

## Biman sees profit at last

*Transformation of national flag-carrier gives us reason to hope*

**A**FTER four years in the red and decades of mismanagement, the fact that Bangladesh Biman has posted an operating profit of Tk 19 crore for the 2007-2008 fiscal year is welcome news and deserving of congratulations all around.

There is no reason why Biman, under dynamic management and leadership, and with modern and efficient practices and procedures, could not be a profitable entity, as many experts and commentators have observed over the years.

Always, what held Biman back was too much interference from the civil aviation authorities and indeed from any politically connected party, up to and including heads of government.

The key to turning this all around was Biman's transformation into a public limited company in 2007 which paved the way for the management to operate independently and without political interference.

The steps taken to bring Biman back to profitability, from greater efficiency in route planning, to better internal discipline, aircraft maintenance, to slow but steady replacement of old aircraft with newer ones, to arrangements to retire long-standing debt and retrench workers, have been bold and decisive, and have all paid dividends.

Now we have a lean and profitable national flag carrier that is poised to further improve now that the initial difficult decisions have been taken and are being implemented. Indeed, the fact that Biman has done so well as the airline industry is in the doldrums world-wide only points to the possibilities in the future.

With ever-growing numbers of migrant workers and NRBs who prefer to travel on Biman, there is a huge niche that the airline can fill. If it manages to fill this niche efficiently, the health of the airline looks promising for many years to come.

This should be the model for our other state-owned or quasi-governmental enterprises. There should be no government interference and the enterprise should be put under professional management, with an eye towards best practices, competitiveness and efficiency, and providing a valuable service to the people of the country.

## Sri Lanka crisis deepens

*Govt should treat Tamil refugees well to regain their confidence*

**W**E note with concern that as the strongholds of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are beginning to fall one by one following close encounters with the Sri Lankan government troops, the number of deaths of civilians is also mounting alarmingly. The air raids that the government forces are conducting to flush out rebels are reportedly taking a heavy toll. Suicide bomb attacks on soft targets unleashed in Colombo by a splinter group of Tamil Tigers are also contributing to more civilian deaths and destruction. We fear that whatever the outcome of the military engagement, a major humanitarian catastrophe is well under way, including displacement of people in the battle-torn regions. This is likely to result in a refugee problem in the near future.

For over two decades the undisputed Tamil Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran managed to keep the government troops off major portions of his territory in a bid to create an independent Tamil land. He managed to have a constant supply of men and women, even teenagers, to join his rebel army in one of the bloodiest of separatist movements in recent history. The long struggle has been interspersed with several attempts at striking peace deals between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. At times, they came close enough to thrashing an agreement to end the conflict.

Even if the present drive to crush the military might of LTTE succeeds, the major task ahead for the Sri Lankan government will be to earn the confidence of the minority Tamil population, who had suffered discriminatory treatment in the hands of the Sinhalese, who formed majority in the state's demographic chart. The feeling of alienation among the Tamils has to be assuaged and they will have to be treated equally as the citizens of the country and invited to be involved in all sorts of nation building activities.

We hope the Sri Lankan government would consider the fact that military victory is short lived and a durable solution can only come through creating an environment of inclusiveness and working for a negotiated settlement. We hope through the sagacity of Sri Lankan leadership an olive branch will be spread across the country.

## Democracy's great leap forward

### PERSPECTIVES

While such revelations are indeed dampening, the analysts and observers reckon that the improvement achieved through the efforts of various agencies in conducting the election is a great leap forward in our transition to democracy.

M. ABDUL HAFIZ

**I**N spite of the mixed signals emanating from the media outlets, an AL victory was assured -- given the party's qualitative edge over others, at least on the eve of the election -- but its landslide vis-a-vis BNP's total routing couldn't clearly be anticipated. Such an outcome of the poll, fought between the two behemoths of our country's politics, hardly crossed anyone's mind. In hindsight, the die was cast and the BNP's fate was sealed during its last tenure in power, when an alienated people disgusted with the party's misrule decisively turned their back to BNP-Jamaat alliance.

In the wake of the last election, even Madam Zia's high profile whistle-stop campaign across the country couldn't effect any dent in public mood, although she pulled crowds everywhere and at any hour of the day or night. Consequently, her hubristic pronouncements till the end turned into a whimper as the election results started pouring in. Curiously, except the BNP itself, few were surprised by its reversal of fate.

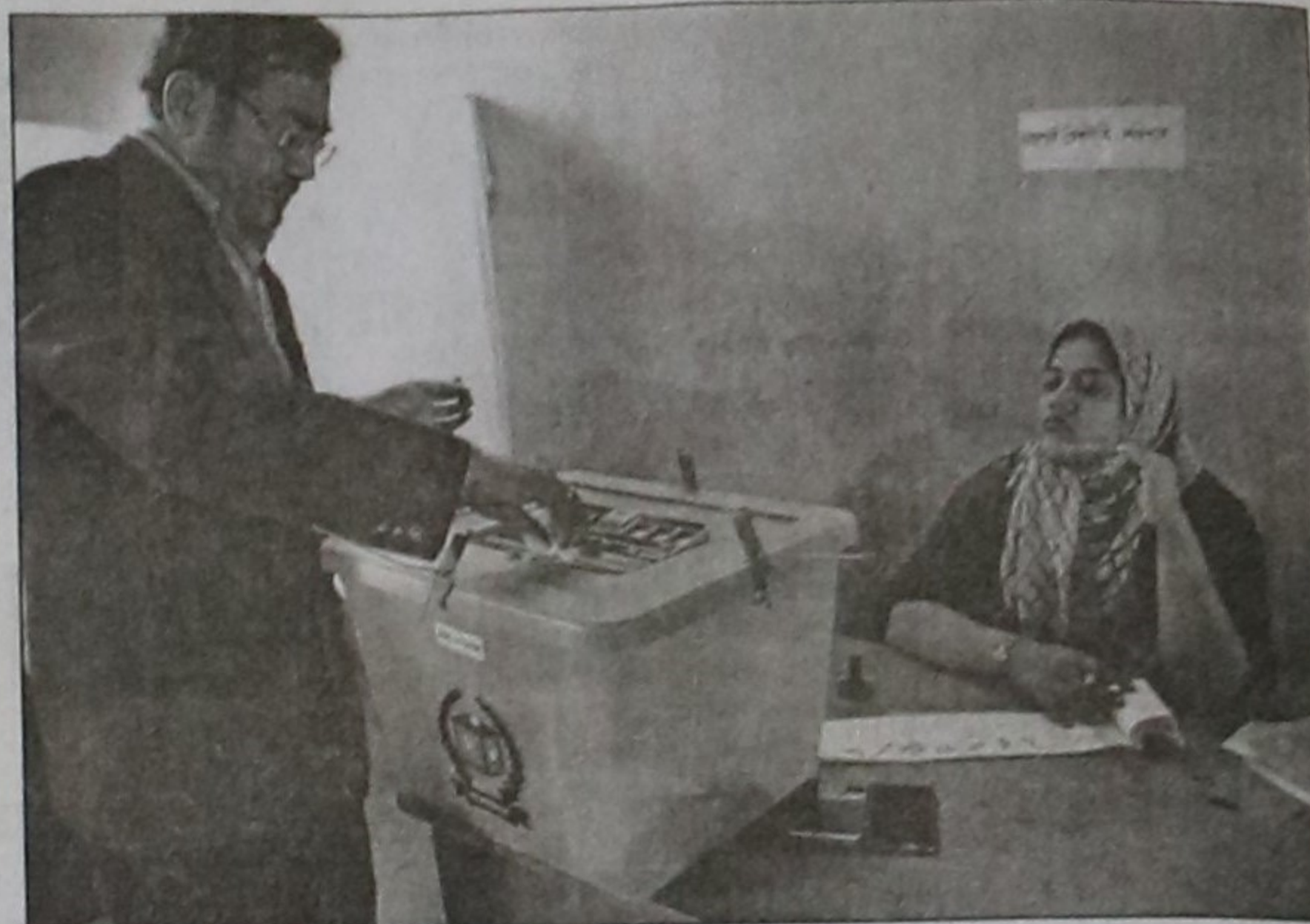
The BNP-led alliance's cup of sin was already full to the brim, and it was only reaping the whirlwind. So, there was no tear from any quarter for the fallen giant. Rather, the people felt relieved. The deafening sound of an imposed silence during the BNP-Jamaat regime, followed by two years of the state of emergency, now exploded into a resounding triumph for "change" -- the mantra hawked by the AL.

The party successfully captured the imagination of a new generation of Bangladeshis, who were eager to rid the country's politics of its stereotypes and democracy of its straw warriors and mere pantomime. They, now fired with a passion to resurrect the founding principles of the nation, instinctively looked to Bangabandhu's AL -- the party that spearheaded the war of liberation leading to the advent of Bangladesh.

The BNP understandably finds it difficult to come to terms with this reality, and in her first official reaction the BNP chairperson rejected the poll result on the ground of serious and wide-scale rigging -- although a strong denial of the accusation followed from all domestic and overseas election observers as well as the Election Commission itself.

Madam Zia further debased the stature of the party with her puerile outburst in the face of defeat. However, her secretary general conceded defeat, saying that the BNP would also join the parliament in a constructive role, notwithstanding its grossly reduced strength. The news has come as a great relief to political observers, who see in it the return of sanity in the BNP.

In the meantime, the new mascot of our politics, the AL chief, faces a great challenge after her party's win with an absolute majority in the parliament. She is already in the sharp glare of scrutiny from various quarters, as well as from the people with bloated expectations. It



Bringing in a sea-change?

is, however, heartening to note that Sheikh Hasina, with her roots among the people for the rights of whom she struggled for long -- risking her life more often than not -- seems to be acutely conscious of the danger inherent in a landslide and adequately cautioned her party men against self-serving greed and temptation. She is repeatedly exhorting them for restraint and self-sacrifice.

Yet, any power centre is invariably and unavoidably surrounded by sycophants seeking favours -- plum position, ministerial berth and soon. They are usually responsible for smearing the government with slurs, weakening the regime with intra-party squabbles and corrupting the administration with their servile flattery.

Much of the success of the next government will depend on how deftly the person at the apex can parry their onslaught and keep them leashed. Our experience in the past in this regard has

been far from savoury. Nepotism, cronyism and favouritism somehow wormed their way into the seat of power.

The election for the ninth parliament may not have been the way it was envisioned by the caretaker dispensation, the EC, an assortment of civil societies, as well as the AL itself. According to the experts' findings, there are persons accused by the court, loan defaulters, and even war criminals among the elected lot. While such revelations are indeed dampening, the analysts and observers reckon that the improvement achieved through the efforts of various agencies in conducting the election is a great leap forward in our transition to democracy. But this improvement accruing benefit to the polity will have to be sustained. That's the way a workable democracy is bound to be achieved. But idealism or perfectionism belong to cloud-cuckoo land.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

## Can we find peace with ourselves?

### BYLINE

We may or may not find peace with our enemies. Can we find peace with ourselves? Not until there is a political leadership as committed to India as it is committed to office.

M.J. AKBAR

**T**HE only good thing about 2008 is that it is over. What remains intriguing is the optimism with which we wish for peace in a new year when there is none within view. We lost peace in the China war of 1962 and have not found it again. Since then blood has been shed in conventional war, domestic strife, communal bitterness, secessionist mayhem, Maoist insurrection and, worst of all, terrorism.

If it was not the enemy without, battering at our integrity, it was the spoilt child within, ripping up stability with violent belligerence. Powerful politicians often nurtured this child in search of votes, and screamed like hypocrites when it turned into a monster.

In the fond hope that music is an antidote to depression, I have been searching for a theme song for 2008. How about this old Mukesh-Raj Kapoor number?

*Aasman mein hai Khuda, aur zamin pe hum! Aaj kal wo is taraf dekhta hai kum* (God is in His Heaven, we're here on Earth! These days, alas, He gives us a wide berth).

The poet does not make facile accusations against the Almighty; he provides evidence: *Chal rahi hain galiyan, phat rahe hain bomb*.

If Raj Kapoor had found the bullets and bombs of the fifties troublesome, he might have given up singing in 2008. The first decade of free India was also the last decade of peace. We got so excited that we named Nehru the world's Messenger of Peace. Even Pakistan, after going to war in Kashmir within ten weeks of freedom, opted for the calm of the status quo.

It is axiomatic that the enemy will not attack unless he perceives vulnerability within us. China was encouraged by Nehru's complacent defence minister Krishna Menon, who thought oratory was a substitute for firepower.

Gen. Ayub Khan's hallucinations in 1965

were surely prompted by our military failure in 1962. Gen. Zia ul Haq realised that India could no longer be defeated in conventional war, and so shifted his attention to the soft underbelly, the weakling around a civilian India groping through complex socio-political challenges and aspirations. He exploited Punjab with malign dexterity; but it was our political class that let Punjab happen.

That is a quarter century ago. We have developed, since then, a fine military, become a nuclear power and, within the last decade, turned into a story for the business pages. Why does a terrorist organisation sitting in Pakistan still consider us vulnerable enough to mount an audacious invasion, weaving its way through the corruption of our systems and the chaos of our cities?

Corruption and chaos are symptoms. The true fault lines lie elsewhere. In 60 years, we should have become a rich country with poor people. Instead we remain a poor country with rich people.

Equality is a chimera; we recognise that. But a nation cannot abandon equity as the operative principle of economic growth.

Philip Larkin, the bitter-sweet English poet, once semi-joked that sex began in 1963. Ideology died in 1991. Britain discovered sex in social liberation. Ideology was killed when a laissez faire philosophy, fattened on the corpse of the Soviet Union,

took over.

I am no admirer of Soviet socialism; it was a dreary concept, fettered in bureaucratic aridity, and pumped up by pseudo-imperialism. But when the fetid bathwater was thrown away, some vital babies disappeared as well. Among them was the responsibility of government as arbitrator between wealth and justice.

Delhi abandoned past policy with good reason, but forgot that the poor must be part of any rising story if that rise has to be sustained. Our upper world is the stuff of television, advertising and government claims, but there is a nether world of poverty, indifference and crime. It will not remain quiescent forever.

Time is not infinite. We measure history by the length of our lifetimes, even if our lives might merit no more than a sentence in future tomes. 2009 will be the last year of another decade. Can we look forward to a new decade of comparative peace? We may or may not find peace with our enemies. Can we find peace with ourselves?

Not until there is a political leadership as committed to India as it is committed to office.

Perhaps another line of poetry is needed: *Nazaron mein lagi hai pabandi, deedar ki baatein karte hain!* (There is a blindfold across their eyes, and they talk of vision!)

M.J. Akbar is Director of Publications, Covert.

## In sorrow, not in anger

### LETTER FROM EUROPE

Immigration control at the Medina airport was a chaotic affair. As I handed over my passport and other documents to the immigration officer, I found to my utter horror that they were dumped into plastic bags with hundreds of other similar documents.

CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM

**I** was born nearly 74 years ago in Dhaka. The thought that I had failed to fulfil my father's expectations had been bothering me for some time.

Whatever little I know about Islam, I have learnt from books. I have often felt the need to go back to the origins of Islam. So when an opportunity to perform Hajj came my way rather unexpectedly, I grabbed it.

On November 27, with a Hajj visa on my passport, I travelled to Medina. I felt a great sense of joy and spiritual exhilaration as I touched Medina's soil. After all, it was here that our Prophet found refuge, escaping from Mecca, where early Islam's crucial battles were fought, and where the Prophet and Islam's first two Caliphs are buried.

Immigration control at the Medina

airport was a chaotic affair. As I handed over my passport and other documents to the immigration officer, I found to my utter horror that they were dumped into plastic bags with hundreds of other similar documents. I tried to keep track of my passport but it was to no avail. In the ensuing chaos, I could see that the other relevant documents were strewn across the counter.

Somehow, I managed to recover my ticket but the passport was taken away without any receipt. I was told that I should visit the Hajj Ministry in two days' time, where it would be returned to me. Little did I know at that time that I would not be authorised to travel anywhere, not even to Mecca, except under the supervision of the Saudi authorities and that I would be spending the better part of my stay in Saudi Arabia trying to locate my passport.

As I had planned to travel to Mecca with

some friends who were staying at the Bangladesh Hajj Mission, I was anxious to recover my passport as quickly as possible. So, on the third day of my arrival in Medina, I went to the address where I had been instructed to go. From there I was sent to another place, where I was asked to pay an amount of approximately two hundred euros.

Once the payment was made, I was asked to return the next day. After several visits, I was told that my passport would not be returned until I left the country. I was put under the care of an official guide and forced to travel to Mecca on one of the government designated buses. A journey from Medina usually takes between five and six hours but it took the official bus nearly 16 hours to drop me at my destination.

When I asked about my passport, the man gave me a wrist band and told me in Arabic (it is curious that although we, the pilgrims, had come from all over the world these people who were supposed to help us did not speak any other language except Arabic) that if challenged by the police, I should show it to them, which gave me an eerie feeling.

I was told that the passport itself would be returned to me after the Hajj. I wondered whether the passport would be returned to me at the Jeddah airport or whether I should make additional efforts to visit the authorities in Mecca to locate

the passport. To cut a long story short, after several visits to the relevant Hajj Ministry (there are several), I was instructed to visit them on the day of my departure, which I did.

There, after further questioning, two officers put me in a van and drove me to the bus station. The bus took me to the Jeddah international airport, where I was finally reunited with my passport without, of course, any of the other documents, which I had so carefully tucked inside the passport while handing it over to the immigration authorities at the Medina airport.

My job and my passion to explore unknown lands have taken me to many countries, but never did I have such a humiliating experience as I had this time in Saudi Arabia except once. Nearly forty years ago, during the Soviet days, I travelled from London to Moscow on a British passport.

I felt unprotected when my passport was taken away by the police at the immigration control. When I protested, the Soviet police officers rudely shouted *niet, niet* and ordered me to move on. But that was during the Cold War, and the Soviet Union, besides being a police state, was a closed society. The Soviets were also afraid of everyone. Now I wonder what the Saudi authorities are so afraid of.

Chaklader Mahboob-ul Alam is a Daily Star columnist.