

Launches collide

Do we still have anything called navigational rules?

THE safety of launch passengers still remains an elusive goal, as yet another disaster struck when two launches collided in the Meghna river on Thursday night. At least 12 people are reported to have died and scores of others were injured in the mishap.

The operators of the two launches are blaming each other for the collision, which apparently was the result of violation of all kinds of navigational rules--visibility was poor; the launches reportedly had no searchlights; both of them were carrying passengers well above their capacity; and neither of them used a siren or horn to alert the other vessel. The result is loss of valuable lives, the number of which is almost certain to rise further.

Launch accidents in recent times have caused quite a bit of public commotion. The government responded by laying down a set of rules for the operators when the death figures began to look unusually high and totally unacceptable. The owners, for their part, tried their best to maintain the status quo, though they agreed in principle to go by the safety rules. That only 8,000 out of the 20,000 launches plying different routes have registration bears ample testimony to the anomalies that plague the sector as a whole.

Nevertheless, people were expecting that at least the primary and avoidable causes of launch disasters would be eliminated by the operators. Installation of devices for weather monitoring might be a costly proposition, but it is not at all clear why a cardinal sin like overloading is still being committed without the slightest qualms. Similarly, it defies understanding how a vessel carrying over 500 humans could operate without a searchlight! We have clearly lost the right to blame misfortune when such glaring flaws exist in the navigational system.

Condoling the deaths is not enough. The government must appoint a probe body and find out how such a collision could take place, when a little more care and alertness on the part of the operators could have saved so many lives.

Qadeer Khan pardon

The plot thickens

THE saga of Pakistani nuclear technology being clandestinely passed onto Iran, Libya and North Korea took another twist Thursday when Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf held a press conference to unconditionally pardon Qadeer Khan and laud him as a national hero. This pardon and endorsement comes hard on the heels of Khan's dramatic televised news conference where he confessed that he alone had been responsible for Pakistan's programme of nuclear proliferation and pleaded for forgiveness.

The improbability of the tale that Khan related in his confession has been compounded by the swiftness with which Musharraf has moved to exonerate him. Prior to the pardon, commentators wondered whether Khan was being made a fall-guy for Pakistan's nuclear proliferation programme. It is, after all, inconceivable that he acted alone without the knowledge of Pakistan's intelligence services and government.

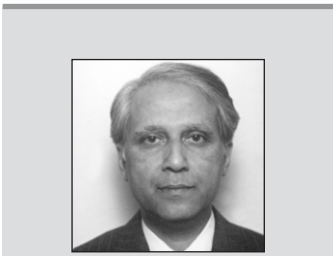
Musharraf's pardon, together with his generous words of praise for Khan during Thursday's press conference, indicates that a deal of sorts has been struck, with Khan falling on his sword for the benefit of the rest of Pakistan's intelligence community, and Musharraf ensuring that the damage thereby suffered by Khan be kept to a minimum.

This point of view is supported by Mohamed El Baradei, chief of the International Atomic Energy Agency, who has categorically stated that "Khan was not working alone" and is merely "the tip of the iceberg."

So where do the events of this past week leave things? It is incontrovertible that Pakistan has been funneling nuclear technology to at least Iran, Libya and North Korea, and maybe others, for several years, contributing greatly to these countries' nuclear development. President Musharraf is doing all he can to try to convince the world community that these were the actions of one rogue individual which were not sanctioned at the highest levels of either the military or the government.

One thing that is certain is that the affair is far from closed. If the world is serious about nuclear non-proliferation than a thorough investigation into Pakistan's nuclear technology transfer programme is called for. Musharraf's attempts to sweep everything under the carpet cannot be the end of the matter. It is imperative that full details of the programme see the light of day, and that measures are put in place at the international level to check this kind of clandestine trade that threatens to further destabilise an already volatile world.

Expanding the Jatiya Sangsad: Need to re-think



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE last few days have seen several comments both in the television and the published media about the government's proposal to expand the Jatiya Sangsad through constitutional amendment. It has generated debate and allegations that such a step is principally being thought of to divert attention of the people from more important and pressing national issues.

Today, the current administration is facing a severe problem of governance. It continues to display its inability with regard to factors like devolution and decentralisation of power, meaningful reduction of poverty, general criminalisation of politics, violence and maintenance of law and order. They have also been unable till now to successfully address several other questions of public interest -- separation of the judiciary from the executive, formation of an impartial anti-corruption commission and electoral reform. It is therefore strange that they should have embarked on another controversial journey.

The election manifesto published by the BNP ahead of the 2001 elections did not include references to the possible expansion of seats in the Parliament. Nevertheless (while presenting the manifesto in a press conference), Chairperson Khaleda Zia had indicated that if her party was elected to office, then her government would consider expanding the number of seats to 500. It has

now been reported that the ruling BNP Parliamentary Party after meeting on 21 January this year, has decided to increase the number of seats through constitutional amendment from 300 to 450. This figure will include 50 reserved seats for women (through indirect elections). Apparently, a few MPs belonging to the ruling party had the courage to disagree with such a move, but as is common in our existing autocratic democratic practice, such expressions were

never engaged through electoral reform. This wishful thinking also has minor relevance within the scope of this article. Nevertheless, what is important is the percentage of the population who will feel left out through such an amendment. They might justifiably feel that the sovereign will of the people has been disregarded through lack of consultation.

The Awami League leadership have already clearly indicated that they are against such a constitutional move. Notes of dissent have also appeared in the media from political thinkers and analysts from all backgrounds. Caution is being urged by representatives of the civil society.

There are many factors that suggest that such a constitutional move will be hasty. The first deals with the essential question of consensus. Political power must not be seen as being exercised arbitrarily. Having a considerable majority connotes that much more of responsibility and obligation. Jurists have already pointed out that the citizens of this country must discover fairness in such proposals. Constitutional amendments must also be seen as 'being in public interest, bereft of any political motivation' (Barrister Harun-ur-Rashid, The Daily Star, 25 January, 2004).

Any form of amendment of the existing structure will have both administrative and financial implications. Some have argued that

another one hundred fifty will add to or reduce the crisis of convening quorums.

It is true that government can avail of the provisions of Article 142 of the constitution and amend the provisions of the constitution. They have the required two-thirds majority. However, there still remains the question of fairness, compromise and consensus. These are important elements in any democratic process.

We have to remember that the parliament is after all an extension of the will of the people. Today, the Awami League, despite receiving 40.13 per cent of the vote in the last general election in 2001, has only 58 seats in the Jatiya Sangsad. The BNP received 40.97 per cent and has 201 seats. If the existing first past the post process had been replaced by proportional representation, then Awami League would have had at least 120 seats. However, that is an anomaly of democracy that can

such a transformation is required on the ground of demographic change. This view appears to lack merit. Such an increase in the number of seats has not taken place next door in India, where 542 seats have remained constant in the Lok Sabha despite substantial increase in that country's population.

Such a move is generally being considered as unnecessary and critics are correctly pointing out that this will mean additional bur-

den on the national exchequer. This would mean diverting essential funds from other important sectors like education, healthcare and infrastructure building. This would also require fresh delimitation of constituencies by the Election Commission. This process will be time consuming and will most likely lead to accusations of being politically directed. Do we really need this?

country. He feels that it is only correct that the process is not seen as unconstitutional or undemocratic.

Important subjects are sometimes decided upon in other countries of the world through the holding of referendums. Switzerland is one example. The principle of referendum is provided for in Article 142 (1A) of our constitution, but it essentially relates to amendment of Article 8 (fundamental principles of state policy), Article 48 (powers of the President) and Article 56 (powers of the Prime Minister). Our administration can take a cue from this possibility. The parliament may in its wisdom adopt a resolution to hold a referendum as soon as possible on the question of expansion of seats in the Parliament and the nature of representation of women in the seats to be set aside for them. The government can then subsequently act on that. This measure would however be expensive.

The other alternative could be to obtain the views of the electorate during the next general elections. Voters could express their opinion as either being for or against such a move. Alternatives could then also be proposed not only as to the additional number of seats but also about whether the expanded number of seats for women should be on the basis of direct voting, nomination or indirect election. This process will not require extra expenditure. It will only require patience.

More than two years have passed since the present government has come to power. It is already facing agitation in the streets. The question of constitutional amendment will only fuel further controversy. There are many areas of governance which need immediate attention of the administration. They need to concentrate on these unresolved issues.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

Tyranny of the democracies!

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

IF the world suffered from the tyranny of the totalitarian regimes and dictatorships in the twentieth century, the twenty-first century has been ushered in inauspiciously with an unhealthy dose of the tyranny from the world's democracies. Led by the world's two oldest democracies -- the UK and the USA -- other more recent democracies, such as Australia, Italy and Spain participated in the invasion of a sovereign nation, Iraq, ruled, admittedly, by a brutal dictator, Saddam Hussein. No United Nations authorisation was sought to legitimise the invasion. On the contrary, the UN was bypassed and demonised as an irrelevant hindrance. Without presenting any credible evidence, Iraq was characterised as bristling with nuclear, biological and chemical weapons of mass destruction and as such an imminent threat to the US. Laughably, the UK and Australia also claimed that Iraq was a threat to them! Dr. David Kay, the former UN weapons inspector, was ubiquitous on all American television channels before and after the war guaranteeing that Iraq was teeming with WMDs. Dr. Kay's enthusiastic assertions made President Bush appoint him the head of a thousand plus crew of American inspectors looking for WMDs all over Iraq. Rather than eat his words and admit failure in a report, last week Dr. Kay resigned his position emphasising that there were no WMDs in Iraq, none existed before the war and that "we were all wrong" about Iraq's WMDs.

Not so fast. It is very convenient to say that the US, the UK, their allies and their intelligence

agencies were not, "all wrong." Facts lead us otherwise. Former Treasury Secretary O'Neill, a Republican who had sat in on nation security council meetings, said that the Bush administration began planning for war against Iraq immediately after taking office, well before the horrors of September 11. After the dire prediction of an imminent nuclear, biological and chemical threat from Iraq in his state of the union

address last year, in this year's state of the union address Mr. Bush sought to justify the unjustifiable by stressing that Iraq had "WMD-related-programme activity," as though that cunning rhetoric somehow vindicated his earlier erroneous assertions about imminent threats and WMDs. Vice President Cheney remains defiant in the face of truth: contrary to evidence and Kay's findings, Cheney still maintains that Iraq had WMD! Deputy defence secretary and Zionist Dr. Paul Wolfowitz, the architect of the war, now admits that the Americans would not have supported the war if the rationale were simply to overthrow Saddam Hussein. To win over the Americans, the warmongers masterfully used the bogey of imminent threat to America from a WMD-loaded Iraq. Once again the Bush administra-

tion has shifted the goal post. Instead of owning up to the lies and the deceptions perpetrated on the American people to satisfy the US military-industrial complex's hunger for war, the new Bush line is: "Forget about WMD! Isn't the world a beautiful place without Saddam?"

In a new book titled "American Dynasty: Aristocracy, Fortune and the Politics of Deceit in the House of Bush," Republican Kevin P.

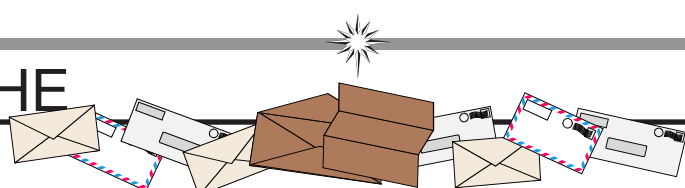
of Iraq, is the conquest of us all: of our minds, our humanity and our self-respect at the very least. If we say or do nothing, victory over us is assured."

Not a ringing endorsement of the world's two oldest democracies, is it? While every nation that calls itself a democracy takes enormous pride in it, the world has not agreed on what constitutes a democracy. In the United States, there is only one national election

what is known as gerrymandering, or redrawing of congressional district in a moth-eaten manner to enhance the strength of one party and dilute the strength of the other. Recently, in Texas, the Republican gerrymandering took such an outrageous shape that Democratic legislators walked out and had to escape to neighbouring state of Oklahoma to prevent the passage of the legislation. Is this a good advertisement for democracy?

Democratic politicians routinely mislead the public, tell untruths and half-truths, lie and deceive, and distort the sayings and accomplishments of their opponents. Two of the most decent recent Presidents of the United States, Republican Gerald Ford and Democrat Jimmy Carter, were hounded out of office, although both were incumbent Presidents. Democracy is an arena where the deceiver, not the decent, thrives. In spite of all his hypocrisy vis-à-vis Iraq President Bush remains immensely popular. One may ask: if democracy is touted to be so good, why is it not practiced in the United Nations Security Council where a single veto by a permanent member destroys the collective wisdom of, and justice sought by the rest of the world? (Something the US does routinely to exonerate Israeli crimes.) The answer is: the mask of democracy has to come off as soon as it stands in the way of what the democracies really want. The world has just witnessed how the world's democracies lied to, cheated and deceived the world to attack Iraq for its oil, and to destroy one of Israel's enemies. The rest of the world is not worried about attacks by the dictators anymore, they are more afraid of the tyranny of the democracies!

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE



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Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Adishonoured Judge

In a society mired in things that are bad, and where we hold the rank of topping the corruption list the sad affairs of Justice Rahman as mentioned in news reports is possibly the last nail in our coffin of the saga of corruption. By and large, the people of Bangladesh had faith in the Supreme Court as the last shining frontier of "Truth, Honour and Justice" of which I am sure in our hearts we felt proud. Today that too seems shattered. The shine now seems matted and dulled. Maybe we have reached the brink of an abyss of hopelessness!

What hurts most is Justice Rahman's unfortunate and immature decision to persist through the investigation. Before the first step of the Supreme Judicial Council was taken, he could have resigned. He

unfortunately did not; throwing away whatever shred of honour that was left to him. This rankles most; for the eternal question will remain: why he did not leave before bringing disrepute to himself and the august institution that he served.

Indeed the event is so shocking that words fail me to describe the sadness, sorrow and shame that cover all of us. We can only say; may Allah bless us. I conclude by taking liberty with the first few lines of James Shirley's poem.

"Honour and Renown
Has tumbled down,
And in the dust now lies,
Along with our anguished sorrowful cries"

SA Mansoor
Gulshan, Dhaka

"Khaled Mahmud and

the African Safari"

It was bound to happen. The former Bangladesh skipper Khaled Mahmud (Sujon) has got the axe. But what was surprising was the gritty fighter, also known as "Chacha" among his team-mates, has in fact retired from international cricket. I honestly feel that he better fits for ODIs, not for Tests.

Khaled Mahmud has probably retired out of emotions and frustrations, and if that is the case, he should reconsider his decision because he is still one of our best all-rounders and "utility" cricketers in the ODIs. And appointing country's leading batsman Habibul Bashar (Sumon) as the new captain, we must admit that there were not many options. Rajin Saleh and Mushfiqur Rahman are still too young to lead us in the international level, and Khaled Mashud was tried out

beforehand without much success (2002-2003). The main question is whether Bashar's form with the bat would deteriorate with his additional responsibilities of leading the side.

Well, only the time can answer all these questions. The squad for the Zimbabwe was probably the best squad that the Faruque Ahmed-led selection panel could select (with Javed Omar being injured). The selectors did a great job. And the cricketers did the same.

Aranya Syed
Dhaka, Bangladesh

A negative sign

Supreme Judicial Council has taken an extraordinary step to remove a sitting Additional Judge of the High Court from his position for bribe related cases. There was another instance in recent past where a High Court Judge was also shown the

door for almost similar reasons. These are not healthy signs at all.

Political interference in appointing Judges is degrading the moral authorities of such widely respected institutions.

To avoid any further embarrassments, the government should immediately take steps to separate the Judiciary from the Executive for a better future.

People of this country deserve a lot more from our political leaderships.

Mr. Amin
United Kingdom

BNP-AL handshake

My attention was drawn to your excellent editorial on BNP-AL (DS issue of January 27th) and to a picture with a news item carried earlier on this meeting. We do share the hope the editorial has expressed

that this is not just a photo opportunity but more.

Come to think of it, isn't Bangladesh the only country in the world where the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition do not meet, do not talk, do not share any forum together? I am sure that both the leaders watch BBC at one time or another where parliamentary debates at Westminster are covered; where the British Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition are regularly shown opposing views on issues of national and international interests but never failing to smile at each other. Then next door, we have India where Prime Minister Mr. Vajpayee often conferring with the Opposition including Mrs. Sonia Gandhi when he is confronted with issues where India's future comes into focus. In England as well as in India, the views that the parties hold

on major issues are often seriously divergent and conflicting. Yet they never close doors and work with each other. In Bangladesh, the views of both the parties on major issues are often only marginally different. Yet, they fight like one desires the total annihilation of the other and nothing less and this is most acute at the top.

While hoping that the meeting would lead to sustainable cooperation between the BNP and the AL, I feel pessimistic. I think that this dislike of the top two leaders of Bangladesh for each other has now gone to ridiculously extreme proportions. Just imagine that the picture shown in the papers of Mr. Mannan shaking hands with Mr. Jaill was instead one of the PM shaking hands with the Leader of the Opposition and this was for real. Then a major portion of what is keeping

Bangladesh from opening the door to prosperity would have vanished giving our country a real chance for real and sustainable progress. I think the media and civil societies need to focus on this point as much as law and order, corruption etc, and bring pressure upon both the leaders to end their mutual dislike for each other for their continued hatred for each other, which is now known to all, is no longer a game that they are playing with each other. It is a cruel game they are playing with the future of 130 million plus people of Bangladesh.

Shahjahan Ahmed
Dhanmandi RA, Dhaka