

Historic third term for Labour

But sharply reduced majority sends clear signal

THE British electorate has spoken loud and clear. It has returned the Labour party to power for a third term for the first time in its history, indicating that the country wishes neither to return to the days of Conservative rule, nor that it is ready to take a chance on the Liberal Democrats. However, Labour's majority of 167 in the 2001 election was reduced drastically by some 100 seats, indicating widespread displeasure with Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The reason was clear. The voters have delivered a sharp rebuke to the PM for his taking the country to war against Iraq in the teeth of popular opinion. Indeed, there can be little doubt that the election results translate into a severe personal reprimand of the Prime Minister, not only for his decision to take the country into an unpopular war, but also due to his lack of candour with the British public on the issue.

Nowhere was the antipathy to Mr. Blair's Iraq policy more apparent than in the London seat of Bethnal and Bow where renegade ex-Labour MP and staunch Iraq war critic George Galloway ran on an anti-war platform and unseated Oona King who had supported the war.

The constituency is 40 percent Muslim (mostly Bangladeshi) and the result mirrored those in the other 40 major constituencies with significant Muslim populations, each of which showed a significant shift from Labour, typically to the anti-war Liberal Democrats.

The Conservatives did better than they did in the last two elections but still have fewer seats than Labour did at its post-war nadir in 1983, while the Liberal Democrats made significant gains, but remain firmly in third place. The Labour share of the electorate was the lowest in British history with them gaining slightly over 36 percent of the roughly 60 percent of the voters casting ballots.

Despite the Labour victory, there is no way to see this as other than a personal defeat for Tony Blair. Certainly the sheen has worn off this once highly popular leader, and even though he has delivered a third term for Labour, he has been tarnished by the result. The big winner is perhaps Chancellor Gordon Brown who is slated to succeed Blair as PM. With the voters sending such a strong anti-Blair message the party may decide to jettison the unpopular Prime Minister sooner rather than later.

Ordeals of expatriate workers

It should not be allowed to happen again

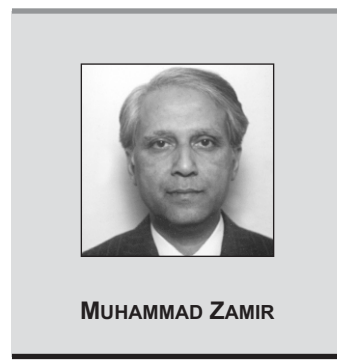
THE painful story of Kabir Hossain, a Bangladeshi worker of a garment factory in Jordan starkly reminds us of our total apathy to the plight and hardship faced by many workers like him on foreign shores. It also tells us how the workers are made to undergo inhuman sufferings at the hands of their employers, violating their rights. Kabir alleged that his employers in Jordan treated him along with hundred other Bangladeshi workers very badly — they were not given enough food, water, accommodation and above all their due wages. And to add insult to injury, Kabir also alleged that they were beaten up 'mercilessly' when they demanded their wages.

This was not the first time such allegations have been made by the Bangladeshi workers against their foreign employers. We don't have to look too far — just about a week ago hundreds of Bangladeshi workers stormed the embassy in Kuwait when, according to them, the embassy failed to do anything about their pending wages for five months. Even in the case of Kabir and his coworkers, the embassy in Jordan allegedly did not do anything either. This is simply unacceptable. As it is, our workers go to extreme measures, like selling valuable possessions or borrowing from moneylenders with high interest to pay, for the much-sought after job in a foreign country, mainly in the hope that a better future would await them. But when the dream turns into nightmare, obviously their desperation knows no bounds.

The bottom line is that the terms of employment do not get fulfilled and they become victims of exploitation especially when there is no one to look after them. We fail to understand why our embassies and high commissions repeatedly fail to come to the rescue of these workers who, incidentally, are one of the highest foreign exchange earners of the country. It is a shame that we tend to remember them only when we calculate the cumulative amount they send from abroad, we do not even try to find out the kind of hardship and horrific ordeal they go through to send the money.

We demand that the ministry concerned take up this matter more seriously than ever, so that fulfillment of terms of employment is ensured. We do not want to hear from another worker on his or her return that he/she was subjected to physical and mental torture in a foreign land.

Bangladesh-India relations: Need to move forward



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

ALMOST every day, over the last two months, we have read reports of simmering disquiet on the Bangladesh-India border. Civilians residing on different sides of sensitive flash-point areas have continued to suffer due to exchange of gunfire between the border guards (the Bangladesh Rifles and the Indian Border Security Force). Such attrition have also led to casualties along the Brahmanbaria border, the Srimangal border, the Akhaura border, the Lalmonirhat and Thakurgaon borders, the Lachharpura border of Khagrachari, the Sathkhira border and also near Jhenidha. The skirmishes and incidents have continued despite over requests for calm and dialogue. Tension has not dissipated.

This is particularly unfortunate, given the fact that we have had only a few weeks ago, at Dhaka, the latest round of border talks between senior officials of the BDR and the BSF.

Reports published at the end of the meeting indicated that there had been intensive discussion on many subjects. Regrettably, however, very little consensus emerged on most issues. Rigidity rather than flexibility dominated the scene.

India reiterated its decision to go ahead with its programme of constructing barbed wire fences. This was explained by BSF Director General RS Mooshahary as a continuous process that began 18 years ago. He also stressed that such fencing was "neither an offensive nor a defensive step but a preventive measure to stop the movement of the cross-border criminals." He also indicated that India would continue the construction of a barbed wire fence outside of 150 yards of the zero point of the international border line. It was also

stated that if there was any particular necessity, due to unavoidable circumstances, such compulsion might require fencing to be constructed within 150 yards of the border. The Bangladesh side was however reassured that such action would be undertaken after keeping it informed. There was nothing new in the Indian position.

India's seriousness about this has been reflected by the fact that they have spent Indian Rs 2404.7 million for fencing on the Bangladesh border during 2004-5. This was stated recently in the Indian Lok

accept this suggestion. They want settlement of border problems at border security sector commander levels. That, according to them, is a more practical method.

Nevertheless, despite the views of the Indian officials, one feels that the serious charges brought up by the Bangladeshi side, should be raised by us also through the diplomatic channel — with the Indian Mission in Dhaka and the Indian Foreign Office in New Delhi. This will enable the Indian authorities to carry out necessary inquiry and take steps to stop such anti-Bangladesh

the Indian border with Pakistan. It may be recalled that the AFP reported a few days ago that border officials of India and Pakistan have agreed to arrest people crossing borders inadvertently and return them swiftly to their respective country. Such as step may also be agreed upon with us. If any one is found crossing into India illegally, that person or persons should be arrested, questioned and then returned to the respective state. Firing to kill is a step of last resort, and should in principle, be avoided by both sides. Shedding blood only

some other Indian companies in coming to Bangladesh can encourage growth and economic partnership. This will result in movement forward in sectors like energy, steel, cement, fertilizers, pharmaceuticals and also in some backward and forward linkage areas in telecommunications and electronics. There is also bound to be a spill-over effect in information technology activities. Such investment will help to strengthen the formal sector of our trade relationship.

We have to move forward. We have to take steps which can create

such an obstacle might help to reduce smuggling of our scarce resources, work against human trafficking, seeking of shelter in India by some of our criminal elements, stop smuggling of phensydl from India into Bangladesh, reduce the possibility of clandestine smuggling in of weapons and the surreptitious entry of anti-Bangladesh elements into our territory? Are these not positive points?

I am an optimist and have always believed in constructive engagement and the need for dialogue. This will facilitate the reduction of border tension and strengthen bilateral relations.

One such hopeful sign has already arrived. Our foreign minister has had meetings with both the Indian prime minister and the Indian foreign minister during the recently concluded Afro-Asian Solidarity Summit in Indonesia. The Indian prime minister has stressed on the need for a meeting between the two foreign ministers to resolve bilateral irritants. The Indian side has also expressed its willingness to come to Dhaka for the next SAARC Summit. Such a meeting could take place at that time. Meanwhile, hopefully, the overdue consultation at the level of Foreign Secretaries of the two countries scheduled in mid-June in New Delhi, will lay the groundwork for discussion at ministerial level and removal of unnecessary communication gaps, suspicion and mutual recrimination.

Our Parliamentary Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs met on 27 April and reportedly observed that at a time when India has started a process of normalising relations with its other neighbours, China and Pakistan, its relations with Bangladesh has continued to deteriorate. This is a significant comment. Neither India nor Bangladesh can afford it. May I, in this context, point out that the visit of Mr Dinesh Nandan, Governor of the State of Tripura to the Akhaura border check-post on 2 May was indeed a positive gesture. It will help to ease tension and strengthen bilateral relations.

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POST BREAKFAST

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Sabha by their State Minister for Home Affairs Mr S Raghupathy.

The Bangladesh side, principally reiterated that it did not agree with India's construction of fences, at less than 150 yards from the zero line. This, they felt, was in clear violation of the India-Bangladesh Guidelines for Border Authorities, 1975.

They also used this opportunity to hand over to the Director-General of the BSF many booklets and documents containing information about anti-Bangladesh insurgent camps in India along with their locations and even in some cases, telephone numbers. The lists also included information about 'nine Swadhin Bangabhumii Movement Organisations and other terrorist outfits, 90 anti-Bangladesh camps, 30 terrorist leaders (including representatives from the Shanti Bahini) and 444 miscreants residing in the bordering regions of India, 21 drug traders, 19 phensydl factories (operating from near the border) and 10 notorious illegal arms traders'. Concern was also expressed about continued anti-Bangladesh propaganda in the Indian press.

In addition, the BDR Chief suggested that outstanding irritations could be settled between the two countries 'through diplomatic levels'. The Indian side apparently (according to newspapers) did not

activities. In similar vein, we should also carry out intensive inquiry about allegations of anti-Indian terrorist outfits (as raised by the BSF) operating from within Bangladesh.

Both sides need to take such allegations with greater seriousness. It is not enough to just state that such charges are incorrect. It is imperative that we approach this issue in the spirit of South Asian unity and good neighbourliness. This will ensure greater security for States in our region. If necessary, journalists from other South Asian countries and representatives of civil society, could also be invited or allowed access to the alleged sites where terrorist camps are supposedly based, both in Bangladesh and India. This will assist in creating credibility with regard to the respective inquiries.

If India and Pakistan can start an 'irreversible' peace process, then there is no reason for us to have a steady deterioration in bilateral relations. We do not have a sensitive issue like Kashmir with its multi-factor ramifications. It should therefore be that much easier for us to tackle our border problem.

Indian border guards may also like to exercise some restraint in shooting at people near the border. In this regard, they might like to replicate what has been initiated on

exacerbates a situation, affects public perception and creates unnecessary misunderstanding.

In this context, it might also be advisable for both countries to complete urgently demarcation of the remaining 6.5 kilometers of their border. This will assist in the implementation of the Land Boundary Agreement, 1974. Both sides can also facilitate coordinated patrolling of the border. These steps will build confidence in the right direction. Political will must be found for this purpose.

In this regard it would be useful to understand the significance of the assertion made by Foreign Ministry M Morshed Khan on 20 April in the 'Prothom Alo'. He said, 'What's the problem if anyone wants to surround his house with boundary wall?' He was commenting on the news that India was setting up a barbed wire fence in the border. His view as Foreign Minister is very revealing in terms of potential flexibility of the Bangladesh position.

Let us try to assess the importance of a good, working relationship with India. I am not being sentimental about India's role in 1971. I am referring here to the possibilities that exist not only in terms of bilateral trade, but also in prospective foreign investment from India.

The interest shown by Tata and

confidence. In this age of globalisation, we must prioritise our economic agenda and see how we can gain from the emerging economic prowess of India. In view of India's location and market potential, Bangladesh should look at India as a long-term strategic and economic partner. If the Japanese and the Chinese can think on these lines, why cannot we?

For example, the other day, during a seminar organised by ICC, Bangladesh to formulate a plan of action to be mooted in the Asia-Pacific Business Forum to be held in Bangkok, an interesting prospect of trade with India emerged. It was pointed out that there was a huge possibility of exporting Bangladeshi medicines to the Indian market. The Indian Parliament apparently has already moved a step closer to banning domestic firms from manufacturing low-cost generic copies of patented drugs. This Indian measure has been taken to meet WTO requirements. This would leave Bangladesh with an excellent opportunity to enter the Indian market as Bangladesh can continue to produce drugs outside the WTO patent regime until January 1, 2016.

I now return to the question of building of fences. Why are we so averse to this arrangement on already agreed and demarcated borders? Do we not realise that

Wanted a truly pro-people budget

A.N. M. NURUL HAQUE

Finance and Planning Minister M Saifur Rahman is going to present the national budget for the fiscal year 2005-06 soon. The forthcoming budget will be the 11th one formulated under his leadership. Probably there are very few finance ministers in the world with such a unique honour of presenting as many as 11 budgets. While the officers and employees concerned of the finance ministry are busy preparing the budget, the Finance Minister has been meeting with the economists, trade bodies, civil societies and professionals in pre-budget discussions. Traditionally the officials concerned of the ministry of finance make the budget provisions maintaining strict secrecy. Even other ministers are not allowed to know the budgetary measures before it is tabled in the Parliament by the finance minister. The finance minister of the successive governments have developed a new culture of holding pre-budget discussions with economists, trade bodies, professional and civil societies seeking their opinions and suggestions on budgetary measures.

At a pre-budget discussion with the members of the Economic Reporter's Forum (ERF), held on April 25, the finance minister said, 'The budget will certainly be election-oriented. We're a democratic government. If we renege on our commitments, we will betray the cause of the people.' He also said that the next budget would be prepared on the basis of 'sound economic policy.' But he insisted that the government could hardly afford to ignore the people given that it's a democratic government and that the parliamentary elections are sched-

uled for late 2006. He also assured that he would try to minimise pressures from the ruling party lawmakers while undertaking politically-motivated projects. The finance minister, however, said that the next budget would be formulated in keeping with the goal of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) halving poverty in the country by 2015.

A pre-budget discussion meeting was also held on April 24 at the office of the finance minister, which

cutting back wastes and corruption with a view to achieving the greater budgetary targets for economic development of the country. They also put forward suggestions that the government should pay heed to the World Bank, IMF and some other donor agencies only to the proportion of their development assistance. Referring to the excesses that the donor agencies often make in terms of policy prescription to the government to the detriment of the country's interest, they said the next budget should try

to attain further reliance on domestic resources to reduce dependence on others.

The leading economists of the country have warned finance minister of the dreadful danger of a pro-election budget for the next fiscal year. But the lawmakers of the ruling party, on the other hand, have requested him for special budgetary allocations targeting the next general election. The chairmen and the members of the Parliamentary Standing Committees on different ministries and other parliamentary bodies at the pre-budget meeting held on April 26, have demanded for enhanced allocation of Taka one crore for each member of parliament in the forthcoming national budget, for development projects in their respective areas. Otherwise, they may face setback in the next general election. But the finance minister did not give any clear reply in this con-

nection. He only said, "I shall not do anything that may break the financial discipline in the next budget."

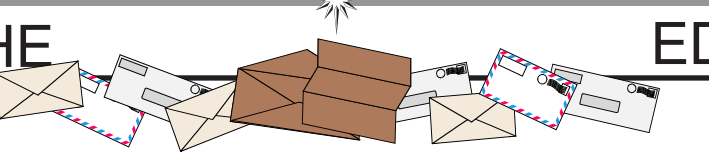
The predominance of the neo-liberal economic considerations dictated by the donor agencies reflected in the national budgets has forced many governments of the developing countries like Bangladesh to withdraw budgetary allocations from public expenditure programmes, as the donors have come up with a new prescription for poverty alleviation in the developing countries. The MDG as conceived by

provide special budgetary allocations for poverty reduction. It has rather become a tradition for the finance ministers of the successive governments to pledge for a pro-poor budget. But whatever the reality on the ground, the poor segments of the society never get the benefits as promised, while the economic disparity between the poor and other beneficiaries of the budget continues to grow over the period.

The people of this country have so far seen a good number of budgets labeled as pro-poor, pro-people etc. It really sounds nice, though it is nothing more than the old wine in new bottle. The budget for 2004-05 was labeled as village-focussed budget, though nothing was done to give a real boost to the rural economy. The upcoming budget is very important in respect of policy. Because four-party alliance government may like to make it an election-focussed budget. With value taka eroding fast and prices of essentials on continuous escalation, the common people are the target of upcoming budgetary assault. The common people have no say in this regard as they have no forum, although they are the overwhelming majority. Let us hope that the most experienced finance minister, will not merely juggle the figures to impress the common people and must not be politically convinced by his colleagues in the Parliament for a pro-election budget ignoring concerns of the common people. The forthcoming budget must also identify itself in a clear term that it is a pro-people budget.

ANM Nurul Haque is a banker.

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.

Continuing dynasty rule?

Now three sons of three political parties will fight it out (DS, April 20). The latest entry is the son of the AL Chief (addressing the Chatra Dal).

History's verdict has been: the Muslim League, which played a prominent part in the creation of Pakistan during the middle of the last century, has faded out, having completed its assignment. In Bangladesh, how long will AL and BNP last, plus the dynasty rules?

Politicians play games in closed stadiums. Why the voters vote? How the politician-voter feedback system works in Dhaka? No bibliography! Who cares? In this ICT age, political communication has become a one-way system, not both ways. From where the sustenance comes? Imposed 'democracy'?

The times have changed, and the rate of change in this new millennium is very fast; hence old mantras cannot be applied indiscriminately. The struggling electorate cannot keep pace with the new games introduced by the politicians (in the third world). Political dogmas are not immortal, nor inventive 'Economic'. Religion is making a come back, through default culture.

The vacuum has to be filled in, first through stop-gap arrangements, then stabilize a proven system with deeper roots. But dedication, patience, and tolerance are lacking. There is nothing known as Fast Political Packs, like fast food, self-service, or service to the masses? The goals and objectives are distorted through hidden agendas.

These political experiments do

not benefit the masses during the transition period. The greatest loss is the time factor. Non-transparent political culture delays public development. Non-political leaders in the society cannot exert mediating influence, as they cannot remain neutral. They can, but that means missing the boat or bandwagon. These days, the spirit of sacrifice has evaporated! Who suffer for moral principles these days?

Bad culture percolates down faster than juices going up (against gravity) from the roots. Time is a healer, and a solvent of intricate problems, especially man-made. Materialist ambitions kick a person upwards; there is not time for caressing the people with the palm of the hand.

Political priorities are warped and non-transparent. It is up to

national debates to demarcate the boundary conditions for dynasty rule in developing societies. Discipline is at an all-time low, and terrorism and religion have entered local and international politics. The rules of the game (political) have changed in the background. Formal recognition of this change is a separate, but vital issue (keeping up with the changing times).

The basic issue is basically simple: which comes first: the survival of the nation, or the party? The party is a tool or methodology, and any party has the democratic right to deliver some of the services. Then why this unbearable intolerance? Is it a sign of strength or weakness?

A. Mawaz, Dhaka

Public libraries

Former Awami League (AL) Government and the present Four Party Alliance (FPA) government, undertook the programmes for increasing the number of Pourashabhas in our country. It is imperative for every government to open a public library in each Pourashabha as a civic amenity.

The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Information should supply the existing and new Pourashoba libraries regularly with the essential and current books, magazines, newspapers and periodicals for increasing the number of readers across the country.

Golam Ashraf, DOHS Baridhara, Dhaka

Pronounce correctly

Still I can't understand what wrong I've done by telling to improve the

pronunciation of our BTV reporters and announcers. Bad pronunciation is a problem and we need to find a solution. Let's do it and stop beating about the bush! We will be digging our own grave if we start disapproving of all matters. There is no point of imitating others and losing self-respect in adopting correct form of pronunciation and linguistic ability.

Moreover I've seen bad pronunciation makes a man fall in awkward position. When the Bangladeshis go abroad, the first problem they face is linguistic problem. And you know, in our country there are many educated and aged people who are working in government and non-government sectors. They are doing high-class jobs but they can't speak English. It is not their fault. This would not have happened if

we had tried to speak English at home. The most important thing is the use of language.

Okay, let me clarify this. If I'm not mistaken, the cause of this problem is that; we don't speak English, thus we can't pronounce the words correctly, and this is the root of all hazards. We've to create a congenial environment first. We need to use the language. When we were in Holy Cross School, we always tried to communicate in English among our friends circle even if our vocabulary were not that rich. And that's why it was not a big problem for us to talk to the teachers. Even if HC is not English medium school but the environment helped us a lot. However, time has passed, situation has changed, and we don't have those friends beside.

After a long time DS has helped me to use the language, and now I see, with the help of DS and voice chat I'm being able to improve my linguistic ability again.

The main problem is we don't speak English, we don't have the environment, our vocabulary is weak, we can't devise the sentences easily and we hesitate if anybody laughs at our mistakes. The most amusing thing is, our new varsity friends speak Hindi (blessing of the daily soap?) very fluently. But when we tell them to speak English, they make faces as if we've given them a Herculean task. We should use English in our everyday life to overcome the obstacles.

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