LATE S. M. ALI

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Prospect for Hasina-Khaleda talk welcome

Both should meet with a positive frame of mind

HE very intent expressed by BNP and AL leaders Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina has made upbeat headlines. Understandably so; for, historically they have been more non-communicative than communicative. For the most part, they virtually have not been on talking terms, even though in their alternating roles as leader of the government and the opposition, they were very much required to have had a working relationship in a functional democracy.

The point we wish to drive home is that they should have met each other in a normal course of events. Why must they wait to be nudged by lawyers, business leaders and foreign diplomats to sit across the table when they should have been doing so, of their own volition whenever circumstances demanded. So, what we would expect from the ice-breaking initiative which has got underway in earnest is not a one-off meeting but one that would herald a series of consultations geared to produce a positive outcome on taking the country forward through elections and peaceful transfer of power -and beyond. Who can be oblivious of the fact that the country has suffered immeasurably through lack of communication between them?

There is an overarching consensus among the CTG, EC, political parties and the people at large over the urgent need for a transfer of power to an elected representative government. The stage is set for it and all the stakeholders should go about their tasks with a positive frame of mind coming unstuck from any positioning that could spike conduct of the election on the due date. Of course, the CTG and EC have the major role to play in ensuring free, fair and credible election, but the political parties have no less an important role in making it possible through peaceful campaigning and unfailing participation which in turn will encourage the voters to come out in great numbers to exercise their right to franchise.

For the talks to be held and held productively, no preconditions should be attached to them and the leaders ought to approach it with an open and flexible mind to yield some result

Gender-based discrimination in Bangladesh

UNFPA report should be an eye-opener

HE latest UNFPA report on the state of the world population, especially where it concerns gender-based violence, should be an eye-opener for us in Bangladesh. That is because the report is quite blunt about the poor position of women in this country, despite everything that has been said and done in relation to women's development. Particularly disturbing is the revelation that gender-related violence in Bangladesh is not readily identified even by the victims of such violence. In other words, violence in the household, et cetera, is a reality that, surprisingly, yet does not resonate within society

Such a finding, coinciding with the publication of a book. 'Breaking the Silence on Violence against Women in Bangladesh', is surely a pointer to what may have gone wrong in our vaunted efforts to promote the welfare of women. In another way, it can also be taken as a sign of what we in this country must do in order for women to understand their rights and the best means of having them enforced and accepted by society at large. The UNFPA report is clear about some laws in Bangladesh being women-unfriendly. Predictably, it cites such glaring realities as the rights that women do not enjoy where marriage, divorce, custody, guardianship and inheritance are concerned. And there is more. More girls than boys drop out of schools. Where workplaces are concerned, women are generally at an unfavourable end. Conditions are patently worrying. And it does not help that for a long time now we have been falling back on the anodyne slogan of women making strides on the Bangladesh social scene.

But, of course, despite all the harsh realities we encounter through the UNFPA report, there is the fact that in recent years Bangladesh's women have indeed made significant progress in a number of areas such as government, industry, NGOs, the armed forces and the police. But such achievements must now expand and percolate down to the grassroots, for that is where the matter of women's rights is still to be promoted and enforced. Reports have continued coming in from the rural interior (as also from urban areas) of women being subjected to myriad forms of violence. From that perspective, the UNFPA report should be taken up as the starting point in a reappraisal of women's position vis-à-vis an exercise of their rights in Bangladesh.

Apples and oranges



ZAFAR SOBHAN

T has been a long two years, but the finish line finally A appears to be in sight. However, between now and December 18, when the elections are scheduled to take place, there is still much that can go wrong, and so it would be premature to conclude that elections, even if they do seem increasingly likely, are a certainty.

The AL appears to be in good condition for the upcoming polls, with its nominees reportedly finalised and little intra-party bickering. Every once in a while it voices a pro forma complaint against the unpopular caretaker respects it seems as though it is pretty much on board for the

Even if it has certain reservations about the coming elections and the intentions of the authorities, the AL seems persuaded that these elections will be far fairer than the abortive elections that were scheduled to be held on January 22, 2007.

STRAIGHT TALK

The counter-argument to the BNP is that if a party has veto power over elections just because it thinks that it might lose, then the election process might be dragged out indefinitely and we will never have elections. The line needs to be drawn somewhere.

The voter roll is the most accurate were on the previous list having current EC seems far more capable and impartial than its universally reviled predecessor.

The city council elections that were held in August were not beyond question, but, by and large, seemed above board, with only one significant allegation of rigging. Certainly, in comparison past, they appeared to be a model of probity.

The principal stumbling block government, but in all significant to the holding of elections on December 18 thus now comes from the BNP and its alliance

> The BNP-led four-party alliance remains thoroughly distrustful of the current government, and has openly accused both the government and the EC of plotting against it.

It has laid out a list of seven demands that it insists be met Indeed, few impartial observers before it will agree to take part in

would argue with that assessment. the elections, but a number of BNP foot? these demands, such as the repeal this country has ever seen, with of both the recently passed mentioning that the two situaalmost 13 million false names that amendment to the election law tions are not quite analogous. and the new constituency delimibeen struck off. In addition, the tation, seem clearly to have been government and the EC last time in made in bad faith with an eye to were BNP appointees and finding excuses to refuse to par- staunch BNP loyalists (indeed the

the game, it remains unclear BNP ticket this time around). whether the BNP-led four-party alliance will take part in the elections or not. Critics charge that (ultimately unsuccessful) vote the alliance, which is in poor shape in terms of the nomination to city council elections of the and pre-election organisational process, fears that it is headed for contained a whopping 13 million defeat and this is why it is dragging its feet.

> Can elections without one major party (or alliance) be considered

The argument against the eventually aborted January 22, 2007 polls was that elections without the AL-led Grand Alliance could not be considered legitimate. Could not the same argument be made for the upcoming polls, but with the shoe on the will be overseeing the elections

Perhaps. However, it bears Both the head of the caretaker then chief election commissioner Thus, even at this late stage in has reportedly been vying for a

> The other election commissioners were also all four-party alliance men, and, in fact, the entire EC was staffed from top to bottom with four-party loyalists.

Add in the fact that the voter list false names, and it is not hard to see why the claims of the AL and This leaves Bangladesh in a its alliance partners that the fix quandary. The big question is: was in were given credence by impartial observers.

The same cannot persuasively be said today. Neither the head of the caretaker government nor the head of the EC nor the army chief can be considered AL men by any stretch of the imagination, and none were placed in their positions by the AL.

Similarly, the personnel who

can by no means be said to be AL kind of trouble they can create people. Finally, it is acknowledged by all that the current voter list is the army have the stomach to the most complete and error-free maintain law and order in the face the country has ever seen.

that in their dealings with the EC it is clear that the EC has it in for accept this claim at face value (and they have never explicated or itemised their grievances) this is hardly the same as the AL's claims two years ago.

Nor is there any evidence that the EC (or anyone else for that matter) is out to rig the elections or that anyone has any ability to do so, even if they wished to.

The counter-argument to the BNP is that if a party has veto power over elections just because it thinks that it might lose, then the election process might be dragged out indefinitely and we will never have elections. The line needs to be drawn somewhere.

party alliance were to sit out the elections, that the elections might still be considered legitimate in the eyes of the general public.

If the BNP does not take part, the inclusion of the JP and the BDB-Gono Forum alliance could easily bump turn-out to as much as 70 per cent, which would further nullify complaints of illegitimacy. It thus seems that the threat of boycotting the polls might not have the sting that it once did.

The big question is, if the BNP and JI decide to boycott the elections and take to the streets, what Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

and whether the government and of potentially violent protests.

The BNP and its partners argue The way things are going, they may have no choice. However, this is something that them. However, even if one is to no one wishes to see, and the better solution for all concerned

> would surely be if the BNP actually did take part in the elections. However, weakened they are. they could surely expect to win a significant number of seats, and there is a good chance that no one would end up with an absolute majority which would ensure them a share of the government

The party may well even pull out

an upset victory like in 1991. Of course, the bigger questions come after the elections: Will anyone have an absolute majority? If they do not, what permutations will there be in the new government? What role will the For this reason, it seems as army play post-elections? What though even if the BNP-led four- concessions will the elected government make to the army? Will the political parties work together to effectuate a functional democracy? To say nothing of how will we deal with all our looming economic problems amidst the global down-turn.

But these are all questions for the future. The first question is whether and how we get to elections in the first place. Only then can the long, painful process of rebuilding begin, and all the other serious issues be addressed.

Foreign diplomat as parliament speaker!



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

NCE upon a time, Soviet strongman Joseph Stalin was overcome by his apes. The task was assigned to Ilya Ivanov, Russia's top animalbreeding scientist, who abandoned the experiment after it was found that two species couldn't procreate unless they had identical numbers of chromosomes. What took the Russians six years to learn, we have learned in two. So, please don't look for the super-candidates in the next election, I mean, as and when it takes place.

For those who might wish to know, apes have 24 pairs of chromosomes while humans have 23. The way it works, to use a computer analogy, is that you can't copy a six-column table and paste it onto a five-column thing. It's a structural problem, a format issue, which is pretty difficult, like fitting a square peg into a round

CROSS TALK

How are we going to remember the reforms of the last two years? We have changed so much that nothing has changed. Here is an idea of change to save the day. The two leaders have agreed to talk, courtesy foreign diplomats. Why not pick a foreign diplomat as speaker of the next parliament? He will make a super-speaker since our politicians listen more to his kind than they listen to their own countrymen.

hole. Apart from that, there is a overactive imagination and remarkable genetic similarity antsy over repeated bungling and form our politics. At least Stalin wanted to create super-soldiers between humans and apes, some- economic hardship. The game was sensible enough to recognise by crossbreeding humans with where in the neighbourhood of 98 started to shift.

If anything, I would say the caretaker government has failed to understand the genetic mapping of our politicians. So what has happened is the logical outcome of what was happening. When it tried to take control over the politicians, it made itself vulnerable to them. To cut the long story short, the politicians have beaten this government at

Over the last two years, the game has also changed. It started as a poker game and the government was riding on popularity. It could shuffle the cards and start afresh, make mistakes but quickly regain ground because people were ready to forgive and forget.

The government could stitch in time and save nine, but it missed

that opportunity. Soon people got

The poker turned into chess, an endgame that forced the government to take certain decisions in the last one year to deliver a credible election. This is where it made further mistakes, maneuvering between self-assurance and negligence, at once showing confidence and diffidence, control and slack, dialogue and deadlock.

In all fairness, the game as it stands right now, looks like a zerosum game. One side wins another loses, but by no means a win-win

I would like to blame the entire thing on the Stalinesque lunacy, which still dominates the attitude of this government. It still shows the streaks of genetic engineering as though it could rearrange the political DNA of this country.

Even now, the government have been its highest secret.

believes it's in a position to transhis follies. At least he knew when to stop and cut his loss before it was late.

So I say that this government is badly confused. It doesn't know whether to learn from its mistakes or repeat them again and again. Fresh round of arrests, fresh round of releases, rise of another nano-party alliance, arm twisting some, handshaking with others, these are reruns of old techniques. This government can further negotiate the negotiations and further manipulate the manipulations, but its chance of creating either super-candidates or super-elections looks remote.

Now that the elections are near and the days of the caretaker government are numbered, the only thing clear about this government's strategy is what should

More than anything, even more than creation of a durable democracy, it has showed its preoccupation with the exigency of its exit. More than taking care of people and the country, it got busy taking care of its own escape. It can't wait

If 1/11 was the culmination of chaos, it's going to culminate in chaos as well. This government will expire, and then, elected or selected, a new government will take over. There will be change of guards, but no changes to guard. More agitations, more clamour, its hopes been so senselessly more rumours, but in the end there will be more of the same. nation been taken for such an Changes will change to protect the constant. The reformers will come out reformed.

risky as well as rewarding, and what this government has created is terribly scary. Now that it's getting ready to leave, it reminds us of Victor Frankenstein who created his own "perfect" human much that nothing has changed. from scavenged body parts, but once it lived the creature was hideous. Frankenstein was disgusted by its ugliness and ran away from its horror, while the monster wandered around looking for friendship.

I would like to come back to the animal kingdom once again. Mammals in general can drink and breathe at the same time, but humans can't do it. This is a price we have to pay for being able to talk. This caretaker government Daily Star. Email: badrul151@yahoo.com.

has talked too much, said too many things, and is now leaving behind a long trail of empty words. In the laboratory of its own fertile imagination, it has created a monster that will make it difficult for us to drink and breathe even if we keep our mouths shut.

One needs to wonder if this nation has been so badly botched up before. Has everbefore its immune system been so badly tweaked? Has the

vapidity of this nation been so ostentatiously exposed? Have dashed? Has ever before this outrageous ride? Corruption condoned, terror sublimated, politics muddled, it will take a Genetic modification can be long time before this nation heals again and dares riding into another reform rodeo.

How are we going to remember the reforms of the last two years? We have changed so Here is an idea of change to save the day. The two leaders have agreed to talk, courtesy foreign diplomats. Why not pick a foreign diplomat as speaker of the next parliament? He will make a super-speaker since our politicians listen more to his kind than they listen to their own countrymen.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a columnist for The

Foreign policy challenges for the new US president

If this trend is not checked immediately, Talibanisation in Pakistan will pose an immutable threat to the country's long-term stability. An unstable Pakistan would spill over into Afghanistan, compounding security challenges there and drawing more resources from the forces of the US, Nato and Afghan National Army.

IMTIAZ ALI

odd jobs as a day labourer to provide viable alternatives. support his six children. The tribal belt's economy is based primarily cost of living.

labourers, but employment was inconsistent. They soon found that the only regular work was as paid fighters with the Pakistani Taliban. It's now two years since they joined the militia, a path all too common in Pakistan's tribal belt.

tribal areas, militants are stronger UL Mohmmand Jan, a than ever, largely due to economic desperation and a failure of both the Bjure Agency in Pakistan's government and the Pakistan's tribal region, works international community to

One of the groups currently absorbing legions of young on agriculture, but work is scarce Pashtun tribesman is Teherik-eand compensation low. Jan sent Taliban Pakistan (TTP, or the two older sons to a local public Pakistani Taliban Movement), an school, but as his health failed, his umbrella organisation of sons were forced to leave school Pakistani militants with ties to aland work to cover the family's Qaeda, operating in Pakistan's tribal belt -- the treacherous Both boys started as day stretch of 1,800 miles that them. President Bush recently described as a potential place for planning of 9/11-type attacks.

The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) saw an influx of foreign militants, mostly Tajiks, Chechens and Arabs, who slipped across the Pakistani border to

Once dormant in Pakistan's escape the US invasion of the Taliban regime in the wake of September 11 attacks. For a generation raised on legends of the Afghan resistance against the Soviets and the mythologised Afghan-Arab Mujahadin, many in the region saw the foreign fighters as noble, and their struggle resonating with the stories of their upbringing. When combined with the hospitality prescribed by pashtunwali, the traditional code of conduct, this proved impetus enough to take the foreign fighters in and, in some cases, join Suddenly, Pakistan had a

Taliban of its own spreading throughout the tribal belt. With local fighters like Jan's two sons in their ranks, al-Qaeda fighters felt more secure in a foreign environment, sabotaging government installations and staging daring

cross-border attacks on the USled forces in Afghanistan. Emboldened by swelling numbers and repeated successes, they no longer relied solely on the "hitand-run" guerrilla warfare of the past, but began "capture-andstay" operations. Today, the Pakistani Taliban, led by comareas, eying cities like Lahore and Karachi, the cultural and financial hubs of the country, respectively. If this trend is not checked

immediately, Talibanisation in Pakistan will pose an immutable threat to the country's long-term stability. An unstable Pakistan would spill over into Afghanistan, compounding security challenges there and drawing more resources from the forces of the US, Nato and Afghan National Army. A nuclear country controlled by the Taliban with ties to al-Qaeda is, of course, a nightmare scenario.

The paramount question is why the Talibanisation of Pakistan has not been tamed despite the deployment of close to 100,000 troops, and dozens of military operations, aided by US forces just across the border in

Afghanistan. The answer is simple: The Taliban know the people and the terrain; both provide cover. Meanwhile, a closer look gency strategy since the launch of operations in 2003 reveals a policy mander Baitullah Mehsud, for the prospect of winning the hearts and child mortality rates are first time ventures out of the tribal and minds of local Pashtun tribes- higher than in the rest of the counmen. For that reason more than any other, the seven-year long counterinsurgency strategy pushed single-handedly by former president Pervez Muhsarraf has proved ineffective, if not downright disastrous.

To end FATA's role as a breeding ground for terrorists, Pakistan must first isolate the militants -local as well as foreign -- from native tribesmen, by rebuilding the traditional Pashtun society in a region where it's been exploited. Only Pashtuns themselves can counter the march of Taliban.

The leadership of the al-Qaeda network has been on the run since late 2001, after escaping the US invasion of Afghanistan and taking refuge in Pakistan's tribal region. However, they successfully exploited two phenomena after

settling on the Pakistani side of the border: the faith of the people and economic disparity. Home of about 5 million people, the tribal into Pakistan's counterinsur- belt is one of the most impoverished parts of Pakistan. About 60 percent of the people have limited focused entirely on a military or no access to basic necessities approach, wholly ignoring the like clean drinking water; infant try; education facilities are deficient in most villages, practically non-existent for girls; health facilities are substandard at best. Between 800 and 1000

madrassas have sprung up to fill the gap created by the state's failure to accommodate educational needs. They provide free education, food and clothing to students. Many madrassas are affiliated with the hardline Deobandi sect of Islam, which provides the ideological base to the Taliban. With hardly any competition from government schools, the madrassas provide ideological priming for radical ideology; even moderate families are compelled to send children to madrassas because it's the only way to feed and shelter them

Conspicuously absent from the

counterinsurgency strategy is a cial systems and political parties concerted effort to isolate Taliban militants from the local tribesmen by turning the tide of opinion against them.

Of the \$10.8 billion in US aid money sent to Pakistan since 9/11, 80 percent has gone to the military, a blank check with no conditionality. The US also earmarked \$750 million in development funds for the FATA. However, money is not getting to the people in the remote areas. During meetings and interviews in the region, hundreds of tribesmen asked me the same question: "Where is the money we have been hearing of? Where are the

development projects?" The majority of tribesmen are suspicious of lofty rhetoric put forth by US officials in the region. The US must be more discerning in where its money goes and how it's spent, not merely channel it towards a nebulous concept of a "war on terror." One option worth exploring: The new civilian set-up of the Pakistan's People Party provides opportunity to negotiate with the tribesmen to bring them into mainstream Pakistan, either by merging FATA with the Frontier Province or making it a separate province. That would allow judito function in the region, making it easier to build schools and offer jobs to compete with madrassas and militias. Aside from providing alternative to the indoctrination, trade and interface with the rest of the world breaks the Taliban's

monopoly on ideas. The overwhelming majority of Pashtuns realised that Talibanisation has tarnished their liberal and progressive image, posing a threat to their identity. The recent formation of indigenous tribal lashkars, or army, against Taliban militants throughout the tribal areas and Frontier province is one sign of this realisation.

Local people have taken up arms and it's high time to isolate terrorists through winning the hearts and minds of common Pashtuns. That's the only way to undermine Al Qaeda and ensure security for Pakistan, as well as its neighbours, and ultimately for the US and her allies.

Imtiaz Ali is a special correspondent for the Washington Post and a World Fellow at Yale

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