

Commission on police brutality

The report should reflect the truth

WITH the formation of a judicial enquiry commission by the government to get to the bottom of the deplorable incident of police brutality on the sports and photojournalists at Chittagong stadium on April 16, the stalemate seems to have ended for the moment. Expressing regrets on behalf of the government for the incident, the state minister for home affairs announced that the one-man commission has been instructed to submit the probe report within the next fifteen days and the same would be made public accordingly. He further said that on the basis of the recommendation of the commission official action would be taken against the guilty persons.

While we view the latest development as a positive outcome, we feel the government's conceding to the demands of the aggrieved parties came about only after the latter took a firm stand against the police action and sought immediate intervention of the law of the land. There is a widespread impression in the minds of the people that if justice is now foreseeable it is only because the journalist community had taken to the streets in a body and boycotted coverage of the ongoing Australia-Bangladesh cricket match.

It is only natural that journalists should have easy access to places where things are happening and it remains the duty of the organisers and law enforcing agencies to ensure that the former may perform their duties efficiently. But the unruly conduct of some members of the force at Chittagong stadium who were supposed to keep law and order and extend support to the journalists grossly undermined the image of the police as a state organ. There is enough evidence to support the claim that the attack on the journalists in full view of the whole world was extremely vengeful in nature. It deserved immediate and sterner action. And while we are totally with the journalist community in seeking justice, we at the same time feel journalist professional bodies must all introspect and put their heads together to devise means to avoid recurrence of such incidences in the future.

Now that the commission is going around digging into the affair, we hope it will be able to perform its responsibilities without any fear or favour and submit the report in time. We also hope the report will reveal the whole extent of the wrongdoing and the culprits will be given due punishment in accordance with the pledge given by the government.

Abuse of domestic help must stop

People responsible should be given exemplary punishment

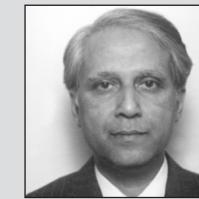
THE other day a boy and a girl aged 9 and 8, respectively, fled the house of their employer Moqbul Hossain in order to escape physical torture by the latter and his wife. They were working there as domestic help. Alas, the boy, told The Daily Star that he and the girl were not only pinched in their bellies by the lady of the house with her sharp nails but also were subjected to caning very often over trifling matters.

Abuse of domestic help is quite frequent in our society. They come from an environment of extreme poverty and neglect, and thus are almost helpless. The scale of incidences of torture by householders and inmates on them is much more than are actually reported. For fear of reprisals victims often continue to suffer silently. In the case of minors it is twice more horrific and tragic.

We therefore feel that tortures and abuse of domestic help, particularly minor children, should receive special attention of the administration. While all accused of the offence should be dealt with severely, exemplary punishment should be meted out to the abusers of minor children. One of the main causes of rising incidences of abuse of domestic help appears to be the administration's failure in bringing to justice confirmed offenders. In not too distant a past we saw reports of a number of severely tortured domestic help undergoing treatment in hospitals. No one knows as to what happened either to them or the offenders thereafter.

Domestic violence and torture has a social perspective too. Those who commit such crimes are sick in mind. It is thus important that alongside the administration our civil society particularly those involved with child and woman's rights (NGOs) also gear up their efforts in building a social awareness in this regard especially amongst the urban population, where most of such domestic help find their employment. The administration in turn should also, through the electronic and other media, embark on an extensive awareness campaign focusing on the legal and social aspects of the crimes.

Reforms dialogue goes nowhere



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE latest episode in the exchange of letters saga was aired in the electronic media this week. Awami League has now indicated the five representatives who are expected to participate on their behalf, in the Joint Committee, to discuss the reforms proposals, as placed in the Parliament in the second week of February this year, by the Leader of the Opposition.

The government has approached the question of reforms in a typical bureaucratic manner. This was their deliberate choice. It was done with clear knowledge that the best way to kill reforms proposals would be to set up a committee, whose terms of composition and agenda would remain vague. They knew full well, that considerable time would be spent in thrashing out the procedural aspects, leaving little time for actual discussion on substantive issues and implementation of agreed decisions.

Progress in reform talks has been like the proverbial snail climbing a greased pole. Carrots were dangled and expectations rose -- to be eventually dashed through spatters.

Nearly two and half months have

elapsed since Sheikh Hasina placed her demands for reforms in the Jatiya Sangsad. Many friends had advised the Awami League that this was the best course of action. It had also been pointed out that this was the democratic norm. Well, that was done. So many weeks later, the two sides have yet to agree on the procedural format. The whole process continues to become more complex by the day. The clock continues to tick away and we now have less than six months left before this administration completes its

denied by the other hand.

Ordinary citizens like us do understand that our government agreed to such a dialogue on the repeated suggestions of our foreign friends. It now appears that this course of action was agreed to by the government for two reasons -- to keep the donor countries happy, and also, if possible, to keep Opposition demonstrators away from the streets.

What is clearly absent is political will. Otherwise, senior government political functionaries would not

people went a resolution of the persisting political crisis. They have their hands full with the sharp rise in the cost of living. Pervasive corruption and terrorism have tainted our national image. It is one thing to be on the Time magazine cover and claim that terrorism has been dealt with satisfactorily. It is another, when we read that the Australian government is sufficiently concerned about terrorism in Bangladesh, to propose the opening of a Federal police office in Bangladesh. Appointing expensive lobbyists will

of the main parties belonging to the Opposition will hardly count, or be treated as kosher.

Currently, things appear to have come to a boil, where the Awami League and other members of the 14-Party Alliance have suggested that they are unwilling to sit in a dialogue with representatives of parties who were associated in anti-liberation activities in 1971. This for them is a matter of principle. They are willing to sit with them as elected representatives in the Jatiya Sangsad, but not sit in a dialogue, in

progress.

It is time the government treats the whole issue of dialogue with some seriousness. No thought appears to have been given as yet to substantive issues and to the drafting of an agenda. These are basic first steps.

There are many significant questions that have remained unanswered. Some of these, like the preparation of the electoral rolls, have already become the subject of litigation in higher courts. These have to be resolved expeditiously.

The Election Commission comes foremost in this regard. The manner in which this institution is functioning reflects irresponsibility. It is already mired in a credibility gap -- thanks to the Chief Election Commissioner. Instead of strengthening its independence, the past few months have seen the government deliberately embroiling it in all forms of unnecessary controversy.

The situation is sensitive. We must understand that uncertainty in politics will only ensure instability that can never be explained away by lobbyists. It will also affect our trade and impact on our competitive advantage. It will also certainly reduce potential foreign direct investment that has become so crucial for improving our existing infrastructure.

Reforms are required in order for us to move forward. Let reason, for a change, rule over emotion and partisanship -- guided by an inordinate quest to stay in power for the sake of power, and not the welfare of the people.

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POST BREAKFAST

Let the discussion and the dialogue be between the Awami League and the BNP. These principal political parties could brief others in the respective camps later. This will facilitate progress. It is time the government treats the whole issue of dialogue with some seriousness. No thought appears to have been given as yet to substantive issues and to the drafting of an agenda. These are basic first steps.

tenure and hands over power to the next caretaker government.

What we have today is a standoff where representatives of the Administration are persisting in double-speak. On the one hand we have the secretary general of the BNP urging the Opposition to continue their efforts towards dialogue. On the other, we have the Prime Minister, the leader of the secretary general's party stating that no reform is really required either in the electoral system or in the present format of the caretaker government. We have a situation where we are experiencing Kabuki theatre, where in a shadow play, one hand is offering a course of action which is being

continue to remind journalists that the government has a few months left of their tenure and that the Opposition will be unable to dislodge them by force from their current responsibility. Their spirit is one of confrontation, not dialogue or understanding. There is no hint of compromise.

The government will do well to understand that their clever politics through exchange of letters will not enhance their standing and support within the broad electorate. You can after all, fool some of the people some of the time, but definitely, not all the time.

The situation as it stands today is far from satisfactory. Common

also not ameliorate the sufferings of the common man. Absence of utilities -- electricity, gas and clean water -- has made daily existence tiresome for millions in the urban areas. In some villages, deficiency of fertilizers and electricity has led to bloodshed and turmoil.

One can only comment that while Rome continues to burn, Nero is still playing with his fiddle.

We have seen how pre-meditated efforts have been undertaken to influence possible course of future events. In this context, it needs to be remembered, that bending the matrix and creating an uneven pitch will fail in the long run. Any election without the participa-

tion of the reforms proposals. This is so, because the Opposition is now convinced that these Islamic parties have been deeply involved in encouraging not only extremism, terrorism and militancy but also in working against the pillars of the state that are codified in the Constitution. They also believe that these forces have subverted secularism within the country.

Let the BNP consider taking the same course of action as has been done by the Awami League. Let the discussion and the dialogue be between the Awami League and the BNP. These principal political parties could brief others in the respective camps later. This will facilitate

Enlightened choice will bring about the best in the polls



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE forthcoming parliamentary election in the country could well turn out to be a poll that marks a turning point in Bangladeshi politics. Exasperated with the experience of three democratic governments in 15 years, with one party coming twice in power and protracted bouts of non-governance, the voters in the country have a chance of either putting things straight or catapulting the country into an existential crisis.

In retrospect, the 2007 election may be a mere episode in the country's development into a mature democracy but it will be an occasion for the voters to exercise some real options: (1) Is single party rule preferable to unstable and shaky coalition of parties with divergent ideologies? (2) Can pre-poll coalitions provide greater stability than post-election arrangement of expediency? (3) Is religious identity espousing mainly radical views, policies and actions more relevant than actual governance? (4) Can the country afford either a PM or ministers who lack mass bases and countrywide acceptance? (5) Should professed ideology take precedence over the cohesiveness of the country?

These are complex questions with no easy answers. But it was the inability of the electorate to address these questions in 2001 that led to the present government becoming a non-performer in governance as well as in all sectors of development activities. People are afraid that the repetition of the same drama in the forthcoming election will have a tell-tale effect on the body politic of the nation. With the parliamentary election due in about eight months

from now, we will hear much in the coming months about "the people."

Every politician willing to contest in this season that is critically dependent on power for operating the well

to provide irrigation water to the crop fields is constrained for shortage of power. Compounded by the fertilizer crisis that is essentially necessary to augment production, the farmers have been pushed to the wall.

The simmering frustration in

having their grievances met through

these long four years of alliance rule

has forced them to come out in the

street and press home their demand

through agitation in some remote

areas like Chapainawbganj and

lately in Saidpur in the northern part

of the country. Government action to

silence the protesters by killing at

least 17 innocent people in Kansat

during the last two months when they

were demonstrating for uninterrupted power for irrigation purposes

is not only mind boggling but

defy any sense. In our 35th year of

independence there is no greater

shame than the fact that nearly all

our people live in such appalling

misery in rural Bangladesh and they

have to die by police firing when they

either ask for irrigation water or

power or fertilizer vitally linked to

their survival.

Alas! how can these politicians,

almost all of them incumbent MPs,

who will be contesting in the next

polls, do it in such a critical period of

the nation's history without the duty

free car or transport they were

allowed to import to serve people's

interest, to reach them without any

hindrance. Sadly true, the cars,

some of them costing even three

crore taka without duty charged

hands and the government lost

revenue to the tune of 280 crore

taka, as it was learnt from newspaper reports.

Well, let's take a statistical look

at what people of the country are like

in our 35th year of independence.

Despite the flood of tears that

they have shed on their behalf by

their elected representatives, more

than half of our people live below the

poverty line as it is indicated inter-

nationally: one dollar a day. These

people have no hope of rising above

the poverty line since most them are

illiterate and, therefore, incapable of

getting what could be described as a

proper job. Bangladeshis who live

below the poverty line -- "the people"

politicians claim to love so much --

have virtually no access to

healthcare either. Less than 30

percent of the populace has access to

sanitation and clean drinking water.

In the absence of job opportunities

either in the city or rural areas,

the vast populace in the rural areas

are dependent on agriculture for

their living but the acute power crisis

is not only mind boggling but

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Government must explain what

prevented