

Avoid political hype Incident too serious for it

There seems to be a pattern here. Every time there is an explosion, killing and maiming of people, the ruling party leaders, including senior ministers, go on a propaganda overdrive. Early this year when the twin blasts in the city, one at the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) rally at the Paltan Maidan and the other at the Bangabandhu Avenue, left seven people killed and many others hurt, some senior ministers simply let speculations and accusations fly around. The major opposition party was not spared either. In the midst of the all those insinuations and speculations, inquiry into the incident simply lost way. Till date, no substantive progress has been made in identifying the perpetrators or the masterminds.

Likewise, four days on since the powerful blast at the Ramna Batamul on Pahela Baishakh left nine people killed and at least 20 injured, we've so far had a lot of rhetoric and finger-pointing, but little progress in investigations to report home about, far less any unassailable insight gained into the heinous incident.

Are we to see investigation lose way in the face of irresponsible behaviour this time, too? We hope not. By this latest act of cowardice and treachery the perpetrators have tried to strike at the very roots of our culture and at the very foundation on which we stand as a nation. The men behind the front-men will have to be tracked down, arrested, put in the dock, and handed out exemplary punishment, so that no one dares commit similar crimes in the future. Every time we fail to ferret out the culprits and take stern measures against them, they and their ilk get a fresh lease of life and so does bomb manufacturing proliferate.

We do not expect the mystery to be solved and the culprits handcuffed overnight but there has to be a clear-cut direction to the probe from the start. However, we get the feeling that the investigators have so far proceeded along presumed lines requiring to fine-tune as well as widen the scope of their work to get to the bottom of it. Professional indifference the spot was not cordoned off immediately after the blast and some valuable clues may have been lost has been a sort of impediment. Let there be a special inquiry into the incident as the politicians, ruling and opposition alike, refrain from political overkill so as to help the investigation reach its objective.

Stop selling off our forests PM must go the whole mile

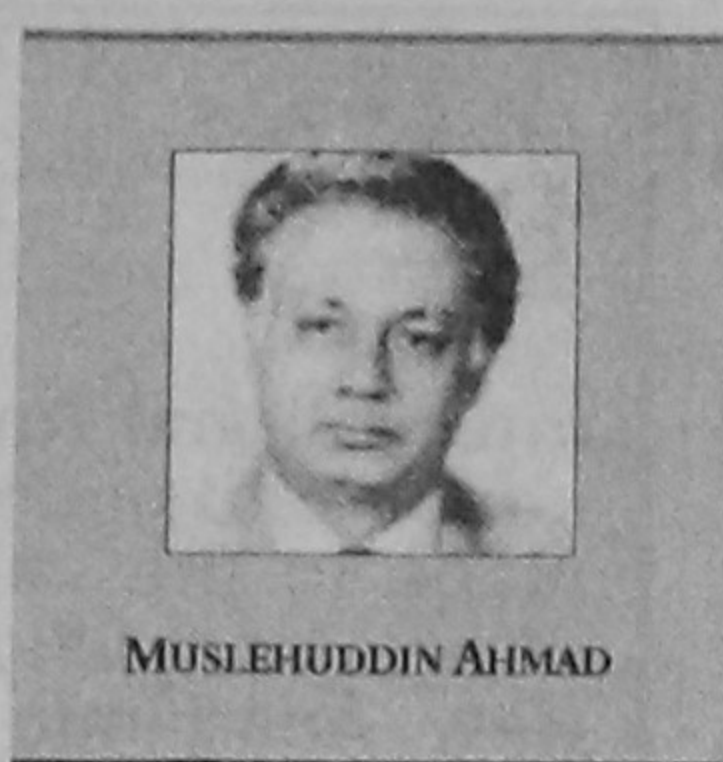
The Prime Minister has turned down a proposal by the Ministry of Forests and Environment to sanction the blanket cutting down of 'sick' trees of various types in the Sundarbans. There have been reports of indiscriminate depletion of tree life in the mangrove forests of the Sundarbans by poachers operating on the pretext of cutting down 'dead' trees, mostly under the protection of the Forest Department. The Ministry's request, if sanctioned, would have given legal cover and greater scope to illegal activities. Obviously, the Prime Minister had her doubts about the proposal and is to be commended for saying no.

But why, at the same time, has the cabinet apparently given the Ministry the authority to cut down 'dead' trees, at its discretion? What this means is that now the Ministry can fell trees, sick or otherwise, as long as it does so piece by piece, and not under a blanket sanction. It can also justify similar schemes, such as one already in the making, to sell off, piecemeal, 'mature' trees in the Hill Tracts including Rangamati, southern Chittagong and Cox's Bazar.

Unfortunately, these illegal activities are merely the tip of the iceberg. Reports of indiscriminate and illegal depletion of all our natural forests have been mounting, implicating the Ministry of Forests and Environment. It is public knowledge that there have been many shadowy deals and underhand arrangements, including the transfer of a senior civil servant out of the Ministry, allegedly because of his non-cooperation in a proposed high-stake illegal deal which, incidentally, has been recently revived.

We applaud the Prime Minister's decision to say 'no' to the Ministry's proposal, but we do not approve of the half-measure it has turned out to be. Essentially, she has a sense of where things are going wrong. She must now go the whole mile with it or see the government thrown into disrepute on an issue that is public knowledge.

Mini-war replaces peace process



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

ALL political developments including war and peace anywhere in the world are heavily dependent on who is or are in charge of the affairs. If Hitler had not been in charge of Germany, World War II would not have probably taken place. Ariel Sharon is in charge of Israel now as he has replaced Ehud Barak. Undoubtedly, something unfortunate. All the countries in the area are wary of him and his programme in terms of dealing with the Arabs. However, George Bush, a conservative, has become the President of USA and the world expects him to use his influence to calm Sharon down.

In any case, one may, for a moment, look back and see the developments in the area of peace negotiations under President Clinton when Barak was still in charge in Israel. There was even expectation of a final deal with the establishment of the Palestinian State. Very intense negotiations were in force with the direct participation of a personality like President Clinton. Undoubtedly M-E peace was his personal commitment, but

his participation reflected the US commitment to the Middle East peace and it was absolutely necessary as America is the protector of Israel which is the most important and permanent ally of the US in the Mid-East.

Once the superpower gives total and unequivocal support to a country's security, that country becomes a mini superpower with the strength drawn from its protector. Indeed, Israel is in itself already a super-

power politician as the President and Israel got a rabid politician who knows no bounds when it comes to dealing with the Palestinians. Surprisingly, both Israeli and Palestinian sides have practically the same people who cooperated so openly and worked so much to find a reasonable solution, but now are mad at each other and seeking blood at every step.

So far as the US is concerned, the new Administration seems to have

dwindled since the outbreak of the intifada. Apparently President Bush feels convinced that the US has to be more involved. He said after his meeting with King Abdullah, "We are working hard to convince the parties to stop the violence. His Majesty and I talked about how best that all countries, peaceful countries, in the region can discourage violent activities."

As a result of this, Secretary Colin Powell has been reportedly having

tinian security Force 17 establishments and bulldozed them indiscriminately. Two Palestinians' deaths have already been confirmed. Israel said, *Jerusalem Post* reports, that Arafat's Force 17 was responsible for the mortar and machine gun attacks on the Jewish settlements. The attacks on the settlements have all along been by Palestinians who have been agitating against settlements. This does not mean that this attack was done

the attitude of a Cabinet Minister of Israel where Ariel Sharon is the Prime Minister, then there is very little hope of any peace under such a government.

However, under the pressure of European Union some actions have been initiated. The US and Russia also have called upon both parties to end violence and resume peace talks. Some security meetings between two parties took place despite the tank shells and bulldozer actions against Palestinians. But unfortunately no tangible progress has been made. Israelis are insisting on ending violence but they themselves are not taking any positive actions in terms of lifting the blockade, withdrawal of army tanks and carriers from the sensitive points, transfer of tax revenue to the Palestinians, stopping of new settlements etc. Thus the fight continues.

The Arab countries must sink their differences and come forward to put up a joint front to support the peace process. Egypt and Jordan are already doing their best, but other important countries having good and meaningful relations with the US should insist on the US Administration to continue to play the same type of active role that previous Administration played; otherwise, there is no chance of ending the present violence. Israel must stop its tank-bulldozer actions and also stop building its new settlements. Security meetings must continue and work should also be undertaken to start the peace process. Once they start talking to each other, tension might be reduced and this is what is needed to curb the violence.

SPOTLIGHT ON MIDDLE EAST

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power in the area because of its possession of nuclear weapons and also of a formidable military strength all with the assistance of the US. Thus the US becomes morally responsible to see that the country it is protecting militarily and diplomatically behaves reasonably well in the area. And this is another reason why President Clinton invested his last couple of months in the peace process. He would have succeeded if Barak had not acted foolishly in terms of dealing with his domestic politics and Arafat had not wasted time in giving his decisions on some of the issues under negotiations. Of course, Clinton also had only limited days in hand.

Things changed so dramatically with the change of hands in the US and also in Israel. The US got a con-

servative politician as the President and Israel got a rabid politician who knows no bounds when it comes to dealing with the Palestinians. Surprisingly, both Israeli and Palestinian sides have practically the same people who cooperated so openly and worked so much to find a reasonable solution, but now are mad at each other and seeking blood at every step. So far as the US is concerned, the new Administration seems to have

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Interpreting Greek

IKRAM SEHGAL, writes from Karachi

As we go the final stretch into the next Federal Budget the economic indicators are not good, certainly not for want of trying on the part of the government. A whole range of factors beyond the control of our rulers have taken its toll on the economic situation, making it from bad to worse, with only a very faint glimmer that things will improve. Moreover, while revenue collection may have shown improvement, what was needed was a dramatic rise.

Electricity has registered a price increase, another hike is definitely on the cards pre-budget. And though to their credit, the government has made a token decrease in fuel prices, the bad news from OPEC is that they intend to decrease production to keep oil prices at between US\$ 22 and 27 per barrel, triggering an upward revision in the near future, definitely again pre-budget. And post-budget we all know what happens, every Federal Finance Minister in recent memory has been forced to resort to what is termed as "mini-budgets" to cover the widening revenue deficits.

The major dynamo of any economy, a vibrant consumer-hungry middle class has had the stuffing knocked out of it by spiralling prices. So much of the population has moved below the poverty line in the past few years that while the middle class has not become extinct yet, they are definitely an endangered species. No wonder, our national savings are at an abysmal 13 per cent, it is the middle class that fueled the consumer economy and then put away something besides for a rainy day. Given that any developing country has to be nearer the 22 per cent savings rate to keep an even keel, we are forced to borrow money from external sources to meet this

gap viz (1) to repay our debts, particularly retiring the more-expensive ones and (2) to bridge the existing adverse budgeting gap. Since we are looking for an inexpensive credit, in return IMF and World Bank demand their pound of flesh. Technocrats can give solace to the world financial institutions but only by ignoring the impoverished millions. With widespread rains in the Punjab, NWFP and the mountains, the much-needed water increased the moisture level of the wheat crop in the irrigated areas when it was badly needed just before harvesting, but in many rain-fed areas the wheat crop has been badly affected. The rains did feed the two main reservoirs of

nationalized commercial banks (NCBs) as well as the private banks continue to generally perform well, a holdover of one of the bright spots of the Mian Nawaz Sharif regime.

Though, prices of consumer items and commodities have not yet gone past the fail-safe point of being within the reach of the common man, the market shelves are well stocked, unfortunately only a significant minority continues to have unrestricted buying power. This economic imbalance along with growing unemployment could well lead to social upheaval. This regime has arrested the rapid economic decline but done nothing spectacular.

word should be good. Army men are notoriously susceptible to glib-talking specialists with an impressive command of statistics, most having no relevance whatsoever to ground reality. While they are dangerous, given PR capabilities they become lethal. When they throw in difficult economic terms, things become difficult. At the best of times and even under political governments the bureaucrats staffing the Ministries remain out of control of anybody because they speak financial language not easily understood by everyone.

No uniformed person in the history of four military regimes has sat in on the evaluation and deci-

control them in a subtle manner are not crooks, but he is simply a role model of the class of technocrats who look to the international financial institutions rather than feel the anguish of the impoverished faces of our teeming masses. Our poor Finance Ministers (and Finance Ministers of any poor country who cannot improve the lot of the common man is poor) are virtual prisoners of the kingdom they are supposed to be absolute masters of, summaries are prepared for them in such a way that to disagree with the Summaries would be tantamount to committing professional hara-kari publicly. To an extent Shaukat Aziz has tried to bring in outside advice,

thing was very clear, the CE sincerely believed in what he was saying about the economy, this man was convinced about the statistics being dished out and the scenario being painted for him. Unfortunately, what he was saying was not really the situation as understood by the entrepreneurs and others present in that room. The CE happens to be a sharp person and certainly not gullible, there can only be one assumption, he is fed information doctored specifically to make it sound rosy, and more importantly, believable. The Army's senior executives are taught to base their decision-making on the information available and assumptions thereof, for technical advice they turn to their "technical" advisors e.g. the Commanders Artillery, Armour, Engineers, Ordnance, Supply, Medical Corps etc who advise the Divisional or Corps Commander (as the case may be) about their respective disciplines, both in peace and war. Ultimately the Commander makes up his own mind, the advisors advise only, they do not (and cannot) dictate what the Commander will do.

One can be accused of being rather simplistic and crude in putting this point across but the bleak economic future is a harsh reality for the common man and this could lead eventually to economic apocalypse and anarchy. One must get the message through to our well-meaning soldiers in the language they understand. This military regime, at least in the upper hierarchy, has proven to be honest and upright but that is not enough for the hapless millions who expect them to bring about a miracle to somehow better their lot. Governance has its percs but along with the percs comes an immense responsibility to try and fulfil the aspirations of the masses who have placed their trust and faith in them.

AS I SEE IT

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Tarbel and Mangla, even so the spectre of drought has not faded.

A couple of private banks have come to grief, this "market correction" has been due to bad management coupled with outright fraud. The State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) has played it really cool and prevented them from going under, allowing due process of the regulations in place to take its course, this lack of panic is a sign of great maturity. However, some people from SBP must have helped these crooks escape detection over the years. What SBP now needs is not only internal re-structuring but fumigating itself of the "crony interests" within SBP, collaborators in the scams perpetuated by a handful of unscrupulous private bank owners. SBP should make an example of all those involved in cheating the depositors of their money. The

To be fair, even maintaining the status quo going is an achievement; however in the larger context simply good management is not good enough, what is needed is an extraordinary effort, mostly in revenue gathering. We are sinking deeper into financial oblivion, immersed hopelessly in individual and collective economic despondency. Only the induction of risk-oriented entrepreneurs in government can break the country's economic shackles.

Military regimes usually go astray when they violate any of the fundamental principles of good governance, prime being that military men should not try and do jobs they are not trained for. You cannot throw Brigadiers at every problem. Credibility is the most important principle to be adhered to, you cannot be seen to be unfair and unjust, your

decision-making process in the Ministries of Finance and Commerce. No Chief Martial Law Administrator (or Chief Executive in the new euphemism) has ever had immediate expert independent advice as to internal functioning of these two vital Ministries and as to how they have been performing, whether what they have been recommending is good for the country and the people. The men in uniform have almost blindly accepted whatever the Ministries of Finance and Commerce recommend. And who do the Ministers listen to? Before they became Finance Ministers they sang a different tune to what they invariably sing as incumbents. Within hours of passing through the portals of the Finance Ministry they abandon their Dr. Jekyll face for Mr. Hyde's. People like super bureaucrat Secretary General Moeen Afzal who

but they are at best a "lunch and dinner club" with the odd suggestion accepted by the bureaucrats to keep them happy.

For the Chief Executive, expert immediate advice is even more important. To most military men, Finance is as good as understanding Greek, so why not get some "Greek" interpreters, maybe couple of commercial bankers, an economist or two and at least two entrepreneurs in a CE's economic "think tank". He should perhaps raid the "Economy Advisory Board" larder for advisors. Such people could explain street economics to the soldiers in the language they understand to make them fully aware of a subject that would normally be Greek to them. A few days ago I watched the CE intently as he spoke for over three hours to a select audience in HQ 5 Corps auditorium in Karachi. One

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

Pahela Baishakh blast

Pahela Baishakh, the Bengali New Year, once again came amid great excitement but unfortunately this year, it was marred with destruction which took nine lives.

Who could have ever imagined such a deluge on such an occasion, which has been going on uninterrupted over the years? Behind this heinous act, there is the hand of anti-Bengali nationalism or anti-cultural activists.

Like every year this year too, I had my desire fulfilled to be present near the main stage at Ramna to enjoy the melodious Rabindra Sangeet. Such a great occasion, makes me lose myself in the magical message of the Kabi Guru. Remembrance of my childhood days, especially my mother a member of the Tagore family, have greatly inspired me to Rabindra Sangeet.

No destruction or barriers will stop the cultural lovers from participating to welcome Pahela Baishakh, the age-old tradition.

We demand immediate action against those behind this inhuman and barbaric act.

Imrana Shahidullah
Gulshan, Dhaka

Honour the President

On many occasions, President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed has proved himself as a guide, philosopher and friend to the nation. His verdict on the 8th Amendment for setting up six permanent benches of the High Court is a milestone in our judicial history. His role as the head of the caretaker administration in 1990-1991 was undoubtedly praiseworthy.

The Present Awami League government selected him for the 2nd time as the President considering his impartial character. As the President, he has tried with utmost sincerity to keep his image above all criticism. In our present form of government the President has no executive power. He has to work upon the Prime Minister's advice. Yet he has opposed many undemocratic and unwise decisions of the government.

It is a matter of great regret that all his good advice goes unheeded by the relevant quarters. We have failed to honour him as an institute. Our political leaders should take note in this respect.

M. H. Bari
Khulna

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.

Burden of life



STAR PHOTO: AKM MOHSIN

Instead of going to school, these two tiny tots work all day to earn their bread. Like these two, the deprived young generation has to start struggling for its existence early. Though child labour is prohibited in the country, the young workers have no choice but to toil all day as no one is there to ensure their basic rights. Will there ever be any change in their pathetic plight?

Inhuman

I was shocked to see the photograph of injured Tipu Sultan (April 4) and startled to read the news. What on earth is going on in the country? A journalist is beaten by the musclemen of a lawmaker of the ruling party and the authorities take no action against him! This lawmaker goes to such an extent that he even conspires so that Tipu does not get proper treatment. Are the lawmakers whom people voted to power so powerful? Shouldn't the Prime Minister take the responsibility of what her lawmaker did and take necessary steps against him? She should also take initiative to send Tipu abroad for proper treatment as early as possible.

Sumanta
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Modern communism

The news item "Brezhnev-Stalin's grandsons join hands to stir Communists" as reported by AFP (April 9) contains factual errors.

Brezhnev's immediate predecessor was Nikita Khrushchev who replaced Georgy Maleiskov. The latter took over as premier of the Soviet Union as well as remained

General Secretary of the CPSU on the death of Josef Stalin in 1953.

Recent trends indicate that Communists are sort of staging a comeback in the former Soviet-dominated socialist-bloc countries through their endeavours to sanitise Marxism and in domestically-held elections.

By discarding the rigid dogmatism of Marxism-Leninism imposed by Stalin and also by renouncing the revisionist line advanced by Khrushchev, the present-day communists in Russia and East Europe countries are bringing about a blend combining revolutionary theory with deep humanism.

Robert Kader
Chittagong

Pendulum politics

Thanks to Dilara Choudhury for her well thought article "Bangladesh politics: In the abyss of despair" (April 11). In fact, politics in Bangladesh is 'pendulum politics'. Most of the politicians only think of their own interest and their only concern is to capture or retain power by any means.

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