

A severe jolt to Saarc?

We hope not

LOOKING at what the Saarc Summit in Dhaka was set to deliver by way of breaking fresh grounds with bold new initiatives for ushering in a substantive phase of cooperation in South Asia, one cannot help bemoan its postponement the second time over in a very special way.

The optimism emanating from the success at Islamabad summit got infused into the preparations for the Dhaka summit which were finalised with a rare gusto and brimming expectations for a truly result-oriented summitry round in Dhaka. The heralding of a free-trade zone, cooperation in the energy sector with a vista opening for trans-border power grid, creation of regional development fund; and initiation of effective steps toward poverty alleviation were all on the agenda.

Leave aside the opportunities for bilateral talks presenting themselves on the sidelines of the summitry, the decision-making on the principal agenda items would have advanced the Saarc process in a marked way. It is agreed on all hands that Saarc can only make a real difference in the region, if people-to-people cooperation is enhanced across South Asia. The postponed Dhaka summit has deferred it that much away.

In the 19 years of Saarc history there have been 12 summits and six of them were postponed. And, the cause for postponement, as in this time has been the inability of a head of state or government to attend an upcoming summit. Ironically, political issues that were kept out of the Saarc charter to obviate the possibility of difference of opinion casting adrift consensus building on economic cooperation have irrepressibly emerged occasionally to set back the clock of Saarc's progress. Summits had been postponed before due to Indo-Pak problems, and this time postponement of Dhaka summit has been caused by India's perception of political developments in the neighbourhood. All these are a reflection of the political realities of the subcontinent to which a collective response from within the Saarc will have to be formulated coupled with a mechanism to hold the summits with unfailing regularity like in the cases of ASEAN and EU.

We are greatly disappointed by the last-minute turn of events centring around the Dhaka summit, but we should be patient and not allow the events either to affect the Saarc or our bilateral relations.

Rehabilitating rickshaw-pullers

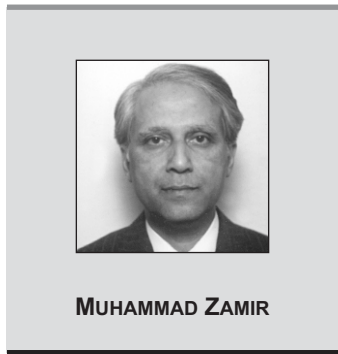
A much awaited initiative

IT definitely is heartening to learn that initiatives are being taken to rehabilitate hundreds of rickshaw-pullers of Dhaka city whose livelihood was dealt a severe blow in the wake of recent rickshaw bans on the main streets of the capital. Gradual pulling off of rickshaws is one of the many steps recently taken by the authorities to ease the unimaginable traffic jams. Naturally, like many others, we were also worried about the future of those rickshaw-pullers and their families since there was no visible steps for their rehabilitation.

In fact the very need to rehabilitate them appeared to have been a much less important issue. It was obscured by the more obvious need of the time -- easing traffic jam which received paramount significance putting the plights of the rickshaw-pullers on the back burner. The thought of providing them with either alternative employment or safety-net to cushion off the effect of sudden joblessness did not seem to bother the authorities much. Therefore the news of rehabilitation efforts with help of World Bank under the Dhaka Urban Transport Project turned out to be most assuring. It's been reported that the project will emphasise on alternative employment, proper trainings and income generating activities for the rickshaw-pullers so that they do not end up being involved in anti-social activities.

Thanks to lack of employment there is potential risk of them taking to crimes and delinquency. Besides, most of them are paupers, destitutes, have a sizable family to feed and came to Dhaka in the first place after losing all they had either to river erosion or floods. Therefore, we hope the project will be implemented as soon as possible so that these helpless people can look forward to a brighter future.

Enough is enough!



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

SAHA ASM Kibria MP, former Finance Minister in the past Awami League government, past Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh, Under Secretary General of the United Nations and a freedom fighter had a dream. He had taken up, over the last few months, the important question of bringing reforms to the constitutional concept of Caretaker Administration. It was in this context that he was expected to present a paper in a Seminar on 31 January, 2005. The Bangladesh Foundation for Development Research had arranged the meeting and he would be the keynote speaker as Chairman of the Foundation. I had been invited to the Seminar and was looking forward to the deliberations. This was unfortunately not to be.

The grenade blast in Habiganj, Sylhet on 27 January took away a precious life and left the nation shocked and outraged. Another explosion had revealed the utter inability of this Administration to provide security and maintain law and order in public gatherings.

Sixty-nine persons have perished and hundreds injured, some critically, as a result of powerful explosions at public places since the takeover of the reins of government by the BNP led alliance in October 2001. This has included bombing and arson inside cinemas in Tangail, Mymensingh and Sylhet, inside the shrine of Hazrat Shah Jalal in Sylhet, at Awami League meetings and rallies at Taltala, Sylhet and at the Bangabandhu Avenue in Dhaka. In 2005, within

one month, we have witnessed a bomb attack on a cultural function in Bogra and now a grenade attack on the Awami League rally at Habiganj, Sylhet.

Till to-date, only one of the cases has had a charge sheet submitted to the court. The investigations of the others have made no headway.

The surprising aspect is that some of these attacks have taken place in very important meetings. It has targeted the former Prime Minister and the current leader of the opposition Sheikh Hasina and in Administration in being able to provide suitable security to the opposition in the exercise of their constitutional rights of freedom of association and assembly.

Time has now come for the government leadership to understand that it is not enough to just express deep shock or desire a dialogue. This is a crisis which demands action, not words, not sympathy.

This trend of thought has been reflected in the comments made by the family members of the late

lack credibility and the culprits will be sheltered from justice.

We have watched with dismay as half-truths and propaganda have overtaken the political scene. It has indeed been pertinent, that Heads of Missions from the European Union, USA, Japan and Australia, should have also expressed their anxiety about the failure on the part of our government to carry out suitable investigations into previous incidents and explosions. They have, quite correctly pointed out that this had led to a climate of impunity

another instance, the British High Commissioner. These are high value targets. Despite this, the approach towards investigation and inquiry have been unsatisfactory to say the least.

The murder of SAMS Kibria has brought anguish to many who have known him over the years. This heinous deed has only underlined what Sheikh Hasina has been saying for the last year. There seems to be a pernicious plan to hunt down Awami League partisans and selectively do away with their leadership either by design or through random selection.

With near impunity, attacks have led to the death of Ahsanullah Master MP of Gazipur, Ivy Rahman, leader of the women's faction of the Awami League and many other mid-level Awami League organisers at the district level. Now it has been the turn of SAMS Kibria.

Armed hooligans have systematically exposed the inefficiency and inability of the

SAMS Kibria and also by foreign dignitaries. Asma Kibria, widow of the assassinated leader has commented with deep sorrow that she does not 'believe that the BNP-led coalition government will ensure justice.' Such lack in the credibility of the government strikes at the very root of governance.

The United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan has 'condemned the perpetrators of this abhorrent act' and called 'for them to be brought to justice.' Amnesty International, has similarly, not only 'called on the Bangladesh government to fully investigate the deadly grenade assault on an opposition party rally' but also criticised it 'for failing to adequately examine similar previous attacks.' In this context, they have also underlined the need to investigate the attacks 'with the rigour and determination they deserve.' Other organisations have also stated that unless such inquiries are conducted thoroughly and impartially, they will

published. One hopes that full access as desired by US Assistant Secretary of State Rocca will be provided this time.

The other factor is confidentiality. This is important but transparency is equally valuable. It would be preferable if the secretive approach adopted by Justice Joynul Abedin in the preparation of his report about the August 21 grenade attack is avoided. The ordinary citizen has the right to be kept informed about the results.

This guarded approach also

appears to be in direct contrast to the views of the Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister who has publicly stated that 'whenever an inquiry commission is formed, its report should be made public' (New Age, 30 January, 2005). Are we then to understand that views of Moudud Ahmed counts for less in the Cabinet?

The government, as in the past (after the 21 August incident), has sought international help for the probe being carried out into this latest grenade attack. The FBI, Interpol and Scotland Yard have all been requested to assist the government. This was done also in the past. Nothing happened then. Some are questioning as to whether anything will happen now.

Last year, foreign intelligence agents came, spoke to some officials and isolated individuals and then left. They apparently did not get full access to all requisite evidence. This might have rendered ineffective their investigations. Subsequently, no report was ever

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We have also not seen as yet any report from the special team of lawyers constituted by the Supreme Court Bar Association. They should remember that delay does not facilitate the carriage of justice.

In the meantime, stung by public opinion, the Chiefs of District and Sadar Upazila police in Habiganj have been suspended for negligence in providing security to those who attended the fatal meeting of the Awami League at Boilder Bazar. This was probably also because of the sermon delivered during the Namaj-e-Janaza at Baitul-Makarram, last Friday. It is being stressed that

these officials are being punished for their inability to provide security to Kibria and also because of their failure to apprehend the assailants as they were escaping after hurling the grenades.

The Awami League leader has been laid to eternal rest at Banani graveyard with full state honours. Diplomats, Awami League leaders, university teachers, lawyers and his admirers came to the graveyard to show him deserved honour as bugles played the last post as a tribute. It was only fitting that this happened. We have lost a great man.

Time is of the essence. The government must understand that there is a cause and effect relationship in their actions. It is not enough to state that investigations could have been completed had the Awami League cooperated. This is absurd. Responsibilities of the intelligence agencies and the police force impact directly on governance. They must be seen to be performed.

The criminals must be apprehended and the perpetrators brought to justice as has been stated by the Prime Minister.

The government needs to understand that the business community, both at home and abroad, follow events very carefully. Unsatisfactory investigations and inability to punish those responsible will further erode our image. We have already been tarred with the brush of corruption. This additional failure will certainly affect future foreign direct investment.

Enough is enough! We must all remember that the people of Bangladesh are not fools. They can, and will, make up their own minds about lack of governance. This will influence their verdict in the next general elections.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador -- any response to mzamir@dhaka.net

OPINION

Dynastic leadership and fallout

AR SHAMSUL ISLAM

IN all fairness it can be said that in Bangladesh much of shaping the government as democratic depends on the two chief political parties -- the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Awami League (AL). It is they that have formed the government and the opposition in tandem, no matter in whatever name the government is called -- the alliance government or coalition government.

To put democracy in Bangladesh on a firm footing it is a precondition that the political parties, mainly the two chief parties, should exercise democratic culture within the partyfold. Unfortunately this is not happening particularly in case of two principal political parties. Far from making decisions on the basis of free, fair discussions these are being, sometimes indiscreetly, dictated by the party chiefs. To make things worse a tendency towards a dynastic leadership is increasingly developing.

The leadership of two chief political parties is more than necessarily centre based and family oriented. We have a splendid constitution, democratic in letter and spirit. But unfortunately the political parties coming to power through the process of constitution more than often court a leadership that turn to be almost authoritarian quite reluctant to be tolerant of others' views and prone to decide everything by itself.

As a result the culture of democracy within the party goes off and the party keeps on being dictated from the highest rung. One is to dictate and all others are to obey almost blindly. There are lot of stories, for instance to quote one: Last year when the AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil declared 30 April deadline for forcing fall of the

ruling coalition government even lot of partymen, let alone outsiders, got stunned. It was not beyond their wit's end to understand who really prescribed the deadline and ordered it to be publicly announced but no one could raise a finger against it. There were many in the party high command to question its substance and viability but they kept them restrained. Ultimately when it ended in a fiasco some senior party members could at best satisfy their resentment by biting General Secretary Abdul Jalil, charging him

father or mother guarded by flocks of 'supporters' (stooges).

'First deserve, then desire' is an axiom that often goes missing in our political dictionary. Rather what practice is menacingly gaining ground is you first desire, particularly when in a familial advantageous position, and then you will be made to look like gaining all the virtues through wild propaganda manipulations.

As artless sycophancy develops as a great political virtue there is an unhealthy competition to get closer

what arithmetic drove him to pronounce a deadline that enacted a farcical suicidal drama for the party. Jalil simply flumbeled in his reply with a tacit reference to the leader of the party. The matter ended there. None dared to keep it up with the party chief. Had there been democratic culture in the party the disaster could easily be averted.

A poet's son may not necessarily be a poet, a player's son does not necessarily turn out to be a player, but how strange in our country a political leader's son or daughter seems sure to emerge as a political leader as if by a law of succession. This is because in the former cases the qualities are to be gained first and foremost and capabilities shall have to be proved in the publicly held solid tests of efficiency and proficiency while in the latter this is a simple domestic process where a sibling is anointed as a leader by the

young activists are in territorial disadvantage than the senior ones. As such when there is a prospect of a sibling to assume important leadership of the party the young turks jump into the occasion to priorities their claim to future dividends.

As evident everywhere in the party goes at the pleasure of the leader. The pleasure may not always be benign. Sometimes it may falter from being wise as well. At times it may turn out to be stained with nepotism. And the result is the anointment of a son or daughter to succeed to a pivotal position of party leadership. Obviously, if need be and the chief desires to remain off the scene, there is no dearth of political priests to perform that holistic job in the public.

So far in Bangladesh the Awami League has been headed by two generations of the Mujibs -- Sheikh

Mujibur Rahman and his daughter Sheikh Hasina. The third generation of party leadership may be in the offing. In the BNP Ziaur Rahman led the party. His wife Begum Khaleda Zia is now heading it. Her son Tareq Rahman, now holding the post of Senior Joint Secretary General of the party, has by this time advanced far with rejuvenating works of the party at grassroots level.

Even in the middle and lower rungs of party leadership a tendency for familial replacement is on the increase in respect of both

the Congress. Rajiv's daughter Priyanka and son Rahul, who has already won a parliamentary berth, are supposed to be offing as the fourth generation of Congress leadership.

In Pakistan, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) has been led by the Bhuttos, namely Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his daughter Benazir Bhutto, in two generations since the party's birth in 1967.

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The examples cited above cannot, however, condone the fatal propensity of the main political parties of our country for clan leadership. Noticeably, other countries have had one vital difference with Bangladesh in this matter. Obviously in those countries the leadership is achieved in a democratic process through unhindered ballot. The dynastic background may have thrown some weight on the polls but it could not make a clean sweep.

The fall-out of this game of dynastic leadership in Bangladesh may prove costly to the nation. Firstly, it will discourage the potential talented individuals to do politics for fear of finding no chance for vertical promotion in the party hierarchy. Secondly, this may create a vacuum in efficient party leadership plunging the party and nation in darkness. Thirdly, this will corrode the spirit of democracy in the party that in turn will make the party leadership and national leadership authoritarian, despotic, exploiting and persecuting. Fourthly, a sort of proprietary attitude may be created in the minds of the leaders who may look down upon the country and their party exclusively as their own making treating these like fiefdoms ordained to be ruled by their families. Fifthly, the party will get crowded with selfseeking yeshmen causing conscientious, independent dedicated workers to exit. Sixthly, creative thinking, updating party strategies to answer the challenge of time will be driven to the back bench. Seventhly, the party leadership will become stagnant, backdated, arrogant that may ultimately not bode well for the organisation.

AR Shamsul Islam is retired Principal Govt. Mahila College, Pabna.

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.

No rickshaw at Bangla Motor

I would like to thank Ms. Sonia Ahmed for her excellent letter (29th January, "Are the roads only for the VIPs?"). She expressed her own views on the recent decision of banning rickshaw at the Bangla Motor area, which is causing great inconvenience to the people. As citizens we have every right to live in our country and use its resources or assets just like the VIPs do. Providing VIPs a privilege should not mean snatching away the rights of the common people.

I hope the government will look into the matter and solve it in some other way.

Mohammed Fahim Hara
Universal Tutorial
Dhaka

Mission accomplished

They chased, and they chased in a devastating fashion that completely

shattered the iron wall of Zimbabwean defence. What an emphatic win it was! The whole nation was geared up after their fine performance in the last match at Bangabandhu National Stadium. The Tigers were down 0-2 in the series at one stage. Many people became worried but the Tigers bounced back and made history as it is only the second time in the history that a side has won a five match series after trailing 0-2. There was huge pressure on the team as they lost the toss but they were confident. After a wonderful show of bowling, the boys came to bat. It was a great moment for any Bangladeshi who watched the batting of veteran Rafiq and the young Aftab. They recorded the highest run partnership and sailed the team towards the heavenly shore of victory. How blistering the moment was, when captain Bashar scored the winning run. The whole country was in a rustling bustling mood. They danced and cheered the huge victory.

All credit goes to the Tigers who

really proved that we have something to be proud of.

Shoaib M. Siddiqui
Dhaka City College, Dhaka

Congratulations to BD cricket team for this resounding victory over Zimbabwe. This was definitely the most satisfying innings I have ever watched. Following the score online at Cricinfo, I could only envy the spectators who watched Rafiq and Aftab in action live. Congratulations again to the team for the comprehensive win of the tour and thanks to Dave Whatmore!

Shafqat
Seattle

Democracy arrives in Iraq

The date 30.01.2005 is an immensely significant date in the calendar of Middle Eastern democracy. Iraq had its first ever democratic parliamentary elections, where the people of Iraq were spoilt for choices - they had over 100

parties to choose from. In the past score of decades, they had just one.

The insurgents and anti-democratic forces in Iraq vowed that they would cause "a bloodbath" during Election Day. Despite that, the brave men and women of Iraq, did something which they were deprived of in their lifetime - choosing their own future. A resounding 60% people turned out to vote (in the previous UK General Election there was less voter turnout - 59%), and this was the biggest blow for the Zargawi-ite terrorists and neo-Baathists, that they could ever imagine.

A lot has to be done though in Iraq. But the Iraqis have showed that when given the choice between tyranny and democracy, most people would always go for the latter. Whoever the Iraqis choose, the international community must cooperate with the elected sovereign government of Iraq -- and support them for the reconstruction of the war-torn nation. This is a day for all supporters of democracy, freedom and liberty to celebrate -

and a day that was impossible - without the help of the coalition forces.

Aranya Syed
London, UK

Saarc summit

India decided not to attend the Saarc summit at the eleventh hour, while Bangladesh completed all sorts of preparation.

It was unwarranted and unexpected.

Surprising that the former US president Bill Clinton visited Bangladesh despite security problems, but not Mr. Monmohon Singh!

Tanvir Sobhan
On e-mail

They care?

This is a narration of an incident that occurred to me and a friend of mine a while back.

I relate:

The city of Dhaka has apparently passed a new 'law' without letting any of its citizens know anything

about it. The night of February 1st 2005 found me returning home with a female friend of mine at about 10 at night. We had gone to renew acquaintances with an old school teacher of ours whom we were meeting after a good three years.

We left our teacher's residence at about 9:45 and I had my car and was on my way to drop my friend at her place in Gulshan Avenue. We took the Mohakhali Road leading to Gulshan 1, but surprisingly we were stopped at the checkpoint beside the lake, nearly opposite to the BRAC building. Thinking it was just a routine check-up we promptly stopped our vehicle.

The officer in charge came up and asked us some regulation questions, which we answered. He then asked me to step out of the vehicle and I complied with his request. It was at this time that I realised that this was not a routine check-up. The officer had some grand plan in store for us.

He informed me in a hurried voice that according to some particular 'law' I was not allowed to

be in companionship of the other sex after a certain time at night. He also mentioned that he could take me to jail for being out at this time of night and that I could face a maximum penalty of a prison sentence. During this time he also kept reminding about how bad the situation of our country is at this time and how we should be doing our bit to improve it. Talk about irony.

During all this time the two other subordinates (who wore the uniform of the same kind of para-militia posted at the US Embassy check-posts) with him were querying my female friend to find out if our stories collaborated or not. She was forced to explain again and again the 'nature' of our 'relationship', and what we were doing out 'alone' (the car was chauffeur driven) so 'late'. When she explained she was a member of the press, they seemed a little less sure of themselves, and turned back to me, and the OC hastily changed his tone to a more paternal one,

said he had our 'best interests' at heart, and that we should make him happy. The exchange of a Tk 50 note from my wallet to his showed us both exactly how we could oblige. We were sent off with a warning to 'behave'.

This incident sheds light on a number of matters, most important of which will be the fact that the police who are enlisted to 'protect' us do so in such 'innovative' manners. We, the citizens would be happy with a more orthodox manner or protection. What say you?

We talk so much about brain drain and the like. Which self respecting youngster would stay on in Bangladesh if he/she is subject to such treatment?

Quazi Zulquarnain Islam and Sabrina F Ahmad (*Protagonists of the above incident*)
On e-mail