

Internal demand in Pakistan for apology

A welcome development

PAKISTAN President Pervez Musharraf has vanguarded something in Bangla-Pak relations during his last visit to Dhaka that has set off chain reactions -- most of which being of positive nature -- in his own country. Musharraf's saying sorry for the excesses committed by the Pakistan Armed Forces in Bangladesh 32 years ago, has had reflective reverberations in Pakistan as though something bottled in for years has suddenly been uncorked.

While his words have gone down well with the civil society leaders and the media in Pakistan, some newspapers called for "reciprocal statements from Dhaka over the suffering of the people who were not Bengalis in the then East Pakistan during and after 1971". However, the civil society activists in a chorus have demanded that full apology be tendered by Pakistan to the people of Bangladesh. Over the week-end, 51 human rights groups in that country issued a joint statement apologising to their 'brothers and sisters' of Bangladesh for the atrocities committed on the people of the then East Pakistan in 1971. They said they felt saddened and burdened by the human rights violations of the past. Quickly picking up the threads from where Musharraf left these off, the civil society groups led by the Pakistan Human Rights Commission (HRCP) are demanding of their government to seek apology from Bangladesh. Obviously they are not content with their own tendering of apology to 'brothers and sisters' of Bangladesh; they want their government to tender a full apology to the people of Bangladesh. HRCP chairman Afrasiab Khatak while welcoming Musharraf's statement of regret said that it did not go far enough. The civil society may have put across their views more emphatically this time around but they are on record to have urged their government to seek an apology from Bangladesh earlier on.

We take it that the positive developments centring around the apology issue signal Pakistan's intentions for making up on some of the feelings generated by the genocide committed by her armed forces on the people of the then East Pakistan in 1971. Beginning with Pakistani intelligentsia's earlier demand that their government had better seek apology for their armed services' role in 1971 through Musharraf's expression of regrets to the Pak civil society leaders' renewed campaign on the question what is conjured up is a forward-looking process on the roll. Apparently, there is no going back from here. Things are evolving in the right direction. If Pakistan tenders a formal apology to Bangladesh out of its own volition, it would not just unburden her people morally they would also be following an international precedent to do good to her image on this count.

Wheat scam

Let the probe be decisive in outcome

THE allegations are indeed serious. Armed criminals, unleashed by middlemen belonging to the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) forced government silos in the northern region to buy a huge quantity of Indian wheat at a higher price towards the end of a four-and-a-half-month nationwide food grain procurement drive. The consignment, loaded from Indian rail wagon at Ishwardi, was not tested for quality; the armed gang shooed the food inspector away from the silos. The wheat was not even for human consumption; it was meant for poultry feed. Above all, some silos were allegedly forced to buy beyond the official timeframe for procurement.

The implications are dreadful as well. The low-quality wheat, if distributed among people as part of food-for-work programmes or relief operations, could give rise to grievous health emergency and even lead to few deaths. The shady deal is said to have already burdened the government with a loss to the tune of Tk 100 crore. Also, should there be the need to dump the low-quality wheat, which seems highly likely, the total loss would hover around a couple of hundred crore more. More crucially, the problematic purchase has subverted the principal objective of the entire procurement operations: the bona fide growers and their produces were crowded out.

The corrective measures should, therefore, come immediately and be effective. The government has initiated an inquiry into the alleged wheat procurement scam. An investigation team has already been sent to Bogra and Pabna to get an on-ground picture. "If the probe finds the allegations true, we'll track down the culprits and take immediate actions," Food Minister Abdullah Al Noman told The Daily Star on Sunday.

The institution of an inquisition has more often than not been employed by the power that be as a tool to defuse public outcry over allegations of gross irregularities, especially when perpetrated by ruling party elements. Hardly ever have such inquiries resulted in conclusive reports, definitive recommendations and subsequent punitive actions. Hopefully, there will be a departure in this case.

History must not be allowed to repeat itself because of the magnitude of the scandal that puts BNP image on line. The government must get to the bottom of the wheat scam, identify the culprits and punish them in the quickest possible time. Meanwhile, the BNP's central leadership should devise means to rein in its greedy exponents at the periphery.

Democracy - 21st century style?

DR MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

writes from Brisbane

TO peace loving rich and poor nations, democracy still is a popular term. Most of the rich nations (OECD) have the privilege of enjoying democracy over a long period of time. Some enjoy Westminster style and some have in place directly elected President or Prime Minister. Recently, there are also few newly democratically elected governments emerged in several developing nations of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Closer to home, India is widely known as world's largest democracy. Bangladesh falls under the category of so called 'Moderate Muslim Democracy', thanks to the Clinton administration. In recent years, however, it has been observed that the democratic norms and values in both more developed and developing nations are in decline. Let us examine first some examples from mature democracies (developed nations) those seem to have been suffering from crisis after crisis in maintaining democratic norms and values unlike their previous records.

The United Kingdom, for example, claims (also true) itself as the champion of democracy. In the last general election Tony Blair's New Labour won by securing only 25 per cent of the total vote. Apparently, less than a half of the total voters participated in this election. When the electorate was asked the reasons for such a low voter turnout, the answer was: there was a growing apathy towards exercising voting rights. The electorates believe that the politicians simply cannot be trusted anymore and some of their running mates are even unworthy of casting vote.

Secondly, in 2000 presidential election, President Bush won the US Presidency enjoying only 22 per cent of the total vote and like Britain, the voters' turnout there was less than a half. It is also universal that the incumbent President was pronounced elected by a majority (4 out of 7) of the judges of the highest court of the land due to a serious legal dispute over the election outcome between Republicans and Democrats. Thirdly, in France's most recent presidential first round voting the majority voters were surprised to see the National Front (far right) candidate Le Pen defeating the left candidate Jospin (also former Prime Minister) and Le Pen

to use racial card in the general election. Apparently, he paid no heed to this call and the last election, after long absence, was dominated by racial agenda.

Turning to the politics and the political philosophy of these leaders. Mr. Blair is a lawyer by profession and has transformed the British Labour Party predominantly from a centre/centre-left to a centre-right party (with some exceptions) over the last ten years. Some commentators in Britain would like to argue that there is little policy difference between the Conservatives (Right) and the New Labour now-a-days. It is no wonder why the voter turnout in recent times collapsed in a country

the Bush administration in upholding democratic norms and values due to terrorist attack on the US soil on 11 September. No administration in the living memory has experienced such a terrible human and civilian tragedy within US. Under this circumstance, it is impossible to make any meaningful comparison between the past and the present political regimes since the Bush administration has been passing an exceptional time. However, the voter turnout in the 2000 presidential election was a record low. Voters' apathy towards overall politics, once again, has been blamed for this. In addition, Bush administration's policy towards the

erstwhile apartheid regime in South Africa in the 1980s. He was also one of the strong advocates of anti-Asian immigration policy in Australia in the past. None of his right wing policies, however, received support from the Australian electorate in the 80s. Accordingly, he shifted dramatically and moved further with the mainstream liberal policies (mostly centrist) in Australia. His radical transformation brought for him the prized highest post (elected Prime Minister) of the nation in 1996. In Howard's third and apparently final term (to 2004), according to some analysts, once again his right wing policies have been afloat. His government's recent handling and

fundamentalist Hindu right wing party. The Bajpayee government has all the ingredients of fundamentalist 'far right' except that the Prime Minister himself is said to be a centre right leader (?). India claims it is a champion of maintaining and preserving democratic culture among the developing populous nations. While this may not be untrue to some degree, the Bajpayee government undoubtedly took some gloss of the Indian democracy out. In the early part of the 21st century, India bleeds from a middle age style communal anarchy. No democratic and civilized society in the modern world can accept such a man made crisis, to say the least. Unfortunately, Indian democracy takes little action against the perpetrators. Some commentators in the West even termed the incidents in the State of Gujarat a state sponsored terrorism.

In the present state of the democratic world it is not unlikely to claim that the mature democracies are in the influence of the right or center right elements of the political spectrum. No one will be surprised if the future generations blame the present right wing politics for democracy's descent worldwide and for opening numerous fronts to create man-made calamities in the early part of the 21st century. In the short run, however, one wonders, is the right wing politics of the present world creating an environment for staging another mindless destruction on the planet earth like the last two great wars and eventually drawing the modern civilization to its end?

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qualified to fight against the incumbent President Jacques Chirac in the final round. In this round, however, Le Pen has miserably failed to attract support of the French voters. Finally, in Australia, things are not bright either. The nation has in place a compulsory voting system (automatic penalty applies if one fails to cast his/her vote) which guarantees almost 100 per cent voter turnout in the general elections. The present government of Prime Minister John Howard has been blamed for not telling the truth to the nation about the asylum seekers' saga on the Timor sea during November 2001 general election. This prompted more than two dozen eminent Australian citizens urging the PM Howard not

with a long long history of democracy. The uncommitted voters do not see any difference in the two mainstream politics (New Labour and Tony) and refrain from voting since the politics of both persuasions no longer offer any major philosophical choices. Moreover, many commentators are of the view that Blair's present term has lost course on making independent British foreign policy and some, out of frustration, even termed Blair as the *de facto* Vice President of the US.

President Bush, on the other hand, is a Republican and the Republican Party is generally known as conservatives (Right) in the US. It makes very difficult, if not impossible, to analyse the roles of

recent incursion by the Jewish State, Israel, into the Palestinian territories, diminished US's credibility on the war against terror. Republicans generally, in the past, kept arms length relation with the American Jewish lobby due to historical reasons and in the last election President Bush attracted only 19 per cent of the Jewish vote. It is possible that the Bush administration's sympathy towards the Jewish state will make the US Jewish lobby happy and the Republicans could attract more and more Jewish electoral support in the future.

Australia's John Howard is a lawyer by profession and is an experienced conservative politician who was famous for his opposition to the West's imposing sanctions to

treatment of the asylum seekers and illegal detainees within and outside Australia become an issue of major concern in the media and among human rights activists all over the world including human rights agencies based in London and Geneva. It appears that his third and final term would bear a scar of racial intimidation and neglect in Australian politics.

Democracy's sorry telling in the beginning of the 21st century would not end if one does not touch the recent gross human rights violation in the so-called largest democracy on earth, India. Democracy's plight in India under the BJP-led coalition government is well known to the readers and commentators in the subcontinent. The BJP is known as

OPINION

Ominous message from Sandwip

NURUL ISLAM ANU

THE tiny Island on the Bay of Bengal, Sandwip -- made history the other day when it failed to elect a Pourashava or Municipal government. It was history because the inability to ensure a single valid ballot is unprecedented in the history of the sub-continent. While it sent a message of immense political significance, it inexplicably failed to generate the desired amount of interest in the broader political community. Meaningful protests were rare, muted and insignificant, if any. The politically articulate civil society looked indifferent. Even the Awami League's response looked programmed, clothed in the monotonous vocabulary lacking bite. Same was the case with the extreme left, the eleven party or the centrists. The constitutionally conscious Dr. Kamal Hossain was silent. So was the volatile *Bangabir* Kader Siddiqui. The more vocal on such issues -- who have singularly agitating with admirable consistency against the influence of muscle power and black money in elections -- the communists did not show any political respect to Sandwip.

In Bangladesh one is overtaken by unwelcome events in quick succession. The incident in Sandwip could hardly breathe before it was overtaken by more ominous event -- the appalling attack by the police on the female students of Shamsunnahar Hall at the dead of night. Both the incidents unfortunately shared the same characteristics -- their unprecedented character. Admittedly the latter event did eclipse Sandwip in terms of its immediate impact. The Election Commission, not

prepared for such bizarre contingency looked baffled and overwhelmed. Simple facts surrounding the mystery were not forthcoming. Mr. Kamal Pasha, the local MP belonging to the BNP boastfully asserted -- the people rejected the election. He did not sound credible against allegation of widespread intimidation, flexing of muscle power, other life threatening ges-

exhaustive and transparent explanation imperative. The Chief Election Commissioner, known as a tough administrator throughout his career, called for a meeting of the concerned officials, indicated punitive actions against delinquents, cancelled the election results. But the nation craved for facts, exhaustive and transparent, which has not been forthcoming. It is inconceiv-

able that local officials were blissfully unaware of the field condition and the pervasive intimidation that made the election an illustrious addition to our history of electoral mismanagement. If the officials have been delinquent in the discharge of their responsibilities, -- in what manner their lack of accountability has been taken care of? The nation has just not been told.

The reluctance to share truth with the sovereign -- the common man -- has been endemic and one of the regrettable parts of our political culture. In pure business terms managers are engaged in a continuous collusive and dishonest practice of withholding truth from the owners. Election at Sandwip was a serious political event and not a village marriage party. The controversy associated with the election are clearly political in nature and against the party in power. A political gov-

ernment enjoying an absolute majority is under a clear political and moral obligation to offer a credible, honest and transparent explanation of this bizarre incident to the people. A failure in this regard implies a regrettable lack of sensitivity to the popular sentiment and respect for the sanctity of the electoral process.

What does this simple incident tells us of the future? Significantly degenerative trend brought us to the huge national debate on the concept of a caretaker government and its subsequent incorporation as a constitutional amendment.

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Sandwip brings us to the core question: Does it indicate a milestone in our moral abandonment of the most significant ideal of a transparent democratic evolution in Bangladesh -- the free and uninhibited exercise of the right to vote? If the unprecedented character of the message from Sandwip is indicative of dreadful prospect that the nation may face in the next national election -- the corrosive potential spectacle of the combined power of muscle and money threatening the very foundation of a democratic society -- it must then be taken as serious challenge to the nation's political ingenuity.

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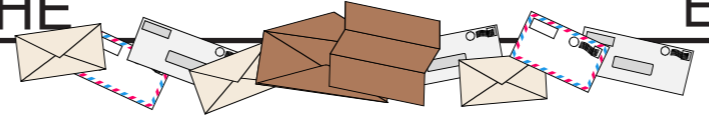
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society -- it must then be taken as serious challenge to the nation's political ingenuity.

What makes things more disappointing is the conduct of political governments in demonstrating a respect for the sanctity of the electoral process. And in this respect the record of both Awami League and BNP has not been above board. If the sham election of February 1996 was avoidable so was the questionable role of the Awami League in the Tangail by-election of *Bangabir* Kader Siddiqui. The political parties are the main players in this noble task of restoration of respect for electoral confidence and the level of their commitment to this goal is as important as the managerial role of a care-taker government.

Sandwip experience is an unacceptable affront to the democratic aspirations of the people and must be rejected. A democratically elected political government with two-thirds majority clearly owes a moral responsibility to identify its solidarity to this aspiration of the nation. Temptation to succumb to cheap and expedient demand of partisan politics and to use government and party instruments to manipulate the democratic process is shortsighted and counter productive. The ominous message of Sandwip must be resisted and with absolute determination. These are compelling demands on the BNP to put a stamp of respect on history in strengthening the very foundation of the democratic process. A failure with a two-thirds majority will be judged inexcusable by history.

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



How can we forget?

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's call for forgetting what happened 30 years ago and start building a friendly relationship for future sounds hollow. Also, putting the blame only on a few over enthusiastic persons for the atrocities done in '71 is not right either.

The entire Military and Civil Administration was behind that heinous crime done against humanity. How can we forget the genocide of millions of people? How can we forget the rape of hundreds of thousands of innocent women? As a member of the Pakistan Army at that time, Pervez Musharraf was also a party of that machinery. He also bears some of the responsibilities. The entire Pakistani nation bears the responsibility of that brutality.

We ask Pervez Musharraf and his people to come forward with honest heart and seek apology from us for 1971. Otherwise, the question of real friendship will never arise.

Kamal Haq USA

Thought provoking

In the utter of chaos in our life, something very thought provoking came out of the pen of Mr SH Imam on mutual respect. I fully agree with him and would like to add what ran down my mind while reading the article.

The cultural and religious values of a society differ from that of others so I wouldn't specify or establish any examples for comparison. With some scrutiny, if one takes the opportunity to understand the behavioural patterns of individuals on traffic or in a marketplace, it is not hard to find the unruliness and impatience leading to focus us to the parental ground of these manners the family, a unit of the nation.

As the article has a flavour to irk some consciousness amongst us I would like to use most of my energy to understand the present status of devoid of mutual respects and nullify comparisons that may take us nowhere. I would rather understand our family, society, culture and religion. There must be something that went seriously wrong unless we wouldn't find us here in the rut. To

stop any further ruination would be the first idea. And it is understood that no external force would work here like the inner individual strength would. Once the missing link road with one's own-self is reconnected the fragrance would touch the family, the neighbour and then on to the society.

Zaiami Dhaka

"Why do we need universities?"

I must be going soft but for the first time, I agree with what Afsan Chowdhury has written in one of his columns.

The other day I interviewed a fidgeting functional illiterate, National University graduate, for a job I'd never give him. In the course of my questioning I discovered that his brother is a student at DU of, wait for it, Farsi Literature!

I personally studied 14th Century French government and cinematography in university. But I am not looking for a job either. How is it possible that there are people

studying Farsi Literature in Bangladesh? They should be doing economics, commerce, accounting or whatever else possible to help them find a job after graduation. In England, Public (i.e. private) Schoolboys used to take Latin, Greek and Philosophy as their subjects in university. That made perfect sense as they were the cream of society and wouldn't have to look for a real job anyway.

If we are to have a university it shouldn't be the Oxford of the East but rather the Oxford Polytechnic of the East (Oxford Polytechnic became Oxford Brookes University in 1992).

I agree with Afsan Chowdhury, so much has happened in the name of democracy, anything goes now. If the spiritual and physical destruction of DU was the price of our independence, that might have been sad but acceptable.

But the decline of DU didn't stop in '71; on the contrary it is our home-grown tyrants whom we spawned with appalling certainty from Day 1 of our independence who really destroyed DU.

Kireti

Dhaka

Humiliated and embarrassed

It's very disappointing for all Bangladeshi citizens living home and abroad to learn about the disappearing of our athletes during the Commonwealth Games held in UK.

I don't have the words to express my anger at this incident. These athletes have tarnished the image of our country and our people.

This is absurd that one of the eminent swimmers lost his way and couldn't seek help from the law enforcing authorities.

Why would we bear the responsibility and face the embarrassment of such humiliating acts of our athletes?

Gopal Sengupta Montreal, Canada

Helping the helpless

We must collectively ensure that we alleviate poverty faced by Dhaka's homeless children. With nourishment and shelter comes more

developed minds and bodies develop, and a greater chance of transcending destitution. Giving nourishment to homeless children now will obviously help them get off the streets later.

Sadly, most of us refuse to part with a few taka for these children, regardless of our religious obligations. As always, we give excuses for our miserly nature: I don't want to encourage begging; they're probably druggies; I need this taka for a rickshaw so on and so on. These excuses are given by those who have lost their ties with mankind, those who no longer feel any human or religious obligation. These homeless children are dying because of poverty and also because of these excuses.

Allow logic, religion, or pity to persuade you to provide for these children. Let there be at least one day in the entire year when we call ourselves Muslims, when we empty our homes of useless belongings and give them to homeless children. Seek to provide them with anything that can help their minds and bodies. Give them bags, give them

tennis balls, give them matches and candles, give them paper and pencils, give them empty cans and jars.

I oppose the belief that giving to beggars encourages them to beg further they beg because we have not been kind enough to give before they asked. Let the word beg not lose its power. And of course there are those who beg without need; but there are far more who really need help.

For the following three nights I will stand at Gulshan-2 Circle at midnight, giving out bags, jars, cans, bags, and balls. I will be sad to see none of you there.

Sajid Chowdhury Gulshan, Dhaka

Mig-29s to be sold off!

Mig-29 is being used by air forces of many different countries. In fact it is the only piece of Soviet made weapon that is still being used by the Luftwaffe. If we are to modernise our air force we should continue to acquire more sophisticated fighters rather than selling what little we have and buy cheap obsolete

Chinese fighters. Chinese made F-7 fighters are of 60's fighter with very little modification to the basic Mig-21 airframe. So naturally it does not even come close to Mig-29s which is a next generation fighter compared to the F-7. Even China is buying Su-27s from Russia.

In fact it is not adding any more J-7 (PLAAF version of F-7) to the PLA Air Force. It is for sale only to Pakistan (F-7MP) and Bangladesh. Pakistan has no other option than to buy F-7 s from China as no other country is willing to sell fighters to the PAF.

Even Myanmar Air Force, which previously bought F-7s from China, has bought 10 Mig-29s from Russia. Just because the AL government bought them there is no justification to sell them off.

We should reduce an infantry division rather than sell Mig-29s because in reality they are more effective than 15 thousand ill-equipped infantrymen of the Bangladesh Army.

Sharup, Dhaka