

Election timetable

A notional, if not specific, timeframe would be helpful

NO less a person than the chief of the interim caretaker government Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed has made it clear that no specific timeframe for the polls can be given right now.

Since the raison d'être of this government is to hold a credible national election as early as possible and it is well past its first six weeks of public spirited service, murmurs are nonetheless heard whether an indicative, if not a specific, timetable can now be announced for the general election. A timeframe, not necessarily a cast-iron one in order to give a firm sense of direction to the nation, could be considered.

The perception of his government's performance and the reform-oriented thrust of his priorities have so far earned him and his colleagues well justified appreciation at home and abroad. But invariably such words of praise are mixed with an expectation of early election timeline. The speed with which he has moved to separate the judiciary from the executive, gone about reconstituting the Anti-Corruption Commission and the Election Commission and booked the political heavyweights and criminals, have all earned the caretaker government tremendous praise and credibility. They all seem directed towards creating an atmosphere for free and credible elections in the country. Work however need to be expedited on the electoral roll update and voter ID card distribution. A cue of a timetable can be had from the Army's offer to complete the ID card preparation and distribution between ten months and a year's time. Let's say we add another few months to hold the election. This takes us at best towards middle of next year. This is by way of giving us a notional timeline with reforms carried out by a caretaker government fully sensitive to the demand of the national polity and democratic image abroad.

It is true that the interim government is riding on the crest of public support and so long as it keeps it the better for it. But it is also true that timely election is also a popular desire.

Crocodile in the city

Who is its owner?

STRANGE things are happening these days across the country. The discovery of a saltwater crocodile from a pond at Hoseni Dalan, a very unlikely habitat for such a reptile, must have come as a big surprise to the people of old Dhaka. It is really not easy to say how it made its way through the roads and concrete structures not at all suitable for a reptile to plod on unnoticed and undisturbed. Apparently, the crocodile completed the mission successfully.

Of course, there is a more plausible, yet no less baffling, explanation of what might have happened. Forest department officials, who finally took charge of the crocodile, believe that it might have been abandoned by its owner as catching or keeping the greatly endangered crocodiles is prohibited by the law. The good news is that the local people did not turn violent on the reptile and no harm was done to it before it was taken to Dulahazra Safari Park near Cox's Bazar. We wish the crocodile a happy stay in its new abode and hope that it will lead a more natural life at the park than it might have experienced in captivity!

A deeper look into the incident could reveal--if it is true that it had been left there by its scared owner-- something more substantive about people's reaction to the sudden tightening of the noose of law. Countless reports of wildlife being plundered by poachers and hunters have been carried by the press, but things have not changed. Now, it would be a welcome development if the crackdown on the corrupt also alerts people violating the law in various ways. Regrettably, the general awareness regarding the need for conserving wildlife is still very poor in our society.

The incident shows that the acquisitive propensity of man not inhibited by the law could indeed be bizarre. We may be in for even greater surprises in the days ahead. After all, we don't yet know what some people have bought with their ill-gotten wealth. The discovery of the crocodile could only be the beginning of a series of even more startling findings.

America's China Worries

Sino-American tensions will worsen because the underlying economic frictions have rubbed relations raw, as underscored by the WTO case. But a higher visibility for problems in the relationship should not be confused with a breakdown in relations. More skirmishes do not make a war. There is not yet the wherewithal or the leverage in Washington for a knockdown drag-out fight with Beijing over trade.

BRUCE STOKES

THE decision by the Bush administration to bring a case before the World Trade Organization against China's alleged subsidies of its industries is the most aggressive and potentially most significant trade action against China by any of its trading partners since the nation became a major player in the global economy.

As a formerly state-dominated economy, subsidies and their competition-distorting consequences remain a fact of everyday economic life in the Chinese marketplace. Unless China succeeds in resolving these concerns, an adverse WTO ruling against China would permit Washington to levy unprecedented import duties on Chinese products.

The administration's action, after six years of benign neglect of US-China trade relations, is a conscious effort to forestall even tougher sanctions against China by the

newly-elected Democratic Congress.

Yet, despite the precedent-shattering implications of the US filing the WTO case, a full-fledged trade war between Washington and Beijing is unlikely. US-China trade tensions are mild compared to those between Japan and the US during the 1980s.

Politically-powerful multinational corporations have conflicting interests with regard to China. And Americans, as debtors, can't afford to stick their thumbs in the eye of their Chinese creditors.

Concern in Washington about China has been growing for some time, reflecting the unprecedented \$214 billion US trade imbalance with China (through November 2006), a 16 percent increase over the first 11 months of 2005. By comparison, in 1987 at the height of US-Japanese trade tensions, the total US deficit with Japan was only \$56 billion.

How prepared are we to face a disaster?



WE have gotten off rather lightly this time. And one does not want to make light of the four deaths in the inferno at the BSEC Bhaban Monday last. But it could have been far worse than the actual number of casualties of the blaze at the BSEC building.

It seems as if there is some cosmic intervention that is coming to our aid every time there are incidents of such distressful nature. Apart from a stroke of good-luck, it was also the very brave and committed band of firefighters that worked under tremendous constraints caused by the combination of various factors, which helped to keep the number of casualties low.

Our firefighters may have been badly equipped and looked a very poor imitation of, for example, the NYFD, but they were, for all practical purposes, equal in bravery and dedication to any fire department in the world.

Seeing the way they risked their own lives to save the people trapped in the building made one

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

It is a sad reflection of our psyche that we spring into action only after we are struck by a disaster or a calamity. Now we are talking about adequate apparatus and all necessary actions to tackle future fires. I cannot believe that the fire department was not alive to the shortcomings of their equipment, and also about the inadequate machinery, to tackle a fire of the scale we saw on Monday. It is perhaps more to do with getting one's priorities right.

feel very proud indeed. One couldn't but feel sorry for the plight of the firefighters, hamstrung not only by shortage of equipment but also lack of appropriate gears to contend with, for example, the height of the building, and the BSEC building is not the tallest one in the area.

The fire brigade and all ranks of the military that participated in the rescue operation deserve full credit for their efforts that helped in keeping the number of casualties low. In spite of lack of adequate and appropriate equipment, and the vast multitude of people who were more of an encumbrance than help, and the built-in danger that was caused by the many safety shortcomings of the building which might have helped the spread of the fire and had certainly prevented the occupants of the building from making a quick exit before the fire spread, they managed to control the spread of fire.

It is for the enquiry committee to find out the cause of the fire, determine whether it was an accident or otherwise, and make the finding public. But for the moment, let us

ask how well prepared in Bangladesh are we to face a disaster of this nature and magnitude?

The only disasters that we have so far bothered to consider in our planning for disaster management are natural calamities like floods and cyclones. And we have acquitted ourselves well when confronted with the elements' fury, in at least managing to reduce the effects of their aftermath on the people, and also for all the necessary post disaster measures. And such has been our success that many in the US were talking about getting experts from Bangladesh to organise relief measures in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Why is it that the BSEC Bhaban did not have adequate measures to respond to fire? It is imperative that some minimum safety arrangements should be in place in the high-rise buildings. That is what the regulations demand, and that is what is invariably neglected, mainly by design. Yes, of course, it is the fault of the relevant people in the administration whose task it was to ensure that the minimum safety-measures were in place.

Two very basic requirements, a fire alarm to warn of the fire and an escape exit, might have prevented even the four deaths. Fires don't spread suddenly and engulf a building instantly. Timely warning can save many precious lives. And considering the several incidents of fire in garment factories all over the country in the past several years, the government should have initiated actions to ensure that all buildings were fitted with adequate safety measures against outbreak of fire.

But while it is easy to blame the government for the failures, is it also not failure, too, on the part of the management of those offices and corporations housed in the building, to ensure that safety measures are not only in place, but also that drills are regularly conducted to face exactly the situation that arose on Monday.

It was their responsibility; too, to ensure that all actions that are needed to reduce hazards to a person's life while working in the office are taken. And it should not be the task of the city corporation alone, but also of the ministry of

The AL and its reform agenda

The truth is, the days of politics with right and left is over. Nowadays, politics is technology and information driven in both democratic and not so democratic countries alike. Whether we like it or not, Professor Muhammad Yunus has the upper hand in both. The only advantage that one can still see for Sheikh Hasina is her party's solid grassroots network. It is possible to utilise this in her favour by welcoming Professor Yunus in the ring. She risks being identified as a not so modern-day leader if she keeps making negative noises in the ring.

MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

IT is no secret any more that, out of the BNP's election-related debacle and the subsequent movement led by the AL during the caretaker government headed by the president, the AL's credibility remains at acceptable level organisationally. Its organisational network has not been damaged, unlike the BNP's.

However, it appears that the AL has been unable to take advantage of this political gift apparently bestowed to them unexpectedly. It is certain that the government of Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed is the darling of neither the AL nor the BNP.

It is also not sure at this stage what role this government will play with regard to Nagorik Shakti. The way things are moving, the Nagorik is unlikely to get any favours or deals from this government, since it is committed to creating a level playing field for the next election.

Although the emergency rule has given a huge boost to the AL as a single entity (as against a leading

partner of the grand alliance), one may ask why this party is failing to take full advantage of BNP's present day disintegration nationally and locally?

I am afraid, I must say, that the AL has been bewildered by the current political environment, and has its own worry about the criminal wing, although it is now clear that AL is no match for the BNP.

It was in the media in recent days that the AL is contemplating about bringing reforms in the party. At last the high command has realised that the party, although having a strong grass-roots network has, unfortunately, not been coordinated at the upper level. It is now clear that a major rift exists among the leaders at national level. Why? One can detect at least five reasons for this:

One, the AL has certainly damaged its reputation in the secular camp of this nation due to its generosity towards Khilafat. The party has lost the huge support of the middle class secular people, who now have an alternative in Nagorik

Shakti. A section of the AL leaders are seemingly very disappointed with this deal.

Two, with regard to Nagorik and its leader, the AL has been pulling the wrong leg without fathoming accurately the present day political environment.

It is no secret any more that Professor Muhammad Yunus is not a fan of the president of the AL, Sheikh Hasina. It is also certain that the electorate is in no mood, at this moment, to hear any abusive or unprofessional language from any corner against the Nobel Laureate.

Three, the nomination debacle of the grand coalition led by AL is not going to go away from the minds of some leaders soon. It appears that the former president, HM Ershad, took full advantage of his market demand during the pre-January 11 politics. Unfortunately, the electorate was very unhappy with both the major coalitions for extending Jamai Adar towards HM for grabbing his support.

Four, many do not like foreign

hands playing a role in our political and democratic movement. Intervention of foreign diplomats in a nation's internal affairs certainly has very bad consequences in the long run, although it may be good in the short run.

In our case, this time, it was more desirable for the nation due to the uncompromising stand taken by our leaders surrounding the general election of 2007. The western envoys led by the US did the job for the people.

Our foreign friends know it well that the BNP had been out of control in the field of corruption, and also that some leaders had been connected to the Islamists apparatus with or without the knowledge of the high command.

In the same way, the AL also failed to cultivate the trust of the foreign diplomats in Dhaka. Some of the AL leaders feel the absence of SAMS Kibria hugely at this hour.

Five, last but not the least, the AL has been depending on too heavily on its old guard. While these leaders had been very strong and dedicated during the war of liberation, unfortunately, the majority of them are now either suffering from ill health, or have lost touch. These leaders refuse to go for retirement, and do not want to accept that they had their turn. This, in turn, made the AL weak at the mid-level.

In view of the above, certainly, the reform initiative is a welcome sign for a strong come-back. To take full advantage of the emer-

gency rule, the AL should engage more time in dismantling its corrupt and criminal elements.

The time has come to take lessons from the immediate past government led by BNP. This party, which is now on the run, had ruled the nation for almost half of its existence.

Having said that, it would be wise for the AL to get prepared for the polls, whenever they take place. The party must keep its eyes and ears wide open on the movements of their hopefuls in this season of shifting allegiance.

Certainly, Nagorik will make attempts to recruit the young and the bright from all persuasions. One must remember that a corporate leader-turned-politician has no time to create good politicians who are likely to be driven by ideology, overnight. However, he can create opportunities for the bright and the best without hesitation.

This is politics, 21st century style, in the era of globalization. The AL must come to terms with this, and must forget the days of vote banks and historical allegiance.

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The only advantage that one can still see for Sheikh Hasina is

ately. I suggest that teams be organised, headed by magistrates, by Rajuk, like the way anti-adulteration drive is conducted, to assess the state of the high-rise buildings and the deviations from the building codes.

Of particular emphasis should be the safety measures, as per the code, that must be inbuilt in the construction of the buildings. The owners must be compelled to make the necessary changes. The team must maintain constant oversight and lay a timeframe within which the changes must be incorporated. And it must be ensured that no future construction violates the building code, which has so far been possible through the unholy truck between the corrupt officials and the builders. REHAB must be engaged more intimately in this venture.

Also, evacuation drills must also be conducted regularly of occupants of high-rise buildings if future calamity and loss of lives are to be averted. We must start our preparation immediately. No one knows that we will not be struck again tomorrow; and tomorrow is never far away.

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One must remember that, against all odds, the nation has doubled its literacy rate over the last thirty-five years. This made the citizens in towns and villages less emotional, and keen to lead a western way of life (individualism?).

The proof is that the AL failed to generate genuine people power after the incident of August 21, 2004, when the nation witnessed helplessly how the party had been unjustly persecuted, with its enemies attempting to wipe it out from the map of Bangladesh.

Reform within a party such as the AL is overdue, and I am sure that the well-wishers of this party have become ecstatic on hearing this news.

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deficit, Democrats and many Republicans on Capitol Hill will want to demonstrate they are doing something to stem the bleeding.

The Chinese yuan is seriously undervalued, some economists estimate by more than 20 percent. Congressional imposition of tariffs on Chinese imports to compensate for this undervaluation has been threatened for some time, but is unlikely. Wall Street's reaction would be decidedly negative. And Congress hates to enact measures that might adversely move financial markets.

More likely to pass is narrower legislation aimed at China. It was to preempt such Congressional moves that the Bush administration launched the WTO action against Chinese subsidies.

Beijing offers a range of export tax rebates to Chinese companies, yet Washington trade lawyers privately acknowledge that verifying such subsidies may prove impossible in the opaque world of Chinese business-government relations. So the WTO case may prove a hollow gesture.

The thinking inside the administration is to initiate a number of such actions soon to defuse trade tensions before they become an issue in the 2008 US presidential campaign and avoid the embarrassment

of a Sino-American confrontation immediately before the August 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

Any actions from Congress or the administration will be tempered by the mutually dependent nature of Sino-American trade and the conflicting self-interest of US multinational firms.

China's exports are only now beginning to impact American industry -- so the political backlash has yet to come. And China bashing may never be as severe as Japan bashing in the 1980s, if only because the US manufacturing sector is far smaller today, so fewer people face losing their jobs.

Moreover, one consequence of years of US investment in China is that Beijing now has hostages. Powerful American companies deeply involved in China have much to lose in a Sino-American trade war.

They will lobby hard against meaningful trade action. Failure of the Bush administration to file a long-threatened WTO case against alleged Chinese failure to protect intellectual property rights -- an action Hollywood once championed and now, at least in part, opposes -- is an indication of the leverage such multinational firms exert in Washington.

Finally, as concerned as

Americans are about Chinese economic power, they worry more about Beijing's military might. China is a military and creditor superpower in a way Japan never was. Thus Beijing must be accorded deference, even if it galls many Americans.

Sino-American tensions will worsen because the underlying economic frictions have rubbed relations raw, as underscored by the WTO case. But a higher visibility for problems in the relationship should not be confused with a breakdown in relations. More skirmishes do not make a war. There is not yet the wherewithal or the leverage in Washington for a knockdown drag-out fight with Beijing over trade.