

## March against acid attacks

*Men and women unite under the banner of a common cause*

**W**E congratulate Daily Prothom Alo on their initiative to raise awareness and concern of society in general and males in particular regarding the gruesome phenomenon of acid throwing. There is something particularly pernicious about this crime rooted not just in taking revenge but trying to make someone suffer for a lifetime. The fact that an acid attack victim has to experience life-long suffering in a world, which almost immediately shuts its eyes at sight, makes it a special crime. It's one kind of living that is probably worse than death.

The joint march of men and women is symbolic but we may need a few more symbols at this point of time. While the march will not change the situation at once, it will draw attention, heighten deterrent activities and increase social condemnation, all of which have to be in place if this is to stop.

The crime itself however continues unabated and despite considerable media attention and advocacy in the last two and half decades, substantial change is still not on. A number of laws already exist but the number of those punished is pitifully small. And the length and range of punishment seems oddly inadequate when one thinks of dealing with a crime which condemns a person to living with a life long torment. Jail sentences do end but the effect of acid attacks endures for an entire lifetime in hell.

Death sentences haven't really brought down crime rate dramatically over a period of time either. Given Bangladesh's justice delivery system, one isn't sure that this will happen at all or not. Perhaps it's time to recognize that the crime is a symptom of a problem rooted in our psychosocial makeup that needs addressing. Ultimately, we must resolve the twists that have emerged in all the sectors, be it law and order or mental make-ups.

The fact that we have become one of the more infamous people in the world for our violence against women should cause us some shame. Unfortunately, we seem to be undeterred and appear to be able to live in happy co-existence with the brutal side of our face. One hopes the Prothom Alo initiative will lead to re-examination of our selves and help us address not just the public issues of law and order but the private demons as well that make us commit gender violence.

## CNG setback

*Boils down to planning failure*

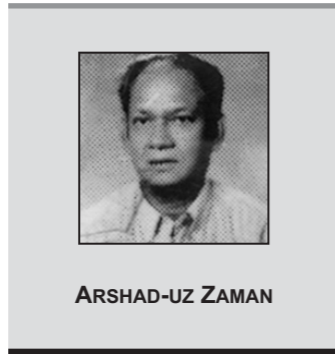
**I**T seems air pollution by two-stroke auto-rickshaws, some 60,000 of them, in the capital city has been of secondary significance to the government, if not less. That combustion of petrol and lubricant oil results in deadly carbon monoxide is known to all. That thousands of people risk acute respiratory failure for breathing extremely polluted Dhaka air day in and day out is also known. Yet, after so many years of suffering the malady topped off by numerous workshops, seminars, symposia and citizens' rallies, thousands of auto-rickshaws regularly spew death into the Dhaka air. The government for its part after an initial roar to regulate the three wheelers appears somewhat muffled in its determination.

The much-vaunted pilot project for conversion of two-stroke auto-rickshaws into CNG-run ones has fallen flat on its face and left us, the residents of the capital, looking at the grim future of inhaling more poisoned air for an indefinite period. The government has a note of assurance for the citizens though -- the decision to shelve the project has been taken in view of its recent decision to withdraw auto-rickshaws from city roads by August this year. Mind you, we are looking at the prospect of their wholesale elimination in a few months' time? The promise has a familiar hollow tone, one might suspect, from the standpoint of realism.

There has been a lot of talks during the previous government's tenure about phasing out two-stroke auto-rickshaws and replacing them with environment-friendly four-stroke ones in five years. Not much was achieved in that direction, one can very well see. The incumbent government had started its tenure with a battle cry against the auto-rickshaws and weathered, it seemed, initial resistance from the auto-rickshaw drivers' union. But what next? Its mission towards a pollution-free city air seems to have lost its steam. The failure of the CNG project could only heighten people's doubt over the environment ministry's resolve to get the problem over with.

Nevertheless, we would like to give the government the benefit of doubt and believe that shelving of the project is actually a precursor to a further effective and efficient move to root out deadly two-stroke engines.

# Challenge before Vajpayee



ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

**M**IDWAY during his tenure of office as Prime Minister of India, Atal Behari Vajpayee is faced with the biggest challenge of his government. This cool, unruffled leader of the largest democracy of the world, how he handles the situation, would be well worth watching.

Prime Minister Vajpayee has been faced with a multi-pronged challenge for some time. The first challenge came from Pakistan following the 11 September terrorists' attack in New York and Washington DC. In December last year, the citadel of Indian democracy, the Lok Sabha, came under terrorist attack, by self-confessed Pakistan terrorists. This offered the perfect opportunity to the Indian Government to continue with added vigour the campaign against Pakistan, to brand it a

terrorist state. The world situation appeared to favour the Indian stance. Following the terrifying terrorist attack on US targets (for the first time in US history on US soil itself) the US carried the war into Afghanistan against the Taliban regime, who were harbouring the mastermind of the terrorist attack-- Osama Bin Laden. Pakistan dramatically switched sides: From the creator and protector of the Taliban, Pakistan eagerly joined

parties like the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress. Most Prime Ministers of India have come from this state including the famous Nehru family. In the last election BJP had come on top and had succeeded in forming government at the centre in New Delhi by allying itself with smaller parties.

The latest elections in four states--namely Uttar Pradesh, Uttaranchal, a newly carved state

are going to play key roles.

Before the election Vajpayee had emphatically stated that the elections were no referendum on his administration in Delhi and they would have no impact on his government there. So far Vajpayee had a relatively smooth sailing since it was BJP, which has been ruling in Uttar Pradesh. The fact that BJP has been ousted in all four states, is bound to cast its shadow over Indian politics as a whole.

devotees returning from Ayodhya. Some 70 passengers are reported to have been burnt alive. This triggered a backlash among the Hindus, who in turn roasted alive Muslims in Ahmedabad. The death toll has crossed 400 and large scale damage of Muslim property has taken place.

The Government of India has taken stern steps to stop the riot and military has been called out to assist the police and para military forces,

of the Babri Masjid, which resulted in the death of several thousand Hindus and Muslims. Since Muslims are vastly outnumbered, the brunt was borne by them.

Atal Behari Vajpayee presides over a delicately poised coalition which at the best of times has a razor thin majority. The government functions because it is agreed by all that Vajpayee is the ideal man of the situation. Although belonging to the Hindu fundamentalist BJP, he has the perfect image of a statesman, who would not allow passion to get the better of the situation. Indeed he has been swift to call the army and quell the situation. He has been quietly working to gain time on the vexed Rama temple issue and hoping that the passions would die down. Yet there are elements within his party, who would not allow him respite.

The latest events enfeeble the hands of Vajpayee. From the purely arithmetic point of view there is no change in the situation. Yet the elections have demonstrated that Indians as a whole do not expect Vajpayee-led coalition to deliver the goods. Yet no clear alternative is discernible. Fortunately for India and the region and as a matter of fact for the world, Indian democracy has come to stay and, therefore, no violent change can be anticipated.

Arshad-uz Zaman is a former Ambassador

## THE HORIZON THIS WEEK

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hands with the US in its destruction of the Taliban by raining bombs and sending a massive military force. Thus Pakistan, who had become a 'pariah' state because of the military dictatorship ruling that country, was eagerly embraced by the west and principally the US. Thus India's efforts at isolating Pakistan from the West did not bear fruit.

Elections have been held in four Indian states, the most important of which is Uttar Pradesh. This is the most populous state of India and is the traditional heartland of large

from the large Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Manipur, in the east, were fiercely fought. The results of the elections were nothing short of a disaster for the BJP, who lost in all four states. In the three relatively small states the main beneficiary appeared to be the congress. In Uttar Pradesh, whose results were watched and analysed avidly, BJP was relegated to the third position behind the two Samajbadi parties BSP and SP. In the formation of the government in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh, these two parties

To compound the challenges faced by Vajpayee, has been added the bitter Hindu-Muslim rioting in Gujarat. As in the past the focal point of the Hindu-Muslim dispute is Ayodhya, where Hindu militants are hell bent to build a temple devoted to their mythological figure Rama, where until 1992 stood the famous Babri mosque of the Muslims, named after the founder of the long reigning Mughal dynasty Jalauddin Babar. This time around bloodletting was triggered by an attack on a train carrying Hindu

who were vastly outnumbered. The presence of the army has had a salutary effect and the situation has calmed considerably. Prime Minister Vajpayee in a nationwide telecast has told of his grief and shame at the terrible events taking place in India. Of all the challenges facing Vajpayee, none is more intractable than the one surrounding Ayodhya. The Indian subcontinent has been the theatre of numerous communal bloodletting including one surrounding Ayodhya, following the demolition

# Why should the public be punished and pay for the sins they do not commit?

A. K. FAEZUL HUQ

**P**ROBABLY in less than three-and-a-half month's time, the redoubtable Finance Minister of Bangladesh, Janab M. Saifur Rahman, will be presenting the country with his much awaited budget; the first of the present four party (or two party?) alliance in the Parliament. Rhetoric apart, there will be unlimited and lengthy discussions--both relevant and irrelevant--centering around the proposed budget, and who knows, it may even turn out into a real session of 'hot discussion' if the main opposition, i.e. the Awami League (AL) wisely decides to join the budget session putting across its own views for the ruling party to ponder over and consider. In the meantime, whichever way the wind blows, one thing is quite certain. By the evening of 30th June 2002, come what may, even if, God forbid an earthquake of the highest intensity measuring 8.5 or 9 on the Richter's scale hits the country, Janab Saifur Rahman's budget will be passed. Nothing to grumble about and nothing to complain; since that is precisely our crude way of working, and I can assure everyone that no power on earth can bring about a change at any time!

On the other hand, the discussions that will follow the presentation of the budget itself will most probably cover 90 percent matters that have absolutely no relevance or connection whatsoever with the annual document of the country's accounts that is presented with so much of a fanfare. Our MPs as usual, (and we were no exceptions) will utilize every second of the precious time they get, to either highlight their own (constituency's) perennial problems or sling mud at their absentee political opponents

**...the poor public is most unfairly and unjustly made to pay through their throats today for the cumulative sins committed by us-- the (elected and self imposed) politicians and the permanent bureaucrats; all of whom thrive upon the miseries and generosity of the common man.**

with all the force at their command. And the poor public will have to bear the brunt of these exercises and take it lying down, since they have no alternatives or avenues to voice their protests effectively. The most that we may see or can expect to see as a ritual, after the national budget is presented, indicating some sort of a protest, will be perhaps the so-called militant procession comprising of some mid-level leaders, tired and hungry party workers and the easily available poor street urchins, followed by may be, a protest rally of a few hundred more people and then the usual set of terse press statements which are drafted much in advance to give an impression that the opposition is quite active and very much kicking! This obviously reminds one of Shakespeare's tale of an idiot, "which was full of sound and fury, signifying nothing".

Now the reason why I have chosen to write on this particular subject so early in the day, is to bring to light certain basic facts which we all tend to skip over or (conveniently) forget. The Hon'ble Finance Minister, whose reputation as a man and a politician has so far remained untarnished, and who is genuinely regarded as an important figure in the present government and who means business and can thus deliver the goods, however needs to be cautioned well in advance. Of course the age factor seems to have taken its definite toll on him also to some extent, as is evident from his blunt and less-tactful utterances in

the recent days; yet the undiluted truth that he has uttered a little too early (has already witnessed a number of 'hi-cups', which haven't been relished by his own colleagues either), but which will eventually bring in the dividends that the nation is so anxiously waiting for. My humble advice therefore would be to go ahead vigorously and give a damn to what the opportunists and the naughty people say; concealing the master plan and the strategy till the final goal is achieved. For example, there is absolutely no need to spell out the real strategy with regard to the 'Rin-Khelafis' (or the bank defaulters) till each and everyone is hooked properly; because Bangladesh is that blessed country where even an ant like secret cannot be hidden anywhere.

Now coming back to our original topic, I would like to start with that many splendoured word called 'system-loss', which has already eaten-up a good portion of our health and wealth. Imagine the extent of our adaptability; we are completely at home with say, a system loss of 40 percent in the energy sector, 25-30 percent in the water sector (WASA), and another 15-20 percent in other sectors. Why should our foreign friends, I mean the donors, pump in their money into our coffers, knowing fully well that 30-40 percent of that precious amount would simply vanish sooner than one can even visualize and that also due to the absence of accountability? Consequently, due to the wastage in the form of an unending

'system-loss', the government of the day also has to continuously raise the electricity, water, gas and telephone charges at regular intervals, much to the chagrin of the customers and albeit at the cost of its own popularity. Would there be any need to raise or enhance the rates of the utility services if the 'bloody' system-loss is effectively contained? Certainly not. Yet no government in the past, and not even today has ever given the matter a serious thought that it so rightfully deserves. The reason is quite clear. None of our national leaders these days want, or have the guts to touch the imaginary hornet's nest (i.e. the CBAs and other powerful Trade Unions), lest their own citadels are turned upside down. The status quo, our working partners, the bureaucrats, and we politicians believe is the best remedy. Why disturb the equilibrium when the 'stupid' public automatically gets used to everything in a week's time or gets tired and resigns to the fate, sooner or later?

Now my question is: How long can this state of affair be allowed to continue and why? After all, "the whole art of government consists in the art of being honest". (President Thomas Jefferson). Is there no one who can protest and lead us, as we witnessed on the morrow of 21<sup>st</sup> February 1952 or the evening of 26<sup>th</sup> March 1971, when the whole world starred in awe and we raised our voices and fists in unison; that brought us not only our right to speak in our own mother tongue but also the much sought after freedom

as well.

Reverting back once again to our core topic, I would like to assert that there is no need of imposing any new taxes by the successive governments every year, if the already imposed ones are collected properly. Today, the Finance Minister of the country with all his sincere intentions, is left with no alternatives or options but to impose new taxes, just because the previous fiscal's collections were either too poor or not up to the mark. Well, that is not a very good excuse gentlemen. The public may legitimately demand severe punishment for such defaulters, if they cannot perform their duties properly as assigned, as servants of the Republic which nourishes and sustains them. How do the officials in India, Japan, Malaysia or even Singapore perform similar jobs so efficiently and effectively? The answer is quite simple. Sheer absence of accountability makes all the difference. We have all the bounties of Allah in Bangladesh, except accountability. Anyone, to be frank, can literally do any wrong and get away with quickly, because there is no accountability at any stage.

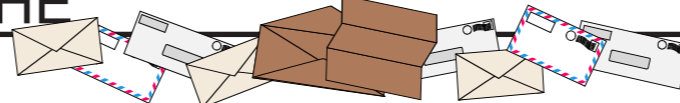
What is the solution then; and let us talk of simple ways instead of the time consuming ones. The solution, in fact, lies in catching hold of the top bosses first before going down the ladder. Each functionary at each and every step should be made responsible and accountable for lapses of all kinds. And for a fool-proof system to work efficiently, the

big bosses should also have their own mechanism to hook the culprit(s) so that they may not, when their turn comes, take recourse to lame excuses and pass on the buck to their junior colleagues and subordinates. Of course he or she would deserve all help and assistance from all corners, because it is definitely a tough job in a society which has been polluted beyond imagination. And once the culture and tradition of accountability is restored, corruption and dishonesty will automatically vanish from the scene.

Unfortunately, the poor public is most unfairly and unjustly made to pay through their throats today for the cumulative sins committed by us-- the (elected and self imposed) politicians and the permanent bureaucrats; all of whom thrive upon the miseries and generosity of the common man. It is the duty of the government of the day therefore to be most courteous to the members of the public at all times. They must listen to their 'feryaads' (prayers) patiently; extend the helping hands whenever needed and work for the welfare of its citizens without the thought of favours in return. And as John Milton had so wisely said: "When complaints are freely heard, deeply considered, and speedily reformed, then is the utmost bound of civil liberty attained that wise men look for". Only then can we really think of a 'Sonar Bangla' in the literal sense of the term. Otherwise it will always remain a hoax or a dream as it has remained till now.

A. K. FAEZUL HUQ is a lawyer and former MP/Minister

# TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



## "An open letter to Mr Faezul Huq"

I am surprised to find out that Mr. Kibria, the former Finance Minister, pays attention to what's written in *The Daily Star* ("An open letter to Mr Faezul Huq", March 9). I wish he would have read a little bit more when the Awami League was in power. But, I do congratulate him for picking up a pen, and not pursuing the AL's self-destructive ways of making a point by calling harts.

Mr. Kibria articulated his point, as an obedient loyalist should have done. It is quite evident that AL does have a leadership crisis, as well as BNP. If not, then why can't we think of a Leader from these two main political parties outside the ruling families?

Moreover, the main reason of these two lady's ascension to political leadership was not due to their vision or political capabilities; they came to power because they either carried the name of their father or their husband.

A party or a country is doomed if there are no avenues to nurture new and visionary leadership. No wonder, in our country history repeats itself every 5 years. We cry for a change, but how will there be a change when these so-called leaders go blazing guns with open hatred for each other? What a great qualification for our esteemed leaders of the nation!

Dissension is an accepted democratic attitude. The Awami League never had the aptitude to accept changes; this party fought for democracy on the street, and still could not develop enough demo-

cratic sophistication to shed the street-fighter mentality and move on to the people's assembly called the Parliament.

Awami League is still in a self-destructive time warp, cannot go beyond its past limitations. What it needs a new visionary leader to steer the party in to the future and offer the country a fresh breath of healthy political environment.

**Nafees K USA**

## Celebrating Women's Day?

As the International Women's Day was celebrated, gorgeously everywhere in the world, I can't help but ruminate on the fact that women in Bangladesh are still oppressed and humiliated in many ways in these men dominated society!

As I was on my way to the hospital to visit my ailing friend, my rickshaw had to stop due to a small crowd on the roadside, curiously hovering over something! For a moment I thought there had been an accident, but when I heard the muffled laughs and giggles coming from the crowd, I knew it was something else. When I came to know the truth, I was stunned!

To my utter disbelief, I saw that it was a poor woman being punished by a policeman, for carrying a polythene bag. Her punishment was to hold her ears and sit up and down. This punishment she had to face because she was unable to pay Tk 500 as a fine, to the policeman. The policeman could have punished her in some other way, rather than humiliating her in front of a large crowd. And needless to

mention, the crowd, consisting of all men, enjoyed it thoroughly! How I wished to go and help the poor women in distress, but being myself a woman too, I was helpless! Shame on us! When the whole world is celebrating "Womanhood" the women in our country are being oppressed and humiliated in every possible way! We are still living in the dark ages and I wonder when we will reach the 21st century!

**Rumi Ahmed Little Jewels School, Katalgarj, Chittagong**

## AL protests attack on Sheikh Hasina

AL supporters have brought out processions protesting the attack on their leader with great alacrity. When are they planning to protest the murder and rape of Sabina and Mahima? Or is that not an important enough issue for AL?

**MA Dhaka**

## VAT of gas bill

I hope Mr Mohammad Faizur Rahman reads this who wanted to be clarified on the VAT of gas bill. As a fellow reader of *The Daily Star* I am giving the information as best as I could gather.

The Bank has misguided Mr Mohammad Faizur Rahman by saying the figure of Taka 193 is all the VAT, which of course seems irrationally higher than the price of gas Taka 157.

Actually the Taka 193 is not only VAT but it is rather SD/VAT, i.e. Taka 193 consists of two components SD and VAT which together is termed as "Sharkari His-sa" (Government

Portion). Lastly, SD stands for Supplementary Deposit whatever that means!

**A Distressed Observer Chittagong**

## Biman-- a losing concern

A few months ago our newspapers published reports about the huge losses of our national Airline -- "Biman". The reports gave detailed accounts of the routes that were incurring huge losses. One of them is Dhaka/New York/Dhaka route. It was mentioned that for every trip to New York Biman's loss is Tk 80 lakhs. Biman has got three offices at New York, San Francisco and Toronto to draw passengers for this sector. But it has miserably failed to operate this route profitably. It was alleged that this route is still being operated to keep a section of Biman officials and other high government officials and their children "happy" at government cost.

Look at the British Airways and other famous International Airlines who have already taken very bold/firm action to save them from ruin and destruction. British Airways recently announced that they are sacking 5,800 officials/staff and selling a few jumbo jets. They will also close some unprofitable routes along with their offices.

Under the circumstances it is imperative that Biman takes firm decision to close down all unprofitable routes/offices immediately to save it from 'bankruptcy'.

**MAlam, on e-mail**

## Shame on our government

What is happening to our women and teenage girls? How can people in the Law Ministry just keep quite about the rape issues? As long as these two ladies are in the power, things will never change and this will remain the way it is. These two ladies are just the two sides of the same coin.

I am simply shocked, outrageous, angry with this whole issue of overlooking the matter and simply not doing anything to catch these culprits and give them capital punishment. How can we organise ourselves and take steps to compel the government to arrest them and punish them right away. Please *Daily Star*, show us the way.

Newspaper can play as a strong medium to bring justice into light and we look forward to seeing that.

**AAhmed, on e-mail**

## Learning Arabic

I am utterly baffled by some of the responses that your online edition has been inundated with concerning the issue of Arabic language instruction in your schools.

I believe that learning any language is a powerful asset; indeed, Arabic is a powerful economic asset given the flow of labour into major Arab markets.

Most of your responses have been festooned with ego, prejudice and nationalistic pride, all of which do nothing for the economy. Given the fact that Bangladesh is a predominantly Muslim country, the issue of Arabic in your schools must be given greater attention and sensitivity.

I am surprised that some would question the language of the Quran. Maybe the relevance of the Quran

## "Basant Utsav in Pakistan"



**Basant Utsav: Un-Islamic?**

I appreciate that you have published the letter of Mr. Iqbal Ahmed and Mr. S. Abedin regarding *Basant Utsav* in Pakistan. I request the *khatib* of national Baitul Muqarram Masjid Maulana Obaidul Huq to please say something (not give *fatwa*) about it. We understand that his prohibitions are only reserved for the events and norms associated with Bangla culture.

We ask Maulana Obaidul Huq (khatib) to please withdraw the *fatwa* he gave against the *Pahela Baishaki/Bangla Nobo Barsho* festival.

**J. Taher Banani, Dhaka**

and its fullest comprehension is overstated in Bangladesh. Some of your respondents display an uncanny disregard for their religion in favour of nationalism. It is a tragedy to see new converts from Western countries embracing Arabic, whereas our brothers in Bangladesh lambaste its usefulness.

**Firas Al-Atraqchi Vancouver, Canada**

I would start off with a line from a letter by Mr. Dorji where he states "... anyone trying to promote Arabic in the school curriculum should be dealt with extreme prejudice." Is he saying that we cannot have a difference of opinion on the topic of introducing Arabic in schools? Why can we not discuss on issues without being labelled one way or the other? Everyone has a right to his or

**Mahmudul Huq Khan New Jersey, USA**