

A growing propensity toward violence

Student bodies must play a positive new role

WE are concerned at the growing tendency on the part of a section of students to resort to violence on any pretext whatsoever. A few weeks ago, agitation by students in the university area as well as Dhaka College led to mindless violence which resulted in the death of an innocent trader. And now come reports of the vandalism let loose by students at Pangu Hospital because of what has been described as a non-fulfilment of their demands. It may well be that the students were provoked into violence. But the point is that students being the enlightened people they are ought not to succumb to such provocation.

Such behaviour is clearly unacceptable, especially when one recalls the immense contributions made by the students' community in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and in the anti-Ershad movement to the cause of freedom and democracy. It is a legacy we have held on to with pride all these years. And precisely because of that pride, we are today appalled at the level of decline that has crept into our academic arena. The ready propensity on the part of some students to get violent casts a dark shadow on our hope for the future. What has happened at Pangu Hospital and elsewhere in the recent past is, therefore, behaviour we condemn in the strongest terms. Such behaviour not only threatens to blight our efforts towards the creation of an educated, egalitarian society but also sends out a very negative message to the outside world about the state of education in Bangladesh. While it is understandable that students will have grievances that need addressing, what is not to be accepted is their directing their anger toward a destruction of public and private property that can only leave every citizen feeling embarrassed.

The time has come for the various student organisations, all directly or indirectly linked to different political parties, to take stock of the situation. All these years, we have observed these student bodies unquestioningly following the course set by the political parties. But so far we have not heard of any of them coming forward with a positive message for their followers, aimed at redirecting young energy toward the creation of a knowledge-based culture. Surely the time is here and now for the students' organisations to take a long, hard look at prevailing conditions and devise the means by which a sense of idealism and discipline can be inculcated in them. The demand of the times is for these organisations to play a positive public role by taking steps to all academic institutions -- colleges, universities, et al -- to inspire their followers in eschewing the path of violence even as they struggle for rights and privileges. The nation expects the students' community to take up the mantle of leadership in future. Unfortunately, with the kind of mayhem and horror we have just seen at Pangu Hospital and other places, such a future can only get badly blurred.

Our workers in Jordan

What we need to do

THE latest series of incidents centring around overseas Bangladeshi wage earners' demands has been reported from Jordan. They have resorted to strike since Sunday in an apparel factory protesting cutback in salaries and irregular payments were baton-charged and debarred entry into the premises.

We have stoutly defended the rights of our workers overseas, especially against the backdrop of highhanded actions in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia which resorted to deportation of workers. We have demanded compensation for the affected and suggested that our government take up the matter at the inter-state level for a durable settlement of the problems.

While constantly demanding action against fraudulent agencies that traded on the miseries of job seeking Bangladeshis, we stressed the need for our missions abroad to be proactive in attending to the problems of our workers.

The troubles that Bangladeshi workers are running into abroad should force some introspection in us rather than blaming it out squarely on others. While articulating our rights, it is important that proper channels be used and we are respectful of the law of the land we are working in. As for Jordan, workers do not have the right to strike. The first option before our workers were to take up the issue with the company management which we hope they had done. Failing this option, they should have reported the matter to the Bangladesh embassy in Amman. Going by our ambassador's version, they did not do so. Had they done so, the ambassador could take up the matter with the apparel company first and then depending on their lack of response could move with the labour ministry in the Jordanian government for a redress. According to reports, the ambassador is exactly pursuing this course now, but it seems if he had moved earlier on, the predicament could have been avoided.

The lesson we need to draw from all these and imbibe is that such adhocism is completely out of sync with the enormous contributions our migrant workers make to keep the wheels of the economy, of not only their mother country but also that of the host country, moving. Our foreign ministry and the missions abroad ought to change their mindset in dealing with the problems of the Bangladesh Diaspora from one of studied indifference to dynamic engagement to enhance their welfare through maintenance of rapport with the host countries.

Towards elections

HEMAYETUDDIN AHMED

THIS is a third eye view of the fast developing political situation around the election process initiated by the caretaker government. Contrary to criticism in the media and in public mind, the present caretaker government has progressed well towards its main objective of holding a free, fair and credible election before the year is out. The roadblocks haven't been totally removed, but certainly some of them have skillfully been averted and quite a few long overdue administrative reforms accomplished.

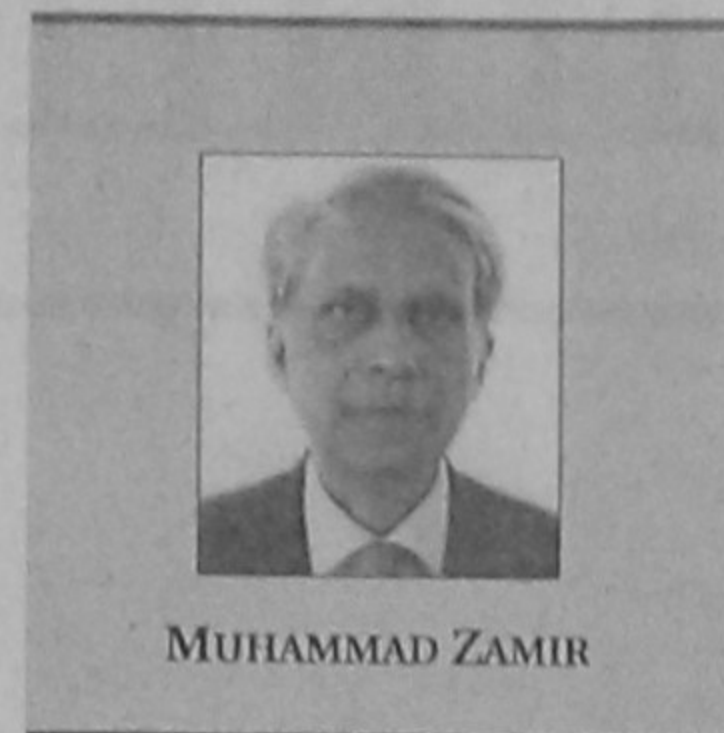
Notable among them are the separation of the judiciary from the Executive, establishment of the Supreme Judicial Council and a Judicial Service Commission to fill up a large number of vacancies in the courts, setting up of an independent Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), re-shuffling of the Public Service Commission (PSC) and the setting up of the

Truth and Accountability Commission (TAC).

The ACC started functioning vigorously, and indicted a fairly large number of allegedly corrupt politicians and officials. Many of them were tried and had been in jail but are now bailed out by the High Court for varied periods. The ACC chief seems to be unhappy about it and is taking all precaution not to leave any loose end in framing charges and following the correct legal procedures. The TAC has been challenged in the court, but it has, nevertheless been put in place, and has started receiving prayers from quite a few individuals for disclosing their hidden wealth with relevant information. The TAC is conducting their hearing with gusto.

The reconstituted Election Commission (EC) headed by senior retired civil service officer got into its job seriously from day one and had worked out a time schedule for the elections at all levels. This was announced on July 15 last with a now-famous road map for holding

Water and sustainable development



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

WE have, over the last few days, been inundated with news about destruction being wrought by the Koshi River in Nepal and Bihar. The international electronic media has highlighted the plight of millions of flood affected people throughout this sub-region. Our domestic electronic media has also telecast reports of Teesta, Brahmaputra and the Dharla rivers crossing danger marks and marooning more than a quarter of a million people inside Bangladesh. Our Water Development Board has recently indicated that there is a possibility of 'moderate flooding' but most analysts consider such a prognosis as an under-estimation. There are already suggestions that a major flood may be underway by the end of the first week of September. On the other side there are more reports of draught in Ethiopia and Darfur.

Lack or excess of water, are both problems. Scientists as well as climatologists are now apprehensive that climate variability and change might further exacerbate the existing situation. Implications arising out of changes in the earth's atmosphere and the repercussions of global warming have recently been addressed in an international symposium convened in Dhaka and will again be the focus of attention in the 'UK-Bangladesh Climate Change Conference' being held in London from September 5 to 11.

The Dhaka workshop, also attended by President Grimsom of Iceland agreed that the adverse impacts of climate change is a global issue because it transcends

boundaries. It was also reiterated in this meeting that the urgency of the situation required a new type of effective political cooperation that should include politicians, scientists, businessmen and civil society.

This last factor was also emphasized recently during the prestigious 2008 World Water Week in Stockholm, Sweden (between 17th and 22nd August). I had the privilege of participating in some of the significant activities of this Week (in view of my being the Vice

different stakeholders in response to emerging challenges.

These aspects provided new perspectives and stimuli for action related to water, environment and development objectives. Different activities within the Week also discussed on how to promote sustainable water practices and adopt new and innovative systems for solving water issues at a local, regional and global level. It was interesting in this context to listen to representatives from South

votes from more than one hundred nations. Since then, population growth, increases in water demand, growing levels of pollution and climate change coupled with inadequate or nonexistent cooperation frameworks between co-watercourse states have aggravated the problems that motivated the Convention's adoption. The Convention has still not been able to attract the required 35 parties to become effective. The Week examined the ongoing process for entry

the water footprint theories and its application in policy and practice in the field and also by business. Fortunately, there were other water experts from Bangladesh. Like them, I had the pleasure of listening to academics illustrating how the concepts of virtual water and the water footprint have helped to improve understanding of the relations between water management, international trade and politics as well as between water resources use and human con-

There were many other focal points which had intensive discussion. It would be pertinent on my part to mention in this context about the dialogue that took place on actions required for promoting transparency, accountability and the fighting of corruption in the field of water delivery and governance. The Water Integrity Network and other civil society practitioners actively held panel sessions and identified ways and means for moving forward in this sector. Participants from South Asia, in particular, interfaced with other experts from other regions to find solutions on how to have an open and inclusive global network that promotes anti-corruption activities and coalition-building at the local, regional and global levels, and between actors from civil society, private and public sectors, media and governments.

Accessing to water in general and clean water in particular along with sanitation facilities are paramount needs for sustainable development. It is a complex subject but one that needs to be monitored with great care in our country and this region. Water, we must understand, is a major catalyst for achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and social development.

I would also like to take this opportunity, before I conclude, to express my deepest sorrow on the untimely and sudden passing away a few days ago of Engineer Qamrul Islam Siddique, President of the Bangladesh Water Partnership. A former Secretary to the government and an internationally known activist in the water and energy sector, he will be greatly missed by his admirers for his wisdom and commitment related to all water and environment issues. We attended the World Water Week 2008 Conference in Stockholm together. May his soul rest in eternal peace.

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

POST BREAKFAST

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President of the Bangladesh Water Partnership) thanks to the Swedish Embassy in Dhaka (an important development partner in water related areas). It was most interesting to see how the scientific, business, policy and civil society communities are advancing the water, environment, health and poverty reduction agendas through exchange of views and sharing of experiences.

This Week focused on a world of rising economic expectations with accelerated urbanization. It also laid emphasis on the fact that our world will add another 2 billion people over the next thirty years. In this context, it reaffirmed the need to build capacity for different professions permitting them to act positively and to facilitate increase of knowledge and a deeper understanding of the links between water-society-environment-economy. It also highlighted the promoting of new, pro-active partnerships and alliances between individuals and organizations from different fields of expertise and the strengthening of existing relationships. The week also reviewed the implementation of actions, commitments and decisions in international processes by

Africa mention that the continuing development and good management of water resources in a water scarce environment is critical for successful wealth generation and equitable economic development. Their approach was significant because it dealt with a problem that is also present in our own country -- in northwestern Bangladesh (which particularly suffers from acute poverty and Monga infestation at certain times of the year). It was fascinating to hear how South Africa was creating an environment where there could be balance between social, economic, development and environmental imperatives in terms of values. I believe that it will be most useful if we could send some of our hydrologists and planners to South Africa to see how they are solving their problems. Subsequently, that might be replicated here.

Another important area of discussion was the UN Watercourses Convention and the prospects for the realization of international policy goals. It may be recalled in this regard that in 1997, the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses, with approving

into force of the Convention and also looked at the Convention's role in contributing to the achievement of international policy goals.

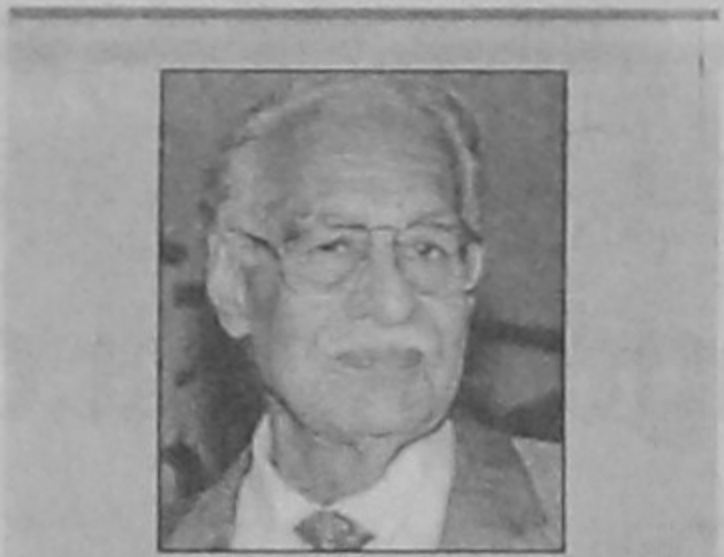
This Convention is of great interest for Bangladesh because of its potential role in preventing interstate conflict in the context of a changing climate, better enabling the implementation of development cooperation programmes, contributing to biodiversity conservation, sustainable use in international watercourses and complementing existing water governance frameworks. It was most useful listening to the moderated debate and the views expressed on Transboundary Watersheds and the protection, equitable and sustainable use of transboundary water resources. This also assumed added significance when seen against the backdrop of the Technical Report on Water and Climate as presented by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). It clarified various facets pertaining to the impacts of climate change on water and the necessary measures that need to be taken in this regard.

The Week also used tangible examples to demonstrate the evolution of the virtual water and

sumption.

Another subject captured the imagination of the participants. It mirrored the great interest shown by the President of Iceland in Dhaka, when he suggested the formation of a Himalayan Council consisting of countries like Nepal, India, Bangladesh and Bhutan to monitor and manage the common resources available in the Himalayan glaciers and the mountain range -- also dubbed as the 'Himalayan Water Towers'. It may be recalled here that climate change poses a serious threat to essential water resources in the Himalayan region putting at risk the livelihoods of 1.3 billion people. Home to the world's largest glaciers and permafrost (other than the two Poles), the Himalayas has seen rapid glacial melting and dramatic changes in rainfall. Bangladesh representatives along with others from China, Nepal, Pakistan and India had a lively exchange of views in the meeting organized for this topic by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD). In this regard, stress was laid on urgent need for regional cooperation to avert natural disasters.

Laboratory of hate



KULDEEP NAYAR

writes from New Delhi

HOW cruel is the coincidence that the birthday of Mother Teresa, who embodied love for Indian children, should have fallen in the same week of August when two Christian children and their mother were burnt alive by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) at Khandmal district in Orissa. True, the naxalites have claimed that they have killed the Hindu mahant (priest), Swami Laxmananda Saraswati, because he had indulged in crimes against the Christians. But the naxalites' statement is taken with a pinch of salt. The Hindu extremists are said to be the real culprits.

Orissa is the same state where a leading Christian missionary Graham Staines and his two sons were burnt alive a few years ago. His brave wife is still working for the amelioration of the poor. The same state chief minister, Naveen Patnaik, was in power and even then he had failed to take appropriate action against the Hindu extremists. Christian missionaries have been imparting free education and treating patients in this

area. But that has not made the Hindu extremists tolerant. They have been attacking the Christians for decades for their evangelical preaching.

The central government too has done very little to guarantee the Christians their constitutional rights. A Union Minister has said that the Orissa government has once again failed in its job. Such statements do not bring chief minister Patnaik to book or punish the government which has failed in

Narendra Modi in Gujarat after the pre-planned killings of Muslims is understandable because the BJP-led government was at the helm of affairs at New Delhi. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee stopped after expressing his indignation because the RSS instructed him not to go beyond.

Why has the Manmohan Singh government faltered in dismissing the Patnaik government cannot be comprehended. It is obvious that the centre is afraid of the BJP which

ties, who want to refurbish the country's secular credentials which are at present clouded.

The disconcerting aspect of the Indian society is that the sense of tolerance and the spirit of accommodation are wearing thin. They have provided for centuries the glue to the country's ethos of pluralism. This glue should never be allowed to dry up. This keeps the country together. Yet it is unfortunate that there is no political party which sees beyond the next elec-

US. New Delhi has had no time for anything else.

Yet, if the nation is to preserve the fundamental values of a democratic society every person, whether a public functionary or private citizen, must display a degree of vigilance and willingness to sacrifice. Without awareness of what is right and a desire to act according to what is right, there may be no realisation of what is wrong. Over the years for many, particularly the government ser-

the fittest. The poor and the weak, indeed, have been driven to the wall. The government still has its faith in the trickle theory -- the higher the growth rate the more would reach the lowest. This thesis does not seem to hold water.

The World Bank, the government's mentor, has said in its latest study that India is home to roughly one third of the poor in the world. It has also a higher proportion of its population living below \$2 a day, than Sub-Saharan Africa, considered the world's poorest region. The progress made in the last 61 years since independence is that the poverty rate -- those below \$1.25 per day -- has come down from 59.8 per cent to 51.3 per cent. This means that nearly 50 crore people still live on Rs 40 to Rs 50 a day.

If India is to mean anything to people within the country and in the neighbourhood, it has to go back to its original ideal of a welfare state. In his first letter to chief ministers, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru said: "Government policies in the immediate future should be geared to meeting requirements of the common man."

In the same way, the measures for enforcing secularism should be implemented. Secularism does not mean that Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs or Christians cease to pursue their religion. It only means that religion will not be allowed to play a part in civil affairs. We cannot afford to let the traders of hatred to have their way. The minorities are the nation's trust, not for consignment to the laboratory of hate.

Kuldeep Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

If the nation is to preserve the fundamental values of a democratic society every person, whether a public functionary or private citizen, must display a degree of vigilance and willingness to sacrifice. Without awareness of what is right and a desire to act according to what is right, there may be no realisation of what is wrong. Over the years for many, particularly the government servants, the dividing line between right and wrong, moral and immoral has ceased to exist.

its constitutional obligation to protect the minorities.

This time the state did not wake up for five days. The VHP spread its vandalism to Khorapur and some other parts of Orissa. They destroyed and burnt houses. The Christian tribals sought refuge in jungles. According to official figures, some 16 persons were killed and 558 houses and 17 churches burnt. The chief minister refused to hold an inquiry by the Central Bureau of Investigation because he naturally found more at home with his setup.

That the central government failed to dismiss chief minister supports the Biju Janata Dal government in the state. Probably, the impending general election has enfeebled the Congress, not knowing how to react against the VHP and such other organisations lest there was an adverse impact on the Hindu mind.

Such fears are unfounded and reflect cowardliness. Had the state government been dismissed, the impression would have gone around that the Congress, heading the affairs at New Delhi, was willing to go to any length to uphold the rule of law. This would have rehabilitated the party in the minds of the people, particularly the minor-

ties.

There are not many credible persons left in the country to enunciate, much less retrieve, old values. The political parties do not realise that there is no alternative to pluralism in a country where the dialect changes after 100 kilometres and where the complexion of the population is different from the one left behind at a short distance. Parties have an obsession to acquire power by hook or by crook. The sanctity of methods had gone and with it the pull of the Gandhian philosophy. The government has been concentrating for the last two years on the nuclear deal with the

personality cult in their favour. In developing countries, a trend grows among the followers too, to project a larger-than-life image of their leaders reducing all others to nothing. This leads to concentration of power in the hands of a Prime Minister that cuts across the spirit of democracy and leads to democratic dictatorship. Eventually this leads to corruption at all levels and in all spheres.

There is a general feeling among the grassroots workers in both the major parties that they ought to take part in the local level elections, as otherwise they would lose ground to the rival party. Their top hierarchy, though, took a rigid stand that first, the Parliament's election should be held, and the Parliament would then decide how and when the local level elections were to be held. EC seems to have been aware of this, which is why it had gone ahead rightly with local level elections. The amended RPO, 2008 is still being disputed, but hopefully, both sides are likely to take a

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It has been seen in the past that politicians in power always try to develop a sort of personality cult in their favour. A trend grows among the followers too, to project a larger-than-life image of their leaders reducing all others to nothing. This leads to concentration of power in the hands of a Prime Minister that cuts across the spirit of democracy and leads to democratic dictatorship.

the elections. The road-map was discussed with the political parties but most of them opposed this move. They perhaps feared that with their top leaders in jail and unable to mobilize people, they would not get the votes. Presumably, EC had also realized this and decided to ignore the opposition and go ahead with the polling schedule. Accordingly, elections in four city corporations and nine municipalities had been held on the due dates and were widely acclaimed.

For the first time in history, a voters' list with pictures was prepared in record time and was used in these elections. Though the major parties first refused to take part in these elections, eventually,

they unofficially fielded candidates, under pressures from their grassroots workers. Some of them contested while serving their prison terms and won by a landslide margin. According to neutral observers, these elections were held in a very transparent way and were free from rigging. Elections to the 482 Upazilas (sub-districts) are now due to take place in two phases beginning from October 23. At this stage also the parties have raised the same points on the same grounds. Perhaps this is more to use this as a bargaining point to secure their topmost leaders' release from jail. But now, with one of them released for medical treatment abroad, and the other is likely to be released soon, the ice may

start melting.

Now the only major snag that has remained unsolved is the vital amendments of the Representation of the People Order (RPO) 1972 enacted over three decades ago. Many of the political parties were aware of the deficiencies in electoral procedures as contained in the old RPO and indeed urged EC for reforms, particularly, of some unreasonable provisions including the ban on floor crossing. None in the past had ever taken initiative in this regard, including the three successive parliamentary governments. The caretaker government in order to ensure a meaningful election and to imbibe a democratic spirit within the parties has now pro-

posed them. The main features of the amendments are the registration of parties fulfilling certain conditions and undertaking democratic changes in their respective constitutions to practice democracy within the parties as well as doing away with front organizations and branches abroad. A lot of research by the civil society had also shown that until long-overdue political and electoral reforms were effected, a mere repetition of the election would not turn the corner.

One of the main reasons for bringing about the amendments in RPO is to prevent dynastic rule and rule by one party with absolute majority. It has been seen in the past that politicians in power always try to develop a sort of

flexible attitude and come to an agreement with regard to the dates by which registration of parties may be completed.

On the debit side, the performance of the caretaker government in routine functions had been sloppy and slothful. Its efforts to bring the chaotic law and order back to normal was largely due to the intervention and vigilance of the Armed Forces and the police though the allegations of the human rights organisations regarding cross-fire deaths still remain unanswered. Its performance in the management of the economy had been dismal. Unabated price-hike of essentials has caused great resentment among the people. Judged against their preoccupation with the complex and difficult political situation, these failures of the caretaker government may, however, be looked at leniently.

The writer is a former Director General of External Publicity.