

## The governance issue

Accountability in high places must be ensured

THE decision by the council of advisers to do away with the import of duty free vehicles for lawmakers raises anew the matter of corruption in high places. In the past sixteen years, members of Parliament have often abused privileges they have been entitled to. A very significant number of parliamentarians have imported duty free vehicles and then sold them off at hefty profit to others. Such behaviour has naturally shocked all conscientious citizens. The scruples that we thus expected from our elected representatives have been conspicuous by their absence. Our sentiments take a little more battering when we are informed that telephone bills amounting to huge sums of money have remained uncleared by our now former MPs, in spite of the fact that they received special telephone allowances.

In light of such realities, the question of how to ensure accountability in high places acquires renewed significance. Government is by definition a matter of ensuring the greatest good for the greatest number of people. But the record of the last decade and a half, and even more, shows clearly how elected government has worked at cross purposes with the aspirations of those whose welfare ought to have been its fundamental aim. The spoils system which developed (and this is now being made clear in the crudest manner possible through a recovery of relief materials from the homes of putatively public figures) has eaten away at the vitals of almost every institution of the state. Parliament, especially in its final stages, was reduced to an institution unconcerned with issues of public welfare. The various standing committees of the Jatiyo Sangsads met either fitfully or not at all, which again was a drain on the public exchequer in terms of the resources wasted. When, therefore, Adviser Mirza Azizul Islam speaks of a need to free the government machinery from corruption, we comprehend fully the exigencies of the situation.

The circumstances demand that a full, relentless programme of reforms be undertaken and taken to a meaningful conclusion. All the political, administrative and other institutions undermined or destroyed in the past must be thoroughly recast through institutional reforms. Political reforms must also be brought into the workings of the political parties if democracy is to become a truly sustainable exercise. Overall, government must go back to doing its fundamental duty, which is to ensure the material and intellectual well-being of the nation. It must ensure a foolproof system of checks and balances that will make it impossible for individuals, groups and parties to subvert popular aspirations.

## Hill flattened for housing plots

Telling upon eco-system

DISTRICT authorities of Cox's Bazar allegedly bypassing rules and despite protests by the forest department, demolished a hill near Cox's Bazar beach to create housing plots for bureaucrats. The 51 acre vast expanse of land now stands flattened and denuded of its valuable forest resources in a government-declared 'ecologically critical area'. It is worthwhile to note that the hill in question at Kolaitoli has been levelled by felling trees in violation of a law that prohibits such action without permission of the Ministry of Forest. We are also concerned over the fact that an erstwhile IGP is listed amongst the beneficiaries ranking atop a total number of 500. The list also includes several Deputy Commissioners including many other government officials. The controversial project was approved by the erstwhile BNP government.

In the meantime we find it rather outrageous the claim made by some of the allottees that they had no knowledge about the adverse impact on the ecology the project may have on the surrounding areas and beyond.

We find the whole incident not only shocking but bizarre. It is sad that such debilitating acts can take place with explicit involvement of a good number of people of the society who are otherwise known to be responsible and conscientious citizens of the country.

However, it's good to learn that the construction work has been suspended since February 19 due to joint forces' intervention in response to media reports and environmentalists' express concerns. But the damage had already been done.

Bangladesh is already at the cross roads of being a veritable time bomb of ecological disaster, both man made and natural. In recent times scientists have already reminded us by predicting that a large mass of land of Bangladesh particularly surrounding the coastal belt may go under the sea in not too distant a future due to global warming.

It is thus our earnest hope that the present government would carry out a thorough investigation into the whole incident, punish those found responsible and reforest the area. No flattening of hills, please!

## The history our children must know



SYED BADRUL AHSEN

A nation that teaches false history to its young is a society condemned to perdition, or worse. In Bangladesh, especially since the coups d'état of 1975, a palpable distortion of history has been going on with, of course, a slight intermission during the period of Awami League government between 1996 and 2001.

The general run of things, however, has been to inform the young at school and college that Bangladesh's history is not what it really has been. That was a criminal act to indulge in, and successive governments after 1975 remain guilty of perpetrating that falsehood.

In the last known attempt to inject a large degree of adulteration into our national history, the four-party Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led government of Begum Khaleda Zia sought, to their sheer outrage, to tear out the Proclamation of Independence in the constitution and replace it with a document that would have General Ziaur Rahman emerge as the prime mover behind that gathering was Professor Kabir Chowdhury. It was he who spoke, however briefly, of the role of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Bangladesh's history.

Beginning in early 1976, therefore, things began to fall into a

## GROUND REALITIES

Political partisanship does not create history. It subverts it. Pundits can analyse historical happenings in their diverse ways, but they do not ever try turning established facts on their heads. The most grievous of blows for us has been the role a handful of individuals have regularly arrogated to themselves every time a need to deal with history has arisen. General Zia's attempt to supplant Bengali nationalism with "Bangladeshi nationalism" has done incalculable damage to national unity.

Even so, there are facts that the people of Bangladesh, particularly those who came of age in the post-1971 period, need to be acquainted with, where the matter is one of a mutilation of national history.

The first assault on historical truth came in the minutes immediately after the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 1975, through the swift, sinister replacement of the liberation war cry of Jai Bangla with the un-Bengali Bangladesh Zindabad. That shock came along with another, when Bangabandhu Betar was quickly pushed back into being Radio Bangladesh.

The first, tentative steps toward a formalisation of historical mutilation came when the journalist Khondokar Abdul Hamid told a surprised Ekuhshey crowd at the Bangla Academy in February 1976 (the country had conveniently been placed under a state of martial law) that "Bangladeshi nationalism" would serve as the underpinning of the state. The only brave soul at that gathering was Professor Kabir Chowdhury. It was he who spoke, however briefly, of the role of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Bangladesh's history.

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pattern. These days you will hear a good number of people extolling Zia over the reality that he never claimed, as his political successors were to do so unabashedly in later years, to have declared Bangladesh's independence in March 1971.

Of course Zia did not make any such claim. How could he? He had, after all, in a 1972 article in the weekly Bichitra, loudly proclaimed his participation in the War of Liberation through the inspiration of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

But if Zia did not try to superimpose himself on national history, he certainly made sure that Bangabandhu was reduced to being a non-person in the five years of his military administration.

None of the observances of national historical importance in the electronic and print media remembered the seminal contributions of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to the story of Bangladesh. The Zia years were effectively spent airbrushing Mujib out of Bengali history.

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biggest shame of the Zia years was the anointing of Bangabandhu's assassins as the country's diplomats abroad. It was not our finest hour.

When, today, the caretaker administration speaks of a correction of history in school textbooks, these and other disturbing aspects of our politics must be taken into account. It is not merely a matter of placing the right individuals in their proper places. It ought to be a far more serious issue of restoring history as it was forged in 1971 before being riddled with scandal after 1975.

History is never an act of striking a balance between individuals or events. Which is why any move to correct Bangladesh's national history must steer clear of the chances of trying to make everyone happy in light of recent political happenings. The facts matter.

And the biggest fact is that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, through his lifelong dedication to the national cause, remains the founding father of the country. Once you acknowledge this truism, you need to move on to another, in this case the role of the Mujibnagar government during the War of Liberation.

Our young have never had the

opportunity, not even during the two phases of Awami League government, to know that the government led by Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed rests on a high pedestal of history not merely because it was the very first government shaped and run by Bengalis but also because of the intellectual brilliance and pragmatism it brought into its conduct of the independence movement. When you do not enlighten the young about Tajuddin Ahmed and his wartime associates, you run a long knife of premeditated falsehood through the truth.

There is then the matter of the roles other political individuals have played in guiding Bengalis down the road to freedom. Despite his periodic bouts of adventurism, Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani has remained a powerful, poignant symbol of Bengali protest. He deserves a special place in the pantheon of national leaders.

But when, in the interest of historical balance, it is suggested that men like Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq be given pride of place in the Bengali hall of fame, you tend to get perturbed.

Suhrawardy and Huq were both brilliant, if somewhat controversial (in the case of the former) and erratic (in the case of the latter) men. Their politics was focused on the All India Muslim League's program of Muslim nationalism. Even in the post-partition years, for all their leadership of such forces as the United Front, Suhrawardy and Huq continued to link their role in politics to their acceptance of the Pakistan ideology.

To suggest, therefore, that these formidable individuals need to be given places as dreamers of a free Bangladesh would be tantamount

to undermining their original politics, as well as sowing confusion in the minds of Bengalis who remember only too well the course that the movements for autonomy and independence took between the 1960s and early 1970s. It would be stretching the truth, with all its uncomfortable ramifications.

Political partisanship does not create history. It subverts it. Pundits can analyse historical happenings in their diverse ways, but they do not ever try turning established facts on their heads. The most grievous of blows for us has been the role a handful of individuals have regularly arrogated to themselves every time a need to deal with history has arisen.

General Zia's attempt to supplant Bengali nationalism with "Bangladeshi nationalism" has done incalculable damage to national unity. General Ershad's ugly move to strip away at secularism pushed us into a deep pit.

It is these truths, and others, that need to enter the books, and the minds of the young. And do not forget that these young, and their children to come ages hence, must learn too about the foreign soldiers who pillaged and killed in their country, of their local collaborators who assisted in the murder of brave Bengali men and in the humiliation of helpless yet courageous Bengali women.

If it is history we are looking for, we will search far and wide until we have retrieved it for ourselves and our children. We will not go half way. And our minds will not be influenced by thoughts of a need for balance. Compromise is alien to history.

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## After New Delhi



HARUN UR RASHID

THE just-concluded New Delhi summit (April 3-4) appears to have injected a new dynamism in Saarc. This is evident from the speeches made by all the eight leaders of Saarc. One golden thread seems to have run through all the speeches, that they have to do something to get Saarc moving ahead, and not remain stagnant as before. This is good news.

In the past, Saarc had become too much of a talking (and arguing) shop and too little of a practical doer. Some say that if the money extravagantly spent for holding the past thirteen summits had been targeted for development, it would have had a great impact on the poor.

The tradition of "sitting, meeting and eating" of Saarc leaders appears to have been abandoned in New Delhi. For example, two agreements -- one on forming a Saarc Food Bank, and the other on setting up a South Asian University in India -- were signed in the presence of the Saarc leaders.

### New member and observers

The New Delhi summit was the first in which Afghanistan participated

as a full member. China, Japan, US, European Union and South Korea attended as associated observers to Saarc. Iran has been invited to be an associated observer at the next summit.

The attendance of observers demonstrates that Saarc is being taken seriously as a regional forum by development partners. It is a region of 1.4 billion people, with large natural resources. It connects the Middle East and South East Asia. The Indian Ocean that stretches from the sands of Egypt to the Straits of Malacca stands at the centre of South Asia.

Poverty, weak state institutions and internal disturbances pose a threat to security and democracy. They are also the sources of many of the world's problems, from civil wars to drugs and terrorism. No doubt peace, progress and stability of this region are of strategic importance to development partners, and they want to help, assist, and cooperate in the march of economic and social development of the region.

### New Delhi declaration

The 30-point New Delhi declaration dealt with, among others, inter-regional connectivity, multi-modal transport system, millennium development goals, Saarc

Development Fund, energy development, terrorism, Safta, environment and global climate change, multilateral trading system, women's empowerment, and the Saarc Food Bank.

The New-Delhi Declaration is a forward-looking document, and progress on each item needs commitment and cooperation from all states. The items mentioned in the declaration are quite relevant for achieving peace and progress.

### Unilateral India breakthrough

India's long-standing policy of strict reciprocity seems to have been put aside this time, and the "Gujral doctrine" has been adopted with respect to its neighbours. India's former prime minister in his book titled A Foreign Policy of India (1998) writes: "The Gujral doctrine, if I may call it so, states that first, with neighbours like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka, we do not ask reciprocity but give what we can in good faith."

On April 3, in an address to the Saarc summit, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh unilaterally announced concessions to South Asian neighbours, without reciprocity. They are as follows:

"As an immediate step, India is announcing a unilateral liberaliza-

tion of visas for students, teachers, professors, journalists and patients from Saarc countries ... India is ready to accept asymmetrical responsibilities, opening her markets to her South Asian neighbours without insisting on reciprocity. I am happy to announce today that we will allow duty-free access to India, before the end of this year, to our South Asian neighbours who are least developed countries, and further reduce the sensitive list in respect of these countries."

The least developed countries in South Asia include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, and Nepal. Already it has been reported that a list of goods is being sent from Bangladesh to India for obtaining this facility.

India has shown to its neighbours that it is willing to provide concessions without reciprocity. This is appropriate for India, being the largest country and endowed with huge natural and human resources.

For example, India is the seventh largest exporter of food grains in the world. The surging economy is complemented by a stock market surge that saw index values go up to a third, and by 200% since 2001, low external debt and large foreign exchange reserves (more than \$100 billion).

Indo-Pakistani ties have been the victim of vicissitudes of a relationship that progresses in fits and starts. Although talks are in progress at different levels, through back channels and diplomatic dialogue, the two sides have made

little headway over Kashmir. President Musharraf toyed with some innovative ideas on the Kashmir issue, but India does not seem to be interested in them.

### Strained Indo-Pakistani relations

The key to implementation of items covered by the New Delhi declaration lies largely in the state of Indo-Pakistani relations. India and Pakistan have been circling each other on a number of issues. Some say that they are like un-reconciled Siamese twins. If relations continue to remain distrustful, implementation of these lofty ideas in the declaration is likely to be unfulfilled. This means that transition from the declaratory phase to action and implementation will face difficulties.

The core issue that generates mistrust is the Kashmir dispute. No amount of good words will wash away Pakistan's concern on Kashmir, and one important dynamics is that Pakistan lacks the power to force the issue with India. It feels frustrated, and has a non-cooperative attitude toward India.

Pakistan Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, ahead of his visit to New Delhi, indicated that the resolution of the Kashmir issue was a "must" for Saarc to realize its full potential. In diplomatic language it means that unless the Kashmir issue is resolved, Saarc will limp and will fall short of its goal.

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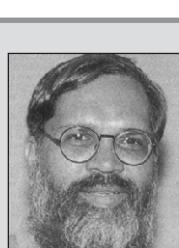
political relations cannot be totally separated from economic relations. A close interdependence between political and economic relations has been widely recognized. The development of Indo-Pakistani relations could not be completely free of the historical legacy of the past conflicts in the region.

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## BJP plumbs the lower depths



PRAFUL BIDWAI

writes from New Delhi

The election commission deserves unstinting citizen support in its efforts to discipline the BJP. The party has got away with murder, and worse, in its cynical pursuit of communalism, thanks to the past reluctance of the CD. This can only happen if the EC and enlightened public opinion remain unshaken by the BJP's bullying tactics.

courted arrest. BJP veterans Atal Behari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani colluded with this rustic and crude tactic.

The BJP has also published lurid advertisements in Hindi newspapers. Emblazoned with the lotus symbol, these accuse the BJP's opponents of shielding terrorists, opposing Saraswati Vandana and appeasing Muslims. They show a neighbourhood full of Islamic flags, with a slogan: "kya inka irada pak hai?" (Is their intention pure?) Pak is shorthand for Pakistan.

The BJP's stand on the CD is egotistically contradictory. It wants to dissociate itself from it. It also behaves as if it owned the CD and is being wrongly punished for it.

Duplicity comes naturally to the BJP and is integral to its politics. After the razing of the Babri mosque, Mr Advani said that December 6 was "the saddest day" of his life. But he has always defended the ideology that led to the demolition.

Gujarat-2002 made Mr Vajpayee "hang his head in shame." But within days, he was blaming Muslims for the pogrom. The BJP seamlessly vacillates between expressions of shame and pride for the same act! However, BJP leaders can't pretend that they weren't consulted during the CD's production. According to the Bul