

Trial of the war criminals

The issue cannot be hedged any longer

NOBODY could have missed the demand of the people of the country during the Victory Day celebrations on 16 December this year. The call for the trial of war criminals reverberated throughout the country from different segments of the people, be it businessmen, be it workers or labourers, be it the civil society or the valiant freedom fighters. We would like to add our voice to it.

We believe that trial of the war criminals is necessary for the democratic future of Bangladesh. Firstly, we believe that it will serve the cause of justice, particularly those that have suffered directly, to call to account the people that in league with the occupation forces perpetrated the most barbaric acts on the people of Bangladesh like murder, mass killing, rape, plunder, loot and arson...the catalogue of crimes is long indeed. And this is very much in conformity with universally accepted legal standards. These are crimes against humanity, crimes against the people of Bangladesh; these are crimes in the eyes of the law everywhere.

Secondly, we believe that our polity and indeed our politics must be cleansed of the stigma of war criminals that has for many years cast a dark shadow on Bangladesh. It acquires greater poignancy when one considers that the issue is linked with a very fundamental question the birth of Bangladesh. These war criminals under the umbrella of the Jamaat-e-Islami and Muslim League in 1971 had sought to strike at the very basis of our statehood. And had they been successful we would have been forever destined to live as a colony and enslaved people, with our culture and language destroyed.

We would like to be unequivocally clear that the issue of the trial of war criminals should not be linked with any extraneous issues like banning religion-based politics, etc. We fear that linking one with the other may dilute the very call for war criminals' trial.

We are also alive to the question as to why after 36 years this question has surfaced again. We believe that the issue has always been alive in the hearts and minds of the people. The demand has been renewed with great deal more vigour and reinforced by certain snide and pejorative remarks about the War of Liberation and the freedom fighters by the Jamaat leaders and people of the same ilk. The inability or indeed lack of inclination to try the war criminals during the three democratic regimes demonstrates a typical case of political opportunism on the part of the major political parties as much the weakness of our polity, rendered so because of the destruction of the democratic traditions and institutions by BAKSAL and the military and autocratic regimes post-1975 August. The autocrats needed political support to legitimise their rule and found in these elements very willing supporters. Jamaat in particular exploited this situation to gain political space.

However, it needs to be made distinctly clear that we are calling for the trial of all war criminals and not just those that belong to Jamaat because we believe for a fact that there are war criminals in many of the political parties in Bangladesh. In the same vein we would like to call upon these parties to consider whether they would like to continue to be associated with those that are mere deadweights because of the grave crimes they are accused to have committed and because of their role in 1971 against the very birth of Bangladesh.

The case of the vanishing tickets

Authorities must intervene to set things right

IT is a retelling of the old tale, one that has been heard for years together, especially at the time of the two Eids. Even today, when one would have thought that with a military-backed caretaker government in office things might have been different, the woes of people wanting to travel home to be part of the religious festival with their families remain. The long queues before the ticket counters at bus, launch and railway stations in the city are once again proof of the old games that a section of unscrupulous staff at these counters are capable of playing with the general public. As has happened so many times before, once again frustration has taken hold of people at being told that the tickets have already been sold out.

It is time for such racketeering to be brought to an end through decisive action on the part of the authorities. With instances in the past of railway personnel hoarding away a good number of tickets for themselves and their friends at the expense of the public, one is hardly in any doubt as to how much of swindling and plain corruption goes on in the matter of an availability and sale of tickets. Often the 'sold out' tickets reappear suddenly, if customers are willing to cough up much more than the prescribed prices. Now, such corruption can easily be dealt with, especially in this age of growing technology, through an adoption of a computerised system of ticket sales at the bus, launch and railways counters. Moreover, when ticket-related problems have been rearing their heads for years on end, it simply does not make sense for the authorities not to have adopted precautionary methods this time round.

In the few days that remain before Eid-ul-Azha, the administration ought to take firm steps to ease the situation at the ticket counters.

All politics is local



ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

THE role of local elected government (LEG) in the post Sidr disaster relief and rehabilitation efforts is being direly missed -- not that the army, the government, and local appointed public officials have shown any lack of urgency in the desperate situation. What I'm talking about, though, is the presence and reach of local elected officials, similar to "first aid" in a medical emergency.

Zafar Imam (minister in both Ziaur Rahman and Hussain Ershad's cabinet) was right when he told me that an effective LEG is the first official machinery to attend to some of the immediate sufferings of the disaster victims with water, food, and shelter, ahead of such supplies reaching from distant city locations.

He observed that for the first time in 36 years there was no measurable misappropriation of relief materials -- unlike in the

NO NONSENSE

Thomas "Tip" O'Neill -- a consummate politician and a longtime Speaker of the US House of Representatives -- once said: "All politics is local." He was elucidating how the issues and concerns of citizens in towns and cities around the country influence the policies and actions of their lawmakers in Washington. He was telling his audience that electoral races for public offices at the local level are where real democracy is at work.

past, when only about 30% reached the victims. Zafar Imam argued that the influence of national level politicians on local affairs was the primary reason why local government was often hamstrung in rendering service to the community and, thus, became ineffective in local affairs over time.

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Had he won in his home state, Tennessee -- the state he represented all his years in the US Congress -- vice president Al Gore would have been presi-

dent-elect Gore in 2000, with or without Florida.

So why did Al Gore lose Tennessee on November 7, 2000?

Bill Jenkins, from historically Republican upper east Tennessee, remarked in an Associated Press report that "Tennessee didn't leave Gore. Gore left Tennessee." He was referring to Gore's changing stance on gun control and abortion as bellwethers. Gore lost the presidential election because he forgot that "all politics is local."

The statement "all politics is local" may sound like a platitude and a generalisation to politicians in Bangladesh -- but it is not. It's a truism not often recognised by rent seeking politicians, particularly those attracted by the glamour of being known as "MP Shaheb" or "Montri Mohodoy."

Since the installation of the

post 1/11 CTG, Western politi-

cians and dignitaries have been

pushing for restoration of

elected government in

Bangladesh, sooner rather than later. Their pre-1/11 concerns were free and fair election and combatting corruption. Although, most western governments are supporting the efforts of this CTG towards achieving both goals, we have rarely heard them emphasising the role and urgency of instituting an effective LEG, where the democracy takes roots.

In all politics, local politics form the political articulation of the local community. This is where:

- Policies influencing local issues are formulated and executed.
- Citizens interact with officials to solve their problems.
- Citizens articulate their aspirations and values through political participation.
- Officials, both elected and appointed, are recruited.

As an integral element for delivering public service in cities and communities in advanced democracies, local government plays a central role in the dis-

charge of "good governance." Recognising that local government is inherently more democratic and responsive to the needs of the people, South Africa, in 1997, restructured its local governments and made them the epicenter of developmental activities.

This restructuring marked a significant reversal of postcolonial models of state-led development in Africa. Until the infusion of structural adjustments in local administration, state-led development was also at the heart of the development programs of the international financial institutions.

In Australia and USA, local government is a stepping-stone to federal and state politics. It's a platform on which the craft of politics are acquired, and there are copious opportunities to participate.

How many of our politicians elected to the national assembly have any prior experience of working in local governments? Not too many -- probably none. Once elected to the parliament, their link with the political offices at the local level is maintained primarily for "carving a cut" from development and infrastructure related projects.

The Election Commission's original plan to hold local election before national election was a great idea -- one that would keep the influence of the win-

ning party on local election to a minimum. Obviously, the same party winning majority both at the national and local levels would bring back the misrule of the corrupt.

Yielding to politicians' demand to hold national election ahead of the local is a trap -- one that'd bring back chaos and disorder in local elections, reminiscent of the mayoral election in Chittagong and other big cities.

Stripping-off of any official role of MPs in the local government in their constituencies is another splendid idea, one that'd make local government officials much more effective while freeing them from courting their MPs.

Local elections are about, and should be, local affairs. Election issues at the local level should remain independent of national issues, although there could be cross-over penetrations of national political issues.

The Election Commission under the leadership of CEC Dr. Shamsul Huda is as good and innovative as it can get -- its proactive character is unique in the nation's 36 years history. Everyone, at home and abroad, expects the CEC to deliver to the country a parliament "of the people, by the people, for the people."

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Is Modi losing ground?



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

IS the tide turning in Gujarat? A month ago, most Gujarat politicians, bureaucrats, analysts and activists were agreed on the dead certainty of the Bharatiya Janata Party's victory in the Assembly election -- with a smaller margin. Today, they expect the BJP to lose -- despite the Congress's timid campaign.

The Congress skirted the 2002 violence, didn't take on the BJP's "glorious Gujarat" slogan, nor gathered the nerve to field more than half-a-dozen Muslims in a state where 20 Muslim MLAs used to get elected. But it might still get catapulted into power.

All exit polls after the first-phase voting in 87 constituencies (state total, 182) forecast a vote-swing against the BJP. NDTV forecasts a loss of 13 seats, placing the BJP behind the Congress. A defeat in Gujarat will be a seismic shock for the BJP and a historic setback for the Sangh Parivar. Mr LK Advani's laughable anointment as the BJP's prime ministerial candi-

THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

Gujarat's patriarchy indices are frightening. The sex-ratio is an abysmal 487:1000 in the 0-4 age-group and 571 in the 5-9 group (national averages, 515 and 632). Gujarat's health indices are barely higher than Orissa's. In social sector spending (as a proportion of public expenditure), Gujarat is second lowest among India's 21 major states.

date will only aggravate the shock.

Ideologically, the setback will be worse than the BJP's rout in the 2004 national elections. It will prove that anti-pluralist politics based on religious hatred isn't sustainable even in a "Hindutva laboratory" state.

Current estimates of the BJP's seats tally by government agencies vary from 70 to 80 seats, way below its 2002 score of 127. Even the party's assessment is reportedly that it's sure to win only 63 seats; and optimistically, another 15.

The BJP is clearly on a down-swing in Gujarat. Four broad factors explain this big change -- shifts in the party's social support-base; reassertion of normal or mundane politics vis-à-vis ideology-driven politics; changed intra-Sangh Parivar relations; and Mr. Modi's personal confrontationist campaign.

The long expansion of the BJP's base in Gujarat has apparently ended. Between 1992 (Babri demolition) and the 2002 massacre, the BJP split the Congress's traditional base

among Gujarat's "core minorities," comprised of Adivasis, Dalits and Muslims, and also among middle castes like Kolis.

Thanks to Hindutva, it attracted many Adivasi and Dalit votes in 2002. It disenfranchised Muslims and prevented them from voting.

However, over the past year or longer, these groups have been returning to the Congress. The BJP has lost much support amongst Kolis, and the powerful Leuva Patels, important in Saurashtra and Kutch (which elect almost a third of Gujarat's MLAs).

These shifts can eliminate, even reverse, the BJP's small 3 percentage-point vote lead over the Congress in 2004, itself down from 10 points in 2002. This seems to be happening in Saurashtra and the southern tribal belt, and in central and northern Gujarat. It's only among urban, upper-caste, upper-class Hindus that the BJP enjoys unshakable support. And although 40 percent of Gujarat's population is urban, the small upper-crust elite can't swing elections.

Reality is catching up with Mr. Modi. Hindutva has become irrelevant to the public mood. Mundane issues like high electricity bills, expensive toll-ways and a wilting Bt-Cotton crop, are chipping away at the edifice Mr. Modi constructed out of tall claims about investment and industrialisation.

As this column noted seven weeks ago, Gujarat's is a case of unbalanced development. It's

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Mr. Modi thought that the banner of Gujarat's asmita (glory), development and "vibrant Gujarat" would produce magic. But the asmita slogan couldn't cover up the chasms and sleaze in society.

Development got reduced to worship of growth without inclusion. And "vibrant Gujarat" is going the way of "India shining" in 2004 -- exposing the BJP to popular scorn for celebrating dualistic growth.

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Absence of door-to-door campaigning by RSS pracharaks will be a major blow to the BJP. As will the absence of canvassing by the Hindu proselytising Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram in the tribal areas. Once, these groups produced pro-BJP synergy,

falling behind other large states in gender, health and environment indices -- 74 percent of its women and 47 percent of children are anaemic. Gujarat's infant mortality and malnutrition rates remain stubbornly high.

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A third adverse factor for Mr. Modi is serious infighting in the BJP. More than 40 rebels are challenging official candidates. The RSS, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bharatiya Kisan Sangh and other Sangh fronts have decided not to help the BJP.

The Election Commission has taken note of his grave electoral malpractice. Sadly, to appear "even-handed," it also issued notice to Ms. Sonia Gandhi for her "merchants of death" speech. But the two speeches aren't even remotely comparable.

The EC must correct this error and severely punish Mr. Modi. But what he needs most is political punishment -- from Gujarat's electorate.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

Sanctifying Bangladesh society

The corrupt businessmen are not only close to the concerned bureaucrats and politicians, they have also become popular through generous donations, and by participating in various social gatherings and religious celebrations. To eradicate corruption from Bangladesh society what is most important is people's awareness, and rejection of corruption as an immoral practice. This needs close understanding and cooperation between the people and the government.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

AMONG the achievements of the caretaker government (CTG) we may safely consider separation of judiciary from executive and activation of a dysfunctional Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) as the greatest. While the positive effect of (a) may take some more time, (b) has been able to satisfy the people that nobody is above the law.

We do not expect cleaning of the Augean stable of corruption in Bangladesh in no time by a single organisation. We have to

realise that ACC is working in a highly corrupt society. It is common knowledge that Bangladeshis did not have a reputation for honesty in the past.

We can hardly defend ourselves against the comments of the famous historian Roberts during the British rule. During the Pakistani days, or during the last 36 years, no serious attempt could be made to make bureaucracy or politics or business free from corruption due to the compromising attitude of the governments.

In the beginning the ACC was a dysfunctional organization, with politicised and largely corrupt personnel from the defunct Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB). With his zeal and enthusiasm

capacity.

It is true that ACC has tried to decentralise its administration. However, this is not enough. There is no guarantee that corruption may not take hold of its district officers. After all, money has very powerful effect on people, and certainly on the low paid officers and officials with some power to exercise. The drive for eliminating corruption may only be really effective if the common people start hating corruption.

As indicated earlier, corruption has existed in Bangladesh for a long time. Broadly speaking, common people neither dislike corruption nor bother about honesty. Thus, it is difficult to prove the dishonesty of a person unless he is caught red-handed.

Common people are helpless against any powerful, wealthy, corrupt person. Ordinary people dare not initiate a case against such a person because he can