

## Positive talks in Delhi

### Stage set for a consultative process

THE positive note on which the long overdue Foreign Secretary level meeting between Bangladesh and India concluded in New Delhi on Wednesday is a welcome development. It is a reaffirmation of the oft-repeated intention of making dialogue the only means of resolving points of discord between two close neighbours. This will, as we can understand from the reports, set in motion a more comprehensive consultative process encompassing contacts at progressively higher levels between India and Bangladesh.

The fact that the joint statement came out a day later is inconsequential. What is important at the end of the day is that there was conformity of views on matters of common concern as much as there was the willingness to acknowledge the anxieties and perceptions of each other.

It is also heartening to see that as many as twenty-six issues have been addressed, that would in their own individual ways help enhance overall bilateral cooperation between our two countries. Noticeable is the fact that there are more matters on which the two sides agreed rather than disagreed.

No doubt the security concerns emerged as the major points of discussion. What was most encouraging was the very conspicuous attempt to face and address these concerns squarely and head on, instead of soft peddling or skirting them, hoping that they might disappear on their own one day.

Good neighbourly relations are built on the basic foundation of a shared willingness to acknowledge the genuine concerns of each other and being sensitive to the need for coming to grips with them. The most sensitive issue of border management must be taken up in right earnest. And in as much as we have shown our resolve to prevent our borders and territory from being used by miscreants, something that India have unhesitatingly expressed their appreciation for, we would expect reciprocation in the same degree by our neighbour in respect of miscreants seeking refuge in India.

The prospects for mutual benefits out of good neighbourly ties and cooperation are tremendous, and these must be fully realised to strengthen our relations further.

## Narsingdi by-election

### It could have been peaceful

SINCE the main opposition party Awami League did not take part in the Narsingdi by-poll, conflict and violence on the election day were the least anticipated turn of events. But what we witnessed instead was much different from what we thought of. Low turn-out, fake voting, intimidation by ruling party candidate supporters -- these are some of the reported allegations that filled the lead stories in newspapers. It was alleged that the ruling party supporters attacked polling agents of other candidates and took control of some centres by driving them away. We just do not understand why they had to resort to this. Were they not sure about their candidate or were they just trying to ensure his victory by means fair and foul?

They even allegedly chased and assaulted an independent candidate, who also emerged as the nearest rival of the ruling party candidate. Even the local police used baton in some places to disperse the independent candidate's supporters when they were reportedly going to lodge official complaints of vote rigging. Why and to prove what? This by-election was in the news in a different way when a controversy raged over the nomination of the ruling party candidate. Thanks to internal conflicts in the local BNP, supporters of other hopefuls created anarchy in the township.

And now with the allegations of irregularities, some of them pointed by a few monitoring groups, during the election day itself, there is another, albeit a more serious controversy, to take note of. We are simply shocked at the lack of tolerance by the ruling party supporters towards the opponent in a by-election which was not even contested by the main opposition party. They could have easily shown restraint. And especially since the issue of holding free and fair elections is a national concern, the by-poll should have passed off without any incident.

### MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

SENSATIONAL happenings emanating from the alleged Ershad-Bidisha feud that crossed the limits of the household and in the process engaged and occupied substantial time and space in both the electronic and print media of the country have amused many but without doubt portray an atmosphere of lack of direction in our mainstream politics. The nation would not benefit by venturing to find out those whose reported machinations behind the scenes are suspected to be instrumental in pushing the scandalous affairs of a fallen president into the forefront of national publicity. Equally disappointing is the apparent comical pretensions of an irrelevant and non-descriptor woman to attract people's sympathy with the questionable motive of creating a niche in the center stage of politics. Authorities that regulate the detention and custody have allegedly acted in a less than appropriate manner as legal experts tell us that the series of criminal cases lodged one after another against Bidisha do not have much substance in them to prima-facie justify her continued incarceration. That may be a matter for the courts to decide. However, the considered view is that the responsible citizens of the country should know whether non-events should dominate our public life at the cost of overlooking or shelving matters that in the penultimate year of a political government when a debatable budget is undergoing scrutiny and serious issues like the proposed reforms of caretaker government and the Election

Commission have not been resolved.

### Disproportionate publicity

Whether one likes it or not the fact remains that politics and politicians, for reasons better left unsaid, occupy a disproportionately large portion of our media reports. The cynics, however, say that in varying degrees the politicians are the promoters-distributors of favours and more so in our kind of a society and no wonder therefore that the favour-

frustratingly lackadaisical scenario.

The question that needs an answer is whether prominence in public life can be attained without some record of public service. Similarly, if the media should, willy-nilly, be a facilitator in furthering the career progression of questionable players. These are important issues demanding resolution because events of the last two weeks relating to the two persons mentioned hereinbefore and the manner of media coverage thereto have sent confusing signals to

tions of the four bad Roman emperors expedited the fall of the great Roman empire. That was a climate where distinction between good and bad evaporated and crass villains were placed on high pedestal of statercraft.

The point to ascertain is whether we are upstaging villains in our history because the fallen ex-president, according to many observers of our socio-political scene, stands accused of toppling a lawfully elected government through brute power and of corrupting almost all the institutions of

erate of self-serving lesser individuals.

The above observations do not mean that our socio-political scene has perceptibly changed for the better but the country definitely has a government enjoying mandate from the people and stands committed to hand over the reins of power, at the end of the stipulated period. It does not draw sustenance from the flexing of muscles of some quarter. Therefore, in the fitness of things, history should gratefully record the sacrifices of

### The desired way

The time has come to cleanse our political and public life. The so-called over-bearing political heavyweights whose real worth are doubtful need to be exposed so that people can choose at the appropriate time. There should be conscious efforts to accord less prominence to sensational stories. All concerned in the media can decide on the desirable course of action. Let the media be equivocal and forthright in saying that the single-minded pursuit of money impoverishes the mind, shrivels the imagination and desiccates the heart. We should not take more wrong turns at the crossroads, misuse our time and take gold for dross and dross for gold. We can face any crisis if we have the benefit of the correct facts.

The nation can no longer make the mistake of thinking that those who hunger for political profit or profit in the form of power are any less dangerous to the society. Our people will be further disillusioned if our democracy is not a rule by meritocracy. Therefore, thinking men and women must take the trouble of giving public expression to their views, otherwise the loud and vociferous voice of an incompetent minority will pass as the voice of the policy. They have to overcome the inactivity resulting from fatalism. Falsehood of the political brats can not be allowed to have too long an innings. Identity of views may not be possible but harmony of goals is. The profligate must not be allowed to overtake the pious in the political battle.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is former Inspector General of Police and Secretary to the government.

# The fallen and the fusty

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seeking satellites continue to hover around them. Under such circumstances, the less-than-holy relations between the favour-giver and the receiver make good news especially if there is a prurient dimension to the unfolding drama. The tabloids have their readers everywhere but they definitely are not the mainstream media. So when men and women of doubtful virtue succeed in getting undeserved attention that becomes a damper to the conscientious folks who are desirous of entering the public life. The political stage needs the vibrancy and grit of a new breed of politicians who are expected to lift the polity out of the

many, particularly the young and the impressionable. One has to know the rationale of precedence in our scheme of priorities relating to the national life.

### Heroes and the villains

History is replete with the graphic and sordid descriptions of the misdeeds and malevolence of the 'Neros' and the 'Caligulas.' Those being very exciting stuff draw the reader's attention instantly but momentarily because it did not do any good to the public cause. Students of history, however, evince keen interest in the achievements of Julius Caesar or Augustus Caesar. The depreda-

the state. His name is synonymous with autocracy and high handedness and all the evils that are associated with it. The massive tarnishing of the electoral process was initiated by him and the consequences are felt now. His was a time when even wife-swappers tried to become guardians of public morals. It was also the time when sense of propriety disappeared from public life and religion was put to unprecedented misuse. Accountability, both administrative and financial was at its lowest ebb and conspicuous consumption was officially patronised. All in all, there was a deliberate effort to convert our society into a conglom-

those valiant men and women who laid down their lives for the restoration of democracy. The struggle of small traders, school teachers, development workers, conscientious public servants working against odds, lawyers espousing public interests, physicians working quietly to alleviate miseries and many others should occupy larger space in our print and electronic media so that the present imbalance is gradually lessened. Let us believe in the proposition that every individual is of some worth and let that worth be recognised. This is important because media reports are history on the move.

# A deal on the wheels



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

standard in this country. Nothing is wrong unless it annoys the Prime Minister's Office. Did not others know about it, the people in the Ministry who must have seen their boss suddenly hopping in and out of a spanking new car? Did not any of his cabinet colleagues notice? Did not the car dealer who sold the car know where it was going? I know, I know. I am asking some pretty stupid questions, but that helps us understand the brotherhood of crooks that upholds wrongdoing

the same bucket can not go partially bad. If the now former State Minister could have taken a car, he might also have taken other undue favours. Who does not know the shopping list of a corrupt man? It includes cash bribe, foreign trips, land, houses and all other elements of creature comfort. On the surface he was not doing anything wrong. He was only trying to enjoy his life, have a little comfort, make a little money, a Chartered Accountant who was doing the books of his life. He took his col-

Yet he had gained from it on many counts. He got elected to the parliament, became a State Minister and got a second chance at life which, as it appears now, was wasted in the same roiling filth. He may have been a victim of party politics as others would like to claim. But he also has been a victim of his own doing, which has led to his embarrassment one more time.

Should we leave it to that only? Should we let him just step down from office and then continue to

the party in the first place, and then why he was let go of on easy terms once he stepped down. Perhaps politics is the magic detergent that washes all stains so that the same person returns like fresh laundry again and again.

How does it make sense to leave public trust in the hands of such people? And why should they not be subject to legal proceedings just like other felons? What signal does it send to those who are in line for future polities? Get power, abuse it, step down and go clean. If

man. As a certified Chartered Accountant, he failed to audit his own behaviour and comply with his professional standards. You do not take a fancy car from a company, which stands to gain within your sphere of influence. It is like a procedural incest when a keeper turns usurper.

The height of audacity is when a man leaving his office in disgrace shows the nerve to harangue others on morality, telling how Petrobangla had turned into a den of corruption. Look who is talking? He is given credit for much of that corruption and for fostering a culture of moral depravity. The same man was blaming others for doing what he had done himself, an outrageously remorseless response to his own outrageously loathsome action.

This is all the more reason why there should be an investigation. It is not enough to ask someone to step down if he does not feel humbled by the shame or guilt of his wrongdoing. He has not yet learned his lesson. That means he has not done his penance.

Can you imagine, giving away a prized position in life for a damn car? One has to be really silly to make a mistake like that, but there are people who cannot resist the temptation of the slightest thing. The path of greed always leads to a dead end. Others might call it a car, but I call it four wheels of misfortune, which looked like a deal until it crashed.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

## CROSS TALK

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in this country.

Then someone cared to notice. That is why the shit hit the fan and we got to hear about it. But was a car the only thing the Minister must have wrongfully taken from that company? Was it the only thing he must have wrongfully taken from any company? We would not know unless we investigated, unless we dug deeper into the scandal and looked for evidence of other misdeeds.

It is common sense that a man can't be partially corrupt like milk in

leagues on a tour of the United States, all expenses paid by a client company. It never occurred to him that what he did was like a judge and his clerk partying at lawyer's expense.

It's a shame though, shame because people of that stature demonstrate such despicable nature, that they stoop low without any scruples. There is also an amount of psychosis to it, a cuckolded man lashing out at the world on the same terms as it treated him.

represent his constituency in the national parliament? If killers at large is scary business, why should corrupt at large be any different? If doctors can loose their license for malpractice, if government officials can be sacked for insubordination, then why the people's representative should not lose his seat if found guilty?

The irony is that a corrupt man was given a cabinet posting and then asked to step down when he was found corrupt again. We do not know why he was chosen by

an 80-year old man can be tried in the United States for committing a crime forty years ago, why do we choose to look the other way if a public servant has lost his job over corruption less than forty days ago?

Too bad there are other reasons why the Minister has lost his job. Too bad there are other Ministers who are engaged in more or less the same level of corruption. But that doesn't exonerate him from what he has done, and that doesn't make us feel any better about the

## OPINION

# Black money

### DR. M. S. HAQ

AT present, a lot of debates and discourses are going on at various societal levels as to whether or not the country should allow, in the next fiscal year (2005-06), the continuation of the provision for whitening black money for the last time with an opportunity for the holders to pay a lesser amount of governmental tax (apparently, an incentive for the black money holders) than that of the tax payers whose source of income is supposedly transparent.

Several aspects of the proposal on whitening black money contained in the budget proposed for the fiscal year 2005-06 have been discussed. The people are exploring the possible impacts of the proposal on the economy, equity, human development and the country's upcoming general election, to mention a few. A good number of reasons in favour of not allowing any further extension of the option have so far been identified.

For the people of Bangladesh to take a final decision on the black money matter, they would be required to: evaluate more precisely and concisely the comparative advantages and disadvantages pertaining to the discontinuation of the provision legally beyond 30 June 2005 in the greater local, national and global interest; get themselves familiarised with the findings of cost-benefit

analyses (should be done in an honest and professional manner) on the option in terms of -- for example politics, economy, hunger, poverty, corruption and the country's immediate, as well as long term future. The people should be able to visualise now the big picture concerning the impact of their eventual decision regarding the black money matter on areas like, the opportunity costs, the economic and the financial costs, and the economic as well as financial losses and gains in the next fiscal year and beyond; make a determination as to how and to what extent, would the stoppage, in a comparative sense, be instrumental in increasing or decreasing the use of black money in the upcoming general election, per se; and take the decision in a realistic, forward looking, balanced and non-partisan manner; to mention a few.

Should the people decide in favour of the option, it will be morally proper for the government to reduce the tax burden on the honest tax payers by lowering the tax rate proposed on their income and the new rate should essentially be below the tax rate proposed for whitening black money.

The continuation of the option for a year will, however, not be sufficient for Bangladesh to fight against black money. It will require, among other things and as appropriate: a national policy; an influential and broad based

constituency, as well as partnership (including both in- and ex-country partners); a bunch of cutting edge strategies, effective institutions, as well as organisational coordination; a result-oriented, broad spectrum and sustainable operations framework; a reliable, transparent and accountable result monitoring and feedback system; more meaningful media support; a country-wide awareness building and advocacy programme; a mechanism for building and sustaining the people's ownership; and the commitment of the political parties and the leaders. The above requirements could, as applicable, be incorporated in the domain of nation-wide anti-corruption measures in order to take a holistic approach to meeting the challenges and using the opportunities in the above areas.

The bottom line is: the future of governance, human freedom (used in a wider sense of the meaning), democracy and development in Bangladesh are currently dependent, among other things, on how best and soonest Bangladesh could get itself freed from black money, corruption, and the present day power politics that are, in many senses, anti-people, anti-state and anti-world in terms of their nature, action and ramification, per se.

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### ABU IMRAN

REPORTS in the media early this month said that some transport operators had increased the transport fare by around 25 per cent following the fuel price-hike announced by the government. It was not surprising being a foregone conclusion. When government raises prices of some item, the backlash is reflected in the form of increase in the price of related goods and services which immensely affect the common people. Therefore in civilized countries, the governments hardly go helter skelter in raising prices of things under their control. In most cases, they remain restrained and give subsidies to keep the prices of essentials stable.

If I remember correctly, long before I had read in a book that at one point of time, a European country had allowed subsidy even up to 45 per cent to the farmers to keep the prices stable and save the people from hardship. That could be a story of more civilized world of the bygone days. But things are more or less so even today in some third world countries. In India they do so. Just last month when the Energy Minister here was unnecessarily arguing to increase the price of fuel, Indian government came up with a big no over the issue in their country.

However, now they have also raised it but it is not abrupt.

The fuel price hike came here at a most inappropriate time and on weak excuses. The time is inappropriate because prices of essentials had already gone high as a result of recent pay-hike allowed by the government for its employees. A hike in the fuel price now has compounded the miseries of common people because, with this prices of essentials have gone up further.

The other excuse for fuel price rise was that the world price of fuel had gone up. Might be the price has internationally gone up. But there could have been some justification in raising the price with rise of price internationally if the government had lowered the price locally when the international price of fuel had fallen. But this never had happened in the past. Only we hear of upward fixing of prices which they call 'adjustment'. Whatever name they give to the rise, the rise in price has its associated backlash to the distress of general people.

The next reason they cited was that the price of fuel in the neighbouring country was higher than here. So the fuel is smuggled into that country. The Energy Minister must be knowing that the prices of hundreds of items in that country are much lower

than those here in Bangladesh. That being so, do all those things are liberally smuggled into Bangladesh? Certainly not. If it were so, then the price differential would have been minimal between the two countries. And now with increase of fuel price in the neighbouring country also, again the difference persists. Should our authorities again raise its price here to check smuggling?

Further, fuel oil (petrol, diesel) if smuggled out, is certainly not done so in cans, jars or bottles. It must be carried in tankers and barrels. Do these become invisible that the personnel guarding the borders and outposts cannot see them go through? So the fuel may be smuggled out because of their negligence. And if so, then for their fault, the general public must not be punished.

The further next reason cited was that if fuel price was not increased, then BPC (Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation) would incur huge losses. Again it is a case of 'robbing Tom to pay Harry'. If BPC is inefficient, they should be taken to task, why the people? And BPC is not the lone government agency that makes losses. There are hundred and one who do so. If the government can afford to sustain 101, then they can easily sustain the 102. There is some logic in this proposition but not in

raising the price of fuel which has caused hardship to the people in the form of increased price of most of the essentials.

Even the government servants whose pay has been raised very recently have also been affected due to further increase in the price of goods and services. The benefit they got in the form of increased pay is now eaten away by the price hike. Probably they are at the same place financially where they were before the salary rise, for two simple reasons: (i) high inflation during the past few years and (ii) compounding of price spiral following pay-hike and the fuel price hike consecutively.

In view of the above the government should immediately review the fuel price, ask the transport operators to withdraw undue fare enhancement and devise measures to control the price of essentials. One of the ways to do so is to display price list of goods on sale. In the Philippines, I had seen that the shop keepers even print the price on the body of a small tomato let alone the big items. The sooner this is done the better so that the hardship faced by the people could be minimised.

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