

Ties with Malaysia

Let's continue down the positive path

THE recent ministerial level meeting of the Bangladesh-Malaysia joint commission headed by the two countries' respective foreign ministers seems to have been a fruitful initiative. Malaysia has pledged to take steps to reduce the trade gap between the two countries, to expand Malaysian investment in Bangladesh, and to increase our manpower exports to Malaysia as well. No less significant is the commitment to support Bangladesh becoming a member of the Asean Regional Forum.

In truth, none of this was unexpected. Last year a high level delegation headed by ex-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad came to Dhaka and engaged in extensive bilateral business negotiation, and we have long retained a good relationship with Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia has long been a good friend to us, and we are confident that the pledges made at the joint commission meeting will be honoured. But the ball is also in our court to follow up and convert the potential into reality.

To us, the significance of the meeting is that it cements the positive relationship between the two countries and promises to build upon this. We look at this as the very model of what our relations with a foreign country should be. The relationship is based on mutual respect and mutual interest.

Furthermore, we feel that the government could look to Malaysia as a model in terms of economic development. Malaysia has done a superb job in modernising and developing over the past few decades, and we could do ourselves a world of good by learning some lessons in terms of good governance from our Malaysian counterparts.

Closer links between Dhaka and Kuala Lumpur thus must be an integral part, both of our foreign policy and also in terms of the direction we take with respect to domestic policy. Not only can trade and investment from Malaysia continue to be of enormous benefit to Bangladesh, but we also can follow the Malaysian lead when it comes to industrial policy, establishing rule of law, infrastructure development, etc.

The need of the hour is to ensure that we nurture this relationship and follow up on its potential. Let closer ties to Kuala Lumpur not be another initiative marked more by fine words than by concrete policies and programmes.

Community involvement for road safety

Brac approach commends itself

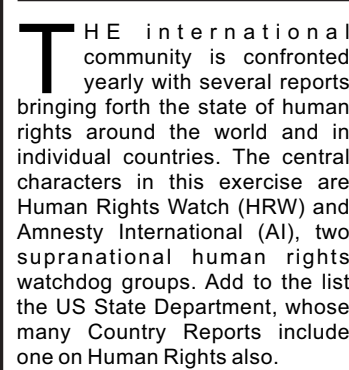
THE Roads and Highways Department and Brac organised a workshop on road safety and related issues in the city on June 6 against the backdrop of frightfully high incidence of road accidents in the country. Brac's community-based awareness building angle triggered a lively discussion with useful inputs from experts going into the shaping of a holistic approach as distinguished from piece-meal ones. There is no scope for adhocism and tokenism as far as the protection of human lives goes.

The organisers of Brac's awareness programme, we are told, had a shocking experience when they conducted training programmes for drivers. It is really disturbing to know that most of the drivers were found to be totally ignorant of traffic rules. Obviously, risk of accident will be vastly increased if a driver knows nothing about traffic rules. Yet, the lives of people are put into the hands of these untrained and inexperienced drivers. Under such circumstances, it is far from logical to blame accidents on destiny. We have clearly failed to eliminate even the controllable risk factors.

Other elements of Brac's programme include training pedestrians on road safety skills. This is also a very important matter, because pedestrians' indifferent attitude on the road accounts for a large number of accidents. The issue of supporting road accident victims also came up. Government decision-makers should take note of the recommendations made at the workshop.

The communications minister is for legal action against faulty vehicles and drivers without genuine licenses. The realisation, belated though, obviously needs to be acted upon now. What we believe is that the authorities should order them off the roads or have those that are repairable made road-worthy on pain of punishment. The minister also spoke of the government plan to redesign roads for ensuring greater safety of pedestrians. This is a long-term plan. But for now we would like to see the roads cleared of jalopies and trained drivers with knowledge of basic traffic rules put in charge of buses, mini-buses and trucks.

Archipelago of secret prisons and the immoral high ground



THE international community is confronted yearly with several reports bringing forth the state of human rights around the world and in individual countries. The central characters in this exercise are Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International (AI), two supranational human rights watchdog groups. Add to the list the US State Department, whose many Country Reports include one on Human Rights also.

These reports take stock of the state of individual and collective rights that are enjoyed or not enjoyed by peoples in various countries. Perhaps it is just as well that such an exercise is undertaken. If nothing else, at least it serves as a mirror for governments to see their probity reflected upon it. Although most governments reject the reports out of hand, it nonetheless serves as a progress report of the state of governance in countries where the political dispensation varies from democratic to pseudo-democratic to outright autocratic rule.

Not surprisingly, it is the third world countries that come in for a good deal of stick from these bodies for, in some of these countries, the abject state of individual rights defies one's imagination. But it is not only the third world countries that have been singled out, but also many developed countries, among which is the US, that have received a fair bit of mention in the latest AI report. The report highlights the deed or the

While one must accept the fact that our human rights state is not without blemish, it is a travesty that one has to bear with the scrutiny of one's state of human rights from those whose own standards of human rights have been called to question and whose actions around the world, particularly post 9/11, have done the most to degrade human rights worldwide.

While one does not question

national security and US national interest. But, pursuit of one's national objective cannot be bereft of principals and morality. The art of diplomacy may have stopped at the cliffs of Dover, unfortunately, the art of deceit, falsehood, and double standards have not. It is the use of falsehood and double standards that has caused the US to forfeit the right, which it has arrogated to itself, to judge others.

Let us see what the two HR watchdogs have to say about the US.

The Secretary-General of AI in her report released last week says that the US administration's role in weakening the "absolute ban on torture" is the primary and the most significant source of the year's set back on human rights. These are indeed very strong accusations against a country that credits itself as the purveyor of freedom and democracy around the world. The AI indictment of the US stems from the treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. In fact AI has accused the US of running an "archipelago of secret prisons" around the world.

But it is not just the treatment of prisoners that cast doubts over US credentials, the fact that torture was rationalised by the US as

ditionally ban torture." The AI report suggests that coercive interrogation has been justified by the US administration, which argued that it did not have to abide by the Geneva Convention while dealing with these categories of prisoners.

Guantanamo has been compared to the gulag; other practices related to the prisoners like the "ghost detainees," is a replication of a common practice in countries like Chile under Pinochet, who, by the way, was put there by the CIA. The practice of "rendering," which involves handing over of suspects to intelligence agencies of friendly countries that are known to practice torture, and setting up military tribunals to try suspects, according to the AI, have made a mockery of justice and due process. This puts the US in the same category as those that violate

international laws and conventions, and which the US chooses to refer to as "rogue states."

Not surprisingly, the US administration has dismissed these reports out of hand. Mr. Bush termed the AI report as absurd, being based on declaration of some people who are "cultivated for not telling the truth." The irony is that it is the AI facts and figures that the US most often relies on for its claims in its Country Reports on Human Rights.

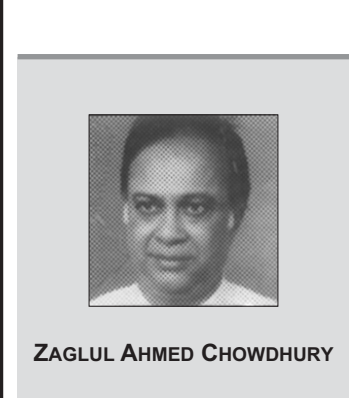
Human Rights Watch in its annual report published in January says that when a country as dominant as the US openly defies the law, it invites others to do the same. According to it, abuses committed by the US have significantly weakened the world's ability to protect human rights.

For many years now the US has been passing verdict on other countries' state of human rights, while at the same time actively supporting many of those countries guilty of violating it. Its use of Human Rights is merely a means of control -- where US corporate interest plays a very big part.

No doubt human rights is a universal good that is deserved by all. Its dispensation can neither be selective nor depend on the goodwill or whims of any particular country, certainly not on those who stand accused of running secret prisons around the world, and whose own human rights record is severely tainted.

The author is Editor, Defence and Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

Is Maldives moving towards representative rule?



OF late, there has been good news from the tiny state of Maldives. The parliament has approved the existence of political parties for the first time in the Indian ocean archipelago's history, in a move that would help end its long autocratic rule and pave the way for multi-party democracy.

Indeed this is something to cheer about since this South Asian nation has been intermittently facing pro-democracy agitation, and any step forward towards changing the pattern of governance definitely deserves kudos.

The parliament, known as the "Majlis" is made up of independent members, but it has decided to allow registration of political parties that would facilitate political parties oriented politics, an issue that caused unrest in the country last year.

President Mamoun Abdul Gayoom, who has been in power since 1978 and is Asia's longest serving ruler, earlier promised political reforms, but the pro-democracy activists were skeptical about his intentions.

The Maldivian democratic party (MDP), which operates from Sri Lanka, says that it will carefully

monitor the progress towards democratisation of the country. It's leader Mohammad Nasheed was among four activists arrested recently when government said they were taken into custody for fear of inciting unrest and were later released.

Nasheed, who returned to the country after self-exile for 18-months, said they would not relent until Maldives introduces multi-

party democracy. At least three parties have applied for registration including the MDP and President Gayoom's Maldivian Peoples Party after the parliament opened the way for multi party political system.

Civil societies in the South Asian region were not turning a blind eye to the developments in one of its smallest nations because the issue of representative authority is inextricably linked with the recent situation in the Maldives. It has been experiencing pro-democracy movement for sometime past and a state of emergency was declared last year there to quell the unrest.

This was not for the first time during the 25-year rule of President Mamoun Abdul Gayoom that the small but attractive tourists land was convulsed by demands for democratic rule. The undemocratic pattern of governance has been continuing for a long time.

The country of only three lakh

people is otherwise generally quiet and the ascendancy of President Gayoom is quite strong without any sign of slackening his authority. He is not known for any iron-fisted kind of rule. In fact, he has a sober and gentle image abroad which is not without any reason. President Gayoom, regardless of the size of his nation, is not unknown in the international arena, and he has

particularly played an active role in the growth and development of the seven-nation Saarc which has earned for him admiration in the region.

He is probably the only head of state in Saarc who has attended all the summits being a founder-leader of the regional forum. The king of another small state, Bhutan, is the other such leader who is still at the helm, but he has not taken part in all the Saarc heads of government conferences.

But the issue of democracy at home is altogether a different matter and there can be uproar if this is lacking in the country. President Gayoom is exactly facing the same. The promised political reforms have not come, hence the pro-democracy agitation in the Maldives.

South Asia is largely a democratic region as most of the countries here are practicing representative government for a long time. The case of Pakistan and Bhutan

is a little different since the former is yet to witness return of full democracy after an elected government was overthrown by the military in 1999. A kind of democratic rule is there following parliamentary elections and an elected prime minister is the head of government, but the real power is rested with the president, who remains in active service of the army as its head. Pakistan was

stripped of its membership in the Commonwealth following the removal of the elected government, but it was restored last year as the process of return of democracy highlighted by the parliamentary elections was taken into account. This development notwithstanding, the country is yet to revert to full representative authority.

The tiny Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan is clearly not a democracy, but the king possibly feels the need for giving up certain authority -- albeit slowly and in a limited way to the people -- and some signs are discernible in that direction. Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka are practicing democracies, while Nepal has unfortunately slipped back to effective monarchy. In recent times when the elected prime minister was dismissed in February and the king seized all powers.

A little further away, the South-East Asian countries have also

moved forward in the quest for democratic rule and some of them have admirably abandoned undemocratic and dictatorial form of governance. Indonesia, the largest of the nation in that region and biggest Muslim country in the world in term of population recently saw for the first time election to the presidency through direct popular votes. This is a great leap forward for

the country which was under one-man dictatorial rule for a long spell of 32 years not long ago. The Philippines is also having representative authority with a similar background of authoritarian rule not long ago. All these are commendable since people's wishes must be reflected in the system of governance and this is finding larger acceptance across the world as a logical corollary to the winds of change.

Maldives may be a small country but it has its own charm and importance. The leader of the nation is also respected otherwise in the regional and international context because of his image and intellectual firmness. However, what is evidently lacking in the Maldives is democratic rule. The MDP, which is campaigning for multi-party democracy, had alleged that pro-democracy activists are coming under all form of harassment. It is heartening to

note that things are now changing for betterment. It will be laudable if the persons at the helm in a country which is tiny but is well known for sophistication of its citizens and their standard of education moves towards representative authority.

President Gayoom appears to have felt the wind of democracy which are engulfing this picturesque land as well, and it is better the sooner it takes place. It will be additionally desirable if he has a role in that positive development for which he will be more commendably remembered in the history of the islands.

President Gayoom has been quoted as saying that multi-party system is crucial for functioning of a sound political pattern and the reforms in Maldives are taking place in that direction. He also said that the new constitution envisaging the reforms is expected to come into force from 2006. These all augur well for the small nation which was devastated by catastrophic tsunami late last year.

The political reforms in Maldives are certainly welcome developments even if they are not to the full satisfaction of the opposition at the moment. It sounds plausible that the country is moving towards democracy, at least based on what the president has said and what the Majlis has approved. South Asia's democratic credentials will enhance if the hitherto undemocratic nations -- Maldives and Bhutan -- embrace representative character, even if slowly.

Zaglul A. Chowdhury is the Foreign Editor of BSS.

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.

Why this commentary?

The front page commentary "How is the BNP paying tribute to its founder" by you caught my attention. Needless to say, I could not understand why you wrote this article. Did you use a solemn occasion like the death anniversary of Ziaur Rahman to rebuke all the leaders of BNP, including the prime minister?

Among other great qualities of the late president, you also mentioned that "the image of personally honest Zia and his financial incorruptibility reaches a level of incredulity when compared with the present reality of BNP and its leaders." Addressing the PM you also wrote, "Will the PM take up the challenge of making public how many sons, daughters, cousins, nieces, nephews of

party leaders are in big business and since when they came into their fabulous wealth?" This actually reminds me of the story of a student who memorised only one essay on "COW" and used it in every exam only by writing a few introductory lines on the top. Is "Rebuke BNP" your actual essay and Zia's death anniversary is just a few introductory lines to use the only essay?"

I respectfully suggest you to write a series of articles whose title could be "Let Us Expose Our Corrupt Leaders." These leaders could be from the BNP, AL, or any other party. You should mention the actual names and the documented corruption of these leaders and how much money they have gathered illegally. That is the service we expect from you.

Aziz Ahmad
134, New Eskaton Road, Dhaka

and adoration for the party and founder, on Zia's death anniversary.

After I witnessed the widespread looting, pillaging and pilfering in post liberation Bangladesh, I had pledged never to vote for AL. I think it is time for sensible Bangladeshis with a modicum of leftover ethics and conscience to take the same stance against the boorish, arrogant and obnoxious BNP. You really have to wonder if the liberation of this country has served the sole purpose for a bunch of criminal politicians, businessmen and 'student' leaders to get rich quick at the expense of the state and people. I hope I have not interrupted the burp of contentment and 'all is hunky dory in good old Bangladesh' crowd among the ruling coterie and other Pollyanna

Bangladeshis here and abroad.

Omar Khasru
On e-mail

I applaud the comments of Daily Star Editor Mahfuz Anam about how the BNP is paying tribute to its founder. We always had the same question in our minds and today you spoke for all of us. Thanks to The Daily Star and specially to Mr. Mahfuz Anam for such a beautiful and fact based commentary.

Will the BNP take some lesson from this and correct themselves to respect their founder?

Delwar Hossain
San Francisco, US

What a beautiful commentary! I just can't believe that a newspaper can publish such comments in Bangladesh. My great respect goes to Mr. Mahfuz Anam.

Shaun Chowdhury
System Analyst/Support
Jim Coleman Company

Dignity of judiciary

James Bryce aptly remarked that there is no better test of the excellence of a government than the efficiency of its judicial system. Judiciary is the guardian of the rights of man and it protects these rights. On the other hand, another eminent scholar said, "If the law be dishonestly administered the salt has lost its flavour; if it be weakly and fitfully enforced, the guarantees or order fail, for it is more by the certainty than by the severity of punishment that offenders are repressed. If the lamp of justice goes out in darkness, how great is that darkness". The observations are relevant in our context today.

We should bear in mind that the

chair of the chief justice is not merely a post, but it is an institution. It has a divine appeal, dignity, respectability and what not. But what are we watching today?

MAH Nazim
Dept. of Political Science
University of Dhaka

Computer tips

These days everyone uses a PC. In most of the Bengali dailies we find that they present "computer tips" which help a lot to solve and learn so many things.

It is very much useful in tackling some little problems and learning new tricks and "know-how" when we use a PC at home.

If Bengali dailies can give it, why we, the readers of The Daily Star, can't get this facility on daily basis? Please consider my appeal for daily "Computer Tips" in one corner of The Daily Star.

Dr. Shameem Hassan
On e-mail

Demise of a freedom fighter

He was involved in politics for 44 years in a row. He served the people of the city for 30 years. He played a huge role during the liberation war in 1971. He was a father figure, a guardian and a real leader of the town.

The veteran Awami League leader A.K. M. Muzammel Haque Chowdhury left us on 10 May, 2005. We pray for his departed soul.

Muhammad Bin Abdullah
Cox's Bazar