

DCs must maintain strict neutrality

We strongly endorse President's call

THESE are words of immense significance. President Shahabuddin Ahmad has reminded district and divisional commissioners that they must maintain "strict neutrality" while discharging their national duties. We strongly endorse this significant piece of advice.

The President's remarks have focused on a very basic issue, which is to ensure that the long arm of the government, extending as it does into the district and divisional levels, remains completely impartial and above reproach.

Unfortunately, the officers of the government, District and Divisional Commissioners included, have been increasingly encouraged by our political leaders to adopt a partisan posture. The Leader of the Opposition has openly called on civil servants to abandon their posts and join the movement to unseat the government through repeated hartals. The Prime Minister, on her part, while also addressing members of the district administration has called upon them not to allow hartals to hamper development work. This is nothing but a call to take a stand against the opposition alliance.

The negative inference of these political statements is obvious, but let us repeat them for the sake of emphasis. The district administration is a nucleus of state power. District Commissioners are pivotal instruments of governance and exert immense influence. As magistrates, they are responsible for upholding the law. As collectors they are the fiscal arm of government. Their modern role extends into development activities, which only adds to their scope of influence. At the end of the day, the district administration is empowered to take decisions that have far-reaching consequences on this nation.

The President's voice of neutrality therefore is of cardinal import. We urge the District and Divisional Commissioners to follow his guidance implicitly. They must never forget that they are officers of the state and not of any political party. Nor must they forget that their powers are sanctioned by the state which represents all the people, and not just one segment of it.

We urge each and every district and divisional commissioner to understand the immense responsibility on his or her shoulders. They must live up to the faith this nation and its President have placed in them. We tell them, very clearly, that upon their total neutrality rests not just the smooth functioning of government, but the continuing confidence of the people in the fundamental notion of democracy.

Accent on biotechnology

Tailor it to suit our needs

IS it realistic to expect our research scientists to make scientific and technological breakthrough? It certainly isn't. True, we have quite a few brilliant researchers in different branches of science and technology. However, they have not been, still are not, adequately sponsored to make groundbreaking achievements like deciphering the 'Book of Life', as human genome is widely known. For research scientists of a third world country such as ours, it's much too far-fetched a proposition to work on genomics, astrophysics or the like. The approach should be pragmatic. We need to focus more on reaping maximum benefit, as appropriate to us, out of the scientific and technological successes achieved in the developed world. In that direction, the first step should be to identify our pressing needs. We must say the minister of science and technology got it right when he accentuated development of biotechnology to be self-sufficient in food production.

We have succeeded to put a brake on the hitherto spiraling fertility rate. Still, the best scenario is that the population would plateau at around 180 million in 2025. The biggest challenge, therefore, is feeding the teeming millions. Given the disconcertingly decreasing arable land in our disposal, the task is indeed Herculean. The equation is simple: we need to produce as many times more as possible than before. Genetically modified seed varieties hold the answer all right; however, we need to be extremely cautious while using them. We all know about the predator seeds and the havoc these may wreak on the ecosystem.

The way out of this dilemma is application of biotechnology in our context. We will borrow technology from the accomplished nations but must tailor it to suit our purpose while not taking a toll on the ecology. Any plan on biotechnological development should have that as a guiding principle.

News: Expected and unexpected



DR. A. R. CHOUDHURY

LAST week, two events have captured headlines in newspapers around the world. While some may refer to one of these events as payback time, the other has raised genuine concern worldwide. The first is the capture of Milosevic in Belgrade which may be seen as a milestone in Serbia's transition from war and isolation to peace and international acceptance; and the second is the stand-off between the United States and China relating to the US surveillance aircraft that was forced to land in southern China.

The arrest of former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic promises to help bring justice to thousands of his many victims in Bosnia and Kosovo. As such, it will lessen the likelihood of further spasms of ethnic violence in the Balkans. But the cause of justice requires other steps by the government in Belgrade. The former dictator was indicted in 1999 by a UN war crimes tribunal in The Hague for atrocities committed by the Yugoslav army in Kosovo. But Milosevic is not expected to be extradited immediately to The Hague to face these charges, although all who respect human rights should wish for him to be sent there as soon as possible. Instead, he

is likely to stand trial in Belgrade for abuse of power corruption and other domestic crimes committed during his 13-year rule. For now, this once-mighty tyrant no longer lives in his tony villa in Belgrade, instead, he languishes behind bars in a Balkan jail. With Milosevic behind bars, the government of President Kostunica, which came to power in a relatively free election, should now give its authority to a hunt for other war-crimes suspects.

But it is for the United Nations tribunal in The Hague to call Milosevic to account for the war crimes of which he is accused. The ethnic cleansing of Bosnia and the campaign in Kosovo both of which included mass murder, torture, rape, the burning and looting of homes and businesses, and other atrocities are crimes against humanity that need to be fully aired before an international court. It was not easy for the Belgrade authorities

ing a historic wrong. It is a step they should be encouraged to take.

On the other side of the globe, tension between Washington and Beijing is mounting after a U.S. navy surveillance aircraft was forced to make an emergency landing in southern China. The stand-off between the two countries could scarcely have come at a more sensitive moment. In recent weeks, the impending sale of sophisticated U.S. military equipment to Taiwan,

where it landed in a Chinese military airfield. The pilot of the Chinese plane is listed as missing.

The Chinese have swarmed all over the state of the art U.S. aircraft and inspected the top-secret electronics gear it contained. Although the U.S. government have complained against it saying it violates international norms, they would have behaved the same if the roles were reversed.

The U.S. government has

Summer Olympics.

For the first time in his presidency, George Bush is facing a split among his most loyal supporters as rival factions push him in different directions over this incident. On one side are social conservatives, demanding that he adopt a hard line against China, a country that they love to hate. On the other side are wealthy Republican business interests and internationalists who don't want Bush to rock the boat any more than is necessary. Bush's foreign policy handlers see real opportunity as well as danger in this crisis. Although this is no Bay of Pigs, the stakes and the potential rewards are high for a president who won a controversial election and is still struggling to shed the doubts about his experience and legitimacy.

No doubt the new U.S. administration wants to show that it will be both tougher and more consistent with China than the previous administration. It talks about the new realism in U.S. foreign policy that has replaced the soft-centered internationalism of the Clinton era. But tough rhetoric would only help to raise the temperature. Heightened tension between Washington and Beijing would be to no one's advantage. Clearly much is at stake and it would be a grave mistake on either side to allow this incident to escalate and further sour the atmosphere. Non-hostile relations between the U.S. and China are essential for peace and stability in the Asian region. What is needed in this situation are cool heads to lay the foundations for a mature relationship between these two countries. A mature relationship is one that is not held hostage to isolated incidents or point-scoring propaganda.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

The extradition of Milosevic to The Hague would not compromise Yugoslavia's independence or constitute a surrender to NATO or the United Nations; on the contrary, it would promote national healing, bolster Yugoslavia's ties with its European neighbours, burnish its international image and foster its economic development... Heightened tension between Washington and Beijing would be to no one's advantage. Clearly much is at stake... Non-hostile relations between the U.S. and China are essential for peace and stability in the Asian region.

At the top of the list are Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic, former Bosnian Serb military and political leaders who remain at large.

Earlier this year, Kostunica's government replaced dozens of judges, public prosecutors and other judicial officials who had been installed by Milosevic and were thought to be loyal to him. Those changes improve the chances of a fair trial for Milosevic rather than a whitewash. It is for a Yugoslav court to determine whether, and how severely, to punish Milosevic for presiding over the dismemberment of his country; for triggering and losing four wars; for needlessly provoking a two-month NATO bombing campaign; for making his country an international pariah; for abuse of power; for embezzlement and for various other home-grown outrages.

to summon up the courage to detain Milosevic. But Serbia's need for economic aid gives the outside world a powerful lever in forcing the Kostunica government to extradite Milosevic. In fact, in response to the Kostunica government, several countries have already agreed to resume aid to the Kostunica government. This act of goodwill should serve to judge Kostunica to extradite the former Serb dictator. The extradition of Milosevic to The Hague would not compromise Yugoslavia's independence or constitute a surrender to NATO or the United Nations; on the contrary, it would promote national healing, bolster Yugoslavia's ties with its European neighbours, burnish its international image and foster its economic development. The people and government of Yugoslavia would be seen as taking a major step to right-

the deflection to the United States of a Chinese army officer, and the U.S. intention to sponsor a resolution in Geneva condemning Beijing's human rights record have all abraded the U.S.-China relationship. These cuts and scrapes came in the context of long-standing complaints lodged by both these countries about arms sales, trade, and environmental pollution.

Intruding U.S. spy planes and intercepting Chinese jets have been playing cat-and-mouse off China for years. Under these circumstances, an accident was hardly surprising. What caused the current crisis, it appears, was a Chinese fighter plane that flew too close to a U.S. navy surveillance plane, bumped it, then crashed into the South China Sea. The American patrol craft limped to Hainan Island, off the China coast,

expressed regret over the incident, which falls far short of Beijing's demands for an apology. An analysis of the incident would show that both governments are trying to find a way out of the standoff before more damage is done to relations between the two countries. The response, or lack thereof, from the respective governments also show the tug-of-war that is going on behind the scene in both Washington and Beijing.

China's balkiness may reflect internal disagreements within the government. The military, institutionally defiant and resentful of challenge, probably wants a tough line towards the Americans; while the political leadership may not want a drawn-out controversy that would imperil trade relations or China's chances to host the 2008

Maoist rebels step up attacks in Nepal



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THIRTY policemen were killed and more than 20 injured when Maoist guerrillas threw bombs on a police party on April 2 in western Nepal, dealing one of the most severe blows to the law enforcing agencies by the radical leftists. The attack in the Rukum district is one of the most daring by the ultras who have kept the government virtually on the toes at least in some areas of the country. The Himalayan country is rocked by a more than four-year-old insurgency by the Maoists who want to overthrow the ceremonial monarchy and the parliamentary system of democracy in the country while asking to change the social and economic structures. They have gained strength in recent times and conflict with the security forces has claimed more than 1600 lives so far. Efforts are continuing for a settlement of the problem through discussions but so far no tangible headway could be made. The country's opposition party has also lent

its support towards a negotiated settlement of the insurgency which has become a major problem for the government. Main opposition Nepal's Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist (NCP-UML) have offered to mediate between the government and the rebels on the issue for resolution of the conflict. The government earlier favourably responded to certain demands of the Maoists like release of some of their leaders from jails. The govern-

ment says the ball is now in the court of the rebels for a meaningful dialogue to end the insurgency. But this development notwithstanding, no meaningful progress has taken place towards a dialogue between the two sides in recent times. This situation casts a shadow on the peaceful atmosphere in this otherwise relatively calm south Asian country, which also houses the secretariat of the seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). It also draws big number of tourists from across the world for the charm and beauty of the Himalayas and the mount Everest. Tourism is a major industry for the country but the Maoist insurgency is affecting the

industry as the 'war' is intense in some parts of Nepal and a sense of insecurity persists because of the stalking insurgents who make no bones about the fact that "destruction for the sake of construction" is one of their avowed principles. Since Nepal is close to communist giant China geographically, it is possible that the Maoists draw psychological strength from there. The Maoists, identifying themselves as Nepal Communist Party (Mao-

ism) and was joining mainstream regular politics. He later issued a statement to say that he was tortured to give earlier views and that the government had forced him to make the statement. The rebels, who model themselves after Peru's "Shining Path" guerrillas and describe themselves as "Lal Shena", then announced that they would not talk to the present government. The government then accused the rebels of using the proposed talks as

had expressed his willingness to broker the peace talks between the government and the rebels.

The Maoist insurgents began their insurgency in 1996 and they also want, among other objectives, to dismantle the feudal structure that remains in-practice in parts of the country. Two sides were in touch on the problem for a dialogue but without any progress. Any future talks needs both sides giving some concessions to confront the security forces. Innocent people often become victims of their operations and this causes public apathy and anger. As such, they are aware of this situation, and possibly cannot afford to turn a total blind eye to efforts for peace if there existed scope for accommodation of some of their demands' also as a face-saving formula. On the other hand, the insurgency is a serious problem for the government which obviously will want to see an end to this. The government is tough with rebels but seems not in a position to crush or suppress them. But the government has to put up a brave face.

The government is embroiled in a crisis over the opposition demand for resignation. The Maoists, in a bid to put pressure on the government to release their men from prison and consider the ultras as a force to reckon with, have stepped up their violence. They caused a series of explosions in recent days in and around capital Kathmandu. One bomb went off near the house of former inspector general of police A. K. Kharel. Another device exploded in the cowshed of Nepali Congress lawmaker Lekhnath Nupane in Bhaktapur, 16 km from the capital.

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MATTERS AROUND US

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The political instability in the country is another reason for violent activities by the Maoists, who say they are hell-bent in carrying out their campaign. But they are also at times in disarray due to internal dissension, lack of means to sustain themselves and necessary weapons

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.

Fooling with fuel



THIS PHOTORIAL HAS BEEN SENT BY AZIZ AMIRUL FROM UTTARA. WE WOULD LIKE MORE CONTRIBUTIONS FROM OUR READERS. PLEASE SEND US YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS!

Small-time traders buy fuel in makeshift containers from petrol pumps that have sprung up recently on the outskirts of the city. The traders sell the fuel at cheaper prices to lorries and buses. The chance of selling spurious fuel is high. The authorities must regulate fuel supply to ensure safety and protect the environment.

Hartal for whom?

It is really frustrating to learn that the Opposition has again called a 72-hour hartal. How can a poor country like Bangladesh afford hartal on three consecutive days? Do the politicians realise how they are crippling the country's economy? They are not hurting the ruling party, instead it is the country and the people that are being hurt.

Soon the next general elections are going to be held. Why can't the opposition political parties wait that long? What is their rush? The politicians should look around the world. How many opposition political parties in other countries resort to such violent tactics?

I hope good sense will prevail upon our leaders, and they will refrain from such destructive attitudes.

Neelima Hassan  
Toronto, Canada

Power not priority

It is strange to see our Prime Minister engaged in various constructive programmes but in the dark about frequent load-shedding and the immense sufferings of people.

Recently the Prime Minister gave a directive to ensure the supply of electricity without any interruption, but like the past, her directive has gone with the wind. It has gone because there has been no proliferation of generation of power with the demand of electricity growing rapidly as each day has passed. Barely a month has passed since summer has set in, but load-shedding has begun with a vengeance, to the intolerable woes of the people. Apart from living amenities and productive services which are being badly affected by load-shedding, the student community, especially the examinees have been put to unbearable odds. Even the hospital emergency services have come to an abrupt stop as supply of electricity stops without any notice. Five years are a pretty long time for a government to address the pressing needs of the people, but it is an irony that the Prime Minister is leaving us in a worse off condition on the power front, to cite only one example.

People would be happier if the Prime Minister were seen opening installations of power generation plants to mitigate the power crisis. That was the priority, but it was not pursued in right earnest.

AH Dewan  
Dhaka

The four-party alliance led by the BNP are calling meaningless hartals one after another. Why are they resorting to such political unrest? The answer is simple, to upset the government. But don't they realise the main victims of hartal are rickshawpullers, tempo-drivers and people of all walks of life not the ruling party?

In the month of May two major examinations ISC and the O and A Levels are scheduled to take place. I request the opposition leaders not to declare any hartal in that month. Students are the future generation of the country and their education should be kept above all political considerations.

Moinul-Alam  
Eskaton Garden, Dhaka

Disaster has struck

This is in reference to the news item "Criminal silence for three years" (April 5). I am astonished that the government has concealed the news of arsenic contamination in Chapainawabganj municipality for three years. Are we waiting for a disaster to strike? But the disaster has already struck. As per GoB information, arsenic contamination has been found in 59 of 61 districts, and unofficial records indicate the two districts have also since fallen in the contaminated list. According to the GoB supported British Geological Survey report of 1999, conservative figures estimate as many as 24 million people are drinking arsenic contaminated water, with another 80 or more million at risk.

Without rapid action, arsenic will not only be a major development issue for Bangladesh, in years to come it may become the only issue of development, exacting staggering costs for mitigation, water supply, healthcare, lost productivity, and human suffering.

It is high time the government took necessary steps in this regard.

Lubna Rashid  
Dhaka

Ban the banners

To make the slogan 'Keep Dhaka City Clean and Green', meaningful, serious efforts should be made. To deal with this issue the authorities should take notice of many problems among which the banner problem is an important one.

Dhaka has almost become a city of banners. Banners are everywhere. Be it in the city parks, road islands,

pavements, across the roads, in front of educational institutions, in residential areas and commercial districts. Nobody appears to be concerned about the nuisance they pose. These old, tattered, outdated, discoloured banners and festoons give the entire city a dirty look. They often obliterate the address as well as the beauty of a building. Sometimes they pose a hindrance to normal movement of traffic. There appear to be no rules and regulations for proper display of these banners.

The city fathers are not concerned about this nuisance. But isn't it their responsibility to beautify the city?

Naima Ali  
Dhaka

The national flag

After thirty long years, it was heartening to see the map of Bangladesh imprinted in golden colour on the T-shirts worn by the valiant freedom fighters, in their massive congregation on March 31 at Suhrawardy Uddyan. Against the background of green and red, the map of Bangladesh in gold came out very sharp, attractive and meaningful.

Can't we have the map of Bangladesh back again on the national flag? That is the way it was when the brave Bangladeshi people rallied under the flag to fight the Pakistani Army, leading to the liberation of the Bengali nation.

I call upon the authorities concerned to put the map of Bangladesh back on the national flag.

Khondkar Habib  
South Bishil, Mirpur