

## AL's welcome step

Letter to foreign envoys embarrassing

Along last, Awami League has decided to play its role in the parliamentary standing committees. The move comes more than two and a half years into the five-year term of the eighth Jatiya Sangsad, and effectively almost a year after the actual formation of the standing committees in 2003. A parliament approaching nearly two-thirds of its tenure obviously lost out on answerability, transparency and accountability of an elected government, which are the essence in a democracy, without a full-fledged committee system in place. After all, the so-called vital committees constituted during the last year's budget session were an apology for a committee system, because the opposition was not part of it. That meant only one thing: standing committees are worth very little if they work as rubber-stamp bodies of the ruling party; either they function as bipartisan entities or they don't. There is no half-way house about committee-work. And, regardless of the same-side mock fights simulated in whatever committees we have had, *sans* opposition participation, they were virtual show-pieces.

In this backdrop, nothing could be more welcome than the opposition AL providing names of its MPs to chief whip Delwar Hossain for incorporation in the 45 JS standing committees. The ball is now in the ruling party's court. The opposition has doffed its earlier demand for chairmanship of at least ten committees to their main overtire of placing names on the committees. But principally the opposition's mind seems made up on the question of ending their boycott of committees which sounds but only logical as a natural extension of their earlier decision to join parliament and play a hands-on role on the floor of the House.

On the important question of the opposition chairing some of the vital oversight committees, we have been consistently of the view that such berths should be given to the opposition for the sake of ensuring balanced lawmaking, and transparency and accountability of governance. As a matter of fact, conceding such an accommodation would set a precedent, although this is prevalent as a standard practice in well-established democracies, for any opposition party in the future to benefit by.

That's all very good; but we are baffled by the fact that 43 letters have been written to as many diplomatic missions in Dhaka 'explaining' AL's stand on the issue. Why should the opposition party of a sovereign country send missive to foreign envoys to convey a certain sense of reservation about something they have otherwise positively decided upon? As well as undercutting self-respect it must have caused embarrassment to the diplomatic community. The AL whip claimed that they were entitled to be doing so because the ruling party leaders had 'complained' of their abstention from committees to the foreign missions. Even if the latter is true, 'two wrongs don't make something right'. We should give a better account of solving our own problems.

## Relief to flood victims

Roll up sleeves, no time to lose

FLOODS are rapidly engulfing us. The number of affected districts has almost doubled within a span of a few days. Sylhet has already seen an unprecedented level of inundation. The Meghna and Jamuna basins have been swelling at an alarming rate, with the other basin Padma yet to heave to a similar level.

Now, the surging water is posing an alarming threat to the capital. According to flood forecasters, low-lying areas of Dhaka and Narayanganj are likely to be inundated in a few days' time. The authorities need to take contingency measures like pumping out the water from the low-lying areas to avoid any catastrophe. The disaster management and relief ministry seems to have been overtaken by the speed of flooding. The forecasting mechanism has been seized of the imminent danger rather belatedly. We wonder if the flood information sharing arrangement between India and Bangladesh has been working well!

Reports of inadequacy of relief materials in the affected areas as well as thousands of people being marooned have been pouring in. The authorities should take immediate steps to alleviate the miseries of people reeling under difficult circumstances. At first, all those who are marooned in far-flung areas need to be evacuated to safety as quickly as possible. Then, an adequate number of relief camps should be opened so as to provide the affected people with safe drinking water, food and medicine. As we have seen in the past, epidemics tend to spread quite fast when water begins to recede. Medical teams, well-stocked with oral saline sachets, water purification tablets, medicines and vaccines, must be immediately dispatched to the affected areas. To repair the breaches in the embankments and restore the disrupted communication links we might need the Army's help, sooner perhaps than later.

## The debate on declaration of independence



AMM SHAWKAT ALI

is said to be Haqqani Publication, which claims the copyright of 15-volume anthology on our War of Liberation, the work of which started way back in 1982.

Certain facts of history remain immutable not only because facts are facts and not fictions, but also because of the widespread acceptance of such facts by all and sundry. Denial of facts as facts amounts to indulging in travesty of truth; more

who was closely associated with War of Liberation and also served in the Cabinet of the then government.

Informed sources dismiss the idea of any original copy being in anybody's personal possession. According to this view, it is more a fiction than a fact primarily because this is in the nature of an afterthought. If it were true, what prevented the Minister from making it public way back in 1975-1981 when

instead of joining the War of Liberation, allowed himself to be arrested and wanted a political settlement. These are wild and imaginary ramblings of distorted minds. The best way to look at it is to say that Sheikh Mujib, in doing what he did, behaved more like a leader than anything else. He had deep and abiding faith in the independence of Bangladesh, which is reflected first by his six-point programme and later

gladly, provides details of the validity of declaration of independence by Sheikh Mujib. He quotes not only independent academics like Professor Rounaq Jahan but also freedom fighters. In addition, Ahmed quotes from Holiday (May 5, 1989), which ranks Ziaur Rahman as the fourth announcer. Further, Ahmed rests his argument in favour of Sheikh Mujib, providing quotations from the banner headlines of

Tauqiq Imam, in his recently published book *Bangladesh Government, 1971* also provides adequate information about the authenticity of declaration of independence by Sheikh Mujib. Tauqiq Imam was the Cabinet Secretary of the exile government and also later till August, 1975.

There are many facts not so much about declaration of independence but about announcements by such well-respected personalities like Maulana Bhasani and other student leaders of 1971. A discerning reader of history must be able to distinguish between a formal declaration of independence by a political leader who commands respect of the people and has nationwide public acceptance as well as international acceptance and others who make either broadcast or other forms of announcement.

The declaration of independence by Sheikh Mujib, later built into the Proclamation of Independence, is what matters. It is on the basis of Proclamation of Independence on April 10, 1971, that the people's struggle for independence took definite shape followed by international support that eventually led to the birth of Bangladesh. All said and done, it seems a terrible waste of time to pull the undisputed leader down and push another leader up in this controversial and meaningless debate. At the end of the day, one must realise that declaration of independence is too serious a business to be left to anybody other than a highly popular leader of public opinion which, doubtless, Sheikh Mujib was.

A M M Shawkat Ali, PhD, is former Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture.

## WORTH A LOOK

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so when settled and accepted facts are overlooked and attempts are made to twist facts for narrow political ends. Additionally, such distortions take place after a lapse of three decades or more.

This is exactly what the eminent jurist Dr. Kamal Hossain has said (*Prothom Alo*, July 11, 2004). Expressing his personal view, Dr. Hossain is reported to have said that the declaration of independence, as part of the constitution, is the main basis of our constitution.

As if to add fuel to the fire, a senior Minister of the government claimed that he has in his personal possession one original copy of the declaration of independence, which does not contain any reference to the declaration of independence on March 26, 1971. This claim has been rejected by another leading lawyer

he was in the Cabinet. In fact, during Ziaur Rahman era, no such claims were made by anybody, let alone Ziaur Rahman himself.

On the other hand, it is also a fact that Ziaur Rahman did make a radio broadcast in Chittagong. A senior citizen, in his late seventies during his daily morning walk told his fellow walkers that he heard this himself but part of the statement also referred to the fact that "Sheikh Mujib is with us." The gentleman further asserts that immediately on the following morning after the announcement of Ziaur Rahman, Sheikh Mujib was shown under the custody of Pakistan Government in Karachi airport. This was evidently done to show that Sheikh Mujib was not in the then Bangladesh.

Questions have also been raised by some quarters that Sheikh Mujib,

by his historic declaration of March 7, 1971. This was his finest hour and his declaration on that day galvanised the whole of Bangladesh and started the process of people's war against occupation forces.

### Views of authentication body members

The distorted version presently inserted has been opposed by an eminent member of the Committee Professor Emajuddin Ahmed. Majority of the members of the authentication body of the first edition of the history of liberation also castigated the attempt to distort facts.

Other views from independent sources

Borhanuddin Ahmed, in his book, *The Generals of Pakistan and Ban-*

both the *Times* and the *Guardian* of London dated March 27, 1971. Part of the quoted text reads:

"Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the acknowledged leader of Bengali nationalism responded heroically to the Pakistan Army's intervention with a call for resistance and a declaration of independence... There is good evidence that most members of the Bengali Regiments will accept his orders."

"Shortly before his arrest, Mujib had issued a proclamation to his people, which informed them: You are citizens of a free country... Today the West Pakistan's military force is engaged in a genocide in Bangladesh... Our struggle is most rewarding. Certain is our victory. Allah is with us. The world public opinion is with us. *Joy Bangla* [Victory to Bengal]."

## Two steps forward, one step back: UPA's first 50 days



PRAFUL BIDWAI  
writes from New Delhi

made certain questionable personnel appointments.

The CMP's dilution was apparent in President Kalam's Address to Parliament. This contained notable departures: on employment guarantee, food security, disinvestment, and foreign policy.

Some CMP commitments were subordinated to "resource availability" -- as if this were an unchangeable given. The promise of 100 days' work to one able-bodied person in

the Nation was a long-overdue return to the discourse of equity and empowering the poor. It was a *powerful appeal for equal opportunity*.

However, Dr Singh was subdued on pluralism and secularism. He didn't mention Gujarat -- although this is the first secular Central government after the pogrom. He dropped any reference to Palestine/Israel.

The Planning Commission has inducted excellent people like

Sivakumar and Madhav Chavan to the National Advisory Council on the CMP. But there's also Mr Jairam Ramesh who, ideologically, could have been with the BJP.

Foreign Minister Natwar Singh rightly met 80 different ambassadors in his very first month. Mr Jaswant Singh had time mainly for the US, and refused to receive a single African ambassador in 5 years! Yet, conservatism dominates the Foreign Office. Our policy on

is incompatible with the Constitution. The UPA should have replaced them with non-partisan people. Regrettably, it didn't.

Dr Singh must correct course by following the Sarkaria guidelines for future appointments. But he must not flinch from surgically excising communal influences from the body-politic.

Among the institutions that

demand ruthless cleansing are AIR-Doordarshan, the Sahitya, Sangeet-

The Law Commission is full of *Hindutva* admirers. Its Malimath report wants to abolish the fundamental "innocent-unless-proved-guilty" principle. The report must be scrapped.

The government shouldn't drag its feet on detoxifying AIR-Doordarshan either.

Take foreign policy imbalances.

The government recently welcomed the American Jewish Committee which lobbies for Israel's policy of ending the "dream of Palestinian nationhood". It must correct this by opposing Israel's annexation of Palestinian territory. It must not recognise Iraq's farcical "sovereign" regime.

Dr Singh must himself seize the initiative. He has made welcome moves -- through his Address and his first visit to Andhra, where he announced aid for farmers in distress. Ten years ago, he was unmoved at the plight of weavers, also driven to suicide.

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Natak and Lalit-Kala Akademi, National Museums, Archaeological and Anthropological Surveys. Equally, the state must stop subsidising Swadeshi Jagaran Manch-sponsored Centre for Bharatiya Marketing Development and other sanghfronts.

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Dr Singh can set a brilliant personal example. He is remarkably austere. He once took pride in possessing only one formal suit. He has decided to give away the two obnoxiously expensive BMWs allotted to him, each costing Rs one crore. He will drive an Ambassador, like all Indian PMs did, barring the self-indulgent Mr Vajpayee. He should auction off all six BMWs ordered by Vajpayee & Co to flaunt their tawdry *nouveau riche* taste. But that's not enough. *Wield the knife, Doctor!*

"every rural, urban poor and lower-middle class household" was diluted to cover rural households alone. "Food security" disappeared altogether. The original CMP categorically ruled out privatisation of profitable public enterprises. The Address did so "generally".

Similarly, the CMP's promise of greatly expanding the Public Distribution System was watered down. It would only be "strengthened" in backward areas.

Instead of reiterating "India's decades-old commitment" to a Palestinian "homeland", as the CMP did without mentioning Israel, the Address upheld "legitimate aspirations" of the Palestinians, but stressed "beneficial" relations with Israel.

Dr Manmohan Singh's Address to

Professors Abhijit Sen and Bhadehara Mungekar, and Syeda Hamid. But it's headed by the conservative Montek Singh Ahluwalia, and includes Kirit Parikh, who argued for expanding the gold-plated Enron project after first opposing it.

The new Home Secretary has sterling qualities. But take the National Security Advisory Board. Convenor S.K. Lambah is a highly-regarded diplomat. Mr N.C. Saxena and Hamid Ansari are worthy members. But it includes journalists C. Raja Mohan and Manoj Joshi, known for hawkish pro-NDA views. Raja Mohan is the media's worst pro-UPA apologist.

The government has named outstanding members like Aruna Roy, Jean Dreze, Mirai Chaiterjee, AK

Nepal, now all but collapsing on our borders, remains disastrously pro-monarchy.

So far, "detoxification", promised in key institutions, has been earnestly practised only by the Human Resources Development Ministry.

The Centre removed four Governors on the ground that they are RSS cadres. Two-thirds of our 35 Governors are indeed hardcore BJP/RSS leaders. But that's not an adequate reason for sacking them: the RSS isn't banned. The true rationale is that most are *partisan-political* and unfit for the job.

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