

Fire at highrise

Chilling insecurity revealed

THE morning business activities in entire Karwan Bazar came to a standstill on Monday as fire raged through the BSEC building for hours. The building houses a number of commercial offices including that of two television channels known as NTV and RTV. We are shocked to learn that two people lost their lives, scores were injured and extensive damage has been done to the equipment of these offices as well as the building itself. Army helicopters were called in to airlift a number of people trapped on the rooftop of the building while police and RAB personnel managed a swelling crowd on the streets.

This was perhaps the first major fire incident in a multi-storied commercial building in the heart of the capital city. But yesterday's fire fighting and rescue attempts exposed some fundamental drawbacks that need to be addressed immediately before a similar incident happens elsewhere. Even though the promptitude and commitment with which the rescuers approached the task were laudable, we have a feeling that had the work been done in a more coordinated way and if the rescuers had better equipment in hand the scale of damage might have been less.

We have reasons to believe that most of the highrise buildings do not have a proper fire escape exit(s) or fire fighting equipment as most owners bypass the rules and regulations that are stipulated in the original plan. Therefore, a powerful committee or a task force be constituted with members of the works ministry, Rajuk and BUET experts to go deep into the basic flaws the highrise buildings have in terms of all kinds of safety measures.

We feel Monday's incident, tragic as it is, should be seen as a lesson learned once and for all. First of all, the gaping holes in security arrangements must be plugged and next extensive awareness campaign in terms of internal security drill should be conducted by experts in respective buildings/offices. But it is imperative that an investigation be launched to unearth the cause of the fire in BSEC building yesterday.

Pilferage of relief goods

Situation calls for a white paper

HUNDREDS of sweepers in Rajshahi have expressed their resentment against Mayor Mizanur Rahman Minu over his failure to provide them with CI sheets as test relief towards a planned renovation of their colony. Obviously, it is a breach of promise on the part of the mayor that has had the sweepers incensed. The situation raises yet once again the issue of how tens of thousands of people have been deprived of relief materials meant for their welfare. With news reports coming in every day of the discovery of CI sheets, biscuits and other items meant for supply to people in distress, one does not require much imagination to know what level of corruption had been going on during the tenure of the BNP-led coalition government.

The enormity of the corruption is regrettable to the point of being shocking. And that is so because of the plain absence of morals which politicians of the now departed ruling coalition, from the highest to the lowest levels, demonstrated through the avarice which overtook the concept of public welfare. In plain terms, it has been an unending tale of pilferage at nearly every stage of the exercise or, more appropriately, partisan use of political power. Such bungling to deprive the marginal of the relief materials they are entitled to is, therefore, criminality that cannot be allowed to go unaccounted for. It is from such a perspective that tough action, of the kind already going on, must be taken and sustained. There are, of course, other and bigger instances of corruption that we trust the caretaker government will deal with resolutely. While that job goes underway, there must be no let-up in the drive against those who have plundered relief goods as well as those who at present are engaged in camouflaging their theft through putting a new coat of paint on the CI sheets they have pilfered.

An important step the caretaker authorities could now take is to prepare a white paper, based on the results of recent drives by the security forces, on the extent of the corruption in the relief sector. Intriguingly, former prime minister Khaleda Zia has reportedly spoken of expelling any BNP member involved in the scandal from the party. Perhaps it will not be wrong to ask why she did not speak of such action when she presided over the government, until recently.

A Bangla language of government

Just as Dr. Yunus saw the way ahead in microfinance, which empowered the poorest to build productive lives and contribute effectively to the economy, so government must look to the ordinary people and build on their values, as well as represent their interests as it moves forward. A Bangla language of government will see all the people as part of one family, giving them all a voice, a Bangladeshi voice, and promoting a fair and equitable form of development in which all can participate.

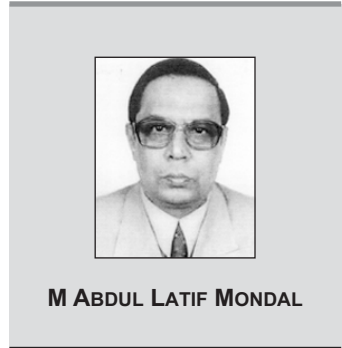
JONATHAN RICHMOND

I am writing in the middle of the night, overpowered by the emotion of the flower laying and mournful music playing at Dinajpur's Shahid Minar.

Dinajpur is a good place to come to, to recognize this most significant of Bangladeshi days, for it is a community at peace with itself: walking through the streets tonight I stopped and reflected, talked and laughed with groups of Muslims and Hindus united as Bangladeshis.

As a visitor to Bangladesh, it is easy to be struck by the gentleness of this nation, the warm welcome, the sense of purpose and the humour of the people. Quite apart from the lovely Bangladeshi graduates of the university where I taught in Thailand, who have done everything to make my stay sunny and memorable, the poorest of people I have encountered on journeys through rural areas have shown friendship to me, and even invited me into their homes for a cup of tea. This is

To finance or not



HERE may not be two opinions that political parties in a democratic country are like any other organization that needs funds to function.

Political parties require funds mainly for three activities: election campaigns, between-elections maintenance of their organizations and political activities, and support of research and information infrastructure for the parties.

In most cases election campaigns are the primary visible activity requiring funds.

Bangladesh has not yet framed any law that asks for the sources of funding of the political parties in general, and financing of general elections in particular.

Article 44CC (1) of the Representation of the People Order (RPO) 1972 simply says that every political party setting up candidates for election shall maintain proper account of the income and the expenditure, from the date of notification till the completion of elections in all the constituencies in which it has set up candidates, and such account shall show clearly the amount received by it as donation above

It is high time that the issue receives serious attention of the government, political parties, civil society groups, academics and the media to free general elections from the influence of black money and muscle, and to encourage honest and competent persons to contest elections. The earlier we can arrive at a consensus on the issue, the better it will be for the progress of democracy in the country.

taka one thousand from any candidate or any person seeking nomination, or from any other person or source, giving their names and addresses and the amount received from each of them, and the mode of receipt.

In the absence of laws regulating the fund-raising of political parties, they are raising funds in dubious ways. Black-money and muscle dominate the general elections of members of parliament (MPs).

This compels persons known for their honesty, erudition and competence to stay away from politics, and from contesting parliamentary elections.

Let us now have a look at the legal provisions existing in some countries regarding funding of political parties, and/or individual candidates, in general elections.

In continental Western Europe, countries such as France, Germany, Italy, Belgium and Spain have made public (state) funds available to political parties, normally using the number of seats and/or votes as the criteria for distribution.

In France, individual candidates receive money to cover the cost of the propaganda (e.g. the printing of election posters) and

the campaigning.

Campaign grants are provided for elections to legislative and administrative assemblies, and for the presidency.

In legislative elections, candidates who win at least 5 percent of the votes in the first round are entitled to receive a state subsidy of upto a maximum of 50 percent of the legal election spending limit through a system of flat-rate reimbursement.

The regime of political parties (or groups) is quite different. Political parties are funded in two ways: by donations from individuals (paid-up members of the parties and elected office holders) and by taxpayers.

The public subsidy to political parties is given in two ways. The first part, for parties which have presented candidates for the parliamentary elections in at least 50 constituencies, is allocated in proportion to the number of votes won in the first round. The second part is distributed in proportion to the number of MPs.

German political parties receive state funding, and the amount is determined, firstly, by the parties' performance in the most recent European, Bundestag and Landtag (state

parliament) elections and, secondly, by the level of contributions they receive from individuals (i.e. paid-up membership subscriptions, contributions by elected representatives and legally acquired donations).

Parties are entitled to receive state funding if they won at least 0. 5 percent of the valid votes cast for their party candidates at the most recent European or Bundestag elections, or if they polled at least 1 percent of votes cast at one of the most recent Landtag elections.

There are no state subsidies available for local party organizations or individual candidates.

In Belgium, about 77 percent of the funding of political parties comes from state subsidies.

It is illegal for politicians and parties to accept donations from companies, or donations of over 125 euros from private individuals.

Political parties represented in parliament receive state subsidies in accordance with the number of votes they get.

The Italian parties resort to two major sources -- public subsidies, which represent the major source, and membership subscriptions, which are generally

less important.

In Spain, since its transition to democracy in the mid-1970s, the political parties have relied heavily on public funding.

Funding of a registered political party in the UK is done through membership fees and contributions made by the members of the party, permissible donation from an individual registered in an electoral register, donation from trade unions, and donation from certain registered companies and societies.

In the UK, some politicians are advocating that parties should be funded by the state; a proposition that promises to give rise to interesting debate.

In our neighbouring countries such as India and Pakistan, there is no state funding of political parties or individual candidates.

The sources of a political party's funds include:

- Membership fees and voluntary contributions made by the members of the party towards the party's funds; and
- Contributions made by the individual supporters of the party.

Having said all this, the question that now arises is: should there be state funding of political parties and individual candidates in the general elections of Bangladesh, subject to fulfilment of certain conditions?

Some civil society members and academics have suggested that there should be allocation in the national budget for state funding of registered political parties and independent candi-

dates, following certain criteria, to free elections from the influence of black money and muscle.

Some people may reasonably argue that state funding of political parties and/or individual candidates will put an extra-burden on the public exchequer.

Secondly, it may result in the mushroom growth of "name-only" political parties and individual candidates.

Admittedly, it will put an extra-burden on the public exchequer. But state funding of registered political parties and individual candidates in general elections may not be a big amount in comparison with the financial loss incurred by the state due to amassing of huge wealth illegally by politicians, businessmen and public servants to contest elections.

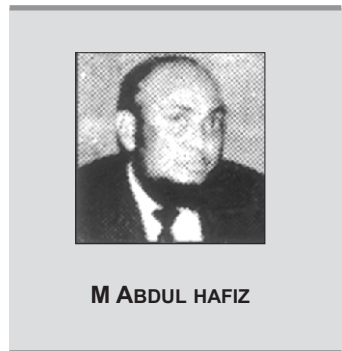
Secondly, and more importantly, state funding of registered political parties and independent candidates in general elections, fully or partially, will depend upon fulfilment of certain criteria to be determined by law.

It is high time that the issue receives serious attention of the government, political parties, civil society groups, academics and the media to free general elections from the influence of black money and muscle, and to encourage honest and competent persons to contest elections.

The earlier we can arrive at a consensus on the issue, the better it will be for the progress of democracy in the country.

M. Abdul Latif Mondal is former Secretary to the Government.

Another Armageddon in the gulf?



AS the February 21 deadline for Iran to halt its uranium enrichment program expires, with Iran defying it, both Tehran and the Western capitals are preparing themselves for possible moves by the other side.

However, a scenario causing discomfort among decision makers in the Bush administration entails Iran succumbing to UNSC demands, but only after giving its nuclear program a decisive push.

Indeed, Iran is likely to announce the connection and operation of six cascades of centrifuges within the next few weeks, signalling that she has, in spite of the US and EU effort to stop her, managed to master fuel-cycle, something considered by Israel as the nuclear point of no return.

From her point of view, the US policy is already a failure, even if Iran subsequently suspends her nuclear programme and enters into negotiation with the US and EU for long-term settlement of the issue.

Iran's prospect of acquiring nuclear weapons would certainly overturn the regional balance of power in Iran's favour. A hostile Iran would also be in a position to interrupt the flow of Middle East oil to the industrial world by dominating the Strait of Hormuz. The US worry does not end there. It thinks that, by means of Hizbollah and Hamas, Iran is also seeking to overthrow Lebanon's pro-west Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and moderate Palestinian leader, Mahmound Abbas, thereby extending Tehran's reach into Lebanese politics and into the arena of Arab-Israeli conflict -- something neither the Arabs nor the Israelis would charitably look at.

In the meantime, Ayatollah Ali Khomeini, the supreme decision maker in Iran, is suspicious of the Western governments, and has no faith in their willingness to reciprocate Iranian compliance of UNSC resolution 1737 of December 23, 2006.

In his view, a hard stance against the West should be tried, since the more conciliatory policies pursued by former president Muhammad Khatami yielded little for Iran.

Jittered, however, by the brinkmanship of President Ahmedinejad, George Bush seems to have already decided to confront Iran rather than engage her in negotiation -- as he was advised to do by James Baker and Lee Hamilton in their bipartisan Iraq study group report. This is notwithstanding the US's predicament in Iraq and Afghanistan.

President Bush is ostensibly influenced by pro-Israeli advisers such as Elliot Abrams, the man in

charge of the Middle East at the National Security council, and by arm-chair strategists in neo-conservative think-tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute which has been clamouring for a "regime change" in Tehran. Although Washington's neo-con cabal suffered a setback in their belligerent Iraq strategy, they continue to wield considerable influence right within the White House.

Also, on a recent visit to the Middle East, the Secretary of State, Ms Condeleeza Rice, sought to mobilise the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to join the US's foray against Iran.

The leading Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, are already concerned at the rise of Iran and militant Shiism, as well as their fallout on their domestic politics. They will find it only reassuring for their future security vis-à-vis a potential nuclear

Iran.

A war of words has already ensued, and can escalate into open conflict on the slightest pretext. Prior to the expiry of the UN ultimatum President Ahmedinejad vowed that Iran would never bow to UN resolutions on its nuclear program, as the military prepared for war games that would include short-range missile tests.

"Even if the adopt ten other resolutions, it will not have any effect," Ahmedinejad told the parliament as he introduced a new budget for the Iranian year starting March 21.

Reciting upreme eader Ayatollah Ali Khomeini's rejection of the UN resolution on January 8, the president said: "No Iranian official has the right to back down on Iran's nuclear right." Iranian state television revealed on its website that Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards would, within days, begin their military

exercises 140 kilometres south-west of Tehran.

Some experts believe that if the US were to attack Iran, the latter would respond by firing missiles against US bases in Iraq and the gulf. Hizbollah might take on Israel, and Israel herself might attack Syria -- igniting a regional war with devastating consequences for all concerned.

Washington has long identified Iran as an adversary, and called it one of Bush's infamous "axis of evil." But in the last few weeks, things have started moving rather fast as far as Iran is concerned.

The US decision seems to be to get tough with the regime in Tehran which, in the words of Dick Cheney, "poses multi-dimensional threats to the US and its allies." The US is particularly concerned because Iran, in its present posture, is directly challenging US hegemony in the gulf region by expelling US military presence from the gulf and substituting it with her own influence.

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The powerful Israeli lobby in the US would compel the administration to face the Iranian menace on two fronts. Firstly, the US already plans to stiffen sanctions as stipulated in UN resolution 1137 of December 23.

Earlier, Iran could afford to ignore it because of the Europeans who watered down the resolution to win the backing of Russia and China. The US would now want a far tougher UN resolution. If that fails, the US would organise a "coalition of the willing" to impose more severe sanctions on Iran.

Besides, the US war machine is already in motion. A US aircraft carrier is anchored in the Persian Gulf, while two more warships are rushing towards the war zone.

It is reckoned that they together can engage ten thousand targets simultaneously to irreparably destroy Iran's nuclear facilities. Arrayed against them is Iran's revolutionary fire with which it could once humble the "Great Satan." The world is anxiously waiting to see if that history repeats itself!

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

oped, and people who are willing must be sought to build a government service on one of the nation's strongest assets: its commitment to values of family, and loyalty to friends.

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Jonathan Richmond has a PhD in transport planning from the Department of Civil Engineering at MIT.