

Hasina's case

HC makes some significant observations

AS we await the decision of the Appellate Division on Sheikh Hasina's petition, we would like to comment on some of the observations made by the High Court pertaining to the process and procedures followed in bringing up the case for trial.

First, the case against Sheikh Hasina was not initially filed under the emergency provisions by the investigation officer (IO), but it was subsequently placed in that category on the direction of an additional secretary of the home ministry. This raises the disquieting point of the case being unduly influenced by a government functionary. One may recall here that the government decided to place all the cases under Emergency Provisions through an order issued on March 21, which was later rescinded on April 8. Clearly the case against Hasina was filed much later. Was it done to deny her bail? That's a highly embarrassing question, which should not have been allowed to arise in the first place.

Secondly, the court has observed that filing of the FIR is not by itself a proof of an accused person's guilt. A person is presumed to be innocent unless proven guilty, and the onus of proving so is on the prosecution. Thirdly, the HC's general observation that rules are not being applied properly is another reflection of how legal procedures have been short-circuited in this case. It raises the very important issue of maintaining neutrality and objectivity of governmental actions, particularly in politically sensitive matters.

The observations made by the HC hint at the law being interpreted or applied not in the best of its spirit in the case against an eminent politician, to say the least. The government's credibility will be jolted if it fails to go by the norms of law and set standards and procedures in putting an accused on trial.

The questions that have been pushed to the fore by the HC ruling need to be examined in all their ramifications. We believe the government should carefully weigh the significant observations made by the court on the case, which include some important legal interpretations. This it should do for its own good.

Musharraf's meeting with Benazir

Once again, a dictator eats humble pie

GENERAL Pervez Musharraf has lately been a troubled man. The extent of his miseries has nowhere been as clearly reflected as in his desperate meeting with exiled former prime minister Benazir Bhutto in Abu Dhabi. Indeed, it remains an irony that a politician against whom Pakistan's military leader has taken a series of actions in the past eight years, clearly to prevent her from returning home and so causing a tumult in politics, is today the very politician whose support he needs to preserve his place in Pakistan's chaotic state of politics. It is a reminder once again that soldiers who seize the state through a loud condemnation of politicians are in the end left with little choice but to go back to them for help. Pakistan's own history is replete with instances of such stories repeating themselves over and over again.

One will be perfectly justified in terming Musharraf's latest moves as the politics of expediency. Only days after the stinging rebuke Pakistan's Supreme Court gave the general on the matter of Chief Justice Iftekhar Muhammad Chaudhry and at a time when the SC prepares to deliberate on the issue of whether or not Musharraf gets to keep his army uniform as he tries to get re-elected as president, the general has some very real reasons why he needs Ms. Bhutto's support. The exiled former premier does not herself have much of a clean record, what with allegations of corruption and misgovernance dogging her two stints in office. The Musharraf regime has made much of her alleged corruption, even pursuing her by legal means abroad. But now, in a strange twist, all the old animosity appears to have taken a back seat as the president decides to explore every option that might allow him to keep his job. His worries are understandable. On the one hand, there is a sudden resurgence in terrorist activities in Pakistan, with scores of people already dead from the resultant violence. On the other, the clear threat by the Americans to go into action against al-Qaeda elements inside Pakistan has significantly eroded Musharraf's image, whatever he had of it, as a man who controlled the situation. To add to his misfortunes, internally his support base has considerably weakened.

The immediate future for politics in Pakistan remains uncertain. But there are clear lessons to be drawn from Musharraf's meeting with Benazir Bhutto in Abu Dhabi, a prime one being that there comes a time when military rulers go bankrupt and are then forced to seek the support of their enemies for their survival. All said and done, however, it remains a big question whether the army is ready to go along with the president in his wheeling and dealing with Ms. Bhutto. Is there any lesson for us in all this?

Of distortions and intellectual dishonesty



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

GROUND REALITIES

In our enlightened, collective self-interest as a people, it becomes critically important that the stains made on our historical canvas be wiped clean. It is equally important that we remember and identify the men and women who have caused those stains on that canvas, the bigger objective being that no one in future will call forth the audacity to challenge our self-esteem as a people. It is not always healthy to go back to conversations of the past, but in societies where truth has received an endless battering and history has been subjected to unending distortion, it makes sense to revive some old, uncomfortable questions and try locating some answers to them.

individuals and as part of the collective scheme of things, have taken upon themselves the onerous and honourable task of setting things back in proper perspective.

It is a job that surely has demanded great courage, given especially the accumulated untruths, the detritus, of all the decades since the tragic occurrences of August-November 1975. And these men who have now decided that enough is enough, that all purveyors of falsehood must be put in their places, are people who truly deserve our gratitude.

That said, it now becomes our collective job as a nation to zero in on the men and women who have, for the last thirty-two years, refined the lie into fake truth. Some of these people are dead; some others are yet moving around, proof that they are not yet embarrassed about the bad role they have played in the mauling of history and proof again that we as a society are yet to condemn them to an isolated corner.

It is all a matter of intellectual dishonesty that we have here. When a very large number of your educated, articulate men decide, in their narrow selfish or partisan interests, that it is

worthwhile to molest the truth and thereby secure for themselves a place in or around the corridors of power, you know how moral depravity may have come to be part of the tale you live through from day to day.

Think of the men who advised the now-departed Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led government on a revision of history only a year ago. All the men who were on the team that decided that General Ziaur Rahman actually declared Bangladesh's independence on March 26, 1971, are still around.

Among them are academics and lawyers, individuals who have seen little reason to feel contrite about their contribution to the distortion of the truth. How many among us have called them to account over their misdeeds? And what action, from that certain moral point of view, does the caretaker government plan to take against them for the damage they have caused to our self-esteem as a nation?

Let us face it: if we happen to be speaking of reforms, in politics and government and, indeed, in society, it is only proper that we take to task the very men who have flouted our

traditions and undermined our history in order for our children to be given false information about the political heritage they are heir to.

These former vice-chancellors and barristers-at-law who stumbled upon the discovery, only because they liked what Begum Khaleda Zia and her government were doing, that General Zia "declared" Bangladesh's freedom on March 26 need to be asked about the sources of their information.

Let there be no mistake here: these men have deliberately played around with the truth and have systematically engaged in the job of keeping this nation divided along partisan lines. Wherefore should they be allowed to go free when individuals charged with other crimes are going through due process of law?

Of course, we do not recommend a witch-hunt. But we do ask that all the men and all the women who have made their singular, sinister, contributions to the degrading of the historical ethos of this country be singled out by name and publicly condemned for their acts. In the months after the murders and mayhem of 1975, a senior journalist came forth with the bizarre thought

that "Bangladeshi nationalism" was what underscored the foundations of this country.

Sit back a while and ask yourself if the suggestion made by the journalist, who later served as a minister in Bangladesh's first military government, was not essentially a discreet going back to the discredited two-nation theory of the 1940s. Expect some people around you to howl in protest.

It was no such thing, they will say. It was only a measure to ensure our distinctive national characteristics, especially in relation to the Bengalis on the other side of the political frontier.

And that, Sir, is where logic takes a mauling. The issue is not that there are Bengalis in our neighbouring country. More specifically, the issue is that it has always been our Bengali nationalist characteristics at work in our long struggle for political freedom.

Why must my social status as a Bengali be done away with only because that other man across the frontier is a Bengali as well? And that is not all. The fundamental truth about our sovereign nationhood is that nationalism for us has always been a culture-based affair.

Nationalism is not a mathematical formula, which works uniformly for all

nations. It is an idea that applies in different ways to different societies. Anyone who argues, therefore, that our culture-based nationalism rests on weak foundations, that indeed our place in history will be determined by the political geography we are heir to, is conveniently engaging in falsehood.

And, yet, falsehood is what we have lived with for years. A whole generation has grown to adulthood

learning about life, not through an understanding of the moral dimensions of living but through a series of lies constantly and consistently packaged and drilled into its sensibilities. It is here that we now need to put a check on things.

Those who have for decades peddled untruth through pushing aside the historical realities behind our long and arduous struggle for free expression as a people need to be officially condemned for their sins.

Those who promoted the cause, if it was a cause, of "Bangladeshi nationalism" and those who, in the earlier stage of the 1970s, were vociferous about "Muslim Bangla" have made large rents in the fabric of our national being. And those who in the 1980s cheerfully gave Bangladesh a religious connotation and thereby gave politics a clear, new, communal twist only put the clock back for us.

In our enlightened, collective self-interest as a people, it becomes critically important that the stains made on our historical canvas be wiped clean. It is equally important that we remember and identify the men and women who have caused those stains on that canvas, the bigger objective being that no one in future will call forth the audacity to challenge our self-esteem as a people.

It is not always healthy to go back to conversations of the past, but in societies where truth has received an endless battering and history has been subjected to unending distortion, it makes sense to revive some old, uncomfortable questions and try locating some answers to them.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

Bangladesh needs a plan for gas import

Coal, nuclear power, hydro-power, solar energy etc., may, to varying degrees, supplement gas as energy drivers for the country in the medium to long term future, but these will not be able to replace gas. The dependence on gas will remain a major feature in the energy scenario in this country. Rigorous exploration for gas in the onshore and offshore areas of the country is a job the government should undertake at this moment. Looking into the present gas reserve, and the prospect of further tapping of "yet undiscovered gas field," it seems that Bangladesh will inevitably need to import gas.

BADRUL IMAM

Afew years ago, when the BNP government was intent on implementing gas export from Bangladesh, a group of people, including members of IOC and a few of their local associates, was trying to sell a theory that Bangladesh was floating on natural gas.

Opposition from the civil society to the gas export plan turned into mass awareness about the limited gas reserve of the country and the danger of selling it outside. The gas export plan was aborted in the wake of a countrywide opposition against such a plan.

One can see how logical the conservative attitude of the civil society was on the issue of gas in a country whose economy is so much dependent on this resource. Several studies predict that the country will face a major gas crisis, with shortfall in gas supply from 2014 and the exhaustion of the present gas reserve by 2020. About 90% of the presently generated 3500-3700 MW electricity is

being produced in gas-fired power plants.

With an electricity demand of 5000 MW, the nation is reeling under load-shedding to the tune of 1200-1500 MW. When the future energy scenario is considered, it becomes obvious that the problem is enormous and will be very difficult to manage.

Let us consider the year 2015. At that time, the electricity demand of the country will rise to about 9800 MW (source: Power System Master Plan 2006), and the country will have already faced a gas supply crisis. In the year 2020, the electricity demand will be 14000 MW, and by that time the present gas reserve will be exhausted.

Some new gas fields are expected to be discovered by that time, but they will not be enough to meet the demand. The assessment of the undiscovered gas resource of Bangladesh, carried out by a joint team of United States Geological Survey (USGS) and Petrobangla experts in 2001, has predicted that there is 95% possibility of discovering 8.2 Tcf gas in the next 30 years.

On the other hand, the government has forecast a gas demand of 25 Tcf over the next 18 years, upto 2025, to achieve a targeted annual growth of 7%.

Coal and other alternative energy sources will be able to increase their shares in the energy mix of the country, but these cannot adequately replace gas. Consequently, gas will remain the major energy source for fuelling the power plants, not to mention sectors like fertilizer and other industries, and domestic and CNG transport. In the absence of enough gas in the country, import of gas will be essential for running the system.

Since there is no scope for gas import from India, Bangladesh has to look towards its other neighbour, gas rich Myanmar, for that purpose. Thailand has been importing gas from Myanmar for several years now. India is on its way to implementing gas import plan from Myanmar, while China is also negotiating with Myanmar to buy gas.

All eyes are focused on the recently

discovered offshore gas fields near the Arakan coast, which is near to the Bangladesh border. This means that there is a crowd of buyers in the Myanmar gas market now. Negotiation for a gas import contract, construction of a pipeline, production, and transmission, are very time consuming processes. So, if Bangladesh does not move to initiate the process early, it may fall behind in the competition for gaining access to the gas market, or the gas may not reach us when the crisis begins.

Energy observers opine that Bangladesh may initiate a gas import plan to buy gas from the Shwe, Shwe Phu or Mra gas fields, discovered recently in the offshore blocks A-1 and A-3 off the Arakan coast in Myanmar (see map). These three gas fields have large reserves, and are only about 100 km from the Teknaf coast in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh will need a 200 km long gas pipeline from the Arakan coast to Chittagong via Teknaf, in order to connect the Myanmar gas system to the Bangla national grid. Certainly, Bangladesh is in a better position with respect to gas transmission from Myanmar, primarily because of two reasons, i.e. dense population living off the fertile cultivable land in coal field areas, and thick, water-bearing layers above coal deposits, which would apparently create huge environmental and water management problems.

Let us consider the case of Asia Energy Company's (AEC) attempt to construct an open-pit mine in

Phulbari. Although AEC gave an assurances that the water and environmental problems could be adequately managed and the people living in the coalfield area would be properly resettled, these were not accepted by a large section of the general public and the civil society.

A violent encounter, resulting in the death of some demonstrators who were protesting against the proposed open-pit mine, made matters worse. Apparently, AEC became a social outcast at that time, and the mining company had to abort its operation in Phulbari. It looks like the incident at Phulbari will make the acceptability of open-pit mining in this country much more difficult than before.

Coal, nuclear power, hydro-power, solar energy etc., may, to varying degrees, supplement gas as energy drivers for the country in the medium to long term future, but these will not be able to replace gas. The dependence on gas will remain a major feature in the energy scenario in this country. Rigorous exploration for gas in the onshore and offshore areas of the country is a job the government should undertake at this moment. Looking into the present gas reserve, and the prospect of further tapping of "yet undiscovered gas field," it seems that Bangladesh will inevitably need to import gas.

Open-pit mines can, however, produce about 90% of the total coal reserve, compared to 25% recovery from underground mines. But open-pit mining does not have good prospects in Bangladesh primarily because of two reasons, i.e. dense population living off the fertile cultivable land in coal field areas, and thick, water-bearing layers above coal deposits, which would apparently create huge environmental and water management problems.

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Within days, a pilot of an A320 can undergo conversion and be ready to fly the A330 & A340. It is the same with the engineers. It is conceptually a brilliant idea, which brings huge cost effectiveness.

Setting-up an aviation school

We have no alternative but to set up our own work-force development strategy, because there is a tremendous shortage of required human resources internationally. This is a pre-condition to our success as we need long term security in this regard.

Engineering developments

Due to very fast and robust expansion in the industry, third party maintenance is a very lucrative business. Setting up a Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul (MRO) station will be a long term, but surely successful venture. A huge number of operators in the region are buying new aircraft, and within the next five to ten years maintenance facilities are going to be in high demand.

Co-operation between airline/ Caab/airport authorities

Biman requires a free hand to run its affairs, and all decisions should be made for commercial reasons only. Removing the Ministry of Aviation from Segun Bagicha and relocating it in the same building where Caab can also be housed will cut down costs dramatically. This will bring close co-operation between all the associated and concerned organizations in developing our aviation industry.

Sheikh Monirul Islam is an Aircraft Engineer.

A road map for Biman

Bangladesh does not have the required management skills to run a commercial airline. There are no easy rides; we have to face the dilemma. We should make a study group, prepare a rescue mission and, with all the necessary documents to please a viable investor, a high power delegation should go to a country like UAE where a big investor like

the National Security Council, and civil aviation and air transportation are part of national security. At times when the RMC industries require urgent shipment to meet the deadline, air transport is the obvious choice.

Second, we must get rid of the idea that a national flag carrier is only symbolic. Let us establish a viable airline business first. Success will come automatically if we take nationalistic pride in the airline.

The regional traffic growth is above nine percent. So there are no fears in taking up this venture without any further delay.

Let the government remove all the barriers by taking the liabilities, so that shares can be offered to viable

business partners. A word of caution here; it is that big investors will look at our record first, they will look at our country profile, and they will hunt for any data available from reliable int'l sources, and then they will make their decision based on those. So, please do not look for short cuts, because there are none!

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I would like to make the following suggestions:

Our present fleet

- The three F-28 aircraft are big liabilities, and are very difficult to sell; no one would offer a price. So what do we do with them? Give one to an airline training centre where they will be able to use it for training purposes, keep one for a future aviation school, and the best one can be turned into a corporate jet for hire by businessmen/VIPs.
- The four Airbus 310s can be sold in the market at a commercially competitive price.
- The DC-10s are good assets, and we need some investment here. Take them to Singapore ST Aviation; modify them into cargo aircraft; keep 2/3 for future cargo operations; sell the others to make some money.

Future fleet

- Our first criterion must be fuel efficiency; so the choice of an Airbus fleet suits our need. Maintenance-wise Airbus aircraft are easy to maintain due to their advance technology. Spare parts