The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA TUESDAY NOVEMBER 20, 2001

Too many bone-chilling murders

Take a firm grip of the law and order situation rightaway

THERE is a growing sense of insecurity following a recent spate in the incidence of cold-blooded murders in Dhaka and Chittagong. With the degree of their dastardliness rising by the day it seems the criminals are out with a vengeance to scuttle the government's plans to improve the law and order situation as part of its first hundred-day agenda. It is forty days since the BNP-led alliance came to power. No miracle can be expected to happen in such a short time. At the same time, however, it must be realised that we are only ten days short of the half-way point on the government's 100-day programme to mark a definite improvement in the law and order situation. The government should, therefore, feel challenged.

Our experience of the last decade since the restoration of democracy in 1991 shows that successive governments proved one-eyed in their approach to law and order problems. During the BNP rule from 1991 till the elections in 1996, when the chips came down, it was more or less 'my cadres right or wrong' attitude which came to militate against law enforcement in test-cases. Subsequently during the AL rule criminals would be always discovered on the other side of the fence. As a result, in both the periods, the police felt incapacitated in dealing with criminals even remotely connected with ruling parties. The caretaker government with its three-month tenure was understandably ill-put to chasten criminals hardened over the years.

So, the basic shortcoming of the ruling parties has been their failure to de-link criminality from politics. Even though they cried hoarse directing the police to be unmerciful to criminals 'belonging' to their side, they inevitably ended up shielding their men. So, it is political patronisation that has sustained the criminals from government to government. Moreover, given the criminal's chameleon-nature his sustenance turns out to be an eternal phenomenon.

In other words, it is a search for the missing political will that must come to bear fruit now. Yesterday, we thanked Begum Zia for de-activating the JCD central committee as a sign of her asserting will against a potential challenge to effective governance. The chain of hopes this move of hers has triggered should now be fulfilled through a successful culmination of the assertion process. As the ruling party she has to take the initiative of weeding out at the first sight any malcontent within her ranks to put the right message across to the police on the one hand and the opposition on the other. We urge Begum Zia to make a public denunciation of criminality in any shape or form together with a demonstrative de-linking of criminal elements from her party. By exerting her political will she will only strengthen her moral authority in proportion to the mandate she has got to govern the country.

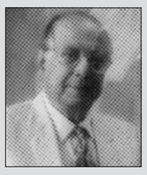
Condemned to death

Gulshan-Banani-Baridhara Lake needs care

THE dead fish floating in the toxic water of the Gulshan-Banani-Baridhara Lake and their odious, overpowering odour, which hangs heavy in the air throughout the posh locality, bear a poignant testimony once again to our collective indifference to the natural environment that we live in. True, the Rajuk has shirked its custodial responsibility to the lake by leasing it out to the Bangladesh Fisheries Development Corporation (BFDC) for pisciculture and maintenance and not watching out for any violation, both legal and physical, of the water body. True, the BFDC has committed a grave offence by not resisting the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) move to link the surface water to the lake. It is also true that the DCC has criminally violated its essential promise to keep the city clean and hygienic by executing such a devious plan. What is even more true, however, is that our collective callousness has allowed such environmental degradation to take place. There have indeed been processions, demonstrations and rallies, protesting pollution of and encroachment on the lake and demanding its proper maintenance and development. On Sunday, the Bangladesh Environment Movement submitted a memorandum to the Rajuk chairman in this regard. Nevertheless, these are just knee-jerk reactions that need to be built into a collective eco-consciousness.

The unpleasant fact of the matter is that we have not yet begun to appreciate the role of natural environment in our lives and as a result, until its degradation assumes alarming proportions, we seldom react. In a subconscious bid to avert our civic responsibility, we have taken refuge in the pretence that there are environmental laws to protect and nurture our environment. A toxic and reeking Gulshan-Banani-Baridhara Lake comes as yet another reminder that we, as the citizens, are not living up to our responsibility. The matter may have gone far and the lake water may have become toxic; however, all is not lost. Let us all join hands and put pressure on the authorities so that they take up a massive cleaning operation, not only of the Gulshan-Banani-Baridhara Lake but also of all the natural water bodies that have been condemned to slow death.

Which way the Afghan conflict?



FARUQ CHOUDHURY

FRANKLY SPEAKING

September 11 had brought into sharp focus the need to tackle both terrorism and intolerance in all guises and forms, not only in Afghanistan, but also, in this region and beyond. This would have been better achieved by actions reached through cool consideration and common consensus, rather than by the wanton show of force against a largely invisible enemy.

THE uncertain outcome of the present conflict in Afghanistan causes grave concern, not the least because of its possible impact on the security, way of life, politics, economy, attitude, mutual relations, and the like, of people all over the globe. The immediate reason for this latest series of conflicts that the hapless country has been experiencing is the September 11 terrorist attack in New York and Washington. Unlike Newton's scientific law of every action having an equal and opposite reaction, in areas, such as human conduct or international relations, an action can indeed set in its trail unpredictable and uncontrollable consequences.

One wonders whether the perpetrators of the dastardly September 11 acts ever realized how self-defeating their action could turn out to be, causing so much of anger, dismay and condemnation all around. One also wonders whether the US Administration, in their understandable keenness to uproot terrorism, gave thought to the matter that by bombing to flush out Bin Laden from his cave, they were in fact sowing fresh seeds of resentment among the suffering ordinary Afghans. Internationally speaking, notwithstanding the public support of the faithful, the bombing is likely to turn out to be a disastrous exercise in public relations. The exposed and the undefended poor and the innocent have been the principal victims of the bombing and not Bin Laden and his associates, who like needles in a haystack, still remain elusive to this 'search and destroy' operations.

Since September 11 and the 'Catch Laden, Crush the Talibans' decision, human interactions in this planet Earth have undergone changes that are difficult to define. There has clearly been a qualitative deterioration in those, seldom seen in this history of human conflict. The third millennium of our history has, alas, had an unfortunate beginning!

After having caught Laden and crushed the Talibans the coalition partners intended to install a representative government in Afghanistan that would hopefully represent not only the North, but also the three other geographical directions of that rubble of a country. In order to fast attain their objectives they took resort to carpet-bombing. This, throwing to the cold Afghan winter winds the questions of morality and ethics concerning resultant fatalities and destruction, has created a humanitarian problem for thousands, who have fled the shower and thunder of bombs and have no food, money and shelter. Offering them humanitarian assistance may temporarily lessen their suffering but will never assuage their anger and mistrust. The bombing and the follow up ground actions of the Northern Alliance and its patrons, are succeeding in banishing the Talibans from the major cities and environs where, in some cases, the disparate Northern Alliance, and in the others, assertive local chieftains are taking charge. History seems to be repeating itself in Afghanistan, the process having been dramatically hastened by the military support of the coalition.

Osama bin Laden, in spite of the halo created around him, is a mortal, reportedly not in the finest of health. He may indeed one day be caught dead or alive. But absurd is the assumption that terrorism from the face of the earth will forever disappear with him or even suffer a setback. The self-appointed crusaders against terrorism must know that to many, Osama bin Laden is not the cause, but the product of terrorism, born of perceived global injustices and that in the eyes of those, the current military actions in Afghanistan are but acts of terrorism of the high and the mighty. To them the cause for terrorism lies in the global injustices being committed in Palestine and elsewhere, to protect the short and long term interests of the mighty few and their surrogates. Getting rid of terrorism is a must, but that cannot be achieved by thoughtless retaliatory actions taken in anger.

It does not call for too much of a crystal ball gazing in gauging the immediate consequences of the quixotic Afghanistan venture. Establishing a representative all party government in Kabul, willing and able to achieve even a modicum of peace in that country, is easier said than done. This stick in the mud prediction is not only based on the recent and the past history of Afghanistan, but also the axiomatic truth that an all party government minus one party, i.e. the Talibans, however anachronistic and distasteful they might have been, is simply not an all party venture. It leaves out the 'party' that, with it's misconceived so-called Islamic beliefs, has existed throughout the centuries in rural Afghanistan. When the atrocities of the Afghan warlords in the provinces and the infighting and misrule of the Northern Alliance (which is in the eyes of the defiant Pushtoons of the South, is Northern alright, but hardly an alliance) had reached an intolerable limit in the mid nineties, that the Talibans moved into the cities and assumed political power. Afghanistan then took notice of them. Then enters Osama bin Laden with his crazy and destructive ideas and his handful of Arab and multiracial followers, engineers his terrorist acts the world over; and the world takes notice of him. In the meantime, Talibanism spreads to Pakistan and beyond, in dozes small and big, and the progressive world of Islam gets wary of it. Then happens September 11, and we find ourselves in the present mess.

It again does not call for the crystal ball to predict that to patch up a representative coalition government in Kabul is going to be a Herculean task. Conflicting interests of the coalition partners are showing up and even the assault on Kabul, before the formation of a representative government, has not been to the liking of some. Different groups in the conflict have their own patrons, and what the Heratis are to the Iranians, Taziks and Uzbeks are to the Russians; and the Northern Alliance is not exactly music to the ears of Pushtoons and Pakistanis. An effective government in Kabul may therefore be difficult to achieve. In fact we are in a catch twenty-two situation, when the Talibans, driven to the hills and engaging in guerilla warfare, will be a constant threat to peace; whereas severely weakened Talibans will cease to be the cementing force for this fragile alliance, which, by being a formidable common enemy, it has so far been.

Again the Talibans in Pakistan and their sympathizers are factors that cannot be easily discounted. Successive Pakistani governments, beginning from Bhutto's have, for their own political reasons, tolerated, indeed encouraged the Talibans.

Their increasing influence had hardly brought cheers to Pervez Musharraf as well as the civil society in that country. Prior to September 11, Pervez Musharraf had been apparently trying to contain the Talibans by working with them, thereby hoping to gradually smoothen the rough mediaeval edges of Taliban policies. In fact even as the Chief of Staff of the Pakistan Army he had propagated that policy (Ref. 'Frankly Speaking' of May 23,1999). But the post September thunder and threat from Washington changed it all and whether his policies would have succeeded will forever remain a matter of conjecture. He may now be blamed by the Pakistanis in general and the Taliban Pushtoons in particular, for conceding grounds in Afghanistan to India, by going along with the idea of tolerating the Northern Alliance, of which India is an enthusiastic supporter. Politically this may land the Pakistani President into serious trouble and create fresh tensions in this region.

Osama bin Laden was bad news to all right thinking people, cutting across religious and political lines. The ordinary Afghans knew well the hell that their life was under the Talibans. September 11 had brought into sharp focus the need to tackle both terrorism and intolerance in all guises and forms, not only in Afghanistan, but also, in this region and beyond. This would have been better achieved by actions reached through cool consideration and common consensus, rather than by the wanton show of force against a largely invisible enemy.

Faruq Choudhury, a former Foreign Secretary, is Advisor, BRAC

Yes gas, no gas, very good gas

AFSAN CHOWDHURY

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

So why don't we set up a neutral caretaker gas export deciding committee who will decide the job for us? A group of people who will study all the angles, talk to all and then submit a report. There must be a dozen people in this country that we can trust. If we don't, then we don't deserve to have

YES, we have gas; no we don't know what to do with the gas, but we know gas is a very good thing. There is a lot of gas in our kitchen and it's blue in colour. I have a friend who works for the Titas Gas. I have no idea about gas beyond that. I don't even know if there is Titas Gas anymore. I pay my gas bills to my landlord who pays it to the company. Other than that my familiarity with the issue is nearly nil. And armed with this knowledge I am supposed to vote in a referendum!

The whole referendum thing appears to be a conspiracy to legitimize ignorance in public life. I shouldn't be allowed to vote because I am not qualified to do so. And nor should others who are like me. We can't be allowed to decide just because we have a lot of gas and export is a possibility.

In Kolkata slang, gas means manufactured facts. The Bangladesh word meaning the same is "Gulpatti" or "Chapa", depending on which part you come from. Somehow, all this talk about gas is getting to me. Mainly because I don't understand it. My young playgroup age son also doesn't know much about it. What happened to education ? In my time we all knew all about gas export by the time we were born. Or was it chapa ?

And now for the first break of the regular programme.

"We have 83 million cubic centimeters of gas, 43 billion hectares of gas fields and one cricket team which can't get a draw unless it rains. So I think we should export gas to India." Expert number 1 said.

" But we also need 92 zillion buckets of liquid gas, 84 bottles of LPG and we have the gas need of the youngest cricket centurion in the world. It's impossible to export gas to India."

" Our garments industry is going. How shall we get money if we don't sell gas? "

" What shall we do with our homes if there is no gas left to light our stove and keep it running forever. What shall we do with the garment factories? Burn them down with kerosene? "

" Yes gas. "

" No gas."

" Very good. Yes and no gas."

" This debate was sponsored by the Asian Development Bank from their bio-gas project. Thank you. Lunch is served in the ball room."

And now back to the programme.

I remember travelling to Sylhet by car once to create public opinion on the arsenic crisis. This was soon after the Magurchara incident. As I passed the fields I saw the huge charred skeletons of trees and the black burnt fields. I had no idea how a patch of scorched earth looked like. It looks like the face of an acid burnt woman. I felt violated, angry and ultimately helpless. There was little that could be done. Depending on who is answering you, you will hear whether Bangladesh was compensated or not for that accident. If actions were taken at all against any company for negligence or not. If any enquiry was held or not. I asked a friend in the trade about it. He said these things happen. "You have to take risks, if you want to gain something." What did we gain? Nobody tells me anything nowadays.

In the last 20 years we have been discussing gas exports to India. Sometime back when BNP was in power under Gen. Zia, a public hearing was organized. I think Col. Akbar was the Petroleum Minister then and even then public opinion was against it, Those were seriously anti-Indian days and even then like now, not everyone knew why. It was decided that it was politically sensitive to do so. Like transit. We have a moral obligation to oppose India whether it's to our advantage or not.

We don't know if gas export is good for us. Worse, we don't know if it's bad for us. But then what else do we know? We know it's probably very good to discuss it and not do anything about it.

Gas, they say. It's all gas.

Now here is a break for a special announcement.

This is to inform all concerned that the Bangladesh Weather Department has been attached to the national cricket team. No matches can be played without prior permission of the Weather Bureau, which has been placed under the Ministry of Defence for security reasons. From now on, all tests will be played during the rainy season. Reasons have not been explained.

Now back to the main programme before you switch channel.

If one expert says that we have a huge gas reserve, another says that we have very little. If you don't want to utilize the gas, why sign all these contracts we don't want to read about? Is finding gas good or bad for us? Or let sleeping gas lie. Somebody says that it can be used to produce electricity and light poor homes but our minister says that it's cheaper to buy electricity from Meghalaya or some other NE Indian state and generate the same. Is everyone talking about the same country and the same gas? Is it possible that after the proposal was first tabled 20 years ago or maybe more, we are still as ignorant as we were. More important, do we know that?

Due to transmission difficulties we have scheduled a short break.

"A lot of money has flown and a lot more will. There is a big plan to destabilize India by separating the North- East using the gas exploring strategy? Don't let the MNCs enter Bangladesh".

" No, no. That's a very bad idea. We won't do it."

" But India needs gas to industrialize."

" Then do it, do it. Great."

" But the US will destabilize the area by setting bases to protect the investment."

" Then don't do it, please don't do it."

" But on the other hand….."

" There is no other hand. I have already used both of them."

" Maybe ……."

"Ahhhhhhhh….."

" These Bangladeshis. Always committing suicide during a debate."

Much simpler to ask a maulana or a marxist. Their positions are simpler.

It's all an Indo-US conspiracy. Back to the programme. Thank you.

Conspiracy may be true but doesn't help us decide. I thought we ourselves were part of a US conspiracy. The US ambassador I once met glares at me and says, " Get real. Either you let us sell the gas in the market or we will withdraw the investment. Who'll invest here? Only we will. We are here to do business." I am with a person who is deep in the energy business and has a toe in the media as well. Maybe I shouldn't have done that small talk about collateral damages in Iraq. Just showing off Your Excellency. Later the man who took me there shows the maps given to him by the oil companies. "These are the best maps in the world. It shows everything. They know everything about us." He is happy and proud.

That must be very painful. Those of us who know so little are in such pain and

they know everything.

Is this a break or a breakdown?

Let's play the trust game

Do we trust politicians?

No

Bureaucrats?

No way.

Businessmen?

Are you nuts ?

Multi-nationals?

Next question, please.

NGOs

Are you mad ?

Technocrats ?

Maybe just a little.

The UN ?

Please spell that again.

The national cricket team ?

"Allah, megh de, pani de, draw de….."

Ourselves ?

You must be sick.

After all we don't even trust the truth.

Back for the final announcement.

Let's face it. It may be good, bad or somewhere in-between but we don't know or whom to ask. No group can decide from us. It will be a deadly mistake to think there is a single person in the decision making world who is trusted enough to decide for us. We don't trust ourselves so we can't decide either. We don't even know what it's all about. But if we don't, somebody else will. That's the small problem.

So why don't we set up a neutral caretaker gas export deciding committee who will decide the job for us? A group of people who will study all the angles, talk to all and then submit a report. There must be a dozen people in this country that we can trust. If we don't, then we don't deserve to have gas.

Afsan Chowdhury is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

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

Congratulations PM

I would like to congratulate the Prime Minister for suspending the activities of JCD (Jatiyatabadi Chahatra Dal) central committee. This is a bold step in the right direction. Now we want all the terrorists of Dhaka University to be arrested.

Shawkat Hossain
Lalmatia, Dhaka

War against humanity

Strike on Afghanistan has become the main global issue. The world rests its eyes on what happened or what is going to happen in Afghanistan. However, a question rises in the mind of many people "Is it a war against terrorism or humanity?"

Due to this war thousands of innocent Afghans have fled from their houses towards the Afghan-Pakistan border. They are leading an inhuman life without food, shelter, medical facilities, drinking water and minimum sanitation facilities. Some food stores of 'Red Cross' have been destroyed by indiscriminate bombing. Thousands of civilians particularly women and children have been killed mercilessly in the name of eradicating terrorism.

But how much have the USA and its alliance been succeeded so far? Osama bin Laden, the prime suspect remains untouched. Then why are so many people dying everyday?

The whole world should be united to fight terrorism. No sane person supports the September 11 attack or the killing of innocent people in Afghanistan.

Mizan
BBA, DU

Weekly holiday controversy

The government has introduced new office timing and declared Friday as weekly holiday. People are really surprised by this decision. It is a wrong decision, which must be changed.

The business community for a long time has been demanding Sunday to be the weekly holiday as most of the countries in the world observe this day as the weekend. But to our dismay the government cancelled the holiday on Saturday, fixed office timing from 9 am to 4 pm with half-an-hour break from Saturday to Wednesday and 9 am to 2 pm on Thursday, Friday being declared as holiday. In many countries, offices remain closed on Saturday. So the new office timing has made the situation worse and our business community will suffer most.

People have become upset and very unhappy by the reschedule of office timing. It would not help the country at all. We hope the government will realise it and set the timing in such a manner that it would be convenient to all and help the country to prosper.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Diversification of NGOs

Bangladesh has thousands of field-NGOs, but a very few NGOs are research oriented at the national level. The LDCs need more local R&D than imported solutions, (which does not work even within the UN system).

The NGO Affairs Bureau may encourage some NGOs to take up in-depth research projects. Several come to mind, including the following:

System loss within the police department. The communication and transport system have to be revamped, for instant action. The closure of the wireless mobile telephones during the general elections in October by the CEC is a case in point.

A summary of the research carried out on the ailing SOEs (state-owned enterprises) may be published, for public feedback. It is unfortunate that the debates in the House lack bite, as the Opposition bit is missing. It is not difficult to finance this research, as thousand of crore of taka are wasted every year without optimum output. No regime could handle the losing state-owned concerns.

Several NGOs to work on political research; on the errant politicians, and the low-profile voters. Why aren't defeats in the elections accepted gracefully? If every agency is wrong, then who is right?

ÊWhat are the research findings on the NCBs (Nationalised Commercial Banks).

A field survey on secularism and how the voters look at it. Also some work on religion and politics (local bias); and on the combination of politics, religion, and secularism (in the LDCs).

MWZ
Dhaka

The readers' column

I would like to thank you for your decision to devote a full page for the letter column on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. I strongly feel that some of the published letters are better than many of your write-ups.

Similar efforts should be taken by other national dailies to give due importance to the reader's comments and views. It is indeed a very healthy sign for the freedom of expression and the right to voice the negative aspects of modern living and life for the good of the common people.

Hats off to *The Daily Star* for this bold venture.

Abul Ashraf Noor
Uttara, Dhaka

The standard of education

I have very often been accosted by parents concerned about the standard of English taught in local schools. These parents are particularly anxious about government schools where they have no alternative but to send their children because of financial or employment reasons. I believe the root cause of this lack of standard in the area of English teaching is because of a lack of initiative and proper training on the part of the teachers and authorities concerned.

There are many examples of children who have pursued their education in Bengali medium schools but have maintained a good standard in English. By English here, I do not mean the pronunciation only but the fluency, capability and understanding that is required in today's world where this language has become essential in all aspects of life.

There are number of ways in which this need can be met in government schools in particular. The recruitment of proficient teachers and training (covering all the skills of English language studies) run by professional educationists of English or institutes that offer such training can be arranged in affiliation with these authorities. Certificates and recognition of attendance can be provided as incentive.

All parents wish to see their children do well in their professional and personal lives. A good knowledge and the skills of using English are important criteria in this respect. Therefore, proper care should indeed be taken in order to provide means of acquiring such skills for children who cannot afford to attend English medium schools. I request the new government to look into the matter as a means to encouraging the creation of a new generation who can meet with the challenges of a progressive world.

Imrana Shahidullah
Gulshan-2, Dhaka

The stenos now dictate!

The stenos in the police department are too powerful, according to the DS (November 17). They have now started dictating, and official investigations have so far failed to charge sheet the alleged accused.

Culture creates easy channels for many types of unusual activities, good, bad or questionable. Later these become conventions, which are more or less tolerated, till hue and cry is raised by the moral monitors in society. We are chasing and counter-chasing cultures in Dhaka for decades, with evident malicious enjoyment!

One such trend originated from the cult of misuse of political power and influence, since the early years after independence. Today the political leadership has lost its credibility, turning the political pool into muddy waters, where peculiar types of fishing takes place.

How to sanitise the politicians? The public verdict was revealed during the October general elections when the mighty party foundations collapsed, along with the porous super-structures. Three decades of evil and shady living cannot be corrected by one single regime, despite the momentous manifestos and speech making.

Back to the stenographers. In this computer age, most officers display a computer on the side table. Are all officers computer-literate? Under which scheme? If they key-mouse their own drafts then what do the stenos do? Is the new breed of stenographers called computer operators?

In fact, stenos and clerks may be replaced with computers up to a certain extent, depending on local compatibility factors (which have to be identified and defined). Bureaucracy is not only top-heavy, but also bottom-heavy, with thousands of redundant clerks creating more files than producing (fast) reports and documents. Machines do not bother about Sunday as the weekly holiday. In every sphere of life, we are bugged with the human element or human system losses. The senior bureaucrats now have a technical option: voice-sensitive computers are available, enabling direct dictation to the machine, without a human steno. Thereafter the computer operator or clerk can process the document.