

Rahman talks to the editors

Dialogue with the opposition stressed

FINANCE Minister M Saifur Rahman in a consultation meeting with the editors on Tuesday apprised them of his strategy for a balanced budget. Strapped for cash, a shoe-string budget it has got to be. In view of the declining import tariff staring us in the face under the WTO regime, the cost-cutting measures as outlined by the finance minister assume critical importance. We are fully in agreement with his emphasis on smaller government, prevention of wastage and carrying forward of the reform agenda that has hurtled along primarily on the rocks of vacillating political will. There were commitments galore on all those points but progress in terms of implementation has been grossly missing. As a result, the loss of face before the donor governments and multilateral financial institutions has been an embarrassment that was eminently avoidable.

While transparency of the executive's plans or actions has been a one-sided preoccupation with the ruling party *sans* any questioning by the opposition at any stage, good governance has *ipso facto* remained a far cry. That's why the bottom-line message we have derived from our meeting with the finance minister is that there should be an immediate dialogue with the Opposition. At the moment the AL may advance their ideas through the media or any other forum about what they would like to see embodied in the national budget. They can then warm up to the ensuing budget session in the parliament participating in its proceedings with the homework done. Yet basically we are for a BNP-AL dialogue on a wide range of issues that urgently require joint attention and working understanding to forge ahead on the road to democracy and sustained national development.

The finance minister has very generously, winsomely and constructively admitted to the lukewarm attitude his own party in the opposition had displayed to the then ruling party AL's overtures for dialogue. This can be regarded as a highly positive feeler for talks to be held early.

The AL should now show the bigness of heart to come forward reciprocating the sentiments of a senior government minister and make the dialogue possible sooner than later.

Doctors arrested, clinic attacked by angry consumers

Body needed to manage complaints

IN a recent incident concerning a private clinic, four doctors have been arrested following charges of negligence leading to death of a patient following an operation. Prior to that, enraged relatives of the patient mounted an attack on the facility. The doctors have been granted bail but the whole situation is symptomatic of the problem that emerges from lack of accountability in the medical sector and public frustration in dealing with such issues.

The question is not that of law and order though both issues have become matters in this case. This is about rational practices of the profession, obligation of reasonable responsibility and consumer's right to services and obligations of consideration for the same. All of these issues are held together by the accountability grid which determines the rights and duties of all concerned. What needs to be faced first is that the fact of the situation will have to be faced by us all.

Complaints regarding medical services have a long history and there is no denial that this sector has drawn some of the highest levels of public frustration. This isn't a question of who is to blame. It's about why the situation has come to this point. And one has to face the fact as well that with increasing awareness of rights, the demand for better services, quality facilities and greater investment in getting well at affordable costs is also rising. It's not about this sector alone but affects the general scene regarding all public services and utilities.

However, the present crisis situation which has led to flight of patients to India for long and more than one instance of violent encounter due to public rage has to be addressed. The point is, we are still unaware if such a body exists where complaints relating to dissatisfied services can be lodged and can be dealt with effectively. It's very important that such a medical Ombudsman body exist which enjoys public confidence as well. That could settle the matter more reasonably along with improving services, preventing violence and ultimately enhancing the dignity of the profession without moving to legal quarters.

The kind of premium we place on human life must be the indicator of the level of civilisation that we have achieved. The medical professionals as healers have the greatest role in making that happen. And as healers they deserve the highest respect. But this will happen only when society as a whole recognises that the consumers as people rest above all.

We should set our priorities right

That a former diplomat is capable of parading few facts and yet defying the truths should come as no surprise. But, that a son of the soil provided with extraordinary opportunities to rise to the office of ambassador can bit the hand that feeds him is appalling.

The facts are there: thousands schooling in Islamic theology; pockets of political cadres training in weaponry and political pariahs repressing minorities; hundreds of religious zealots shouting slogans 'Bangladesh will be Afghanistan'; and President Clinton cancelling scheduled trip to the national monument outside Dhaka for security reasons.

The truths are there too: tens of thousands more schooling in mainstream arts, commerce and science; population at large condemning fanaticism and terrorism be that political or religious, ideological or communal; tens of thousands rising up in arms - in war, in peace, in debate, and in discourse - to keep Bangladesh Bangladeshi; and President Bush Jr. congratulating the Prime Minister for Bangladesh's cooperation in the war against terrorism.

The truths behind the facts paraded by Mr. Mostafa Faruque Mohammed are also common knowledge. Lest national security be jeopardised, one ought not let callous, at times biased - even malicious and often misinformed insinuations such that by Messrs Mostafa Faruque and Bertli Lintner of Far Eastern Economic Review slip off in disguise of intellectual discourse and free speech. Take leaf from how the United

States blasted off Afghanistan and inflicted enormous civilian casualties as 'collateral damage' primarily based on hearsay and suspicion without much intellectual discourse a-la Mr. Mostafa Faruque's or investigative journalism a-la Mr. Lintner's. Take leaf also from Thailand that recently dealt firmly without fear or favour against two FEER correspondents who the government accused of jeopardising national security and sovereignty by playing up the much revered constitutional monarchy against the popular prime minister.

Syed Nazmul Ahsan
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
The image of Bangladesh

A patriotic person can never support any type of derogatory report about his country. Though some incidents took place after the October 1 election, Bangladesh still holds the reputation of a moderately secular country. I would like to request Mr Mostafa Faruque Mohammed to compare the situation that is prevailing in Bangladesh with India. Would he still stick to his argument and consider Bangladesh as a breeding ground of terrorism?

The Daily Star Editor was on the right track, keeping Bangladesh's image as a moderate country intact.
Sabir Ahmed Chowdhury
Dhaka City College

Is it a counter commentary or sycophancy?

What is the value of judgement of your counter commentary Mr. Mostafa Faruque? Your write up was not about Mr. Mahfuz Anam's commentary rather it was about the Awami League.

After America's war against terrorism in Afghanistan, in Bangkok and in Singapore people are naming the new borns after 'Laden'. How do you judge this? Do you think these countries have turned into Taliban countries? Apparently every clash of civilisation has turned out as clashes of religion so far. How do you judge the 'crusade' against Talibans, Israel's fanaticism and the Gujarat riot?

You depicted 'the post-election attacks on minorities' and pierce Mr. Editor by saying 'Friendly attacks'. Your conception is shadowy. Bangladesh government took initiatives to stop this kind of fanaticism. But what about Gujarat? Your statement on the post-election atrocities against the minorities proves that you are an Awami League supporter. Your focus is not on humanity, but on Awami League.

Mahfuz Masum
Dhaka University

Urging AL to join parliament

The news of leaders from the minority community urging AL to join parliament seems encouraging. It would indeed be a step in the right direction if Awami League agrees to their request.

Would Bangladesh be able to improve its record and establish good governance? Will it be able to attract investment and skills and turn Bangladesh into a happy,

prosperous and successful country?

Bangladesh is a beautiful land that benefits from enormous natural assets and a resourceful and united people. It can, and should, be a magnet for investment, a beacon for visitors, a great place to live and to do business.

However, the sad fact is true democracy does not exist in Bangladesh. As a consequence, the country's economy and its very future are in peril.

Our joint effort could give the people of Bangladesh a better future by backing initiatives to encourage the opposition to join parliament as was done by the minority community leaders. This is a simple and straightforward objective. The Daily Star could take an initiative to start a petition to urge AL to join the parliament!

Azad Sarwar
NY USA

Home Minister

The Home Minister has done it again. He has managed to make a fool of himself by openly coveting with criminals while he's assuring a minority community that he'll protect them!

Our Home Minister so respects us that he will remain silent about his frolics with killers and probably be flying about in his borrowed helicopter soon.

Cervantes
Dhaka

"MIGS and helicopters"

This refers to Biggles' (May 6) reply to my letter.

I must be deaf, dumb and blind to understand how a paramilitary force alone can defend a country! Anyway, that's beside the point.

There you go, wondering around in a tea estate, watch genuine BDR vs BSF quarrel, trespass into another country in broad daylight right in presence of the BDR and change over from tea drinking to liquid stuff and then loose recollection! However, unless your 'friendly' big brother learns to treat its smaller and weaker neighbours with full respect and as equal partners, apprehension and suspicion of the big brother will not be and can not be erased.

Ashfaq Chowdhury
Barani, Dhaka

This refers to Mr Biggles' letter (April 27). I do not know how one can imagine a country without armed forces?

The duty of the BDR is to prevent smuggling on the border areas. They also have a duty to prevent entrances of foreign soldiers in the country.

The Coast Guards do the same in coastal areas-- prevent trespassing of foreign fishermen.

In a nutshell we can say that the BDR and the Coastal Guard are there to control smuggling. They do not need heavy fighting instruments. What they need is rapid and light modern firearms like AK-47 and such.

In this nuclear era the Army, Navy and Air force must be equipped with modern weapons to protect our motherland.

Sohel Bin Seraj
Mymensingh

"Special Fund for Army Officers"

I am so happy to read this report. Now I'd like to know what Mr Asfaq, Mr Sami and all the others who've been arguing against me have to say.

Their most likely reply would be that these officers were just the few rotten apples and that this does not reflect on the rest of the corps. Well I would beg to differ. Whenever you have an unaccountable parallel state as we do with the military, such abuses cannot be stopped. Similar reports of corruption have also surfaced with the MIG and the frigate purchase, so these officers were not the exception.

What is important to realise is that all these revelations of corruption have been exposed because of the interaction with the civil administration. Had it been an internal military issue, we would never have found out and rest assured there are many such examples hidden away.

MA
Dhaka

Safe transports! Whose problem!

It is an old story to tell. All of us accustomed to news of road accidents and during this part of the year with more cases of launch accidents causing loss of human lives and resources. Can we hold anyone responsible? Possibly the answer is 'no'.

In this present context of privatisation and shrinking the role of the state, this is an area that the government should be able to

do something positive- that is making the roads safe.

How can we do this?

1. Monitor if the National Road Safety Council is holding its regular meeting and discussing, monitoring road accidents all over the country.

2. Investigate each of the cases of road accidents and identify the areas prone to road accidents and declare those as accident zone in distinct understandable signals.

3. Make the issue of road safety an agenda for political discourse- this is a recipe that cannot be imposed upon.

4. Strict enforcement of motor vehicle rules is a must. If needed make new rules- make people more accountable for their actions, reward for good efforts etc.

5. Contract out 'road safety compliance certification'-- a scheme that can be developed to be provided by private sector qualified agents all over the country.

6. Invest in road safety such as highway patrol.

7. Highway patrol, road-clearing etc can be contracted out, this would cater for both road safety as well as for ensuring safe passage of vehicles at night against road dacency.

8. Automatic road camera and over speed control camera have to be set up in highways.

9. Road police should be dedicated for roads for a particular area and not covered by Thana police. They should not be given any other duty such as law and order duty. They should have specific targets and not be transferred or closed or suspended for bad performance or gross negligence of duty, rather they should be terminated if

such complaints are received.

10. Ensuring safe roads' should be a political agenda in which citizens should vote in future, through quantifiable figures people would see and vote for those who had done better in this area.

MM Haque, on e-mail

"Potka fish"

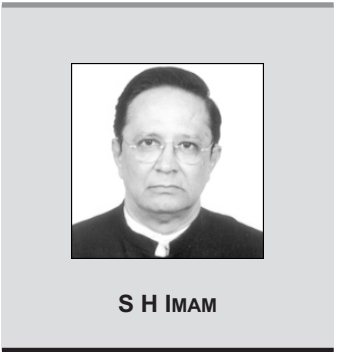
My thanks to Dr Rahaman for replying to my letter. I am only sorry he doesn't have any recipes but from what he's saying, it may be better to stay away from Potka fish. Although it just occurred to me that since this fish is thrown away as wastage, there might be a prospect for its export to Japan. Something to ponder.

Don Quixote
Dhaka

Fake Swimmers!
Bangladesh really is a joke isn't it? First the government got us suspended by FIFA for not reading the regulations properly. Then one of the heirs of BNP was hoisted as the head of Bangladeshi cricket although he had no prior experience with the sport. Recently a cricket match was cancelled so that there could be a reception for the winner of the Dhaka Mayoral election. And now fake swimmers are sent to Korea and the Minister feigns ignorance!

The State Minister should be made to resign for his incompetence and for embarrassing us.
Cervantes
Dhaka

The latest in ultra-right story



S H IMAM

THE political landscape in Europe features a populist anti-immigrant Far-right that is fearfully raring to come into the mainstream. There's a sense of gloom and doom about it.

Curiously, the phenomenon is underlined by the assassination of Pim Fortuyn in Amsterdam a week before the Dutch general elections. Within just months of his ultra-right party's inception, it came into reckoning as a favourite for 20 parliamentary seats, even regarded as a threat to the established political parties. In fact, the Christian Democrats and the Liberals were even toying with the idea of working with Fortuyn in a likely coalitional arrangement.

What was so special about him? A sociology professor, he had a flamboyant lifestyle with a gay streak to boot. All that in a country where the royalty is a picture of propriety riding bicycle. Thoroughly opposed to immigration, he publicly criticised Islamic culture as being 'backward', thereby sending tremors through Muslim immigrant communities.

But the finger of suspicion is not instantly pointed to any immigrant of Turkish, Moroccan or Albanian origins. Fortuyn's supporters liked to ascribe the murder to what they called media demonisation. An 'extreme leftist' from a deeply religious township is the prime suspect in the reckoning of the intelligence services.

The 'martyrdom' of Pim Fortuyn is likely to generate a sympathy wave for his followers in the general election scheduled for May 15. In effect, the anti-establishment

Party's doings. And, its leader Mr. Griffin has been quoted as saying that he wanted the lives of the Asian immigrants difficult.

The isolationist and xenophobic ideology of Le Pen in France may have been rejected hands down in the Presidential election. But can there be any trifling with his support base of 18 per cent among the 43-million-strong electorate? And despite the mustering strong by all political parties to block his chances in the run-off polls, he ended up bettering his showing of

Chirac and a Socialist prime minister it had seen earlier on.

With the Socialists in their lonely furrow after the presidential polls and depending upon how Le Pen's National Front fares in the assembly elections, there could be a change in the equations between the Far-right and the Conservative right as represented by Chirac.

Looking back, Socialist Mitterrands' ability to attract centrist votes won him a second term as President in May, 1988. In a diametrically opposite scenario 14

JUST ANOTHER VIEW

The west's monopoly claim over frustrations to express disgust every now and then at what's happening eastward by way of religious extremism looks assailable. It has a glass ceiling that is about to splinter. The rest of the world has its disappointment to vent out, too. Fanaticism by whatever name it is called -- religious obscurantism, racial hatred or ethnic intolerance -- is one and the same thing and equally reprehensible. It has to be politically tackled in each country not by any touted ideological superiority.

vote could be larger than what the pollsters had originally predicted.

That way the assassination might pay a greater dividend to the murdered Far-right leader's cause. What an upshot it's going to be!

In northern Britain the racist British National Party (BNP) has won three seats in the local council elections for the first time in ten years. More than the number of seats, it is the percentage of votes the party has secured that is worrying.

Most of the racial riots in Bangladeshi-inhabited areas have been linked to the British National

the first round.

The broad coalition of forces that made Chirac's resounding victory possible has already broken up going their ways. The Socialists are bent upon avenging their humiliation in the presidential elections through a victory in the legislative elections. The choice of Liberal Democrat Raffarin as the interim Prime Minister with a low ideological profile might not do wonders for Chirac's party at the parliamentary polls.

France may well be looking at the prospect of a repeat of the 'cohabitation' between Centrist

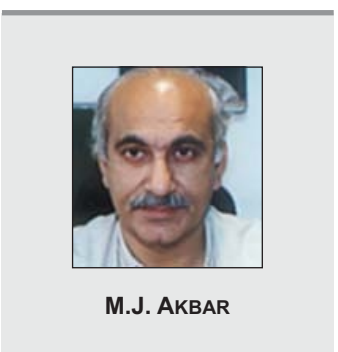
years on, Chirac, the centrist neo-Gaullist has been re-elected to presidency by virtue of the Socialist vote. But while the power at the top has changed hands between the Socialist and the Conservative, the Far-right has remained the constant third factor. French politics has continuously shifted to the Right since 1981. As part of the process, the impressive performance of neo-fascist candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen is nothing new; it dates back to the elections in late eighties.

In Austria, Jorg Haider's Freedom Party (FPO) with its admira-

such its right to participation in the general elections due in September has become a subject-matter of legal battle launched by Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder of the Social Democratic Party. The government's case may have been somewhat weakened by its use of ten spies in the investigations. Pending Supreme Court judgement, the NPD is putting up its candidates for the polls.

Nearly in every country of Western Europe France, Belgium, Switzerland, Norway, Poland, Denmark, Italy, Austria, Germany politics of the Right is on the

All that is new about rape, George Fernandes



M.J. AKBAR

YOU can take some people out of boarding school, but you can't take the boarding school out of some people. Kamal Nath's little sideshow during the debate on Gujarat in the Lok Sabha, when he passed on gum or a clove or Heaven knows what to his leader Sonia Gandhi, had all the sophistication of a private giggle during chapel. However, mastication is not a crime. What was irritating about the incident is that it distracted attention from a singular fact of that long night in Parliament. Television and newspapers should have associated George Fernandes with just one thing during this debate, and that was not chewing gum.

It was a sentence that must stand out as the most revealing photograph of the mind of a man who has turned into a poseur, a fighter who has become a dwarf, and an idealist who has become a fraud. That sentence is stark. It is brutal. And it is confirmation of a deep political and intellectual corruption that has taken over what once used to be a heart.

The five words that George Fernandes uttered will haunt his conscience, if he has one left: What is new about rape?

Every womb is new about rape, George Fernandes.

Every woman is new about rape, George Fernandes.

Every scream is new about rape, George Fernandes.

Every death is new about rape, George Fernandes.

Every child who smelt burnt flesh is new about rape, George Fernandes.

George Fernandes began his career training to become a priest. He left the frock but for long years in politics he retained that commitment to morality that must have taken him towards the church to begin with. Today he reminds one of a saying of the Prophet Muhammad (I quote from memory): "The nearer you are to government, the further you are from God."

The explanations and they only

flash of light that has exposed much more than the decay of George Fernandes. Gujarat has already given us a new name for Narendra Modi: Narendra "Milosevic" Modi. George Fernandes will henceforth be known as George "Rape" Fernandes.

There is nothing new about governments telling lies to cover up rape; nothing new anywhere in the world. I am engrossed at the moment in a superb book written by an old friend Phillip Knightley, 'The First Casualty: The war correspond-

an orgy of rape and plunder". History has never seen such rape and plunder as it witnessed across Asia, Europe and Africa in the first fifty years of the last century. Even the Mongols of Chengiz Khan and Hulegu might have shuddered at what happened between Germany and the Soviet Union and Japan and China. We Indians were fortunate in that the second world war stopped at the Burmese door in the east and never reached Iran and Afghanistan to our west. But we made our evil contribution to this history of horror

Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda organisation had recruits from all over the world, including America! But there were no Indian Muslims in the organisation. We have faced our battles in Kashmir, and armed recruits to the cause of Kashmiri separation have come from Pakistan, Afghanistan and even occasionally the Arab world. But non-Kashmiri Indian Muslims never joined that cause. They do not want India to suffer another wrench, for this is their country as much as anyone else's. They are indignant when confronted with allegations from the past. They are irritated when asked to produce certificates of loyalty. And they are devastated when a Gujarat occurs.

came days later, couched in cliché do not wash. There is no explanation for the vulgarity and insensitivity of such a statement, precedence being the least of them. To his credit L.K. Advani understood this instantly, and sought to distance himself and presumably his government from the hectoring, senseless statement made by Fernandes through an intervention after the infamous speech. But this is not the kind of sentence that can be forgotten after a minor rap on the knuckles. It echoes. For it accurately reflects the attitude of authority to the colossal tragedies that have occurred in Gujarat. That sentence is a justification for administrative indifference and bifocal morality. It also proves the old adage that when you start to defend a lie, you end up inadvertently telling the truth. Good criminal lawyers know this all too well. That sentence is a blinding

dent as hero and myth-maker from the Crimea to Kosovo". The title originates in a comment made by an American senator, Hiram Johnson, in 1917, that the first casualty, when war comes, is the truth. It details how precisely government after government, across the world, used every mechanism of power (and whipped-up sentiment can be as much a weapon of power as any other) to suppress facts, from the Crimean war to the Americans in Vietnam and Iraq, taking in world wars, China, Russia, Korea and Algeria along the way. The book is the story of journalists being forced by circumstances, or sometimes ideology, to participate in this cover-up; but it is also the story of an Edgar Snow who both reported and understood the consequences of the Japanese rape of Nanking, "when 300,000 Chinese civilians were murdered by Japanese soldiers in

with our savage conflicts during the partition of India.

The justification for George Fernandes' indifference can go as far back as recorded time and as near as the Congress hypocrisy that inflamed him more than Narendra Modi's proven culpability. Maybe there were generals and colonels on those second world war battlefields of central Europe who did shrug, what is new about rape? Was George Fernandes displaying the mentality of a serving general on the battlefields of the communal conflicts of India, in which case his place by the side of Narendra "Milosevic" Modi is secure. But these generals will not have one comfort, that of censorship. The censorship policy of any army was well summed by an American censor who said that he would rather not tell the people anything until the war was over and then tell them who had won. India's

looks completely out of sorts is Modi himself. The relentless pursuit of the story by the media, the direct sallies of Sonia Gandhi, and the unwillingness of the world to ignore such blatant inhumanity has had its cumulative effect. The contortion became official when the Gujarat debate shifted to the Rajya Sabha. The BJP declared itself its own opposition, joined the demand to exercise Article 355 in Gujarat and incidentally or coincidentally? sent K.P.S. Gill to start the long effort towards the restoration of law and perhaps also some order. It was an appointment two months too late, but better late than never.

Can the BJP think tank discover any rationale for the party's existence other than the demonisation of Indian Muslims? That is the crux of its dilemma, and the challenge before it as well. Much as they might want to believe it, the Modis did not

bring the BJP to power; and they will not be able to retain the power that others have handed to them. Hatred is combustible, but it also burns itself out very quickly, particularly if it is not refuelled constantly. It also leaves regret where it once resided, except in those committed to hatred as a philosophy or a belief. The dribble has started on the Modi boom; and if the Gujarat elections are held early next year, as seems probable, the BJP might discover that Modi's blood bank of votes is bankrupt.

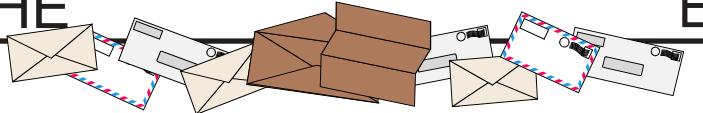
How long will the BJP keep asking Indian Muslims to prove that they are Indians as well as Muslims? Obviously the hangover of partition will continue to be a dull pain; and there will be some Muslim "leaders" who are hysterical, and others who indulge in the rhetoric of hatred. But the broad mass of Indian Muslims has never been lured by the politics of extremism. Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda organisation had recruits from all over the world, including America! But there were no Indian Muslims in the organisation. We have faced our battles in Kashmir, and armed recruits to the cause of Kashmiri separation have come from Pakistan, Afghanistan and even occasionally the Arab world. But non-Kashmiri Indian Muslims never joined that cause. They do not want India to suffer another wrench, for this is their country as much as anyone else's. They are indignant when confronted with allegations from the past. They are irritated when asked to produce certificates of loyalty. And they are devastated when a Gujarat occurs.

This has become a story without an end. For years since that harsh winter of 1992 and 1993 this monster slept, so that we became complacent. After a decade it woke up and another generation of children saw life tortured to death before their eyes.

That is what is new about rape, George Fernandes.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

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