bleak state we all have to come forward and take necessary steps to ensure the rights of women. The offenders should be tried and punished. We

must realise that women are also human beings and they should be treated equally. Will the situation ever improve?

Anindita Alam
New Eskaton, Dhaka

Our politicians

Our politicians are always paranoid about finding fault with other politicians. They always mix up party politics with the government and creates confusion and gives rise to political unrest. Before being elected to power, they offer the world to the voters but after clinging to power all they are concerned with is petty party politics. They resort to all sorts of political chaos like hartal not caring about the inconvenience of general people. Is this why they are elected to power? Shouldn't looking after people's welfare be their top priority?

Rina Sultana,
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Our woes

It doesn't seem that there is a government in the country to take care of our woes like pollution, traffic jams, copying in exams, increasing crimes and so on. Instead of taking care of these problems, all the government seems to be interested in is petty party politics. Is this why we have elected them to power?

Sarah
Dhaka