

Merry Christmas

Greetings to our Christian brethren

We extend our best wishes for a Merry Christmas to our Christian brethren on this auspicious day. We wish them a joyous and happy Christmas.

The Christians in Bangladesh for years have endeared themselves to the nation and have set a shining example of brotherhood, earning their fellow countrymen and women's respect and recognition. The community has established a legacy of peaceful co-existence and commitment to the common good.

Over the years our Christian brothers and sisters made all round contributions towards the development of our society. Here in Bangladesh they have made particularly significant contributions to our education, particularly at primary and high school levels. To this day a number of schools continue to be managed and run by Christian missionaries with traditional zeal and commitment, imparting quality education to our children all over the country. These schools virtually serve as models for all the other schools.

These are difficult times, not only for Bangladesh, but also for all nations around the world. Conflicts of all dimensions, religious or otherwise, are not only hindering the overall progress of the society, but also are leading us on a path of destruction of all universally accepted human values. Amidst such an environment, our Christian brothers and sisters always upheld their belief in universal brotherhood and value systems. Today we take this opportunity of recalling the august visit of the previous Pontiff to Bangladesh years ago, signifying the ultimate brotherhood and solidarity between the Christians of our country and the community at large all over the world.

We thus believe that this day we should also take a vow to follow the examples of our Christian brethren in our efforts to bring about the much needed equilibrium and tranquility in our society. Only trust in one another, tolerance, and forbearance for each other, irrespective of one's religious calling or cultural practices, can ensure our successful march towards that goal.

We also take this opportunity to convey our best wishes for a Merry Christmas to Christians all over the world. Together let us renew our pledge to free societies anywhere and everywhere from all forms of religious persecutions and social injustices.

Taking a stand against religious extremism

Police action to be applauded

THE law enforcement authorities in Dhaka did a fine job on Friday, for which they deserve acknowledgement and praise. The day was fraught with tension, as two groups of anti-Ahmadiyya bigots held separate programmes against the Ahmadiyya community, threatening to unleash massive violence and disorder if they were opposed, and things could have turned quite ugly had the combustible situation not been handled competently and efficiently by the local authorities.

The police did an excellent job of restraining the demonstrators without descending into excessive brutality or violence against them. The demonstrators were permitted to demonstrate and make speeches, but not to disrupt the city or to attack the Ahmadiyyas as they threatened, and outbreaks of violence initiated by the bigots when they did not get their way were swiftly and effectively dealt with.

Ultimately the police were able to ensure that the bigots were unable to hang an insulting sign on the wall of the Ahmadiyya complex in Bakshibazar, as they had threatened, and unable to successfully besiege or attack the Ahmadiyya community.

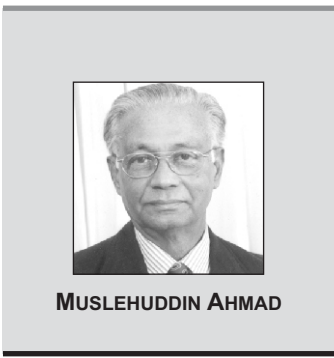
This comes as a welcome change from instances in the past, when local authorities have stood by and permitted the bigots to intimidate and attack Ahmadiyyas in an orgy of violence unchecked by the police.

The government stand against the bigots is welcome and comes at a critical time. It sends the right message that the government will neither tolerate the spreading of religious hatred, nor permit any group to flout its authority. We would like to think that the official action on Friday has made clear that intimidation and violence have no place in our society, and that fighting with the police and acting in a manner that is contemptuous of the law will not be tolerated.

The anti-Ahmadiyya bigots are not only spreading bile and hatred and acting in an unconstitutional and illiberal manner that is inconsistent with the nation's ideals. They have also been brazen in flouting the law and expressing their willingness to challenge all governmental authority.

In the current climate, this is something that we can no longer tolerate. Neither can the government sit back when religious freedom is impinged and bigots spew hatred and incite violence, nor can it permit them to run riot through the streets if they do not get their way. Friday's police action shows that the government can successfully contain religious extremists if it musters the political will.

Are we really serious about Bangladesh's welfare?



ARE we all really serious about our country's welfare? It seems not. This is not only the feeling of the ordinary citizens of Bangladesh, even some foreigners feel the same way. A relation of mine who is in his final days of MBA course at a top US university told me that a very senior business professor who hails from our part of the region remains very critical of Bangladesh's development future. While referring to a case study of a developing country, he says the current situations in Bangladesh are not particularly good to offer bright development environment. Such remarks obviously made my relative sad.

While giving reasons, the professor talks about the failure of the political parties in dealing with Bangladesh's problems. What he probably meant is that the political parties are all engaged in war of words against each other and fighting serious battles for staying in power or grabbing power and really not interested in the people's welfare. In other words, the political leaders are fighting for power only and not for curing the country's ills. Whatever the political parties may say, this is how the people in general feel about the political developments. This is unfortunate, indeed, as we depend so much on our political leaders.

The ruling party(s), whatever party is in power, fights only for retaining its power so that the corrupt individuals who remain generally powerful in any party apparatus can hold on to their ill-gotten money without being charged for it. Even if they are charged, they create situations by which the governmental machineries feel obliged to withdraw the cases from the courts through some questionable means. This has been happening all along regardless of which party or parties are in power. This is why no politician has ever gone to jail for his crimes. The only exception was Ershad as no political party came to

his rescue.

While the professor's comments, in the light of some bizarre situation in the country, are largely valid, there is no doubt that Bangladesh, compared to other countries of the subcontinent, progressed in several social sectors, despite the failure of the political parties in dealing effectively with the country's problems. Here the role of the people of Bangladesh deserves special mention. I told my relative that he should point out to the professor that Bangladesh made considerable progress in areas like women's empowerment, girl's education where in primary schools there are more girls in the classes than the boys, maternity casualties reduced, sanitation situation and availability of drinking water improved in many

The above achievements in some of the social sectors, despite failures in other crucial areas, only lead us to the positive conclusion that if these political parties, and particularly the major political parties, bureaucrats, and all of us who boast of being intellectuals and having done a lot towards the country's development and welfare could work together as we all did in 1990-91 in overthrowing the military dictator, Bangladesh would have largely come out of the present political stalemate and vicious poverty cycle. The country has the potential. It is largely a question of harnessing them for the welfare of the people.

A lot depends on the bureaucrats who are unfortunately seriously divided on political lines because of

(CFAC) to fight corruption as best as possible.

There are many people who do hate corruption which is undoubtedly a criminal activity but are forced to do it as they find no other alternatives to get things done. At least this is what the businessmen say. But a time has come when they must stand firm and bring corruption demands from any quarter openly to the public even if this delays their business somewhat. There is no doubt that their silent contributions, obviously to get things done quickly and that also in their favour, has brought the situation to this shameful state.

Political rivalry, and political and monetary corruptions are the major evils that are seriously clouding Bangladesh's political and eco-

mission and not as a monarchy or dictatorship. The members reportedly are not even in talking terms with the chief. The people would like to know why such an anarchic situation exists in an important institution like the Election Commission. If it is a democratic country, the people must know reasons. Why are we in such a flap? Is there any need for asking for reform of the Election Commission rules when the commission itself suffers from such a bizarre situation?

The demand for reform of the Care-Taker Government, an undemocratic system which was put in a democratic Constitution, has been there for many months. There is a need for the ruling party to sit with the opposition on the issue and

appropriate checks and balances. Moreover, Bangladesh cannot continue indefinitely with this undemocratic system which declared no confidence on all political parties. It's a great shame on all of us. If we can trust a ruling party for long five years why can't we do it for three months? If the conscience is clear and genuine desire is there to accommodate differing views, then most of the problems, if not all, can be solved satisfactorily.

Another unfortunate and indeed terrible situation in country's politics. There is politics even on the "departed souls." It is high time to allow those devoted leaders who sacrificed their lives for the good of the country to rest in peace. They will live in the memories of the people on the basis of their respective contributions to this nation. When they were alive there was no controversy over who declared Independence. After 35 years, is there really any need to fight on this issue? Let the historians put them in their respective places on the basis of their great contributions. Let's leave it there and not complicate the country's politics and mislead our coming generations.

Finally, the deadliest of all is the emerging religious corruption which is also destroying Bangladesh's position as a secular state. "Secular" may mean different things to different people. However, normally it should mean neutrality to different religious beliefs and no bar in practicing one's religion. But it seems that some people would bomb people to establish an Islamic state. The practicing Muslims should have no problem with Islamic rules and regulations. Any Muslim would follow them whether we call it an Islamic state or not.

Our Prophet established Islam but never preached killing of people to establish Islam. Under his state, the people of other religions lived in peace. The basic principle should be to tell the truth about Islam and let people decide whether to embrace Islamic faith. Forced faith is no faith at all. If this belief is there, then there can be no problem. May Allah guide us all to the path of peace which is indeed Islam.

Muslehuddin Ahmad is a former Secretary and Ambassador, and founder VC of North South University and Presidency University. He is also the Chairman of Citizens' Forum Against Corruption (CFAC).

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rural areas, etc. Recent developments in the area of empowering the local governments with separate budgetary authority is something that needs to be mentioned. Only thing that has to be watched is that the local MPs do not poke their nose into the developmental decisions of the local authorities. It has to be clearly remembered that the MPs all over the world are basically engaged in framing laws keeping in view the requirements of the country and this is undoubtedly a very complex, important and time-consuming job; the MPs must concentrate on them instead of getting into somebody else's domain, apparently for the purpose (obviously not by all MPs but by many) of making some extra gains there, either political and or monetary.

Anyway, I advised my relative to keep those in view for further discussions on Bangladesh with the sole purpose of rescuing my country's position from the critical tongue of the professor and also to improve my relative's position as a Bangladeshi in his class. There is, however, no doubt that some credits should go to the successive governmental authorities as they have been supporting those activities as per the country's agreement with the donors and particularly with the World Bank, which has been regularly working with Bangladesh authorities in these areas.

politicization of the bureaucracy by the successive governments. The bureaucracy is really the pillar of the administration. The democracy means that the politicians would come and go as per political strengths of the parties, but the bureaucrats remain as permanent civil servants. So they need to perform as best as possible without caring much for what happens in the political arena. Their views must be based on what is best for the country though often political parties go by their narrow political gains. The country's welfare must be top in their agenda. The people expect them to stand firm on the basis of what is good for the country. If an officer is good in his work and honest, no politics can harm him.

Whatever may be our performance standard elsewhere, we are at the top in corruption. We have internationally recognized degree on that. One Bangladeshi businessman who has a reputation of being honest told me that the biggest problem of Bangladesh is corruption. If corruption could be brought to an acceptable limit, the development of Bangladesh would have been phenomenal. His comments are obviously indicative of the role of the private entrepreneurs in taking the country's development forward. Obviously, he was fed up with the situation and wanted us to do something as we already formed the Citizens Forum Against Corruption

omic future. We all boast of practicing democracy, but where is democracy when successive opposition parties boycott the parliament for months and even for years together? Yes, walk out from the parliament for a short period as a mark of protest is undoubtedly democratic, but not for months and even years. This frustrates the very concept of election and democracy. Why should people vote the members of the political parties to the parliament when parliament boycott is an endemic problem? Stranger still is the practice of MPs drawing remunerations without attending the work place and not performing the functions of the MPs. The parliament cannot belong to a government party alone. This happened earlier too. This is certainly not a democratic practice. The political parties need to answer these questions to the people before they go to the next poll.

With the word election, the Election Commission comes into the picture where the situation appears very complex and indeed unfortunate. We have an Election Commission which does not function as a commission. It again seems to be one man's rule as appears from the position reflected in the media and often statements issued by the commission members. As per the Constitution and rules and regulations, the Election Commission must work as a com-

find out why such a demand is there. This must be sorted out swiftly if we are interested to maintain democracy in the country, which was established at a great cost. In case, through some adjustments and concessions from both sides, consensus could be created, then there may not be any need for a radical change. But if the demand is genuine and there is a need, all heads should be put together to find a suitable solution. This is how democracy functions. The political parties must talk and talk for the sake of the country. Party rivalries outside democratic norms or personal rivalry have no place in democracy. The parliament is not the only place where negotiations can take place; if necessary negotiations should take place outside and then brought the results back to parliament for ratification.

Maybe solution could be found if there is a decision to return to the democratic system with clear checks and balances to be introduced in the Constitution, particularly by curtailing the power of the caretaker PM to allay the fear of the opposition (my suggestion in the matter is already there with both ruling and opposition parties including Dr. Kamal Hossain for consideration). In any case, this undemocratic system was agreed to be put in place for four or five elections only; then why not revert to the normal democratic system with

Will 2006 be better than 1996?

FARID BAKHT

MAKING predictions is like walking into a minefield. So I thought I would do a little research. I looked at some op-eds from this time last year to see what they had to say. Rest assured, hardly anyone spelt out just how far the bombers would reach. Who predicted August 17's 500 simultaneous bombs exploding in practically all districts? Not me. Similarly, many got it wrong with the garments industry. It is not well but at least it is very much alive. So I am going to take the easy way out and admit I do not know what is in store. I will, however, try to ask the right questions which will take us half way there, and ask you to tell me the rest. Let us look ahead then, even if we are not looking forward to 2006.

I am trying to avoid writing something along the lines of: The country is in crisis! Can anyone tell me when it was not in crisis? Which was the best year for Bangladesh? 1972, but surely only the first three months? Or 1990 when street power overthrew a dictatorship? Or 1995 when Dhaka share prices shot through the roof, while the London Financial

When will the price of rice and essentials come down? Will businesses be able to cope with multi-day hartals and shutdowns? Will the Taka plummet to Tk.80 to the dollar as capital flight intensifies? Will inflation hit the roof? Will the garments industry haemorrhage orders and jobs as in 1996's pre-election impasse? Politically, 2006 bears some disturbing similarities to 1996, except we have a new wild card in play.

Times ran headlines screaming: Dhaka is the hottest market in Asia? Will 2006 be the best or will it be one of the worse ones? It will not be the worst. Nothing beats the terrible famine year of 1974.

Something in the air?

Nevertheless, it is true to say that the country faces a new type of crisis, with the appearance of a sustained, sophisticated bombing campaign and the introduction of suicide bombers. I am puzzled. Could you tell me where is it going, and what the end game is?

I have not seen the foreign community baton down the hatches. The parties, field visits and meetings go on. There has been no serious security alert, no whiff of evacuation. Perhaps they have got the measure of the situation and know what is going on. Many are hard-

bitten veterans who have seen it all before. If one has worked in Afghanistan, Sudan or Sierra Leone, then this might be merely a picnic in comparison. To find out where the wind is blowing then, you could do no worse than stand on a street corner in North Dhaka and stick your finger in the air. It is all quiet on the Gulsahn front.

For 2006, here are your nine questions:

1. Will the bombings reach new depths on the lines of August 17 but worse?
2. Or will the Rapid Action Battalions break up the network first?
3. Will Jatiyo Party and BNP join hands and become an unbeatable alliance, while the Awami League marks time?
4. Will BNP say "sayonara" or will it be "au revoir" to Jamaat?

5. Will the rejigged alliance do the unexpected and call a snap election, catching the opposition napping?
6. Will the opposition do a workable deal on "electoral reform" or will it drag us into a pointless confrontation and boycott the elections?
7. Will the incumbent regime be able to peacefully hand over power at the end of September to a 90 day caretaker government?
8. Will the caretaker government be able to handle the election process in the face of unprecedented bombings and "reformed" electoral violence? Will 90 days mean 90 days or will it become another number?
9. Will we miss cuddly Harry K Bangla?

Meanwhile, the rest of the 147,000,000 (minus 10,000 otherwise pre-occupied politicians) will

ask: When will the price of rice and essentials come down? Will businesses be able to cope with multi-day hartals and shutdowns? Will the Taka plummet to Tk.80 to the dollar as capital flight intensifies? Will inflation hit the roof? Will the garments industry haemorrhage orders and jobs as in 1996's pre-election impasse? Will remittances from migrants drop off as they wait and see what happens? Will investment collapse as foreign and domestic businessmen all go slow amid the uncertainty? What natural disaster will befall us? We escaped the tsunami of last Christmas. The last great flood hit us in 2004 and surely we will not be deluged on that scale for another four years? Who knows? Let us hope we avoid the long overdue cyclone too.

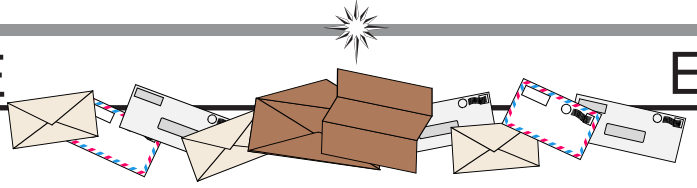
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except we have a new wild card in play. By the end of 2006, if the answers to the questions above turn out to be benign and harmless, then I would say we were damned lucky. Enjoy the Christmas and 31st evening. Do not expect a happy new year. Just make a wish for one.

As a footnote, I cannot leave you in such a negative mood. If everything else is depressing, let's forget the big picture and dwell on the good things. We can make 2006 the year of football. Bangladeshis normally support Argentina (strange but true) and we can all watch the World Cup Finals at 2 am in the morning. As long as the Ministry of Loadshedding allows us. And we can cheer on the exploits of our Argentinean-managed Bangladesh national football team too. Close your eyes and hope for the best. Maybe it will turn out OK, then?

Farid Bakht is the author of a forthcoming book on the future of Bangladesh.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE



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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.

Blair playing Polonius!

England's Tony Blair has already acclaimed much of public ridicule at home and abroad for his queer act of following George W Bush in his acts of war. Blair has digested much of disregard from his people for waging a war on Iraq on a completely false pretext. His countrymen got furious when they came to know that their leader duped them with lies.

Recently, as a part of anti-terrorism action Blair is going to give the power of shutting down Muslims' mosques to the police. The act has not only raised concerns among the conscious people in England but also across the world. Muslim religious leaders are opposing the move for it'll undoubtedly hinder the way of peace and amity. Muslims across the globe are really passing a testing time. This new law will alienate the moderate Muslims

residing in the UK. For the first time in history this sort of negative drive is going to be implemented in the land of Milton and Shakespeare. The way Blair has been following Bush's whims it appears that he is playing Shakespeare's Polonius!

Rafiqul Islam Rime
Agrabad, Chittagong

About missed call on mobile

I would like to tell something about the missed call on mobile. I think it is one of the worst disgusting things. Now-a-days most of the people have mobile set. Not only that some of them also use two or three simcards at a time, sometimes we get huge missed call from numerous unknown number. Those who give missed call their only work is to give missed call and annoy people. I am also an experienced person. It is an interesting thing that I am going to

tell. A few days ago I got a lot of missed calls from a Banglalink numbers. When I got twenty missed calls within twenty minutes then I called that number. He received my call but that noble man did not talk with me. After ten minutes I got again missed call from that number. This time I tried my best to talk with him. That missed call owner received my call and managed a sardonic single syllable laugh. After that I yelled at that man. After two minutes I got a message from that number telling me that "Apnake ami valo mone korechilam kintu apnar behave je ato kharap ta bujte parini, sorry to disturb you". My question is that whose behaviour is bad?

Khondokar Abdul Malek
One e-mail

Lethal drug addiction

Drug addiction is lethal to our civilization. It corrodes our life gradually. The whole world has been contaminated by the tenacious bite of drug-

addiction. Drug-addition has been broken out in an epidemic form particularly among the youth in the whole world. They are becoming addicted by taking drug like pathedrine, phensedyl, heroin, cocaine and so on. Those who are becoming addicted most of all are suffering from frustration in a broken family and also due to unemployment. Sometimes supply of spurious drugs is the cause of a lot of premature deaths. Drug trafficking should be strictly checked. There should be strong family ties so that they don't go astray. We have to develop mass consciousness against addiction to save our future citizens.

Waliullah
Intll. Islamic University, Chittagong

An honest expression

I read the article 'The past is still present' by M B Naqui published in

DS on 17 December. The perspicacious write up is very successful to depict the puritanical exploitation in ruthless ruling by autocratic martial rules endorsed and patronised by feudal lords in West Pakistan who stampeded every right of East Pakistanis in those pre-independent days. He goes against two-nation theory while telling 'It stands proven that Islam, Islam alone, can't sustain a modern state, especially if it comprises two geographically separate zones.'

The writer has welter of chagrin. Ah! the irony of it all. West Pakistanis are paying the price. Democracy once subverted in early 1950s has never returned either in original or present Pakistan. This Pakistan is under a military government in its fifty-eighth year. A confession made by him, Pakistanis are paying the price with their own slavery for keeping the east Bangalis slaves for 24 years. The sagacity of the Pakistani colume-

nist rendered in his expression is no doubt laudable. But what about the defeated Pakistani remnants in Bangladesh who loathed Bangladesh's creation and still want to supersede 16 December by 14 August? What will be their eye-opener? What will make them sober up?

Roney
On e-mail

IB System

Till date the English medium schools of our country have followed the British O and A level systems of education but now some of them like the Aga Khan School are switching to the IB system. One part about this is that it keeps science subjects like Physics, Chemistry and Biology combined till class 9 whereas O level separates the three at around class 7. This means students no longer have the depth of knowledge on each of the three subjects because inte-

grated science is just an outline of the three subjects. This I believe will greatly disadvantage students in grade 9 when they will take science subjects as they will not have a solid concept of the subjects. Thus, schools shifting to IB system must ponder about this before the problem gets severe.

Nayeem Islam
Class-9
The Aga Khan School, Uttara, Dhaka

Iran President's remark

This is in response to the letter by Aranya Syed, Queen Mary University of London, UK on Iran president's remarks. She wrote "The recent anti-Israel comments by Iran's firebrand President should be condemned by the international community."

I would say no, he shouldn't be, rather he should be praised for his

diplomatic comments. Media always play a big role while conveying a message. Do you really know what he wanted to say. Ahmadinejad wanted to say that if others harmed the Jewish community and created problems for the Jewish community, they have to pay the price themselves. People like the Palestinians or other nations should not pay the price for it.

If you believe the holocaust occurred in which 6 million Jews died at the hands of the Nazis in World War II then it was very appropriate to say by the Iran's President "If you have burned the Jews, why don't you give a piece of Europe, the United States, Canada or Alaska to Israel," and is very reasonable to say "if you have committed this huge crime, why should the innocent nation of Palestine pay for this crime?"

Nasreen Khan
On e-mail