The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA SUNDAY JULY 7, 2002

Making Parliament effective

More serious effort needed by the Treasury Bench

OUR simple plea to both BNP and Al is, do yourself today (BNP as the ruling party and the AL as the opposition), what you advised your opponent to do yesterday (when roles of both parties were reverse). One of the beauties of the present political situation is that both sides- BNP and the AL- have been on both sides of the aisle. They have both been in the government and in the opposition. Therefore they both know what problems exist in the smooth running of the House and also how we can solve them. So our simple advice to the present Treasury Bench is that remember what you demanded of the Treasury Bench when you were in the opposition, namely allow the opposition to speak without interruption and provide them maximum opportunity to participate in the affairs of the House. Conversely, our suggestion to the present opposition is do yourself exactly what you had advised the previous opposition to do when you were in power, namely attend parliament regardless of what the government does.

We say all this because we are tired of seeing the same old play in action again -- ruling party making things impossible for the opposition and the latter walking out of the parliament on the flimsiest of grounds.

From press reports we gather that the AL is returning to the House with plenty of questions to ask. Among them will be one dealing with the PM's accusation that the opposition was conspiring to overthrow the government and another dealing with the censor motion against Sheikh Hasina for her remarks on the graveyard of BNP founder Ziaur Rahman. Of the two we would prefer a thorough debate on the PM's conspiracy charge against the opposition as it is far more serious and has far greater implication for future politics than a debate on the other subject. As we have already commented in an earlier editorial that if there was really a conspiracy than the government is duty-bound to share information with the people so that we know who the conspirators are and isolate them from the people. If, on the other hand, it was a mere political rhetoric than it was extremely unethical, self-defeating and irresponsible on the part of the government. We had seen the previous government also using the word 'conspiracy' recklessly without ever bothering to prove what was being asserted. We had hoped that this government would show a little more maturity.

We commend the opposition for the seriousness with which they appear to be returning to the parliament. We hope they maintain that seriousness throughout.

Early foreboding of flood

Signal to get ready

FROM water-logging in Dhaka city we now confront a somewhat developing flood situation that perhaps threatens to engulf the whole country. In fact, looking at the mid-section of Bangladesh in early-to-mid-July period one can sense how big the flood can get, other things remaining the same, as the standard phrase goes. Now how is 'Dhaka in the mid-riff region of the country looking at the moment: Buriganga, Turag, Kaliganga and Tongi canal are in a spate, albeit sympathetically with the surge in the country's river-system as a whole.

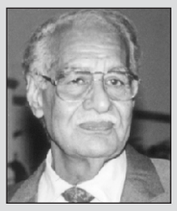
The outlook does not quite seem to be of the annually visiting type of flood recurring this year also; it might be of a more serious kind in prospect. At least that's what we must prepare ourselves for, so as not to be overwhelmed or thrown off-gear by its onset. If it does not come about in the form we fear it might, well and good.

The premonition of a bigger flood is based on two basic assumptions: first, the rains had come as early as in March-April and have not since quite left us except for brief spells. Secondly, in the very first week of the critical month of July, we have had cascading waters from the upstream coupled with heavy downpour in Bangladesh putting our rivers in a spate. Weather forecasts speak of more rains and further swelling of the rivers.

It is only when the Brahmaputra-Ganges-Meghna river basins rise simultaneously and remain in spate for quite a while that we face the danger of a big flood. This is some way off yet; but who knows?

We think the time has arrived for a preparedness strategy to be adopted with the previous pitfalls avoided and the best practices embraced from past experiences with biggish-to-big floods. First and foremost, the day-to-day flood forecasting practice needs to be connected to a broader perspective and complemented by trend analysis based on regional meteorological coordination and international weather satellite readings. The gaps will have to be filled in there. Already, the flood embankments have breached in a number of places requiring to be urgently repaired. Men and material must be placed properly for a comprehensive relief and rehabilitation operation to be mounted on a short notice. Let's roll up our sleeves to meet the challenge before it engulfs us.

Where is justice?



KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

NO school bus stops here to pick up children. No postman comes here to deliver letters by name. It is no longer on the beat of the media. Rioting makes news, not the absence of it; relief or rehabilitation is a mundane story. Even after four months of carnage, thousands of victims in Gujarat have no home, no hearth and no work. Refugee camps, where they took shelter when their houses were destroyed or burnt in broad daylight, are being shut. Some have tried to go back to the places where they lived to rebuild their tenements and lives. But the hostile neighbourhood has forced them to return. They cannot stay on where they are today even in unhygienic conditions. The government says that its "work" is over. What are the states for if they cannot look after the people who are ruined due to government's failure to protect them?

The victims have no place to go. They feel helpless and abandoned. Yet the prime minister had promised them ample compensation and quick rehabilitation. They have received some money as a grant. But it is too small to be considered compensation and too meagre to help them make a beginning. Are they victims of prejudice or politics or both? They have come to believe that they are the sacrificial lambs state chief minister Narendra Modi used to polarise the society. On this premise he seems determined to go to the polls in September or October, six months ahead of schedule. The BJP, his party, expects to reap the harvest from the poisonous seeds Modi has sown.

"If it is a question of vote, please disfranchise us," many inmates of refugee camps say. This is probably the strongest denunciation of a system, which claims to be democratic and secular. Muslims constitute 10 to 12 per cent of the electorate in Gujarat. Still the BJP insists on playing the Hindu card.

The elections are some months away. The problem of victims is immediate; how do they pick up the thread and from where? They would like to go back to the shops they had and to the houses where they and their forefathers lived. But many in the majority community do not want it. The administration could help but quite a bit of it is contaminated. And at the helm of affairs is Modi who is far from repentant. His new antic is to open a school of *ahimsa* (non-violence)!

To turn the tide flowing in favour of the Congress was the task entrusted to him when he was sent to Ahmedabad from Delhi where he was the BJP's general secretary. Being an RSS *pracharak*, he had learnt only one lesson: how to play on the imaginary fears of Hindus against Muslims to communalise the society. He would have created a Godhra train incident if it had not happened. The tragedy is that some Muslims played into his hands. Modi probably knows that the Gujaratis would one day realise what harm he has done to their economy and their image. But that will take time. At present, he wants to cash in on the atmosphere of prejudice, suspicion and fear he has built.

This can be well imagined from a letter that a Muslim gentleman has written to me: "Not long ago, I would walk up to the nearby post office to send my letters and pick up fresh fruits and vegetables on my way back. I liked the leisurely talk with the Hindu vendors. Now my servant does all that. I am afraid to go out even in a car. I prefer to stay at home. But that is not life."

Many Muslims have begun to migrate to other states. Some of them, who had come from UP in the wake of the Babri masjid's demolition, have gone back. But the Vishwa Hindu Parishad is trying to spoil the atmosphere by reneging on its earlier promise. It has refused to accept even the court's verdict on the mandir-masjid controversy. The prime minister's statement that the BJP had never deviated from the mandir agenda had created confusion. But the BJP's reiteration to honour the court's decision has saved the situation.

So have the NGOs working in Gujarat. They are the only rays of hope in an otherwise murky scenario. All of them are Hindus. They have been looking after the refugee camps from day one. Hindus have contributed lakhs of rupees and some of their organisations have adopted the Muslim villages, razed to the ground during the riots. Indeed, all this has given the victims a feeling that they are part of the Indian nation.

Yet Hindu fundamentalists have not relented in any way. They had planned a series of *rath yatras* in the next few days. The Muslims had responded positively when they cancelled the Muharram celebrations. But the sponsors of rath yatras were adamant. It took the National Human Rights Commission's strong statement to make them come down from their resolve. Former Union Minister Ram Vilas Paswan also appealed to the prime minister to stop the yatras. Such pleas hardly matter to a party that is out to divide the nation.

New BJP chief Venkiah Naidu is going still further. He said the other day on a TV network that he would ask the BJP ministers to spread the party's message. He does not realise the implications of the statement. External Affairs Minister, Finance Minister or, for that matter, any other minister is that of the country. True, he belongs to a party but in a notional sense only. Otherwise, it will be mixing politics with the state. Venkiah Naidu's emotional burst clouds his vision.

The BJP chief should have taken a leaf out of America's contemporary history. Both the Senate and the Congress unanimously passed a resolution to condemn 'bigotry and violence' against Sikh American citizens in the wake of the terrorist attack on September 11. The resolution was co-sponsored by 39 Senators and 131 Congressmen and signed by President Bush to make it a law. The resolution regrets that many Sikhs "who are easily recognisable by their turbans and beards, which are required by their faith, have suffered both verbal and physical assaults as a result of misguided anger" after the September 11 attacks.

An American who killed a Sikh soon after the attacks was prosecuted and executed within a few months. But in India, where 3,000 Sikhs were massacred in Delhi alone, culprits have not been found till today, even after 18 years. Nor has parliament passed any resolution to condemn the large-scare murder. We have had a plethora of commissions to find out who were the guilty. One commission is still sitting in New Delhi.

The "ethnic cleansing" in Gujarat looks like meeting the same fate. The commission appointed to find out the guilty is yet to begin its work in right earnest. The senior member, Justice Nanavati, is busy with the commission on the Sikhs' massacre. That the BJP appointed him is not a coincidence. In the commission on Sikhs' massacre he is to pinpoint the Congress responsibility. In the Gujarat case, he will be finding out the culpability of the BJP. Quite a feat!

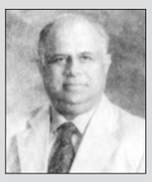
The Congress government never allowed the truth about the Sikh massacre to come out. The BJP will see to it that the truth about Gujarat remains hidden. The party has already given a clean chit to Modi. India's tragedy is that convenience has the better of the rule of law. Politics and crime have become the two sides of the same coin. Where is justice? Or is there anything called justice?

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

In India, where 3,000 Sikhs were massacred in Delhi alone, culprits have not been found till today, even after 18 years. We have had a plethora of commissions to find out who were the guilty. The "ethnic cleansing" in Gujarat looks like meeting the same fate. The commission appointed to find out the guilty is yet to begin its work in right earnest. The senior member, Justice Nanavati, is busy with the commission on the Sikhs' massacre. In the commission on Sikhs' massacre he is to pinpoint the Congress responsibility. In the Gujarat case, he will be finding out the culpability of the BJP. Quite a feat!

Media and combating corruption



IKRAM SEHGAL
writes from Karachi

WITH the technological advances of the 20th century, and those anticipated in the 21st, media has become a most potent weapon both in peace and in war. However its role as the guardians of the oppressed carries most relevance for civilization. Working without any fear or restraint a free media is the best check on excess of any kind by anyone or any entity having the potential and the inclination to inflict excess. What to talk about individuals, even nations feel the heat that the media can generate on any wrongdoing. Conversely, influence over a "free" media allows the generating of excess without undue hue and cry.

The mass media, in particular the printed press, enjoys a special status which gives them protection against conventional social policies. This freedom is a vital element, a safeguard of human rights in a democratic and civil society; media autonomy must be respected and defended. The exceptional degree of autonomy carries duties and responsibilities that call for regulation both on legal and ethical levels i.e. the media must also be accountable. It would be both sociologically and politically naive to place media outside of any social controls. Accountability can conceptually be divided into various levels and aspects, including law and ethics. The mass media is regulated by legal and financial means to a degree determined by the political balance of power prevailing in each society. And there is little that the professional and academic community can do about it, but there is an untapped potential for indirect participation in the democratic process of media accountability through media criticism. The media criticism called for is not the kind of politically motivated interest group advocacy that is well known everywhere, but scientifically based description and assessment of media performance, carried out by methods of content analysis. The reasoning follows the correspondence theory of truth: comparing media coverage with extramedia data. However, truth checking can be left aside, why pay so much attention to content, especially at a time of media concentration and globalization? The mass-mediated content constitutes a strategic part of broader reasoning about freedom and accountability, and ultimately media's role in democracy.

Propaganda is "a deliberate attempt to persuade people, by any available media, to think and then behave in a manner desired by the source. It is really the means to an end." Propaganda is a process and in the present age the media have become very useful tools of propaganda. Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman offered a 'propaganda model' of how the mainstream media work in the USA, this "traces the routes by which money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalise dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interest to get their messages across to the public." They mentioned a number of ingredients or set of news "filters" through which information must pass, viz (1) ownership of the dominant mass media firms; (2) advertising as their income source and (3) the media are dependent on government and business industries as information sources.

The three major propositions of the Chomsky-Herman study were, viz (1) media perceptions and representations of other countries are highly biased, selective and stereotyped; (2) mainstream media usually become the agents of government and elite propaganda and are obstacles to regional peace and stability, eroding its integrity as neutral observer of truth to a certain extent. For example, the Indian media mainly reflect elite consensus and neglect the voices of the subjugated, the causes of minorities being given lower priority. In foreign policy and inter-State matters, the media often take a pro-establishment tone and (3) media plays a significant role in fuelling ethno-religious conflicts, having far-reaching implications for an entire region. These are highly interconnected in terms of religion and ethnicity, media's jingoistic postures only aggravate the existing situations.

We must highlight objectives necessary for good governance of society and the fight against corruption viz (1) generate media support for the fight against corruption, (2) determine means to ensure the freedom and independence of the media and (3) develop an improved understanding for the media's potential for preventing and combating corruption.

The first requirement is to obtain transparency in government functioning and the availability of better access to information. One of the major reasons of corruption is that information is denied to the public under the pretext of confidentiality. Except for a very few areas of national security, there is nothing in the country that requires any classification. This camouflage must be removed from all public dealing and the media particularly must be allowed to function in bringing transparency into all transactions. At the same time no one or entity should be allowed to interfere with the level of freedom and independence of the media. This is a sacred trust that should not be violated. Both the democratic and military regimes have supported free media, but a few incidents did take place during the democratic regimes that were unsavoury, quite counter-productive to this concept. The Faisalabad baton-charge recently during the Presidential referendum campaign was completely out of character of the present military regime. Given their rock-bottom salaries and incentives the media is vulnerable to this evil in society, the media itself has to watch out for corruption among its own ranks. What is really required is a self-developed code of ethics and integrity.

The media has a very substantial role in exposing corruption. The guilty do not like public attention and while investigative journalism is not that developed in Pakistan as in the western world, it certainly has great potential. The problem is that investigative journalism is anathema to both the public sector as well as the media's commercial transactions. Both the government (in third world countries like Pakistan) and free enterprise control advertisements that fuel the cash flow of the media balance sheet. Controlling the purse-strings gives them virtual VETO powers over investigative journalism. Whereas in developed countries such journalists are considered top of the line for any media corporate entity, in Pakistan the media bosses barely tolerate their presence. While curbing the powers of bureaucracy may not be an attainable goal in the present circumstances, can we really expect investigative journalism targetting corporate entities like ENRON, TYCO, XEROX, WORLDCOM, etc? Do people in Pakistan know that ADT is a subsidiary of TYCO? Would any accounting firm be subjected to cynosure in the media like Arthur Andersen has been in the US? There must be a law to protect the rights of whistleblowers, both in the media exposing wrongdoers, and those giving them the information. Of the greatest of importance is the fact that we have to make our politicians accountable. Today people seem to enter public life mostly with the intention of looting the till. Despite NAB's best efforts the biggest crooks are still vying for political leadership in the future. They serve as bad models which our youth tend to emulate. We must not do selective accountability as we are doing now but target all who enrich themselves at the expense of the State. A free media is the best possible support that NAB can have in a country where the excesses are many but the evidence non-existent.

By a constant barrage of exposing facts about corruption on the one hand and of avoiding corruption on the other, the media has a definite role to play in changing society's attitudes. Both the electronic and print media must eulogize honesty and integrity. They must also encourage all members of the public to consider themselves equal participants in the war against corruption. Only by universalizing the fight against corruption we can increase the sources of information vital to combating corruption; only by involving the general public we can force-multiply the availability of concrete evidence.

Ikram Sehgal, a former Major of Pakistan Army, is a political analyst and columnist.

AS I SEE IT

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

Hartal: Suffering of a working woman

It was ten past nine at the morning in Dhaka. I got prepared for my office before one hour. It was raining cats and dogs outside. The strong wind was frequently changing direction. In normal (non-hartal) rainy days, I could phone a taxi cab and go to the office or could send someone to bring a baby taxi. But it was a hartal day. I had no other choice other than going out in the rain. Umbrella did not help much. I had to get a rickhshaw. It did carry me to my office (a long journey of more than one hour), but wasn't able to protect me from rain. It is not a good experience for a woman to work a full day with wet cloths.

Shiekh Hasina is a woman. Will she understand how a working woman like me suffers from her hartals?

Dalia Satter
Dhaka

The never ending cycle

4th of July 2002-- the 226th Independence Day of the USA. For Bangladesh, it is simply another hartal day. Our politics is about a never-ending cycle of lies, lies and more lies. On 3rd July night BTV ran a short documentary on Sheikh Hasina's promise of "No Hartal" while campaigning for the October 2001 elections. It is not only an undying cycle of lies, it is one of ironies, contradictions and more lies. Being the opposition, you must call a hartal every month and being the government, it is your 'duty' to let the public know the oppositions' flaws. The foreign media is ready to pounce upon any mistake by the government of Bangladesh, as we all are aware of. Our country is only 30 years old and we have just realised that we are not even sure who declared Independence in 1971.

Our reputation is also on the decline in many countries. Add to that the economic, health and security problem the country is facing every single day. Miracle is not the answer as something like that would be called a "propaganda". I am sorry to point out the negatives, but that is the way it is.

Haji Mohammad Isam
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Hartals aren't what they used to be!

I was quiet disappointed on July 4 when I took my car out to get to the office at 9:30 in the morning. There was a traffic jam as rickshaws, tempos, buses, cars, ambulances and vans plied nonchalantly on the road utterly defying the "hartal" call. By the time I reached the office, I had to circle around the office building a couple of times looking for a place to park!

Whatever happened to the good old days when hartals meant roads would be filled with pedestrians and rickshaws? One could breathe clean air, relish the long rickhshaw rides, enjoy the sound of "silence" as the city would unwind and lay back all because of the strike!

My point to Shiekh Hasina/Khaleda Zia is that if reasons for a hartal are not strong enough or if you don't have the power to see it through, don't bother at all! People no longer care, and the impact it once had is now gone.

Farhan Quddus
Old D.O.H.S. Dhaka

No foreign magazines!

I can't believe that the present government has decided to tax so heavily of foreign magazines such as Times, NewsWeek, Reader's Digest etc.

These foreign publications are an extremely good source for our youths in learning what is going around the world and also improving their English speaking or reading ability. This tax on knowledge is not going to do any good rather it will isolate the Bengali citizens from the surrounding world. I would like to make a request to all the honourable and learned MPs in the parliament-- if you really love Bangladesh and want this country to prosper "Please don't tax on knowledge".

Rubayet Ahmed
New York, USA

"The Drama at the DMCH"

Your editorial of June 30, "The drama at the DMCH" really touched me. What a society we live in! It is worthwhile to reproduce a part of the editorial "what we need to do is to ask ourselves what sort of society we have built, where a mother is forced to give away her child for money. It may hurt us deeply but we must come face to face with the fact that there is a bottom tier of our population who are victims of extreme poverty and to whom neither the NGOs, and far less the government have been able to reach. The large number of women and children who are trafficked abroad are part of the same phenomenon of trade in human beings that exists in our country".

Such problems must be given priorities and has to be tackled from all possible angels. The civil society cannot shelve its responsibility towards the ill, the old, the infirm, and the unemployed. The mother and the abandoned child are our social responsibility.

Shahabuddin Mahtab
Dhaka

Ban student and teacher politics

My heartfelt congratulations to our PM for her proposal to ban student and teacher politics to save our educational institutions from ruin. However, I am deeply shocked to learn that our Leader of the Opposition opposed this important and timely proposal put forward in the JS. It is well known to all that the present student politics is the root of all violent activities such as killings, kidnappings, illegal toll collections, and tender snatching in the campuses. Unfortunately, political parties support campus politics.

I urge all political parties to be sincere in reaching a consensus on this vital issue to ban the student and teacher politics immediately for the greater national interests.

M. S. Uddin
Nagoya, Japan

BRTC taxicabs

I just saw an ad in the paper by the BRTC for the supply of 500 taxicabs.

This is intrinsically wrong on so many levels. Why on earth should we expand another state parasite? The way the BRTC works is buy, use and throw away. Look at the Volvo buses, which have been plying our streets for these last few months. Already they are showing wear and tear far more than normal. The Ashok Leyland buses bought a year ago are half wrecked already.

Now they are buying another 500 taxicabs. Why not let the private sector provide this service? Even more interesting, the taxicabs are not even CNG. If this state parasite must expand its fief then why not at least in environmentally friendly cars?

Just goes to show that the right hand of this government doesn't know what the left is doing.

Cervantes
Dhaka

To help yourself help the helpers

With the reference to the letters 'Helping the helping hands' I was shocked on Ms Basmiah Jahir's opinion that the government should step up about the issue. According to her the general mass of Bangladesh will act properly after only getting the nicest advice from our very kind and respected government.

Ms Jahir probably is not aware of the fact that our government and the leading opposition party both are very busy in restoring the stature and rights of their past leaders. So, Ms. Basmiah, you are doing a good job by being nice towards your household helpers. Our small efforts will definitely bring change in the lives of the people of our country, without the help of the people of the government. Let us not judge what others are doing but judge what we have done for others. Let's not be disappointed by others and let's not become the disappointment of others.

One simple point everybody does not understand is that by helping our poor helpers we are actually helping ourselves, which Ms. Shahrin Hussain Tania wanted to say. For example, one of my close relatives always behaves in such a way that so within one week the domestic aides leave her house. With no helpers she then has to do all the work by herself. But again when she gets any helpers she forgets her hardship and repeats the same mistake. Being harsh on the helpless helpers she becomes the ultimate sufferer.

M. S. Hamid (Bobby)
Old DOHS, Dhaka