

EC infighting going too far

A body-blow to credible electoral preparation

WHILE the Election Commission needs urgent reform to be strengthened, empowered and rendered independent from executive interferences, whatever remains of its functional authority stands compromised by internal squabbles at the moment. This is highly regrettable, particularly because the time is running out for adequate preparations for the upcoming general election.

The long-running battle between the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and the two commissioners over fresh voter list versus an updated electoral roll, has come to a head. The CEC has opted to go it alone with his decision for a new voters' list. To prepare this, he has apparently arranged with the ministries concerned to recruit 2.4 lakh enumerators, 70,000 supervisors, 6,235 assistant registration officers and 83 registration officers. Even a detailed schedule has been drawn up unilaterally for completion of recruitment by November, the incumbents' training by December and commencement of the voter-list preparation in January. In all of this, the two election commissioners were not consulted -- in any real sense. The CEC might like to argue that the election commissioners had been repeatedly issuing their note of dissent and since he had a timeframe to maintain, he could not wait indefinitely on the issue.

On a closer look, his argument does not stand to reason. It can be assailed by recourse to an honest evaluation of his approach in this particular case. First of all, he has not made any credible attempt to bridge the gaps between himself and the two election commissioners on the question of a new voter-list.

As an experienced person in the legal world, he must be fully aware of the distinction between a commission (that too a statutory and a constitutional one) and a one-man authority. Above all, what appears to be an inexplicable folly on his part as the leader of the commission is his failure to convene a meeting of the commission for the last three and a half months. If held, the interaction would have helped iron out the internal differences. Or at least, the next course of action could be determined through a consensual approach which is regarded as indispensable for fostering public confidence in the Election Commission.

If the CEC embroils himself deeper into a controversy, the credibility of the whole election machinery will come under question.

That is the note of warning we would like to issue.

Outbreak of dengue

Government should be more pragmatic in efforts to contain the scourge

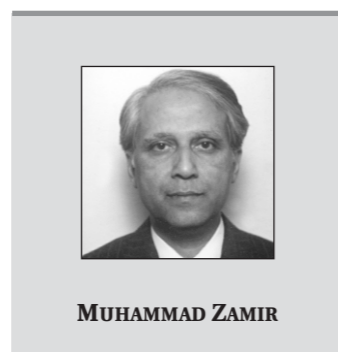
ALONGSIDE the prevalence of many other tropical diseases in Bangladesh dengue too is becoming a regular public health hazard. This year, as observed by medical experts, the outbreak is due to early rains preceding the onset of winter resulting in the breeding of the Aedes mosquitoes. A good number of patients are already undergoing treatment in both private clinics and public hospitals all over the country.

We are concerned. While the government is often accused of underplaying the outbreak of the deadly disease, our medical experts too have not been able to come up with any clear picture of either diagnostic or preventive measures for the benefit of the public. We strongly feel that there should be a more concerted scientific approach in tackling the disease aimed at its ultimate eradication.

For long Bangladesh lived under the scourge of Malaria caused by yet another variety of mosquito, that claimed thousands of lives all over the country. Today we know of only a few isolated cases in years. And as Dengue too is a disease caused by mosquitoes we feel that the government should facilitate extensive research on the various aspects of the disease and find ways and means leading to its eradication. Collaborative research could be undertaken involving both national and international expertise including resources from within the country and other interested private and public bodies from similar climatic zones having similar vulnerability. As a first step towards that direction consideration could be given to research initiatives between scientists and medical experts of the public sector and ICDDR,B which has a longstanding credible record of public health covering both rural and urban population of the country. It also has the required infrastructure by way of diagnostic facilities and other related resources.

In the meantime, government should ensure availability of proper, prompt and adequate medical services for treating Dengue patients at affordable costs. A public awareness campaign against the disease should also be geared up.

Dhaka Declaration and post-SAARC Summit action



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE 13th SAARC Summit has come and gone. We have had a week of extra-ordinary security, lots of meetings at various levels, and as expected, an agreed Declaration re-affirming various steps that are expected to lead towards greater South Asian unity. The fact that the twice postponed meeting could be convened at all tempts one to suggest that it was a success story.

Twenty years have passed since the First SAARC Summit declared that notwithstanding the misunderstandings of the past, 'regional cooperation is necessary, desirable and mutually beneficial.' Two decades later, the SAARC leadership met again in Dhaka and tried to ascertain whether the SAARC process had been able to foster confidence and trust within the region. They also tried to assess whether the seven countries were looking at their problems in a regional as opposed to only individual or bilateral contexts.

The SAARC leaders in their 53 point Dhaka Declaration agreed on the need to improve regional relations, to expand the group, to create a regional disaster management centre, to implement SAFTA and to reduce poverty over the coming decade. They also signed three major agreements, all for facilitating intra-regional trade-Agreement on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Customs Matters, Limited Agreement on Avoidance of Double Taxation and Agreement on the Establishment of SAARC Arbitration Council.

Yes, on paper it appears that many pious intentions have been agreed upon. However, analysis of the Declaration indicates that while the leadership agreed to achieve certain objectives, they left the hard task of implementation to decisions to be undertaken in future meetings. Modalities and regulatory mechanisms pertaining to the implementation of

Summit decisions have not been clarified. This will only create delay.

For example, a lot of effort has gone into identifying South Asian Development Goals and steps towards poverty alleviation. This has been done because higher population growth juxtaposed with lack of education and healthcare has made the South Asian population more vulnerable. It has also been prompted from the realisation that lack of regional cooperation is directly contributing towards the slow pace in the reduction of poverty.

The leadership has agreed that effective tackling of this complex phenomenon will require not only an active

SAARC Charter which states that "in case sufficient financial resources cannot be mobilised within the region for funding activities of the Association, external financing from appropriate sources may be mobilised with the approval of or by the Standing Committee." I believe that this opens the possibility of acquiring additional funds, if so required, from international donor agencies like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

It was also satisfying to see that the South Asian leadership understands that poverty reduction will require the creation of a more technically educated human resource base. It may be recalled

the last few years has had more than its share of floods and earthquakes. It has also had to bear the brunt of a devastating tsunami.

The recently concluded Summit has seen agreement on the need for protecting the environment, controlling population and preparing for natural disasters. More than one leader reminded us of the need for forging closer ties and deriving benefits from the synergy of collective, well-planned and focussed initiatives. It was also underlined that SAARC should evolve regional mechanisms for effective and timely cooperation pertaining to disaster relief and management and also to addressing health emergencies. It was

I now turn to the question of facilitating trade within SAARC. The Summit stressed on the importance of the entry into force of the SAFTA Agreement. This reflected that despite general understanding on all sides about regional economic cooperation, differences remain. The existence of comparative advantage on similar products -- textile materials and products, leather and leather products, agricultural products and fresh fish -- within South Asia appears to be hampering progress.

The SAFTA agreement was signed during the 12th SAARC Summit in January, 2004 and was expected to enter into force in January 2006. That does not

Convention on Suppression of Terrorism but have refrained from any reference to the need for agreeing to a fast-track extradition procedure for criminals and terrorists who have sought sanctuary in one SAARC state after perpetrating criminal acts in another SAARC country. This step is vital for any effective engagement. The European Union is already profiting from such a uniform measure. Our leadership should try to replicate this in South Asia.

I cannot however conclude this column without three other observations.

SAARC members need to reconcile themselves with the fact that there have been changes in the international scene. They have taken the right decision to expand the horizon of SAARC by including Afghanistan in the process and agreeing to accord the status of Observer to China and Japan. Ways and means must also be found to strengthen the SAARC Secretariat by empowering and authorising it to undertake meaningful dialogues with the ASEAN, the EU and the UN. This will enhance the prestige of the Secretariat and add to the importance of the South Asian institution in the international arena.

The second relates to the need for the SAARC Summit not only to convene their meetings annually, as scheduled, on a regular basis, but also to meet if possible, at least one more time within the year. They should also try to devolve the power of decision making to the ministerial level, so that the secretariat can implement decisions without delay. Meetings also need to be more functional and less extravagant and ritualistic.

The last relates to the undertaking of a conscious effort to create a South Asian mind-set among the peoples of the region and their leadership and remove the 'trust deficit.' Pakistan's Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz has quite aptly underlined the need to 'move from conflict management to conflict resolutions through credible solutions and sharing of best practices.'

This will be the only way to firmly embed the footprint of SAARC in this region. The current SAARC Chairperson has less than a year to prove this before the Caretaker Administration takes over. Within these ten months we can either have effective leadership or several rounds of meaningless meetings.

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POST BREAKFAST

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engagement but also the creation of a suitable Fund. Accordingly, they have decided to establish a SAARC Poverty Alleviation Fund (SPAFA). Agreeing on suitable operational modalities with regard to the Fund has however been left to the Finance/Planning Ministers -- and that means further delay.

At the present moment we have a South Asian Development Fund (SADF) with USD 6 million in its coffers. In the absence of clear guide lines, its activities have suffered. The SADF has so far financed a negligible number of feasibility studies of poverty reduction projects. They have also been unable to implement any of them due to resource constraint. This hesitation has similarly led to indecisiveness with regard to use of the US dollar 100 million already offered by India for undertaking poverty reduction measures in the six member states of SAARC other than India.

I can only hope that this time round the responsible SAARC authorities will take meaningful steps to raise the capital and speedily launch the agreed SAARC Poverty Alleviation Fund. This Fund could be mobilised through contributions from Member States as well as individuals. I also strongly suggest that the Member States should consider taken advantage of Clause 3 of Article IX of the

that the SAARC Human Resource Development Centre (SHRDC) was established in Islamabad in 1999 with the objectives of undertaking research, imparting training and providing information on human resource development. Six years later, it has hardly made any progress.

In view of that, it was heartening to note the Indian Prime Minister's proposal to set up a South Asia University. It is the mind-set behind this idea that is laudable. However, instead of starting another new institution, it might be advisable to undertake capacity building, expansion and strengthening of the existing facility. We already have excellent educational institutions that can easily transform SHRDC into an institution of excellence through indirect support. One hopes that the SAARC leadership will now address their attention to this important matter and take necessary steps. This is vital, given the region's need for focussing on agriculture and pisciculture (the mainstay of economic activity for the billion strong rural population of this region) and also on information technology.

I will now turn to meaningful cooperation not only with regard to prevention of natural disasters but also in the tackling of the aftermath of disasters. South Asia, in

also suggested that a SAARC Health Surveillance Centre needs to be established. These ideas look good on paper but what about implementation? It is not clear as to who will be responsible for getting these ideas off the ground and who will bear the related expenditure in what proportion. I express my anxiety in this regard because infrastructure building can easily be affected by mistrust and competing interests.

We have to understand that pious intentions and agreement on paper will be meaningless without concrete action. It would have been advisable if the SAARC leadership, instead of widening the agenda had generated more dynamics with regard to past agreed programmes. That does not seem to have taken place.

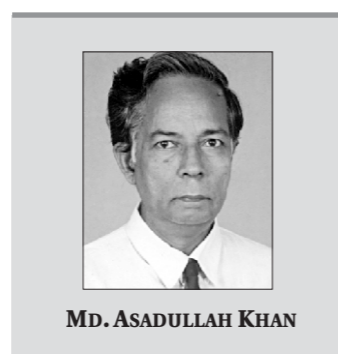
A SAARC Plan of Action on Environment already exists. The SAARC Summit this time round, could have focussed more closely on this, and ascertained why this is not moving forward. For example, a decision could have been taken to create a Task Force for drafting a Regional Environment Treaty. They could have also pledged funds and resources for this purpose. Nothing like that happened. There was also no agreement on the need for establishing a Disaster Management Directorate within the SAARC Secretariat.

look likely at this moment. The committee entrusted with the task of completing negotiations on the four outstanding issues of sensitive lists of origin, revenue loss compensation mechanism and technical assistance has not been able to finalise agreed formulas. They have whittled down differences on sensitive lists and rules of origin but disagreements still remain. Greater efforts are required to reduce all barriers to trade, not just tariffs. The same is true of the revenue compensation mechanism.

I believe that the complexities and mutual distrust can only be removed through generation of political will. In this context, it will not be enough to leave completion of national procedures to committees. Operationalisation will require active intervention from the political leadership. Member States have to transcend immediate interests. Future economic integration demands that they overcome obstacles and iron out their differences.

Another area that needs greater attention is the effective containment of terrorism. The recently concluded Summit, as expected, has reiterated the need for collective response to this hydra-headed monster. They have called for early and effective implementation of the Additional Protocol to the SAARC

Tackling terror



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE serial blasts on August 17 followed by bomb attacks in the courts of Chittagong, Laxmipur, Chandpur and most recently in the house of a judge at Sylhet injuring the judge himself did more than kill and maim innocent people. The sinister move did more than demonstrate that we are hostage to an organised extremist group who have the training, skill and manpower to carry out orchestrated attacks across the whole country. They served as a pathetic reminder that no place, not even the remotest corner is immune to terrorism. Precisely true, the outlook is gloomy. The blasts even if had not taken a heavy toll of lives and properties, had certainly convinced the citizenry that some groups belonging to radical Islamic faith, with Taliban connections are involved in banal terrorism. Unhappily, terror continues to come visiting us, stealthily but steadily, no matter where we are, at the Bangla new year's morning rally, in the shrine or in an amusement park. Its carriers, the paradise seeking jihadis, shatter the dignities of life and, once again bring the profanities of faith in our known environment.

It once again shattered the national idyll of complacency. Out there someone has been waiting for the right moment and the right place to strike. Fear has a definitive religious address, is no longer a distant memory even if the coalition government claim that they would succeed in combating terrorism in the

country. The apprehension proved chillingly correct. In the morning of November 14, Mamun, 38, a member of the JMB suicide bomb squad, as reports reveal from documents found in his possession, in a deathly game snuffed out two judges in Jhalakathi by throwing a powerful bomb in the microbus they were riding to the court. Even in a country inured to selective killings, this fresh carnage caused a severe shock in public mind. It was the first time that judges, the most innocent people in the country and in no way related to filthy politics had to pay with their lives while performing their

Over the last four years the JMB chief Abdur Rahman and JMB chief Siddique Islam alias Bangla Bhai through meticulous planning set up organisational bases and militant training camps inside madrassahs and out in the remotest areas of the country. It relates to foreign money that came into Bangladesh since the coalition assumed power in 2001, nearly a substantial amount of which went to jihadi fund. The money, as reports reveal, came mainly from Muslim countries in the Middle East. The revelation is worrying because when large amounts of foreign money have come in the name of

warnings about the cannibalistic activities of Bangla Bhai just pass it off as media threat without investigation or without asking for reports from various intelligence networks? More so, how could the intelligence agencies shut their eyes to the flow of funds from Middle East running up to crores of taka in the name of funding madrassah education and recovery of Islamic heritage sites? Neither the government nor the general public have any knowledge about the amount that slipped into jihadi fund.

The most damaging is the impression that BNP led coalition government has

where economies are chronically dysfunctional and central leadership is incapable of governing.

From the day the grisly tales of torture and cruel killing of target people by Bangla Bhai and his men came in the open giving enough indications of an unstable situation developing in the country, the government chose not to know and not to believe and consequently turned a deaf year to the steady rise of Islamist fundamentalism. Even persistent media outcry about the sinister rise of militant organisations with ulterior objective to destabilise the government

out of shared beliefs but out of realisation that they need the support of Islamic groups if they are to make further gains in power.

One way or another, the Islamic card has long been played in this country. With government moves hardly making any dent in the accelerating escalation of tension and growing rise of militancy by the jihadi groups, radical Islamic groups can often surface and spread. Clearly they are in general no longer abused, but used by the politicians and other opportunists -- even though they espouse militant jihad and the establishment of theocracy that goes against the country's constitution. While these radicals, by and large, make up only a tiny minority of the Muslim population, their views got a boost since Sept, 2001 because of the development of seemingly unbridgeable gap between Islam and the West. Bangla Bhai, Abdur Rahman or Mufti Hannan may be petty characters, but for some they are heroes battling western hegemony.

In such a critical situation, the head of the government should make the courageous decision to discard the Islamic card. The first step is simple: all that the government has to do is state unequivocally and straightforwardly that it fully supports, upholds and commits itself to the cause of moderate Islam and that extremists are a serious threat to the future of democracy and plurality in Bangladesh. The Prime Minister needs to understand the root cause of Islamic militancy and how the doctrine of jihad is exploited to justify attacks on innocent people and then devise a strategy to curb radicalism. What is required is a clear conviction and vision of the tolerant and progressive society that Bangladesh has the potential to be. Without this, conscious citizenry fear, any steps the government takes are merely in response to international pressure. Once the pressure fades, the government will return to business as usual and radicalism will continue to fester.

Md Asadullah Khan is former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET.

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duties and upholding the values for which they were inducted into this sanctimonious service.

The fundamentalist Islamic groups operating covertly in some particular areas for the last four years, presumably with or without the knowledge of the administration, law enforcement agencies and intelligence networks who always miscalculated or underestimated their striking capability, gained from strength to strength to strike at the edifice of power. If the text of the leaflets circulated in Bangla and Arabic are anything to go by, the outlawed Islamic militant group called JMB wants "to establish Islamic rule in the country," followed by a threat that they will go for "counteroffensives against the administration should the government fail to pay heed to our warnings." The leaflet further says, "We are the soldiers of Allah. We have taken up arms for implementing Allah's law and the principle Prophet Muhammad (SM), Sahabis and heroic Mujahideen have followed for centuries." The leaflet denounced democracy, calling it a system crafted by Kafirs. It also declared the country's constitution and instead called for setting up Sura (the highest Islamic Consultative Committee) comprising Alem, Ulema, Mashaek and Islamic scholars.

It was these schools many of which later became recruiting grounds or training centres of those who lead the fight for establishing a quaint pattern of administration divorced from reality.

The rise of fundamentalism in its present form based on hate campaign was inevitable when Jamaat-e-Islami, the reported mentor of JMB and JMB behind the scene, got credibility and opportunity after its two members were appointed ministers. After so much of tumultuous events in the country during the last two years where zealots had played crucial roles to destabilise the administration, the alliance between the coalition partners is so firm that religion and politics often appear as two sides of the same coin. It is worrying as to how could the government despite repeated media

failed to rise to the occasion when it so demanded and is unable to cope with the pressures of coalition politics. Starting from deteriorating law and order situation in the country, endemic corruption in all sectors, unbridled price hike of food stuff, Monga situation in the greater Rangpur area and horrendous power sector that could not add a single watt in these four years, the country is almost bleeding and heading towards a catastrophic situation.

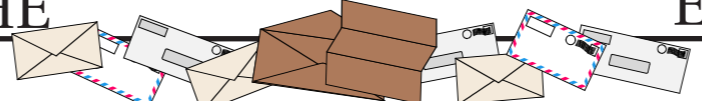
Psychological shock waves surging out from the blast scenes are bound to interact with the nation's fragile social and political ecosystems, testing the resilience of the weak government and dealing a body blow to a sputtering economy that has yet to recover from the whirlwind of globalisation and free market. The threatening discordant notes, the behind the scene activities of a group inspired by a hate ideology that clouds the mind and sensibilities, place the country at a crossroads. From here deterioration could accelerate plunging the country into bloody violence, divorcing from the international communities and turning it into a fertile ground for a menacing rise of terrorism. If that occurs, Bangladesh could sink to the status of countries such as Congo or Indonesia

could not nudge the government to take action presumably for the reason that the BNP led coalition government did not like its alliance with the Jamaat-e-Islami, BNP's vote bank, to be fragmented in any way.

With bomb making materials like RDX (Royal Demolition Explosive), the most powerful explosive, seized from a courier service parcel at Rajshahi and six live bombs along with a leaflet circulated by JMB and bomb making materials allegedly smuggled into the country by Rohingya insurgents at Bandarban, it is apparent that underground terrorists actively supported and financed by extremist masteminds are still harbouring young jihadi and planning fresh attacks at the opportune moment.

Complicity is the enemy of security. If these small terrorist groups are even a tiny minority and have even not a big cache of such hazardous materials like bombs and explosives at their disposal, they don't need large number of recruits to cause enormous damage. A big obstacle in the fight against terrorism in Muslim-majority countries like Indonesia and Bangladesh is that you will be branded anti-Islam if you take on it. Some of the insiders in the cabinet have backed radicals like Bangla Bhai, Abdur Rahman and Mufti Hannan covertly not

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.

Hazardous road crossing

The DMP road traffic month has failed to achieve its aims and objectives, purposes and services. Further there is no guarantee of safety and security of life of a city dweller while crossing a public road or street anywhere in Dhaka city due to disorderly, heavy and haphazard traffic.

Unless you see and practically face it you can't believe and feel how dangerous and risky it is to cross the one way traffic Folder Street, Wari at i) Nari Shikha School/Wari School/Dawn Garments point and at ii) Balda Garden/Rajdhani Market point.

Everyday thousand of school boys and girls, men and women, young and old are

crossing the above mentioned two points amidst hundreds of running buses, rickshaws, cars, push carts, CNG scooters and taxis at the great risk of their lives. Every now and then many accidents are taking place, many pedestrians are injured and even killed but the authorities concerned DCC and DMP do not care at all.

The greatest problem and difficulty in crossing the Folder Street, a minor portion of Chittagong-Dhaka one way road from Jatrabari to Gulistan and Motijheel, C/A is that there is no zebra crossing, no traffic signaling, no island on the middle of the one way road for the pedestrians to make a halt. Of course there are 3-4 police sergeants and traffic

constables present but most of the time they are standing leisurely and gossiping making little traffic control and rendering little service to the pedestrians.

The residents of old Dhaka, Wari and Ganderia have drawn the attention of DCC and DMP to this effect several times but all in vain.

OH Kabir
Hare Street, Wari, Dhaka

Repealing Article 70

It seems to me that Article 70 of our constitution is undemocratic. After achieving independence in 1971, Bangladesh has taken a new constitution based on the fundamental principles of democracy. At that time, the Article was

incorporated into the constitution in order to ensure party discipline. But today's socio-economic situation and political environment of the country are significantly different from those of the past. In addition, the Article is in clear contradiction with the democratic spirit of our constitution. Because it leads to the establishment of party dictatorship. I think it is irrelevant today.

However, Article 70 forbids an MP, who is elected as a nominee of a particular party, to vote against that party in the parliament or to abstain from voting defying party directives. Those who fail to comply with this Article risk losing their membership of the parliament. Thus the Article obviously limits the free role of

MPs. Not only that, it is a major obstacle to discordant views within the party structures. So it impedes the healthy development of political parties' internal democracy.

Saleh Md. Shahriar
Chittagong University

Do not hide worries under smiles

Saarc countries are the homes of the world's maximum poor people. On the momentous occasion of their 13th summit the regional leaders raised many issues. The government of Bangladesh must be intrepid and diplomatically matured to bring-up the following topics, considered bases

of our life. Can we turn the banes into our blessings?

Firstly, the removal of the causes of the Trade Deficit due to the lack of openness and trust.

Secondly, to decide and determine an explicit goal, in order to establish a common vision to alleviate poverty.

Thirdly, developing tourism to motivate and facilitate people-to-people contacts. This is a high priority subject for the promotion of people-to-people communication in the region to strengthen reciprocal understanding, interaction and goodwill among the peoples of South Asia. To achieve this, and to commemorate the 20th year of SAARC, the year 2006 may be desig-

nated as "South Asia Tourism Year" and special events organised to celebrate it.

Fourthly, tariff and non-tariff hurdles to be removed to allow Bangladesh companies' products to India, so that Bangladesh can export its goods to the northeast India.

Finally, adhering to the ASEAN countries, production target should be fixed, i.e. who will produce what. The Prime Minister and her aides are fully aware of Bangladesh's needs and the people in Bangladesh implicitly appeal Do Not Hide Worries Under Diplomatic Smiles! We heartily wish the leaders unstinted success!
Tajul Islam
Gulshan-1, Dhaka

Road from Agargaon to Mirpur II

There was a proposal to construct the above road for the last so many years. The work was started; survey was also almost completed but stopped for unknown reason. The road is very important for the locality and for the city itself. Most of the people believed that the samewould be completed very soon. Higher authorities of the government promised so many times but the matter remains as it was.

I do not like to kill the time any more as everyone knows this. May, I therefore expect that the construction of the road would be taken up by the present government in no time!
FR Chowdhury
Pirerugh, Mirpur, Dhaka