

Choked lifeline

'Save the Buriganga' must become a social movement

THE combo picture front-paged in this paper yesterday says it all. While a group of environmentalists demonstrate on a boat on the Buriganga to press home the demand for immediate and effective steps to save the city's lifeline and other natural water bodies from encroachments, a concrete-processing plant operates on full swing at the foreshore of the Shitalakhya, another endangered river. The Bangladesh Environment Movement (BEM), the organiser of the boat procession, highlighted on Friday a wide range of issues related to overall environmental degradation of the city. It was specific in demands and insightful in terms of suggestions. Recovery of public lands, rivers, lakes and canals in and around the city from illegal occupation, end to indiscriminate dumping of toxic wastes into the Buriganga, relocation of tanneries at Hazaribagh, etc no doubt sum up the common concern of the environment conscious residents of the capital. Meanwhile, afforestation along both sides of the Buriganga and snapping of water, gas and power lines to illegally built houses and factories could indeed help restore ecological balance and discourage encroachment respectively.

Nevertheless, it could all add up to a big zero, if the government and relevant departments, directorates and divisions remain as passive as they have so far been. As has been the case on any issue of public interest, the governmental reaction to encroachment on and dereliction of the city's lifeline has been knee-jerk at best and curious callousness at worst. Heaps of reports and editorial comments in the news media, series of seminars and symposia, and sustained outcry from the environmental groups and the civil society notwithstanding, the government has refused to take a broader outlook of the issue and accordingly outline a comprehensive plan of action. There have been assurances of immediate redress, formation of a few inquiry and implementation committees and even fewer actions deterring encroachment. In the end, each government step has been as ineffective as the other. As a result, the river has inched towards death everyday, the dying process gathering momentum with every passing moment.

Also, to be fair, the Save the Buriganga movement has stuttered from the very beginning, never quite gathering the momentum a social movement like this should have. It has never acquired the intensity the movement to save the Osmani Udyan gathered when the government planned to build an international convention centre on a section of the park or when an unscrupulous businessman attempted to construct a five star hotel-cum-shopping mall. The failure is collective and reflects a societal indifference to environmental matters. Such a demonstration of apathy, even if not intended, could only encourage the anti-environment elements into more harmful undertakings, while the government remains passive as ever.

Reappraisal of AIDS crisis

Global commitment firmed up to fight it

THE most comprehensive AIDS conference in Barcelona engaging 15,000 doctors, public health officials, researchers and NGO representatives after marathon stock-taking sessions ended last Friday on a grim note. Even after two decades of the disease's detection no cure or anti-body booster has been found.

Only anti-retrovirals that prevent the progression of HIV infection are available, mostly in the exclusive markets of the west. These are highly expensive medicines requiring anything between US dollar 25,000 and 30,000 per patient per year. So, there is a big demand from the developing countries to make such medication available at an affordable price. In this context Brazil importantly has defied patents to produce its own variety and so has India its Sipla anti-retroviral which has enabled the country to manage HIV afflictions reasonably well.

The WTO regulations on intellectual property rights need to be relaxed in this particular case. At the Barcelona conference delegates from developing countries vigorously stressed the urgency to provide anti-retrovirals within the affordability range of developing countries.

What really set the tenor for the conference -- along a grimmer line -- was a reality check applied on the earlier expectation that a vaccine against the virus was only five years away. Now, the five-year expectancy period has been replaced by the heart-breaking 'not in the foreseeable future' assessment.

Meanwhile, Nelson Mandela's clarion call for leaders in every country to show the way for ending stigmatisation and ostracisation of AIDS victims in their societies must be heeded. Simultaneously, former US President Clinton's impassioned appeal to the developed countries that they commit more funds to research in the field should meet with positive response.

Bills for raising remuneration of the MPs

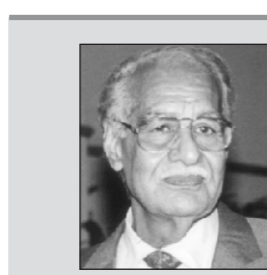
Bills to raise remuneration and privileges for the legislators were withdrawn minutes before their introduction to the Jatiya Sangsad on the 10th July. Don't worry! In good time these bills would be again introduced and duly passed -- probably by voice vote. The leaders of the nation would raise their voice in peoples' cash.

A few days ago the national budget was passed in the parliament. The cost of living - particularly for the middle class people - would go up due to this budget. This class

comprises mostly the fixed income people whose annual increments in salary never offset the effect of inflation. Did the government say anything about compensating these people in any way? When was the last pay commission implemented? And at what percentage the salaries of government and semi-government employees were increased? However, the newspapers say that the bills were to propose 50 - 300 per cent increase in allowances for the Prime Minister, Ministers, and the MPs.

In the last month they closed the Adamjee Jute Mills and snatched away jobs from around twenty four thousand workers and staffs. They had to be punished because they

Dial 'D' for dialogue



KULDEEP NAYYAR
writes from New Delhi

DIALOGUES between countries do not necessarily start after the situation normalises. They take place to normalise the situation. India and Pakistan are two countries, which are known for picking up the thread after the end of hostilities. They did so at Tashkent when the 1965 war ended and again at Shimla after the 1971 war. And when the guns fell silent, they, ritualistically, adopted a long list of peace measures, which unfortunately remained only on paper.

Today's standoff between the two countries is similar to the ones witnessed earlier. The difference is that there has been no last-minute agreement or dramatic declaration, although both sides say that the war is over. They are more used to wars than to think of peace.

There is yet another difference: never before have the forces of the two countries, 10 lakh in number, stood eyeball to eyeball for six months at a stretch. The two countries do not know how to get out of the corner to which they have painted themselves. Once Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf publicly stated that the war had been averted, they should

have restored the status quo ante, following the precedent at Tashkent and Shimla. Maybe it wouldn't create an ideal situation, but at least there would be a modicum of normalisation.

The two countries should have begun de-escalation by now. There is no doubt that the tension, which you could feel at one time, has now lessened. Soldiers on both sides have begun to go on leave. The atmosphere of confrontation looks somewhat relaxed. It is childish to insist on the other side taking the

13 years, such a reaction was understandable. But when there is proof of infiltration lessening why drag your feet? Home Minister LK Advani, not known for understatement, himself says that the infiltration has decreased. Defence sources also confirm it. Whether the infiltration has completely stopped or whether no such act will be repeated in the future is a matter of conjecture. Even after the employment of all modern facilities, the earliest we would know about the complete stoppage of infiltration

straight to the border was hasty. It is nobody's case that there should be any let-up in meeting cross-border terrorism. But exhausting the forces by letting them on the border is counter-productive. It may be because of pressure but Islamabad is making efforts to stop infiltration. It is true that most of the camps that the ISI has established to train and equip militants for cross-border terrorism have not been closed yet. And there are reports that a few more are coming up. The international pressure on winding them up

Indian airspace. Similarly, Islamabad, unlike Delhi, has not named the High Commissioner to India. Our Pakistan friends tell us that we should not make them as a test case. Their argument is that Musharraf is under a lot of pressure from the *jehadis*, religious groups and other fanatics. By not reciprocating to India's steps he is trying to give an impression that he is not yielding even an inch to New Delhi. The propaganda against him in Pakistan is that he has sold Kashmir to India at the behest of

community is still on tenterhooks. They want de-escalation. Armed forces, if they are not in the barracks, give an impression of disturbed conditions.

For reasons best known to him, Defence Minister George Fernandes has said that the troops will not be withdrawn till October. What is he trying to convey? Pakistan and Kashmir are scheduled to hold elections in October. How are they connected with the withdrawal of troops unless the stationing of them is meant to influence the elections? India and Pakistan have to find a way to get away from the present situation so that a dialogue can get off the ground. Once New Delhi makes an announcement that a dialogue could begin soon, the pressure on Musharraf from within his own countries will go down. The reported *jehad* plot to kill him sounds ominous.

Whether we can trust him or not is not as relevant as the situation we may face if he is ousted. At present he has the upper hand but the reports that there are *jehad* elements in the army does not augur well for the future. Again, it is not in our interest that Pakistan becomes a failed state. Its weakness can create innumerable problems for India.

Islamabad's strength will be in proportion to the steps India takes to normalise the situation. The withdrawal of troops is on the top of western powers' list. New Delhi's intransigence on this point can cost it the support of international community which has been so consistent in putting pressure on Musharraf and which has been saying that the line of control (Loc) is sacrosanct.

Kuldeep Nayyar is a leading Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

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first step. Maybe both countries should withdraw their troops simultaneously, after the field commanders have worked out the modalities.

If India were to take the initiative, it would in no way lose its *izzat* (honour). In fact, its stock in the international community would go up for taking the step towards normalcy. Nowhere in the world hostilities are allowed to be permanent because they affect all in some way or other.

We are on a strong wicket because our demand has been more or less met. New Delhi's condition was that it would not withdraw its troops or hold talks with Islamabad until the infiltration stopped. After facing an undeclared war from across the border for some

is six months. Should forces stand in a war-like position for such a long time? We are talking about human beings who are stationed at perilous heights or in the sweltering heat of the deserts, not robots.

As for infiltration, the West is also in the picture. Musharraf has repeatedly said that the infiltration has been stopped. He has even given an assurance to that effect to Washington and London. In fact, he has assured America that he will stop infiltration permanently. He can do shadow boxing as he has done before but he cannot renege on the promise made to Washington, which is Pakistan's economic lifeline.

New Delhi's response should have been more positive. Even our first reaction to take the forces

is increasing and Islamabad will have to do that ultimately. In any case, the end product is stopping infiltration. Since it is lessening, it is in our interest to take further steps.

For example, people-to-people contact is an important ingredient of better Indo-Pak relations. New Delhi should resume the bus and train services to Pakistan. Similarly, Pakistan air service to India should be allowed to operate. Once people from both sides meet, they might be able to goad their respective governments towards peace. At least, the atmosphere will become more conducive to it.

Islamabad is not making things easier. Even what New Delhi has done has not been reciprocated. For example, New Delhi's gesture to allow Pakistan flights to fly over the

America. Rhetoric on both sides may be difficult to check in the days to come because it is grist for their propaganda mills. Hardliners in the two countries are digging in their heels. Yet, there should be some steps to indicate that both of them have left far behind the period when they were about to jump at each other's throat.

In a way, they have because the foreign dignitaries relaying visits to New Delhi and Islamabad to normalise the situation is far less than before. Although they are talking to New Delhi and Islamabad all the time, they are still a little worried. The second visits of British Foreign Secretary J Straw and America's deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage in less than six weeks suggest that the international

An autopsy of Indian secularism

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

INDIA'S secular image is getting increasingly blurred. Invasive incursion of religion in statecraft is apprehended by some despoiling the hitherto exquisite fragrance of Indian secularism (albeit tarnished in the recent past) which hopefully would not be consigned to the dustbin of history to be fossilized. Exuberant religiosity has the possibility of lowering the threshold of tolerance of the majority community towards the minority.

The minority community see signs of a darkened sky in the recent political changes in India i.e. elevation of Home Minister L.K. Advani to the post of Deputy Prime Minister; appointment of Venkiah Naidu, an Advani loyalist, as President of BJP; reshuffle in the federal cabinet in which BJP now has 44 out of 77 Ministers. They feel that these events are shedding BJP's liberal image and perhaps indicating a return to its original Hindu roots. This appears to be amazingly similar to Pope John Paul the Second's insistence during his visit to then Czechoslovakia in 1990 (after the fall of communism) that democratic advances be accompanied by a recognition of Europe's Christian roots. Getting rid of communism, the Pope declared, was not enough if it was to be replaced by "secularism, indifference, hedonistic consumerism, practical materialism" etc. But then it is the Pope's job to tend to his flock lest they go astray. But for politicians who can influence the destinies of millions of people in the largest democracy in the world to preach theocratic values sends shiver along the spine of many people both in India and beyond.

Some historians thought that the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 following the Thirty Years' War heralded the end of the last of the great wars of religion. How wrong they were. Since then the world has seen pogroms in the name of religion so many times and in so many places. It is tragic that while the rest of the world, in varying degrees, is displaying religious tolerance through enactment of laws and accession to international treaties and conventions, one fifth of humanity is sliding down the path of religious intolerance, often expressed in its most vicious forms.

One of the fundamental tenets of Indian Constitution has been secularism. The leaders who pioneered India's freedom struggle were secular in thoughts and deeds. Despite the blood bath in Punjab and Bengal during the partition of India, the Indian leaders were convinced that secularism had to be the binding thread in the country's quest for unity in diversity. They believed that religion should not play any significant part in the country's political or civic affairs. They practiced secular humanism. In 1933 Pandit Nehru addressing the students of Benares Hindu University "denounced in forcible language, and especially condemned the activities of Hindu Mahasabha... (and) laid stress on the reactionary character of Hindu communalism." The outstanding fact seems to me" he wrote in his Autobiography "how on both sides (Hindus and Muslims) the communal leaders represent a small upper class reactionary group, and how these people exploit and take advantage of the religious passions of the

masses for their own ends".

It would be wrong to say that everything was hunky-dory before BJP took over the reins of government in India. Incidents of communal violence during 44 years of Congress rule and loss to life and property were considerable. It has been alleged that during the Emergency Rule of late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi many Muslim youths were forced to undergo vasectomy operations to slow down birth rate in the Muslim community. But the greatest assault on Indian secularism occurred in 1992 when the Babri mosque was razed to the ground notwithstanding the promise of then Indian Prime Minister Narashima Rao to the nation on 15th August 1992 that Babri mosque would be protected and despite the guarantee given to the Indian Supreme Court by then BJP Chief minister of Uttar Pradesh that no damage would be caused to the Babri mosque while building the Ram temple. The destruction of Babri mosque had an infernal effect on both the communities who perpetrated some of the most vicious crimes in the name of religion. Riots in Mumbai were particularly horrific. Thousands of lives were lost at the hands of mobs intoxicated by religious fervour who had played into the hands of Hindu fundamentalists.

Communal riots in India as the massacre of Muslims in Bosnia by the Serbs and to the Serbs in Croatia proved that fundamentalism was not sole preserve of Muslim extremists as is generally perceived in the West particularly after the events of September Eleventh. It has to be understood that the fight for a Palestinian State is not a religious struggle but a political one

as much as is a solution of the Irish problem. Support by the Islamic countries to the Palestinian cause should not be confused as a manifestation of Islamic fundamentalism because the Palestinian cause is also supported by almost all the members of UNGA and most of the members of UNSC. It is, therefore, necessary to distinguish between such cases where victims are coincidentally Muslims and Hindutva, a movement to turn India from a secular country into a Hindu state. Granted that 82 percent of the people in India are Hindus and 12 percent are Muslims with the rest being Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists etc. But it is difficult to comprehend that a diverse country like India folding within its womb people of different ethnicity, race, religion, culture and language can remain robust both politically and economically, if all other communities except the Hindus are marginalized. India must remain secular and not go the way of Gujarat and its Chief Minister Narendra Modi for India's own sustenance. Scapegoats for trans-border terrorism should not be searched within its border just because some people profess different faith. They are no less patriotic than the people belonging to the majority community. North Eastern states, albeit sparsely populated, are peopled by Christians, Buddhists and Animists many of whom have valid or imagined grievances against the central government. West Bengal has steadfastly remained communist for the last quarter century. It is difficult to gauge the appeal of Hindutva to the people living in these states. There is a distinct possibility that

BJP's strategy of communalizing its domestic policy is aimed at state elections in the ten states scheduled for next year and the federal elections in 2004. But then in the recent elections in Uttar Pradesh BJP did rather poorly and is now in partnership in the state government at the whim of mercurial Mayawati who once in the past had dumped BJP in a merry-go-round arrangement for sharing Chief Ministership. Hindutva may appeal in the Hindi heartland states in the North but not axiomatically. One has to take into account that BJP rules only in three states while Congress has control over fifteen. Besides, BJP's 1999 electoral victory was not only due to resurgent faith of Hindus in their religion. The election was won by the NDA alliance and not by BJP alone and not all alliance partners are ardent supporters of Hindutva. Different components of NDA have different constituencies. One may recall that during the 1999 elections campaign BJP in order to attract support from large number of parties had put forward a "common programme" that excluded parties of the party's agenda viewed as hostile to the Muslims e.g. building of Ram mandir at Ayodhya. After the elections, however, due to pressure from VHP and other components BJP's policy appears to have undergone some drastic changes.

Carnage in Gujarat, widely condemned both at home and abroad severely tarnished India's secular image and added further to the existing insecurity complex of the minority Muslim community. Perhaps it was as a measure of damage control that eminent scientist Dr. Abdul Kalam, a Muslim, has

been nominated by BJP and endorsed by the Congress for the Presidency. It may be recalled that in 1967 when Mrs. Indira Gandhi wanted then Vice President Dr. Zakir Hossain to ascend to the Presidency (opposition parties were championing the candidacy of former Chief Justice K.S.Rao) some of the senior Congress leaders had advised her to drop Dr. Zakir Hossain. Mrs. Indira Gandhi reportedly told them "India's profession of faith in the ideal of a secular state would never be believed if Dr. Hossain were denied the office". Though this time around Dr. Kalam is sure to win the election Bajpayee-Advani combine is no Indira Gandhi. Yet one finds it difficult to believe that BJP would embark on a policy of Hinduisation of India and consequently alienate fifteen percent of its Muslim, Christian and Buddhist population and millions of Hindus who abhor Hindu fundamentalism as much as they hate Islamic fundamentalism.

While war against terrorism of all varieties should be pursued with full vigor BJP would be well advised to keep its own house in order. All communities which have contributed to centuries old Indian civilization; pride of the East, a gem in the sub-continent's Rubensque psyche; need to be reassured that they have a continued stake in the progress of India in this century no less than what they had in the one which has just gone by. Such assurance would not be altruism but self-serving and would help India propel itself with greater force in its march towards further prosperity.

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OPINION

The ETV case: How to serve public interest

MANZOOR AHMED

THE threat of shut-down of ETV, the only independent alternative to the state-controlled BTV channel, hangs like the Sword of Damocles. The High Court verdict of 27 March, in a public interest suit, found the terrestrial transmission license granted by the government to ETV to have been done in violation of due process. The Appeals Division of the High Court upheld this verdict in its decision on 2 July, but allowed five weeks for the respondents to present their arguments for a Supreme Court Review.

The terrestrial transmission license enables ETV to broadcast directly to viewers instead of relying on satellite broadcast distributed by cable to viewers. ETV is owned 55 percent by Bangladeshi private investors, 40 percent by Citicorp of

USA and 5 per cent by International Finance Corporation, a World Bank affiliate. ETV, as the only private channel, barring satellite-based channels which reach a very limited number of viewers, has become a popular and widely acclaimed television channel for its attractive content and presentation, balance in its coverage of news and views, and a generally high standard of intense political partisanship.

The High Court verdict and its upholding in appeal establishes, unless the verdict is overturned or modified by the Review, violation of law in the course of setting up ETV. The verdict focuses on the procedure of granting the license for terrestrial transmission (using state-owned BTV facilities).

Disregard for laws and rules--whether "technical" or more substantive cannot be taken lightly,

especially when it involves a matter of significant public interest. When the matter is brought to the highest judicial body of the land, it is incumbent upon the guardians of justice to go beyond the technicalities and consider and protect all vital aspects of public interest.

Will public interest be served if the Review confines itself to procedural violation and upholds the High Court verdict and, consequently, ETV is shut down? Presumably, such an outcome will lead to a re-organization and re-opening of ETV, perhaps under another name, and with a drastic change in its ownership and management. Because it is not quite rational that the investments made and infrastructure built will be simply abandoned and liquidated.

It has not escaped viewers that ETV's editorial philosophy, along with the effort to follow professional

journalistic norms, reflects an attempt to promote progressive, secular and non-communal values. Should such a voice disappear from the broadcast media scene?

Does public interest hinge on just deciding on the process of granting the license, in disregard of consequences of the decision taken? Shouldn't the larger issue of public's right to have openness in electronic media and existence of alternatives to the state-controlled channel be a consideration? Whatever harm may have been done to public interest by initial violations of rules is likely to be compounded by shutting down ETV or its control being seized by people intent on serving partisan aims. The latter consequence is a distinct probability.

There are not many precedents in our country of "judicial activism" through interpretation of law and

application of the doctrine of legal tradition and tenets of natural justice to direct state authorities to act in public interest. May we dare hope that the ETV case will break new judicial grounds because of the nature of public interest at stake?

How can public interest be served best and how can the judicial Review help guide the course of action?

Public interest will not be served if ETV is shut down and not allowed to continue to operate as an independent channel under the present ownership and management. They have earned journalistic *bona fides* by the way ETV has been run.

The owners and managers, however, should not be absolved of responsibilities for violations of laws and rules, if the findings of the High Court are also confirmed by the Review. It should be determined if the state has been deprived in

financial and material terms and restitution should be made, if this is the case.

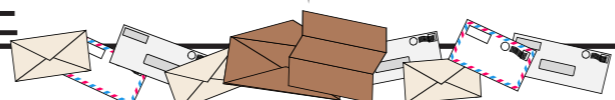
The judicial review can direct that ETV should set aside a proportion of its broadcast time and production resources, say 20 per cent (including prime and off-prime time), for educational and public interest broadcast. The general nature of the content and criteria for decision on content should be in the hands of an independent panel of experts.

The review can further direct that the Board of Directors of ETV should include two additional members-- one may be a well-respected educationist and another known for his/her role in upholding freedom of the press.

Let true public interest prevail, not just the technicalities of procedural compliance.

Dr. Manzoor Ahmed was formerly the Senior Education adviser at Unicef headquarters.

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



failed to run the mills profitably. They never promised they would be able to do that. But the leaders promised that they would improve law and order situation, ensure social security, eliminate corruption, generate employment and what not. They failed to do what they said. And they want to reward themselves by increasing their allowances by up to 300 per cent!

A h m e d
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Ban student politics
I have been a resident student and a teacher for several years at Dhaka University. Having lived in campus

as a resident student for more than four years and later working for the University as a teacher for several years, I think I have seen enough of student politics to comment on this topic. I think student politics should be banned from all school, college and university campuses. That means, there should be no political activities in any campus.

It cannot be denied that students took very positive roles in the socio-political events in the past. Students of Dhaka University were the pioneers of the Great Language Movement. However, since liberation we have seen tremendous erosion in the moral values in university campuses. Student politics has simply become a lucrative trade for some

people. University campuses have become the epic center of violence, extortion and other evil deeds. Physical force, violence, intimidation and illegal arms have destroyed the peaceful learning environment. Long gone are the days when Dhaka University was called "Oxford of the East". When other nations in Asia have moved forward in technology, science and education, we have fallen behind. So, it is time that we take a serious look at our campuses. For that matter, involvement of teachers in politics should also be banned.

Dr Reza Nomen
On e-mail
Banning is no solu-

tion
When the Far Eastern Economic Review printed a not so flattering report on Bangladesh a few months ago, the government banned the article. In the United States, when there is a threat of terrorism, the call to ban all immigrants is loud and clear. When a student gets killed by a stray bullet on a prestigious campus in Dhaka, there are calls to ban student politics. Folks, "ban" is a dirty word. It is an easy "solution" to all the world's problems. Simply plugging a leak will not stop the problem. The ship will eventually sink.

Banning student politics will not solve anything except maybe give a number of people one good night's sleep. Why don't we examine the reasons why students are involved in politics? And please, let's not compare the students of today to the students of the 50's and 60's. What is the reason of so much political activities on campus? Is it about power, territorial motivation, money, or is it really about genuine politics. What do I mean about genuine politics? To me genuine politics is social activism, civic duty, and monetary justice. Is this kind of politics active on campus?

As someone who has very little knowledge about his own motherland, I pose these questions to the more knowledgeable members. Please tell us, why students show an interest in politics. Is it because it is a method of releasing tension and pent-up frustrations? Why are students not interested in studying and doing well and then making money? Why would anyone be interested in politics?

Banning will never achieve anything. Human nature will never succumb to force or pressure. The more you ban the bigger the problem grows. The solution has to come from within the campus and not by any governmental decree.

Rahfat, On e-mail