

## Dissent under threat

*The govt mustn't allow this to happen anymore*

WE are once again shocked at the despicable behaviour of the ruling party activists at the mass dialogue meeting of Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh (BDB) and Jatiyo Oikyyo Mancha (JOM) on Monday. All that these two parties were doing was conducting a perfectly legitimate political dialogue in a transparently peaceful manner. But they were subjected to such gangsterism that it has sent shock waves throughout the country. To set the government party 'maastans' against a peaceful political meeting is an act of outright mayhem and terror in itself.

We cannot but think also that, the way the whole act of disruption was carried out and the venom that spewed from some of the party minions, it all seemed preplanned and well tutored.

We find the ruling party elements' behaviour abhorrent and totally unacceptable, it being repugnant to all civilised political norms. By allowing the perpetration of this act, we are constrained to say, the government has exposed its undemocratic, fascist mentality.

The shameless denials that follow these incidents are intended to make us believe that nothing at all has happened. After all who is the government trying to fool? It would be wrong on their part to think that the people are not aware of those behind these acts and their motives. We feel the government is fooling none other than itself. In the process it is increasingly becoming unpopular and the people are gradually getting disenchanted with it.

We wonder what the approach of the government is to legitimate dissent? The idea appears to be to crush all dissent at the seminal stages before it can bloom. To the ruling party circles it may be a good play, but it would do well for them to contemplate the boomerang effect in the form of a Frankenstein that will visit them eventually.

Every single expression of lawful and peaceful dissent must be permitted and treated with respect. Otherwise we will stand to lose, as a democracy and as a nation.

## IMF's encouraging remarks

*The underlying challenge must be met*

THE IMF-GoB review discussions on the Poverty Reduction Growth Facility (PRGF) concluded on Monday marking a greater degree of understanding and appreciation of each other's position on what has already been achieved and what remains of the reform agenda to be done. The IMF mission complimented Bangladesh government on its success in certain areas; revised some of its earlier projections about our economy in light of economic losses sustained from the recent floods and the rising international oil prices; and underscored the challenges lying ahead of the economy.

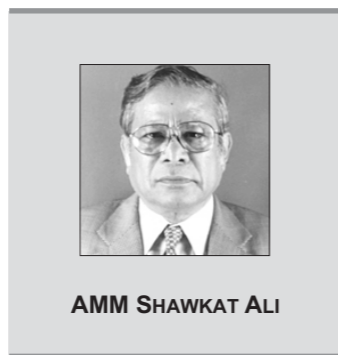
It is heartening to note that 'despite the floods there has been progress on structural reforms'; 'appropriate fiscal and monetary policies have underpinned Bangladesh's strong economic performance'; and that 'the macroeconomic performance has remained strong to-date'. The lending commitments of the IMF and their disbursements under Poverty Reduction Growth Facility (PRGF) are on course. We commend the government, the finance ministry and the Bangladesh Bank for the positive elements in macroeconomic management. That a steady hand is behind all this is not lost on us.

The IMF has revised its earlier projections on GDP growth and the rate of inflation. The flood effects coupled with the expiry of Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA) are likely to bring down the GDP growth from 6 percent predicted earlier on to 5.2 percent. The soaring international oil prices and the losses due to floods could lead to 6.8 percent inflation in place of 5 percent as previously projected.

Bangladesh is under pressure to raise oil prices to offset the inflationary trend and cut back on deficit financing. But we must be prepared to live down the fallout of an increase in the internal oil price.

The rise in international oil prices is not in our hands, it's beyond our control. But what certainly lies within our power to alleviate are the non-economic factors like bribery, inefficiency, and extortion, both silent and noisy. The local consumers are caught between the devil and the deep sea. On the one hand, the rising international prices are wringing them, and on the other, they are being squeezed by the extortionist elements leading to price mark-up across the board. Where are they to go?

## Your home in the air



AMM SHAWKAT ALI

"YOUR home in the air" and "Peaceful nest in the air" are often seen as part of the advertisement drive of our national flag carrier, Biman Bangladesh (BB). In the recent past, BB has attracted the attention of the media which appears to have centered on its F-28 aircraft and the safety of passengers. An English daily went so far as to say "PM opts to fly by helicopter rather than F-28" (The Bangladesh Observer, October 13). The daily quotes "a reliable source" to support such a contention. The source is also quoted to have said that the PM "was annoyed with the State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism for his callousness in managing the ministry." If this news is correct, BB would not be out of trouble, even under a new minister, because of the option exercised by the PM. The option so exercised is sure to shake the confidence of the intending travelers who are likely to view BB not as safe, but as a dangerous home in the air. Whether this perception of the PM came in the wake of the recent accident in Sylhet is not known. In the past, the media had carried some news questioning the addition of more F-28 to the fleet.

Another English daily provides graphic details of Biman's faulty F-28s, saying that despite "repeated technical troubles" and opposition

from pilots, BB bought two 28-years old F-28s in May this year, raising the fleet to five (The Daily Star, October 23). This news came in the wake of another F-28 that remained grounded in Sylhet a few days back due to technical troubles. These outdated planes were purchased from Indonesia. The cost of procurement was reported to be \$2.91 million (The Independent, October 10).

The BB management defended the purchase on the ground that "the condition of the two 26 years old

28s for the domestic route. One F-28 indeed came to Bangladesh and there was a flight from Dhaka to Sylhet. Among others, the then aviation minister late MAG Osmany was on board. Osmany alighted from the plane and was received by the then Deputy Commissioner (DC).

Osmany told the DC that he would just visit Hazrat Shah Jalal's shrine and come back to fly to Dhaka again. He told the waiting Biman crew to take the DC inside the aircraft until he had returned. A

### The culture of blame game

As in politics, BB is also not immune from blame game. In the view of the pilots responsible for running the aircrafts, the condition of the Sylhet runway was poor; there are depressions alongside the main wheel track, and there was water-logging after only a little rain. It was also said that the runway went under waist-deep water during the recent floods that caused serious damage, but no repair work was undertaken (The Daily Star, October 10).

recent visit to Osmany airport, he ordered to complete the necessary repair and renovation of the runway, an issue that civil aviation authority officials do not find necessary, as earlier stated. He also told the journalists that the repair work would start within the next fifteen days. The minister also informed the journalists that the width of the runway would also be increased.

How the minister arrives at this conclusion of expanding the width of the runway is not known. He, however, talks about the intended result.

because these are old?

### Damaged F-28 and insurance

It is learnt that the ill-fated F-28 was insured for \$3 million, of which \$2.65 million, as insurance claim, has since been reimbursed.

### Standards of replacement

There are standards for replacements of old transports whether it is motor vehicle, ocean-going ships, or planes. Press reports indicate that the government recently decided to replace 20 years-old motor vehicles as part of measures to ensure road safety (Prothom Alo, October 14). It is learnt that the F-28 which met with the accident on October 8 this year, was bought in 1981. This means that it is at least more than 23-years old.

### Minister's view

The aviation minister is yet to come out with any statement relating to standards of replacement. What he had recently told an electronic media indicated that Biman was in for a buying spree. He was reported to have said that Biman would now purchase at least two more aircraft not more than 10-years old for domestic flights. Is that the standard? Defending the purchase of 28-years old F-28s and then taking steps to purchase two more aircraft not more than 10 years old appears to be a contradiction in terms. Equally conflicting was the defending logic that the aircrafts earlier purchased were maintained at European standard. Why then is there a new move for purchase?

AMM Shawkat Ali, PhD, is a former Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture.

**WORTH A LOOK**

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aircrafts was very good as they were maintained at European standard." However, the aviation experts were quoted to have said that the Fokker Friendship company of the Netherlands stopped production of this type of aircraft in 1987 and the company no longer existed. The aviation ministry also owes it to the taxpayers, not to speak of passengers, to explain who is right and who is wrong.

While the cause of the F-28 crash is yet to be found, BB is reportedly running short of planes in the domestic route. No statistical data is available to assess the widespread perception of the unsafe travel in the domestic route. There is some news available, however, on the disruption of flights caused not only by lesser number of planes but also a short-lived pilots' strike.

### F-28 rejected in 1973

Some senior citizens affirm that way back in 1973, BB wanted to buy F-

few weeks later, DC asked him why F-28 was not being used for Dhaka-Sylhet flight. "Oh, no, the technical committee rejected the aircraft as being unsuitable," was the reply from the minister.

It is now found that years later, F-28 was found suitable. Parameters for technical evaluation might have changed over time. This is not to say that F-28 is an unsafe aircraft. Indeed one must pend such a judgement until the probe committee reveals the cause of the recent crash in Sylhet. At the same time, the newspaper reports have it that another F-28 is now immobile in the hanger, causing more difficulties for BB to maintain its flight schedule. As for the reported option of the PM, newspaper reports also indicate that one F-28 was kept on stand-by during her recent visit to Rajshahi. This appears to contradict the PM's reported perception of F-28s being unsafe.

An official of the civil aviation authority, however, contradicted this. According to him, flight operations had been going on at Osmany airport without any trouble. The state minister for civil aviation presented the political dimensions of the culture of blame game as expected. He was seen being interviewed by an electronic media a couple of evenings back. He was heard saying that Tk. 600 million were allocated for repair and maintenance of Osmany airport during the AL rule but not a single Taka was spent. What he left unsaid was that even during the last three years nothing was done in this regard. If only our politicians would shun the political culture of finding scapegoats, the country would be much better than it is today.

### Quick response

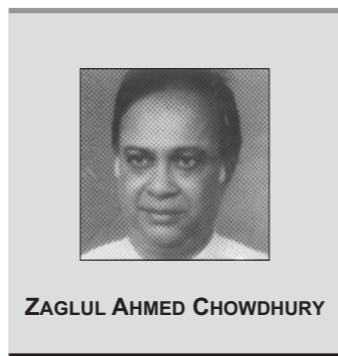
The aviation minister is known for his quick responses to what essentially are technical issues. During his

According to him, after expansion, aircrafts flying in from London, Kuwait, Dubai, and other airports would fly directly to Sylhet. As is already known, it was during the first half of the seventies that initiatives were taken to convert Sylhet airport (later named Osmany airport) into an international airport. As a result and as part of the later efforts, wide-bodied aircrafts now operate between Dhaka and Sylhet. Is the width less than the technically specified width? This aspect remains unknown.

### Defending F-28s

Although the cause of the accident is as yet unknown, the minister defended the aircraft, asserting strongly that the cause of the accident was not any fault in the aircraft. At the same time, he frankly admitted that the F-28 aircrafts were old and no replacement could be made due to lack of funds. Does it mean that the aircrafts are unsafe

## Big challenge awaits new Indonesian president



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

FORMER army General Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has taken oath on October 20 as the sixth president of Indonesia, but first elected directly by popular votes amidst high expectation of strengthening the nascent democracy, curb corruption and provide a good governance in the nation of nearly 24 crore people.

Indonesia, world's fourth largest populous nation, in August went for elections to choose a president for the first time through direct votes in a remarkable step towards balloting. None of the candidates could secure more than 50 percent of the votes to emerge as winner, then in the run-off voting in September the ex-General convincingly beat incumbent Megawati Shukarnoputri to become the democratically elected president of the country made up of numerous islands.

Indonesia is not a new country but the process of democratic rule has only been introduced in the vast nation of the south-east Asian region. The system is something like the French presidential polls where the chief executive of the country is chosen by direct popular votes. The American system is somewhat indirect where the voters' choice is based on electoral college

votes which does not necessarily guarantee that a candidate winning more popular votes than his rival will be elected (president George W Bush received less popular votes than Democratic nominee Al-Gore but the later lost because of electoral college system that went against him).

Indonesia, long ruled through undemocratic methods, has finally gone for democracy and it is all the more heartening that the system is ideally representative in the current

president. Certainly, it would have been much admirable had she accepted the defeat more gracefully. But the very fact that it was under her presidency the election that has been acclaimed by national and international quarters as free and fair had taken place and this has carved out a niche for herself in the history since she made no attempt to impair fair polling. She would go down in the Indonesian history as someone who facilitated introduction of democracy in the country.

quish the presidency for alleged incompetence and corruption and Megawati was the clear choice for the position.

She enjoyed the advantage of being the daughter of the leader of the Indonesian freedom movement and her tenure as president has been marked by both achievements and criticisms. A good governance remained a subject of discussion in the country and alleged interference in different matters including business deals by her parliamentarian

several months away. Because the future political scenario was largely contingent upon the outcome of the much-awaited polls.

All the southeast Asian nations were not democratic but the wind of change had put its impact on the region in a positive manner. Indonesia being the largest country in that area occupies important position in the larger context of democratic rule. The presidential election was a key component in the whole exercise. The smooth holding of the

Megawati failed to live upto expectations despite the fact that certain areas marked improvement during her rule. As is the case with most developing nations, she could not maintain the pace with people's aspirations. However, she has shown her maturity as a leader when during a valedictory kind of address to the parliament she spoke more on what she could not accomplish and less on what she did. This is commendable.

President Yudhoyono must spare no efforts to consolidate the edifice of democracy on one hand and provide a good governance on the other. He must remain alert that his past as an army general is not reflected in his new democratic role. He has small support in parliament as his Democratic Party commands scant strength in the house and as such he needs to carry others along with him. The new president has already shown some sagacity as he has retained some ministers from Megawati's cabinet including the key foreign minister. But his main challenge is containing endemic corruption which eats away much of the developmental efforts of the country. He has vowed no compromise on the issue and has warned ministers that none would be spared for wrong doings. It is essential that we disseminate to the public that our Armed Forces are on sound moral ground fighting a difficult battle to rid this country of the terrorist menace.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist.

### MATTERS AROUND US

The new president has already shown some sagacity as he has retained some ministers from Megawati's cabinet including the key foreign minister. But his main challenge is containing endemic corruption which eats away much of the developmental efforts of the country. He has vowed no compromise on the issue and has warned ministers that none would be spared for wrong doings.

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In the first phase polls, former General and ex-security minister under president Megawati Shukarnoputri, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono topped the elections with 34 percent of the votes followed by the president herself, who secured 26 percent of the votes. The third position went to another ex-army general Wiranto with 22 percent. In the second round of polling, Gen Yudhoyono secured more than 60 percent of the votes while Megawati could muster only 40 percent and consequently, the incumbent president lost. She did not openly concede defeat but created no noise over the outcome of the voting. Megawati allowed a smooth transition even though she chose not to remain present at the oath-taking ceremony of the new

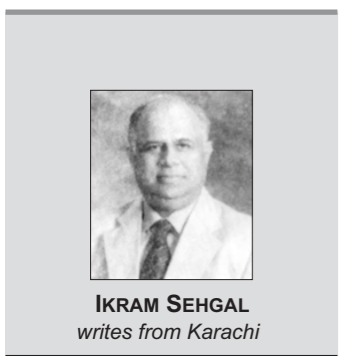
Indonesia won freedom from the Dutch under the leadership of charismatic Ahmed Sukarno, who remained at the helm till deposed in the failed pro-communist coup in 1965 that brought Gen Suharto at the centre stage and he ruled the nation for long 32 years mainly through autocratic style. A pro-democracy movement forced him to quit power, bringing Borhanuddin Habibie as interim president and later Abdur Rahman Wahid was elected president by parliament members. Megawati, daughter of "Bung" (Brother) Shukarno, was widely expected to become president but when dark horse Wahid was chosen, she graciously accepted vice-presidency in a praiseworthy decision that earned her admiration. Physically handicapped Wahid was forced to rely

husband also formed a part of criticisms against her. However, the president was firm in the saddle as the opponents were not a big threat against her. Meanwhile, Indonesia admirably moved closer to democratisation and the decision to elect the chief executive of the nation through direct popular votes was a step in the right direction. Many eyes were cast in the presidential polls since it is new and unique for the country. I had the occasion of visiting Jakarta late last year and was impressed to see the development of the country, which is also the population wise biggest Muslim nation in addition to being an important Asian nation with considerable clout in the Southeast Asian region. However, people at that time were eagerly looking forward to the presidential polls that was still

presidential polls and the transfer of power marks the culmination of a remarkable chapter for a nation that had to go through autocratic rule for a surprisingly long spell while being close to the West symbolising democratic pattern of rule.

However, the new president faces a daunting task of streamlining the economy, curb alarming corruption and arouse public confidence in the democratic system. The very fact that he is a former army General and relatively new in the political arena, but beat an once popular politician and daughter of the hero of Indonesian independence raised eye brows in several quarters. His relentless promises to stamp out corruption and repeated vow to keep the nation on track of democracy endeared him to the people.

## Counter-guerilla operation against terrorism



IKRAM SEHGAL

writes from Karachi

ACCORDING to Comd 11 Corps, Lt Gen Safdar Hussain, 246 militants have been killed during the course of military operations in South Waziristan, at least 100 foreigners (Uzbeks and Chechnyans among them), in the last few months. He claimed that 579 militants have been arrested. And then came the shocker, 171 of our Pakistani soldiers (regular and paramilitary) have also died during the operations, 21 because of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). As a company commander of an infantry battalion (44 Punjab now 4 Sindh) which suffered the maximum casualties (some of it in hand-to-hand fighting) during counter-guerilla operations in Balochistan in 1973, for me the high casualty rate is alarming. The Corps Comd estimated several hundred tribal militants operating against our forces,

100 plus being foreigners. Ruling out the presence of Osama Bin Laden in the area, he confirmed indications that Tahir Yuldash, a leader of the Independent Uzbekistan Movement (IUM), could be operating with the hostiles. What this successor of renowned Uzbek Mujahidi-deen leader Juma Namangani (killed fighting alongwith the Taliban in Kunduz in Oct/Nov 2001) is doing in Pakistan is anyone's guess!

South Waziristan has always been a very difficult area. During British rule there was a permanent brigade group stationed at Wana and another one in Razmak (North Waziristan). When the Quaid entrusted the defence of our western frontiers to the tribals in what became known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the brigade groups were pulled out. Brig Ingall, the first Commandant of the Pakistan Military Academy (PMA) being newly established at Kakul, requested the respective Brigade groups for help. All the furniture, furnishings, crockery, etc of the two Officers Clubs (including the crests of the two brigades and the regimental crests of the British units which had served in Razmak and Wana) were donated to PMA, enough to furnish the Academy's cadet messes. For many years two of the cadet ante-rooms were known as the "Razmak Brigade" and "Wana Brigade" rooms. Fifty years plus into our independence a

larger military presence than the British ever had in Wana and Razmak will be required for the foreseeable future to rid the country of the curse of terrorism.

There is a clear nexus between guerilla warfare and terrorism in Wana. Guerillas operating in their own territory are usually careful not to alienate the local population, that being their major source for their

i.e. till the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Both North and South Waziristan thereafter became staging areas for the Afghan Mujahideen, this spurred some economic activity, and even sparse affluence. Over the years some of the foreign Mujahideen settled down permanently with the Mahsuds and the Waziris.

With the advent of US-led coal-

ition forces in Afghanistan and the rout of their Taliban mentors, there was a fresh influx of foreign fighters as elements of Al-Qaeda found a safe haven in this no-go (self-imposed by the government) territory, operating at will on both sides of the Durand Line. With plenty of cash from the foreigners, with religious sentiments decrying the occupation of Afghanistan by western powers and with a heritage of spurning laws that are not essentially tribal in nature, besides being a safe haven Wana became an ideal recruiting ground from among the

media are major force-multipliers to their potency, the use of IEDs as a terror weapon adds a new dimension.

The Soviets using booby traps in the forms of toys and other articles of daily use to kill and maim during their counter-guerilla operations in an alien land is understandable if unacceptable, that such vicious means are being resorted to by the hostiles in utter disregard of innocent local casualties among their own kith and kin. It is appalling. Only foreigners without any stake locally can have such venom!

Wars are nowadays not fought in only the classical sense of combat, the newest version of warfare is how to successfully exploit the media to (1) create a favourable image of oneself while (2) creating an adverse image of one's opponent. We must be careful that in persisting with "glasnost" we do not compromise national security, Comd 11 Corp's giving away our casualty

figures has only added credibility to the rumour mills, this will be multiplied many times over. Despite it's claim of being the world's largest functioning democracy, India for over 50 years permitted outsiders (foreigners and nationals included) on a strictly restricted basis, if at all, into the areas of conflict. India has been able to keep its many insurrections under wraps. The media is absolutely barred from the long running internal conflicts in Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Bodoland, etc, the bloody freedom movement in Kashmir gets almost

no international attention because of this media quarantine. The Pakistani media has recently been permitted into Kashmir on a very "controlled" basis. What to talk about Kashmir, let any foreign media person report adversely about any issue, if the Indians decide this is out of line, he or she will be out of India on the next flight. The domestic Indian media treats national security with kid gloves, catch them talking about the atrocities in Kashmir, or for that matter, elsewhere in India.

The US learnt many media lessons from Vietnam where the war was lost mainly because of the bloody images on TV in the drawing rooms of mainline USA, "embedded journalists" with their troops were only allowed in Iraq once they knew the invasion was a walk-over. Why don't the US now "embed" journalists in Falluja or Baghdad i.e. except on selective basis? In our context such an idea is absolute nonsense. One should certainly "embed" journalists with units in peacetime and (maybe) during conventional war; to allow the media access to the area of operations during a counter-guerilla warfare campaign is nothing less than madness, if not outright hari-kiir! In Wana Pakistan Army is fighting a bloody cross between classic guerilla warfare and pure terrorism, there are bound to be excesses, this can be complicated by misreporting. The

political and geo-political merits and demerits (and sensitivities) of indulging in counter-guerilla operations against the wishes and feelings of the Pakistani masses notwithstanding, the operations area should be media-free. One should only have briefings like the one given recently in Peshawar, even there why talk about our own casualty figures?

The Catch-22 is that rumours can take over in an information vacuum, containing such rumours effectively is essentially the job of PR. "Damage control" is hardly possible by disclosing sensitive details to the media. The Armed Forces have to cope with horrendous factors in very difficult terrain, they need far more heli-mobility than is available. One can never be happy about fighting one's own countrymen and in such a complex situation and in such adverse conditions, the least we can do to support our Armed Forces is not to romanticise terrorists but to shun them. It is essential that we disseminate to the public that our Armed Forces are on sound moral ground fighting a difficult battle to rid this country of the terrorist menace.

Ikram Sehgal, a former Major of Pakistan Army, is a political analyst and columnist.