

PM's fresh appeal for unity

Let this be followed up by some confidence building measures

PRIME Minister Khaleda Zia's call for unity at the weekly holiday discussion meet on Saturday was impassioned. And it was distinctly so with a greater degree of urgency exuded than had been discerned in her earlier calls for 'consensus', a word which remains a wish patently unfulfilled for the last one decade of democracy. Speaking on the theme *Towards a Liberal Political, Economic and Cultural Order Perspective*, Begum Zia's choice of words was very significant. Her operative expressions were 'estrangement and hostile rivalry' that needed to be replaced by 'national unity and coordination', phrases that certainly are more expressive and vibrant than the 'consensus' cliché.

We could not agree more with Begum Zia's prescription against the ailment: political parties should not indulge in or promote activities that are likely to disunite the people and divide the nation. But the question is how the BNP as the ruling party, with an inherent responsibility to initiate things that help forge national unity, is going about its early tenor-setting role? None can question the prime minister's sincerity of intent or purpose behind the latest call for national unity but since it involves a degree of reconciliation the government has to cautiously avoid giving any mixed signals to the opposition. The opposition has had a sense of persecution, whether one likes it or not. And one can only be ostrich-like to pretend that this does not need to be allayed. Then, a serious, concrete and sustained approach will have to be made by the ruling party at the appropriate level for building some sort of a bridge with the opposition for parliamentary interactions to begin.

This is not to suggest, however, that the opposition must be coaxed into joining the parliament which the voters had actually voted them for, but to urge the government to be more pro-active in building a working relationship with the opposition before it is too late.

We have not yet come to any conclusion that the government is not trying; but frankly speaking, the early signs have not been quite confidence-generating, and that's where the government needs to shift its attention on.

Violence at Sutrapur and DMCH

An old culture in a new bottle

AS politics becomes violent and law and order structures fail to rein it in, it's leaving the internal partisan spaces and spilling into innocent civilian ones. After two people died in a shoot-out at Sutrapur they were brought to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital where the doctors declared them dead. As a reaction to that, the people who had accompanied the victims went on a hospital bashing spree and beat up the doctors. Each event seems to have been triggered by the one before and there is an air of inevitability in all this as the political system threatens to grind to a halt.

It is now BNP gangsters falling into groups that are fighting each other much the same way that AL mafsaas had done when the party was in power. The description of the Sutrapur violence would be as banal as the repetitions of such acts by different political groups across various regimes. No party in power, the present or the past -- have discouraged violence since emerging victorious to rule requires the strength of the muscle more than logic. Thus, violence has not only been established as the functional language of political transaction but as the most useful one as well. Only violence guarantees results. It's the legitimization of this concept that is worrying.

The casualty of gradient violence has been the democratic space. Governing is not the priority but ruling is. Which is why no political promise is sacrosanct and no activity is legitimate to remain in power or overthrow someone to reach there.

Unless the political culture changes to fit civilized democratic shoes the chances of decline of violence is low. It has little to do with incidents of violence or clashes. These are manifestations of a take over by a system of ruling, which has generated a culture of its own now on display.

However, there is hope if we decide to agree that the governing process will be under the umbrella of rule of law and order.

Will Bangladesh become another Nigeria?



AFSAN CHOWDHURY

"Then you have no complaint."

I gave her 5 dollars to get the piece of paper with all the miswritten info. Since then I have rarely travelled with a suitcase. Even today I feel a twitch in my belly when I stand in front of the luggage belt.

So welcome to Nigeria with one pajama, one vest and one shirt. I paid 150 dollars advance to check into the hotel. No money no check-in. Next day I gave my clothes for washing and stayed in my room. I

them to me. Apparently they took two hours to go home. I thought that the South Asian middle class never had to suffer so much. Nigerians ate little, commuted for hours and lived in a world of extreme violence. Now I am not so sure that we are better-off. As Dhaka becomes impossible for mass transit and only car riders have a fine time, it's a sign that the rich who rule have decided to give up and know they can get away with it.

Even in a distant part of Northern Nigeria, from where the ruling class, mostly Muslim army and bureaucracy came, a CSW sitting in a deserted hotel lobby sang the same song.

"Hello Sir."

LIKE in Dhaka and Bangladesh, violence is everywhere in Nigeria. It's nurtured by the political groups and the military but primarily by the

rights leaders including the Ran-some-Kuti brother was arrested. I knew Koye R-K who is a global leader in health care. Fela R-K who recently died of AIDS is a global music legend while Beko R-K is a human rights activist of unparalleled commitment. The present President Gen. Obesunjo was arrested too in that case. It was so transparently dishonest that people didn't even bother to protest. People were being killed at will and I was told to be careful.

oil wealth yet the people are so poor. Shell is often blamed. Money has been pumped out but mostly have flowed to already wealthy pockets. The environment has been wrecked and when I was there they hanged activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and his friends. Some body pushed a leaflet into my hotel room the day he was hanged.

"This is it. They are going to arrest us and execute us. All for Shell."

The Ogunis were hanged and although people right up to Nelson Mandela protested nothing happened. Everyone knows where power lies. The powerful certainly know.

I don't know whether Shell is guilty or not but the Nigerian elite certainly are. Greedy, corrupt, cruel and cynical, they have abandoned their people. In this desertion, the MNCs have assisted. Even by being there, they have helped for the people have suffered because of oil economics.

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

IN Nigeria like in Bangladesh, the Shell Company is not just a company but also news that is bigger than most other news. People are perplexed that they have so much oil wealth yet the people are so poor. Shell is often blamed. Money has been pumped out but mostly have flowed to already wealthy pockets. The environment has been wrecked and when I was there they hanged activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and his friends.

had no trousers to wear.

WHAT one notices in Lagos is the surfeit of cars. Everyone drives in Nigeria. Well, almost everyone. In Lagos they have run out of roads and the cars move with a desperation, which Dhaka never had but now has. In the first few days, I noticed the evening rush hour and was horrified. Hundreds of people would cram into microbuses to be ferried home. The packed buses defied space. More people than one could even imagine would fit in to go home. But then I noticed that they had no buses on the road. No public transport. When I enquired I was told that the government discouraged buses and every time someone imported, they soon broke down. The ministers had a big stake in vans and cars. The roads were unfit for big transports, cars would use the footpath whenever needed and the rich in their MBs didn't have to worry about anything. I once gave a lift to a group of Nigerian colleagues and they were ever so grateful that I was shocked. They bought snacks and stuff and gave

As it happened in Nigeria.

I would stay in my hotel room almost every bloody day because life is terribly unsafe outside if not in a car and I am not interested in any social life anyway. I would stay in my room. Down there as the band played black music, I would watch reruns on the hotel TV. One could also see the commercial sex workers sitting in tables waiting to be picked up. When one day I went down to visit the poolside and drink pink Fanta and listen to the jazz, the plaintive come-ons were heard. I was approached by so many.

"Please sir. Hello sir. Excuse me sir." They are not calls for vendored sex, they are words of beggars looking for money.

My work was all about AIDS and I knew how many had been infected by the fire disease. But these young women were past caring. Sitting with a bottle of beer, barely more expensive than a coke, they smoked lonely cigarettes and waited for a client which meant a meal and maybe some more for another meal. Tanbaraz CSWs ate much better.

desperation of a society which has no opportunities left for making a living. People become armed robbers because they have no option. There are no jobs, no business and no future. Oil has brought so much wealth and misery that it's impossible not to wish that God had spared Nigeria the mercy.

"We have many resources but our leaders have mismanaged everything. We have no hope."

This is the commonest statement made in that country. I wonder in which other country the same is said with such frequency?

But the armed robbers are of a desperate class. They kill and ask questions later. Literally. Everyday about five die at their hands in Lagos alone. About a hundred are hit. Just like in Dhaka, one remembers which road to avoid and which to take. In Lagos the robbers do another thing. They mount armed attacks on wealthy households.

And no one ever calls the police.

THE DAY I landed for the first time, Sunny Abacha gave a timetable for civilian rule. Soon a major conspiracy had also been found and all civil

"Don't move without your UN credentials, when travelling close all the windows, don't talk to strangers and don't visit bars." Adam Mboya was serious.

"I don't go anywhere Adam. I am a hermit."

"Your bags. You got them back?"

"No. Do you think I will?" It's already a month."

"You must try. Never give up hope." Adam smiled encouragingly.

Two months later while going home to Abidjan, two hours from Lagos, Adam got off a bus to cross the state check post and get into another and go home. In front of at least 50 armed policemen Adam was knifed deep. He struggled for a week in the hospital and then gave in.

One of the lasting memories I have of Nigeria is the wailing of Adam's wife, screaming in grief and aloneness. I have never felt so pained that they had no children. I understood she would be alone.

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

Lessons from Enron's collapse: The way out in Dabhol

PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

IN Pakistan, the United States' ambassador is often called the "Viceroy", a figure far more powerful than "the natives". In India too, we may soon have to use that term half-jokingly to convey the imperious pronouncements of Ambassador Robert Blackwill.

On Jan 28, Mr Blackwill said that if India's reform "rabbit" is not to become a "turtle", and then a "rock", it must open up to foreign investment. The key, he said, lies in resolving Enron's dispute over Ambassador Robert Blackwill.

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Mr Blackwill said the dispute over Dabhol--our super-controversial power project--feeds the perception "that India may not be ready yet for big-time international investment." Doubts over "the sanctity of contract... can spell death to potential investors."

The message is: don't punish Enron, however crooked it might be; don't alter the power purchase agreement (PPA) between Dabhol Power Co (DPC) and the Maharashtra State Electricity Board (MSEB). Otherwise, you'll get no foreign investment, you'll become a Burma, you'll perish...

It is incredible that Mr Blackwill should say this just when the Enron mega-scandal has engulfed the US, and bigwigs from President Bush and vice-president Cheney downwards are in the dock

Perhaps Mr Blackwill is only emulating his predecessor, Frank Wisner, who in the mid-1990s lobbied "patriotically" for Dabhol--only to join Enron's board of directors.

The other role-model is former US ambassador to Pakistan Robert Oakley, who in 1996-98 strongly pleaded Unocal's case to the Taliban, and vice versa.

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and the media.

Enron is history's worst case of self-inflicted corporate bankruptcy. It flourished on energy deregulation, bribed its way to dizzying heights, cooked its books, and failed disastrously.

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(himself a former chairman of oil industry giant Halliburton). It made "donations" to 70 percent of all Congressional energy committee members.

Under Enron's pressure, the US National Security Council, says *The Washington Post*, was turned into a "concierge service" fixing Mr Lay's appointments with Mr Brajesh Mishra.

ter- guarantee from the 13-day Vajpayee government in May 1996.

This was the Vajpayee cabinet's sole executive decision, taken during a five-minute meeting. Without these moves, the PPA wouldn't have been approved and India's financial institutions wouldn't have lent it Rs 6,000 crores.

The project was pushed through

The PPA is bad in law, violative of sound economics, and steeped in fraud. It must be scrapped under Section 23 of the Indian Contracts Act 1872 because it violates "morality", civility and "public policy".

A contract is a "voluntary" transaction. But it can't be obnoxious. 'A' can't have a valid contract with 'B' for, say, being brutally beaten up periodically in return for money. National laws override commercial contracts.

The way out of the mess lies in evaluating DPC's assets accurately, and then transferring them to MSEB. Any compensation to Enron must exclude padded-up costs, rigged-up prices, and past losses.

We need a *full-fledged Parliamentary inquiry* into how the deal was made, who took the critical decisions, and when.

India abjectly capitulated to Union Carbide in the Bhopal gas disaster which killed 12,000 people. Carbide got away by paying a pittance. Its Indian subsidiary's ex-chairman Keshub Mahindra has now been honoured with a "Padma Bhushan".

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Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

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Mr Clinton's energy secretary in June 1995 too warned India: "Failure to honour [DPC] agreements... will jeopardise not only the Dabhol project but also most... other private power projects...."

The Bush campaign owes Enron a huge debt. Mr Kenneth Lay, earlier "Kenny Boy" in the White House, donated \$113,800 to it. Mr Lay was central to the evolution of the pro-corporate, anti-environment Bush-Cheney energy policy.

However, Mr Blackwill is mistaken in suggesting Enron is a normal company, dealings with which carry "sanctity". Enron exemplifies all that is sleazy, greedy and unethical in corporations and their unholy nexus with governments

marketage".

Enron has become America's household name for corporate criminality, a potential 21st century Watergate. MIT economist Paul Krugman says: "Enron, not September 11, will come to be seen as the greater turning point in US society".

So much has been written about Enron's doctored balance-sheets, reckless speculative trading, and "befriending" of auditors, politicians and the media (with payments of \$50,000 for a single speech) that one needn't recapitulate the filthy details.

Enron was a beneficiary of Mr Clinton's energy deregulation policy, and a major influence in its further corruption under Mr Cheney

Enron brought influence to bear on successive US administrations, and through them, on Indian politicians, in respect of Dabhol. The project was signed in 1993, but the BJP-Shiv Sena threatened "to drown in the Arabian Sea" until 1995.

Then, under Enron's hectic lobbying, they signed the deal; its size was tripled!

Four things happened: a mid-1995 meeting between Mr Bal Thackeray and Ms Rebecca Mark; Enron's self-confessed \$20 million (Rs. 95 crores) expenditure in "educating" Indians; an improper clearance to the project from finance secretary Montek Singh Ahluwalia, and a "sovereign" coun-

without competitive bidding, and in breach of market principles. MSEB, forced to pay DPC a horrendously high return of 31 to 52 percent, went into the red.

Finally, six months ago, MSEB had to stop buying DPC power. A Maharashtra-appointed (Godbole) committee has made proposals to resolve the imbroglio, but DPC doesn't cooperate. Instead, Enron invokes a PPA clause that shields DPC from Indian jurisdiction and demands overseas arbitration.

This violates Indian law. The pertinent question is not the "sanctity" of the PPA, but how to replace that obnoxious deal. This cannot be done by transferring Enron's 65 percent stake in DPC to the highest bidder.

media, who have adapted Western values, ideology and way of living and always blindly support and advocate the US policies, do not come under above mentioned definition. Some of the Muslim minority sects, who support the US and the Western policies of dividing and therefore weakening Muslims as a whole, also do not qualify for the above mentioned definition, and thus the possibility of their killing or any other action is negligible. Only those Muslims qualify for the above definition, who follow the teachings and orders of Islam (as prescribed in the Holy Quran and Sunnah) in their daily lives, and therefore they are conscious of their rights, duties, values, history, civilization and moral obligations as Muslims, and always raise their concerns and oppose the atrocities being committed on them in their own lands.

OPINION

Terrorism, an implied definition

ARSHAD ALAM