

Spectacular beginning for Olympics

Sporting best on display in a spirit of solidarity

AFTER seven years of meticulous preparation, undaunted by occasional pointers to Beijing's overcast environment, the likely fallout of the Tibet-related human rights issue, peripherally reflected on the otherwise undeterred journey of the Olympic Torch, and the doping concerns, China holds the 29th Olympics under gaze of four billion world citizens.

The efforts China took, her single-minded pursuit of the task, the high tech preparations going into the staging of the event and the total dedication of the country to the Olympics testified by the crash course on English learning taken by teeming Chinese volunteers, all go to establish the fact that China has come of age with a fiesta and dynamic face. Already, a growing economic power China has seized the opportunity of displaying its best. Its osmosis into the world community seems total today. We congratulate the government and the people of China on their success.

The Olympics is a magnificent event of unparalleled size and significance as more than ten thousand contestants from two hundred countries participate in more than three hundred items. Here the quest for perfection through fierce competition and the spirit of friendship, solidarity and brotherhood have always intermingled in a triumphal march against attempts at scoring political points between powerful countries. Here the East and the West and the North and the South converge on one place.

Bangladesh has sent a team of athletes and observers, more of the latter than of the former. Our interest is in swimming, shooting and athletics. We obviously fall far short of world standards. The exposure can only be of benefit if we learn about our strengths and weaknesses firsthand and accordingly train ourselves for the future within a time-bound plan.

It is the Olympic spirit that can be a shining beacon for mankind. Imbued with it, we must strive to remove the divisive tendencies and conflicting proclivities among countries, peoples and communities. The balmy breeze of harmony that blows out of the Olympic venue should refresh the whole world into containing violence and extremism. It is one world; one dream that must bind us together, not ephemerally but on a sustained basis.

Family planning in trouble

Address the service delivery problem

EITHER we are resigned to the declining trend of success in the family planning drive or are unable to turn the ebb around. According to the Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) 2007, the gap between demand and availability of family planning methods is yawning. While in 2004 it was 11 percent, in 2007 it worsened to 18 percent. People's eagerness to adopt contraceptive methods far outstrips the availability of contraceptives. At the current rate, the unmet demand is likely to rise to 40 percent in the next 15 years, jeopardising the fulfilment of MDGs in terms of not merely containment of population but also halving the incidence of poverty by 2015.

The previous practice of motivating couples about planned parenthood and distributing short-term contraceptives through door to door visits has been virtually abandoned with the lid put on recruitment of family welfare assistants (FWA) over the last decade. The FWAs were also instrumental in taking people to family welfare centres and have them adopt long-term contraceptive methods. Whatever family welfare assistants remain on the roll were distracted by other calls such as their assignment with EPI, birth registration and voter enrolment.

The answer lies in filling the 2100 vacant posts of FWA and making the entire field workforce concentrate on family planning tasks and reproductive health.

The campaign that was at its peak in early 1980s has taken a long dip over the last two decades. It has to be resuscitated rather than resting on the laurels of past success. The baseline of the fertile population is already high and that is where we have to have programmes to shore up the family planning efforts. Basically, improvement of door-to-door service needs to be complemented through supply of oral and other forms of contraceptives.

All this calls for a radical change in the attitude of lip-service being given to the family planning sector by the bureaucracy and government. We believe an impetus could be provided to the lackadaisical family planning campaign if the NGOs can be involved in it.

Please stick to your mandate



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE August 4 elections to city corporations and municipalities have been held in a reasonably peaceful atmosphere but without great enthusiasm (probably due to existing emergency provisions). The first step in the revival of the electoral process has been taken. Its importance will be remembered for the use of the new voters list. For this, the Election Commission and those associated in preparing the voters roll deserve special recognition. It also demonstrated the people's overwhelming support for Awami League supported candidates both in the four Mayoral races (four out of four, with one being elected for the second time from interment) and in the nine Pourashava polls (eight out of nine).

The political paradigm in Bangladesh is complex and it would be foolish to think of it only in terms of black and white. The Election Commission would do well to remember this. I am also constrained to take this opportunity and point out that this election revealed certain weaknesses and problems that need to be addressed urgently. There appears to be lack of suitable training for election officials

and their ability to function speedily with regard to matching serial numbers. This caused great discomfort for the voters. The Election Commission had also initiated many rules regarding these elections. Yet, at the end of the day, they appear to have made several compromises both with regard to statements submitted by candidates under affidavit and also amounts spent by candidates during the campaign.

emergency would be undesirable. On the other hand we have the Chief Adviser reiterating recently in Sylhet that 'time is not ripe to lift emergency'. After the August 4 polls the Chief Election Commissioner has also spoken of a possible parliamentary election under a state of emergency. Such an inflexible attitude on the part of the government can only be construed as a vote of no confidence in the maturity

and integrity of the voters in this country. Such vacillation also makes it clear that this serious issue is still being debated. This is unfortunate because the greater the delay in taking a decision, the higher the chances of uncertainty -- and that is the last thing that we need.

A confrontational situation is also emerging over the question of holding the upazila elections ahead of the national parliamentary election. The media has reported that such upazila elections may be held in about 300 upazilas on 23 October. It has also been mentioned that election in the remaining upazilas will be held after the national election. I cannot comprehend this kind of inflexible approach on the part of this administration. Instead, as test cases, the administration can undertake election to six upazilas in the six administra-

down efforts about reforms.

It is also a similar situation with the proposed Representation of the People's Order (RPO) Ordinance, 2008. Most of the political parties have claimed that it does not reflect the suggestions proposed by them during their dialogue with the Election Commission or the government. This is a direct consequence of the lack of transparency that has marked this process till now. The Election Commission has pointed out that they have tried to include as many proposals as possible of the different political parties. They have also suggested that it has attempted a compilation of least common denominators. If that is so, then it should be easy for the Election Commission and the government to publish all the demands made by the individual political parties and then also point out why they would not agree with some of the proposals. This will permit the people to form their own opinion. It will also increase accountability. A paternalistic attitude is sometimes not the best way to find a consensus.

We still have a few months left before the election. What we need is more flexibility as well as consistency during this period. The efforts of the government should be directed now not towards opening of new courses of controversial action but towards the completion of the task at hand. Let the administration just concentrate on its mandate.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador and can be reached at mzamir@dhaka.net

POST BREAKFAST

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I laud them for some of the steps that they have taken to improve governance and to reform the electoral process. It was necessary to correct the electoral rolls and to undertake the difficult task of issuing identity cards. These are fundamental for the holding of a credible national election. This administration has however not stopped there. In their desire to create a more sanitized parliament and to discover 'honest and competent candidates' they have undertaken tasks that they are now having difficulty in completing. This inability on their part is affecting public perception.

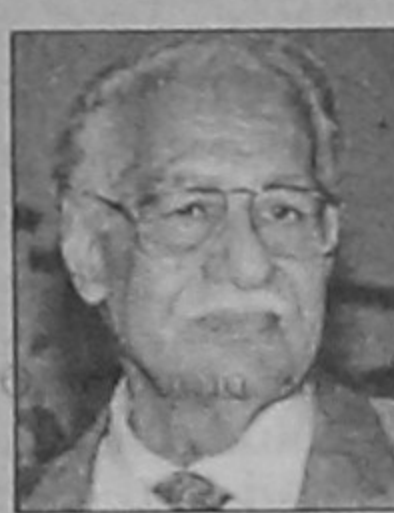
have been permitted to leave the country ostensibly for medical treatment. This has further complicated the scenario.

On the other side is the question of encouraging reforms within the political parties. Over and over methods on the part of certain authorities over the last eighteen months have contributed very little to the exercise. Some members of different political leaderships took the initiative to implement reforms within their respective political parties but have since retraced their steps back into the mainstream. Consequently, the political scenario has assumed greater complexity.

The Chief Adviser has said that he wants full participation of all the political parties in the coming election. That is the right spirit. However, this might not take place if this government continues to muddle its top-

Over the last eighteen months, according to human rights activists, tens of thousands have been taken into custody. Many of them have been charged with corruption,

A storm that blew over



KULDEEP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

A Pakistani has said in a letter to a leading English daily at Karachi to recall the "10 million Muslim refugees who made immense sacrifices to make the country a reality, besides nearly one million who got massacred" at the time of the partition. He has taken exception to the words that Tahira Mazar Ali Khan, a well-respected left activist used in a letter to the same paper: "I now realize with ample pain that our land was butchered and aimlessly cut into pieces. We cannot reach out to those we love in times of stress and grief." One of her old friends had died in Mumbai and Tahira had found herself helpless in contacting her friend's relations.

I too feel like Tahira, cut off from those with whom I have spent early years of my life. I am from Sialkot city where I was born and brought up. I love my friends in Pakistan, not many left now, and their children in the same way as I do my friends and their children in India. I am at home in their company as much as on this side. I do not find any contradiction. It does not make

me less Indian. Maybe, it is an emotional baggage of history. Maybe, it is nostalgia. But persons of my generation cannot efface the memories of youth spent in each other's country. We represent the culture which transcends borders and religions. I have no doubt that one day the wall of hatred between the two countries will come down. While retaining our sovereignty, we

side would probably tally with those on the other. The uprooted from both the countries totaled nearly 20 million; half of them were from India and half from Pakistan.

I have seen murder and worse while traveling from Sialkot to the Amritsar border. I can assure you that it was the same drama of blood and butchery, force and ferocity, on both sides. The only difference was that the victims

seen their followers becoming murderers in the name of religion. Perhaps, what it teaches them is noble and sublime. But when it comes to putting them into practice, one community is no different from the other. Resounding in my ears are still the deafening slogans of Allah ho Akbar and Har Har Mahadev. I saw how unashamed were people on both sides in brandishing weapons to kill.

things: one, the announcement by Britain that it would withdraw on August 15, 1947, instead of June 6, 1948 as declared earlier; two, the failure of the boundary force which was constituted to curb the rioting. Many years later, when I was writing my book, Distant Neighbours, I asked Lord Mountbatten at his residence at Broadlands, near London, why did he change the date because that resulted in the

report: "Throughout the killing was pre-meditated in its ferocity. Neither age nor sex was spared: mothers with babies in the arms were cut down, speared or shot...Both sides were equally merciless."

In terms of men, the Boundary Force had a strength of 55,000 men, including Brigadier Mohammed Ayub Khan who later became Pakistan's President. The force had a high proportion of British officers. In fact, this proved to be its undoing because they were interested in repatriation to Britain, not in an operation which might tie them down to the subcontinent for some more time. The British Commander of the Force, General Rees, had instructions to protect only "European lives."

Looking back, however, one cannot but blame Mountbatten for doing so little to ensure protection of the minorities on both sides despite his assurance. When rivers of blood flowed in Punjab and other parts of the sub-continent, when destruction engulfed habitations, and when, on the one hand, Jinnah begged Mountbatten (23 June) to "shoot Muslims" if necessary and, on the other, Nehru suggested handing over the cities to the military, Mountbatten's response was feeble. He appeared more interested in becoming the common Governor General of India and Pakistan -- an office which Jinnah did not let him have -- than curbing the lawlessness. He should have been tried.

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

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shall be moving from one country to the other as people do in Europe.

In fact, Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, founder of Pakistan, wanted India and Pakistan to be like America and Canada, with facilities to travel without any fuss. Since the writer of the letter mentioned Jinnah, I thought he or she should know the Quaid-e-Azam's vision.

Yet I want to remove the impression given in the letter that the Muslims who went from India were alone in undergoing sacrifices and losing their dear ones. We, Hindus and Sikhs, too were victims of a similar type of frenzy, verging on fanaticism. The number of the killed on one

up to the Amritsar border were non-Muslims and from then onward Muslims. There were similar types of atrocities-- the killing of passengers in trains, raping of women and kidnapping of young girls and children. When I migrated to India on Sept 13, 1947, one month after the partition, most of killings in both Punjab had subsided. I still saw piles of bodies on both sides of the road, the half burnt vehicles, strewn luggage and empty trucks which bore testimony to the murder and looting that had taken place.

If some one were to tell me that Hinduism showed more tolerance or that Islam more compassion, I would beg to differ. I have

Yet I cannot forget one touching scene while crossing into India. It was still daylight when I passed the white-washed drums with India's flag atop a pole that demarcated the border. Some of us stopped to see a group of people-- just to see-- going to Pakistan. None spoke neither they, nor we. Both had left behind their homes and hearths, their friends and neighbours and the relationship of living together for centuries. We could relate to each other. It was a spontaneous kinship. It was that of pain and loss. Both had been broken on the rack of history. Both were refugees.

What exacerbated the situation was the complication of two

massacre of two million people?

He did not contradict me. He argued that he had to advance the date because he could not hold the country together. "Things were slipping from my hands," Mountbatten explained: "The Sikhs were up in arms in the Punjab. The Great Calcutta Killing had taken place and communal tension prevailed all over. On top of it, there had been the announcement that the British were leaving. Therefore, I myself decided to quit sooner."

The Boundary Force, formed on 1 August, did little to stop ruthless and well-armed persons from killing innocent men, women and children. It merely recorded what it saw. It said in a

Have faith in people

CAPT. HUSAIN IMAM

THE much talked about local government election to nine pourashavas and four city corporations finally took place on Monday. The election has been, according to election observers, reasonably fair, transparent and peaceful. It has been free to the extent that the voters could go to the polling centers freely and cast their votes according to their choice.

However, as the election was held under the state of emergency, one might, and rightfully so, argue that how can an election be free in the true sense under a state of emergency where people's democratic and constitutional rights have been kept suspended?

The great Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping said, 'It does not matter whether the cat is black or white, as long as the cat can catch the rat.' Borrowing these famous

words of this great leader, I dare say, it did not matter whether the election was held under emergency or not, what mattered was whether it could deliver the goods? To me, in all fairness, it has delivered the goods.

The election, never mind it had some technical flaws and managerial lapses, was held in a reasonably free, fair and peaceful atmosphere. The voters could cast their votes freely and independently in favour of candidates they wished to vote for and got the result according to their expectations. More importantly, the much needed electoral process for transition to a democratic order, which was kept in abeyance for long 18 months, has been set in motion.

The election, first for the reconstituted Election Commission (EC) under the military backed caretaker government of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmad has, according to their

Have faith in the power of judgment of the ordinary people of this country. History tells us that they have never failed in giving correct judgment or rising to the occasion in times of crisis whether it is through exercising their right to franchise or taking to the streets. Why take the trouble of tracing back to history?

own version, not only made the EC and the government happy but also increased their confidence in holding the parliament election due in December this year successfully.

It was for the first time the election was held on a new and corrected voter list with photo, diminishing chances of fake vote to a great extent. Thanks to the EC and all others, especially the personnel of our armed forces, for the sincere and hard work they have put up in preparing the voter list.

It has been reported that there were some confusions with serial numbers in the voter ID card and in the voter list resulting in unusual delay in casting votes. Also some voters could not cast their votes as they did not find

their names in the voter roll, although they had the ID cards in their possession. Delay in counting votes and announcing results of some centers was also a point of concern.

The chief election commissioner has sought apology for this and has assured the voters that the matter will be looked into so that the same mistakes are not repeated in the next elections. I am sure he will do that.

It will be important for the EC to keep in mind that the just concluded local government election in the context of Upazilla and parliament election is only a tip of the iceberg. The lapses in the election process (said to be technical or managerial), however small as it may

appear now, unless properly addressed, may surface as a cause of serious concern when the act will be played on a much larger canvas.

The caretaker government and the EC have reasons to be happy about the election. They took it as a test case and they have passed the test. Most of the political parties were against holding the local polls before the national election and under emergency rules. To their credit, the government and the EC could convince almost all the political parties except BNP alliance to participate in the election and that also under emergency rules. Even BNP who had initially decided not only to boycott but also resist the election ultimately softened their attitude

and allowed their local leaders to contest the election.

Still the government or for that matter the EC has little scope to be complacent. Buoyed with success of the local polls held last week if they decide to remain adamant in holding the upcoming elections under emergency rule they might land not only themselves but also the country into big trouble.

The two major political parties, Awami League and BNP, seem to be firm in their demand to lift emergency before the national polls. Even Awami League, who won all the four mayoral seats of city corporations and eight out of nine pourashavas in the election held under emergency, wants the emergency to go before the

national polls.

The donor countries and agencies also want the emergency to go sooner than later, not only for the election to be credible but also for the economy to pick up momentum. The European Union has already announced that they will not send observers if the election is held under emergency.

Why the government is so reluctant to lift the emergency before polls is not very clear. If it is out of their apprehension that the known criminals turned politicians now behind the bar on various charges will come out and either contest the polls or pollute the political atmosphere with money and muscle, then the answer is-- (a) sit with the stakeholders, with the major political parties in particular, engage in continuous and constructive dialogue with them to work out a realistic mechanism to keep the criminals at bay, (b) tighten the

electoral rules and regulations, (c) allow the judiciary to function absolutely freely and independently and (d) let the voters exercise their right to franchise freely and independently without any interference, temptation or intimidation from any quarters.

More importantly, have faith in the power of judgment of the ordinary people of this country. History tells us that they have never failed in giving correct judgment or rising to the occasion in times of crisis whether it is through exercising their right to franchise or taking to the streets. Why take the trouble of tracing back to history? Take the case of the recent poll. Only a million or so ordinary people with some (ballot) papers in their hands have, in less than 12 hours time, shown us the path that we have been so frantically looking for over the last 21 months or so.

Capt. Husain Imam is a freelance contributor.