

Set agenda for talks

In the meantime CBMs to create congenial atmosphere

OVER the past few days there has been no shortage of offers and counter-offers between the government and the opposition on the subject of a dialogue between the two in an attempt to resolve some of the outstanding differences between them. However, we feel that the time has come to move beyond generalised offers issued either in the media or informally, and to put things on a more concrete footing.

It is our recommendation that the government start the ball rolling by tendering a formal offer for talks in writing to the opposition. The offer should encompass the following: the first step is for the secretary generals of both major parties to meet one to one with a view to agreeing to the details for the talks between the two sides.

These details must include the date, time, and venue for the talks to be held, the agenda, and the composition of delegates. It is time to formalise the statements of cooperation and willingness to talk that each side has been making, and to ensure that the current momentum for talks is not lost or dissipated.

Equally important as a concrete written formal proposal for talks that sets out the particularities and leaves no important detail unattended to, is for the atmosphere surrounding the talks to be congenial and conducive to compromise and real progress.

To this end, we would urge that both sides tone down the rhetoric against one another and refrain from name-calling or innuendo or other measures that could be expected to sour the atmosphere. The government needs to also refrain from using the apparatus of the state to harass the opposition.

We stand at a moment of significant promise in which the two parties, if they are sincere and committed, can go a long way to resolving their differences, which would be to the benefit of the entire nation. They cannot let this opportunity go abegging due to pettiness and partisanship.

Terror financing by NGOs

Form a taskforce to deal with the issue

THE issue of tackling Islamic militancy has come to the fore following some nerve-shattering developments recently that have left a deep scar on our collective psyche. The government waking up to the problem rather belatedly, is trying to measure up to the threat, but one particular area regarded as crucially important to accomplishing the task of eliminating the menace, is yet to be addressed such as terror financing by so-called Islamic NGOs.

A Daily Star report yesterday highlighted the matter citing specific examples which go to show that some militant groups are being financed by certain NGOs calling themselves 'Islamic'. An important finding relates to the funding of the budget of the banned Jama'atul Mujahideen from such sources.

Now, the crackdown on the militants will not produce the desired result as long as they continue to receive funds. The routes of financing are not being cut off and that amounts to ignoring a vital aspect of global networking. Without question, the costs of the high-tech operations that the militants have launched are huge and only regular inflow of funds could keep them running.

We have seen the government take on certain NGOs in the past, imputing political motives to their operations. In other words, steps that are at best opaque have been taken in the name of NGO management. But it is suspected that some NGOs with 'Islamic' label have been playing a role in funding the rise of militancy with impunity. This vital issue can no longer be sidetracked.

The government now has to make a determined effort to put an end to such dangerous NGO operation under the guise of an altruistic mission. We suggest that a special taskforce be immediately formed to look into the question of militancy financing. Of course, a line must be drawn between the Islamic NGOs engaged in humanitarian work and those aiding the militants. Those who use the name of Islam to exploit the religious sentiments of people to sow the seeds of extremism and fund extremist outfits must be identified and brought to book.

The state of the nation

DR. ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

MY country is in shame, not because it has done something iniquitous, but because what its politicians have led it to -- an economy in shambles, governance and judiciary in progressive politicisation, a media in intimidation fatigue, its democratic institutions in disarray, and people in corruption weariness. During our early years of schooling we all learned "when money is lost nothing is lost, when health is lost something is lost, but when character is lost everything is lost."

As soon as TI's corruption perception index is reported it becomes instant global news. The NY Times wrote: "In Bangladesh, government agencies siphoned off a reported \$68 million through corruption last year. Government officials [ministers] and senior bureaucrats were blamed in 72 percent of the cases involving misuse of public funds." No sooner had the ink of the NYT dried, came the slap that: "The World Bank (WB) has cancelled loans worth Tk. 6.8 crore against three projects in health and local government sectors on grounds of corruption and asked the government to refund the money already spent against these loans." (DS: November 8).

Sometimes I wonder, how do the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister travel to foreign lands and face other leaders and dignitaries with so much of stigma, indignities, and negativities in their administration's credentials. Many of us here in the US were bemused by the Prime Minister's October 10 speech to the nation and are convinced that she may not be reading newspapers and are encircled by "tabaydars" (courtiers) and toadies, who are feeding her with elusive success stories of her administration.

This article is not about corrup-

tion per se, it is about the absence of leadership and existence of inefficiencies in every sector of state operation in which corruption has the most incapacitating effects. Speaking about leadership, both the former PM Sheikh Hasina and the current PM Khaleda Zia have failed even to be an effectual leader of their own party -- each failing to keep the party as one cohesive unit -- let alone becoming the nation's leader.

A leader is one who leads or guides and is in charge or in command of others; who has influence or power, especially of a political nature. A leader always takes responsibility for

Since independence, whichever party came to power, its grass-roots supporters, including student leaders and the highest echelons of the party, assumed that it was their turn to rule and loot the country. Inefficiency, waste, and lack of leadership have put the government literally up for sale. The ruling party's pretensions of not seeing what every one else sees and not realising what everyone else realises have brought us to where we are today.

failures and rarely tries to find scapegoats. Based on these leadership traits and her government's last five years of degenerating performance in almost every sphere of national life, can we consciously hail Khaleda as a national leader? Unlike President Zia, she does not enjoy the reputation of her immediate family members being incorruptible and not meddling in the affairs of the state and her party. In fact, it is widely alleged that her son and her brother are the power behind all the big wheeling and dealings that are set out inside the Hawa Bhaban.

An example of how inefficiently the country's resources are squandered is that there are nearly 70 ministers including state and deputy ministers and a few advisors with some form of ministerial status. In the parliament, 83 percent of the MPs are businessmen. Many of them have no legitimate business address or listing. A great majority of them are literally vacuous and politi-

cal neophytes, having little or no understanding of the rudiments of lawmaking, economics, and national policies. When the parliament is in recess, these MPs are seen loitering in the corridors of power looking for wheeling and dealing opportunities for themselves or for their cronies.

There are not too many countries where a chartered accountant would become a Finance Minister, presenting eleven national budgets in a row, achieving hardly any success in poverty alleviation or increased GDP growth, an economist (Ph.D) with WB experience would become Education Minister instead of Finance

Minister, a geologist (Ph.D) would become a Health Minister instead of Minister of Natural Resources, an Air Marshall would become Commerce Minister instead of Aviation or Communication Minister, to name just a few of the most inappropriate portfolio assignments.

To be fair, give some credit to the Prime Minister that the Law Minister is not a medical doctor, and the Science and Technology Minister is not a lawyer. It is really surprising that the Finance Minister and the Central Bank Governor have no prior expertise in financial markets or monetary and open economy macro-economics.

What is even more abstruse is that senior civil servants are shuffled arbitrarily among ministries and departments by the stroke of a pen without the wisdom of realisation that there is a learning curve in the new job, loss of valuable experience gained in the previous one, and thus a serious compromise on efficiency.

Over the last five years political expediency and pacification of civil service cadres appear to have become the primary basis of promotion to higher posts -- a debilitating source of inefficiency.

The people in Bangladesh has been bedeviled by ill-governance for most of its 34 years of existence while the Asian Tigers, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and South Korea are marching ahead with opulence and pride. The reasons, like it or not, are simple and direct:

- Our politicians have collectively contributed directly and/or indirectly to eroding the foundations of

towards 10 percent and possibly higher and making the poor citizens' plight nightmarish.

The government is growing bigger by the day, breeding corruption and inefficiency in bureaucracy. The typical government response each year is to ask for a larger budget. The basic incentive structure of government agencies engenders inefficient management because, unlike the free market system, there is a lack of inducement to be cost-conscious and innovative. Instead, the hallmark of bureaucrats is to be extremely cautious and make all decisions by the book. Such

behaviour may maximise official norms, but it usually fails to minimise costs, attain efficiency and maximise public welfare.

Lack of effective leadership and compromising of efficiency in managing external funds for MDG and PRSP has scored fifth worst ranking (only next to Ethiopia, Rwanda, Niger, and Madagascar) for Bangladesh in failing to alleviate poverty which has caused an assortment of repercussions in the WB and the IMF. Because of dreadful inefficiency and waste, poverty alleviation is progressing only at 0.52 percent, well below the target rate of 2.2 percent.

Because of administrative ineptitude and inefficiencies in every sphere of state affairs, creativity had been pushed aside as the politicians accolade mediocrity through politicisation wherever they could get their hands on and heads in. To halt further degeneration, the following five exigencies are worth noting:

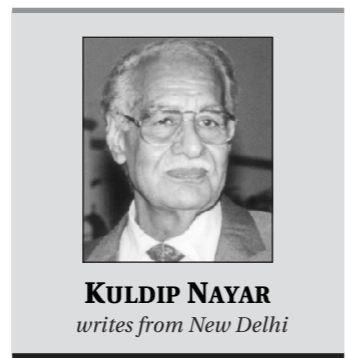
- It is highly unlikely that the wheel-

ers and dealers once reelected (regardless of parties) will operate any differently in restoring good governance domestically and country's image internationally. Hence, there is little chance that the people will escape from the fulsome stigma of being the most corrupt country any time soon. The country needs new faces with vision.

- Politicians cannot do their wheeling and dealings without the tacit acquiescence and sycophancy of the civil servants. Therefore, the country must hope that one day some civil servants of character will act as loyal servants of the people instead of their bosses.
 - The country needs a true leader with the dedication and a sense of mission who will reform the civil service to produce squarely competent and honest civil servants and recruit politicians with character.
 - This leader will be expected to govern justly, espouse the rule of law, pursue a reform agenda with veracity, and rekindle hope in the people.
 - Finally, this leader will command respect and influence abroad to help in attracting FDI and building confidence in the minds of aid sponsors, the World Bank and the IMF.
- Since independence, whichever party came to power, its grass-roots supporters, including student leaders and the highest echelons of the party, assumed that it was their turn to rule and loot the country. Inefficiency, waste, and lack of leadership have put the government literally up for sale. The ruling party's pretensions of not seeing what every one else sees and not realising what everyone else realises have brought us to where we are today.

Dr. Abdullah A. Dewan is Professor of Economics, Eastern Michigan University, USA.

Bihar gets its chance



KULDEEP NAYYAR
writes from New Delhi

THE post-election scenario in Bihar is not bright because of two things: the BJP's excessive visibility and former chief minister Lalu Prasad Yadav's non-reconciliation to his defeat. The first expects to occupy more territory. The second fears more exposures -- and punishment -- if he stands still. Both may continue to exert pressure on chief minister Nitish Kumar because they want to be counted.

The BJP wants a mid-term poll and hopes to ride over its internal feuds through the victory in Bihar. Lalu does not mind a mid-term poll, but wants first to convince Congress president Sonia Gandhi that Ram Vilas Paswan is not a dalit leader but a pretender who has to be eased out for her party to have a meaningful support in the Extremely Backward Class (EBC). For the first time Lalu does not want the spotlight on himself. He intends using the Congress as a shield to ward off further onslaughts.

Lalu's defeat was never in doubt, but his rout was. Although the swing against him is less than one per cent,

he has lost nearly one fourth of his strength in the state assembly, some 21 seats. When I was in Patna after the third phase of polling, I could see a yearning for a change. People had had enough of Lalu and his mis-performance. Still Lalu's staunchest opponents did not give the Nitish-BJP combination 143 in the 243-member assembly as the tally turned out to be. It seems the undercurrent of anger against Lalu was too strong to be gauged correctly.

a tremendous job, ensured this time that it could exercise the franchise right without fear.

Paswan also had made it clear before election that he did not want to be a party to the ordeal of prolonging Lalu's 15-year-long misrule. However, the initial mistake is that of the Congress and the Marxists. They should not have insisted on Lalu because of his bad name. But both wanted his Rashtriya Janata Dal's support in the Lok Sabha to keep the Manmohan

strength in the state assembly. True, Nitish, heading the government, has made it clear that he has nothing to do with the BJP's philosophy of Hindutva. He has said the same thing during electioneering. But an average person cannot differentiate between the two when he finds them in the same government. BJP leader Uma Bharti says that they won in the name of Ram and roti (bread). The BJP has 55 seats against Nitish's 88 and added 18 more seats to the February poll tally

Dal (United) and the BJP reminds me of the Janata which was constituted in the wake of Mrs Gandhi's rout in 1977. The Jana Sangh, the predecessor of the BJP, joined the Janata government and had its two BJP leaders, Atal Behari Vajpayee and L.K. Advani, in the cabinet. The Jana Sangh was dissolved for public consumption but worked as a group within the Janata Party. This group left when told to break its ties with the RSS. My worry is that Nitish may find out one day that

Sabha seats, is too big a state to be left to secular pursuits.

At least New Delhi should not make Nitish's task difficult. One of the central ministers has said that governor Buta Singh will not be transferred. By not allowing Nitish to form the government in February when his was the largest combine, the governor played a partisan role. The Supreme Court characterised it as "unconstitutional." How can he continue as the Bihar governor? In fact, he is one of the causes of Lalu's rout. The governor dissolved a house that was never constituted. He did not even allow the elected legislators to take oath. This angered the people, who voted for the NDA with a vengeance.

Patna was once Patliputra, capital of Emperor Ashoka. It was here he renounced violence after winning the war at Kalinga, Orissa, where thousands of people were killed. Victory, Ashoka said, might put up the back of one, but it meant destruction. Defeat is an opportunity to improve. Can Lalu Yadav learn a lesson from Ashoka and consider his debacle a chance to renounce the path of crime and corruption? Were he to do so, he would fulfill the dream of Jayaprakash Narayan, because Lalu, like Nitish, was JP's lieutenant. Bihar needs to be pulled out of the morass of poverty and helplessness. Were Lalu to work at cross-purposes, the state would not go ahead with full speed which it badly needs. His statements after the defeat are of little help.

Kuldeep Nayyar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Patna was once Patliputra, capital of Emperor Ashoka. It was here he renounced violence after winning the war at Kalinga, Orissa, where thousands of people were killed. Victory, Ashoka said, might put up the back of one, but it meant destruction. Defeat is an opportunity to improve. Can Lalu Yadav learn a lesson from Ashoka and consider his debacle a chance to renounce the path of crime and corruption? Were he to do so, he would fulfill the dream of Jayaprakash Narayan, because Lalu, like Nitish, was JP's lieutenant.

Most analysts blame Paswan for lessening Lalu's votes. This is partly true. Nitish, himself a leader of backward community Kurmi, organised his support from among the EBC, primarily Paswan's base. This chunk of 35 per cent electorate solidly voted against Lalu because he represented the Yadavs who had treated them with contempt. In the past, the EBC did not generally vote because the Yadavs would not allow it to go to the polling booth. Fear stalked its habitations. The Election Commission, which did

Singh government in power. On the other hand, Paswan's suggestion to have a Muslim chief minister was not outlandish. He wanted to strengthen the secular base in the country. True, he has halved his own seats through his doings. But both he and the CPI, which has stood by him, have proved that they were right in their assessment about the unpopularity of Lalu.

The worst thing which the CPI (M) and the Congress have done is that they have polarised the state to the benefit of the BJP. Riding on the Nitish bandwagon, the BJP has increased its

of 37.

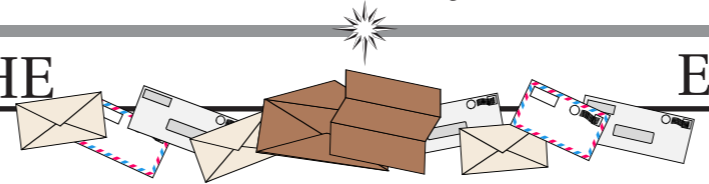
Even the Muslims, tired of Lalu's promises, have voted for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), a combination which the BJP has constituted in parliament to become an alternative. Nitish has said that there can be a difference on the basis of ideology. But pluralism and parochialism are antithesis of each other. The BJP cannot be part of the same government. What message has gone when the deputy chief minister in the Nitish cabinet is the state's BJP chief?

The combination of Nitish's Janata

the BJP has not stopped working on its Hindutva agenda. With him, the party has attained respectability.

I have no doubt Nitish would put in all his efforts to restore law and order in the state and develop it economically as much as he can stretch the resources. He is a product of the Jayaprakash Narayan movement in the 1970s and its ethos was to effect parivartan (change) in the society. Nitish may not make much headway despite his honest work because the BJP's eyes are fixed on New Delhi, not Patna. After all, Bihar, with 48 Lok

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.

Monga -- not a newly coined word

We the people of Northern Bangladesh are familiar with this word for the last 50 years. During the time of Pakistan, monga affected people used to get food for work. The size of the population was small. The number of people and affected areas were not so wide. Moreover, there was no wide publicity of monga, the people of North Bengal used to see newspapers after 2/3 days of their publication in Dhaka. Again the local people used to provide loan against standing crops. So, the monga was never a national problem.

The government always kept an allocation in the budget to combat monga. Now the size of the population has increased substantially. Naturally, the area and size of affected people have increased and the media

is focusing on the problem. But the media has never said anything about remedial measures. We have suggested that employment opportunities be created for the people. We have requested the authorities concerned not to give any cash dole to these people. Because by giving cash dole they are encouraging them to rely on help only.

Mahubul Haque Chowdhury
Kalabaghan, Dhaka

Trials and tribulations

During the recent Eid ul Fitr I received a greeting card from a bank. It carried a simple message, with a simple illustration of the moon in five declining phases, from the full moon to a crescent. Below was a quotation from the Holy Koran in English: "And for the moon we have measured phases, until it returns to a tiny crescent."

I was attracted by the originality and simplicity of the deep message. I pondered on life, and I was reminded of the trials and tribulations in a human life. As a science student, I recalled the sine wave, with the positive and negative peaks above and below the zero axis. The sine wave of civilisation also shifts (east to west as we see in our history; and now the movement is reversed: from the industrialised West peak to the East one again).

There are no straight lines and right angles in Nature. The tides and phases are a part of the dynamics of the cosmic universe. The materialists hanker for constant states of prosperity. Adversity is a test for tolerance, patience and introspection for the created.

Attending prayers in a mosque is a social equaliser, as the social status of

the other devotees are not revealed; and community interchange takes place after the prayers.

There are seasons and timings for each phase of life, in a nation, society or individual.

Notice how evil minds hide in pious postures. This is not the end of personal reflections. Religion has to take root inside first, before it is displayed outside for public view. Man is not the judge.

A Mahasem
Dhaka

Pensioners' woes

All government employees have got reasonably raised pay scales and emoluments of all high-ups also have been enhanced substantially. But ironically the pensioners who served the nation for their whole active life

got only an alms-like increase of 10 per cent which can hardly provide any relief in the face of the spiralling prices of all essentials. The medical allowance they get is barely enough to meet the fees of one visit to a doctor, let alone the huge costs of old age medical care.

Will the government consider the woes of the pensioners and do something to enhance their income and also pay for their medical expenses, so that they can survive in these difficult days!

MA Hashem
Dhaka

TB patients

One of my closed relatives had been suffering from lung infection. He went to a doctor and he advised him to have X-ray of P/A view for diagnosing the disease. And the report found

massive fluid effusion in his lungs. The doctor referred him to the CMCH (Chittagong Medical College Hospital) emergency department. He was admitted there but was accommodated on the floor as there was no bed available. But we found two empty beds in the ward, and were told that these were reserved for patients who had taken poison (apparently to commit suicide!). Then the doctors checked him and finally they came to the conclusion that the patient was suffering from TB.

Unfortunately, our hospitals are not well equipped to treat TB patients and there are still lots of anomalies insofar as offering the needed facilities to the patients are concerned.

Chandra Mani Chakma, CU

The militant threat

Now the cat is almost out of the bag!

The mistake that the BNP made in handling the militants must have been a costly one. Constant denial and the urge to dismiss everything lightly were the most conspicuous features of the BNP strategy as far as the militant issue was concerned. But bombs are now being hurled at the government installations and functionaries, and the ruling coalition is facing a highly embarrassing situation.

Now, the crackdown on the militants is not a simple matter of ordering the law enforcers to chase them. Because they have a network and they are working behind the shield of religion. The task of making people understand that what is being done in the name of Islam is very much a violation of its spirit has to be undertaken in all seriousness.

The attempt to bring Imams and

religious leaders into the scene (Prothom Alo - November 26) should have been made long ago. I am fully convinced that a large number of religious leaders will take a stand against these barbaric activities perpetrated by the fanatic elements.

But the problem is that such a stand may not be enough to counter the threats that the militants pose to the nation. We must not forget that they are not acting with popular support. It is a typical case of a determined minority group trying to dominate over the majority. So there is no alternative to the pure law and order approach.

The government must act decisively and quickly to eliminate the menace before it gains more strength.

Mansoor Raja
Dhaka