

Hasina's no to vengeful politics

Forward-looking element in the speech welcomed

THE address by prime minister and that by leader of the opposition on Sunday didn't exactly run parallel to each other, there was something complementary between the two speeches. They threw a line to each other in an apparent bid to steer clear of the present political mess. It is a recognition of what the people wanted, and that's where the hope lies. However belated, it is welcome.

Yesterday, we focused on the prime minister's call for enlightened politics (Alokita Rajnit). Today, we greet the promise made by opposition leader Sheikh Hasina in her speech that she wouldn't indulge in politics of vengeance if she returns to power. When politics has gotten to the level of seeking obliteration of each other, Sheikh Hasina's statement not to pay the BNP back in its coin sounds like spreading the olive branch.

The change of tone, at this stage perhaps more on the part of opposition leader than that of the PM, may have marked the beginning of electoral politics. The fact that they are striving to endear themselves to the people augurs well.

Whether the public will take Sheikh Hasina's repudiation of vengeful politics at its face value may be something to ponder, though. When in power Sheikh Hasina had promised not to call hartal if she would be in the opposition. But she has.

Nevertheless, we believe that just as Begum Zia hit the nail on the head by stressing the need for 'enlightened politics' so also has Sheikh Hasina made a correct diagnosis of the national political ailment by emphasising the necessity for eschewing vengeful politics.

Another positive feature of opposition leader's speech is she did not ask for toppling the government. She has demanded early polls which is not outside the norm of democratic politics. But whilst the opposition can demand snap polls they cannot impose the same on the people. That will be undemocratic, unconstitutional. The right to declare dates for general election rests with an elected government.

The best electoral politics the opposition can now do is to direct it energies towards mobilising public opinion in its favour by staging massive rallies and forming human chain, marking a complete departure from hartal, the surest route to unpopularity. They should join the parliament to stay in, without any further vacillation.

The opposition has expressed doubts as to whether the next general election would be free and fair. People would like to be convinced about the assumptions they are basing their suspicion on.

Essentials costing unusually dear

Get to the bottom of price jacking

THE government has failed to tackle and contain the abnormal rise in the prices of daily necessities. We have been witnessing with great alarm in the last few weeks that for whatever reasons prices of essential items in the market have registered a steep increase. Surveys carried out by various newspapers including The Daily Star have revealed a very distressing picture. In some markets, prices of some vegetables and other consumer items have hit the roof, causing unimaginable misery to low and middle income groups.

Various reasons are being cited by the government for such a scenario. The Prime Minister has ascribed higher domestic prices to increased import costs. The floods and heavy rains are also held responsible for supply shortfalls and consequent rise in prices. Though there is merit in such arguments, yet not all of the soaring spurt in prices can be explained away in terms of flood damages. We think it is the large scale extortion at the ports and ghats, on the highways and supply lines and at the wholesale and retail points that is pushing up the prices. Even the commerce minister himself has admitted to a high incidence of extortion taking place.

In the past there were allegations of a nexus between some insider vested quarters and traders causing market distortions through the choking of supply lines. Though it is just an assumption as far as this year is concerned, it would nonetheless be worthwhile to probe how deep that nexus has gone and how active it is in the present scenario.

There must be a neutral and expert investigation into the price situation, followed by an identification of the culprits and action taken against them. In the webs of such vicious and criminal manipulation, the helpless consumers suffer the most. Those who resort to black marketeering must not be allowed to continue with their trading in human miseries.

The best is yet to be



AMM SHAWKAT ALI

'POOR governance, graft worry us" was the title of a news published in an English daily the other day (October 10, 2004). The sub-title was "We are doing our best". The title is based on the observations of the visiting administrator of USAID, Andrew S Natsios. The subtitle is the sum of the reply to the observations made by Andrew Natsios who is quoted to have said "Further deterioration in governance, corruption and the rule of law would not only affect Bangladesh's economy but also threaten democracy". He further said "we are worried". Andrew emphasised the need for checking the slide and called for commitment not only from the Finance Minister but also from other ministers, members of parliament and parliament as a whole to overcome the situation.

In response, the Finance Minister was reported to have said that the government had taken a good number of steps to ensure rule of law and to improve law and order and further that such things could not be changed overnight. What has been left unsaid is that it is not a question of overnight but more than a thousand days including nights. It is an irony of fact that the critical observations of Andrew Natsios come at a time when the four-party alliance government has just celebrated its more than a thousand days in power through a public meeting.

About the commitment of all ministers and the parliament as a

whole asked for by Andrew, it can be said that such commitments have been given during the past three years or more as part of the conditions of the donors' pledge for development assistance. The situation has not shown much signs for improvement in governance including the slide in law and order.

Many election pledges fulfilled!

Andrew's observations come in sharp contrast to what has been claimed by a four-party alliance

(Sangbad, October 10, 2004). The subtitle of the news contained the appeal by the business community to the State Minister for Home Affairs "Please save us".

The views of small entrepreneurs

It was reported that the shopkeepers of different markets of Dhaka city met the State Minister in the conference room of the Home Ministry on October 9, 2004. Representatives of a cross-section of shop owners attended the meeting

Policy Dialogue (CPD) not to speak of Transparency International, Bangladesh (TIB) and the lead donor like the World Bank (WB). BEI published its findings in January 2004. The study is titled "Reducing the Cost of Business in Bangladesh". The conclusion drawn by the study is that compared to China, India and Pakistan, the cost of doing business in Bangladesh today is considerably higher. Among others, the judicial system and law enforcement have been cited as major factors that add to high cost in doing

business payments has grown in the area of awarding of public contracts. This was reported by 93.5 percent of the companies under the survey.

Fourth, the lead determining factors of business competitiveness environment have been identified to be 14 in number. Among these, corruption leads the list of factors, inefficient government bureaucracy ranks second and crime and theft ranks third. Last year, crime and theft ranked sixth. Crime and theft is affecting business more than it did in 2003.

assessed to get external assistance. The costs of doing business, except for the big ones, are hardly assessed. The major cost in this regard is the abject failure in the prevention and detection of crimes by public sector agencies. Worse still, there is widespread public perception that the law-enforcing machinery is utterly incapable and corrupt.

The government, in a desperate bid to check the continuing upsurge in organised crimes, has established elite forces like RAB, Cheetah and what have you. RAB has done some good work in apprehending some notorious and dangerous criminals who later died in 'encounter'. This has been widely criticised by the media. The issue of protecting small and big business concerns continues to remain a live problem that is adding to the cost of doing business as well as ensuring human security. At the end of the day, the citizens are victims of high price and insecurity. This is the message that the small business leaders appear to have attempted to give to the State Minister for Home Affairs. Despite the government doing its best, the best is yet to be seen. At the other end, Andrew seems to have attempted to drive home the message that widespread sense of insecurity coupled with the absence of rule of law pose a threat to democracy.

It remains to be seen if within the course of next two years in office, the alliance government will be able to solve the problems raised by Andrew, the independent think tanks, the media and the small business leaders. At this point of time, one can only say that the best is yet to be.

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WORTH A LOOK

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leader. It has been claimed that many election pledges have been fulfilled by the alliance government. Yet in even more sharp contrast than the above is the headline of a Bengali daily. It said that the main election pledges were not fulfilled even in three years (Prothom Alo, October 10, 2004). The published news referred to the fact that the election manifesto of BNP contained more than one hundred pledges centering on as many as 32 subjects. One of these pledges related to the commitment for improving law and order including containing illegal extortion of money in a way that will ensure peaceful life for the citizens across the country.

Further contrast
Another Bengali daily's red-lettered banner headline comes in sharp contrast contradicting the claims made or the best efforts made by the alliance government. The headline reads "Businessmen are the victims of illegal extortion of money and the buyers are the targets of snatchers"

as did the senior police officers. The small business community leaders gave a graphic account of illegal extortion of money from them by criminals who, it was alleged, commit such crimes even in the view of the policemen on duty or at markets which are situated close to police stations. The business leaders also had made it known to the State Minister that on many occasions the visitors to the market fell victims to criminals who snatched all that were bought by such visitors. Further, allegations were also made that the situation had come to such a pass that sometimes the buyers expressed doubts about the complicity of the sellers with the criminals.

Evidence from independent research

The highly adverse effect of corruption and deteriorating law and order situation has been subjected to research by independent think tanks like Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) and the Centre for

business.

Findings from CPD

CPD conducted a study titled "Business Competitiveness Environment in Bangladesh, 2004". The survey covered 100 companies each having total assets of not less than Tk. 100 million. The major findings of the survey as these relate to the state of governance tend to provide a rather gloomy picture. First, the faith in independence of judiciary has been eroded further in 2004. More than three-fourths of the companies or 78.6 percent underscored that judiciary is not independent from political influence of members of government, citizens or firms.

Second, the incidence of crime, violence and organised crime impose significant costs on business. Police services cannot be relied upon for protection of business from criminals. This has been reported by as high as 93.9 percent of the companies surveyed.

Third, the magnitude of undocu-

The case of small business

The plight of the small enterprises has been subjected to much less research than the relatively big ones. In fact, very little or no research relating to the cost of doing business is available in this area. What the small business leaders told the State Minister for Home Affairs remains a matter of concern. The added dimension of the problem is the plight of the buyers as well.

Overall, the climate of investment as well as small business remains highly adverse for the business community. This is sure to have its negative impact on the economy. Bangladesh economy is exposed to double jeopardy. First are the natural calamities that visit Bangladesh not too infrequently. Second are the man-made calamities in the form of a high incidence of illegal extortion of money from the business community as well as from citizens. The cost of natural calamities are always

said.

The IPPA also has a social action programme called the Ma'un Society, which is made up of volunteers who work in their communities in the areas of health care, crime prevention, family counseling and special services. The volunteers direct people to the source that can help them with their problems. The society also provides communities with drug interdiction, prenatal care and cholesterol and blood pressure screening services. "The Ma'un society is IPPA's way of bringing our people together for the common good," Abdur-Rashid explained.

Party officials are excited about the party's potential to play a seminal role both in the Muslim American community and national, state and local politics. But they plan to move slowly to build a base and ensure the party as a viable political entity. At their National Platform Conference, some party officials talked about running a candidate for President in the 2008 elections."

"It's a possibility," revealed Hough, who added "We are making rapid progress, and we don't need millions of members to continue doing that."

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An Islamic political party in America

RON CHEPESIUK

IN the late 1980s, when 37-year old Jabil Hough was a Methodist who attended church every Sunday, he began having religious doubts about Christianity's Holy Trinity and the worship of Jesus as the Son of God. "I searched for an authentic Christian Bible that had not been altered or tampered with, but couldn't find one," Hough recalled.

Then after the Gulf War broke out in 1991, Hough became aware of Islam and began studying the religion. "Islam's monotheism began making sense to me," Hough said. "The religion says God is one and he has no partners, parents, sons or daughters."

Today, Hough, one of approximately 4.5 to five million Muslims in the US, is chairman of the national board of the Islamic Political Party of America (IPPA), the country's first and only Islamic political party. With about 4,000 members and chapters in 12 states, the IPPA seeks to encourage Muslim Americans to become more involved politically.

"We (Muslim Americans) need to organise politically because we are living in the most dangerous period in our history," said Ali Abdur-Rashid, the IPPA's national coordinator and one of the party's three co-founders. "Muslim Americans are scared. We know what happened to the Japanese during

World War II, and we don't want that to happen to us." The party was founded in April 2001, five months prior to 9-11, but IPPA officials said that Muslim Americans were facing serious problems like religious profiling and harrassment long before the event

2001 and then deported in August 2002.

IPPA officials said none of the political parties have taken the Muslim American community seriously. "When it comes to Muslim Americans, there is no balance in American politics," Hough said. "Look at that first

resulting in most party members lacking the time or energy to caucus with any of the presidential candidates."

The conference discussed such issues as educational system reform, "stopping the national tax rate" and the importance of equality in health care.. Confer-

Muhammed." The party hopes to build alliances with non-Muslim political groups, he said. "We will work with a non-Muslim group so long as they agree with our principles."

The party is also working hard to embrace both traditional Muslims and what officials identify as

INSIDE AMERICA

IPPA is working hard to embrace both traditional Muslims and what officials identify as "indigenous Muslims," or African American Muslims. "At the moment, IPPA's Charlotte chapter has about 100 members, but at least 10,000 traditional and indigenous Muslims are living in the city," chairman Hough revealed. "Could you imagine what kind of impact we Muslims would have at the local level if we are organised as a group?" national coordinator Abdur-Rashid noted that Brooklyn, New York, is about 98 percent African American, 30 percent of whom are Muslim. "We have the numbers that can give us more control over our lives," he said.

happened. "The U.S. government was putting Muslims in prison on the basis of a secret evidence law," Abdur-Rashid said. "Remember that famous case of al-Najjar? He was put in prison for several years and the government didn't even have to explain why."

The US government arrested Mazen al-Najjar, a former University of South Florida professor, in 1977 on charges of overstaying his visa and having ties to terrorist organisations. Al-Najjar was released in December 2000, only to be arrested again in November

presidential debate between Kerry and Hough. They both talked about the War on Terrorism and Iraq being about ensuring Israel's security."

The IPPA is not endorsing any political candidate for president, but it's encouraging its members to vote their conscience in this year's elections. A statement by the party at its National Platform Conference Meeting held in Lynchburg, Virginia, last August 14 stated that "its members have been focusing on securing IPPA as a legitimate entity and carefully securing IPPA's foundation,

ence representatives agreed to establish a national platform that would "provide the backbone to the core of the IPPA ideology and position in the hopes of becoming a benefit for all the people of America, not just the Islamic population."

Hough acknowledges that the IPPA is concerned about the plight of the Palestinians, but he added that the party is focused on domestic issues. Abdur-Rashid said that anyone can join the party, so long as they "believe in one God, Allah, and follow the teachings of Prophet

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OPINION

'Bush is dead wrong': Stiglitz is probably not right

DR. M. S. HAQ

"**B**USH is dead wrong" is the title of one of Joseph Stiglitz's recently published articles in *The Guardian* newspaper. In the article, Noble Laureate Stiglitz pointed out, among other things, the rate of annual economic growth of the US -- on an average 2.5 percent over the past 3.5 years -- was slower than during the Clinton years. He also indicated in the same article, the growth rate of 2.5 percent was better than 1 percent of Europe's during the above period. He presented such facts as: the drop of median income in real terms; the transformation of a surplus -- 2 percent of GDP left by the Clinton Administration -- into a deficit of 5 percent of GDP through tax cuts for the rich; and an increase in the number of Americans not covered by health insurance; in an attempt to establish how, according to him, Bush's failed policies have cost the economy dearly. But he agreed the economy was stimulated, a little though, by tax cuts.

Noble Laureate Stiglitz might be wrong, in many respects, when it comes to his analysis and finding with regard to "Bush is dead wrong" due, among other things, to the following reasons:

Mr. Stiglitz used time dimensions and pertinent statistics as some of the key factors in his analysis. But based on those and other factors he had used in his analysis, it might, inter alia, be difficult in a deeper sense for many people to conclude, at this point in time, and in a straightforward and wholesome fashion, "Bush is dead wrong".

Because the "perimeter" of the kingdom of knowledge is still nearly unknown or undiscovered or both; a continuous chain of what I will call the 'relative truth' after the 'relative truth' has apparently been the motive power (used in an engineering sense) for knowledge available so far to human beings (hereinafter: the knowledge, unless used otherwise); the per capita share of the knowledge is not the same or equal throughout the world; and the very existence (in a physical sense) of explorers, developers and users of the knowledge say, human beings, is not absolute but relative to say, time and space, like-wise the products of human beings and the outcomes of those products, for example. Those are among the reasons why two big physics theories of the 20th century -- quantum and relativity -- have failed, in several respects, to deliver a unified field theory to the

world -- approximations cannot apparently become the basis of the unified theory, per se.

The bottom line is: in an apparently moving, as well as constantly changing reality (up to and beyond say, sub-atomic levels) that has been constantly affecting say, the life and living on earth, the demand

for continuous human efforts towards the revelation of, and harnessing the 'truth' behind the 'truth' has been on the rise with the '