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FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

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High handed JS proceedings

PM should address the House on army drive, death in custody and related issues

WE deplore the way the Business Advisory Committee (BAC) conducted its meeting and how the first day's business in the parliament was handled. The very fact that a session that begins after 11 a.m. is abruptly adjourned for the weekend barely two hours after it starts, speaks volumes of the Speaker's perception of the urgency of the matters before the House. Earlier BAC, the parliamentary body that decides on how the whole session will run including topics of debates and their duration, and one that really sets the tone for the whole session, summarily dismissed all the seven topics suggested by the opposition for discussion. Foremost among the AL suggestions were discussions on the army drive, law and order, price hike, seed crisis, etc. Interestingly the first two ministers to address the Parliament on Thursday were the Home Minister and the Agriculture Minister, speaking on the army drive and the seed crisis. Why then were the opposition's suggestions rejected? The only logical explanation is that this way a proper debate could be avoided and the ministers could give their versions of events without the opposition getting chance to challenge them or speak on the same topics.

The Speaker on Thursday seemingly turned the House into a forum of the ministers to give their speeches and then abruptly adjourned the proceedings without any chance for the opposition MPs to have any say. The Opposition Leader was given a brief chance to speak but her mike was switched off after only a few minutes. This is not how a democratic parliament is run.

Why the Treasury Bench is not grasping a simple fact? There is a general expectation that the parliament will debate the issue of the joint army drive. This expectation has to be met and cannot be wished away by adjournments or short sessions or depriving the opposition from speaking. People have a right to know why the army is out on the streets, what brought things to such a pass that army had to be called, why and how 23 people died in army or police or post army/police custody, what are the terms under which the army is operating and how long will this continue. A statement by the same home minister, whose failure is the principal reason why the army is out there, cannot satisfy the people.

We urge the Prime Minister to tell the people from the floor of the parliament as to why these things have happened and when it all will end, and how will things be controlled afterwards. She needs to take the people into confidence for the sake of accountability, transparency and as a part of her duty to the electorate. More importantly she needs to do so to share with the people her thoughts, concerns and policies so that she can take the people along with her on this very important action that she has taken. To fail to communicate at this critical juncture is to permit perverse interpretations, unfounded rumours and to throw the people at the mercy of confusion and misinformation.

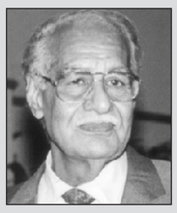
To call in the army is definitely not an everyday affair (at least it should not be). Only in dire emergency is such a step taken. We have reported that at the grassroots level there is a certain relief felt by the people. A sense of welcome still prevails as more and more criminals are being caught. But that is not the whole story. Simultaneously there is also a concern and a fear. These are real and must be addressed by none other than the Prime Minister herself.

Sheikh Hasina, in view of the BAC and the first day's session has threatened to think of boycotting. This we strongly advise against. Opposition's presence, if nothing else, helps to expose the one-sided nature of the running of the parliament as it did last Thursday.

For the Treasury bench we say please learn from the experience of the last 12 years during which BNP has been twice in power. Avoiding accountability, depriving the opposition their legitimate right to debate, switching off mikes and abruptly adjourning the House did not solve any problems in the past. Nor will it today. It only made the opposition's position more credible to the public. So will it now.

To the Speaker we say, please recall how distasteful the role of Humayun Rashid Chowdhury was and how he, instead of strengthening, had actually weakened the parliament by his partisan role. Did he serve his party or only contributed to isolating it from the people? Will the present Speaker do nothing to move away from that trend?

Licence to kill



KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

IN the fifties there was a poet in the communist ruled Hungary, who said: "We are living in cannibal times." I was reminded of the observation the other day when an eyewitness said that the Ansal Plaza shootout at Delhi was no encounter but a straight murder of the two ill-fed men without arms. In one sense it is a sad commentary on the environs where people can be bumped off without trial. The witness, Dr Hari Krishna, was afraid for his life after he contradicted the police. Officers had given a detailed account of how the encounter took place and how the two terrorists armed with the AK-47 guns were killed before they could harm any of the hundreds of Diwali shoppers. Krishna phoned me frantically that the police had threatened him of dire consequences if he did not withdraw his version. Harsh words were used after he rejected several entreaties. His wife and son felt unsafe. If such a sequence of events does not constitute cannibal times, then what does?

But I must admit that most people have not liked my submission to the National Human Rights Commission for an inquiry on the shootout. In fact, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad has demanded my arrest under POTA. Most of criticism is on two counts. First, why I relied on the doctor's statement and did not verify the facts myself. My explanation is that the doctor, who had no axe to grind, is as credible as anyone else. Why should the doctor be telling a lie? He happened to be in the parking lot of Ansal Plaza's basement at the time of the shooting. It requires courage for someone to contradict the police version. It impressed me. The charge that I did not verify the facts is neither here nor there. With whom could I check? The police were ruled out. The Ansal Plaza shopkeepers were so afraid after having found that the terrorists were in their midst that they were all praise for the police. They went to the extent of giving Rs 1 lakh to the police for their courage. Incidentally, the person who presented the purse of Rs. 1 lakh is the one against whom a criminal case is pending for the death of 65 people during a cinema tragedy. Another point of the criticism is: why I had asked in my petition for the transfer of the two officers who had carried out the encounter. It is but fair that those who are suspect should be kept out till the inquiry is complete. However, I had one point against them. They are the same officers who had recently picked up some human rights activists from a closed-door meeting and had detained them for 72 hours without warrants or any explanation.

I do not understand why the BJP and the police have tried to confuse the incident. At issue are not the "so-called human rights activists" or their "anti-national stand." Nor is it the past record of Kirshna's "frauds or dacoity" as alleged by the police are relevant. I am concerned only with the eyewitness account he has given. The point to ascertain is whether the "encounter" was genuine or not. The version of the police is that the doctor reached the shopping complex two hours after the shootout. I doubt if there is any technology which can trace the movement of a person on the basis of mobile telephones or calls. Still the police have stuck to their stand that it was an encounter and that the doctor did not witness it. I have come to be skeptical about the encounters after reports from Kashmir and Punjab where innocent people have been bumped off by the hundred. Many cases, challenging the veracity of encounters, are pending before the courts and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC). In the name of eliminating the Naxalites, the Andhra Pradesh police have committed atrocities beyond words. In Guwahati, two people were recently killed outside the chief minister's residence, and the story given out was that they were terrorists. At Ahmedabad, a person in police custody was killed. In Punjab, a person by the name of Kalra has not been produced in the Supreme Court even though a judge ordered his presence some eight years ago. Even when I saw some clips of the shootout on television I felt that the police story had many gaping holes. Reports in the print media only heightened my doubts. Still I left the matter at that. But when the doctor's eyewitness account appeared in two newspapers, I decided to follow up the story. I met Justice AN Verma, chairman of the NHRC, to request him to order an inquiry to find out the facts. He saw my point and ordered an inquiry.

The question to ask is why the BJP spokesman rushed to defend the police when the inquiry was in progress. And why he should get irritated if I am one of the "so-called human rights activists" and "the overground face of the underground." If he or his government has any proof, let them move against me. Maligning people because they are critics is neither legally or ethically correct. The problem with most of us is that we do not hold any discourses dispassionately. Those who constitute the establishment do not use arguments to defend themselves but resort to abuses to cover up their deficiencies. The BJP spokesman's spat made the Foreign Office at Islamabad say that the Indian media had suggested that the evidence of terrorists' nationality was "fabricated." There has been no such discussion in the media. There is enough evidence that they were terrorists. They may well be from Pakistan because it has not stopped cross-border terrorism. The Lashkar-e-Toiba still has its headquarters in Pakistan. My concern is with my country which is open and democratic and where the rule of law has pre-eminence. The doctor's charge is a serious one, not to be belittled or ignored on the ground that the police morale would be affected if the allegation was pursued. When there are persistent voices that law protectors have become law violators, the government must sit up and ponder. The state can frame as many laws as it requires for fighting terrorism. But it has to stay within the limits of the law. It can't become a law unto itself.

Human rights activists are as much against state terrorism as against the terrorists. The activists do not want the voice of dissent to be muzzled. Nor do they want the right to differ misused. But no governance is worth a dime if human rights are not an integral part of it. I am surprised that those very people who suffered during the emergency in the hands of the police are defending them. Some peopleeven television networkshave warned me that my credibility would suffer if the doctor's story turned out to be false. I do not know about my credibility. But it would definitely hurt the credibility of eyewitnesses. The point to consider is how to impress upon the police not to kill even terrorists without proper trial. At stake are the law and law courts. Still the courage to stand up and be counted, which is lessening in the country day by day, should be applauded. People are afraid to tell the truth lest they should land themselves in trouble. Such an attitude does not portend well for a democracy.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

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On the whole a popular president

MEGASTHENES

NOT long ago the American Film Institute celebrated 100 years of American films. The occasion was commemorated in a befitting manner. Distinguished people from various walks of life were polled to select the 100 greatest American films from the 40,000 or so produced during this 100 year period. An over two-hour programme was shown on television, with eminent persons -- most of them involved with films and a few pre-eminent in other fields explaining their choices or favourites plus scenes from the films chosen. All the 100 films were covered, beginning with film No 100 and moving up to the top choice of film No 1.

There were a few surprises but most of my favourites were there. Singularly enough, many films chosen had not won Academy Awards for best picture and a fair number that had won this coveted award were overlooked. President Clinton he was President at that time spoke briefly, before scenes from his favourite film, *High Noon,* was shown. The picture is more than a great "western". It is also an allegory made at a time when McCarthyism was rampant in much of the US. Gary Cooper's performance as the beleaguered Marshal, abandoned by virtually all around him, was perhaps his best ever. He deservedly won an Oscar for the portrayal.

There would be few quarrels with the choices of the top four films : *Citizen Kane*, followed by *Casablanca, Godfather and Gone With The Wind*. Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* made when he was in his mid 20s has long been acclaimed as a masterpiece of technique and a landmark in film-making. Welles never approached such heights again. The film was a parody of the life of media moghul William Randolph Hearst. Hearst's acolytes rallied to ensure that the film was all but ignored -- only one award for original screenplay -- at the Academy Awards ceremony in 1941. It also failed at the box office and Welles was virtually driven away from Hollywood to Europe. The honour thus came a little late in the day for him.

Given the choice, I would place Casablanca at the top and not in second place. It has an elegiac, wistful and edifying quality that never fails to touch the emotions. The impact and magic of the film were enhanced by the lead players, Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, who played their roles to perfection. The film won the best picture award in 1943.

Incidentally neither Bogart nor Bergman was the first choice for their respective roles. The producers had first thought of Ronald Reagan and Ann Sheridan for the film.

Reagan had few illusions about his acting abilities or star quality. He rated himself no higher than an "Errol Flynn of the B's". He found his true vocation and niche when he moved, a little belatedly perhaps, to an altogether different and more demanding career. Over decades he had metamorphosed from a New Deal Democrat to a conservative Republican. His major assets; he was immensely telegenic, had a disarming smile and candour and could communicate very effectively with the people. He had an optimistic, if also simplistic, philosophy of life and politics -- a mixture of the robust pioneer spirit and individualism. His approach could be paternalistic at times but he remained enormously popular, in part at least because he made Americans feel good about themselves and confident of the future. He was unique among Presidents in certain ways. He broke a 120-year old jinx, by which every US President since 1840, elected at twenty-year intervals i.e. 1860, 1880, 1900, 1920, 1940 and 1960 had died in office. He survived a bullet in his lung and colon cancer to achieve this. He was the oldest President to assume office and the oldest to leave it. He was the first divorced man to be President and has lived longer than any other person who has held the office. When he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, he made this public himself -- I am not aware of any other public figure doing something similar.

As with all public figures, he has had his share of critics. In 1991, some 500 eminent US History Professors were polled to rate American Presidents. Reagan was rated below average. Madame Tussaud's Waxwork Museum in London annually polls 3500 international visitors to the exhibition, asking them to name, among others, persons most hated and feared by them. The 1981 poll by Madame Tussaud's in London placed Reagan in second place among most hated persons, after Hitler and ahead of the Yorkshire Ripper. A similar poll the same year in Madame Tussaud's in Amsterdam put Reagan first ahead of Brezhnev and Dracula, among most hated persons!

At times Reagan was said to have misquoted people or even attributed quotes that were never made. He was named for the Doublespeak award in 1980. This dubious award is given by the Committee on Public Doublespeak of the National Council of Teachers of English to public figures who have used language in a "grossly unfactual, deceptive, ..., confusing or self-contradictory" manner. Some of his more famous reported misquotes : 1. Alaska has more oil than Saudi Arabia. It was pointed out to him that this statement was incorrect; he continued to use it anyway. 2. As candidate for President, he quoted Carter as saying during a visit to Poland in 1977, that "Our concept of human rights is preserved in Poland". 3. In December 1981, he quoted Franklin Roosevelt's respected Secretary of Interior, Harold Ickes, as saying "What we were striving for was a kind of modified form of communism". 4. In a televised speech in 1976, he quoted Henry Kissinger, "The day of the US is past and today is the day of the Soviet Union. My job as Secretary of State is to negotiate the most acceptable second best option available". None of the quotes were accurate or even remotely true.

Reagan was seldom comfortable with the minutiae of complex issues or negotiations. He never sought to micro-manage; preferring instead to give broad guidelines. At the Venice economic summit in 1987 he was reportedly provided with cue cards not only for official discussions but also for an informal cocktail party. He could have bizarre lapses of concentration or focus. In 1981, at a White House reception for US mayors, he reportedly greeted his Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Samuel Pierce, with the words "How are you Mr. Mayor? I am glad to meet you".

It has been some time since Reagan has stopped appearing in public and sadly, according to media reports, he no longer remembers having been President. The prayers and good wishes of good people everywhere are surely with the former President and his family at this time of trial and affliction for them.

A definitive and dispassionate assessment of Reagan, his Presidency and his times will have to await scholars and historians of a future generation, as more of his state papers are declassified. Intellectually he will never be considered the equal of Woodrow Wilson; as President, however, he was far more popular. The nuances of such largely academic issues may not be of great interest to many. As someone who has derived enormous pleasure from American films, I am myself simply content that Bogart and not Reagan played the lead in Casablanca. Countless film lovers will surely concur.

LIGHTEN UP

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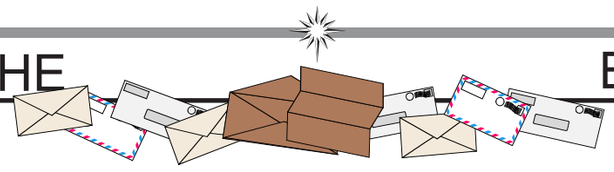
TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



"Let's become disabled friendly"

In response to Angela Robinson's letter on the above (November 11) I would like to echo the same sentiment. When I had sprained my ankle, the worst pain came from trying to get an X'ray, as the Pathology Lab was on the third floor, with no wheel chair provision, nor any lift-- so you can imagine the excruciating pain trying to climb three floors on a sprained ankle. I think the hospitals, clinics and Pathology Labs should have mandatory wheel chair access and elevators.

I had recently been to Washington, Toronto and London, and when my friends ask me what was the highlights of these cities; they are surprised by my answer- as I was amazed by the care and attention taken so that disabled persons have no problems moving about, shopping etc. The car parking areas have designated parking for disabled people, the public toilets have special handrails and even the buses in London have ramps for wheel chair bound persons. I even found Wal-Mart has motorised wheel chairs for disabled customers. I guess we are still learning to handle movement of the able bodied persons, so thinking of the disabled are a far cry. Thank God my ankle healed!

Joey
Gulshan, Dhaka

Army raid

The announcement of the phone numbers and email addresses to file complaints about army harassment is a welcome gesture. This should have been done from the first day and would have prevented a lot of misunderstandings.

There is however one detail that we are still ignorant of. Under what exact orders are the soldiers carrying out their raids? What rights of search and seizure do they have? What rights and privileges do we have if soldiers stop our car or knock on our doors at midnight? For instance when stopped at a check-point, how are soldiers supposed to address us? Do they have the right to search a person? What questions can they ask?

These clarifications would greatly help prevent misunderstandings with civilians and also allow a point of reference when dealing with the soldiers.

Azad
Dhaka

* * *

The current army drive seems to have brought over a cloud of uncertainty in our otherwise routine political life. The army is justifiably hauling in JCD and BCL backed criminals. But this crackdown does seem to be tearing apart BNP from the seams. Both the main parties are beholden to and dependent upon their cadres and this crackdown may terminally weaken them both. I am not for a moment defending these so-called cadres in the pay of AL and BNP. But "Operation Clean Heart" may end up leaving a power vacuum with only Jamaat and Shibir left. Right now Jamaat's heavily armed cadres seem to be the only ones safe from the army's wrath. That in it self is very scary.

Riki
Dhaka

* * *

It's been quite some time the army raid is going on and many think that the situation has improved. But has it really? Then how come a daring bank robbery takes place in broad daylight?

Sona Selim
Dhaka

* * *

Many argue that human rights are being violated during the recent army drive. I'd like to ask these people what option was there to improve the situation. Are they still hopeful about our police force?

Arman Khan
Dhaka

* * *

23 people have already died in army custody and the government is silent about it. But don't we, the general people and the families of the victims have a right to know why and how such death occurred?

Rabi Khan
Lalmatia, Dhaka

"Saluting the Nation Builders of Tomorrow"

I admit that majority of English medium students in Bangladesh will eventually end up abroad, preferably in America and Canada. But that doesn't mean that they cannot be appreciated by the country itself for their academic achievements. The students work as hard as the Bengali medium students to attain good results. Getting 6 A's and 3 A's in both the levels of examination is not a piece of cake. It takes the same amount of hard work and dedication as the HSC and SSC exams.

Mr. Abdul Hannan needs to know more about our system before asserting his views. As an English medium student, I found it obligatory to reply to his degrading letter. And sir, Prothom Alo has given out prizes for the HSC and SSC students for their credentials.

Haji Mohammad Isam
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

* * *

Alas, what Mr. Hannan ("Saluting the Nation Builders of Tomorrow", November 13) writes in his letter rings true.

In the recent issue of The Economist, there is a trenchant article about the brain drain of developing countries like Bangladesh. It made for startling reading. In many of these countries, most people with university degrees and higher are leaving for greener pastures of the West. Opportunity abound for hungry, ambitious people in countries like United States, which thrives on talented immigrants like Indian computer programmers, Pakistani doctors, and Bangladeshi businessmen.

How to stem the flow of such talented people is a difficult proposition for a country like Bangladesh, where corruption is endemic and quality jobs are given to the well-connected.

What Bangladesh needs is a meritocracy. It is not enough to have colleges and universities, but to have the opportunity, as well. Smart, talented people should not go begging or paying for a job. Just look at India, even though it established the prestigious IIT to produce the leaders of tomorrow, most eventually winded up in the United States for lack of jobs in India. To avoid doing this, we must rid the country of corruption and waste. Provide an environment so these young minds can flourish. Most people don't want to leave Bangladesh, but have no choice.

I can't really say I blame them. I left Bangladesh when I was only a toddler, when my father had to leave for economic reasons. Like many other immigrants before him, he prospered here in the United States, but still reminisces about what could have been if things were different in his native Sylhet.

Unfortunately this will continue. Western Europe and Canada (and to some extent, the United States), after years of low birth rates, will be facing a labour crisis in the coming years, so the demand for immigrants will be great. Unless, Bangladesh makes life more amenable for its smartest citizens, it will suffer.

Karim Abdullah
New York, USA

Congratulations to the chess teams

Congratulations to Bangladesh Men's chess team for securing 34th position (total 31 points among 134 teams) in Bled 35th Chess Olympiad, just after Canada and above USA (41st). Considering the tough competition I personally think Bangladesh Men's team has done quite well though there was room to do a little better. May be next time. Also congratulations to Bangladesh Women's team for their well fought 41st position (with 21 and 1/2 points among 89 teams).

Shuja
Canada

Bangladeshi workers in the Gulf

One of the critical factors for the well being of Bangladesh's economy is the remittance it gets from citizens who work overseas, primarily in the Gulf. There are hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis working and living in the Gulf, but their livelihoods are under threat from some emerging economic realities in the region. I am surprised little attention is being paid by the government and in the pages of newspapers about this issue.

During the boom times, many Gulf states, primarily Saudi Arabia, flushed with petro-dollars needed thousands of workers to help build their infrastructure. Many South Asian nations--- Bangladesh, India and Pakistan-- happily obliged and labour export became a major industry for the region. Till today, airports are clogged with people lucky enough to land jobs in the Gulf, hoping for a better lives for themselves and their families. But how long will this last? This is the question Bangladesh must ask?

Today things have changed dramatically. The boom times are over. Countries like Saudi Arabia are now in debt, its oil-based economy stagnating, and has a growing population of restless, unemployed youth. To remedy this problem there are many calls for the Saudization of the economy. That foreign workers be kicked out and replaced with locals.

This is taking place as we speak. It was only a few months ago that Saudi Arabia classified certain job for Saudis only, including that of managers, salesmen, and other professionals. Just recently, it announced that all foreign taxi-drivers will be replaced by Saudi ones.

This is just the beginning. Who knows where it will end.

Niraj Agarwalla
USA