

Violent echoes

Create confidence amongst minorities

PROBLEMS faced by Bangladeshi Hindus have had an echo in India especially West Bengal. A number of political parties have taken up the matter and are trying to create an issue around this. There are allegations by Indian parties there that Hindus have fled Bangladesh, fearing for their life. The Chief Minister of West Bengal is on record to have said that the Indian media reports on the issue have been exaggerated. We consider that the present event is being unnecessarily politicised and made into a bilateral issue.

Meanwhile, the special committee of Secretaries set up to investigate the allegations have said that two of the nine allegations of attack on the minorities are true but no Hindus have left Bangladesh for India. Official committee reports are never fully believed, even the best ones and the bureaucratic committee of the government was hardly expected to do or say too much. One should however appreciate that some admission was made of the crisis but in effect it still follows the Altuf line of argument which partly accepts but mostly denies.

The situation also reveals the sensitive nature of the problem. Because each of the countries in South Asia has a dominant religion or ethnic combine which is shared with another and the potential for identity based conflict is high. Since the region has a long history of communal violence, we are all the more prone to it. Instead of wishing it away couched under committee reports or loud statement by party intellectuals, it would be best to face it head first and resolve it.

Our leaders will have to recognize that Hindus in Bangladesh and Muslims in India share the same fate, that of being minorities where the majority is huge and sometimes very insensitive to the minority problems. Since violence is a mutual echo they have a responsibility to ensure communal safety. The echoes of mutual violence always ring louder than the pious denials issued by different inquiry committees of respective governments.

What the BNP government will have to do is create confidence amongst the minorities by taking stern action against those who have committed the atrocities. This can't be done by committee reports but a commitment to upholding the rights of every citizen belonging to any religion. Unless BNP and its allies can rein in their discredited militant supporters, the situation will not improve. So heal the wounds, arrest the criminals and calm the fears through action and the voices against Bangladesh will automatically be stilled.

Quorum crisis

MPs must take the Parliament more seriously

IT is not even a month that the Eighth Parliament was elected and it is facing an attendance crisis. On Thursday the parliament session had to start nearly an hour late when the requisite 60 MPs, including the Speaker himself, formed the quorum. Everyday the sessions start about half an hour late on an average. The question is, why? After spending so much energy, effort and not to mention money, why do our elected members to the parliament not feel the need to participate in its proceedings?

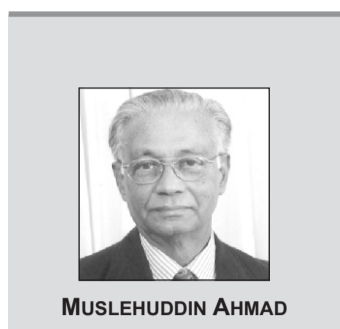
There are two possible reasons: first because there is no opposition, and second because the elected MPs do not think much of the proceedings of the parliament. As for the first we can only reiterate our long-standing position urging the opposition to come to the House. We have said it to the BNP when it was in the opposition and we say it to the AL now: do not abandon the parliament. The House does not belong to the government, it belongs to both the sides. In fact if there is any tilt, a parliament can be said to be tilted more to the opposition than to the government, because it is here that a government is held accountable.

The second reason is disturbing. Why should the people's representatives think so poorly of the proceedings of the House that they should be reluctant to attend its sessions? The elected MPs must make it their habit to attend the parliament sessions. It is the reason why they have been elected. It is not to do *tabdir* in the ministries or secure financial allocations or procure projects for their constituencies that they have been elected from. Their job is to legislate for the good of the country and its people and to watch over the government and other public institutions.

We think the party whips need to become more active. We also think that the Speaker should communicate his serious concern to all the members about the quorum crisis. If need be he should directly communicate with the parliamentary party leaders of each of the groups represented in the House. Prime Minister herself should take a more serious view of this situation.

Please remember, if the elected MPs do not take the parliament seriously then how can we expect the general public to take it seriously.

US takes up M-E problem head-on



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

SEPTEMBER 11 attack on the US, whoever might have been responsible for this deadly event, has changed the world. The changes seem to have deeply touched the relationship between people -- between religions, faiths, cultures and above all between states. One can only hope that the direction of changes would largely be towards good though initially apparent revenge attack on Afghanistan jolted the civilized world. One has to wait and see the results of such punitive actions against a country which is poorest of the poor. Though all forms of terrorist attacks and particularly the ghastly attack on the US on September 11, 2001 stand condemned, the immediate fall-out effect has been the movement of the US to find some acceptable solution to the Middle East problem.

Any way, optimism is detected everywhere over the obvious realization by the Bush Administration that it is absolutely necessary to clear up the breeding grounds of all forms of terrorism. Bush Administration has at long last abandoned its 'hands off' policy towards Middle East and indeed has moved head on to deal with it effectively. The British government, however, took the initiative immediately after the 11th September attack through the visit of Prime Minister Tony Blair to the M-E, who talked about 'a viable Palestinian State' and a secure Israel both of which must live side by side in peace.

The latest visit was by the EU

delegation led by the Prime Minister of Belgium, which visited both Palestinian territory and Israel and talked with the leaders there. Their visit was somewhat complicated by the report that Belgian media had already suggested trial of Sharon for his 'indirect responsibility' for Sabra and Shatilla massacre of innocent Palestinians. They also encountered serious difficulties with Prime Minister Sharon who continued to insist on the theme of complete calm for one week followed by six weeks

10, 2001, where he, for the first time, used the word "Palestine" to describe a future Palestinian State. Colin Powell said, "We have a vision of a region where two states, Israel and Palestine, live side by side within secure and recognized borders." The most important was that Secretary of State described Israel's hold on the West Bank and Gaza as an occupation. And he said "Israel must be willing to end its occupation" of the land the Arabs lost in 1967 war. By mentioning Arab

a 100 per cent effort" for stopping the violence as he knows that Hamas and some other radical parties were against any peace with Israel. However, Sharon's 7 days of complete calm is unlikely to be a reality on the ground under the present circumstances. He must withdraw his troops completely from the Palestinian areas and areas nearby and make no further incursion into the Palestinian areas on any pretext. General Zinni must ensure this with a view to making

resolutions 242 and 338, and accept a viable state." [J.Post Nov 20, 2001]. Thus the framework of the talk on the future of East Jerusalem has been laid already. Now major issue would be to deal with the settlements that encroached parts of East Jerusalem.

White House spokesman Fleisher said that President Bush was "heartened" by the reactions of both Israel and Palestinians on the Secretary of State's speech. Powell himself was very pleased as Arafat

President Bush would be well advised to invite Arafat soon to the White House with a view to having a firm commitment from Arafat for a major push against Hamas and other radical factions within his area of control.

Sharon said earlier that he was going to form a high powered committee with him as its head to negotiate peace with the Palestinians. This is the most discouraging and indeed the negative point in the entire exercise. He is someone who is incapable of negotiating any peace deal with any one let alone with the Arabs. He should indeed allow Foreign Minister Shimon Peres to lead the negotiations. May be the US will have to ask Sharon to change his strategy if any success has to be achieved in the peace negotiations. Similarly the Palestinians should also form a committee that should include moderate negotiators. Arafat and Sharon should head only the respective highest level committees for final talks. Once the deal is finally brought to a shape, there would be less possibility for Sharon to make any major change without the approval of the US.

The US policy statement indeed puts huge responsibilities on Arafat and his associates too. They must work hard and very sincerely to bring calm into the area regardless of what Sharon says. In any case, why give Sharon a chance at all to create more obstacles in the quest for peace? Too many lives have already been lost during the last 14 months of violence. The Palestinians should also remember that they lost an opportunity while former President Clinton made a last ditch effort before leaving the White House. This is probably the second and could even be the last one apparently provided by the unexpected event, though an unfortunate and disastrous one, in the world-theatre, which should never happen again under any pretext or circumstance.

Muslehuddin Ahmad is a former Secretary and Ambassador and founder-president of North South University.

SPOTLIGHT ON MIDDLE EAST

Too many lives have already been lost during the last 14 months of violence. The Palestinians should also remember that they lost an opportunity while former President Clinton made a last ditch effort before leaving the White House. This is probably the second and could even be the last one apparently provided by the unexpected event, though an unfortunate and disastrous one, in the world-theatre, which should never happen again under any pretext or circumstance.

of cooling off period and the confidence building measures etc. which were outlined in the Tenet and Mitchell Plans. But it was clear that these would never happen as long as Sharon is at the helm of affairs and continues to make incursions into Palestinian areas and kill Palestinians branded as terrorists by Israel. But it seemed that the EU delegation was an advance team to the conflict zone before the announcement of the US policy plan. Apparently several EU leaders had initial discussions with the US Administration during General Assembly session in New York before the EU team made a trip to the region. Thus the EU's contributions to the recent and indeed the firm position of the Bush Administration was considerable.

In his speech at the University of Louisville in Kentucky on November 19, Secretary of State Collin Powell divulged the US's latest policy towards the Middle East. Indeed, his speech centered on President Bush's earlier address to the UN General Assembly on November

lands Powell did include all Arab land including Golan Heights. He also insisted on a framework that would halt the violence enabling the parties to go for some form of lasting peace. He said, "Whatever the sources of Palestinians' frustration and anger under occupation, Intifada is now mired in the quicksand of self defeating violence and terror directed against Israel." Palestinians need to understand that however legitimate their claims, they cannot be heard, let alone be addressed, through violence.... "Terror and violence must stop and stop now." He warned the Arab world that they must make "unmistakably clear" its acceptance of Israel as a "Jewish State" and its commitment to a negotiated settlement. He also asked Israel to stop settlement activity because he said, such activities "cripple the chances for real peace and security" [Jerusalem Post]. Though Sharon always insisted on 7 days of complete calm, Powell avoided going into such a condition and instead called upon Arafat to "make

reasonable progress as desired by President Bush.

Secretary of State also said that the US "could not hope to turn the situation around by acting alone." He called on Egypt, Jordan, the EU, UNSG, Russia, and others to be the partners in the latest efforts. This clearly went against the stated position of Israel as it never wanted the EU and others to get involved in the peace process.

Jerusalem Post reported that Prime Minister Sharon praised Powell for a "constructive" speech but made it clear that he views Jerusalem as Israel's eternal and undivided capital. Sharon's position is known to the Americans but Sharon would have to go by what the American Administration would finally ask him to do if he remains the Prime Minister till all these are worked out. In any case, Secretary of State's policy statement gives a clear indication of the future of East Jerusalem when he said "Israel must be willing to end occupation, consistent with the principles embodied in the Security Council

telephoned him to "express his satisfaction with the speech and to say that he was ready to cooperate." There was expression of support from the Arab League through Amr Moussa and others... Nabil Sath termed it as a positive speech and said, "For the first time, the United States is speaking about ending Israeli occupation. For the first time they are speaking about a viable Palestinian state." [IHT report].

The US is sending General Anthony Zinni to the area on Sunday, November 25, and he will start working with help of William Burns to activate the talks on security measures ultimately leading to the cease-fire. President Bush reportedly desired that some good results should be achieved before Prime Minister Sharon meets President Bush either on the 3rd or 4th of December in the White House. This will be second visit of Sharon to the White House to meet President Bush. It needs to be noted that the White House has not yet decided on inviting President Arafat for a meeting with President Bush.

OPINION

Saving the sinking garment sector

OMAR KHASRU

THE country is in dire economic strait and financial doldrums. It is obvious from the closure of a slew of garment factories and laying off of oodles of garment workers, overwhelming majority of them female workers. Garment is not merely any old industry in the context of Bangladesh, it has become the proverbial lifeline in job creation, industrial growth, export enhancement and foreign exchange earning and refurbishment of foreign exchange reserve. Garment sector axiomatically is the symbolic goose that lays the golden egg. Few countries have ever been so entirely and enfeebly dependent on one field and therefore so susceptible to market fluctuations and vagaries of economic downturn. Almost total dependence on jute by Pakistan after 1947 and complete reliance on sugar by Cuba in the 1960s may be construed as comparable examples.

In the 1960s we learned that Venice, the city of sailable canals and waterways was slowly sinking, and unless remedial measures were undertaken on an emergency basis, the city would immerse like a sack full of prodigious rocks. They hastily initiated corrective measures and the emerging disaster was averted. Our garment sector, embodying Venice like industry, is sinking fast, with a myriad of big cancelled orders and shrinking overseas market. A confluence of unfavourable events, such as the

reluctance to give quota free entry into the US market, myopic vision and lack of long term strategy and planning, short term profit mongering and dearth of backward linkage seem to spell doomdays for this once blossoming, prospering and flourishing industry. We need immediate crash programme to save this essential and imperative industry from sinking deep in a quagmire. It will spell disaster for the export industry and the concomitant foreign exchange earning and reserve, burgeoning financial independence, authority and clout of mostly female labourers, with disastrous consequences for the economy as a whole. This has significance for the society far beyond what the naked eyes see and what the conspicuous mind can contemplate.

The prerequisite and a potent catalyst for social progress and uplift of the lower strata of the society are education and/or financial autonomy of women, the so-called weaker sex. Educated, employed and empowered women routinely postpone marriage and child bearing. This has profound effect on population growth, children and women's health and wellbeing, consciousness about their rights, political power and social standing. In most garment factories, the working conditions, long hours, safety standards and general treatment of workers are quite abominable. This, however, is typical at the initial stage of the primary industrialization in most countries. The sweat

shops, long hours and seven days a week work schedule, atrocious working conditions in the garment industry in New York City in the early part of the 20th century bear ample testimony to that. But situation improved slowly as the industry progressed, the mostly female new migrant workers became aware of the legal and constitutional rights, organized labour unions and lobbied to promulgate laws and regulations to uphold their interests, including specific work hours, overtime payment, strict safety standards, minimum wage and fringe benefits.

It could happen in Bangladesh over time, perhaps in a generation or two, if the garment industry could survive, and the female labourers could retain their jobs and sustain slow but sure improvement in the overall working conditions. Women's financial empowerment is a much better precursor of social progress than comparable financial status of men. The reason is difference in priority, preference and pattern of spending. Most men, especially in lower income groups, tend to spend more on themselves, their whims and hobbies, card games, smoking and drugs, entertainment and fun activities with peers. The main priority for women is family wellbeing, especially health, welfare and education, nutrition of the children. While men are prone to spend, even squander most of their income in a short period, women tend to generate savings for rainy days and try to

maintain a nest egg. These are of course broad generalization but both anecdotal and actual illustrations tend to support the observations. I, for example have seen housemaids forego a good meal and take it home to feed the children, and save money to send children to school; while their day labourer or rickshaw-puller husbands have little time and show scant interest to children's education. It is both an irony and a paradox that in a overwhelmingly, even obscenely, male dominated society, the main catalyst, energy, impetus and contribution for positive and favourable social change is provided by the low level, low earning and largely neglected female work force.

We hear the tall talks, grandiose plans, and observe regal attitude, combined with sweet dreams and cacophonous expression of implementation of these in the short order from successive inert, inept and incompetent governments. A main, perhaps the most important, priority of the current government ought to be to check the eventual sinking of the garment sector, save 15 lac female employees from financial ruin so that they and their approximately 30 lac progeny can survive and prosper. They will do immense good for the economic growth and social progress of the country, and ultimately the enhancement of the quality of life index. Far more than any government can or will do.

Omar Khasru is an administrator at North South University

The lost nakphool

KALYAN KAR

AFTER going through 'the story of Shefali and Joyonti' presented by the Star roving team on the front page of The Daily Star on 10 November 2001, I was stunned for some moments and at the same time my eyes became tearful in anguish. I just could not believe that such horrible incidents happened in our land for which three million sons of the soil sacrificed their lives! I could not make me believe that more than 200 helpless women were raped by their neighbours who are also having their mothers, sisters, daughters and who speak same language Bangla. Yes, the people who did that barbaric acts were not the Pakistani people who did the same thing in 1971.

The barbarous act that took place at Bantor Bari of Lalmonohar upazila under Bhola district was not just an attack on the Hindu women, rather an attack on the whole human society, an attack against humanity and human civilization. On the day more than 200 women lost their *nakphool* (losing *nakphool* means loss of the chastity for woman) at Bantor Bari where they took shelter to save themselves from the atrocities of the perpetrators. Alas! where they took shelter for saving their lives and chastity became the most convenient place for the vermins to accomplish their heinous acts. Oh Bantor Bari (soaked with the blood and tears of the victims), how could you tolerate this? How could you throw bare the helpless women who wanted shelter from you in danger?

Yes, I am asking you, otherwise whom can I ask? Should I ask to the home minister who did not even want to admit the incident and who termed the news of attacks on minority Hindus across the country as false, exaggerated and politically motivated? I don't know, Bantor Bari, how the history will judge you. But I know the shelter seeking women who lost their *nakphool* in your fields will never get that back and how terribly are they surviving!

After the general election, how many women were raped remains unknown. However, the home minister informed the house on 18 November that in the first 25 days of October the police recorded only 263 rape cases. But he did not tell how many culprits were arrested for that.

The inhuman attacks on religious minorities of the country certainly is not a good sign. We are still getting the news of atrocities in the dailies but we are yet to know whether the authorities are taking necessary steps to stop this. The culprits who are responsible for the attack on minorities across the country should not go unpunished. A society where rapists and criminals can move freely can not be a civilized society. The government should take necessary steps to punish the perpetrators and rehabilitate the real victims. It is true, no one can give them back their lost *nakphool*. But if they are given aid and security, they will at least get a way to survive.

Let me conclude offering my salute to the Star roving team.

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

'Great expectations dashed'

The Dhaka University authorities feel constrained to draw your attention to the contents of a letter published under the above caption in The Daily Star (DS) on 21st November 2001, presumably written by 'A teacher of Dhaka University'. With total commitment to restore academic normalcy and with honesty in a non-partisan manner, the university authorities have no intention to get drawn into the students' party politics, as depicted in the anonymous letter. However, the authorities may only refer to an earlier DS report by Abul Kalam Azad, captioned 'BCL struggling to reorganize itself' (October 28, 2001). That report mentioned that the JCD activists were totally eliminated from all the students' dormitories during the previous administration, and they "finally found the chance to regain supremacy after the landslide victory of BNP-led four-party alliance." The report went on to add that the demoralized BCL activists, who until then were in control of the dormitories, "left the campus in the small hours of October 2. Consequently the JCD established its control on the campus without any clash and opposition."

One of the main tasks of the present Vice-Chancellor has been to bring all the students, irrespective of their party affiliation, back to their respective classrooms and dormitories. Accordingly, he has already met the BCL leadership and by now it is widely known that the two major student parties have already agreed to have peaceful co-existence in the campus politics. Persuasive effort, including media support, would be necessary to sustain it.

The second part of the anonymous letter is a deliberate effort to malign the Vice-Chancellor himself and it can only be regretted that a national news daily of the standing of DS has chosen to publish such a personal attack. The Vice-Chancellor has served with honour the University of Dhaka and the nation in various capacities. He certainly now takes it as a matter of great privilege to be assigned with such an onerous responsibility of serving the nation's premier seat of learning and there is indeed a shared pride with the large university community who have been so kind as to extend their wholehearted support, but he is not aware of the kind of political lobbying as claimed by the anonymous writer of the letter. If there is anything specific in the knowledge of the writer of the letter about 'the past record and financial scandal' involving the VC

that may be placed before the authorities, including the court of law for appropriate action, and he should not be made a victim by sheer media trial. The VC himself is quite willing to give a very patient hearing to anybody, even to those having any kind of complaints against him.

Public Relations Officer
University of Dhaka

We agree that we should have deleted the paragraph of the letter referred to above. We apologise to the newly appointed Vice-Chancellor for our oversight and wish him all success in the challenging task ahead. We also assure him of our support if he can really rise above party politics in discharging his duties. -- Editor

Fishing in poisonous waters

For some time now we have watched with anguish how the usual array of vested interests and unscrupulous forces have been blatantly engaged in usurping the public interest and conspiring to grab various portions of the Gulshan-Baridhara Lake (GBL). Matters have now come to such a pass that the entire water body has become a poisonous sore, quite

literally in the heart of the so-called most posh area of the country. While various concerned agencies try to pass the buck to one another in a bid to evade responsibility, the inhabitants of the area continue to suffer in odorous silence.

Protests have been made by different local citizens' groups. There is an urgent need to save this water body from all forms of degradation -- the most serious of which is land-grabbing along the low-lying lake-side areas -- a phenomenon that goes unabated and unchecked despite court orders and injunctions. These force us to ask the basic of all questions: Hello? Is there anybody in charge around here?

Amongst all the fishy business now going on over the lake, the fishiest of all is the attempt by a particular quarter to corner a lucrative contract (Tk. 100 crore, we are told) for development of the lake. The lake does not need 'development' -- on the contrary, it needs to be left alone, free from encroachment, degradation and desecration. We know what some people mean by development -- concrete structures, restaurants, shops -- we have seen enough of those. For God's sake, stop 'developing' this city any further and give its citizen some breathing space. It is essential that

the GBL remains beyond the grasp of the grubby hands of developers and predators.

K.A.S. Murshid
Gulshan Environmental Initiative
Dhaka

To the opposition leader

I voted for AL because I thought it deserved a second chance. I thought that the problems we have are not possible to remove. If BNP comes to power, it will fail as expected but just keep blaming the past. If Awami league came to power it would try to do something in the 2nd innings because it won't be able to blame the past government as itself was the past government. It will do the utmost to maybe improve the situation just a wee bit, if at all possible.

Dear Sheikh Hasina, right from the beginning of the Caretaker Government you blamed the CA to be partial to the other party. But you forgot he was trying to undo what in a desperate and crazy state you did during the last days of your regime.

Don't agitate now. Nobody will love you for it. Everyone wants to get politics behind them and continue with normal life, trying to make up for the losses. Please, accept the situation and begin your new duty as

a wise Opposition leader and not like the past Opposition which opposed anything and everything, whether good or bad.

May God bless you.

L. Rafique
Khulna

Some proposals

(1) The defeat of the Awami League may be surprising to the AL chief and leadership but it was expected as the 'appropriate response' of the silent majority. A vote against the "terror and arrogance" of Awami League. Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina and SAMS Kibria failed to measure the mood of people. I urge the AL leadership to undertake a project to understand what the grass-root level terrorist and leadership did during its tenure. Feni is a case in point.

(2) Field level law enforcing system is not strong enough to eradicate terrorism, thana level police are ill-paid, ill treated and ill-equipped. Due to lack of scope of promotion they are unhappy. A Sub-inspector of police must have the status of 2nd class gazetted officer and opportunity to acquire promotion even up to the IGP.

Nazmur Rahman
A Sub-Inspector of police
Technology at remote

village

Rural people have rich knowledge in the many uses of native plants, farming methods and other alternate systems. The transmission of knowledge has been going inter-generationally for centuries but their knowledge is transmitted orally. So the valuable knowledge resource remain unrecognised and undervalued.

An initiative has been taken in the country to preserve the local knowledge and utilise them in effective ways.

At the first stage, a school has been established in a remote area as a base station for the project which has drawn skilled teachers and students who are doing ambitious things with low cost locally made tools. I believe if proper tools are provided great breakthroughs are possible.

We are now facing some unwanted problems, for which the cooperation from the Ministry of Education and others concerned are requested. I believe we would bring to the Ministry of Education a valuable insight to the problems and possibilities in introducing technologies particularly, ICT Information and Communication Technology at the grassroots level.

Prof. Lutfor Rahman

Dhamondi, Dhaka-1209

Weekly holidays

The present office hours if it is to be changed should be consistent with the practice of most developing nations of the world with two hours break for Jumma Prayer, half day on Saturday and full holiday on Sunday. If it is not possible to declare Sunday as a holiday, then present system of two days holiday (Friday and Saturday) should be followed with the following exception:

All hospital/banks/post office/telephone offices should work six days a week from 8 to 14 hours with normal tiffin break with Friday as a full holiday.

These will help to minimise traffic jam in big cities like Dhaka, Chittagong and would also enable the public to utilise public services like hospital, bank etc. on Saturday or early hours in other working days. The generalist view that every body has to have the same type of office timing or weekly holidays do not fit in well in the modern concept of management.

M. Bazlur Rahman
Uttara, Dhaka