

On the wrong side of Human Rights, again

Govt. did not listen when we reported the same facts, will it listen now?

HERE is practically nothing in the State Department's report on human rights and related issues in Bangladesh that has not previously been reported by the national press. All of the incidents and facts mentioned have repeatedly appeared in the local media followed by editorials and commentaries as to the national and international repercussions of such a state of affairs. What is perhaps new in the State Department's report is a comprehensive presentation of those facts. And the other difference is that they are coming from the US government and not us.

Given our habit of denying all charges of failure or of non-performance, we will not be surprised if such be our government's response to these latest charges of human rights abuse. However we would certainly hope that this time around the government will take the points raised in the report somewhat seriously and look into ways of mitigating them. We should not continue with our ostrich like habit of thinking that the world cannot see what is going on in our country just because we refuse to see them.

Time has not yet come to expect that our government's standard of human rights performance will match those of the west. We accept that. But we definitely can expect that our own standard be matched if not improved upon. Do we really need to have 194 people die in custody of the law enforcers and then have absolutely no accountability for their action? These, mind you, are only the reported ones. Do we need to use police for political purposes as has become the habit now? Why are journalists having to indulge in widespread practice of self-censorship, not to mention some getting killed and many being threatened?

Government will be ill advised to go on a denial mode and restrict its response to the situation to issuing a statement rejecting the report and terming it to be based on inadequate investigation and data, a likely scenario. It is our view that the report, more or less, reflects the situation on the ground. In fact it can be held guilty of couching some facts and cushioning some assessment with diplomatic language. The facts, in some cases, are harsher still. The government's treatment of the opposition in the last few days reveals more about our situation than the report does.

We will be wise to take the report seriously and try to address the issues raised in it. Such a course of action will be the only intelligent and constructive way of moving forward.

The tiger census

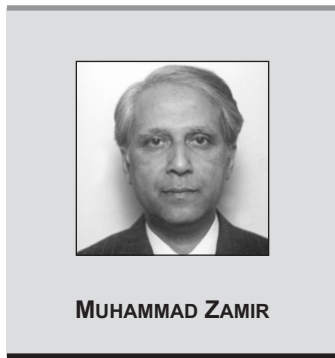
No more wild guesses, indeed

Better late than never -- after a lot of demands from conservationists, guessing and reluctantly concluded figures, wildlife experts embarked on the first ever comprehensive census of Royal Bengal Tigers inhabiting the world's biggest mangrove forest. We must commend both the governments of Bangladesh and India for realising the need for such a census, although differences of opinion on how to approach it delayed the process. But a major portion of the appreciation goes to United Nations Development Programme. For without their support and assistance, such a big and complicated project would not have seen the light of the day.

There have been many attempts in the past, in fact since the late sixties, to assess an accurate figure of the world's most endangered wildlife species. But none of those efforts could provide any authentic number of Bengal Tigers in the Sundarbans. It varied from as low as 50 to as high as 300. Now, hopefully there is a possibility of finding out the real picture. At least the method the teams of experts are going to adopt has proved to be the most accurate.

Undoubtedly, this is a noteworthy effort on the part of the authorities to protect and conserve bio-diversity. But more needs to be done. The venture must not end with just the census. It is widely believed and almost an established fact that the number of tigers has decreased alarmingly in recent time. And the lack of conservation programme is being blamed as the main reason for that. The authorities failed to protect the natural habitats of the tigers, could not put a stop to illegal logging and poaching either. Therefore it must be ensured that after the census is over, the tigers who are a part our heritage, a great symbol of our national identity, must be protected. It is our duty and responsibility to save them from extinction.

Democracy must be seen to function



THE Bangladesh Constitution, like many other Constitutions, contain provisions that not only enumerate high ideals but also suggest how these will be protected for the common good of the people of this country. The preamble refers to democracy and suggests that 'it shall be a fundamental aim of the state to realise the democratic process'. We are also reminded that the state machinery will take steps to ensure 'the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice, political, economic and social' rights for its citizens.

The Constitution might be 'the embodiment of the will of the people'. It might have been framed so that 'we may prosper in freedom and may make our full contribution' as citizens. However, at this point of time, we need to ask ourselves as to whether all that has been promised is actually taking place.

Only one week ago leaders of various political parties were making pious declarations about upholding the values of Ekushey February. They were, everyone of them, re-dedicating themselves to carry forward the torch of free thought and speech that was lit fifty-two years ago in Dhaka. Yet, even while such assertions were being made, a political group was being denied full opportunity to observe the International Mother Language Day near their central office. Sheikh Hasina's Government had been responsible for UNESCO according special status and recognition to this Day and the Awami League was obviously trying to remember this success.

Newspapers reported that police sealed off entry and exit of people to the Awami League party central office. Barbed wire fencing was erected on the eastern and western ends of Bangabandhu Avenue. The party was also reportedly not allowed to erect any rostrum for their Ekushey programmes. Police, according to bystanders also used batons to disperse the people and the leaders and activists and tried to stop them from entering the venue. The Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina also faced difficulty in entering the venue and addressing the cultural function.

has the right to that form of governance, which would guarantee for its followers, diverse benefits, over every one else, pertaining to the State's largesse. This motivating factor has possibly encouraged the ruling Administration to forget that "if their 46 per cent (of the votes) gives them legitimacy to rule, then, Awami League's 41 per cent also entitles them to receive all the respect and dignity of a party that enjoys that many voters' confidence".

Tolerance and partnership are the key words. This is a very simple fact, and there should not be a mind-

on threat, where citizens are forced to stay at home out of fear.

In this regard, one is constrained to point out that observance of peaceful hartal is one thing, but destroying public or private property through arson, during or before hartal, is another. It was therefore most disappointing that the evenings before two successive hartal days, saw the burning of motor vehicles and destruction of public and private property. This should not have occurred. Trying to create fear in the minds of the population a few hours before the hartal starts does

monplace. Social disintegration is being encouraged through various formats of political patronage.

People in general have also noted that the Opposition was not given adequate chance to air their opinions within the Parliament. They have also seen how Opposition requests and notices for debate and discussion within the parliament were not given the requisite importance. There were reports of the microphone of the Leader of the Opposition being switched off and formation of Parliamentary Standing Committees without consulta-

All these elements are affecting the image of Bangladesh abroad. It is also casting a long shadow on potential foreign direct investment in our country. The common man knows this. So do our friends from abroad. That is why, we recently had Ms. Michele Sison of the US State Department, Bureau of South Asian Affairs, commenting in Dhaka that "good governance, a strong judiciary and congenial law and order are the requisites for sound business climate in a country and the absence of these would shy the investors away."

Similarly, while urging Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League to return to the Parliament, the visiting German Parliamentary Delegation also reiterated that the Opposition's presence in the House should not be hampered and "its work must be given full visibility". That is the crunch word.

The Opposition needs to be shown full respect and not be subjected to a 'partisan attitude' within the Parliament and arbitrary detention outside the Jatiya Sangsad.

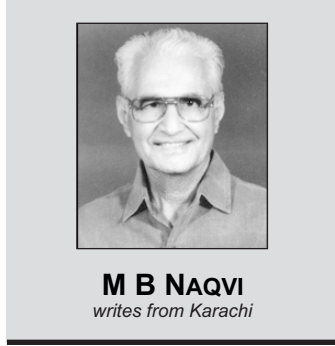
Democracy should enable us to use the democratic institutions for the good of the people. There should be participation of different opinions. Enabling measures need to be introduced whereby those in the Opposition feel that they might not be the governing party but their views still carry weight in decision making.

This alone might enhance the prospect of Opposition parliamentarians returning to Parliament -- not empty words. After all, if the Opposition did not believe in democracy and associated traditions, they would have resigned their seats by now. They have not done so, I believe there is still time for wisdom.

Display of strength by the government machinery will only stoke tension in the 'political cauldron'. The current political scene needs cool heads rather than issuing of fractious and incendiary statements.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

The only exit: Sign the NPT



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

THROUGHOUT February the Army Chief has been frightening Pakistanis into helping him tide over the four major crises facing the country. Although the people played no part in creating these crises, except for illusions and extremist beliefs of some of them-- by no means a majority - they do stand to suffer the consequences. As for Gen. Pervez Musharraf's, or rather his institution's' actions or failures, their responsibility is unquestioned. The people are entitled to turn round and ask: when were they last consulted on any major issue? And also ask what precisely are they required to do? Is it only to stay quiet and go on "obeying" Gen. Musharraf? Will that help? Let's examine. Why would the would-be bombardiers - the stated threat to Pakistan - punish us, the people? They are likely to recruit another US-led coalition for bombing for two main reasons: it has the image of a persistently unstable state. Secondly, its actions have been reprehensible for most democrats. The examples are:

(a)Pakistan Army was instrumental in the creation of Taliban and imposing them on Afghanistan. It protected Taliban regime for the grandiose purpose of gaining 'strategic depth'.

(b)Pakistan has been an active proliferator of the knowledge of atomic bomb making, blueprints, technology and all. That Pakistan Army or Army-dominated governments did not do so and what happened was a dismal private enterprise of some scientists is an unbelievable story. No one has bought it anywhere. In any case, both the Army and so-called governments

failed to check the proliferation; it was their duty to do so. Why did they fail?

(c)Pakistan has been, in most foreign eyes, happily materially supporting the Jihadis in Kashmir for 13 years. Now, the most powerful foreigners regard the Kashmir Jihad as terrorism, to be fought no matter why has it arisen. Like the withdrawal of support from Taliban, Islamabad stopped supporting what India and the US regard as terrorism in Kashmir after India credibly threatened an invasion of Pakistan itself. The US too showed that it is a strategic partner of India.

under the thumb of the Army Chiefs.

Irrespective of who has done what, the consequences are going to be visited on the common folks. Well, ordinary Pakistanis have asked for it. They have to pay for their weakness and cluelessness in controlling governments and especially the Army. No outsider will weep for them when they suffer. But no use crying over spilt milk. The point now is what can be done? Here again that political incompetence of the citizenry prevents it from doing anything necessary. So, the agency that is in fact in a position to do anything is the Army Chief

dose of his displeasure. He appeared to be truly angry over the temerity of his critics - not sparing the "pseudo intellectuals" who once wore uniforms. That was a PR disaster, as many have put it. The President, apart from being PR savvy himself, has an army of advisors in the Administration over which he truly presides. Didn't they tell him that this wholesale berating is counter-productive? Not that he needed such an advice. If he indulged in the exercise, there must be a specific purpose - even if it might be limited to only terrifying the weak-minded. But was it limited to

or interpretations of Islam by authentic or orthodox Ulema. 'There were a handful of Madrassas that produced intolerant fanatics', he said, and most were devoted to promoting a sufistic Islam that preaches love and service to all. The President appeared to be at pains to imply that his audience represented the mainstream Islamic learning while there were only a few fanatical leaders.

One need not anticipate what the authentic religious leaders of the Savad-i-Azam (majority) will say. Most of the MMA constituents did not seem to be there. Pray, why

it the main message?- was that Mr. Musharraf's repeated insistence on the (basic) Islamic injunction was 'obey those who have been placed above you' (the ruler). He also said God put him where he is. Are these the utterances of a democrat? Is he, by any chance, laying the groundwork for dumping an elaborate fib, called democratic government, and revamping his dictatorship by also wearing the superfine moderate and modern Islam's robes? This however is one's speculation, based on what he said and what his body language was telling. One will be happy to be contradicted.

No one has told this country's saviours that changing a country image is not like putting a fresh coat of paint on stationary things in an Army unit. There has to be a nexus with reality. Why forget or stall around the simple and devastating proposition that no civilised government anywhere will trust nuclear weapons in the strong hands of Pak Army.

What needs to be done for putting Pakistan outside harm's way is to stop running with the hare and hunting with the hound. No halfway houses can withstand the gale that might hit this country, as is widely feared. Pakistan is likely to be left with just one choice: either accept joint control of nukes with the US or sign the NPT as a soon-to-be denuclearised country. It is better to ring up Mr. Al Baradei of IAEA, call in his team of experts and get rid of all nuclear weapons and fissile materials. After all they were of no use when needed most. The IAEA controls, if called for by Islamabad, will be more honourable than to be saddled with something else.

Another urgent need of Pakistan is for Pakistan Army to show actual patriotism by willingly ceding the areas of decision-making that are the domain of democratic governments. Or else, wait for trouble from an angry populace at an unexpected time. Will the Army obey the government and the people? Ask Mr. Musharraf.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

POST BREAKFAST

Democracy should enable us to use the democratic institutions for the good of the people. There should be participation of different opinions. Enabling measures need to be introduced whereby those in the Opposition feel that they might not be the governing party but their views still carry weight in decision making... This alone might enhance the prospect of Opposition parliamentarians returning to Parliament -- not empty words.

Such obstruction, in the opinion of most people, was short-sighted, unnecessary and unfortunate. It could have, and should have been avoided. One must remember that confining a group behind barbed wire might in the short run restrict their ability to express their ideas, but eventually, it only evokes more interest to what might have been articulated by them. Secondly, the purpose was cultural with international connotations. This action, from that point of view, smacked more of repression and political hindrance. Instead of cooperation, regarding an important event, we have seen confrontation.

Like any sane member of society, today, I am seriously concerned about observance of democratic traditions in our country. The major political parties, instead of co-existing in the spirit of amity, mutual tolerance and trust' appear to be bent on testing each other's weaknesses on the streets.

The problem probably lies in the belief that the winner in any election

block to such a principle. In fact, had the Opposition not felt marginalised and neglected, they might not have gone to the streets for observing controversial 'hartal'.

In the recent past, we have seen how senior elected representatives have been brutally lathi-charged causing serious head injuries. Why should this happen? Can we not think of other ways to contain such difficult situations? What about using water houses? Similarly, as was done in the cases of two former Ministers, some political activists could be taken in buses and then set free many kilometres outside Dhaka. The British did it all the time before 1947. It just does not make sense to target some well-known party officials and then beat them senseless.

Democracy is the right to express dissenting opinion. It pre-supposes the principle of agreeing to disagree. In this context, all sides have to follow basic rules. Neither party should try to coerce the followers of the other to a particular view based

not win friends. This should be remembered by the leadership that calls hartal. It would have reflected a sense of maturity and responsibility on the part of the Awami League organisers to have asked their activists and supporters not to resort to violence ahead of or during hartal hours. Such action can only alienate public opinion and provide an excuse to law enforcement agencies to take recourse to use of excessive force. They have to believe in the power of the silent majority and their perception and analysis of ongoing events. Taking the people 'hostage' during the hartal period does not give additional focus to issues.

Today, people in general clearly feel that the current government is failing to provide them with adequate rule of law and order. Killings by mastaans, violence against women, toll collection from business people, mugging, dacoity at banks and business establishments and kidnappings have become com-

tion and representation from the Opposition Parties. They have not missed the fact that the Opposition was not given satisfactory access to participate in these parliamentary bodies. They realise that these shortcomings might have driven the Representatives from the Opposition to the streets.

Good governance has also been undermined by persistent and growing corruption at various levels of the Administration. The civil administration and the law enforcement agencies have also been politicised. These factors, directly and indirectly, have contributed to the unnecessary price spiral of essential food items and an abnormal rise in the cost of living. There have been certain successes in the macro economic framework, but high unemployment rate, both open and disguised, continue to create their own impact on security and safety not only within the rural population but also in the urban areas. In turn, this is affecting poverty reduction.

PLAIN WORDS

What needs to be done for putting Pakistan outside harm's way is to stop running with the hare and hunting with the hound. No halfway houses can withstand the gale that might hit this country, as is widely feared. Pakistan is likely to be left with just one choice: either accept joint control of nukes with the US or sign the NPT as a soon-to-be denuclearised country.

(d)There are religious schools that mass produce Islamic fundamentalists in the sense the west uses this term. Islamic extremism, the foreigners notice, is widespread in Pakistan. It can be seen in its press, judiciary, politics and Army as well as administration. Pakistan's image conforms to this reality.

(e)Therefore, not unnaturally, there are a lot of supporters and protectors of the fugitive Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders in the country. Insofar as the US CIA and FBI, now also operating in Pakistan, have not lost all their contacts gained in the last 25 years, their information regarding their presence cannot be dismissed. In any case, Pakistan's own ISI too, knows a lot about this matter. How can any individual be blamed for Pakistan having acquired an image that corresponds to reality? Since there has been no democratic government or any mechanism of consulting the liberal opinion, the blame must rest with the Army Chiefs who have ruled either directly or indirectly by having appropriated the spheres of national security and foreign policy. Nominal civilian governments have stayed

alone. One pins no hope on the so-called federal government. Its relationship with reality is questionable. It is more of an illusion or charade insofar as policy-making on sensitive matters is concerned. What we are left with is the Army, as noted, and functionally only Gen. Musharraf. The latter is making all the decisions that matter; no one else, except his own aides and a few Army colleagues, has anything to do with higher policy-making. So, what does he propose? Among the Presidential actions, so far, three are notable: First the President chose to ignore foreign and other reactions and hurriedly accepted Dr. AQ Khan's mea culpa plea without fully disclosing the results of over a month long military investigations. It seemed to all the world that the Pardon was some sort of a deal with the Doctor. In any case, foreign reactions speak for themselves. It is also the opinion of most commentators at home that thus the matter has not been closed; Pakistanis are likely to hear more of it. Secondly, Gen. Musharraf collected most of the national press - editors and columnists - and gave them a stiff

that? Could it be that he has had enough of this anomalous press freedom in a dictatorship and may be a direct approach or controls are under consideration? Thirdly, again ignoring the so-called government, he called for a big conference of Ulema and Mashaikh (religious divines) and again unburdened himself about the stark eventualities awaiting Pakistan, if 'we all' did not get our act together. What is implied is not clear. There may be a lot of things that he, the Army, and government departments may have to do to take Pakistan out of the quagmire. But there is little that the ordinary people can do; besides, the spectacle of Ulema and Mashaikh shouting pro-Musharraf slogans was a strange display. Here too there must be a definite purpose.

Presidential performance this time was a study in contrast with what he regaled the editors and commentators with: He was more or less at an invisible hustings and was wooing the extraordinarily large gathering as if they were voters and he a candidate. There was no suggestion that Islamic extremism results from the authentic teachings

were those Ulema and Mashaikh so full throatedly shouting pro-Musharraf slogans? Could it be a case of rent a crowd, with only a sprinkling of traditional Mashaikh and rest were ubiquitous Sarkari Maulvis. One would also want to hear from Maulanas Fazlur Rahman, Samiul Haq, Qazi Hussain Ahmad and JUP leaders about this neat division of Islam between modern, moderate and love-preaching one and a producer of hate and intolerance. The context looked uncommonly like his taking charge of them for changing Pakistan's image. He obviously hopes that this New Islam will pass muster for being under his leadership a la Kernalism.

Remember that Prime Minister and his Cabinet (excluding Shaikh Rashid Ahmad) were nowhere near a major political action. Gen. Musharraf, and he alone, was in charge of the Operation Restoration of Pakistan's image. His conduct to-date has shown that Mr. Jamali, the Cabinet and Parliament were an elaborate fib, necessary to display them when needed.

The most astonishing thing - was

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

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.

The greatest Bangladeshi

The BBC recently carried out a series of programmes and conducted a poll to decide the greatest Briton of all time, which was won by Winston Churchill. This idea has really caught on around the world now and the Germans, South Africans and Russians, amongst others are carrying out similar activities as well. I think a poll on the greatest Bangladeshi would be quite interesting, even though we are not even 33 years old yet. Maybe including figures from the pre-independence

era would make it more challenging. I think The Daily Star would be the worthy party to undertake this task because they are the entity in the Bangladesh media today, including all newspapers, magazines and television channels. Maybe, a series of special supplement profiles each week on some of the great figures, culminating in the results of a poll being announced an say an Independence Day or Victory Day, would be quite well received by the public I think. AK Fazlul Huq, Bangabandhu, Suhrawardy, Bhashani, Zia-ur-Rahman are some of the great figures that spring to

mind.
Shayan Khan
On e-mail

Third force

I had been following with interest the new political developments taking place with the possibility of a third force emerging under the leadership of Dr. Kamal Hossain and Dr. B Chowdhury. The development or formation of a third force in a system, where two major parties are dominating strongly, is not after all a bad idea. The third force in a system, where two parties play political

musical chair, has played constructive roles in some well-established democracies.

The Liberal Party in Britain, The Australian Democrats in Australia, where I live, and there was one short-lived force in New Zealand, are a few worth mentioning examples. The Liberal Party in Britain and the Australian Democrats are still the third forces to reckon with while the one in NZ has just about faded.

The Australian Democrats (AD) as a political party was formed and launched by one Mr Don Chipp who was a long time member of the

Liberal Party (one of the Australian major parties which is now the ruling party) and an MP in the lower house where the government is formed. He had been a minister in the late 60's and early 70's. He had a fall-out with the next Liberal PM Malcolm Fraser and was not included in the subsequent ministry. He resigned from the party and contested his seat as an independent but failed to win. He then decided to form and launch his own party Australian Democrats and contested upper house senate seats in various states. He won with one or two

others in other states. The senate elections are run in a different system in Australia which is another story to tell some other time.

Over the last few years the AD party strongly contributed to the Australian political system and is still continuing to do so. Don Chipp while launching his party was asked as to why he was launching this while fully knowing that he would never be able to form government. His simple answer at the time was "to keep the '...' honest". Since then the AD had maintained a balance of power in the senate, the upper

house of review in the Australian parliamentary system. Both the major parties all along had to negotiate with the AD for the passage of their bills. Senate is the house of review in Australia and the bills can be rejected and sent back to lower house for amendment.

In the absence of honesty in Bangladesh politics and a unicameral system one wonders what sense will it make to have a third force. New Zealand has a unicameral system, the third force has failed as it evolved. The AD as a party is in decline among Australian public right at this moment

because of internal leadership squabbles. The founding leader Don Chipp has long retired from politics. Another force Australian Greens is growing fast in its place.

Dr Kamal Hossain and Dr B Chowdhury are two very highly respected veterans in Bangladesh political arena. I have no doubt about their honesty, patriotism and integrity but I have some doubt about how successful they will be in their endeavours.

Abu Ahmed
On e-mail