

## Misuse of remitters' welfare fund too glaring to ignore

Put it in the hands of a board of trustees

It is unfair, unjust and exploitative to the core. What is called Wage Earners' Welfare Fund has been reduced to a political wheeler-dealers' jack-pot. This is an instance of the worst breach of contract that any state could commit with its own citizens and, that too, extremely poignantly, with the Bangladeshi Diaspora. They not merely built up the welfare fund themselves they have also been providing critical inputs to our macro-economic stability since Bangladesh's birth.

The so-called Wage Earners' Welfare Fund created through mandatory contributions by Bangladeshi workers as they left the country on contractual jobs overseas, had a capital accumulation of Tk 105 crore a few years ago. Out of that total sum, at least Tk 50 crore has been utilised for purposes that are far removed from the objectives the welfare fund had originally set out to achieve. The amount was allocated by the preceding AL government to 1393 schools and madrassahs on the recommendations of party lawmakers. This was contrary to the stipulation that some money could be spent for educational purposes provided that the facilities being financed were located in places where children and relatives of the expatriates lived. The institutions which received allocation of Tk four lakh each during the AL rule hardly fulfilled the above criterion.

The fund was basically meant for taking Bangladeshi overseas workers under its wings whenever the need arose. It was for providing them with legal aid in case of dispute with employers, breach of service contract by the latter or in the event of deportation, prosecution and incarceration. Nobody has "heard of any legal support being provided to any of the around 12 lakh Bangladeshi workers in Saudi Arabia", lamented Noman Chowdhury, Bangladeshi chairman of the Saudi-based recruiting agency Dahamashi Corporation. The glaring example of the fund's misuse at home reverberates abroad in a strange way: around 1560 Bangladeshis are languishing in different jails including those in Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. Curiously, our missions complain of fund crisis when faced with the prospect of having to send dead bodies of Bangladeshi workers back to their homeland while the welfare fund should have come in handy for that purpose; even compensation could be paid out of it to dead expatriate workers' families in appropriate cases.

There has been a certain continuity in the misuse of the welfare fund, meaning thereby that while the previous BNP government initiated it, the subsequent AL government continued with it on an incremental scale. Since it took on scandalous proportions, all the holes through which the misuse happens need to be plugged.

Our suggestion is the fund should be divested of the government control and placed at the hands of an independent board of trustees comprising representatives of stakeholders and having a clear mandate to put it in a bank account and administer it for the purposes as set out in the terms of reference.

There are so many ways in which the welfare ends of the fund can be served. Housing estates may be developed and dormitories built in Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet for the visiting expatriate workers and their families. They can also be sign-posted to available investment facilities and service delivery systems. So, it will be worthwhile to have a board of trustees look after the fund's interests.

They deserve the best of treatment the country can afford. For, it is admitted on all hands that but for their remittances our macro-economic stability would have been a far cry. At a time when we have balance of payment deficits we feel it in our bones as to how invaluable an asset they are for the country's economic uplift. Let's act on this realisation, always and unfailingly.

## Back to the past?



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

ALMOST for the umpteenth time the call has gone out to allow sanity to prevail in the polity. This time around the announcement was made from the most appropriate and competent forum. It is capable of reflecting public aspirations by virtue of its representative character and capable of turning rhetoric into action. To ban something permanently because of its being against public interest there is no better way than passing a law making it a punishable offense. If and when the law is passed it will usher in a new chapter in our national life and thereby highlight the enduring role of Jatiya Sangshad as the pre-eminent national institution to guide the destiny of the nation. More significantly, it will be demonstrated that law making is not only about addressing emergent issues but that it also represents a vision of the future. Because such laws transcend contemporary exigencies they can be seen as embodying the ideological aspirations of the nation more cogently than others.

Exhortations to ban student politics were made earlier also, and not less than from the highest quarters. Like an abortive take-off it fell flat on the indifference of political parties. The appeal, however, resonated throughout the various strata of society that bear the brunt of the problem. The print media pursued the idea relentlessly keeping alive the embers of an incipient public opinion-creation campaign. At long last the issue has found its way to the parliament which alone

can make a historic breakthrough by taking a major legislative action. This time it has been articulated by no less a person than the head of the government. It was her party that toyed with the idea soon after the resounding victory in the last election and the subsequent rampage in campuses signaling the "change of guard". The whole nation must have heaved a sigh of great relief at the change of attitude demonstrated by the loud thinking. But it would be too simplistic to think

droves, many also left studies permanently to devote full time to the political struggle raging in the country. After independence students in India went back to normal life except those who, much later, became involved in the revolutionary politics of Naxal movement in a few states.

In former East Pakistan students' politics remained independent of national political parties, though not detached from issues of national concern. Till the end of Fifties no

by the turn of Sixties when national political parties, particularly those on the right, opened their students' fronts. Since then every political party of significance came to have their supporters and workers among students though it was not until much later, after the emergence of Bangladesh, that the phenomenon of armed students' cadre became common in campuses. Not only it marked the end of innocence in students' politics, the distinction between students' politics and

muscle and firepower almost all parties came to patronize and maintain students' cadre.

The dependence on students for agitational politics, confrontation and showdowns led to controlling campuses, particularly residential halls. This often took vicious forms with guns blazing in broad daylight evoking high noon of the wild west in America, except that in this reprise the sheriff and his men stood as silent on-lookers. Most of the times it had been the innocent students who

they are affiliated. If campus has to be freed from the scourge of student politics this nexus with national politics has to be broken. This cannot be done simply by passing a law. Rending asunder the symbiotic relationship will require a sea change in the way politics is conducted at present. Parties will have to adhere to constitutional politics, democratic norms and rule of law. They will have to agree to govern and be in opposition within the framework of constitution without resorting to muscle and fire power. These requirements cannot be fulfilled by mere promulgation of a law or by an administrative fiat. Only a shared vision for the future and common conviction about the need to keep students free from the rough and tumble of national politics can lead to a consensus among parties. A law banning student politics will have better chance of success if such a general agreement prevails.

There is no disagreement about the egregious nature of student politics and the urgency to rid campus of their consequences. Proposing to take action in the legislative forum is a major step forward to stem the rot. But it is not sufficient. To use the medical metaphor again, student politics is the symptom, the cause of the ailment lies in the political culture that breeds it. Unless qualitative change is brought about in the conduct of politics students will remain indispensable to politicians. It is difficult to throw off old habits, dismantle entrenched institutions and remove vested interests. But our politicians should neither balk at the enormity of the challenge nor be seen as dithering. The nation as well as the campuses is longing for a change with a deep sense of nostalgia. They wistfully remember the golden Fifties. It is one of those few occasions when the past becomes so welcome for future. Sociologists have an expression for it: the modernity of tradition.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

## IN MY VIEW

There is no disagreement about the egregious nature of student politics and the urgency to rid campus of their consequences. Proposing to take action in the legislative forum is a major step forward to stem the rot. But it is not sufficient. To use the medical metaphor, student politics is the symptom, the cause of the ailment lies in the political culture that breeds it. Unless qualitative change is brought about in the conduct of politics students will remain indispensable to politicians.

that student politics can be stopped simply by passing a law. Student politics may be the cause of many ills within and beyond campus but it is not an autonomous phenomenon existing on its own. It reflects the extant ethos of our politicians and is the consequence of the political culture that has been nurtured and sustained over a long period. To use the familiar medical metaphor, it is the symptom and not the cause of the ailment.

Recapitulating the past in brief it can be stated that the history of students politics in the sub-continent is a checkered one. It was indistinguishable from national politics during the colonial period when the movement for independence from alien rule was launched. Everyone, irrespective of caste, creed, class and even age considered it a moral, even a sacred, duty to engage in the struggle for freedom. It was such a noble and irresistible goal that very few hesitated in contributing their mite, however much that meant in terms of sacrifice and suffering. In this popular upsurge students not only joined in

student wings of political parties were organized and functioned within campuses. Politically conscious students of former East Pakistan took part in various movements from non-partisan perspectives even when these coincided with the stands taken by some political parties. Campuses at the time throbbled with academic debates on various national issues and bristled with cultural and sport activities. Annual elections to various students unions were fought on non-political party basis and students with outstanding academic and extra-curricular achievements gave leadership in campus. By any reckoning, campuses before the advent of Sixties were idyllic places. This is not to imply that students then were lotus-eaters living in ivory towers indifferent to the realities and problems of national life. Their spontaneous participation in the 1952 language movement, struggles for provincial autonomy etc. bear ample testimony to this.

The halcyon days of peace and tranquility with pristine academic atmosphere in campuses were over

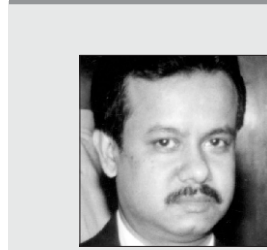
national politics also became blurred. As national politics became confrontational capitalizing on agitation, reliance on student wings by political parties increased. Eschewing constitutional means and democratic procedure political parties resorted to street politics which often resulted in skirmishes. For this kind of test of raw power parties required a large number of 'foot soldiers' and the students recruited as cadres proved extremely useful in this respect.

In independent Bangladesh regimes changed at irregular intervals sometimes through ballot, sometimes with bullets. But students in politics remained firmly entrenched. Their use in street demonstrations, public meetings, hartals and, last but not the least, at election time continued to increase in intensity casting a long shadow over constitutional democracy. In time student politics became a full time engagement spreading its tentacles in very nook and corner of national life. To be in power and to overpower opponents through

were caught in the crossfire, the latest victim being Sony, the hapless girl student of BUET. Money and arms have been liberally distributed by parties to maintain the fearsome presence of students' cadre. When they seek to supplement this flow of funds through extortion or manipulation of tenders their political godfathers wink and nod or simply turn a blind eye. Arrayed against each other the students' cadres fight for their survival as much as that of their patrons. The result is the transformation of campuses into battlefields and high-risk areas. From time to time they come out of campus and take up positions at strategic points to pounce on designated targets. It then becomes evident that error in campus is nothing less than preparation for this greater showdown.

Students in politics, specially the armed cadres, unleash a reign of terror at their sweet will and with impunity. But their main strategy is to use campus as the base and the staging ground for bigger operations outside campus. Their goal is control of national politics in line with the policy of the party with which

## Against the dying of the light



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE streak of white in the split of blue flashed again in front of his eyes, the fleeting image of a folded leg in white pajama ensconced in the slit of a blue chemise, which he saw on the side of a speeding baby-taxi on his way to work. For the split of a second he caught glimpse of her foot, snuggled in a black shoe, its complexion having the lustre of fresh banana. His heart filled with sadness as though the epiphany of a lifelong illusion had eluded him once again.

Throughout the day, the memory of that illusion burned in him like a simmering fire, and he wondered how he could be intrigued by the part of a woman's body which he had not seen as a whole. He thought that perhaps it was symptomatic of old age, that an aging man would clutch at anything that characterised youthful ebullience so that he could convince himself that he had not aged. Old age brings desolation, which brings desperation because the depletion

of life is obvious by then.

For a strange reason, what he saw in the morning stoked the fire that was gone. It was like sunrise at dusk, fire in the ice and spark in a damp spot. Suddenly, he felt that his body was radiating the heat, which used to keep it warm in youth, that the embers that looked cold and wet began to glow. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw the exquisite curve of that folded leg, its fleshy bulge between the flaps of

honed by the grief of haunting death. His blood boils with a frenzy of despoiled desire as he looks at these fresh redolent faces, death denied in the rapture of their youth, their physical beauty appealing to him with the intensity of a fervent call. Young men don't make him feel the same way; instead they remind him of the fertility of youth that he once had. They remind him of his own beginning of which this old age has been a consequence, the

his own life. It is the extension of time one is given to survey the long trail of ruins one has left behind, so that he will reconcile the beginning with end, compelled to endure the embarrassment of his own desecration, and suffer the humiliation of his own extinction. Old age is redemption, recovery of death seeded in life, the shriveled kernel of the body from the hard shell of youth.

Every time the streak of white in

And how does it happen? He appreciates their wholesome beauty, which initially makes him sad, and that sadness soon converts into a passionate longing to consort with them, which reminds him of his misfortune as an old man. This misfortune readily turns into a voracious hunger that wants to devour whatever it can, which makes him feel desperate because old age is the nearest thing to death. It overcomes him with a

the gifts of life with earnest hands.

This morning he felt that passion in the elusive bend of the leg, which rose from the floor of the baby-taxi and then turned in the direction of an enigma right above the seat. He couldn't see what the owner of that limb looked like, but it occupied his mind as if it was the most attractive piece of an intriguing puzzle. It looked so fresh, young, round, plump, graceful, and full of life, which jolted him with an indomitable urge to live forever.

Just about then he is crestfallen, and the surge of life turns into the slump of death. Like a drunkard resenting his behaviour when sober, he realises that life cannot go on forever, that his craving for the infinity is doomed in the finite absurdity of his own existence. He must die in the end no matter what, that death signifies old age in the same manner sex signifies youth.

He thought of death in his youth, and now he thinks of sex in old age. Often he thinks that his life has been nothing but a long wait for both while one contested the other in the prime of its age. Perhaps that is where lies the secret of life. It grows in the tussle between beginning and end.

"Old age should burn and rave at close of day; Rage, rage against the dying of the light," he muttered the words of Dylan Thomas, while the scurried visual of white in blue flashed before his eyes all day like a flickering light.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

## CROSS TALK

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chemise conjuring the magic of an irresistible lure.

This lure has now crept into his flesh like miscreants in an abandoned house. Is it the last flicker of a dying flame, the last sputter of a failing engine? These days he enjoys watching young women as if it is an antidote to his old age. He doesn't watch them with lust or love but with the levity of a prisoner whose release is imminent. If sex is the passion of youth, death is the passion of old age, a dead young man being as unacceptable to the world as a dirty old man.

He likes to look at young women in a bizarre twist of sexual fire

inevitable dereliction of sexual prowess in the despicable wreckage of senile dotage.

He despairs often in his wretched solitude, propelled by the appetite of sex in the shadow of death, which proves doubly hazardous for him. He is at once pulled by life and pushed towards death, a lifeless soul aggrieved by what he doesn't have and what he is going to lose. The young women, their flawless limbs and sprightly looks dispel the fear of death as they fill his heart with anticipations of life bereft of hope.

Old age is blight, when a man is condemned to lick the wounds of

the split of blue flashed before his eyes, he wanted to go back into that hard shell, to become young again and feel the jolt of that electrifying time. English mystic Thomas Taherne exclaimed that he knew not that maids were born or should die, because they were "strange seraphic pieces of life and beauty!" He walks on the streets and goes to shopping malls to watch young girls, not in the way of a pedophile or a lecherous old mind. He feels the vibration of life surrounded by them, enervated by their voice, gestures, giggles and innocence, tempted to forget the miseries of old age and embrace the festival of life.

sense of relief that he will not have to live long with the burden of guilt even if he is doing anything wrong.

It is the energy of that comfort that he likes so much, the threat of vanishing time that enervates him, the anxiety of the end, which prompts him to begin again and again. It works like a vacuum cleaner; the whirring emptiness inside creates the force to suck particles from outside, like the lungs which exhale in order to inhale, the void which creates the scope for its own fulfillment. In the end he feels greedy, an exciting intensity of acquisitive passion to collect

## OPINION

## USA and Yasser Arafat

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

THE well publicised proposal for removal of Yasser Arafat by the US President has not been as welcome in other parts of the world including many a developed and European nations other than inside USA. Even in US too many a US scholars of history and experts on the Middle East affairs have expressed their reservations on the practicality of the Bush doctrine. The US President's resolve on removal of Yasser Arafat from the Chairmanship of Palestine if anything is certainly not reflective of respect for the institution of Democracy. No wonder he received a weak and lukewarm response to his proposal at the recently concluded G8 Summit. At least two of the Summit partners namely Canada and France expressed their inability to give their active consent or support to the US proposal.

It appears that the world's most powerful man triggered by his and his coalition's otherwise limited success on war of terrorism thought he could get away with this too. One must realize that the success(?) so far achieved in subjugating the

Taliban and the subsequent installation of a liberal government in Afghanistan vis-a-vis the Palestinian issue are two distinctly different issues both in character and content.

However I wish to make it clear that the War on Terrorism or the Taliban and their offshoots are real and the USA must be given the credit for pioneering that struggle. The fact however remains that the progress to date has also raised many a questions relating to rising incidences of human rights violations.

The truth and the basis of the Bush doctrine lies elsewhere: The Jewish factor in the American politics. The US President is unable to dispense the Jewish and the Israeli lobby. The present move has two distinctive objectives, to please the Jewish lobby inside USA and at the same time keep Ariel Sharon happy. There is yet this third strategic objective i.e. to buy time hoping that Arafat may succumb to pressures. Frankly this particular strategy may work, who knows. However, the US president and world leaders elsewhere must realise that the Palestinian issue has more to it than mere removal of Yasser Arafat.

Frankly, the political strategy

being pursued by the US president have some similarity with that of many of our third world democracies. It is all about staying in power and working out strategies for the next elections. The only difference between USA and others is that with all its resources it can extend that strategy beyond its own geographical boundaries in the name of demilitarizing and democratizing the otherwise insolent third world nations who do not tow the US line. The other objective is to pursue economic interests..

Truly, the American hypocrisy rules the day. Remember how United States constantly supported despots and dubious leaders whenever they met her needs like Suharto in Indonesia, Pinochet in Chile... USA must realise that the middle East crisis can never be resolved until a different policy is adopted which is beyond narrow self interests. Clearly US is more interested in protecting and enhancing its interests more than solving the Palestinian issue. USA therefore with regard to the Palestinian issue must pursue a policy based on pure human rights and international law.

OMAR KHASRU

THE Prime Minister in her concluding remarks at the budget session proposed a prohibition of student and teacher politics to "save our education system" and sought the cooperation of the opposition parties in this regard. Frankly, it was far less passionate or compelling than the rest of her speech, especially the part where she warns the opposition to cease and desist from conspiring to topple the government. There is little doubt that she made the wobbly, tip-toe, halfhearted proposal as a consequence of popular clamour for such bold step in order to free our institutions of higher learning from terribly detrimental effects of the double whammy of student and teacher politics.

The leader of the opposition, who has taken the term 'opposition,' too literally as in opposing everything that the government party says and does, including beneficial and constructive proposals and measures, opposed the ban vehemently. She made sanctimonious and inane utterances to the effect that terrorism and criminal acts of extortion and tender terror were the

main evils and not student politics. It would be similar to NRA (National Rifle Association), a diehard US pro-gun lobby, saying, "People, and not guns, kill people". The leader of the opposition has to be given credit for the keen sense of the obvious but we all know the state of existing student politics is such that one cannot separate the criminal activities from it. There mostly is gratuitous politics and hooliganism and almost no attention to routine student matters in student politics. The obsolete and token left wing parties, caught in a time warp, joined in the chorus with the leader of the opposition in opposing the ban. The fact is, there is no alternative to banning student and teacher politics, or at the very least putting a temporary moratorium for the sake of wellbeing of students and academic institutions.

People have a notion of the vicious and destructive nature, and gutter quality of existing student politics but have a less clear idea about the equally insidious and harmful effect of teacher politics. The 1973 ordinance that caused the inception of polarized and partisan teacher politics has done incredible harm to higher education in this

country. Brazen party politics, discord and friction among hardcore, opportunistic and expedient backers of different political parties, unbridled selfish ambitions and managing unmerited positions and status on the part of some teachers permeate the public universities. You are hard pressed to find simple and genuine teachers. What you are likely to find are teachers of different shades, pink, white and blue, to denote their allegiance to different dogma and political parties. I heard of a Dhaka University teacher who was present in the classroom only six times during the academic year because he was busy with other external matters. Teachers can get away with such glaring dereliction of duty because there is no accountability. A teaching position seems to be a permanent lifetime employment without concern for performance or evaluation. This can easily be mitigated by introducing teaching evaluation by students. Many teachers, especially those who give priority to politics over teaching, will oppose it tooth and nail. But this is considered a useful and essential tool in most advanced countries to assess the quality of teaching and bring about possible

improvement. It is an important factor in teacher advancement, honour, promotion and tenure.

I, like many others, was once a proud student of Dhaka University (DU). Unfortunately, many public university teachers now are more interested in ingratiating themselves to leadership of political parties in order to snatch positions such as VC, Pro VC, Registrar, Treasurer, Provost and Proctor, rather than classroom teaching. There are off-campus positions such as University Grants Commission (UGC) and Public Service Commission (PSC) membership, Chairman of WASA and other government and semi-autonomous agencies, occasional ambassadorships and even party nomination for MP. These are far too desirable and attractive than mere dedicated and diligent teaching and imparting knowledge to students. These teachers do almost everything but teach, which ought to be their main occupation. The most sinister and appalling thing is some of these teachers would go to any length, including involving and coddling leaders of affiliated student wing of various political parties, to attain their aim. It is not an innocent

achievement of objective; it involves stepping over others, with similar ambition and aspiration, in a rat race, and frequently superseding more deserving candidates.

The basis and the main criterion of appointment of teachers to lucrative administrative positions seem to be political affiliation and connections in high places rather than appropriate background and qualifications, expertise and acumen. The involvement of teachers in the unsavory competition to further their career goals at the expense of teaching is outrageous, abominable and objectionable. This is something that the general public does not have to stand for and the government can bring to a welcome end by radically altering the 1973 regulation, and forbidding teacher politics, and affiliation or hobnob with political parties. The government can do it without delay with or without the consent and cooperation of the main opposition party. The opposition parties, true to their nature, will oppose it strongly and stridently but their customary and predictable opposition will be swept away by the tide of public opinion and student benefit.