

AL must first join the parliament

And then claim chairmanship of standing committees

It is well over six months since the Eighth Parliament was formed. The Opposition has boycotted it from day one reducing its representative character and interfering in its functioning as the basic institution of democracy. Moreover, parliamentary standing committees are yet to be constituted. This has made matters worse, because standing committees are crucial to ensuring transparency and accountability of various government ministries.

The overriding necessity is that the opposition join the parliament. Membership or chairmanship of standing committees come next. It is only by attending the Jatiya Sangsad that the opposition MPs can legitimise their claims and entitlements to the powers, functions, privileges and status as elected representatives of the people. We will, therefore, urge them to go to the Jatiya Sangsad, attend the plenaries and speak for the people in order to justify their very election as MPs, let alone their oath of office as such. By holding the JS ransom to their whims they are committing a grave betrayal of the trust their constituencies have reposed in them in addition to dealing a body-blow to the parliamentary system. This is illogical, unforgivable and repugnant to fundamental democratic ethos.

As they join the Jatiya Sangsad they will be in the mainstream of parliamentary business, effectively placed to take issues with the Treasury Bench, including that of their weightage on the committees as members or chairmen. Rather than carping from the wings, that we think, is the way to go. The opposition has 58 members in a 330-member parliament. It is asking for one-fifth representation both as chairmen and members of the 49 standing committees there are. For the chairmen's slots, the opposition wants ten allocated to it. This is not justified by precedent, because during the AL rule, not a single BNP MP was made a committee chairman. Even so, as the opposition walks into parliament, the ruling party could strike a compromise formula with the former to take AL MPs as chairmen on some crucial oversight committees, the public accounts committee being the most prominent among them. This being an election pledge with the BNP, the party should be able to provide some important chairmanship berths to the opposition.

But our sole point of emphasis is that the AL's legitimacy of claims to all privileges and powers as MPs hinges on their joining the parliament. They should do it without any ado now.

Denmark makes up for the breach

Still, 'the intent towards corruption', as alleged, needs probing

THE government of Denmark has put an end to a diplomatic deadlock its Under-secretary of State Peter Lysholt Hansen created by alleging Shipping Minister Akbar Hossain of a "serious intention towards corruption in the tendering process concerning rehabilitation of four ferries". The Danish government has admitted that the press comments Mr Hansen had made on April 13 were a breach of diplomatic norms and took note of Bangladesh's concern over the embarrassing episode.

While sticking to the decision for withdrawal of US\$ 22 million grant, earmarked for the inland water transport sector this year, it has expressed willingness to 'continue undeterred' co-operation with Bangladesh in different development activities. It augurs well in terms of strengthening the bilateral relations between the two countries which have been traditionally friendly.

Nevertheless, one must say, the episode has put a question-mark on the handling of the ferry repair and rehabilitation project at our end. The Danish government has backed away from a possible diplomatic deadlock all right but not quite from the allegations its under-secretary had brought against the shipping ministry. Therefore, it is imperative for the government of Bangladesh to streamline things on the home-front. A committee should be set up right away to get into the heart of the matter. The inquiry should be independent of any interference, either from the government or the ruling circles, and its findings made public in their entirety to set public misgivings at rest. And should any foul-play be detected, the individual or individuals responsible must be appropriately dealt with. After all, it is not a fistful of dollars we are talking about, we are dealing with the country's image.

The government must realise that lack of transparency and accountability in its dealings can lead to a dwindling confidence in our system. Taking the Danish episode as an example, we must perfect our aid utilisation procedures by underpinning them with a co-ordinated supervision. An elected government should feel obligated to the people to let them know how it is using aid money.

Do you remember April 29, 1991?

The sea of sandmaids



AFSAN CHOWDHURY

EVERY year I try to remember the people and the children who were assassinated by the April sea in 1991 in the coastal parts of Chittagong. More than a decade later they are memories for some, forgotten by many and not even part of the memory for most. Yet, on that day, on that deadly Baishakh day, thousands - as many as 120,000 by some estimates - were killed in a single night. Till now I can't forget their socket less eyes staring at the living and the dead.

He was a young, extremely endearing chap called Duke, who worked for a tobacco company, was posted in Cox's Bazar and lonely as hell. He knew me as a friend of someone senior to him and came to the motel where so many of us UN Walla's had converged for our annual "retreat" that month that year. It was an opportunity to think about the future in peace, comfort and calm. Duke took me in his dune buggy to meet the sea. It was early night and the sea seemed like a prehistoric animal raging at men who stood still knee deep in water, fishing for prawn hatchlings. Bent over their nets they seemed so much like farmers furrowing an unwilling land. Their young children populated the beach deserted at night except for the harvesters who come to collect a meagre living from a mad sea where no mermaids dare to live. They separated the hatchlings from the debris of the brine and also cooked the meals they would eat with their fathers, mothers.

"You can take my picture sir, no

problem." The girl, naked to her waist with a bony ribcage, stood out with a smile so attractive I took a shot, one of the few photographs that I ever took which came right. She had put a *gamchha* in front of the cooking pot as a shield against the wind and blowing sand, a tattered and failed flag.

"My *abbu* says the sea is angry. My *abbu* says funny things." She smiled again. Duke gave a resume of all the camera shots he had planned of taking but never did. The last time I saw him was at Hotel

sands, many thousands.

Within a week after departure I was back again. I was back in a world where the architecture of environment had been reduced to trees without leaves and twigs without branches. In Chittagong city you didn't see the dead because by then they were already gone. You saw the dead trees: huge, awesome, magnificent in death. They lay like patriarchs, waiting with immense dignity for the clan to mourn. Many of us shall always remember the trees and their final

repairing these water sources without rest for days and days like so many of his colleagues. Such a strange lot of men, these unknown heroes of the 1991 cyclone, who repaired tube wells and prevented more misery than any one group. They saved lives and if today they are purveyors of death by arsenic, that day they just were saving lives in a way no order can achieve. I can't think of anything more courageous than what the tube-well people did, monotonously, efficiently, wonderfully.

except that of the sea. There were no people because most had been washed away. The rest had run away from that killer sea. The trees were without leaves and the wind rushing through village met no one, not even a rotten twig with which to play and make a sound.

The man was begging me to take him away with me in our vehicle, which was haranguing people to get their children immunised.

"I can't take it anymore. I want to go back where ordinary people live.

She said all this with the calm of describing an afternoon meal, this death of all her children. No panic, no screaming, just plain facts.

It was Barua who rescued me, this man a few months away from retirement who must have seen this before and knew she had lost her senses and would explode anytime.

"This always happens in disasters, don't let his bother you. You don't have to feel. Relax, think of your own family. Forget this. Everyone has to go one day."

That's perhaps what I could never understand. Why did they all have to go and for what? I have seen 1971 very closely and understand the political logic and the price people pay for constructing states but what did these people get? What did they want? What did it mean to die within a matter of hours in a sea storm, which attacked the land people?

"Don't try to understand what you can't. It's not for yours to understand. I don't understand but you mustn't try to? Promise me that?"

I promised that to Barua who repaired his hand mike with his own money and walked the ravaged areas asking people to drink boiled water. Who soon retired but stayed back because I asked him to.

*Dear Sir,
This is Barua from the health department. I have walked the Cox's Bazar seashore area with the picture of the young girl but failed to find her. Many of them were washed away people say. But new people have come and taken their place. The trees are not so bare anymore either. They are slowly turning green, full of leaves. Many see hope in them. Don't worry too much. Have faith in your God.*

Our sea doesn't have any mermaids but that day in April I saw the sandmaids to whom the sea belongs.

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

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

... I visited a habitat of over 3,000 people to report on an extreme situation. I couldn't first understand what was odd. And then it struck me. There was no noise except that of the sea. There were no people because most had been washed away. The rest had run away from that killer sea. The trees were without leaves and the wind rushing through village met no one, not even a rotten twig with which to play and make a sound.

Sonargaon where he was part this company which was dealing in stocks when the boom was on. Or maybe he has gone away to Australia. Or maybe both.

Nobody bothered about the danger signals that were being announced by mike carrying rickshaws. It was No. 10 and we stood and laughed. We were laughing because so were all others.

"These people are always announcing danger signal 10 but nothing happens. Nothing has happened for 10 years. Why should it happen now?" This was collective wisdom.

As these people learnt with a deadly price, never take the sea for granted. Not that raging, angry hungry sea.

Just two days before the storm struck I was in Bogra. The morning after, I was ordered to return to Dhaka. By nightfall, I was in and the horrific details were coming in. The dead were being counted in thou-

sleep in a rumbled, tumbled world.

If you have stood near a shoreline and looked as far away as possible and seen only the gently lapping of waters with corpses hugging the shore as far as eyes can bear to see, you may never want to see again. Seeing the dead, the putrid, bloated corpses, stuck to each other along with insects, rats and animals, as company is a reminder of the conquest of maggots. As if this was a festival of death, a jamboree of the dead who had come from all over to lie and enjoy the wonderful Bengal sun. I remember that the stench of the dead would never go away, never leave the clothes no matter how much one washed as if the odour of death had become lonely and stuck to the living. I would wonder whose smell of death did I carry?

"There will not be an epidemic because people aren't drinking any water." The man was a government tube-well mechanic, who went on

Lord, was it a circus? Of course, it was. There were more journalists and TV crew in Hotel Agrabad than ever before or after. There were more rescue vehicles than anybody could count, more foreigners than anybody had eve seen, more people than from anywhere who didn't know what to do.

"We are from Japan. We deal in earthquakes. We are specialists and have come to help you." He smiled, bowed and almost rescued me in his bright orange uniform.

I didn't have the heart to ask him what he was going to do in the coast where no buildings had crashed because none were there.

It was the spirit of it all.

At a remote area of Banskhalhi where we were assisting the setting up of a diarrhoea management centre, I visited a habitat of over 3,000 people to report on an extreme situation. I couldn't first understand what was odd. And then it struck me. There was no noise

Please." He began to weep and me, from Dhaka with a white Pajero, money and authority, took the volunteer in. Once inside the car, he suddenly screamed and began to cry. It was so sudden and so odd that we stopped the car.

"They will tell me more, they will tell me more. They will tell me how their parents had died. Stop, stop, I can't hear anymore."

Nothing simpler could happen. He was being killed by other people's memory, the memory of the survivors.

"When the roof flew away, I was holding my two kids. But the wind was so strong that I couldn't save others. I don't know what happened to them. I reached a palm tree and tried to take shelter but both my hands were tied. Then I let go my one son and with that free hand I held on to the tree. But the wind grew stronger and I let go the other hand and the wind carried the second one away. Now I have none, no one."

Global flak over Gujarat : Injured innocence won't do

PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

AS the world recoils in horror at the Gujarat violence now in its third month, and almost as bad as that in Palestine India's ministry of external affairs (MEA) has launched a campaign to snub foreign missions for "interfering" in the country's "internal affairs".

India, says the MEA spokesperson, "does not appreciate interference ... including utilisation of the Indian media by foreign leaders ... to pander to their domestic lobbies".

The MEA's statement was a response to innocuous remarks by foreign minister Erkki Tuomioja of Finland, the European Union's smallest member.

This itself reveals the MEA's lack of self-confidence. Earlier, it chose not to respond to US assistant secretary Christina Rocca, who called the Gujarat situation "horrible". Nor did it comment on a more damning British High Commission report, which describes the violence as "pre-planned".

Since then, the Germans, Dutch and Canadians have also produced reports or made statements of concern. The MEA has accused them of "playing a partisan role" and "injecting themselves" into India's internal debate.

And Prime Minister Vajpayee has now joined the MEA in telling

the world India "needs no lessons in secularism".

The Indian government's attitude is misguided. It attributes foul motives "pandering to domestic lobbies" to perfectly understandable expressions of distress at the Gujarat carnage.

What powerful anti-India "domestic lobbies" are at work in Finland, the Netherlands, Canada or

more space in Western newspapers than any other event, including the nuclear tests, or Kargil.

The MEA originally tried to defend the indefensible by trotting out half-truths about how "the riots" (a misnomer for targeted killing of one group) were part of "the complexities of a multicultural society" (rather than *Hindutva's* threat to multiculturalism), and on how the

India's credibility as a plural, tolerant society. As three former foreign secretaries have said, the Gujarat violence has cast doubts on India's pleas about Pakistan-sponsored terrorism. It weakens India's stance on Kashmir.

There is a connection between today's anti-Muslim pogrom and the post-1997 anti-Christian violence in Gujarat by *Hindutva* forces.

gurdwara.

India's main sources of oil and gas are located in the West Asian countries. These states' hostility could affect India's energy flows. New Delhi's pro-Israel stand on Palestine has already embittered them.

That makes it imperative that India does not adopt holier-than-thou postures on Gujarat, or feign

secured extradition of the Chilean dictator for mass murder 25 years earlier, the idea is growing that there must be no impunity for those guilty of crimes against humanity. Hence the special UN-sponsored tribunals on the former Yugoslavia.

More important, some countries, e.g. Belgium, have passed laws for universal jurisdiction. In Austria, Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Senegal, Spain, Switzerland and UK too, prosecutors have successfully investigated heinous crimes committed abroad.

Civil litigation including compensation for injury and property damage can be instituted in many countries, including the US, under the Alien Torts statute.

Not to be underrated is the International Criminal Court, with *inherent* global jurisdiction in respect of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. The court will formally be born on July 1 despite dogged opposition from the US, India and China. It will provide an international forum for criminal prosecution.

The arm of international law has become long. India can escape it only by damaging its credibility.

It will be embarrassing for India to be seen to be mulishly opposing worthy litigation. India can avert this only if it promptly prosecutes those culpable for the Gujarat carnage.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

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Germany?

When the European Union expresses concern at the killing of European citizens of Indian origin in Gujarat, that is "interference". But when New Delhi deplors mistreatment of people of Indian origin in Fiji, Uganda or France, or condemns ethnic killings in Rwanda, that's not "interference".

The MEA has failed to appreciate Gujarat's disastrous impact on people's consciousness worldwide. The world hasn't recently seen large-scale state-sponsored-butchery of one religious group comparable to Gujarat.

Somalia, Rwanda and Kosovo invited external armed intervention because millions were shocked worldwide by the events there.

Today, Gujarat claims for India

government remains firm on "secularism" (after rubbishing all its premises).

That strategy failed. So the MEA decided to "Modify" itself using the very arguments that the chief minister has put out in expensive high-page advertisements in all major newspapers about "normalcy" returning.

But lakhs of people remain in Gujarat's refugee camps, including traumatised children who can't take their board examinations. Some wrote them wearing oxygen masks.

The day the ads appeared, violence killed 28 people and *Hindutva* mobs attacked refugee-camps right outside the Ahmedabad police commissioner's office.

Gujarat has severely damaged

The world knows these very forces are in power in New Delhi.

Gujarat's economic impact will be terrible. Global ratings companies like Standard & Poor, Fitch, and Moody's say that "rising ... tensions could have a detrimental effect on [India's] sovereign ratings ... and distract policy-making from economic priorities."

This has undermined investor confidence. Foreign portfolio investment flows into India have fallen by 81 per cent within a month.

Not to be underestimated is Gujarat's fallout on the two million-plus Indians living in Muslim-majority countries from Morocco to Indonesia. Their rights are likely to be affected as has happened in Kuwait with the closure of its sole

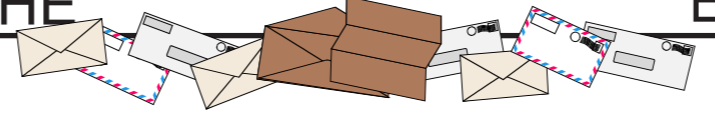
injured innocence. An honest, wise and credible approach would be to tell the world, and India's people, that Gujarat is a disaster, but we'll try to rectify matters by punishing the guilty and then *actually* punish them.

This means the Centre will must impose a spell of President's Rule on Gujarat and appoint as the Governor's advisers people of impeccable integrity, chosen through all-party consultations.

Otherwise, the government could find itself in the *international* dock literally. Many European and American nationals of Indian origin are preparing to sue Modi & Co in foreign courts which accept *universal jurisdiction* for serious crimes.

After the Pinochet case in which a Spanish magistrate in 1998

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



"Where do you want to lead us to, Mr. Editor?"

This refers to Mr. Mostofa Faruque Mohammed's opinion (April 26).

I would not fret much over Mr. Mohammed's comments. They appear to come from a disgruntled ex-government official who wanted both side of his bread buttered. Unfortunately for him, the October 2001 general election dashed his hope for a further extension to his career. So, he turns into an unofficial 'spokesman' for the opposition party AL for some political back up, as clearly can be seen from the comments he has made.

However, it also cannot be denied that if most of the Bangladeshi newspapers, including *The Daily Star*, had 'not' jumped the gun and opted all out for sensational news (pre and post September 11) and made mountains out of mole hills or nothing, the former Ambassador would not have had the opportunity to start foaming in the mouth in trying to convince the readers about Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Bangladesh. As we all are aware, subsequent investigation proved that those reports were baseless - as baseless as the official handout by the then AL government on

Taliban/Al-Qaeda presence in Bangladesh during President Clinton's visit. Why an elected govt. would deliberately smear its country's own name has still remained a million-dollar question!

But what bothers us is that how can a slogan by an individual or a group represent a whole nation of 140 million? If I should visit say, for instance, Azampur Road in Dhaka alone or with a group and gave slogans like "We will be Taliban and Bangla will be Afghan" will that make the residents of that road, leave aside the whole country, all Taliban?

Ashfaque Chowdhury
Banani, Dhaka

(To the best of our knowledge, no investigation by anybody was carried out on post 11 September news coverage. We have no idea what the writer is referring to. We stand by our reports of the period. - Editor)

I feel like asking Mr. Faruque, "Where are you leading us to?" At a time when countries with affiliation with the Taliban regime are trying to disown it, you wrote a long article proclaiming our affiliation with the Taliban!

You went to extreme length to establish a relationship between the Talibans and us. How can a diplo-

mat be so un-diplomatic? If your sole intention was to show your allegiance to Awami League, then wasn't there any other way of doing so? If you feel AL has been implicated unfairly then please say so, defend them by all means. But please, don't lose perspective. To establish the credibility of a party do not jeopardise the image of the whole country!

Mr. Mostofa you wanted to know how we could be sure what Mr. Lintner wrote has no grain of truth in it. Well, I can be sure because I am not a Taliban, the person next to me can be sure as S/he is not a Taliban and so on. But you can't be sure because you are confused. Your party affiliation has blinded you.

Please do not try to scare us by saying that soon we will be ruled by religious fanatics and that soon Bangladesh will be another Afghanistan. We, unlike you do not live in cocoons. We, the majority of the people, have a completely different view of what our country is and what's it going to be in the future. If in your article you wanted to show patriotism then I must say it was patriotism Taliban style!

Nazneen
Old D.O.H.S, Dhaka

No smoking

When the rate of smoking is

decreasing at 1.1 per cent in the developed world, it is rising at 2.1 per cent in the developing countries.

Tobacco is responsible for four million deaths per year globally. By 2020, tobacco is predicted to become the leading cause of death and disability, killing ten million people every year; and 70 per cent of them would be in developing countries.

Tobacco is the only consumer product that kills when used as intended by the manufacturer. During the last four decades more than 70,000 scientific papers have confirmed this (revealed in a message of the Regional Director, South-East Asia, Region, WHO).

In Bangladesh, the situation is alarming. As many as 60 per cent men and 30-40 per cent women smoke or chew tobacco. In our country chewing tobacco is hardly considered as harmful. Rather it is a social custom to offer betel nut, *Jarda* (chewing tobacco), tobacco leaf or pan-masallah etc to a visitor. These are considered as a symbol of hospitality. Thus diseases like stroke, heart diseases, cancer and bronchitis are increasingly becoming a threat for the national health.

I would therefore appeal to all smokers to think over it judiciously and quit smoking for a happy and

healthy life.

Abdul Jabbar
Dhaka

Alleging EC and the govt

We are disappointed reading the news of CEC's dissatisfaction over the police maintaining law and order during the DCC election, less turnout of voters, rigging in election centres, keeping mayoral candidate confined in a polling booth, bribery by a son of the ruling party and so on.

What are the EC and our government's reply regarding these allegations?

Gopal Sengupta
Montreal, Canada

Another conspiracy against our nation

The un-diplomatic behaviour of Danish Under Secretary appears as another conspiracy against our nation. Ours is a government elected by the people under a Caretaker Government. The foreign government has no right to demean our elected minister.

Thanks are due to *The Daily Star*, which published opinions of its readers, condemning the un-

diplomatic behaviour of the Danish Embassy. Our Foreign Minister has rightfully dared the Danish government to prove the charge against a minister of our elected government.

MK USA

BTTB's call rate

I would like to know the latest position on the BTTB's previous decision to implement a per minute charge for local calls. BTRC came to the rescue and held that BTTB's decision without consulting them was illegal.

However, recently a few of my friends from Dhaka has received huge telephone bills which, they believe are as a result of a per minute charge!

I urge *The Daily Star* to investigate into this matter.

Ariful Islam
SOAS, University of London

Let the PSC run smoothly

We are deeply shocked at the government's undemocratic, unconstitutional and inconsiderate attitude towards PSC- an autonomous institute which is supposed to be free from all kinds of political

influences.

The government has put a bar on every activity of PSC related to BCS recruitment that has resulted in tremendous frustration among thousands of BCS applicants, who have been in the process for long (1999 - 2002). Many of them, waiting in uncertainty, have lost their age for government job by this time.

Leaving the majority of the young educated people unemployed, every effort to stop chaos and eradicate terrorism and corruption in the society would come to naught.

We urge the government to let the PSC run on its own otherwise it would lead us to greater problems.

Tuhin Mustafiz
Dhaka

Inefficient Home Minister

According to a report in *The Daily Star*, in March 336 people were killed and in February the number was 280. This clearly reflects how terrible the law and order situation of the country has become. But the one person who is unmoved in face of such a frustrating state is the Home Minister Altaf Hossain.

However, the one thing he seems to be good at is how to obstruct the opposition from resorting to any

political programme. His only concern is to prove that the opposition is always responsible for all the mishaps and that our newspapers are giving too much coverage on them. For how long do we have to tolerate such an inefficient Home Minister?

Jabed Sylhet

Don't follow the examples of previous government

Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina was prevented from joining a programme at Falcon Hall in the Dhaka Cantonment (Daily Ittefaq, March 17)

Similar kind of incidents occurred during the AL regime. The politicians must come out of such practice of attacking each other on personal levels for the greater interest of the nation. They should look forward to establish a friendly relationship with each other. Otherwise, democracy would not be established in our country.

Oli Md Abdullah Chowdhury
Sylhet