The Dhaka-10 by-election points

to the pitiable position of the election

commission in the face of interven-

tions made by the party in power. In

fact, Dhaka-10 is a clear case study

of the failure of the election commis-

sion to ensure a free and fair elec-

LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA TUESDAY MAY 17, 2005

Does the minister take responsibility?

High time for parliamentary scrutiny

E have been here too many times before. Once again a launch has capsized, killing dozens of passengers. Once again we have learned that the launch in question was plying its trade without a route permit and approved design to carry such a heavy load. The loading capacity had in the past been arbitrarily raised from 60 to 80 without any authorisation, and in any event there were over 200 passengers on board when the launch sank.

Enough is enough. In the past 10 years there have been over 4000 deaths in launch accidents with the last three years having seen mounting casualties. The numbers of missing and injured were horrifying as well. The shipping minister must be called to account for this appalling record.

There have been too many deadly incidents. We understand that the recent inclement weather has made the waterways more dangerous, but that does not absolve the authorities of their responsibility. Had the launch been operating as per regulations, the tragedy could have been

Unregistered launches routinely ply the waterways of the country without route permits and fitness certificates. They have neither signaling nor safety equipment and are always dangerously overloaded. Despite repeated warnings, there appears to be no government oversight and no punishment for those at fault.

The minister is on record as saying that government orders are not complied with by the owners and operators. But this begs the question as to what action the government has taken further to the non-compliance.

We understand that the launch owners are a politically powerful lot. The owner of the Prince of Patuakhali is reportedly a local ruling party leader. But does their power grant them immunity for culpability in thousands of deaths? Surely not.

What has the minister's response to multiple launch disasters been? He appears to be either incompetent or uncommitted. He has certainly been ineffectual. If he is unable or unwilling to fix things, why does he not simply vacate the office in favour of one more capable of effective stewardship? In any other country, a minister with his record would have resigned long ago.

We expect a full parliamentary inquiry and we would like to see the minister on the floor of parliament explaining in detail how Sunday's disaster could have happened and what defence does he have against the ringing indictment on his failure as shipping minister.

Sign of a deeper malaise

Resist assault on entertainment shows

HE bomb attack on a circus at Bagerhat, which left at least eight people wounded, is the latest in a series of assaults made recently on various cultural and entertainment forms that people in this country have been familiar with for a long time.

Police have arrested four suspects but the reason behind the act of wanton violence is yet to be established. In the present case, there has been a surmise that the attack could either be ascribed to internal squabbles between rival quarters or the outcome of orthodoxyinduced reaction. In whichever way one looks at it, the bomb attack on the circus does suggest that certain quarters are out to exploit the religious sentiments of people. Of course, the authorities have to see to it that the decency threshold is not crossed in the name of entertainment and that there are no anti-social activities on the sidelines.

Circus is an event where acrobatic skills, physical fitness and stamina play an important role. So it is hard to imagine how it could be viewed as a negative thing. The administrative response has been rather inclined towards acceptance of orthodox values in such matters. However, events like *yatra*, circus or *mela* should be protected from attacks by the forces of intolerance.

The highly localised nature of the attack on entertainment shows should enable us to identify and apprehend the culprits. It is equally important to find out who are really behind such attacks. The number of incidents in which entertainment shows came under attack in recent times is not negligible. So there is reason to believe that some kind of conspiracy is being hatched to detach the society from its cultural moorings.

Circus, or any other form of harmless entertainment for that matter, does not clash with our cultural values. So any attempt to eliminate such activities must be resisted by the community as well as law enforcers.

Election reforms need of the hour



OT to speak of the national election, the recently held mayoral election of the Chittagong municipality, to my mind, induced much more attention and anxiety than it ought to have done. Truly speaking, both government and opposition parties took the mayoral election as their prestige point in advance of the upcoming general election in the country. To the nation as a whole, it was a test of the government's popularity in the wake of rising prices, growing terrorism, and deteriorating socioeconomic and political conditions. To the opposition, seemingly, it was to show that a good candidate can win despite strenuous campaigning against him by prominent ministers and the like. Besides, the spectre of the Dhaka-10 by-election -- marred by vote rigging -- haunted the supporters of the opposition-backed candidate ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury, and inclined them to put up extra measures to face the

The government side had the view that "the flood of development" initiated by the current regime would take the ship to shore. The government-backed candidate, Mir Nasir, probably thought that success would be his if he took his cue from

sion, vehemently criticized for its failure to ensure free and fair elections, especially in Rajshahi and Dhaka, seemed to take Chittagong as the last chance of proving its credibility as an institution. On the other hand, both foreign and domestic observers took it as a test

Personally, I was not surprised to see that Mohiuddin won the election for his third consecutive term. During the last two years or so, I had

had to sacrifice his valuable time (and we suspect that he abstained from his duties without taking any official leave) in order to campaign. At the last leg, Mr Tareq Rahman the BNP Joint Secretary General and son of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia also used his late father's name in an attempt to win over the hearts of the voters. The returning officer allegedly appointed some unqualified persons as polling officers and later had to withdraw some of them. A dozen ministers paraded through

thus creating a panic in Chittagong. Smelling the ominous sign, an estimated 100,000 people surrounded the office of the chief returning officer, stayed there the whole night, and forced him to make a declaration at dawn. I am also told that a few ministers managed to flee through the back doors upon seeing the sea of men and women chanting slogans for a fair declaration. I agree with eminent lawyer Dr Kamal Hossain when he remarked that the victory of Mohiuddin Chowdhury is a tions. The clear answer to all of this question is that no free and fair election is possible (nor was it possible) under the present government and the current election sys-

I have always harboured serious doubts about the efficacy of the caretaker government since its inception, although I also know that both AL and BNP (with and without alliance) got to power under such a system. Under the system, the president of the country -- basically

a man of the party in power -- holds

the key to the whole system. That

makes it partisan from the very

cropped up during the caretaker

government headed by Justice

Habibur Rahman, Abdur Rahman

Biswas -- the then president elected

by BNP -- made some attempts to

align the administration in favour of

BNP, but failed in the face of a per-

sonality like Habibur Rahman. Can

one expect that a president, elected

by a particular party, would like to

see that his party should be out of

power on account of his neutrality?

Then comes the issue of raising the

age limit of the chief justice with a

view to positioning a loyalist to lead

beginning.

The contradictions

tion in this country. It is also a case where money and muscle dominated. In the pages of our history, the Magura and Dhaka-10 byelections will go down as a black Reforms in the election commission and the caretaker government are, therefore, a must to ensure a free and fair election in the country. Without that happening, we might witness the spectre of the Dhaka-10 by-election visit-

ing us again and stealing the verdict of the people. All parties must sit together to work out a system that benefits all Our experience with the last either. Even a caretaker govern-

general election is not good ment headed by Justice Latifur Rahman allegedly failed to ensure the voting rights of the minority community. Candidates belonging to the AL were intentionally harassed or assaulted during the time of the election. The then president and the head of the caretaker government failed to control the atrocities against the supporters of the AL and the minority community. In the backdrop of these conundrums, reforms in the election system should constitute the core concern in the upcoming days. Especially in a situation when the party in power is believed to have already set the stage for the

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Reforms in the election commission and the caretaker government are a must to ensure a free and fair election in the country. Without that happening, we might witness the spectre of the Dhaka-10 by-election visiting us again and stealing the verdict of the people. All parties must sit together to work out a system that benefits all.

to visit Chittagong on a number of occasions. My impressions suggest that he has turned Chittagong into a clean city. Development works to beautify all areas of the port city speak to his efforts. With an investigative mind. I talked to different classes of people holding different political views, and thus could confirm his credit-worthiness in the eyes of the citizens of Chittagong. Thus, given a free and fair election his win would be the obvious out-

What, however, surprised me is the way the government waged a war against him to see its candidate. Mir Nasir. as the mavor of Chittagong. As many as 30 cabinet ministers, 50 MPs, and hundreds of top-ranking leaders thronged the port city to campaign for the candidate. Even the mayoral candidate, who is also in charge of a ministry,

the polling areas at the time of the election with walkie-talkies in violation of the election code.

During the last three years or so, things have happened as the administration wanted, but not this time. Mohiuddin won by an unimaginable margin of 91,000 votes. According to Fatema, the cleaner who cleaned my hotel room: "The ministers only increased Mohiuddin's margin, as people do not like to see them. Who can steal the people's verdict if sufficient guard is guaranteed, sir?" My driver who took me to the airport and the shopkeeper from whom I bought cigarettes also echoed the same sentiment. Power lies with the

But conspiracy was there to foil the people's aspirations. Suddenly, the results of the election from different centers stopped flowing

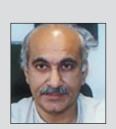
victory for the 140 million people of

Does this victory of Mohiuddin mean that there is no need of reforms in the character of the caretaker government and of the election commission? The government side, especially Law Minister Moudud Ahmed, seems to hold the notion that the Chittagong election is a case that shows that elections could be neutral even with a party government in power. According to him, the victory of the oppositionbacked candidate serves to put the reform issue on the back-burner.

But Mr Law Minister, what about the by-election in Dhaka-10 and the mayoral elections in Rajshahi and Dhaka? Another argument against the minister could be that in Chittagong rigging would have happened had people not awakened to guard against manipula-

the upcoming caretaker governpawns to play the game for them. ment. We are convinced that the 13th amendment to the constitution was made by the then party in power to suit its own needs. Jahangirnagar University

The Cotton Revolution



M.J. AKBAR

AST week the guardians of the civilised nations gathered in Moscow to commemorate the worst episode of sustained savagery in the history of the world. We do not know the exact figures of dead during the awesome and sweeping victories of a Chengiz Khan or an Amir Taimur between China and eastern Europe, for both victor and vanquished tend to exaggerate, one in pride and the other in anger. The less careful historians take recourse to that useless phrase "countless millions" which is both a tautology and an absurdity. At what point do the nillions become "countless"? After twenty? Moreover, the population of the world in the 13th and 14th centuries was not enough to justify such casualties, even though whole cities were wiped out. But the dead of the Second World War, which ended 60 years ago in Europe and a few atom bombs later in Japan, were counted. more or less

It was entirely appropriate that the political memorial services were being held in Moscow, with the victorious, defeated and bystander nations in attendance. (India was in the curious position of being both a bystander and an activist for reasons we shall address later.) For as much as 70 per cent died in what is known as the eastern front, that vast expanse between Berlin and Moscow. It was on the eastern front and the conflict between Hitler and Stalin that the Second World War was won and lost. Compared to the Soviet Union, Britain and Winston Churchill were secondary players; America was a late but critical arrival and France was hors d'combat --

out of the game. Stalin won the war against Hitler and lost the propaganda against Hollywood. Vladimir Putin, his successor, was making a conscious effort to redress this injustice. A popular impression has been cre-

ated that the tide began to turn against Hitler with the Allied invasion of France on June 6, 1944, D-Day. But D-Day only highlights the fact that no one was fighting on the European mainland for most of the war. The British empire retreated from Europe after the humiliations suffered in 1940, symbolised by the escape from Dunkirk and did not return till, bolstered by America, Allied troops crossed into Italy in 1943 and then into France (still with great trepidation) in 1944. The nadir for the British came with the fall of Singapore and the almost contemp-

ised (vis-à-vis the "barbaric" brown and black people of Asia and Africa) indulged in unprecedented rape and bloodlust against civilians. Women were raped and men killed. Nazi evil acquired an especially racist dimension against Jews and "non-Aryan" blood types such as the gypsies, who were treated as worse than vermin. Wars have always been fought between ruling classes in search of wealth and empire, but extermination of a race has rarely been a war objective. The nearest earlier instance was the Spanish Inquisition which eliminated Mus-

as immorally as Germany and Italy and Japan sought to colonise them. It is curious that even the horrors of the Second World War never taught Britain and France that imperialism was wrong and morally unsustainable in a changing world.

France, the weak link of the Allied coalition, and a nation which did very little to deserve the rewards of victory, was particularly insistent that its ravaged colonies be restored to French rule after the Allied victory. This led directly to punishing wretched wars in Vietnam and Algeria: you put the millions who him to fight alongside Japan. Bose agreed, and led 80,000 Indians up to Indian soil before the tide of war changed. It must be stressed that Bose was critical of Nazi genocide against Jews, but he was willing to deal with Hitler as an enemy's enemy. Does that make Bose a fascist? No. In his estimate, he was negotiating with one enemy to destroy another.

Similar sentiments persuaded Gandhi to keep the Congress out of the British war effort, although Gandhi had absolutely no sympathy for Nazism and was willing to

Democracy has become George Bush's leitmotif. He has all the zeal of a new convert since he discovered democracy only after he failed to discover the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. But while zeal has its advantages, it is no substitute for understanding.

There is a basic and critical flaw in Bush's prescription for the world's ills. He is right to claim that democracy is the best medicine but he cannot seem to appreciate that democracy is impossible without sovereignty. Democracy is a flower, not a weed. It will bloom only if its conditions are honoured. Strangely, you can have independence without democracy, but you cannot have democracy without independence. The elixir becomes a killer if it is not administered correctly. That is the danger of

the American policy in Iraq. Gandhi understood this perfectly It is a pity that his name is being erased from the scroll of memory at a time when his ideas have become indispensable. After Moscow Bush went to Georgia where he praised the "Rose Revolution" in which the people of Georgia got rid of dictators through non-violent struggle. This is the new dharma in a post-9/11 injustice should be non-violent Surely the greatest of the nonviolent wars was the Cotton Revolution led by Gandhi. It is unlikely that a speechwriter travelling with President Bush will mention the Cotton

Dr Manmohan Singh should have. The slogan of the French Revolution was "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity". The cry of the Cotton Revolution was "Liberty, Sovereignty, Nonviolence". The Cotton Revolution did not devour its children as the French one did. Instead of unleash ng terror it found space for children of many hues and a multiplicity of views, united not by any plastic ideology but by commitment to a nation.

Revolution. But a speechwriter with

I know that cotton is also called yarn in America, because it is spun. Trust me, President Bush: Gandh spun a loom around the British empire, but his doctorate was not in spin. Raise a cheer to the Cotton

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age

The slogan of the French Revolution was "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity". The cry of the Cotton Revolution was "Liberty, Sovereignty, Non-violence". The Cotton Revolution did not devour its children as the French one did. Instead of unleashing terror it found space for children of many hues and a multiplicity of views, united not by any plastic ideology but by commitment to a nation.

to the Burmese door of India. Japan lost the war when it provoked the United States at Pearl Harbour, and Hitler lost the war when he awakened the Soviet bear. Britain's contribution to real war came in Africa under Wavell (made Viceroy of India after he was replaced) and Montgomery. More accurately, it was the British empire's contribution, for empire troops were a critical element of the British armies.

Churchill, in a sense, was more mportant than Britain. His contribution lay in courage and conviction, and his power lay in rhetoric. It would be foolish to underestimate the importance of such qualities. Defeat begins in the mind and that is where Churchill refused to be defeated. This was in sharp contrast to France, where Marshal Petain, a genuine hero of the first war, compromised with Nazi evil. The figures tell the story: the Soviet Union lost 37 million dead. France does not advertise its casualty figures. although it was as key a battleground as eastern Furone.

America lost around a quarter million, but that is not a true measure of its contribution. Since the war was not fought on American soil it was spared the ravages of civilian agony. This was the true savagery of this horrific war. Nations who called themselves progressive and civil-

tuous Japanese victories that lims and Jews from Spain and brought Emperor Hirohito's rule up Portugal. Muslim kingdoms from Morocco to Ottoman Turkey provided space and shelter not only to the Muslims but also to the Jews who were welcomed as people of the Book and lived in those empires till the 20th century. The Communists, who under-

stand the relationship between motivation and definition, first ignored the Second World War as a clash between rival capitalist imperialists. Their analysis was right, but their complacency was wrong. Hitler turned towards the big prize, the Soviet Union, after he had occupied and pacified the rest of Europe and swept up to St. Petersburg and Moscow. But when Stalin began to fight back, he defined the war as the Great Patriotic War -- a defence of the homeland rather than an offense against Germany. It was a war of peration from the oppressor.

"Liberation" was a favourite word of the speech-givers in Moscow. But perhaps they should have extended the word into a term in order to complete its meaning. They were talking of self-liberation rather than liberation as a principle. In that sense, it was even a selfish liberation, for to the European powers liberation was never a universal virtue. Britain and France and even Holland and Belgium were the great colonisers in Asia and Africa, happy to brutalise black and brown people

died directly to France's account. General Charles de Gaulle, at best a pseudo-hero, was as contemptuous of the colonies of Francophone Africa as any dictator with a heightened sense of self. The Dutch had to be thrown out of Indonesia, which they happily demanded back from the Japanese after having done damn all to defeat Japan or Germany. Belgium, always pernicious in Congo, was eventually kicked out more than a decade later. The British left India with less

grace than they claimed, and might have been more stubborn had not the British electorate delivered a stunning defeat to Churchill in a general election just after he had saved his country from Germany Churchill had vowed never to preside over the liquidation of the British empire.

Such duplicity (one principle of freedom and independence for Europe and another for the colonies) led inevitably to contradictions. In the same week that Dr Manmohan Singh was in Moscow to applaud the Allies for their victories in Europe, Shyam Benegal released his biopic of Subhas Chandra Bose in which the Indian nationalist's escape from a British prison in Calcutta and his epic journey to Germany and Japan is a powerful theme. Bose, affectionately called Netaji, or the Leader, had a mature dialogue with Hitler who advised position was not quite the paradox it seemed: India would fight beside Britain, but only if permitted to do so as an independent nation. Jawaharlal Nehru took a dimmer view of fascism, and would have ioined the war effort, but of course he would never break rank with Gandhi, Jinnah had no qualms about supporting Britain in the darkest days of British despair. The rewards were handsome. The American President, Frank-

describe Hitler as evil. Gandhi's

lin Roosevelt, a Democrat who was also a democrat, was sympathetic to the colonies and championed the vision of a United Nations (his term) of free countries. But he died before the war ended. His successor Harry Truman wore conventional glasses and remained indifferent to a change that Roosevelt could perceive. And so after the Second World War ended, a genuine world war began, for freedom and liberation of the colonies from imperialists. There was no alliance, but each nation rose in anger and eventually found freedom. During the Cold War many of the former colonies preferred to trust the official antiimperialism of the Soviet Union to the neo-colonialism of the democratic West, but soon they realised that they had bought into an illusion. As East Europe proved and Afghanistan illustrated, the Soviet Union was an empire-monger as well

Revolution!

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE



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.

Prof. Naiyar Sultana

Naiyar Apa has left us. We will indeed miss her. But the good news is: she is now, in many respects, nearer to us than ever before through the loving memories we will carry throughout our life, at least in this world.

Naiyar Apa was a nice, gentle and smart lady with a strong faith in God. She was honest, courageous, helpful and determined. She was a highly knowledgeable and dedicated teacher, an amiable personality to her admirers, an excellent administrator and a good relationship builder. Her sense of duty was exemplary - for example, she continued discharging her responsibility and accountability as the Acting

Chairman of The Bangladesh Public Service Commission even when her aggressively progressive lymphoma was constraining her movements and other activities badly. In her service life, she had, both individually and as a team member, made a sizeable contribution to the development of Bangladesh, particularly in the field of science education, as well as public service. Her good work was recognised on several occasions by various organisations. May her soul rest in peace Dr. M.S. Haq

Distortion of Bangla

I have read with interest the views

expressed by Mr. Mahfuzul Haque (DS, 22.4.05) on the subject. Though I do not know much about the underground scenes prevailing at present but I have come across some recorded tracks of these bands, and found them to be bizarre; sung in distorted Bangla (Banglish?). By coincidence, only last night on ATN channel I saw a vocalist (for the first time) and got the shock of my life! Her accent, style, rendition, melody and the overall music was so English (typical R&B) that categorising these songs, as Bangla Pop/Rock would be a gross mis-statement. She would do better if she performed English compositions instead, and there is nothing wrong with it. Shaukat Islam

Savar tragedy A building came down like a pack of

cards, killing, maiming, suffocating, and dismembering over 200 human beings, repeat human beings. To date nothing has been done to bring the responsible persons to book. Why? Is it because some people are beyond the law in this country? Is it because corrupt officials have been appropriately bribed? Has the media also, so to speak, been managed? Why can't we have some transparency? Where is the

committee report due in three days?

Who is/are holding it back? Why is

the govt. so slow when it comes to

the question of helping poor peo-

ple? Some money was distributed to

some relatives of the dead. What a joke-- is that all? As if they are trying to make it a forget- and- forgive matter.

What about justice? It has died a slow death like those trapped under the concrete, screaming for help, but we could not help them... The rescue efforts should also be investigated. I do not believe Bangladesh has only one crane for heavy lifting. Why were other cranes not made available in time?

Who will answer these questions? I ask as a concerned citizen. Wasif Islam

Dhaka

Power supply to CHT The recently concluded workshop in Rangamati on the subject is a positive step towards

bringing power to a much needed area, which lacks in development because of paucity of power.

It could be guite true that availability of power by extending the national grid though the hilly terrain to remote small localities may not be economically viable as maintained by a consultant in the workshop. However, this alone need not rule the case out, considering the potential economic growth contribution.

Considering the terrain, scattered load points and other logistic shortfall it could be logical to have on spot mini power plants with associated localised power grid. generation units should have possibly hundred percent redundancy due to the adverse

circumstances of the CHT, principally because of terrain and distance from repair, replacement, trouble shooting and repairing expertise.

However, solar energy as a power option which was proposed is not the best. I personally feel that wind energy could be a better option. While solar energy is limited to hours of sunlight and also cloud free sky; wind energy can provide power irrespective of sunlight or cloud. On a very rough estimate, solar energy may be available around 2200 hours in a year which represents only 25 percent availability! In contrast wind energy availability should be much higher. Exact availability may be extrapolated from historic

meteorological date; which hopefully is available.

However, whichever route we adopt, the crux of the reality is that investment cost per KWH is bound to be higher compared to conventional power projects. We must at all time bear this in mind and not just negate the proposal on simple mathematical feasibility model. This could well be the case as the proposal undertakes it laborious route through various ministries prior to getting positive governmental nod.

Gulshan, Dhaka

S.A. Mansoor