

Opposition must join the parliament

It's a compulsory obligation to the voters

It is a welcome aperture to an otherwise slammed-shut situation. It's a silver-lining around what we would frankly call the clouds of AL's own creation. Opposition leader Sheikh Hasina has indicated her party's readiness to attend proceedings of parliamentary standing committees when these are up and running. But her boycott of parliament she otherwise sticks to, as if it were her privilege to do so. She has conveyed this to none other than World Bank South Asian Region Vice President Meiko Nishimizu who visited Dhaka lately. A modicum of good sense has prevailed upon the opposition not to go entirely out of parliamentary business but to maintain a minimalist presence at the standing committee meetings.

We don't know what to make of the news report in a major Bangla daily which quoted deputy parliamentary leader of the opposition and former speaker Abdul Matin Chowdhury as saying that AL would join the next session of the parliament provided the government created the right atmosphere for it.

It can hardly be overstressed that attendance in the standing committee meetings, in fact, joining the parliament as a mainstream activity is not a matter of choice but a compulsory obligation for the MPs to fulfil. The opposition MPs have been voted to represent us as much as their ruling party counterparts. When we voted for them we put our trust in them that they would attend the parliament sessions, regardless of being elected as the ruling or the opposition party. While you campaigned for the vote, did you make your participation in Jatiya Sangsad conditional upon obtaining a majority in the parliament? So, you are duty-bound to take part in the parliamentary proceedings or it becomes a veritable breach of trust with the people.

The present opposition leader would do us a good turn to remember that as the Leader of the House she cried hoarse in urging the then opposition to end their parliamentary boycott. The reasons she had adduced then for drawing the opposition to parliament are all applicable in her case now. Hasina has no political, far less moral grounds to refuse changing her stance on joining parliament.

That said, we have to bring up the fact also that no official communication has been made by the ruling party to the opposition in a bid to allay the latter's apprehensions of being curbed in its role in the parliament. The ruling party also needs to reprimand and rein in elements that engineered instances of repression on opposition activists after the polls.

But let's reiterate our position unambiguously that joining the parliament is not subject to any give-and-take between the ruling and opposition parties, rather it's a must-do obligation to the people.

Extortion under the nose of authorities in Dhaka!

A phenomenon that outlives change of parties in power

TOLL collection is part of Dhaka life but every time it's reported, the sense of humiliation and helplessness hits us. The Daily Star has reported on the ten toll collection points in Dhaka city operating in the name of transport trade unions. The powerful will always collect money from the less powerful using coercion and the authorities will always look away. So one isn't surprised when the police say that they investigated but found no toll collectors and the trade unions denied all involvement.

The point is, whether it's considered a criminal act anymore or not. Toll collection is a phenomenon that has survived the rise and fall of various governments and seems to be inextricably linked to power, politics and resource mobilization to administer both. There is almost an element of acceptance of such activities. The street level toll collection is only a small indication of a much larger practice.

The MP in question of the Uttara constituency, the trade unionists and the workers union leaders have all said that they are not part of such activities though it's done in their name. That may well be the fact but toll collection and its universality is a bigger fact. Toll collection happens in every place and part of town. It's a fact of urban life and certainly more efficient and regular than garbage collection.

The present BNP government had promised an end to all this when they campaigned and later came to power. But in Bangladesh politics certain issues are always neglected. The party in power always feels invulnerable to the power of public opinion. The recent publication of pictures showing party activists using arms in the campus and the lack of firm action against them by the authorities indicate that this isn't an issue to be considered worth firm handling by powers that be.

The bottomline is that law seems to have definite operational limits. The fact that such illegal activities have been on for decades and continue to flourish under every rule means the malaise is deeper than a simple law and order situation. We hope the present government will see the historic opportunity of ending a system that thrives on endless extortion.

After the Taliban's retreat: Durable peace or dirty war?

PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

THE Northern Alliance has cut through Afghanistan like a knife through butter. The fall of Mazar-i-Sharif and Kabul was sudden. No less dramatic has been the overrunning of all but four of the country's 31 provinces.

The speed of these developments is stunning. Politics and diplomacy have failed to keep pace with them.

Democrats have something to celebrate in the Taliban's retreat. Its claim to popularity based on a religion-politics mix stands smashed.

After five years of darkness, Kabul's playing fields are being used not for public executions, but for football. The music is back in the streets, so are beardless male faces, and above all, women out of burqa.

But those replacing the Taliban are no liberators, no respecters of human values. The Northern Alliance is essentially a collection of former mujahideen thugs, with a horrifying human rights record.

NA constituents ruled Kabul between 1992 and 1996 through death, torture and loot. Such was their pillage, mass rape, and brutality that Mohammed Najibullah's regime, itself no model of democracy and compassion, became

something to be longed for.

In 1996, after 50,000 civilian killings, and thousands of rapes, many Kabulis welcomed the Taliban. At least they didn't rape. And they imposed some order, however despot.

We shouldn't be misled by fond descriptions of the NA as "foot-soldiers" of the "international coalition" or the suave images of NA ministers like Abdullah, Qanooni

strictures, robbed of culture, compassion and even mysticism. They paved the way for the Taliban ideologically, socially and politically.

RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan that remarkable organisation of Afghanistan's only true heroes is against the NA, as well as the Taliban.

This raises questions about Afghanistan's regime succession. It

for a representative, broad-based government. The UN's 6+2 formula has failed. It is proposing a 21-nation grouping and holding a major intra-Afghan conclave in Bonn starting this week.

But the UN faces a credibility crisis. In recent years, it has allowed itself to be kicked around by the US, and even by the Taliban. It has to earn a legitimate role; it can't naturally claim one.

Pushtun Southern segment ruled by the Taliban minus Mullah Omar; and a broadly Tajik-Uzbek-Hazara North. Some people in the US favour such a partition.

Such a "solution" like in India, Cyprus or Yugoslavia could prove much worse than the "problem". It will lead to many Bantustans at war with one another, and none with a viable economy. Warlordism will rule.

That's no cause for New Delhi to exult unless it wants to further lower its dignity and standing. Islamabad has, tactically, played its cards better. It has overcome its international isolation. It has got \$1 billion-plus in aid. New Delhi has only highlighted its Kashmir obsession, while prostrating itself before the US.

Pakistan's "gains" will evaporate quickly. Its mountainous tribal "agency" areas could become the Taliban's main sanctuary. The Afghan "blowback" has already brutalised Pakistan's Northwest Frontier. This could happen to Baluchistan, and even Punjab.

The US must not get entrenched in our neighbourhood. Anything that destabilises this region's existing equations, while strengthening Big Power interests, will work against India.

This calls for a cautious, principled, prudent approach. The best solution might be to place Afghanistan under UN trusteeship for two to three years, during which an interim government, with strong RAWA representation, rules under a multilateral peace-keeping force.

To combine principle with practicality, this solution will need the UN's energisation along genuinely multilateralist lines. The world must give it a chance.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

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and Fahim.

What they hide is the ugly reality of Gen Rashid Dostum, or of the militias who, for instance, in 1997, massacred thousands of prisoners of war after torturing and starving them.

Dostum has a hair-raising record: tying suspected defectors to tanks which would be driven round and round till their bodies were chopped into pieces.... Other NA generals too have used unspeakably barbaric methods.

Most NA militiamen come from mujahideen groups which fought the 1979-89 Soviet occupation with Western (and Saudi) encouragement and arms. The mujahideen's Islam was a penal code of severe

would be a tragedy if one terrible abomination were replaced with a slightly less terrible one.

Ethnic representation is only one of many criteria here. The US has been promoting exiled King Zaheer Shah. Islamabad, having first pooh-poohed Shah, is now falling back upon him as a means of retaining Pushtun influence in the next government.

India, Russia and Iran are pushing their own candidates too. New Delhi's support to the NA, highlighted by the visit of its 43-strong delegation to Kabul, is opportunistic.

There doesn't exist a single force within or around Afghanistan, which can take a dispassionate initiative

Many proposals are on the table for a new Kabul regime: the UN's "six-step" plan, another *loya jirga*, or an "Islamic" peace-keeping force. All of them assume that a broad-based, stable, regime can be created in Kabul until other arrangements (e.g. a Constituent Assembly or general election) follow.

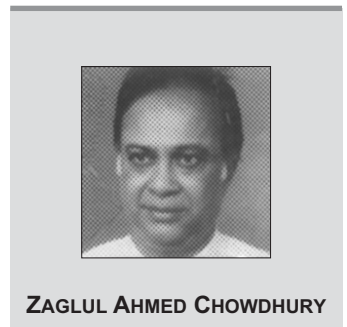
This assumption appears dubious. The contending interests and states have extraordinarily wide divergences. They include sworn enemies: Zaheer Shah and Mr Rabbani, New Delhi and Islamabad, Tehran and Tashkent.

If the UN-backed "provisional council" plan fails, Afghanistan could undergo a partition, broadly along the Hindu Kush: a broadly

This spells lethal trouble for the corruption-ridden Central Asian republics, and more critically, Pakistan. Given the colonial Durand Line's unpopularity among the Pushtuns more of whom live in Pakistan than in Afghanistan this could inaugurate Pakistan's breakup, with unmanageable consequences for India.

That's why we must not jubilate over Pakistan's current difficulties, compounded as these are by the crossing over of 3-5,000 Taliban. Islamabad may have failed to exploit its "frontline" status. With its new bases in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the US is no longer as dependent on Islamabad for military support as it was.

Vajpayee faces twin problems - Fernandes and POTO



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

try some six months ago and it was the most serious such allegation dealing with purchases for the defence ministry since the "Bofors" scandal that once caused election debacle for late prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. Fernandes staged a comeback in the government raising eye-brow in many quarters and creating an embarrassing situation for prime minister Vajpayee. But it is the prime minister who took back his friend Fernandes as the senior minister knowing well that the decision might spark a debate.

curb funding of suspected terrorist groups, confiscate their properties and intercept communications between terrorists. The prime minister said the POTO has become necessary in the wake of the security concerns in the country following the Afghanistan war after the massive terrorist attacks in the United States. India is also fighting separatist insurgents in the Muslim-majority Kashmir and the north-east. However, the critics of the POTO charge that the measure was an attempt to bring back the terror-

which arms security agencies with greater power to tackle terrorism. However, the opposition chief ministers were not much convinced. But it is the Fernandes issue that is creating more headache for the prime minister although it poses no serious problem as the BJP-led ruling national democratic alliance (NDA) enjoys clear majority in the Lok Sabha and there is no threat to its rule or Vajpayee's leadership as the prime minister. Interestingly, George Fernandes is both a "trouble-maker" and "trouble-shooter"

which showed top level persons allegedly taking bribes from journalists who posed as arms dealers. Secret tapes containing conversations indicated that the defence minister might as well be among the beneficiaries of the bribes but he stoutly denied any wrong doings. The incident was a setback to the coalition government of the NDA, of which Fernandes is the convener. He belongs to "Samata Party" of Bihar, whose chief Ms. Jaya Jaitley was also accused as accepting kickbacks. Impression gained

wanted to resign sometime ago out of frustration caused by comments of some leaders of the coalition partners, it was his friend from Bihar, who held ministerial position several times in the long political career, came to his rescue by convincing the prime minister to stay on without his loss of face while managing the problem-creators.

But this time when George returned to the ministry, all is not well for the NDA government and Vajpayee, who did not appoint any defence minister during the last six months that Fernandes was out of office. The prime minister's argument that the country cannot afford to be without a defence minister particularly at the present stage of deteriorating security environment in the region may carry some water but bringing George back before completion of the investigation casts a dark shadow on the question of morality of the government. Obviously, Vajpayee waited to take back Fernandes again as defence minister, but he did it in haste. Not surprisingly, the opposition cannot lag behind in exploiting the issue. Arguably, this issue and POTO will not create any serious problem for the NDA government.

But certainly both the issues, particularly the Fernandes issue has sullied the reputation of the government. Vajpayee is certainly aware of the adverse reactions on the matter but seems to be swallowing them for his friend who is definitely a strength for him although coming from a different party. Needless to say, he played a key role in the formation of the NDA which has benefitted both Vajpayee and George himself.

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MATTERS AROUND US
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Vajpayee is seeking to put up a brave face on the issue, saying allegations against Fernandes were not proved but clearly the step lacked upholding moral values that the prime minister so proudly espouses and for which he is otherwise quite well known.

The decision to re-induct Fernandes into the cabinet and that too with the same sensitive ministry while the matters is still under investigation is a matter of discussions now in the Indian political circles and has received a new boost as the parliament has gone into session. Yet another problem is also attracting criticisms from the opposition parties. Last month the Cabinet approved prevention of terrorism ordinance (POTO) which seeks to

ist and disruptive activities act (TADA) which lapsed in 1995 and was not revived following protests from the opposition parties and national human rights commission that it was "draconian".

The POTO has been criticised by most political parties including the Congress which said it can be grossly misused. True, the new security exigencies in the region may provide a basis for such legislation but the opposition parties are smart enough to smell the possibility of this being used against them. They are trying to keep the pot boiling on the issue.

The prime minister recently explained this to the chief ministers of the component states seeking their support to the tough new law

for Atal Bihari Vajpayee. He created a stir not much after becoming the defence minister by describing China as the "number one" enemy of India and the prime minister had to control his defence minister after opposition parties charged that George was queering the pitch of assiduously nurtured normalisation between New Delhi and Beijing. China had also given vent to its feelings about certain "reckless comments" by the Indian defence minister like that Beijing was building up military strength near the Andamans and Myanmar targeting India.

Fernandes restrained himself but had to resign seven months ago when a news website ran an expose of his defence ministry

ground as to how the defence minister could be innocent when his close aides were allegedly involved and that too in his ministry!

He is a real "trouble shooter" for the prime minister as he succeeded in resolving several crises for the NDA government and the prime minister himself. Vajpayee relies heavily on Fernandes for resolution of political problems and he was not wrong in placing such confidence on George. Whether it was recalcitrant Mamata Banerjee issue or the sensitive matter of adjusting with numerous partners of the government ranging from parties in the south to the north, George has seldom failed in his task to evolve a satisfactory way out providing sigh of relief for the government and the prime minister. When Vajpayee

OPINION

We all are equal citizens, we want to live in peace and harmony

MOHAMMED IDRIS

As well as many others wrote a number of letters/opinions in The Daily Star on the core issue of deteriorating law and order situation which is gradually drifting toward a state of no return as it seems.

As all such writeups were in the form of an appeal to Prime Minister Begum Zia, it would be hard for me to think that what was expressed through the courtesy of the press has escaped her attention or has fallen flat.

As the Prime Minister has stipulated a time frame within which period she would put the house in order the people hope let me not say hoping against hope that she means what she has said and it is no political stunt. But what has been happening since the set up of the new government leaves much to be desired.

Five murders in one day, the BNP cadre leaders being behind the dastardly crimes as reported in the newspapers, the harrowing tales of savagery on the Hindu community in Bhola and last of all the killing of the principal of Nazirhat College have hung our heads in shame.

As the end of the time frame for curbing crime and establishing law and order is drawing near, we see

little sign of improvement of the anarchy situation. The situation has now come to such a pass that criminals are coming to the houses of the people in the guise of plain clothes policemen and are victimising the innocent people as there is no way so far how to identify real plain clothes policemen from the fake ones and even we fear that any of these days it will be even difficult to identify uniformed policemen from the fake ones. While such modus operandi has been adopted by the criminals I would urge our Home Minister and Prime Minister to issue a press release announcing for the security of the public that they should call the police control room by dialing 999 and to request them to come and identify if the people claiming themselves to be members of the police department are genuine or not, and until such time the people should be given the right not to allow them to enter the house or houses.

Security of life and property of the people has become a big challenge should I spare to call it a big question. I just wonder why the situation worsened immediately after winning the election by BNP and it is regrettable that what has been happening runs counter to what we hoped for. There must be something wrong somewhere

otherwise how the criminal activities could so sharply increase despite the assurance from the PM and the Home Minister.

I would like to draw a parallel between the period of the caretaker government and the present period of the newly elected government. During the period of caretaker government there appeared a sense of security among the people who even indulged in fancying that they wished the caretaker government remained for five years as there was created an environment of security with the same existing law enforcing agency. Whereas it was then election time when the atmosphere was charged with emotion. The election being over, a deluge of reshuffle was made both in the civil administration and in the police department with an "honest" intention like the proverbial saying, "The road to hell was paved with good intention." All that matters is the net result, which is far from satisfactory.

I cannot help urging Begum Khaleda Zia to take stock of the present crime situation and to consider herself as one among the people who are not provided with special security, and she should come to grip with the deteriorating condition before time so as not to be stigmatized for misuse.

For the success or failure of the newly elected government it may be said in no ambiguous term that nobody but Begum Zia would be blamed because the people voted her to power to rid the country of all evils. I, therefore, pray that she should prove herself equal to the task by curbing the activities of the so called 'partymen' who are out to create an anarchy situation for her government and I suspect it a ploy which she should not lose sight of.

The atrocity committed on the Hindu community in Bhola bares description and is a disgrace to Islam. Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and people belonging to any other faith lived in harmony all these years. But it is amazing to note that after the election certain quarters have engaged themselves in acts not admissible in Islam.

I would, therefore, like to assure the minority communities in Bhola and elsewhere in Bangladesh that the heinous act perpetrated in Bhola has been done by the bigoted ones and the Muslims in general in Bangladesh strongly condemn this all over. I firmly believe that the present government will do everything possible in its power to create an atmosphere where we shall all live in peace and harmony as the citizens of Bangladesh having no religious barrier.

The Afghan crisis: What's going to happen next?

F AHMED

IN the aftermath of the twin-tower tragedy most fundamental socio-political variables around the world are in a topsy-turvy state. It was in fact the first time in history that superpower USA has been literally hit hard not only physically but also psychologically. The ripples of the twin-towers are what we all can see but what needs to be seen with one's mind's eyes is the psychological break-down the tragedy has caused. With it has been added the threat of anthrax, another deadly menace. There is no doubt that the sudden and unexpected attack on the twin-towers and the Pentagon has made it evident that the world's most developed and the strongest country is also vulnerable and very badly as such. One can only wish the incident had not occurred but what has happened is already a matter of recorded history and the most unprecedented one, too! One wonders how could it not be possible by the USA's ever alert intelligence people to sight those hijacked planes and intercept them, before they could hit the twin-towers or the Pentagon, even at the cost of a few hundred lives, but thus saving thousands as well as prestige and image of the USA? Where were the so-called ever alert defence people?

Now that the incident has

occurred it has left the entire world in a state of confusion, disbelief and hatred. Many of the Jews and Christians are thinking that it was all the doing of the Muslims. Although official reports about the incident pointed at "terrorists" but the epithet "Islamic" was added before that! It is being claimed that the Taleban supported Al-Qaeda did it and so there has now been an almost endless bombardment on the mountains and villages of Afghanistan killing hundreds of innocent people including women, children and the elderly who just don't know why they are so badly under attack and where to for safety. Even if it is agreed that the Taleban helped it and Osama bin Laden was the mastermind behind all these, have the US military operations been able to bring them to book and spare the innocent? Even without being supportive of the Taleban and Osama, any neutral observer would be of the view that it has just been the show of strength by the world's most powerful nation on the poorest, hungriest nation. Millions of people in Afghanistan are living without food and shelter and they badly need clothes and shelter to survive the current onslaught of cruel winter according to all UN officials in and around the area. But who cares! Even many of the UN food depots have been bombed to ashes. It looks like he most powerful is only unleashing its wrath on

the powerless enemy. There seems to be none to soothe the sufferers and tell the USA that the problem could be tackled diplomatically or politically as well at least some attempts could be made that way thus sparing the innocent millions.

Afghanistan being a Muslim country, the bombardment is not being viewed favourably in almost all Muslim countries. The killing of innocent people has antagonised almost all in the 53 Muslim countries as well as peace loving people elsewhere in the world. There has not been any vivid proof of the alleged crime shown, and here has not been any trial but punishment is going on. Is it not unfair, illegal and a flagrant violation of the UN charter and human rights? Or do we have to presume that whatever a powerful nation comes up with is just and right and international law is not applicable for it nor is it available for a poor country for protection of its right to survive? It's just strange that those who are most vocal about human rights are giving a damn to these when it is all in their interest. Who gave the verdict that Afghanistan is at fault and deserves punishment? It looks like the invisible offenders of the twin tragedy are being visibly punished but only on the basis of doubt and suspicion!

The world today is in real trouble. The problem is not just military and political but also economic. There has been a massive decline in

economic activities in the USA and other countries of the West. Income in the USA especially in aviation and related industries has gone down drastically. This has resulted in a general decline in demand in the USA and Europe resulting in decline in exports from countries like Bangladesh. Our garments industry is in the worst position facing literal closure of dozens of units as the USA, which used to be the main buyer of our garment products, is otherwise engaged fighting a war. Our efforts to ensure duty and quota free access to the US market have failed. Export orders are steadily declining just in keeping with the depressed demand abroad. Our people and for that matter the people of India, Sri Lanka etc working in the USA are facing unemployment. This has already adversely affected our remittances. It is thus a vicious circle and no one knows when it is going to end. Even if the war ends now, the aftermath will continue for years and the reconstruction of Afghanistan will need enormous funds but who will be there to help a nation that has earned the wrath of the world's most powerful nation? One would just wonder why did not Afghanistan disown the Al-Qaeda and Osama in its own interest? Taliban are not doing it even now, but with all the evil consequences political as well as economic all over the world. Only God knows what is going to happen next!