

### Guidebook scandal

Government should take zero tolerance attitude

NO one has the right to make vulnerable the smooth functioning of secondary education system in the country by creating artificial crisis of textbooks. But, regrettable as it is, we have been witnessing the same crime being perpetrated quite blatantly in this country for a long time now. It is an open secret that textbook crisis at the very outset of the academic sessions is created by a section of corrupt publishers in cahoots with some dishonest government officials only to force students to buy so-called guidebooks, publication of which is prohibited under the existing law. Through this evil practice, the publisher-official nexus earns windfall profit right before the eyes of the administration. What is most disconcerting is that despite all indications of the nexus in action, the 'hostage situation' has also been created this year compelling students to go to school without books. The failure on the part of the administration to frustrate the practice has given rise to many pertinent questions in the minds of the citizens. We think it is time the administration came up with satisfactory answers.

The details of this year's crisis, as given in a front page story in this daily on Friday, says that the syndicate of publishers of textbooks are delaying supply and distribution of secondary level textbooks in open markets to force students buy guidebooks. But the Notebook Prohibition Act-1980 clearly forbids printing and marketing of such notebooks for Classes up to VII. Only notebooks of class VIII or above can be printed and marketed with prior permission of the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB). But it appears that the law remains only in paper and is hardly enforced by the relevant authorities.

It is indeed a matter of grave concern that even into one and half months since the academic year began students and guardians are frantically running from market to market in search of textbooks. Extensive coverage of the issue in media and protests from guardians and academics of the country failed to create a dent in the armour of the syndicate. They continue to look as formidable even after a crack-down on unscrupulous publishers by the government taskforce. We therefore believe the government will have to take a 'zero tolerance' attitude and go all out to break the evil network that is out to destroy our education sector.

### Hands off the migratory birds

Treat them as an integral part of our fauna

IT hurt many readers of our newspaper on Thursday to see the frontpage photospread of two dead Pochards, rare migratory bird species, on a boat, having been reportedly recovered (!) from Hakaluki Haor in Moulvibazar. They were supposed to have been trapped or drugged to death, or both.

The countless numbers of birds that travel to wetlands of Bangladesh in winter to escape the inhospitable, intense cold of Siberia are so beautiful, suffused with colour, coming in different sizes and shapes -- all very sleek and eye-soothing -- that the thought of harming them could only be entertained by the cruelest of Homo Sapiens. They add colour and delectability to our landscape, otherwise plane and homogeneous in formation; and more importantly, they enrich bio-diversity which is the staple of ecological and geo-morphological balance.

We know these sophisticated concepts of environmental sensibilities and rationale mean nothing to those who see lucre in the poaching business and also who are driven by lack of income to look for an easy source of earning, aside from of course shamelessly nibbling at the meat. So, a holistic approach with some specific components needs to be taken to discourage poaching activities in our haors and other marshlands.

We suggest a four-pronged strategy: punishment, community awareness and involvement, strengthening of official vigil, and developing the haor areas to generate jobs. As for punishment, it must be deterrent. Far from it, what happens now is that the hunters and poachers, even when caught, get out without any scratch. This must stop. Let the forest and environment staff take legal action against the culprits, demonstrating what it costs to break rules.

The wildlife preservation and bird-watcher groups should make it a common cause to sensitise people by instilling in them love for the migratory birds. More than study and research groups, we need action groups. The print and electronic media can take up the cause in a bigger way. Alongside wetland management personnel, the local body leaders and some dedicated NGOs could lend a hand in conducting a campaign for the protection of our wetland resources. Last but not the least, the wetlands in spite of their potential for development, remain marginalised, so that special projects need to be implemented to enable their economic growth.

## In democracy we must find positives

The members of this Parliament have several tasks ahead of them and there is urgent need that they give attention to them for the sake of national interest. That applies not only for those in the government but also for those in the Opposition. That should be given utmost priority. There are issues like -- resolving the crisis arising out of our energy deficit, achieving food autarky, removing corruption through strengthening of the institutional process,

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THE last few weeks have been eventful. The holding of the parliamentary election in the last week of December 2008 was the first step in the transition of power. After that came the courageous formation of a cabinet with its interesting blend of experience and freshness. It raised eyebrows but almost everyone agreed that it symbolized change that had been the buzz word in the Awami League election manifesto.

This was followed by the eventful upazila elections. The fact that this electoral process pertaining to local government was completed at all, needs to be seen as a positive. It may be recalled that many analysts within the civil society had expressed doubts about the completion of such an exercise under an elected political government. They have been proven wrong. It required political will and that was not absent.

This however should not be construed as being sufficient. The government will need to continue its constructive engagement. It has to provide full cooperation to the Election Commission in its inquiry into the various allegations pertaining to irregularities in 48 polling centers in the Upazila elections. The subsequent holding of fair, credible and acceptable Upazila polls in the seven suspended upazilas will be a litmus test and the relevant authorities cannot just afford to fail in this regard.

The evolution of the democratic trend has been taken forward subsequently through the convening of Ninth Jatiya Sangsad and the election of the Speaker. There have been accusations that the ruling party has not upheld some of its promises and has been arbitrary in deciding on certain procedural formalities. I believe that there is need to rise above controversy and focus on the bigger picture. The baby that symbolizes democratic governance has just finished crawling. It is a toddler which is learning to walk. There have been a few faltering steps. We need to evaluate the situation from that perspective. Let us permit the exceptional promise of democracy to reveal itself slowly. Let us

not lose patience.

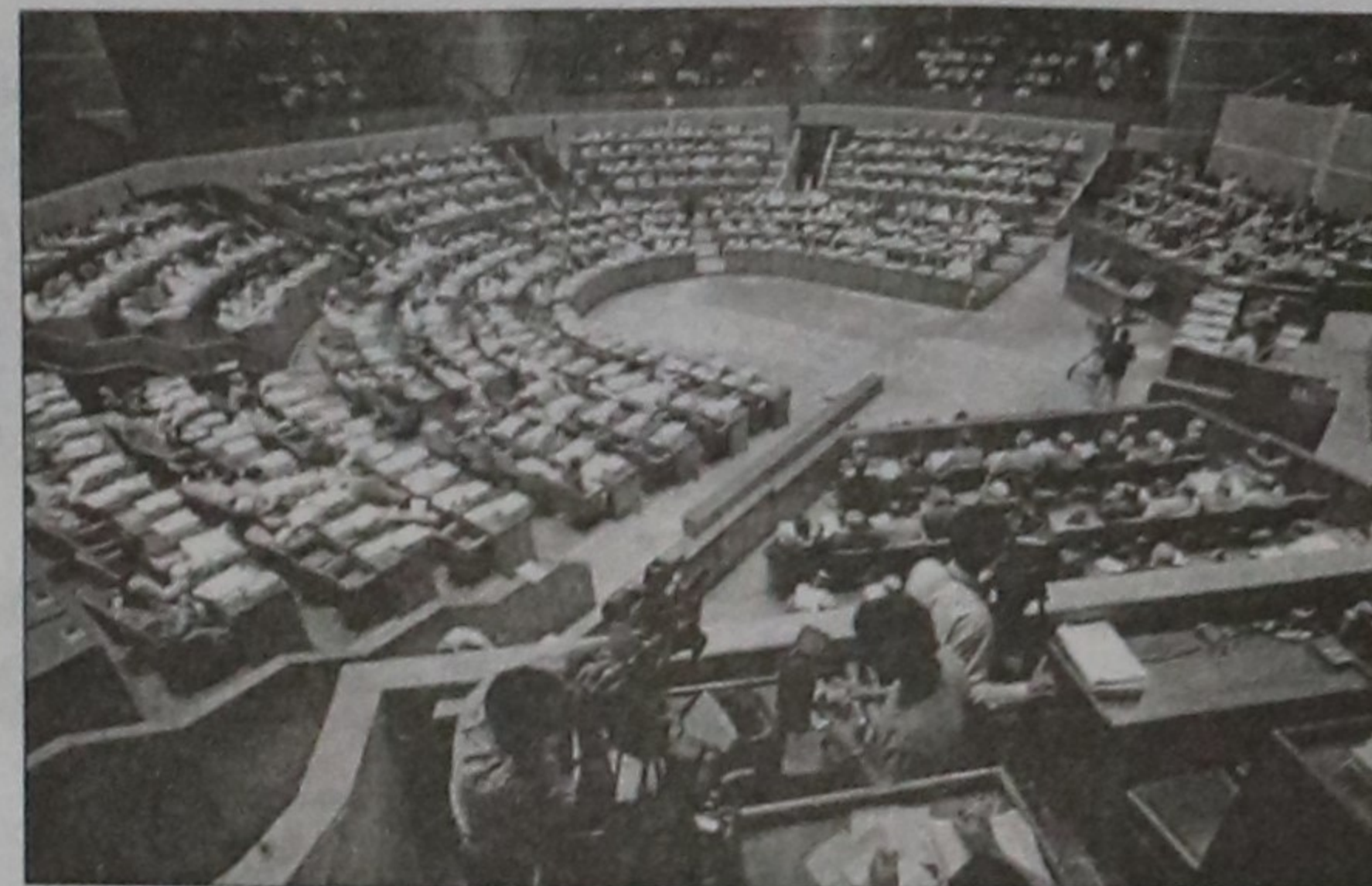
Nevertheless, I also agree with the view that the ruling party with its exceptional majority will not only have to maintain a favourable atmosphere within the Parliament but also make it more inclusive. This will ensure the opposition's continued participation in the House, make the proceedings lively and strengthen democracy. It will also stop repeated walk-outs which are a serious wastage of scarce public resources.

Yes, the government has many problems ahead of it. It is going to be difficult restoring discipline, curbing unnecessary enthusiasm and ensuring a stable, secure environment. There is also the question of disagreement at times within the different factions of the associate associations of Awami League itself (Chatra League, Jubo League, Sramik League etc.). Resolving these issues will require self-control, determination and unwavering commitment. The Prime Minister realizes this. Her statements have already clarified that failure to follow this prescription might lead to frustration in achieving desired good governance.

The government has been firm and demonstrated the necessary resolve in tackling the ripple of isolated unrest that surfaced after the election. It helped to shore up the law and order situation and restore stability. It was considerably better than what transpired after the 2001 election. This helped to instill some public confidence.

Such a spirit needs to be nurtured within every sphere of activity -- particularly within educational institutions and their residential facilities. The atmosphere prevailing in areas of learning must not be permitted to deteriorate other due to partisanship or politicization. It might then seriously impact on discipline and overwhelm governance later on.

In this context it would be important to point out that the quintessence of practicing democracy starts within the Parliament. If that can be undertaken successfully, it will take the sting out of the tail. We have focused for the past two years and for five years before that on re-



It costs Tk 15,000 per minute: We just cannot afford it to be dysfunctional.

establishing our rights. This can be best safeguarded through a participatory engagement within the political dynamics. The Parliament has to be the focal point of all our political activities. Making it effective will ensure the consolidation of the spirit of democracy. The meaningful involvement of bi-partisanship on national issues and transparent deliberation within parliamentary standing committees and on the floor of the House will avert acrimony and move our developmental process forward. It will also facilitate accountability and assure the reduction of mal-governance particularly in public project expenditure.

This attitude will be vital if we are to tackle and achieve the many objectives of balanced development as set forth by this government. Those in the opposition seats within the Parliament also need to understand both inside the Sangsad as well as outside that the needs of the people at large are more important than ego trips and confined agendas which address limited procedural aspects.

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There are issues like -- resolving the crisis arising out of our energy deficit, achieving food autarky, removing corruption through strengthening of the institutional process, completing the demarcation of our maritime boundary, finding ways and means for diversification of our exports at a time of global recession, re-branding our image abroad, empowering successful devolution of local governance,

containing terrorism and militancy, ensuring welfare of our migrant workers and providing them suitable support, upholding of human rights, promoting balanced regional development, generating employment opportunities in our rural hinterland, improving water management and reducing pollution.

To this list could also be added the following: streamlining our regulatory mechanism so that it facilitates foreign direct investment (in a competitive international environment) and encourages the spread and intensification of e-commerce through wider use of information technology.

There are also other areas where there needs to be convergence of views so that the required process can move forward. That includes the appointment of an Ombudsman and the setting up of a Constitutional Commission to examine seriously a possible review of our Constitution. There is also the question of agreeing on the required steps and measures that will facilitate the holding of the trial of war criminals that has haunted our national conscience for so many decades.

Those inside the Parliament should remember that (according to Transparency International Bangladesh) it costs Taka 15,000 per minute to run our Parliament. We have many responsibilities ahead of us and they need to be addressed with a constructive attitude. We just cannot afford a dysfunctional Sangsad at this critical juncture. We now have a new President of the Republic. Let him feel proud of the Parliament of which, till recently, he had been the Deputy Leader of the House.

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## Some beginning, at last

We are almost back to square one. However, the committee's statement does at least show Islamabad's intent to register the cases on the basis of the inquiry conducted by the FIA. The government has detained as many as 71 persons in connection with the attack on Mumbai. In a way, there is a formal acknowledgement of the existence of a Pakistani link in the attacks.

KULDIP NAYAR

SUPPOSE 10 Indian Hindus had taken a boat from Mumbai and attacked Karachi, killing some 180 people, including 81 foreigners, what would have been the reaction of Pakistan? Again, how angry and broken the Pakistanis would have been if New Delhi had not even identified the perpetrators, much less brought them to justice? Would the government at Islamabad have waited patiently for almost three months after the carnage to get a reply and that too mostly through non-official channels? These are precisely the questions raised in India as its exasperation increases day by day.

Right from the beginning, Pakistan has been dismissing the whole thing as if it was an adventurous prank of some street urchins. It has never appreciated the depth of anger that is seething throughout India nor the pressure on the coalition government by its partners and within the ruling Congress itself to act.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has shown commendable restraint while the government at Islamabad has done little beyond holding meeting after meeting. Everything coming from India has been either rubbish or scoffed at. Questions asked through the Pakistani media have even suggested that what happened at Mumbai was India's doing.

It looks as if Islamabad has something to hide. Otherwise, the Asif Ali Zardari government should have come clean on day one itself. Why has it dragged its feet? Frankly speaking, it is not difficult to guess. Anti-India elements still dictate Islamabad. Although democratically elected, the government seems to lack gumption to join issue with those who have enjoyed power for decades and who are not terribly upset over the Mumbai attack.

The tragedy is that political parties in Pakistan want to be on the right side of such elements because even if the leaders were

to challenge the establishment they are not sure whether they would be able to bring people on the streets on secular issues. The lawyers' movement is a warning. It began for laudable purpose of reinstating the judges dismissed by former President General Pervez Musharraf and continued for months. But it petered out due to lack of popular response.

It is possible that the dossier New Delhi has given Pakistan has holes. Every bit of evidence cannot be foolproof. But Islamabad raises doubts whenever New Delhi provides it with any evidence. It is considered fragmentary and, cynically, described as information, not evidence. At least the telephonic talk between the terrorists and those in Pakistan should have been taken as concrete evidence.

Take Islamabad's denial of Kasab's nationality. Islamabad went on saying that he was not a Pakistani national. It was the Pakistani media which forced the government to admit that he was a resident of Murdika, near Lahore. That Islamabad should ask for facilities to interview Ajmal Kasab, the lone surviving terrorist, is not surprising. But why did it reject New Delhi's earlier offer to facilitate Pakistan to interview Kasab? (He is under threat from the underworld). It shows as if Pakistan had a closed mind on the Mumbai attack and reacted in that manner long before India's dossier reached it. The purpose was to shift the blame. Once reports from Islamabad were that the perpetrators were from Bangladesh and then the name of Europe was substituted for the origin of attackers.

Foreign Minister Shah Mohammad Qureshi's statement that the Mumbai attack was not discussed with US liberal representative, Richard C. Holbrooke, is enigmatic. Washington had made it clear when it announced the appointment of Holbrooke that his job was confined to Afghanistan. Both New Delhi and Islamabad are keeping Washington in the



Mumbai attack investigation: Some beginning has been made.

picture. That is enough. Let us not involve it in the problem which we have to sort out between ourselves.

As of today, Pakistan has not accepted the involvement of people from its soil, whether of state or non-state actors. This reflects one-upmanship which is counterproductive. Some statement to suggest that Islamabad itself was not sure on this point would have gone a long way in building up trust between India and Pakistan, something essential even if they were to start afresh. What Pakistan should have reckoned with from the beginning is that its statements on the Mumbai attack would be taken with loads of salt.

Even now Islamabad is asking more questions than answering them. Seeking more information may well be part of Pakistan's strategy of denying everything lest even a bit of admission should lead to a trail which it does not want to be followed. But it is sad that in the midst of such efforts -- India is also to blame -- the main issue of terrorism has got lost. Prime Minister Yousuf Reza Gilani is right when he says that it is obvious that the terrorists have succeeded in their purpose to divert attention from terrorism.

Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee's reiteration that every option is open or the statement by the chief of the army staff, Deepak Kapoor, that the strategic strikes are possible may well be meant to pacify the people in India. But it only strengthens suspicion about New Delhi's bona fide. It renews the age-old belief that India is out to destroy Pakistan. Because of the impending Lok Sabha elections, the two main

political parties, the Congress and the BJP, are vying with each other in making inflammatory statements. It appears as if the ruling Congress is going to stretch the Mumbai tragedy till after the polls, scheduled to be held late in April or early May.

It was an unhelpful top level meeting which Gilani presided over the other day to discuss a preliminary report on "evidence" from India linking "elements" in Pakistan to the attack. An official announcement said Pakistani investigators needed more information from India to complete the investigation into the Mumbai attacks and that Islamabad would convey a request for further details to New Delhi shortly. "The meeting, however, observed that without substantial evidence from India it will be exceedingly difficult to complete the investigation and proceed with the case," the statement said. "In order to complete the investigation the questions which are arising from the inquiry carried out by the Federal Investigating Agency (FIA) need to be answered by the Indian authorities. These will be communicated to the Indian authorities shortly."

We are almost back to square one. However, the committee's statement does at least show Islamabad's intent to register the cases on the basis of the inquiry conducted by the FIA. The government has detained as many as 71 persons in connection with the attack on Mumbai. In a way, there is a formal acknowledgement of the existence of a Pakistani link in the attacks. This seems to have been conceded unwittingly. But at last some beginning has been made.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.