

Dumbfounding fiasco

Questions left to be answered

THE planned exhibition of Bangladeshi archaeological artefacts at a French museum has been abandoned under circumstances which will definitely invoke lots of queries and questions in the public mind. It is the latest example of an important matter being so awfully mishandled, that even our diplomatic relations with France might come under strain. However, what the French Charge de Affairs said about the protestors has, to our mind, been unthinking and undiplomatic which we wish he had better avoided.

It all began with the government being not open at all about the deal with its French counterpart. Public protests over the priceless artefacts leaving the country, albeit temporarily, were ignored with inexplicable non-chalance and the go-ahead signal was always on. But the theft of two statues before they could be airlifted to France suddenly brought the amateurish handling of the government in full public glare. Nothing can perhaps alter the plain truth that the security aspect, while sending the articles abroad, was completely overlooked. The result is a major embarrassment to the government and an invaluable loss for the nation.

It is not clear why the government agencies were found napping when the security arrangement at the very doorstep of Bangladesh should have been foolproof in view of the uproar and protests from the civil society and people at large over the decision to dispatch our artefacts to France.

Now, the matter is far from over. The first batch of the artefacts sent to France has to be brought back. A vigorous investigation has to be launched into the theft and those behind it have to be brought to justice. We must be alert enough to thwart any attempt at bruising our image as a nation.

Finally, the government should issue a stage-by-stage clarification of how the matter was messed up. It certainly owes an explanation to the people who are anxious to know the details of the incidents taking place in the last few days. They are not asking for too much, for the artefacts are our great assets and we have to tighten our security arrangements to protect our valuable heritage.

Workers in trouble in Malaysia again

Can't we thrash it out once and for all

THIS is the second time in four months that abused and underpaid Bangladeshi workers have sought refuge at our country's embassy in Kuala Lumpur. This time 225 workers have been sheltering partly within the mission compound but mostly on the pavements since early December. Only in September, 100 Bangladeshi workers, driven by poor working conditions and low pay in the host country, had organised protests at the High Commission premises.

In recent years there have been tales aplenty of our workers in Malaysia (as also in the Middle East) being subjected to exploitation and discrimination. They have been often cheated by agents in Bangladesh and once arriving in Malaysia the so-called local agents took full advantage of their vulnerabilities. Most of the workers had sold their meagre property at home and even taken out loans from others to pay the recruiting agents so that they are thrown to the wolves. Eventually, they land on jobs they had not contracted for accepting low pay and substandard conditions. Or they face detention or deportation.

True, the workers' desperation forces them to make mistakes but surely it is the government's responsibility to put a system in place in collaboration with the host countries so that the expatriate workers are not victimised by the swindlers on both sides. There are two compelling reasons why at the inter-governmental levels the manpower business should be streamlined once and for all. First, the manpower importing countries hugely benefit from the contributions of the expatriate workers to their economies. Secondly, the country exporting labour is also tremendously helped through remittances from exported manpower. It is a two-way traffic and a win-win proposition for both countries.

We would urge the government to send a high powered delegation to Malaysia to sort out the problems on a durable basis. It involves not only remittance but also our goodwill with countries who have been recruiting our manpower. The untoward happenings demean our image abroad which we believe is entirely avoidable through cooperation of both sides.

Looking back at 2007



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THE country had to weather many storms since the start of 2007, both natural and political. We are, regrettably, still in the process of picking up the pieces from both, and unless we play our cards right weathering the political storm may prove to be very difficult.

The months since October 2006 had been devoid of politics and without a democratic government. However, it would not be wrong to suggest that our minds had been fully occupied with anything but politics, and that it has been any less interesting than it would have otherwise been under a democratic government and a politically charged environment that the people had been held hostage to the past 5 years.

It has been less violent though, with no political hartals and the attendant collapse of normal public life. The transition to 2007 was extremely painful, not only because of the very belligerent attitude of the two major parties towards each other that cost us very dearly in terms of life and property, perhaps equally painful has been the subversion of politics and failure to ensure continuity of the democratic process.

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

There is always the danger in a dispensation such as this for people in the government to get very used to their jobs. The government, one hopes, is alive to the pitfalls of the prolonged stay of an unelected regime, as well as a prolonged political void. It can ill-afford to lose public trust and support. However, it cannot waver in its plan for political reforms as well as cleansing the country of corruption, either.

The blame for this must be shared by both the major parties, but the biggest contributory factor that created the political uncertainty has been the attempt by the then ruling party to ensure election victory at any cost.

Thus, a pliant serving judge of the appellate division was illegally appointed head of one of the most important democratic institutions of the country -- the Election Commission. The media's call to rescind the appointment has been vindicated by the recent ruling on the matter by the highest court.

One wishes that the judgment on the matter had come sooner. It is the systematic distortion of the institution to suit the blueprint of the ruling party that had destroyed its credentials. And all the problems that followed stemmed from the general distrust of the perceived role of the EC.

The shenanigans resorted to in compelling a situation that led to the self-appointment of the president as the chief advisor to the first caretaker government need restating, if only to remind us that a modicum of sagacity by rising above partisan politics by the honourable president would have averted the situation that we are facing now.

What the events demonstrated was the shameful contest for power;

while one party was willing to go to any lengths to hold on to power the other would stop at nothing to prevent that from happening.

The consequent uncertainty led to a unique and unforeseen situation, but whose inevitability could not be averted. We had the luxury of not one but two caretaker governments.

The second was hailed by, and enjoyed the support of, the general mass. And in the new dispensation the armed forces played a substantive role, a role that had the support of the public too. And the only reason that the new dispensation engendered popular support was the great expectation of the people, that it would deliver them from a regime of destructive and ineffective politics.

And that is why the immediate measures undertaken by the caretaker government to bring in reforms and indeed revive public credibility and trust in the democratic institutions found a positive resonance in the public mind.

Expectations were raised with the re-manning of the EC and re-inauguration of the ACC. The drive against corruption and the commitment of the CTC to bring in political reforms pointed towards a new trend in politics and a reformed polity in Bangladesh.

But that was very well and good as far as the intentions of the CTC went. There has been, regrettably, very little of substance that the government has been able to deliver in the nearly one year it has been in office. One could, perhaps, be so bold as to suggest that the public support graph for the CTC has taken a downward turn. This calls for some retrospection.

It was very clear at the outset that the new government was caught between two compulsions that were complementary towards achieving the goal of return to good democratic governance.

The compulsion of having an election as early as possible was predicated on the popular demand of not going back to the politics of the past.

There can be little argument about the aim of achieving clean politics by bringing reform of politics and of the political parties. However, the objectives and the method of reaching it have, at best, been hasty and, at worst, flawed. The handling of the issue of "exit/entry" out of and into the country of the leaders of the two parties is a case in point.

We had, through these columns, several times in the past pointed to the pitfalls of taking too many things

on the plate and opening too many fronts that might prove unmanageable and eventually turn hostile. That has come true, regrettably.

The political parties have come round to acknowledging the need and the benefits of reforms but the reform of the political parties must come from within, although the government can on its own introduce measures that would indirectly compel party reform.

If the political front saw a patchy performance, in the economic front, the unbridled rise in prices of essentials did not help the cause of the caretaker government. But the remarkable thing was that the reaction of the people was far from hostile. They were willing to give a chance to the CTC to sort out the economic and business sector and go after the syndicates.

What was perhaps not foreseen was the cumulative effect of the government drive against corruption, and the political reforms, on the country's overall socio-economic condition.

The reality is that while politics has become as much a matter of business it has not been able to come out of the control of the businessmen. The nexus is only but natural, needed for both to not only survive but also flourish.

What has raised queries in the public mind is the selective and personality oriented approach to political reforms. We had, in these columns in the recent past, emphasised on the fact that reforms and changes attain credibility only if they are attended by honest intentions. A caretaker government cannot afford to have the rationale that motivates its policies become

questionable. The government is aware of this situation, and has taken some steps to restore it. One of the mechanisms it is trying to evolve is the truth commission, of which there is too much speculation and too little substance available to post any worthwhile critique.

But we had expressed our reservations regarding affording opportunity to the jailed politicians and businessmen, and most of them are two-in-one, to pronounce simply *mea culpa* to atone for their crimes. Who will verify whether what they are stating is true?

And there is also the better business forum that will allow our businessmen to ply their business with fewer hindrances or let. What does it mean for the poor consumers, less costly products? One hopes so, but can't help wondering whether that will be the case.

There is always the danger in a dispensation such as this for people in the government to get very used to their jobs. The government, one hopes, is alive to the pitfalls of the prolonged stay of an unelected regime, as well as a prolonged political void.

It can ill-afford to lose public trust and support. However, it cannot waver in its plan for political reforms as well as cleansing the country of corruption, either.

We cannot expect to have a situation at the end of 2008 that, in essence, will not be better than what was obtaining when the current CTC took over the reins of the state.

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How non-residents can help



TO my knowledge, today, December 27, is the first time ever that the country is hosting a 3-day conference of non-resident Bangladeshi (NRB) scholars in Dhaka on a near grandiose scale. There will be seminars and meeting of the minds of the scholars of Bangladesh, wherever they come from -- home or abroad.

Make no mistake, I'm neither a spokesman nor a designated promoter of the conference -- simply an onlooker from a distance, if you will -- but, of course, a staunch well wisher for sure. I was on the lookout for a topic for my column and guess what -- I found one when I learned that six of my friends, NRB conference bound, had already left for Dhaka.

In this entourage of six is Senator Hansen Clark (Michigan State Senate). Although Hansen isn't a son of the soil, he thinks like a son of the soil, spoiled by his association with nearly 20,000 sons of the soil living in Detroit, Michigan. This is

NO NONSENSE

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his first ever trip to Bangladesh. Hansen has also planned a visit Sylhet -- his father's birthplace.

Others in the entourage are Dr. Aziz Khandker, Dr. Farruk Moshen, Dr. Saful Hasan, Ehsan Taqbeem, and Kawser Jamal.

There's no lack of prescience among the conference participants, which our motherland needs. Bluntly speaking -- the country needs politicians who are enlightened and altruistic. The country needs technically skilled personnel.

Politicians are brought into this discourse because politics is everywhere -- where there are Bengalis there's politics.

There's no reason to believe that the conference organisers would ever allow intrusion of any politics in the evolving institution of the NRB. Given our culture of bringing politics into everything -- there should be vigilance against incursion of elements with partisan political affiliation.

An organisation is always has good intentions at birth. As it grows and expands undesirable elements masquerading as desirables intrude and bring with them their self-

aggrandising and self promoting baggage and brewing conflict -- to the detriment of the organisation.

Overzealous political cohorts almost always create a wedge among the NRBS, culminating in multiple Bangladesh associations in the same city -- in all big cities in the US. There is dissension and discord on any given issue, which drives the professionals, especially the scholarly ones, away from the organisations.

This happens mostly because of the penetration of dirty homegrown partisan politics and intolerance of dissenting views.

Another issue that has often haunted me is about our top leaders visiting Washington DC, New York, and other big cities. There's no known initiative by these leaders to meet the NRB scholars and intellectuals for a discourse; instead, they meet their party affiliated NRBS for a home-style vociferous welcome amid the festivities of party line self-filling catchphrases. By avoiding any meeting with them the leaders adeptly bypass many issues, such as:

- Why is there a constitutional

provision that bars NRB's (who took citizenship abroad) from assuming any advisory or other high level positions in the government, including contesting in local and national elections?

- Is it because the NRB scholars, if allowed to serve in various capacities as experts, might work as foreign agents to the detriment of their countrymen with whom they share an eternal bond?
- Why isn't the government considering the creation of an "NRB investment zone" similar to the EPZ to attract direct investment by the NRBS?

- Why isn't the government taking concrete initiatives to develop the much-needed base for producing skilled workers in the area of IT, computer technology, and in all other areas of technology-intensive industrial growth?
- What is the government thinking of when allowing mushroom escalation of universities and madrasas instead of encouraging and investing in institutions of technical expertise? Expatriate

remittances of over \$7 billion realised this year alone could have possibly doubled if that was planned only a few years ago.

Our neighbouring country is transforming by leaps and bounds into a major economic power, growing at such a pace that other countries are racing to invest there. Indian indigenous technological know-how, the trained labour, and computer experts are sought after everywhere.

For its emergence as a global destination for technocrats, India has lured many non-resident Indians (NRIs) to return to their country of birth, giving the country a brain gain.

India has opened multiple investment opportunities for her NRIs in high-tech industries, real estate, and savings and deposits instruments. Legal provision of home loan and other financing schemes have made the investment environment friendly and convenient for the NRIs.

At the inauguration of the 3rd Pravasi Bharatiya Divas in Mumbai on January 7, 2005, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh declared: "I am happy to announce that we have decided to extend the facility of dual citizenship to all overseas Indians who migrated from India after 26th January 1950, as long as their home countries allow dual citizenship under their local laws."

The government has created a new and separate Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs to function

as a "one-stop-shop" on all matters pertaining to overseas and non-resident Indians. The NRI model is a big deal, and a stunning success.

It's not known how deeply the government is behind today's NRB conference and its future initiatives, or whether this undertaking is essentially a private effort. It may be noted that the NRI-encompassing effort was initiated by overseas Indian residents passionately supported by the Indian government.

It's obvious that without the domestic government's enthusiasm, and wide participation of the NRBS living in the US, Canada, UK, Australia, EU and Middle-Eastern countries, Bangladesh will be deprived of the positive fallout from potential NRB driven economic and intellectual activities.

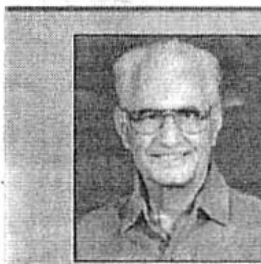
All erstwhile governments gave an impression that they wanted the NRBS' money, but not their expertise and inputs in the countries affairs.

John F. Kennedy once said: "My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

We harbour no pent-up grievances to ask for remedies -- simply asking our country to tell us how can we help -- and are pleading for creation of a bureaucracy free "one-stop-shop" for our initiatives -- similar to the NRI model, even if on a smaller scale.

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Citizen's duty



M.B. NAQVI
writes from Karachi

THE political conditions are extremely confusing, and it cannot be overemphasised that the country is in a bad shape: everyone realises that a number of wars and polarisations describe Pakistan polity today, what with the Taliban's depredations and BLA's campaign in Balochistan. There is intense polarisation between the social and economic elite and the army. A reconciliation, and honourable peace, has to be achieved. A dictatorship with a democratic façade is holding an election which is controversial at home and suspected abroad.

This situation has largely been brought about by this very regime. It is not part of a solution; it is part of the problem. Attention has to be focused on the dangers from pro-

PLAIN WORDS

The main task of the regime is to fight the wars of the US-led west, keep the people of Pakistan quiet, and run the country the way the west wants. It is a joint endeavour of the conservative forces of this country and the international conservative forces, represented by the US and its various conservative allies around the globe.

vincial disharmony, or the crisis of federalism, as also ideological polarisations between Islamic extremists and moderates.

Law and order is breaking down, and inflation is running high. There are other danger signals. The situation has to be corrected if Pakistan is not to suffer another big tragedy. This means that the present regime must go. How can it go? The subject requires thought.

The regime is a powerful one. It enjoys the support of the only superpower and its allies in the Middle East, Nato members in Europe, and most other US allies, including India.

The regime, in fact, is its pro-teege. It is also based on the solid support from social and economic elites of the country, as has been noted in this space earlier. Politically, it is supported by PML (Q), the King's Party, MQM, PPP (S)

and PPP (Patriots). The west has ensured that both PPP and PML (N) should also lend support to the Musharraf regime by participating in its election, despite their reservations and popular objections. This combination equals heavy odds against the people achieving what they need most.

The main task of the regime is to fight the wars of the US-led west, keep the people of Pakistan quiet, and run the country the way the west wants. It is a joint endeavour of the conservative forces of this country and the international conservative forces, represented by the US and its various conservative allies around the globe.

The task, therefore, comes to this: It ought to go peacefully and constitutionally; no violence should be introduced, otherwise there would be a free for all in this largely armed country where most

institutions of state are crumbling.

Local conditions are bad: law and order is deteriorating; crimes are rising; and several civil wars are going on. Economic trends are ringing alarm bells about an eventual meltdown in not too distant a future, if things continue going wrong.

There may be objections that one has not mentioned the real strength of the regime. Over 600,000, indeed over 800,000, rifles and bigger guns are behind the regime; opponents run the risk of suffering horrendous losses if violence is permitted. The task is, thus, not easy. But it can be done. It has been done many times elsewhere. The secret of success is people's power. Should the people unite behind right or adequate leadership, they can achieve almost anything.

When a united and determined

people require a specific goal nothing can stop them achieving it. People's power cannot be defeated by any army, big or small, foreign or local.

It is for this reason that all non-democratic regimes want to keep the people divided, and preferably in conflict amongst themselves. The first requirement, therefore, is uniting behind an enlightened leadership and insisting upon a rational and adequate program of reforms that would guarantee all freedoms to the people, plus economic development that actually gives something to the impoverished. The promised economic betterment has to be specific as to what precisely the state will do, and how.

The overriding task is to bring back democratic freedoms for the people, along with rule of law, separation of powers, independent judiciary, and a responsive government that would run the economy for the benefit of the impoverished masses rather than serve the interests of the few rich. That has to be done.

As an immediate first step, the requirement is that the regime must be made to retrace its steps and bring back the Pakistan of pre-Nov 3, as a first step only.

The next step is, of course, a free and fair election. After that, there has to be a transfer of power from the tycoons and grandees of today to the common people of Pakistan through a freely elected parliament. The objective is to restore the 1973 constitution as it was originally written.

In addition, the people must insist that it follows honourable, self-reliant and free policies of peace and goodwill for all others while the state must serve the people in hard specific ways in addition greater autonomy, backed by financial powers to tax, to provinces and local governments.

Now look as to what really is going on in the shape of political polarisations and warfare. The one war that the regime is fighting along with America and its allies is against Islamic terrorism and extremism, specifically the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda.

The second is against local Taliban because of their rebellion inside Pakistan territories, both in tribal areas and in settled districts of NWFP, although their depredations are not confined only to the NWFP. Even Islamabad has had its taste.

The third is the guerilla war of Balochistan Liberation Army

against Pakistan army. This is the second civil war within the country.

But even more important from the long-term viewpoint is the polarisation between the civil society led by the lawyers, judges and human rights activists, and now students are joining it, against the US- and Pakistan army propped regime that has been failing to be either an effective or an enlightened government that favours freedom of its citizens. Its economic policies have been questionable, yielding dangerously poor results.

Pakistan has to be rescued and peace restored. The people can bring about this objective by accepting the new leadership of the civil society: the lawyers, pre-Nov 3 judges, and the rest of the intelligentsia that is joining them.

The first demand of the lawyers and many others was to boycott the election. Political parties did not agree to that. Only a few smaller parties are boycotting, including, notably, the well-organised Jamaat-e-Islami.

What people can do is not vote at all, or vote in a manner that the pro-regime parties are defeated. The latter can be done either by the destruction of the vote or by giving it to any party that promises to

support the judiciary's restoration.

But voting or not voting will not affect the outcome, since these elections are not likely to be quite free and fair; they are likely to be a "managed" one.

The master solution remains mass political action, with the caveat that it should remain non-violent and as constitutional as possible, though not totally restricted to what the government orders. The ultimate goals must be spelled out for the benefit of the new leadership. It has also to be educated on matters of foreign, economic and other policies.

One can leave political policies to the lawyers and civil society leaders easily because they have necessarily to favour rule of law, independence of judiciary, and political freedom of the ordinary people.

This is a good reason why they need to be supported and helped into becoming good economy managers and good foreign policy formulators. This can be done by the intelligentsia through a free intercourse of ideas in the country as reconstruction begins to take shape.

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