

A close shave with disaster

Biman should get its act together

We are greatly relieved that all of the 215 passengers and crew aboard Biman's ill-fated DC-10 have survived what could have been a fatal accident. The aircraft skidding some 12 feet off the runway at Chittagong Shah Amanat International Airport, with one of its wings catching fire, the incident had all the ingredients of causing a disaster. We are thankful to the Providence for its benign intervention.

What can't but make one sit up and take note are the reported allegations of inefficiency against the pilot and of his being under the spell of alcoholic drinks while on duty. In fact, it is understood that on behalf of his colleagues a written complaint about him was made to the higher authorities, but in spite of this he was purportedly made chief of safety. A five-member probe committee which has been promptly constituted to go into the accident is expected to shed light on this.

If these allegations are proven following the investigation, then it is only natural that serious questions about flight safety would arise in the public mind. First and foremost, however, one would like to know whether any inquiry was instituted into the allegations to determine their validity or otherwise, so that preemptive action could have been taken in good time. The civil aviation authority must find answers to these questions because it is a matter of safety for many people who choose to fly Biman.

There have been as many as three plane accidents in the last one year. Technical faults were mainly cited as reasons for the mishaps not to the exclusion of a mix of human factors, though. Biman badly needs to spruce up its image in a highly competitive world of civil aviation commerce where safety standards are prime considerations in making choice of airlines.

On and off, there have been controversies over how much of an older vintage some of our aircrafts are as well as over purchase deals, etc. It's high time the government took the matter seriously and assured the Biman clientele of good safety and service standards.

Structural flaw in river-crafts

No time for wrangling, remove it

A reported face-off between the shipping directorate and the launch owners has revealed some glaring defects in the designs of launches plying on different river routes. The finding is significant, given the dismal statistic that more than 4,000 people died over the last decade in launch disasters.

The primary cause behind launch capsizes, as found by the shipping directorate engineers, is that most of the vessels do not have a solid ballast, and, to make matters worse, they are structurally top-heavy. Resultantly, they can't withstand the pressure of sudden gusty winds. It is really disturbing to learn that 212 out of 312 launches that came under scrutiny are faulty in some way or the other.

Little wonder, so many launch disasters took place over the last few years. The directorate officials admit to having failed to make the owners comply with the rules because of the latter's clout and influence holding sway over them. Politically influential vessel owners have managed to thwart attempts at setting things right. They resort to strike when safety standards and other rules are sought to be enforced and passengers are the ones to suffer. Political meddling into application of law has created a situation where the concern for the safety of passengers is being totally ignored.

It is no secret that a huge number of vessels are not river-worthy. The issue is usually raised after every launch capsizes which triggers a public uproar, with the government promising to take all kinds of corrective measures, but very little happens on the ground. The navigational rules are laid down, only to be flouted with impunity. Even over the latest findings the owners are skeptical and have dismissed the allegations brought against them as baseless.

The government has to take a firm stand on the matter. The task on the decision-makers' hands is to neutralise the owners' clout and have them go by the rules on pain of losing their business. They must not forget that the rainy season has begun and human lives are once again exposed to danger. There is absolutely no room for laxity.

Reducing the leave of absence from parliament

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

WHILE speaking in parliament on June 29 the minister for local government, rural development and cooperatives and secretary general of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan suggested enactment of law with provisions that would lead to vacation of a lawmaker's seat if he was absent from parliament, without leave, for ten consecutive sittings. Also this would disqualify him from taking part in the election for one term. There have been mixed reactions to the above proposals. The main opposition Awami League's (AL) secretary general Abdul Jalil has termed the proposals as digging the BNP's own grave. In his reaction Gono Forum general secretary Saifuddin Manik has said that something should be done to make parliament effective and to create an atmosphere where the opposition can speak without hindrance. Workers Party president Rashed Khan Menon has termed the proposals as an insult to the lawmakers. It is expected that some other opposition political parties will shortly come up with their reactions.

The constitution of Bangladesh provides that a member of parliament shall vacate his seat if he is absent from parliament, without the leave of parliament, for ninety consecutive sitting days. Rules of procedure of parliament (ROP) clarifies that leave of absence applied for at any one time shall not exceed a period of ninety days. Let us now see what the constitutions in some countries including our neighbouring countries say on the vacation of seat by an MP on grounds of his absence from the sessions and / or sittings of parliament. The place of a member of the Sen-

ate becomes vacant if he is absent from two consecutive meetings of the Senate without having obtained the permission of the President of the Senate.

According to the Australian constitution, the place of a senator shall become vacant if for two consecutive months of any session of the Parliament he, without the permission of the Senate, fails to attend the Senate. The place of a member of the House of Represen-

question arises as to why the leave of absence of the MPs should be substantially reduced?

First, countries having a parliamentary system of government normally have bi-cameral legislature. But Bangladesh has got a unicameral legislature in which is vested the legislative powers of the Republic. A bi-cameral legislature in countries such as Britain, India, Australia, Canada provides checks and balances in lawmaking. The

It has been noticed that during the last thirteen years or so, the lawmakers of the main opposition party have taken advantage of article 67 (1) (b) of the constitution, which saves their seats in the House even if they remain absent from parliament without leave of absence of parliament for eighty-nine consecutive sitting days. This period normally encompasses more than one session of parliament. Instances are there to show that during a period of eighty-nine consecutive sitting days, MPs from the main opposition party attended sitting(s) of parliament for a day or so to save their seats. But they have never hesitated to take all the remuneration and privileges of lawmakers without discharging their constitutional responsibilities.

period of sixty days.

The constitution of Pakistan says that a House (the National Assembly or the Senate) may declare the seat of a member vacant if, without leave of the House, he remains absent for forty consecutive days of sittings.

The 1990 constitution of Nepal provides that the seat of a member of parliament shall become vacant if he, without the leave of the concerned House (the House of Representatives or the National Assembly), absents himself from thirty consecutive meetings of the House.

The constitution of Fiji provides that the place of a member of the House of Representatives becomes vacant if he is absent from two consecutive meetings of the House without having obtained the permission of the Speaker to be absent. The place of a member of the Sen-

tates shall become vacant if for two consecutive months of any session of the Parliament he, without the permission of the House, fails to attend the House.

The 1996 constitution of South Africa provides that a person loses membership of the National Assembly if that person is absent from the Assembly without permission in circumstances for which the rules and orders of the Assembly prescribes loss of membership.

It appears from the above discussion that the lawmakers of Bangladesh enjoy the privilege of leave of absence from the sittings of the House for the maximum days.

The civil society leaders, the print media and others raised proposals earlier to substantially reduce the leave of absence of the MPs from the sittings of parliament. The

members of unicameral parliament of Bangladesh are not only responsible for making laws but also for other matters ancillary thereto. These include, *inter alia*, (i) electing the President of Bangladesh, (ii) electing the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker of parliament, (iii) participating in the deliberations of parliamentary standing committees on ministries and other parliamentary committees, (iv) asking questions in the House on the performance of the ministries, departments, autonomous bodies and enterprises, (v) moving resolutions in the House relating to matters of general public interest, (vi) moving a motion expressing want of confidence in the cabinet, (vii) removing the Speaker or the Deputy Speaker, (viii) impeaching the President. To discharge the above functions and responsibilities

two major political parties namely the BNP and the AL, the main opposition party has resorted to hartals and sustained boycott of parliament. The process is still on. The sole objective of boycotting parliament by the main opposition party from time to time has been to make parliament dysfunctional and thereby force the party or alliance in power to step down. The sustained boycott of parliament by the main opposition party from time to time has not only obstructed the functioning of parliament but also put the nascent democracy of the country at stake. So, there is need for legal measures to make it obligatory for the lawmakers to attend the sittings of parliament.

Third, it has been noticed that during the last thirteen years or so, the lawmakers of the main opposition party have taken advantage of

article 67 (1) (b) of the constitution, which saves their seats in the House even if they remain absent from parliament without leave of absence of parliament for eighty-nine consecutive sitting days. This period normally encompasses more than one session of parliament. Instances are there to show that during a period of eighty-nine consecutive sitting days, MPs from the main opposition party attended sitting(s) of parliament for a day or so to save their seats. But they have never hesitated to take all the remuneration and privileges of lawmakers without discharging their constitutional responsibilities.

Last but not the least, it appears that in the countries having a long tradition of parliamentary democracy the leave of absence of the MPs does not exceed sixty days. Bangladesh has little experience of parliamentary democracy. According to political scientists and analysts, the success of a parliamentary democracy depends upon a number of factors such as democratic spirit of tolerance, devoted sense of respect and relentless response towards the institutionalism of democracy. Bangladesh is yet to satisfy the above conditions for the successful functioning of parliamentary democracy. This necessitates a vibrant parliament which is possible with the participation of lawmakers belonging to the ruling party/ alliance and the opposition.

To conclude, the greater national interest demands substantial reduction in the leave of absence of the MPs. The leave of absence at any one time should not exceed thirty consecutive sitting days.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary to the government

Sometimes strange bedfellows

RON CHEPESIUK

IT'S widely believed that Christian evangelicals in America compromise a powerful, monolithic religious block that invariably votes Republican and is fixated on abortion and same sex marriage as political and social issues. Indeed, Christian evangelicals are widely credited with delivering the 2004 presidential election to one of their own: George Bush, Jr. That belief, however, may be based on one of the biggest myths that's shared by not only many liberals but also conservatives. People like Karl Rove and Ralph Reed have done a brilliant job of wedging the evangelical community to the Republican Party." Tony Campolo, evangelical minister and author and founder of the Evangelical Association for the Protection of Education, said recently in MSNBC television interview. "And so when you begin to think about evangelicals, you begin to think in terms of the values of the right wing of the Republican Party."

Depending on how researchers ask the question, some 25 to 45 percent of the U.S. population report that they see themselves as either born-again or evangelical Christians. About 30 million Americans belong to member churches of the National Association of Evangelicals. In political terms, these are sizeable percentages and numbers that dwarf by millions of members such prominent political action groups as the National Rifle Association and labour groups as the Teamsters and AFL-CIO.

But as political analyst Chip Berlet pointed out in an article in the summer 2003 issue of Public Eye magazine, "...contrary to the impression fostered by the direct-mail rhetoric of many liberal groups, not all evangelicals are part of the Christian Right, and some evangel-

cals are actually politically liberal or progressive." In noting the high profile evangelical Christian leaders involved in American public life, liberal groups tend to count the usual prominent conservative evangelical leaders-Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, James Dobson, and, of course, George Bush, Jr. But they fail to remember Martin Luther, Jr. and to include prominent liberal evangelical personalities such as Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, Rick Warren, best-selling author of the "Purpose-Driven Life", and Jim

Call to Renewal was organised by Jim Wallis, whose magazine, Sojourners, styles itself a progressive Christian community focused on faith, politics and culture. At about the time of the Call to Renewal's founding in 1995, Wallis said in an interview that "social movements change history more than finding the right person for office. It's the difference between trying to create moral authority and seizing power. Pharaoh has the power, but Moses has the authority."

Jim Wallis is the author of the

INSIDE AMERICA

So America may be polarised, but some common ground exists upon which liberals can meet and even work with evangelical Christians. As Madeleine Albright, the Secretary of State in the Clinton administration, told USA Today: "Within the American political spectrum, the religious right and international left stand at opposite poles, but on humanitarian issues, it's more a circle than a straight line."

Wallis, Sojourners magazine publisher and best-selling author. In a broad sense, conservative and liberal evangelicals share a common religious experience. They are born-againers who believe that the Bible is the word of God and that they should help spread his message. But within these broad groupings are varieties of evangelical experience, ranging from the fundamentalists who reject evolution and believe in the literal truth of the Bible to the more moderate but still conservative traditionalists, who are trying to maintain their traditional beliefs in a changing society, to the ethnic evangelicals, Blacks and Latinos, who total about 267 million in numbers and tend to favour the Democrats in politics, to the progressive liberals, who believe their brand of evangelicalism should include a social conscience.

And the Call to Renewal. Founded in 1994, the Interfaith Alliance describes itself as the faith-based voice that's countering the radical right and promoting a positive role for religion. It has 109 chapters in 39 states and 150,000 members from more than 70 religious faiths, including Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims. The Alliance provides training, research, education and support to grassroots religious groups working to promote social justice in their communities.

Among its recent actions, the Alliance opposed the passage of an amendment in the US House of Representatives this June that prohibited law enforcement from removing a Ten Commandment display in Indiana. The Reverend Dr. C. Welton Gaddy, President of the Interfaith Alliance, described the congressional move as "an extreme act of congressional activism." The

current best-selling "God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It." In Wallis's view, religious conservatives are co-opting the religious language and are using it to polarise America, while liberals shun the idea of religion in American life, even though Christianity's true mission-working for peace and correcting social ills-is in line with those values. In an interview with the Dallas Morning News, Wallis said: "So a number of us in this country as Christians, as evangelicals, are waiting to see policies that reflect the language and the intention of a faith-based initiative or compassionate conservatism. We are not seeing policies that benefit poor people in this country or around the world. That, for us, is a religious concern, not just a political one."

But many conservative evangelicals, even social policy issues have joined the agenda. This has led them to develop broader alliances in some really odd ways." There have been several developments in recent years to illustrate Professor Green's point. For example, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 was passed, thanks to a broad alliance that ranged from Charles Colson, born again former Nixon aid convicted in Watergate to feminist Gloria Steinem. In 2004, a coalition of Korean Americans and conservative Christians helped push the North Korean Human Rights Act through Congress. The act directs the US government to stress human rights issues and nuclear proliferation in dealing with North Korea. Conservative Christians were also involved in the recent campaign to cancel the \$40 million owned by poor nations to international organisations

such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

Last year, the National Association of Evangelicals adopted a new position statement on social engagement titled "For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility." In the manifesto, the Association pledged to "protect the vulnerable and poor and guard the sanctity of human life, to further racial reconciliation and justice, to renew the family, to care for creation and to promote justice, freedom and peace." With regard to the pledge to "care for creation", evangelicals have shown that they are committed to walking the talk. For instance, the National Association of Evangelicals, together with other religious groups, have joined with scientists to call for action on global warming, or climate change, as many conservative evangelicals prefer to call the issue, under the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, which states that "global warming is an universal moral challenge." Meanwhile, Senator Joe Lieberman (D-Conn) and John McCain (R-AZ) have reportedly sought out evangelical support for an amendment they are sponsoring that will limit global warming pollution.

So America may be polarised, but some common ground exists upon which liberals can meet and even work with evangelical Christians. As Madeleine Albright, the Secretary of State in the Clinton administration, told USA Today: "Within the American political spectrum, the religious right and international left stand at opposite poles, but on humanitarian issues, it's more a circle than a straight line."

Ron Chepesiuk is a visiting professor of Journalism at Chittagong University and the author of recently released "Drug Lords" (see www.ronchesepiuk.com).

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



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.

Good job, Apollo!

I just would like to convey my sincere gratitude to the Apollo Hospital, its doctors, and staff and the management for the superb service they provided to my daughter and me recently.

I was truly pleased to see that the management of this hospital has taken keen interest in developing world class health care in Bangladesh. This once again proves that good things are possible even in Bangladesh! I hope the very best for this hospital and wish that all other healthcare providers in our country be even more caring in their dealings with patients badly in need of professional care and support.

Rahat, Dhaka

Introduce bus service

I am a student of BUET. My brother also studies in BUET. We are residents of Jigatola. Like us many students studying either in DU or BUET have to go to university using

the narrow rickshaw path in the Newmarket portion of the Mirpur Road. Bus service is unavailable on this route. The road is very narrow and only two lines of rickshaws can be pulled. So traffic jam is a daily phenomenon here.

Rickshaw-pullers also don't want to go through the road. So we often suffer from many problems. We need a bus service on Mohammadpur-Jigatola-Newmarket route immediately.

Md. Musfiqul Alam, BUET

How many more premature deaths?

Thousands of children are victims of premature deaths. Yet there is no action from the government. The political weather is more muddy and sticky. The news in the press is hotter and more spicy, and it is being lapped up like jhaal-moori and chaatpoti. At long last, the political virus has hit the political godfathers (and godmothers, if any), and the

own will and don't care about the law.

They kill people mercilessly and they are never punished. If this continues, I believe our future is very bleak. Launch after launch is sinking and people can't even take their loved ones' bodies.

One after one student is dying and yet there is no law that can stop those drivers from driving recklessly. The way trucks and the buses move, you can be sure that they are going to do harm to the pedestrians or to the vehicles smaller than them. Hasib, Dharmundi

Political virus

The monsoon is late, and it is hot, humid and sultry weather. The political weather is more muddy and sticky. The news in the press is hotter and more spicy, and it is being lapped up like jhaal-moori and chaatpoti. At long last, the political virus has hit the political godfathers (and godmothers, if any), and the

chain reaction is expected to boom in the coming weeks. It is a self-cleansing process, approved by timeless nature.

After the resignation of the state minister for energy, the chairman of BTTB has been replaced (alleged sabotaging one limb of the ICT sector). Note the two key areas of 'development': energy and telecoms. More scapegoats are in the processing line for sacrifice; because the political pando's box has been opened, and political AIDS and HIV are out in the environment, to benefit awareness of the masses (note the recent government advertisement on BTV on AIDS awareness!).

Also notice how party field workers are being rubbed the wrong way by Rab teams. It is not quiet on any front. Leakage ooze out for many reasons: planned leakage, reprisal leakage, revenge leakage, aggrieved leakage, tit-for-tat leakage, and you name it. We are bugged with systems losses every

where. The correct term is corrupt practice. It needs two palms to clasp (or clasp). Like the collapse of the 9-storey RMG factory, the political tsunami warning is on (yellow signal). We need a huge political flood to wash out the debris (and reputations).

A good purging is needed before the next general elections