

Murder witness dies in custody

Political overtone suspected

WHEN a healthy 30-year-old man is taken into custody and dies shortly thereafter, with bruises found on his body and bandages on his legs, what conclusion can one draw other than that his death was a result of his treatment in custody? Indeed, Sumon, a key eye-witness to the murder of AL.MP Ahsanullah Master, is the fourth person to have died in Rab custody in the past three weeks, to say nothing of those who have been killed or injured. We need hardly mention how lawlessness on the part of law enforcement officials is especially repugnant and disturbing.

Nor can there be too much doubt that the death of Sumon had political overtones. Sumon was a key witness to the sensational murder of Ahsanullah Master on May 7, and had appeared before a magistrate and identified some Jubo Dal leaders as being involved in the killing. Sumon was under threat and pressure; in fact, put on notice by interested quarters to refrain from canvassing in any form against the ruling party candidate or else face dire consequences. In the latest incident, some people reportedly complained of his involvement with extortion which apparently prompted Rab to take him into custody. The question is: if it was clearly a case of extortion as claimed by Rab in which the latter had laid a trap for him to be caught, why would he need to be interrogated and tortured? He could be legally dealt with as an extortionist. Since this was not done, we are inclined to think that the family version to the effect that he was picked up from home is acceptable.

This tragedy should send shivers down the spine of any sentient person. If someone who had witnessed a crime can be, by all appearances, tortured to death in custody then what does this say about justice in this country? This is not the first time that a special drive is tainted by excesses but it certainly is a pointer to how soon the lessons of Operation Clean Heart have been unlearned. We have clearly crossed some kind of threshold.

The by-election to the Gazipur-2 seat vacated by Master's death is coming up. Would one be wrong to suggest that the killing of Sumon might have had to do with the removal of a key witness who had identified the killers?

Dhurat tragedy

Calls for a judicial probe

THE Dhurat embankment breach, believed to be a monstrous act of sabotage, has left 5.5 lakh people marooned in two districts. The death toll could rise as at least 60 people are reported missing. We are facing a humanitarian crisis of unbelievable magnitude.

The people in distress are trying desperately to keep themselves afloat in a virtual deluge -- most of the households have gone under water and there is an acute shortage of food. It is very unclear how long they will be able to survive unless relief operations are geared up in the affected areas. It is a big challenge to the men in charge of rescuing the marooned people and alleviating their misery.

The disaster struck under mysterious circumstances. The Water Development Board officials have termed it an act of sabotage, and that has apparently annoyed the deputy minister for disaster management and relief. The latter wanted the comments by WDB officials withdrawn. But the board officials asserted that the embankment was sabotaged. The report that the breach could be the result of a feud between two local BNP men certainly raises questions. Even if it were true that there was some tussle between the men looking for the contract for repair work of a part of the structure, it is difficult to comprehend how such a horrendous crime could be committed by any sane person. The opening of the dam and exposing people to the full fury of a mighty river could lead to loss of a colossal number of lives. Yet, the perpetrators of the crime failed to show the slightest of compunction for the lives of fellow human beings.

The government should not allow the men responsible for the tragedy to get away unpunished -- be they saboteurs or irresponsible employees of the WDB. We believe there is sufficient reason for a judicial probe to be instituted to ascertain the real cause behind it. If the sabotage theory were true, then one of the most barbaric crimes in our history has been committed. And, if it was due to negligence it's equally reprehensible. The persons responsible can duly be charged with mass murder.

Bad politics is the bane of this country

BRIG GEN SHAMSUDDIN AHMED (RETD)

OUR woes as a nation lie not in being over-populated as many would suggest, nor in being a small country short of resources and hemmed in by a big neighbour like India, as many anti-Indian lobbyists would have us believe. Essentially the problem with us is that of governance and managing the affairs of the state. The international community, including our neighbour India, has been giving aid and assistance to us since the emergence of our country as a sovereign independent state in 1971. Had we been able to govern ourselves well, with the aid and assistance that continued pouring in for rebuilding and reconstruction of this war-ravaged country, we could have completed rebuilding and restructuring this country politically, economically, and socially in consonance with the spirit of our Liberation War long ago, and people by now would have begun to enjoy the benefits that a democratic state promises its people. But that was not to be, because the breed of politicians who have been governing this country have failed to deliver, without any exception, so far as running the affairs of the state is concerned. And add to this misfortune of the nation, the insatiable greed for wielding state power and authority and holding on to it at any cost, and an almost unquenchable avarice as exhibited by the so-called leaders of our people.

We have been misgoverned since day one of our journey as a new nation. While good governance aims at establishing the rule of law, pooling and harnessing of resources for optimum development and growth, cutting waste and corruption, setting national priorities right, bringing about distributive social justice, alleviating poverty, ameliorating the lot of the common run of the people, and more pointedly, catering to and focussing on the needs and aspirations of the people, it is mainly the needs and interests of the rulers and

the ruling class of the day which have shaped and guided our national policies so far. Be it Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Ziaur Rahman, HM Ershad, Begum Khaleda Zia, or Sheikh Hasina Wajed, all have tried in their own way to perpetuate their hold on power, and to that end have allowed, wittingly or otherwise, the rule of law to be circumvented, injustice to prevail over justice, wrong to triumph over right, falsehood to supplant truth, and the interests of a politically linked tiny group of people to push to the background those of the majority people and the nation. This is how nepotism, parochialism, corruption, and aberration have become the order of

the day. This is how the ugly phenomenon called the criminalisation of politics or the politicisation of crime has welled up in our body politic. A senior bureaucrat in Prime Minister's Office being retired rather ignominiously, and the episode of a senior police officer probing a murder case of a prominent opposition MP having been suddenly withdrawn and then prosecuted for allegedly trying to bribe the Home Minister in the recent past are all tell-tale events which speak louder than words about how the good name and reputation of a fine national institution like the civil administration is being besmirched, and its efficacy impaired because of the evil of politicisation. And the less we say about the stage-managing of the recent by-election of Dhaka-10 constituency the better, because it only smacks of the alacrity with

which this government and all other previous governments have been pursuing their political agenda of systematically destroying brick by brick, the edifice of good governance, democratic rights of people, human values, truth, and justice that democracy and the rule of law stand for and our constitution offers to protect. Thirty-three years have gone by and we have heard a good deal of promises and rhetoric from our political leaders since we became independent from Pakistan, but as a nation we still seem to be foraging around where we started from in 1971 in quest of our political freedom and economic emancipation. Despite hundreds of billions of

in abject poverty, and that people do not enjoy fundamental human and democratic rights, not because they do not deserve it, but because their political leaders have failed them. The vast opportunities that our hard-earned freedom and independence in 1971 laid open to us to develop our potential to full flowering as a democratic, self-reliant, vibrant, forward-looking, liberal country have been misused by our political leaders only to further their narrow political ends. Grabbing state power and making personal fortunes have been the be-all and end-all of our major political parties and their leaders. Our political system in place has only engendered mutual mistrust, animus and hatred

Islamic state ruled by clerics on the model of Mullah Omar's government in Afghanistan. Our political norms are so below par that an elected political government is not trustworthy enough to ensure voters democratic rights to vote freely, which is why the novel concept of a non-party caretaker government to conduct general election is in place now. The question that comes up naturally in the mind is: Is it not somewhat paradoxical that a government which cannot be entrusted with the task of conducting free and fair parliamentary elections is mandated to govern the country? Does a government which cannot be trusted to ensure that a citizen can freely exercise his or her right of franchise have the necessary moral authority to inspire confidence among the people that their fundamental human and democratic rights are safe under it?

Clearly the crying need now is for the politicians to do some soul-searching, cast aside their narrow political differences, and work together for reforming the political system in order to allow democracy to guide and shape politics of this country. Politicians must first learn to practice democracy within their political parties before they are called upon to demonstrate democratic behaviour as members of parliament and as leaders. Black money and illegal arms and those who hold them must be banished from the arena of politics. Our politicians must stand on the moral high ground of impeccable personal honesty, integrity, knowledge, vision, and commitment to serve the people and the country. Notorious listed criminals, smugglers, black marketeers, persons accused of murder, rape and arson, bank loan defaulters and such "tainted" people known to be godfathers of terrorist gangs, and people opposed to our independence and war of liberation who collaborated with the occupation force, etc must be disqualified from being a member of parliament. There is no other short-cut to our national recovery.

The writer is a former Military Secretary to the President of Bangladesh.

Our political norms are so below par that an elected political government is not trustworthy enough to ensure voters democratic rights to vote freely, which is why the novel concept of a non-party caretaker government to conduct general election is in place now. The question that comes up naturally in the mind is: Is it not somewhat paradoxical that a government which cannot be entrusted with the task of conducting free and fair parliamentary elections is mandated to govern the country? Does a government which cannot be trusted to ensure that a citizen can freely exercise his or her right of franchise have the necessary moral authority to inspire confidence among the people that their fundamental human and democratic rights are safe under it?

among our political parties leading to wide-spread violence and disunity across the whole spectrum of our national life. It has been our political culture that the government and the opposition must be perennially at loggerheads. Neither of them recognises the other as an essential entity and partner in the existing political dispensation. The government is prepared to exhaust all its power and authority to bully the opposition out of the parliament and ride roughshod over it, brutalising, terrorising and harassing the opposition political leaders and workers. The opposition, for its part, does not show even the modicum of respect to the government elected by the people, and vows to pull down the government by any means, fair or foul, and to that end resorts to boycotting the parliament and staging anti-government street agitation like processions, laying

demands some independent agency to find out whether the money for the armed forces was rightly spent. The Tehelka disclosures have shaken people's faith in the purchases made by the military. There has never been a parliamentary committee appointed to look into the spending by the military. Why not appoint one now? The Auditor General's scrutiny is too superficial. One former defence secretary McNamara in the US during the Kennedy regime reorganised the Pentagon in such a manner that even the military gave him credit for having done so. Billions of dollars were saved. The Government of India needs a similar exercise. Too much money is wasted on too many weapons under too many heads. I wish defence minister Pranab Mukerjee who has been finance minister would act like McNamara and rationalise the whole apparatus.

ever loud its declaration that it will not be the first user. Moral postures hold so long as they are not tested in the battlefield. With improving relations with Pakistan and China, the hike on the weaponry makes little sense. Either we are not serious about normalising relations with the two countries or we are not clear about our defence policy. In both cases, we betray lack of mature thinking. Even otherwise, the world has arrived at a stage where war means only

might have on the neighbouring countries. Pakistan has reacted adversely. Its people are also poor like ours who need food and employment, not guns and warships. Were Islamabad and Dhaka to tear a leaf out of our book, they too would lessen expenditure on social welfare and the poverty alleviating programmes and go for the armament. For a country like India every penny counts. A raise of Rs. 17,000 crore is too big an amount to be ignored. I do not want to translate

Poor don't eat guns!



KULDEEP NAYYAR writes from New Delhi

WHEN Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, he wrote to then Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi to propose a cut in the defence expenditure. She sternly rejected the suggestion. He was disappointed because in a famished economy like India's he saw no other way to find money for other sectors, particularly agriculture. It is strange that the same Manmohan Singh should be increasing the defence expenditure by Rs 17,000 crore, a hike of some 27 per cent, and that too within one month of assuming power. True, the exigencies of the budget cannot afford delay. But no new government can have an estimate of its defence needs in a few days' time. It is obvious that Manmohan Singh's defence minister simply totalled up the pending projects to include them in the budget.

This would not have made much difference if the approach of the Congress had been similar to that of its predecessor. The BJP is chauvinistic in thinking. It believes that the more weapons a country has, the greater is its say in the world affairs. Its is arrogance of power. The Con-

gress, on the other hand, has had the tradition to confine armaments to the needs of defence, neither profligate nor offensive. The BJP-led government took only a month after coming to power to explode the bomb. But the governments headed by the Congress and the non-BJP parties did not explode the bomb although they had it in the basement for years. Their reasoning was that the explosion would nullify India's advantage in conventional weapons if and when Pakistan followed suit.

fascist tendencies. He does not realise that the BJP is responsible for making India lose the advantage of superiority in conventional warfare. My purpose is not to renew the discussion on the bomb but to know what we have gained. We gave Pakistan parity overnight. Does the colossal expenditure on weapons from Israel, Russia or America make much sense when Islamabad has made it clear more than once that its defence is the bomb. Some 15 years ago when I inter-

viewed Dr A.Q. Khan, father of Pakistan's bomb, he minced no words in making it clear that "if you ever drive us to the wall as you did during the Bangladesh war, we would use the bomb." Islamabad's modernisation of its armed forces is nothing except the strategy woven around the bomb. President General Pervez Musharraf has often argued that the modern war does not require a large army. While effecting a cut in the Pakistan forces, he made the same point and mentioned the change in the conduct of warfare after the bomb. I cannot visualise the situation where Pakistan does not use it even when it faces reverse after reverse. India will also use the bomb if repulsed, how-

ever loud its declaration that it will not be the first user. Moral postures hold so long as they are not tested in the battlefield. With improving relations with Pakistan and China, the hike on the weaponry makes little sense. Either we are not serious about normalising relations with the two countries or we are not clear about our defence policy. In both cases, we betray lack of mature thinking. Even otherwise, the world has arrived at a stage where war means only

demanded some independent agency to find out whether the money for the armed forces was rightly spent. The Tehelka disclosures have shaken people's faith in the purchases made by the military. There has never been a parliamentary committee appointed to look into the spending by the military. Why not appoint one now? The Auditor General's scrutiny is too superficial. One former defence secretary McNamara in the US during the Kennedy regime reorganised the Pentagon in such a manner that even the military gave him credit for having done so. Billions of dollars were saved. The Government of India needs a similar exercise. Too much money is wasted on too many weapons under too many heads. I wish defence minister Pranab Mukerjee who has been finance minister would act like McNamara and rationalise the whole apparatus.

BETWEEN THE LINES

One former defence secretary McNamara in the US during the Kennedy regime reorganised the Pentagon in such a manner that even the military gave him credit for having done so. Billions of dollars were saved. The Government of India needs a similar exercise. Too much money is wasted on too many weapons under too many heads. I wish defence minister Pranab Mukerjee who has been finance minister would act like McNamara and rationalise the whole apparatus.

Narasimha Rao changed his mind even after all was ready at the Pokhran site. The fallout deterred him. Indeed, the reading that Pakistan would retaliate turned out to be correct. Islamabad detonated the bomb within a week of India's explosion. Then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif told me that he had to do so because he could not resist the pressure from his own people. "They would have killed me," he said. I am surprised that the Congress party, which harks back on the values of Mahatma Gandhi, should have increased the defence expenditure. L.K. Advani's pride in exploding the nuclear device is understandable. He belongs to the RSS which has

viewed Dr A.Q. Khan, father of Pakistan's bomb, he minced no words in making it clear that "if you ever drive us to the wall as you did during the Bangladesh war, we would use the bomb." Islamabad's modernisation of its armed forces is nothing except the strategy woven around the bomb. President General Pervez Musharraf has often argued that the modern war does not require a large army. While effecting a cut in the Pakistan forces, he made the same point and mentioned the change in the conduct of warfare after the bomb. I cannot visualise the situation where Pakistan does not use it even when it faces reverse after reverse. India will also use the bomb if repulsed, how-

destruction. There will be no victory, only defeat for everyone. Strategists from now onward will have to keep this in mind while planning even a limited war. Violence cannot possibly lead today to a solution of any major problem because violence has become too terrible and too decimating. One thing which is clear is that there cannot be an imposition of ideas on any large section of people. The experience of Iraq is before us. America believed that it could enforce its way of thinking on the Iraqis. See the consequences: the resistance has come to represent nationalism striving for freedom from foreign control. I am worried over the effect the sharp raise in defence expenditure

the allocation into schools, hospitals or houses. But making a fetish of defence does not help. People can always be frightened into spending much more on "security." Is the spending-spree on defence goodies necessary when we are in the midst of fighting a grim battle against poverty? The military is such a holy cow that nobody wants to touch it. But every purchase has to be justified. There is no reason why we should look for more weapons, not for avenues of employment. The Left's silence intrigues me. It does not criticise the 27 per cent increase in the defence, taking away quite a bit of resources. But it picks on small expenditures here and there to talk about equity. It should have at least

In any case, the sum total of defence is not the outlay but the country's honour and dignity. What face does India have when the American police strip searches George Fernandes on the suspicion that he is "an unwanted element"? The then government under the BJP did not demur, much less protest, lest it should annoy America. Washington's explanation that there is a system where a foreign government's ministers are not even searched is like rubbing salt into the wound. George Fernandes was searched twice over a period. It was not a mistake. It was an affront. Did we get more weapons from America? I am ashamed to ask.

Kuldeep Nayyar is an eminent Indian columnist.

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.

Tune the feedback

Feedback systems work quietly in the background in natural phenomenon. In man-made applications also, scientists employ the feedback principle (mostly negative) for monitoring and correction of operations automatically. The negative feedback systems play a critical role in controlling undesirable internal and external influences within a system. The same principle can be applied in the running of a society. That means it has wide applications in daily life at all levels. It works even in cases when the observer or operator is not aware of the principle (like threading a needle, picking up an object, or reacting to environmental conditions). The professionals in society have to point out the aberrations for awareness of the uninitiated and non-technical citizens. For example, there is something seriously wrong in our political culture,

because the messages from the various feedback sources are being ignored, and corrective steps not taken, either intentionally or in ignorance. In certain cases, the public-interest goal and party goal may differ. Ambition or economic gain might stand in the way of genuine public service. Forward planning exercises need sensitive awareness of small future details. Hence monitoring through feedback is essential to reduce the systems losses in the long run. In business, corporate success depends on feedback systems installed for monitoring consumer trends and competition (QC is included). The overall responsibility is on the top leadership, to detect the nuances of the messages coming in. The recent Indian elections provide a good study of the surprise downfall of the existing regime, and capture of power by an unexpected group (Sonia Gandhi's Congress). Fumbling with the basics!

Looking at the local scene in Dhaka, criticising the opponents all the time for the ills of the society has a limited field, and acceptance. The social problems are deeper and wider than seen through partisan political vision. The ambitious suffer from the weakness of ad hocism (go ahead, we'll see when the problems appear). A correctly set up feedback system is 'neutral' in behavior, depending on the parameters chosen by the designers (who are controlled by clients, some of whom might be powerful in the wrong way). In public services, a powerful minority control the masses (the bureaucrats or the elected politicians); hence there is the need for feedback from different sources, internal and external (including parliamentary debates). The external messages tend to be independent, hence the noise factor rises in debates and protests. An unsettled person, party or group, cannot pay proper attention

to the problems in hand. Hence the nuisance value rises. Public service entails offering services to others, compared to internal arrangements. When this service is poor, the whole environment is adversely affected, as we witness today. The leaders of the society have to forget their colours and flags for a while, and take interest in non-political issues. Many moral issues lie outside political solutions, hence it is not correct to believe in service from a political core only. The wily politicians seek exclusive credit all the time, drying up inspiration and dedication in others. Where is the cementing ingredient? Md. Abad Dhaka

Political migration patterns Political patterns change every decade to a marked extent, and during these new millennium years, it appears to be changing at a faster rate. There are two levels of changes; at the core (central); and the other at the periphery (more localized). The latter is an evolving process, experimental, grouping, with initiation of pilot plans for testing (bait and watch, as in Bangladesh). The political migration patterns also change in a similar way, according to market conditions, since politics has become a business at three levels, international, national, and local. Now a new dimension has been added: religious spices. The tropicalised spices are rather sensitive to the tastes, and evoke extreme reactions. What is happening in Afghanistan and Iraq may not be tropicalised, but the dry and blunt realities have rattled human morality values. The dormant forces released are diversified, and cannot be controlled by single or dual sources, regardless of military clout. Take a look at the political patterns in Dhaka. The migration pattern became polarized and bipartisan in the 1990s, soon after free

general elections were held after more than a decade and a half. Therefore, the migration pattern also becomes polarized. More and more retired and talented civil service officers started aiming for the political platform, to grab a piece of the pie. Free and gift offers come once in a while; to get rid of unsold stocks, and for competition. Is our politics becoming more competitive? The outcome is that the bureaucrats today find it difficult to work in a neutral environment, and neutrality has lost its face value. This essential tool of public service is a great handicap for any budding society, because both sides of the coin cannot be presented to the public from a single source. Thus freedom of expression is constricted, and polarized views are encouraged. Those on the other side of the fence have to bear the risk--unnecessarily. How to neutralize this colour spectrum? It is a sort of political colour blindness, and those with colour-blind eye-

sight can appreciate what it means. The politicians in power see more colours than the rainbow shows (although the computer is said to differentiate several hundred colour tones); and those in the opposition see less. That is why lingering in the opposition is a boring stance, and we have mantras like the April 30 toka. Good politics should not imitate bad astrology. How many types of fortune hunters are there? The current trend is debasement of political culture, refined, or crude. Therefore, the political migration pattern is set for a change. The style will depend on the options available in a changing market. That is the problem: ill will cannot be cemented; and good foundations come from goodwill. These contradictions keep the crowded streets of Dhaka busy with political agitation round the year. Spending huge energy does not mean that the output would be useful (calculate for Iraq, and the price to be paid in Bangladesh, for

example, for hoarding black wealth). Suppressing facts and truths cannot last long, and curious peeping Toms are willing to pay the admission price for a diverting show (what happened in US-controlled detention camps in Iraq). The key focus is on private financial stability of those who are playing in the political stock market. The innocent voters are not qualified as players, or spectators, of this *crore-pati* multi-game. Earning one's living is a basic human urge. After a certain comfort level is reached, mini-ambitions sprout like mushrooms. These interact with other similar pastures, creating many side business opportunities. Public service provides a ready opening these days, although a bit gray in some areas. The problem is technical: developing capital public assets; and, the maintenance of the same. Not that easy and simple. A Mawaz Dhaka