

Leave it to experts

Blame-game is counterproductive

At last, we have an expert view on the ammo haul. Though admittedly tentative, it somewhat clears the air thickened by political bickering as to the origin and destination of the munitions recovered from Bogra. Former army chief General (ret'd) Mustafizur Rahman making an on-spot visit to Bogra, maintained that the recovered ammunition were made for use in insurgency or unconventional warfare. "A regular army", he added, "cannot use bullets not marked with the name of the manufacturer."

On a point of controversy pertaining to the seized bullets being allegedly made at the Bangladesh Ordnance Factory, the former army chief said that he didn't believe that those were smuggled from the local factory. However, "if it is suspected that the bullets were made at the Bangladesh Ordnance Factory, the government should come up with a clarification," said he.

Pat comes the government clarification on Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina's contention that the ammo recovered in Bogra were made in Bangladesh Ordnance Factory (BOF). Home Minister Altaf Hossain Chowdhury told the Jatiya Sangsad on Saturday that bullets produced by our ordnance factory bear the factory name (BOF), but the hauled up bullets have no such mark. So, the opposition leader's theory based on pure conjecture, stands nailed. On such an important and sensitive issue concerning national security, there is no scope whatsoever for any knee-jerk reaction or politically retributive comments. She would have certainly done better if she had refrained from making the premature and rash remark about the origin of the bullets.

On the one hand, we hear such reckless observation from the opposition and on the other, there has been the ruling party finger-pointing to AL involvement even before the investigations got seriously underway. Such knee-jerk reactions to the series of recovery incidents touching on national security, sovereignty and stability do not evidently sit in with the gravity of the issues involved.

The bottom-line is: it's not a matter for politicised handling. Indeed, the munitions haul should be left entirely to the experts for unravelling the truth about it. In this context, we endorse the view of the former army chief to the effect that a technical inquiry by experts from BUET, the ordnance factory, army and police is an imperative necessity at this juncture.

Flood footsteps?

Areas of concern

WATER levels at some points in our river-system have risen above the danger-mark. The early warning for flood needs to be heeded so as to avert any huge loss of life and property.

The Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre has said the capital itself is threatened as the rivers around it are swelling. In fact, the low-lying outskirts of the city have already been inundated. The news from the country-side is no better.

Accurate forecasting of the likely course of floods is crucially important as far as flood preparedness is concerned. Here, Bangladesh has to rely on India, the upper riparian, for inputs to analyse any developing flood situation for the river basins downstream. The frequency with which data is exchanged between the two countries is of utmost importance in getting a clearer picture of how things might shape up in the next few days or weeks. Forecasts will have to be at still shorter intervals.

Weather experts have said excessive rain in the month of June has aggravated the flood situation. They also predict that the flood situation may improve for a brief period before a heavy rainfall adds to the fury.

So, the country has to brace for a prolonged flood. It is a natural calamity we have grown familiar with; hence, we might take things a bit too much in the stride which would be a wrong thing to do. Thousands of people have already been marooned or forced to leave their homes in the worst affected districts. Inundation has been topped off by river erosion.

Strong current of onrushing water has created breaches in many an embankment. And, as these cave in, people will have no defence against floodwaters. Though attempts are being made locally to protect these last lines of defence, people in certain cases are reported to be fighting a losing battle. This is an area crying for immediate attention.

Relief and rehabilitation plans have to be put in place right-away if we are to minimise the flood-related losses. The affected people are in desperate need of potable water, food and medicine. The government agencies concerned must get a move on to reach all kinds of succour to the flood victims.

The hard choices before the Arabs



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

IS Iraq turning into a horrible quagmire for the US? In spite of putting up a brave face on this question, the US administration cannot but be profoundly concerned. Because, barring an early military victory virtually every single American plan for Iraq has gone awry -- from Jay Garner to Paul Bremer and from Kurdish North to Shiite South. Most of its strategic allies have refused to send troops and bestow legitimacy on Iraq's occupation. In the meantime an armed resistance against 150,000 American and 15,000 British occupation forces in Iraq is steadily building up. A hit and run war inflicting 'thousand cuts' on the enemy -- weak but effective -- is already in the offing. The every other day the occupation forces are targets of phantom opponents which bring their objective in line of snipers' fire or rocket-propelled grenade.

While this war is brewing up in Iraq, the Arabs who are in one way or the other affected by Iraq's occupation forces in Iraq is steadily building up. A hit and run war inflicting 'thousand cuts' on the enemy -- weak but effective -- is already in the offing. The every other day the occupation forces are targets of phantom opponents which bring their objective in line of snipers' fire or rocket-propelled grenade.

PERSPECTIVES

Much will depend on the Americans themselves. After 35 years of Baathism the Iraqis are weary of conflict and despite the portents of resistance the overall balance of forces still favours the democratic aspirations. But more inept and oppressive the occupiers' rule, the more their neo-imperial or Israel-serving agenda takes precedence over their reformist one, the more liable they are to tip the balance in favour of the nationalist camp.

conservative ambition will only provoke what amounts to a second Arab struggle for independence. So, for them the signs of the occupation forces increasingly running into trouble are hardly surprising and have resonated round the region. Earlier, the shock waves of the Arabs' hopelessly ineffectual response to US-British invasion had thrown into sharp relief two competing currents among Arab political class: a relatively new 'democratic' one versus the older pan-Arab nationalist or Islamist ones that dominated Arab politics since independence.

The visions of Iraq by both sides are those of humiliations of the Arabs unparalleled since their crippling defeats by Israel in 1967. Both are sceptical of the US' ostensibly reformist mission and about its professed desire to spread democracy and are conscious of the fact that under the veneer of these noble purposes it has self-serving neo-imperial objectives that include its oil and corporate interests and, of course, an enhanced regional dominance. To them it is no more a secret that the occupiers also want to broker peace for a Middle East settlement that would kill Pan-Arab nationalism once for all and plant Israel more firmly at the heart of a new regional order. Both the camps oppose those schemings and want

to 'expel neo colonialism' but envisage different route to that end.

According to Lebanese columnist Abdul Nasr, the basic question is whether Iraq should give priority to liberation or building democracy and reconstruction. The democratic camp favours the second course. For 'democrats' it was the lack of democracy which brought the Arabs to their present predicament and for that they blame the nationalists, the holder of power since independence as much as the Americans. "National liberation

regimes", says Reda Helal, the deputy editor of the Al-Ahram, "have trampled the freedom of their people for so long under the pretense of ending colonialism, but they ultimately helped colonialism's return under the excuse of 'liberating' their people" it is a great irony of the politics of Arab nationalism.

It is not without a reason that there is a growing trend in the 'democratic camp' to give a chance to the US' official democratising aims at least to succeed. Nonetheless it is an

extremely difficult choice even for the democrats. "I never imagined," says Leila Qadi, a Lebanese researcher, "that I would be looking to those neo-conservative, pro-Israel extremists and right-wing Christians to improve our lot, but the fact is that as a result of the US-British venture in Iraq there is a chance for change."

Saddam's ignominious collapse is seen to exemplify the rottenness of not just the nationalist/Islamist regimes such as Syria and Iran, but also of those pro-American ones such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The 'democrats' however do not want the US to do to them what it did to Saddam. "The change must be internal, not US-imposed," says Hanan Hasan, a professor in Damascus University.

The nationalist/Islamist camp, by contrast, believes that the 'liberation' of Iraq should take precedence over 'building on all levels' despite evidence that it was essentially this self-same choice which first led the Arabs astray. Still their priority remains what it always was: national or religious self assertion confronting the US imperialism and Zionism. They want Iraq to be the crucible for a new anti-colonial struggle. Many Arab 'democrats' consider that presumptuous. "The most peculiar thing" says a Kuwaiti commentator, "is that some Arabs

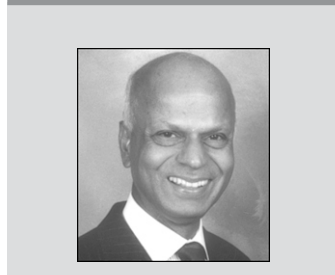
are more Iraqi than the Iraqis, urging them to launch a popular liberation war -- this after they suffered from three absurd wars". The democrats argue: even if the 'democratic route' to regaining Arab independence is slower, it will be much less costly and ultimately just as effective as the nationalist/Islamist one. Let the Americans bring us the democracy and in doing so they will by their own hand defeat their other neo-imperial agenda.

The Saudi daily *Al-Watan* argues that the American requirements cannot be fulfilled by the free choice of any Arab people. What would happen if a freely elected Iraqi parliament wants China, for example, to participate in reconstruction or refuses to become an oilmilk cow or to normalise with Israel? But if under a nationalist/Islamist banner the Iraqis choose 'liberation' above 'building', will this certainly be a different story. Which way Iraq -- with it the Arab world -- will go remains to be seen.

Much will depend on the Americans themselves. After 35 years of Baathism the Iraqis are weary of conflict and despite the portents of resistance the overall balance of forces still favours the democratic aspirations. But more inept and oppressive the occupiers' rule, the more their neo-imperial or Israel-serving agenda takes precedence over their reformist one, the more liable they are to tip the balance in favour of the nationalist camp. Few Arabs dispute that, so far, the Americans have done badly -- so badly that, in view of Abdul Bari Atwan, editor of the Pan-Arab newspaper *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, they risk provoking "a national awakening and war of attrition that make Vietnam seem like a picnic in comparison".

Big (red) Hafiz is former DG of BIIS.

A crisis of credibility in British politics



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM writes from Madrid

ACCORDING to some newspaper reports, after much useless squabbling over the future constitution of Europe, Mr. Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister left the three-day Thessaloniki (also known as Salonika) summit of the European Union leaders in a hurry (or was it in a huff?) to go back to London, before the meeting came to an end. He and his friend, Mr. Jose Maria Aznar (who together with Mr. George W. Bush have the dubious distinction of forming the Axis of Azores to restart Western colonialism in faraway Muslim countries) were the only leaders who were not present at the final ceremonial dinner attended by not only the leaders of the fifteen EU members but also the leaders of the thirteen other European countries who are seeking membership of the EU club.

There is no doubt that Mr. Tony Blair, the Oxford-educated Labour party leader (I have difficulty in understanding how he squares his religious fundamentalism and passion for jingoism and colonial adventures with the Labour values, so steadfastly upheld by Sidney Webb, Beatrice Potter, Harold Laski, Clement Attlee, Hugh Gaitskell and Harold Wilson) is a man of great courage and firm convictions. He is also a smooth talker, a persuasive debater (presumably because of his training as a barrister) and a charmer. No wonder, he has been so popular with the British electorate for such a long time. But lately things have not been going very well for him. He is a man, who seems to have lost his charm.

Although the quick military victory in the Iraq war has halted the massive anti-war demonstrations across the country (which took place before the start of the war), his

popularity keeps plunging and the credibility gap between what he preaches and what he practises is wider than ever. He is now perceived as a manipulator and a spin doctor, who at best speaks half-truths and at worst lies through his teeth to deceive the public. His famous last words at the end of every speech, "Trust me, I know the right thing to do", no longer resonate among the British people in the same manner as it used to do in the past. (According to a recent poll, if the elections are held now, the Conservative Party will win more votes than Mr. Blair's party.) Even within the party, he is considered by many as an arrogant opportunist. (Only last week he introduced major

(an important British newspaper), intelligence agencies on both sides of the Atlantic were furious that briefings they gave political leaders were distorted in the rush to war.... they (the leaders) ignored intelligence assessments which said Iraq was not a threat." It is also coming to light that Bush and Blair deliberately tried to link the Iraqi regime with the 9/11 attack, even though their intelligence agencies had reported otherwise. As Paul Krugman of the *New York Times* puts it, "Starting a war on false pretenses is, to say the least, a breach of trust".

In February of this year, close to 90 per cent of the British public were against the war. There was a strong belief (which now has been proven as a

damaged British relationship with other major EU countries, deceived the British public and lost the confidence of the party. Tam Dalyell, the longest serving member of the House of Commons, who happens to belong to the Labour Party, has openly called for his resignation as the Prime Minister. There are many others, who even though have not come out so openly, also feel the same way.

On the economic front, the credibility gap is also widening. During his second term, each successive year has brought higher deficit than forecasted. Actually the overall economic picture does not look very promising. Although now, after the end of the war, the stock

even lower (maximum 2.2%). The prospects for fiscal 2004 are even gloomier -- growth will fluctuate between 2 per cent and 2.5 per cent (not by 3.5 per cent as initially projected).

Under normal circumstances it will be considered as bad news if the economy does not grow as budgeted. But it is worse when a country has decided to maintain an occupation army of tens of thousands of troops in a faraway land, which may easily cost several billion euros or more. The slower growth will also have a negative impact on the government's investment plans. The Labour government had finally decided to rebuild the country's infrastructure made worse by the

point of the GDP? It is difficult to estimate an accurate figure because of so many unknown factors. Britain has a history of record budget deficits. In 1992, it reached a peak of 8 per cent. Later it levelled off at an annual average of 6 per cent. Actually, at a recent meeting of the finance ministers of the European Union, it was estimated that in the current fiscal year the British budget deficit will go over the 3 per cent limit set by the Growth and Stability Pact of the European Union for its members.

This brings us to the other question: What is happening to Mr. Blair's dream of joining the euro? Mr. Blair is a man of divided loyalties. Politically, he has given his unflinching loyalty to the United States. So much so that in the British press he is often dubbed as 'Bush's poodle'. But, from an economic point of view, he understands that Britain's future lies with the EU, hence his enthusiasm for the euro. He wants Britain to become a member of the euro as soon as possible. He has been trying hard to convince the British public and his stragglers the Chancellor that joining the euro will bring huge economic benefits to Britain. In this, he has had limited success. Mr. Blair wants to call a referendum on this issue as soon as possible, while Mr. Brown wants to put it off as long as possible. A few days ago, the government announced 'the postponement of the referendum until further notice. The Chancellor feels that although the British economy is slowly converging with the economy of the euro area, there are still significant divergences on issues such as an acceptable exchange rate between the pound and the euro (which will become fixed, once accepted), interest rates, inflation and the budget deficit limit of 3 per cent of GDP. It is inevitable that if things do not work out as planned Britain will either have to scrap its idea of rebuilding its infrastructure or take the unpopular measure of raising taxes even further to maintain its budget deficit under control. So it is highly unlikely that the referendum on the euro will be held in the near future. Actually Mr. Blair has been talking about holding this referendum for such a long time and later postponing it that there are growing doubts in Britain and elsewhere -- which does not help his falling credibility rating -- as to whether it will ever take place under his leadership.

LETTER FROM EUROPE

What is happening to Mr. Blair's dream of joining the euro? Mr. Blair is a man of divided loyalties. Politically, he has given his unflinching loyalty to the United States... But, from an economic point of view, he understands that Britain's future lies with the EU, hence his enthusiasm for the euro.

changes in the British constitution and the cabinet without much consultation.) For someone who continuously brags about moral leadership (again I have difficulty in understanding how he can brag about his moral leadership and yet at the same time openly wage an illegal and unjust war ignoring the advice given by the keepers of Christian morality like Archbishop Rowan Williams, Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor), these are serious accusations.

The main reason (which later turned out to be the main excuse) given by Mr. Blair for invading Iraq was to disarm Iraq, whose president, according to him had developed weapons of mass destruction and was capable of launching an attack on the United Kingdom in forty-five minutes. More than two months after the fall of Baghdad and despite the presence of several hundred thousand British and American troops in the area, no weapons of mass destruction have yet been found. Most people are now convinced that Mr. Blair got only overestimated Iraq's capabilities but also deliberately manipulated intelligence reports to influence public opinion in favour of war. According to *The Independent*

fact) in Britain that President Bush and his neo-conservative advisors had already made the decision, sometime in the summer of 2002 to invade Iraq and were merely going through the motions until they were ready to attack. But by the end of March, Mr. Blair with his half-truths and lies (refer to the BBC's recently published nine-page letter) and the help of his highly efficient propaganda machine was able to change the trend completely. It was indeed a remarkable feat. By then 56 per cent of the British public thought that President Saddam Hussein posed an immediate threat to the UK, therefore a pre-emptive war was necessary to destroy Saddam Hussein's highly dangerous weapons before he could strike Britain. Now, in light of the subsequent events, even if weapons of mass destruction are found in Iraq, will anyone trust his words?

Even if Mr. Blair can survive the current review (investigation) of the alleged manipulation and misuse of intelligence reports to swing public opinion in favour of war, there is no doubt that his reputation as a trustworthy leader has been seriously damaged. Actually many Labour party members feel that he has destroyed the United Nations,

market is rallying on hopes of a stronger recovery in the United States (whose stock market, according to many experts is still suffering from an "irrational exuberance") is still far below the record highs of previous years, industrial production is falling, the construction industry is contracting and the unemployment situation is not getting any better. First warning of the deteriorating economic situation came several months ago from the Bank of England, when it lowered the interest rate to 3.75 per cent. (In the United States, the interbank rate now stands at 1 per cent, lowest since 1958. The European Central Bank has recently made two cuts to bring it down to 2 per cent, maintaining a difference of 1.75 per cent between the two. This is a far cry from the situation in 1997, when the gap between the interest rates of Britain and its major European competitors, France and Germany, was nearly 4 percentage points.) This warning was later confirmed, when it was stated that in fiscal 2003 the British economy will grow by about 2.5 per cent, if everything goes well, which is lower than what was originally forecasted by Mr. Brown, the Chancellor. Actually according to a recent OECD report, the growth will most probably be

legacy of years of neglect during the days of Mrs. Thatcher by increasing government investment in public services like healthcare, education and transport. In this, however, Mr. Blair did not follow the fancy American example (supply-side economics) of introducing huge tax-cuts for the wealthy. Instead, his government quite rightly tried to claw back money from increased taxes and social security contributions to finance these projects. The brunt of tax increases will, however, be borne by the middle classes, who in the mid-nineties, attracted by Mr. Blair's New Labour agenda flocked to the Labour ranks and brought Mr. Blair to power. But among these supporters, there has been a slow but steady erosion of confidence in Mr. Blair because of the growing burden of tax increases, unsatisfactory public services and the prospect of having to pay the full cost of education for their children.

In any case, under the new circumstances of lower economic growth, these measures (tax increases) are not going to be enough because the tax revenues will certainly be lower than expected. Therefore, the budget deficits will grow. Now, the inevitable question is: By what percentage

OPINION

Reduction of budget for local government What does it imply?

BAIDIJAL ALAM MAJUMDAR

THE budget, as pointed out by many commentators, has both positive and negative aspects. However, one of the disappointing aspects of it is the significant decreases in the allocations for local government bodies, especially for Union Parishads (UPs) and Paurashavas, in spite of the substantial increases in the overall budget. Consequently, the question that is now in the minds of many: what do these decreases mean?

Experts differ on the appropriate tiers of local government in our country. However, there is no controversy with respect to one tier -- the UP for the rural setting and the Paurashava for the urban area. The major political parties are unanimously for it. Our honourable MPs have no objection against it. Members of the civil society are strongly for strengthening the UPs and the Paurashavas by giving them more resources, functions and responsibilities. Nevertheless, the honourable Finance Minister, to the dismay of many, proposed drastic cuts in the allocations for these bodies.

The revised Annual Development Plan (ADP) for the current fiscal year is Tk. 17,100 crore, of which the allocations as lump sum grants for 'Upazila Development

Assistance' (which is distributed as ADP grants to UPs) and 'Paurashava Development Assistance' are Tk. 200 crore and Tk. 120 crore, accounting for 1.17 per cent and 0.70 per cent, respectively, of the total. In the new budget for 2003-04, these allocations are reduced to Tk. 170 crore and Tk. 100 crore, respectively, although the total ADP is increased to Tk. 20,300 crore. In terms of percentages, Upazila Development Assistance and Paurashava Development Assistance consequently have gone down to 0.86 per cent and 0.49 per cent, respectively, of the proposed ADP. It may be pointed out that the allocations for the six City Corporations are also reduced from Tk. 120 crore (0.85% in the current revised ADP to Tk. 100 crore (0.49%) in the proposed ADP for 2003-04. Similarly, the grants for Zila Parishads, although non-existent as elected bodies at this time, are reduced from Tk. 85 crore (0.50%) to Tk. 70 crore (0.34%). Thus, the allocations for all local government bodies -- Zila Parishads, Upazila Parishads, Union Parishads and City Corporations -- have gone down significantly in the proposed ADP for the fiscal year in question.

It may be noted that in addition to the above reductions, the government has taken two decisions in recent years which put to risk the

very financial viability of local bodies, especially the UPs. For example, in 1997, the authority to lease water bodies of 20 acres or less was taken away from the UPs and given to the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Similarly, the authority to lease local markets was transferred from the UPs to Upazila Nirbahi Officers last year. These decisions could potentially cripple the UP bodies, although our constitutional commitment (Article 60) is "to confer powers on the local government bodies... including power to impose taxes for local purposes, to prepare their budgets and to maintain funds."

It is hard to fathom the justifications for weakening the financial viability of the UPs -- the oldest and the only ongoing local government bodies of rural Bangladesh -- by both taking away the taxing authority and reducing their budgetary allocations. The UP election was held early this year, in which nearly 55,000 elected local representatives, including about 13,000 women in reserve seats were elected by the people at the grassroots. The election for the Paurashavas is expected to be held at the end of the year, which will also elect several thousand more local leaders. These leaders would be utilized, many hoped, for mobilising local people and resources for solving locally

many of the problems confronting our society relating to hunger, poverty and governance.

Many also thought that local government bodies would be used in the future to get more resources to the people at the grassroots. National resources are currently spent in a highly centralised manner and little of those resources actually reach the common people. Our research shows that the national government spends roughly between Tk.5-10 lac per year through a UP body. We have also found that the government directly spends about a crore taka each year in a Union. Nearly 60 per cent of such spending is used for salaries and benefits of functionaries including teachers; 30 per cent on building infrastructure, much of which are of very poor quality and which people can do without; 5 per cent as handouts; and the remaining 5 per cent on the so-called human development activities such as health, education and so on. Unfortunately, very little of these resources reach the people in poverty, which is reflected, in a glaring manner, in the growing disparities of income and opportunities in our society.

We can find a rather naked display of the resource deprivation of the ordinary people if we look at their entitlements in the national

budget. The budget for 2003-04 is about Tk. 52,000 crore, which comes to about Tk. 4,000 on a per capita basis. Thus, the share of a Union, with a population of 25,000, in the national budget is about Tk. 10 crore. If the government directly spends only about a crore in a typical Union, then the question that bogs the minds of many is: what happens to the other Tk. 9 crore? The amount is obviously spent -- in a centralised manner by the administrative and political bureaucrats and in the name of the people. Unfortunately only the crumbs of this huge sum reach the people in villages, and much of it is wasted and misappropriated, earning us the dubious distinction of being the most corrupt nation in the world.

Given this, it was hoped that the government would use the large number of newly elected local leaders and their institutions as conduits for transferring resources to the people in poverty. Such transfers would no doubt contribute significantly to our progress as a nation. For example, if the government would allocate Tk. 1 crore to each Union every year and require by law that the UP body prepares local plan through effective participation of the people and holds periodic open budget meetings to account for all the spending, then many of the challenges faced by the

common people could be solved in the next five years. Experiences show that closer are the power, authority and resources to the people, greater degree of transparency and accountability are established in their utilisation and more benefits do they accrue to the people.

Despite these strong arguments in favour of giving more resources to local government bodies, why has the government -- it is reasonable to ask -- decided to lower their allocations in the budget? Does it reflect its lack of seriousness toward strengthening local government?

One should not be surprised if there is indeed a lack of seriousness, for many of the official decisions of the past decade went against the interests of local bodies. Cancellation of the Upazila system; forming of the 'Thana/Upazila Development Coordination Committees' with MPs as advisors; giving the government officials the power to suspend and remove elected representatives and directly supervise and control their activities defying the constitutional provision of autonomous local bodies; designating the MPs as advisors in the 1998 Upazila Parishad Act and making their advice mandatory; ignoring the 1992 decision of the Supreme Court to 'update' the local government laws in view of the Twelfth

Amendment of the Constitution and not holding elections of local bodies; using the allocations for local government as patronage for party functionaries -- are some of the examples of governmental decisions against local government. These decisions have progressively weakened the local bodies, if they are in existence at all, over the years. The incoming Gram Sarkar, according to many observers, is likely to worsen the situation, threatening the very existence of the UPs.

The reduction of budgets for UPs, Paurashavas and City Corporations clearly indicate that the government is putting less importance on these bodies. However, do the reduction of grants for Upazila and Zila Parishads imply that the government is not thinking of holding elections for these bodies in the near future? If so, it will mean a clear defiance of the unanimous decision of the Bangladesh Supreme Court. In the case involving the cancellation of the Upazila Parishad, the Supreme Court in 1992 directed the government to remove non-elected persons in local bodies by holding elections within six months. Unfortunately, this decision has not been implemented in the last 12 years.

If elections of Upazila and Zila Parishads are not held, it would also mean that the ruling party would violate its own election commit-

ment. Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), in its election manifesto before the last Parliamentary election, stated: "Active initiatives would be taken to form Upazila Parishads and Zila Parishads and make them the centre of all development activities in order to achieve administrative decentralisation." Begum Khaleda Zia made a similar commitment when we, along with a group of UP Chairmen, met with her prior to the election.

It may be noted that Bangladesh Awami League, in its election manifesto, made a similar commitment. It stated: "If Awami League forms the government, it would hold elections of all local bodies including the Upazila and Zila Parishads and hand over to them the necessary powers and responsibilities in the light of the laws already passed and the recommendations of the Local Government Commission." Former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also in her 1995 book entitled *Poverty Eradication: Some Thoughts* committed to make local government the "driving force of all development activities." Unfortunately little was done to strengthen local government while she was in power.

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