LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA WEDNESDAY MAY 28, 2008

AL's extended meet decision for movement

It must be rethought in greater national interest

HE decision taken at an extended meeting of the Awami League, based on the sentiment of its grassroots leaders and workers, not to participate in the on-going dialogue and general elections unless party chief Sheikh Hasina is freed introduces a worrying new element into the political dynamics of the moment. The concern is fundamentally that if the AL sticks to its decision to boycott the voting, a situation will likely arise that can only complicate an already fraught political atmosphere. We at this newspaper have stated earlier that our politicians and our political parties must put the national interest above any other considerations. It is especially at a time like the present that such maturity is called for.

The sentiments involved in the Awami League's demand for Sheikh Hasina to be freed are understandable. However, we also note that as a party, the AL has traditionally been in favour of elections even in some of the most trying of circumstances. Where the exigencies of the present are concerned, it cannot but be the responsibility of the party and its leaders and workers to ensure that nothing is done that can jeopardise the holding of the elections promised for the end of this year. The fact that Sheikh Hasina herself has in a message to her party voiced her support for the elections must basically be taken into account.

The elections are yet six months away, but a process of dialogue aimed at facilitating a smooth passage back to democracy between the parties and the government is already underway. The Awami League, as a major stakeholder in national politics, should make its valuable contributions to the dialogue by being part of it and voicing its demands through it. And especially when the detained BNP chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia has instructed her party to join the dialogue, the AL should also be part of the process.

The nation is in no mood for a return to the kind of chaos which caused the political changes of 11 January last year. Given such realities, it now becomes the responsibility of the Awami League to rethink its latest position regarding the dialogue. Political agitation on the streets at a time when the national endeavour is toward a peaceful return to democracy is farthest from the public mind. We therefore call upon the Awami League to uphold its own tradition by taking part in the dialogue and taking full preparations for the upcoming general elections. Surely its grievances and demands, let us reiterate, can be thrashed out at the dialogue.

Prioritising agricultural research

Funds must be utilised efficiently

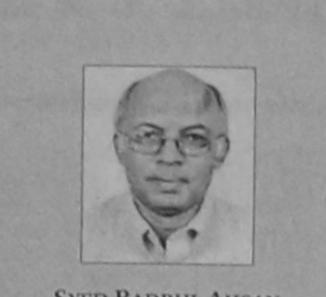
GAINST the backdrop of intermittent food crises in the country, the government decision to allocate funds to I the tune of Tk. 622 crore to carry out agricultural research is a timely step. The research endeavours will be directed towards finding ways and means to increase production of essential agricultural commodities to meet the need for food. The burgeoning population and growing demand for food make such research all the more pressing at the moment. Reportedly, the fund under the project titled National Agricultural Technology Project (NATP) will be distributed in two phases, one for research and another for extension services. It has also been said that a sizeable portion of the fund will be spent for building an effective marketing system for farm products, project preparation and coordination. According to the government, the implementation of NATP would raise production of crops, fish and livestock by 10 percent and increase farmers' income by 20 percent.

Theoretically, it sounds cheering. But we are not sure how things would turn out to be once the project goes under implementation with unforeseen variables coming in the way. The reason for our skepticism is, there is anomaly as far as statistical figures given by various agencies are concerned. Most of the reports and analyses concerning our agriculture are found unclear and often contradictory. We are not well-informed about the amount of land available for cultivation of different varieties of rice, jute, cotton and vegetables. We have not been told specifically how extensively we can go for crop diversification on a given piece of land or how harmful a particular variety of seed or fertilizer could be for the native species. With acute shortage of land and waterbodies in the country how far can we extend fisheries and livestock farming without affecting cultivable land remains to be addressed by the experts.

The anomalies in statistics we have mentioned here stem from the conspicuous lack of primary research done to explore the definitive potential of our agricultural sector. It needs no emphasising that a vast area of the sector remains underutilised, as farmers tend to apply the traditional method of agriculture. Though new varieties of seeds and sowing and irrigation techniques have been introduced sporadically, there is enough opportunity for introducing them throughout the country in a planned manner.

We hope the ambitious research and extension work will be done with the participation of genuine experts having genuine intent. This however should not become another consultancy-driven highprofile exercise to use up the fund within the stipulated time.

History can reclaim territory it has lost



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

HE reformists, if they are really that, in the Bangladesh Nationalist Party have clearly fallen on bad days. Saifur Rahman has made a safe exit out of the country. How he managed to do that and who let him go remains a mystery. Mannan Bhuiyan is in jail. Both men have now seen fit to acknowledge once more the primacy of Khaleda Zia in the party. That has left Major Hafizuddin Ahmed in the soup. The army officer-turned-footballerturned-politician now tells us that the caretaker government has taken the country back by a decade. Really? If that is an expression of wisdom, we the people will be content to confine ourselves to the kingdom of naivete.

That Begum Zia will continue to be a force in her party should have been evident to Saifur Rahman and Mannan Bhuiyan a long time ago, before they allowed themselves to be part of this reformist charade in their party. And what exactly has compelled Hafizuddin Ahmed to round on the caretakers is a mys-

GROUND REALITIES

It is possible to go back to the roots, to idealism as we once shaped it in 1971. History does more than simply move forward. There are times when it can return to the spots where it has stumbled, or has lain wounded, to reclaim lost territory.

tery that is yet to be unearthed.

Meanwhile, there is all around things get a trifle disconcerting. us this huge question of what lies leading political players in the interest of a credible electoral country will go for a dialogue with the government has been raising all manner of questions. And, of where the fate of its own detained course, for obvious reasons.

If you have noticed, there is suddenly a certain chill in the wind, with many of the leading political prison. Things appear to have concerted campaign for the release ment will find it hard to talk to Zia. And that is political expediency anyone, given the fierceness with for those in real distress, even if you which it has been cracking down are nauseated by the thought of

tions being held by the end of the year, one that now almost threatens to turn into a cliché. Elections, we can safely tell ourselves, are always charming little demonstrations of the popular will.

into the business of promising you in the face. elections and, at the same time, makes it clear that politicians always Parliament that was accused of corruption must face

political set-up as Bangladesh's,

Think of the Awami League. It ahead for politics in the country. All has insisted, at least so far, that this matter of whether or not the Sheikh Hasina must be freed in the exercise. That is beginning to cause hope to come alive in the BNP chairperson is concerned.

Khondokar Delwar Hossain, evidently relishing the sad plight of the reformists in his party, would figures having been carted off to like nothing better than a unified, reached a stage where the govern- of both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda equating the former with the latter.

surprising refrain of general elec- certain feeling of unease. Some might go a step further and call it uncertainty. Take your pick. After all, when an election commissioner begins to think loudly of a change (in times when Parliament does not exist) in the constitution, But when a government gets it is indeed uncertainty that stares

And we all thought that it was supreme, that caretaker governthe music, especially in a fragile ments did not possess the mandate

or the right to play around with the constitution, or even think of doing so. It is these fears that keep us on our toes, just as thoughts of a Truth Commission keep us nailed to both disquiet and repressed fury.

Yes, of course there is a parachange in the nation's politics. But, as these past months of experimenting with the internal dynaman overworked lemon, in the five years between 2001 and 2006) are cabinet. equipped to do.

That said, there is still the rather So, all around you, there is a But our political classes, for all tune as a nation that Parliament, for their questions and reservations all the nobility of thought and proabout the doings of the caretakers, should be acknowledging to themselves the difficulty of going back to politics as usual. These emergency times should have been a lesson for all of them, in the sense that they must know that impunity will no more be a given, that it will be penalised.

> That, of course, presupposes the enactment and adoption of reforms, which truly and substan-

tially matter if democracy is to totter to its feet through replenishing the energy in its roots.

For starters, Article 70 of the constitution, a sad encumbrance on the right or ability of lawmakers to vote on legislation in consonance with their conscience, will need to go.

You cannot have Article 70 and yet believe that democracy will underscore your way of life. Once this article goes, but not before that, can you reasonably expect prime ministerial government to actually give way to cabinet govmount need for a qualitative ernment. And cabinet government is important, for considerably more reasons than we can think of.

Suffice to say for now that it will ics of the political parties have so bring into the entire governance patently demonstrated, it is a job process a high measure of accountonly politicians (and we are not ability. In a big way, it might also including here the predators who lead to a culture where the parliain the name of politics squeezed mentary opposition diligently the country dry, in the manner of prepares to govern someday through giving shape to a shadow

It has been our singular misforfundity of dreams associated with it, has remained captive to the majority party and, in turn, the majority party has cheerfully tied itself to the apron strings, or the coattails as the case may be, of its leader.

We need to cut ourselves loose from such a debilitating tradition, for politics based on unquestioned partisan loyalty leads inexorably to

a haemorhaging of democracy. A legislative body hobbled by a

personality cult or emasculated by an arrogant majority is not intellectually equipped to provide a sense of direction to the country. And direction is not what you will come by unless parliament arms itself with the authority to discuss within its hallowed halls everything under the sun -- education, diplomacy, defence, internal security and what have you.

It will not be an effective forum for public debate and policy formulation as long as the prime minister and the leader of the opposition do not tangle over the issues at question time. And do not forget that when parliament comes to be presided over by a speaker who cannot leap across party loyalty and reach a higher plane of thought, nothing that it does will reassure people about their individual and collective future, as also the future of their children.

It is possible to go back to the roots, to idealism as we once shaped it in 1971. History does more than simply move forward. There are times when it can return to the spots where it has stumbled. or has lain wounded, to reclaim lost

In our instance, that lost territory is but the landscape where once the four fundamental principles of nationalism, secularism, socialism and democracy were our beacon unto the future. Get them back. If you do, this cannibalism we go through will be no more.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The

POTA + federal agency not the answer



writes from New Delhi

HE Jaipur blasts, which claimed 66 precious lives, are horrible reminders of how vulnerable Indian citizens remain to the depredations of fanatics who consider mass murder a legitimate means to further political goals. Official agencies haven't identified the crime's perpetrators.

It isn't clear if their motive was to ignite communal strife, or sabotage the India-Pakistan peace process, as Prime Minister Manmohan Singh alleged. But the blasts demand a rational, coolheaded, resolute and united response.

However, the Bharatiya Janata Party, which rules in Rajasthan, has politicised the issue. It has tried to cover up its police's ineptitude by accusing the Congress of being "soft" on terrorism.

This is doublespeak. The BJP said for four years that terrorists were striking at Congress-ruled states, but not at Gujarat -- thanks to Mr. Narendra Modi's "tough administration.'

THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

The BJP clamours for an anti-terror law like Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, 1985, or its aborted successor, Prevention of Terrorism Act. It also wants a special federal agency created to deal with terrorism. The BJP demands a "hard state," which would practise maximal violence against terrorists. Some retired police and intelligence officials also advocate tit-for-tat approaches to terrorism -- with blatant human rights violations.

Minister Vasundhara Raje's statement that she won't allow Rajasthan to become a "Gujarat" through anti-Muslim violence. Ms. Raje claims the culprits have

"external links," but the men havedetaining Bangladeshis, she's arbitrarily rounding up scores of Bengali-speakers, many from West Bengal, for "infiltration."

Their demonisation is similar to the abuse ("asylum-seekers") that poor South Asian migrants face from Western xenophobes. The BJP attributes political motives to people who migrate for survival from a dirt-poor to a slightly less poor society, and deserve compas-

The BJP clamours for an antiterror law like Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, 1985, or its aborted successor, Prevention of Terrorism Act. It also wants a special federal agency created to deal with terrorism.

The BJP demands a "hard state," Yet, the BJP is speechless at Chief which would practise maximal

violence against terrorists. Some ordinary crimes -- witness the retired police and intelligence officials also advocate tit-for-tat approaches to terrorism -- with blatant human rights violations.

They contend that terrorism has n't even been identified. After now entered a particularly maliaccusing the Centre of asking her to cious phase. It can only be fought if offices, besides identity docuto intrusive surveillance, allows preventive detention, reverses the burden of proof, and admits confessions to the police as evidence.

> These arguments are silly kneejerk reactions to Jaipur. The cures they propose are worse than the

To start with, the utility of a harsh law will be limited to punishing, not preventing, terrorism. It's unlikely to deter suicide-bombers. A law is no good if its enforcers are incompetent, corrupt, or both.

Regrettably, that's true of much of South Asia's police, in which recruitment involves hefty bribes.

The police routinely violate their own procedures -- for example, writing station diaries in serial order in tamper-proof ink. It rarely exercises care even in investigating Noida murder case.

India already has countless surveillance measures, including roadblocks, metal detectors and closed-circuit TV cameras at airports, train/bus stations and create a "Guantanamo Bay" by the state wages all-out war, resorts ments with a huge amount of personal information. But these aren't used intelligently.

> India has unacceptably intrusive electronic surveillance. All internet service-providers and cellphone operators must maintain transaction records for three years. The government can tap email conversations at will.

This hasn't produced useful clues to terrorism. But malice, mistaken identities or incompetence has resulted in innocent people being jailed for months -like journalist Iftikhar Geelani and IT professional Lakshmana Kailash.

Surveillance has limited use. Britain has nearly 5 million CCTV cameras. London alone has over half a million. The average citizen is daily tracked by some 300 cameras.

Yet, these yielded no warning of or clues to the July 2005 bombings. Cameras have helped solve less than 3 percent of street robberies.

Take the "special" antiterrorism law the BJP demands. Any law that routinely allows preventive detention violates the fundamental principle that nobody should be deprived of liberty unless held guilty by a court

should be repugnant to a civilised legal system. Such colonial laws Sikh. have created huge popular discontent in Kashmir and India's Northeast. They must be repealed, not replicated.

Similarly, inverting the burden of proof violates a basic tenet of the legal system: an accused must be considered innocent until proved guilty, however grave the crime. The demand that confessions to a police officer must become evidence is misguided.

Confessions can be extracted under duress, sometimes torture. They cannot have evidentiary value in a credible legal system. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights prohibits such obnoxious practices.

It's simply wrong to contend that India doesn't have laws to deal adequately with terrorism. It does. The police want still tougher laws because they can detain suspects indefinitely without doing their job of gathering evidence and building a strong prosecution case. They can also harass people against

whom they nurture prejudice. The TADA story is horrifying. Some 67,000 people were arrested under it, but only 8,000 put on trial, and a mere 725 convicted. Official committees found the law's application untenable in all but 5,000 cases. Under TADA, religious minorities were selectively tar-

For instance, in Rajasthan, of 115 TADA detainees, 112 were Muslims and 3 were Sikhs. Gujarat had an even worse pattern under POTA: all Detaining suspects for months but one of the 200-plus detainees were Muslims, the remaining one a

> Nor is a federal anti-terrorism agency a magic wand. Besides, many states, including NDA-ruled Bihar, oppose it.

Talk of waging war on terror is dangerous -- witness the US's ""Global War on Terror." Since 2001, it has caused a sevenfold increase in terrorism globally, and implanted religion-driven extremism where it didn't exist (Iraq). GWoT has entailed enormous human rights violations, with Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo Bay, and harassment of thousands of US citizens too.

In the last four years, US immigration authorities have detained over a million people, including 311,312 last year alone, creating an "American Gulag."

That's not the way India should go. Terrorism can only be fought if we improve our policing, revamp intelligence agencies, and respect human rights. There's no militarist shortcut to fighting terror.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

Crisis and response

In short, first do more good than harm. Invoking R2P in Burma is a three-way lose-lose option. It will complicate, not ease, the delivery of relief; fracture the delicate consensus on R2P at the UN; and diminish the chances of protecting victims of atrocity crimes, which should be the primary focus of R2P. Maybe, after the humanitarian emergency has ended and if the action seems practicable, the Burmese generals could be tried for "crimes against humanity" at the International Criminal Court.

RAMESH THAKUR

HE "responsibility to protect," or R2P, endorsed by world leaders at the United Nations in 2005, is a call to action -- not the opening lines of a Socratic dialogue by diplomats. Its origins lie in our collective failure to prevent or halt mass killings and ethnic cleansing in Rwanda, the Balkans and East Timor in the

1990s. The goal of the innovative formulation by the Canadiansponsored but independent international commission was to increase the chances that in future, such calls to action to protect populations at risk of atrocity crimes would be answered: rapidly, effectively and properly. To that end, we restricted the circumstances under which R2P would apply, setting the bar for military R2P

intervention very high, and outlined tight political and operational safeguards against its abuse.

The mix of recent cases of intergroup armed violence and ing. Broadening it to cover continuntended victims of natural disasters confirms the need for R2P, the environmental vandalism, risks of straying too widely from it HIV/AIDS and natural disasters and the difficulties of activating it even when warranted.

The death toll from Cyclone we face the next Rwanda tomorrow Nargis could surpass 100,000. The -- without materially helping the numbers of displaced, homeless, in needy today. desperate need of immediate

At first blush, this is a strange call. R2P's provenance is protecting at-risk populations from genocide, war crimes and ethnic cleansgencies like nuclear proliferation, may have the perverse effect of weakening support for R2P when

In our original report, we identihumanitarian relief, is as high as 2 fied "overwhelming natural or million. The military junta balked environmental catastrophes, at opening Burma's borders to where the state concerned is either supplies of international humani- unwilling or unable to cope, and tarian aid and skilled humanitarian significant loss of life is occurring relief personnel. Reflecting his or threatened" as among the conhumanitarian background, French science-shocking situations justi-Foreign Minister Bernard fying international intervention. Kouchner suggested that the This was not included in the 2005 Security Council should invoke UN document, but "crimes against

the necessary legal cover to sidestep the recalcitrant generals and give help directly to the afflicted

While the legal case is powerful, the politics against it are compelling, which explains why it was dropped in 2005. Unless the Western powers want another war in the jungles of Southeast Asia, a quickly turn into one of national liberation against foreign occupilanguage at all.

humanitarian official and a former British ambassador to France, described Kouchner's call as unnecessarily confrontational. The British cabinet minister for international development, Douglas Alexander, rejected it as incendiary. Britain's UN ambassador, John Sawers, said R2P did not apply to natural disasters.

generals, who are beyond shame, dig in their heels even more firmly. It will antagonise the Southeast when international attention and Asian countries, whose political African reaction was engaged after support is vital to communicating the killings inside the church very cowardice. with the generals and persuading much along R2P lines. A potential them to open up. It will alienate R2P situation might arise in China, India and Japan, the three Zimbabwe, with the army taking

essential for delivering any meaningful relief in Burma. It will prove divisive within the UN, reintroducing the North-South polarisation over "humanitarian intervention" that the R2P formula transcended.

Faced with firming opposition at all these levels, will the Western powers, already overstretched militarily in Afghanistan and Iraq war of relief delivery that will and increasingly despised around the world for belligerent machismo as their default mode of engageers, it is better not to speak this ment with regimes that don't kowtow to them, be prepared to use John Holmes, the top UN military force? If not, they will damage their own political credibility and that of R2P by invoking it ineffectually.

> on intellectual toughness are surprisingly limp in following through the logic of the after-effects of their calls to arms, a syndrome we saw in the lead-up to the Iraq war.

Darfur remains everyone's Invoking R2P will make the favorite poster-case for R2P intervention. An R2P-type situation arose in Kenya earlier this year, humanity" was and would provide big Asian powers whose backing is charge and liquidating opponents.

imagined also in Nepal, Sri Lanka and North Korea. Yet even in Darfur, military intervention against the government could trigger an even worse humanitarian carnage: There is no crisis so dire that a war cannot make it

Our responses continue to be ad hoc and reactive, rather than consolidated, comprehensive and preventive. Actually acting in time and effectively when governments are guilty of mass killings should -must -- form the intervention agenda of R2P. Sins of omission during natural and environmental disasters can be better handled Analysts who pride themselves under the prevention, persuasion

and reconstruction formulations. When Burma's regime claims to be the "legitimate" government, the very concept is corrupted and highlights the international community's lack of courage in conintellectual laziness and political give voice to their opinions.

would preempt the need for mili- Palestinians from the serial collec-

Possible R2P scenarios can be tary intervention. Millions lost their lives during the Holocaust and in Cambodia, Rwanda, Srebrenica and Darfur. After each we said "never again," and then looked back each next time, with varying degrees of incomprehension, horror, anger and shame, asking ourselves how we could possibly have let it all happen

> The global South, led by China, India, Brazil and South Africa, is many global issues. Get used to it. The major Northern powers must global negotiations like the Doha round and climate change.

commentariat -- the chattering mary focus of R2P. Maybe, after champions of illiberal interventionism -- seems to have trouble adjusting to the rise of the rest practicable, the Burmese generals fronting the illegitimacy. Hand- beyond the West, pontificating as if wringing in the aftermath of a the virtuous West has divine disnatural or human catastrophe is pensation to set the moral compass Criminal Court. proof of earlier, not post-disaster, for the evil rest while refusing to

The West should get real. If R2P We need a "paradigm shift" from can be applied to force aid at the a culture of reaction to one of pre- point of guns into Burma, can it be vention and rebuilding which extended to protect the

tive punishments and hardships imposed by Israel? If our sense of justice and moral outrage is to trump political calculations, then should those who waged a war of aggression in Iraq be sent for criminal trial in an international court?

Like the call to invoke R2P in Burma, the net result would be, not the criminal trial of powerful leaders, but the destruction of embry-There's another consideration. onic and fragile international

In short, first do more good united and negotiating for the first than harm. Invoking R2P in Burma time from a position of strength on is a three-way lose-lose option. It will complicate, not ease, the delivery of relief; fracture the accommodate this new reality in delicate consensus on R2P at the UN; and diminish the chances of protecting victims of atrocity The trans-Atlantic crimes, which should be the prithe humanitarian emergency has ended and if the action seems could be tried for "crimes against humanity" at the International

> Ramesh Thakur, one of the original R2P commissioners, member of the international advisory board of the Global Centre for RZP in

O Yale Center for the Study of Globalization, All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.