

Metropolis in a dire strait

New mayor has his work cut out

ONE thing is for certain. Sadeque Hossain Khoka, the mayor of Dhaka, will have his hands full being at the helm of the Dhaka City Corporation affairs. First and foremost, he has to restore public confidence in the DCC itself and, needless to say, in the position he will hold for the next five years. Over the years, the city corporation has earned the notoriety of being a den of corruption, mismanagement and what not, thanks to its blatant politicisation and subsequent criminalisation.

The Nagar Bhaban has been rocked by armed clashes over tenders for different city development activities. More often than not, the DCC has been linked to attempts at encroaching upon public spaces -- parks, ponds, pavements, etc. Even the Osmany Udyan was targeted and a huge chunk of the lone green space at the junction of old and new towns would have been taken over by unscrupulous developers, had the media and the civil society not put up a timely resistance. In fact, several old trees were felled to accommodate a five-star-hotel-cum-shopping complex there. In other words, the outgoing mayor virtually lacked the moral authority in public perception to be the city father.

Essentially, therefore, Sadeque Hossain Khoka is saddled with an institution for which the residents of the capital have little respect or trust left. However, he is in a relatively advantageous position compared with his predecessor. Unlike Mohammad Hanif, the present mayor begins his tenure at a time when the party he belongs to, namely the BNP, is in power. Moreover, he has reasonable public support behind him and has earned wide acclaim for his unrelenting dynamism. Most importantly, his predecessor has marked out for him the path he should not tread on. The tasks that lie ahead of him are daunting but not unattainable. He has identified the areas he should focus on and all he needs to do is just follow up on his commitments.

As the capital city, Dhaka represents the country's face to the outside world including tourists and prospective investors. Needless to say, it does not offer a pleasant sight at the moment. Endless traffic snarl-ups, thick blanket of black smog all over the city, unplanned urbanisation, dilapidated roads and other infrastructures, garbage galore at every nook and corner, etc are enough to put off any visitor. Crucially, law and order in the city is in a mess.

The new mayor has to change all that. Indeed, there has to be effective co-ordination between different service agencies, and also between the DCC and the government. Hopefully, he is ready with a plan. He better be. He has got to the post he always coveted. He should now make the most of it by redeeming all the pledges he has made to Dhaka-dwellers.

French vote for moderation

Jingo back into cocoon?

RIDING the crest of a reaction vote against his far-right rival Jean-Marie Le Pen, President Jacques Chirac has won a second term by landslide. Late last month in a first round stunner Le Pen had emerged from the rear eliminating Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin from the race. An anti-Europe and anti-immigrant spectre was instantly raised as the 'fascist' National Front leader swept into contention against Chirac in the run-off polls for the presidency.

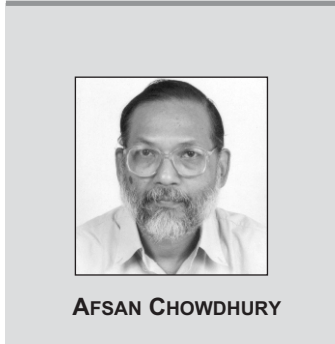
Nobody in the right frame of mind thought that Le Pen stood any chance of an outright victory over Chirac but the threat of a possible ultra-right swing could not be shaken off either. That's why there was a virtual national galvanisation to keep Le Pen's score in terms of voter percentage as low as possible. The Left-wing parties and centrist splinter groups joined forces with the intellectual, cultural and civil society leaders to pull their weight combinedly behind Chirac to ensure a resounding victory for him.

Given Chirac's track-record in power tainted by allegations of corruption, it was no positive straightforward vote for him. Rather, we are inclined to endorse what one analyst said: there was 'no choice', one had to vote for him out of a sense of 'obligation' to the nation. So, there is something of a muted euphoria over the electoral outcome and Chirac must feel the pressure of bettering his performance second time around. Besides, one could expect a Socialist backlash to take place at the parliamentary elections slated in June, so that he may still have to 'cohabit' with the Left. He is perhaps in for more check and balance to his power.

But the bottom-line for the progressive elements in France is this: in spite of the national galvanisation against far-right, Le Pen's score in the second round remains the same as in the first round -- 17-plus percentage. This is no small support base for an ultra-right ideology. Its coralled presence needs watching.

When children die young

A time to cry, a time to heal



LAST week a friend's child died. He had been unwell for some time but was recovering, ultimately the rigours of treatment itself killed the child. I can't think of words to describe the death of a child so young, so much to claim from life and so deeply denied. There can be no heavier burden than that of a dead child, which some parents have to carry.

I never met the child but I know the parents. I know Rubana, the child's mother from the days when she had just finished school, still a child and an adult living in one soul. She was a bubbly person, full of energy and bonhomie. Anis and I became friends in the course of an aborted plan to host an interview programme for TV of the chief election contenders last year. The programme didn't happen but friendship did. He has an innate sense of decency that comes from within. They will now have to gather the strength to bear the loss of their most precious possession.

I never met the child but heard him from a distance while in their home. They had just returned from the US and as we sat and chatted I heard the child's voice. He had become a little irritable and given what he had gone through, this was natural. The parents were optimistic and never let their worries bother others. They were coping with life and moving on.

On the day the milad was held at their home for the son who had passed away, Anis came out and shook as many people's hand as he could, thanking everyone for being there. His face was devastated, dazed like father's is, when the child has suddenly gone from one's midst. Yet he never forgot his courtesy despite the extreme situation.

I knew Md. Anka from before. We

ANIS had talked about his ability to give his child the best possible treatment. At some point, efforts reach their end and words too are useless to bandage the pain that has happened. Yet knowing them as I have recently, I know the calm dignity and love that will give them the strength. The child, whose picture was published in the newspapers, has touched so many. In his

been condemned to death. "There is always some money to buy a gun or a car. There is never enough to let a child die peacefully." "What about her parents?" "Both were killed by the same. They were poor migrant workers who went to India. In the end, this is all they had left behind." Nothing.

A child who dies young becomes a child forever. They don't age and

went on digging. We waited like fools in that place with no answer and no solution. Leaving some food packets and water bottles we left, unable to deal with young children without parents. There were so many of them that year in that land. Which is more painful, more unbearable? Children without parents or parents without children? I have held dying children in my

My schoolmate Joyanal lost his son to cancer a couple of years ago and the child's face smiled at us from the mourning announcements. That's how we will remember him, a smiling child. Joyanal who makes a living in the hospitality business has become a legend producing the Tona-Tuni stories and songs for children. Despite his grief, he has continued with his work, a stirring example of overcoming tragedy and being courageous because his world now belongs to children. What he began as a hobby, as a beautiful activity, has turned into a sublime tribute to his departed son. It has become a worthy life.

RUBANA and Anis will find that life will never be the same again. Grief will seem the only possible emotion, sadness the only possibility. But mourning passes as life's own demands emerge and it finds purpose in action. In an interview to the press they had spoken of helping other children, something they already do and yet are quiet about it. But just as a child goes to sleep, grief too must sleep and mourning lie down.

Sharaf will never grow old till all of them meet again, somewhere, sometime.

THE African sun was going down and the neighbours all came out of their homes in printed clothes, faded and work worn, to sing the song of life and death. As the sun died, the child was buried and fires grew as people rocked to and fro, praying, singing, comforting, never letting the mourners be alone, never letting the dead be alone.

They sang the sadness away and held the children close to them in love and joy without denying the finality of death.

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

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

A child who dies young becomes a child forever. They don't age and defeat time. I often think of the picture of this young girl Shazneen, staring with a lovely smile at us all. There are so many of us who will be having daughters of her age and for all she is particularly special. She is also someone who is not only ageless but someone alive only with the raw pain of sudden death inflicted on her family. Every child who dies dies again every year on that day. Their families die bit by bit, every year. In memories they stay alive, both beautiful and pain inflicting.

had met in Dhaka and our friendship was renewed in northern Nigeria where we met again at Bauchi. Anka's people are deeply religious and he invited me to his son's *akikah*. Everyone seemed very happy about it and they thanked God for being so merciful to Anka. I was puzzled at all because I didn't think it was his first child. "What is this commotion about Anka's child's *akikah*?" "Don't you know? Both of Anka's children were burnt to death last year."

I couldn't say anything except shiver in shock. Life seemed like touching the images of a pattern on water. Nothing holds, nothing stays forever.

What did Anka and his wife feel when they lost both the children, and in such a horrific way? How had Anka remained so calm, not even sharing the terrible news with me? Somehow the restraint had given the entire incident a dignity that defied and ultimately overcame death of his children by fire.

terribly untimely death, he had conquered more hearts than was thought possible. A child who dies so young becomes special to everyone.

THERE are many deaths that can never be special. They are sometimes not even deaths but just a passing away in bare feet, dirty filthy limbs, and bodies unable to fight anymore. As if the caring arms that lift them up even as they die are as beloved as the hands that rock them to death. I have been cursed to see children die of AIDS in more than one land. I have seen them lie, in a small huddled heap, faces marked by sarcoma scars as they weep beseeching release.

Older children who are also affected but have not reached an advanced stage of the disease watched this child in the home of abandoned children slowly die. They knew even as children, that it would happen to them too. That they would never grow up. That they had

defeat time. I often think of the picture of this young girl Shazneen, staring with a lovely smile at us all. There are so many of us who will be having daughters of her age and for all she is particularly special. She is also someone who is not only ageless but someone alive only with the raw pain of sudden death inflicted on her family. Every child who dies dies again every year on that day. Their families die bit by bit, every year. In memories they stay alive, both beautiful and pain inflicting.

DURING the storm of 1991, at a place called Khankhanabad, we met a few children around a trickle of a stream. A young boy was digging at the mud and then waiting for the water to collect. He would then fill a broken earthen cup and give it to an even smaller boy who sat unmoving, drinking water drop by drop.

"Where are your parents?" "Gone. Washed away." "Who's left to look after you?" "No one. All washed away." He

arms, not because I cared but because I wanted to feel the shame of failing to help them when we could. There are far too many deaths that could have been avoided, but were left alone. Instead we have this madness of society that justifies deaths of young children, unmourned, ungrieved, as if the death is logical, part of the moving of the natural clock of time.

It's terrifying to hold and feel the ebb of life slowly leave the body as pulses recede and breathing declines and the child sees nothing in its vacant eyes. I have seen a woman hold a young boy like a woman holds a baby and softly murmur to the departing about trees and green grass in a remote Uganda village. And as the child died she sang, slowly, gently that killed the weeping that came into me and I stared into her eyes hoping to understand.

I don't understand but when I hear of dying children I think of women who can softly sing children to death and sleep.

Winning the battle, losing the war

NDA in the doldrums

PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

ONCE upon a time there was a dishonest nobleman. He would thieve large sums of money from the Emperor's treasury. One day, the Emperor caught him. The Emperor decided to punish him but gave three options: eat 100 raw onions, get lashed 100 times, or pay a penalty of 100 gold sovereigns.

The greedy nobleman chose the first option. But after eating 50 onions, he became sick. He told the Emperor he would prefer the lashes.

But 70 of these were enough to floor him. He ended up paying the penalty after bankrupting himself. The story may be apocryphal, but its source is a senior bureaucrat in the Prime Minister's Office, who describes how the Vajpayee government behaves in the face of criticism of its collusion with Mr Narendra Modi.

Each time the government ducks its responsibility, it loses yet more credibility. The National Democratic Alliance survived the Gujarat censure motion in the Lok Sabha. But its victory was Pyrrhic.

It demeaned itself by resisting discussion under Rule 184 and blocking Parliament for days. Then, it childishly threatened to invoke the same Rule to discuss Bihar and West Bengal -- as if that redeemed

the original mistake! If its purpose in preventing discussion was to cover up the cracks in the NDA, then it was squarely defeated.

These rifts have become more apparent, with the Trinamool, Telugu Desam and DMK demanding Mr Modi's resignation, the Lok Janashakti Party quitting the NDA, the National Conference abstaining,

motion's core was the Gujarat government's complicity in a horrible massacre, and the Centre's failure to defend the fundamental rights of all citizens, irrespective of religion. This failure is rooted in the NDA/BJP's refusal to follow democratic norms.

Central to these is secularism -- separation of religion from politics. Secularism is indispensable to

BJP's Paid Priesthood in the media, no one defends it.

There is a broad consensus that Vajpayee must do what he has failed to do for two months: fulfil his Constitutional obligations.

Yet, so prickly is the government about criticism over Gujarat that it grossly overacts to it. It has spent huge diplomatic energies in a make-believe game vis-à-vis the interna-

No less important is the Indian business response. The Confederation of Indian Industry -- the most modern, technologically savvy, outward-looking association of Indian industry -- has highlighted the damage done by Gujarat to India's stature and its economy.

The CII's apex meeting highlighted the relevance of secularism to business. It featured Ms Sonia

Samajwadi Party-led government in UP.

This may also help keep Messrs L.K. Advani, M.M. Joshi and other BJP leaders out of jail in the CBI's Ayodhya conspiracy case for a while -- by delaying the technical correction of a state order.

But the order is a double-edged sword. Ms Mayawati's rule will probably erode the BJP's core upper-caste base. All BJP gains from the BSP alliance could prove temporary, even hollow.

The BJP has no reliable ally left, perhaps barring Mr George Fernandes. Even its NDA partners know its priority is to find a distinctive sectarian identity for itself -- rather than preserve the coalition.

That's why the BJP has reinvented itself as Jana Sangh-II and reinforced its intimacy with the RSS which is taking over its critical organisational functions in the regions.

The BJP's march towards hardline *Hindutva* is beginning. This must be stopped forthwith -- through public pressure, political opposition, civil society mobilisation, and through assertion by the bureaucracy too of its Constitutional duties of secularism, and even-handed treatment of all citizens.

It's time all Indians took a Constitutional-secular stand.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

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and the TDP walking out. The NDA has emerged looking battered. After lowering the quality of debate to the gutter level in the Lok Sabha, it scored a self-goal in the Rajya Sabha by adopting the Opposition motion.

As if to "cover" this loss, the BJP has hurriedly allied with the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh, whose leader has twice ditched it. Ms Mayawati says the "Manuwadi" BJP indulges in "terrorism", no less (Feb 7).

The NDA leadership pretends that the Parliament vote was solely about dismissing the ghoulish Modi government.

This distorts the truth. At the

democracy. This doesn't only derive from the "Basic Structure" of the Constitution, which cannot be altered by Parliament.

Secularism is a *practical* political imperative. The BJP betrayed it by allowing the pogrom to happen, and by condoning/justifying it. The NDA can now survive, but only by brazenly violating all norms of secular-democratic functioning.

This has deeply antagonised India's liberal intelligentsia, its thinking citizens, and its professional classes.

There is stringent criticism of the Vajpayee government from the international community and India's own business elite too. Barring the

tional community.

The Ministry of External Affairs' official website does not even mention "Muslim" in describing Gujarat's victims. It claims that Mr Modi was exemplarily efficient in bringing the violence "under control" although the refugee camps are still swelling.

Even worse is the MEA's claim that the European Union did not issue it a *demarche* -- when it actually did. For days, the MEA tried to make hair-splitting distinctions between a *demarche* and "mutual discussion".

In reality, several EU members, and then the EU itself, registered strong protests on Gujarat.

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

Launch disaster

The launch disaster in Meghna is a perfect example of the misplaced priorities of our government. When the Danes had made their allegations about the Shipping Minister, the entire cabinet, much of the media and popular opinion leapt to the defence of the Minister and the affront to our sovereignty.

May I remind you that the people the Danes were accusing of corruption were none other than the BIWTC? The same individuals who complacently watch people drown every year and never implement any of the recommendations of the inevitable boards of enquiry.

The Shipping Minister in the opinion of many people should have resigned in the face of the Danish accusations until his name was conclusively cleared. That he didn't is more a reflection on the ignorance of our general public and politicians on the niceties of the Parliamentary form of government rather than malicious intentions.

Now there has been another of the repetitive ferry accidents, where the loss of lives could have been avoidable, had the BIWTC and the Shipping Ministry not been negligent in its work. But this being

Bangladesh no one, not the Minister, the Secretary or the Chairman of BIWTC will take any responsibility and resign. Why bother?

Bastiat
Dhaka

Where is the outrage?

Letters and columns have appeared in your daily, as in others, asking for the punishment of those responsible for crimes against humanity in the Middle East, India, Central Asia, Africa, and South America. All Bangladeshi opinion leaders seem to have a cause to celebrate some class of victims. Good for them.

However, who is going to seek punishment for the cold blooded massacre of innocent Bangladeshis on September 11, 2001 in downtown New York's World Trade Center? These were our fellow men and women who had just gone into put in an honest day's of hard work when terror forever took them away from us.

The despicable fact is that not only have many of our politicians and columnists not said a word about that assault on Bangladesh but rather surreptitiously created excuses for those who killed our

fewest citizens. Where is the outrage against these murderers? ES Missouri, USA

A ray of hope

It is heartening to read the report "Small Bangladesh in Bay of Bengal".

Usually such kind of reports are not met with any follow-up neither by the paper, nor by the reader and definitely not by the people who matter. I am therefore glad that Mr. Muksitul Islam has come up with a letter to the Editor on the report and that too with some suggestions though brief in content but convincing enough.

Ours is the most densely populated country and any invention that can offer its inhabitants more breathing space with accompanying blessings like protection from flood, erosion and drought will not only be welcome but will be received with both hands by the people as an act of Providence.

The World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) of Geneva had patented the technology in 1998 endorsing the innovations of Dr. Khaleque. The best reward for a

scientist is the recognition of his talents. It will therefore be a sad commentary on the quality of our intellectuals, the politicians and the people of this country if the achievements of Dr. Khaleque are allowed to go unnoticed and ignored.

Mr. Islam has rightly pointed out that the 'advent' of Dr. Khaleque with his innovations has come as a golden opportunity for the ruling party to outbid their opponents for the days to come and we can only hope that they will not let this opportunity slip out of their hands. Finally, I endorse the suggestion of Mr. Islam that *The Daily Star* should run a follow-up story with more details from Dr. Khaleque, if possible.

Rezaul Karim
Malibagh, Dhaka

Tax holiday and RMG sector

The Finance Minister is not entirely correct when he says the RMG industry pays no taxes. Every year we have to renew the following: Bond Licence with Customs, Trade Licence, Export Promotion Bureau Registration, Import Registration Certificate and Export Registration Certificate with the Chief Controller of Import and Export at the Com-

merce Ministry, Fire Licence, Labour Licence and BGMEA Membership.

Out of all of the above, only the BGMEA one is done without anyone extorting money from us. The rest all require bribes the amounts varying on which renewal is the more essential and on current events. For instance the Customs Bond Licence is the lifeblood and hence the most expensive and recently with the stampedes in several factories, the Fire Licence has also gone up in cost.

So my dear Minister, abolish the tax holidays if you wish. But only if you resolve to remedy the other irregularities in the government. Otherwise you'll simply be making us even less competitive.

Dorji
Dhaka

"Tower Hamlet" not "Power Hamlet"

In the 5th May issue of *The Daily Star*, it was mentioned that 27 Bangladeshis were elected councillors of Power Hamlet Borough Council. The correct words should be, "Tower Hamlet" not "Power Hamlet".

Tower Hamlet is an area near the

famous London tower and mostly inhabited by people from Bangladeshi and African origin. Khairul Hasan Surrey, UK

Is this democracy?

A murder was committed at Kapashia thana of Gazipur district which was covered by all the national dailies. This is not anything new as we are quite used to reading news of killing, murder, rape and robbery. Before the last October election, the 4-party alliance promised to improve the law and order situation of the country. But after coming to power they have failed miserably to keep their promise. The law and order situation has rather deteriorated to an alarming rate. Mahima's rape, Shihab's murder, abduction of Mutka, murder of Jamaluddin are only a few examples.

College student Jamaluddin Fakir was tortured in police custody and when he tried to escape they killed him in the river. Is this democracy? Human rights are being violated all over the country and the government is doing absolutely nothing. Salim Azad

Rajshahi University

Pauper teachers of rich schools

Mr Mustafizur Rahman and the 'worried parents' deserve thanks for bringing out an important aspect of English medium education. ("Pauper teachers of rich schools", March 4 and March 20).

It is true that the teachers are overworked and inadequately compensated. Most of them are also not interested in improving their teaching skill and do not get necessary training and incentives that may help them to improve.

On the other hand, large number of teachers neglect their duty and concentrate more on private tuition. Compared to the amount of money they earn from private tuition, their respective schools have very little to offer: lakhs as opposed to a few thousands. The students also look for shortcuts, especially at the secondary levels. Their favourite shortcut is the answer books or lecture notes of the tutors.

While the authorities concerned don't seem to care, the teachers suffer and the holes in the parents' pockets grow larger. But the main victims are the students. It is time to

ask: are we grooming them to be competent and responsible or only the guardians to be bankrupt? Khademul Islam Dhaka

21st BCS exam and our fate

Almost 11 months have passed since we, about six thousand candidates, completed the preliminary test, written test, psychology test and viva voce of 21st BCS examination. However, we are still waiting for the final result. The result was supposed to come out by November 2001. But due to a circular issued by the concerned ministry, PSC postponed the exam result.

This delay of publishing result has caused much frustration. Because after completing the university education every one wishes to get a good job and BCS cadre service is the most lucrative of them.

We request the authority to publish the result of the 21st BCS examination as early as possible and help us build up our career.

K M Kamruzzaman Selim
Dhaka