

The endgame in Sri Lanka

Rajapakse must act with sensitivity toward Tamils

THE enormity of the humanitarian tragedy now unfolding in Sri Lanka can only be imagined. In the last three months, as Sri Lanka's military has systematically pounded away at LTTE positions, as many as 6,500 Tamil civilians have lost their lives in the fighting. That is what a United Nations report reveals, confirming the grave predicament tens of thousands of Tamils have been in with the extent of the fighting shooting up to unprecedented levels of ferocity. It is now fairly obvious that Velupillai Prabhakaran's Tigers are on the verge of defeat and have nowhere to go. His fiefdom today shrunken to a mere strip of territory, Prabhakaran is either on the run or, as some think, already dead.

The endgame for both the government and the Tigers is now here. With President Rajapakse refusing to consider a ceasefire (because he smells sure victory), it is almost certain that Sri Lankan soldiers will go on digging deeper into LTTE territory until the last rebel bastion crumbles. It is now, therefore, the question of what happens after the Tigers are finally vanquished that really matters. A significant priority for the government must be to take Tamil sensitivities into consideration; and that can happen only if it can resist the temptation to treat the defeated Tamils (not all of whom were part or supporters of the LTTE) as subject people. The biggest need, once the conflict actually draws to a close, is for the government to seriously and sincerely treat all Tamils as citizens of Sri Lanka. It is on how the majority Sinhalese behave toward the Tamils that the future course of the country will be decided. If the Tigers have in the last twenty six years been guilty of brutality, the establishment in Colombo must also acknowledge the political and social injustices done to the Tamils since the 1950s. What is of essence, therefore, is for a fresh new beginning to be made for all Sri Lankans, through clearly specified constitutional guarantees of mutually acceptable political accommodation.

The bloodletting that has gone on for nearly three decades has deeply saddened all conscious sections of the global population. One would have preferred a negotiated end to the conflict, of the kind the Norwegians kept hammering away at until both the government and the LTTE (the latter more than the former) opted to go back to war. Now, with the end of hostilities in sight, let a process of national reconciliation be inaugurated in Sri Lanka. It is up to President Rajapakse to consolidate or squander his government's military triumph. Magnanimity and sagacity can set a new course for the country. At the other end, triumphalism can only sow the seeds of renewed conflict in the future.

College admission in student cadres' grip

Remarkable harmony between political adversaries!!

Seldom do we have the opportunity of seeing the two major political parties, whose bitter rivalry has caused us great sufferings in the past, agreeing on any national issue. However, when it comes to exploiting opportunities, particularly those from which pecuniary benefits accrue, the two parties find common ground to work in complete accord. This happens as much at the national level as at local levels involving the party cadres.

We have an example of such a harmonious arrangement in Pabna Edward College where the Chhatra League (BCL) and Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) have come together to control the admission process of the college in exchange for money, according to a report appearing in this newspaper.

The most shocking aspect of the matter is that in this utterly despicable exercise some teachers have also chipped in. Seats have been allotted to each of the groups through mutual understanding, to get their so called supporters admitted, under what has now become an infamous phrase - 'political admission'. And a section of the teachers has been given their share to play along in this business. But Edward College is perhaps not the only educational institution where admission seekers have had to suffer similar difficulties because of admission business.

The consequence of political admission has been that more than 300 students may not get admission to the college and may miss the current academic year because the college authorities did not pluck up enough courage to complete the process of admission. That was because the BCL could not finalise its list owing to an intra group dispute, which resulted in injuries to several of BCL and Jubo Dal cadres, over finalisation of the list.

We take some comfort from the fact that an enquiry committee set up to investigate the matter has found involvement of some teachers in the admission racket and we hope severe action would be taken against them. But there is also the need to free the colleges and universities of the country from the clutches of the cadres of the political parties so that deserving and meritorious students can get admission and pursue their studies without having to be beholden to one political party or the other.

We had in this column in the past brought out the deleterious effect of unregulated activities of student cadres. The disruptive behaviour cannot be checked unless the two main political parties take prompt and effective measures to restrain their respective cadres.

Bailing out the economy

Cash subsidies have many drawbacks in terms of equity, efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and also in terms of incentives. Policy support works better than cash support, provided policies are pursued promptly.

ABDUL BAYES

FOR quite some time we had been hearing about a bail-out program for the sectors hit hard by the economic recession. It is quite natural that Bangladesh not sit silent when almost all other countries are taking serious steps to save their affected sectors.

The finance minister has also recently announced an incentive package worth \$500 million to remain true to the earlier commitment of his government. We reckon that the package is the first step, since the worst of the recession is yet to hit, and adjustments would have to take place in accordance with the severity of the slides unfolding over time.

One fine thing to note about the package is that an element of flexibility is enshrined in the package, and this has already been shown with an assurance of bringing the textile-spinning sector under the umbrella of the incentive package.

A comparison of our package with our competitors in the international market might show that, in terms of monetary allocation, Bangladesh falls far behind. A package of \$500 million pales in comparison to India's stimulus package of billions of dollars. But bear in mind that India's exports account for roughly one-fifth of its total GDP compared to Bangladesh's one-tenth. By any stretch of imagination, India's vulnerability to external shock is much higher than that of ours.

We argued before that the prevailing recession could be rewarding in the face of falling prices, and Bangladeshi manufacturers could seize upon this opportunity in upgrading and modernising their technologies.

Let us note a few positive points from the package. We are happy to see that cash subsidy is not as pervasive in this package

as it had been in the past policies of addressing sector-specific sickness.

Cash subsidies have many drawbacks in terms of equity, efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and also in terms of incentives. Policy support works better than cash support, provided policies are pursued promptly.

The aim of driving up domestic effective demand through job creation via infrastructural development, capping the lending rate at 13%, and rightly identifying the really reeling sectors like leather, frozen foods, and jute goods, emphasis on agricultural sector, etc should boost the economy.

And more importantly, an allocation of Tk. 374 crore, reserved for safety nets should go a long way in bailing out the poor.

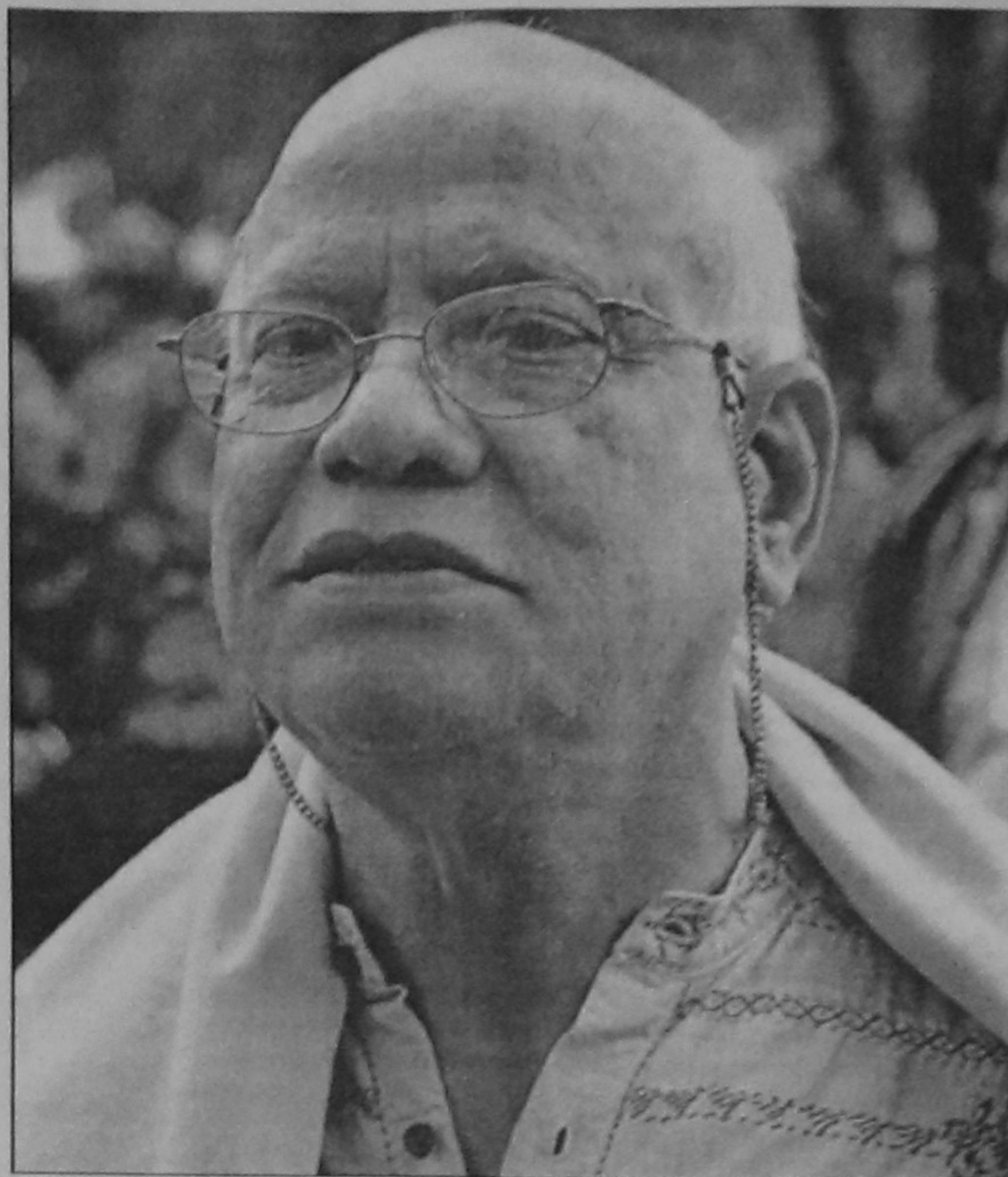
The allegation that the most vital sector, RMG, had been left on the back burner does not auger well just at the moment. Resources are very scarce and have to be allocated judiciously on priority basis. It is true that RMG sector is passing through rough weather, but the growth rate and the prices are not so bad compared to other sectors that find their boats sinking.

As the package is flexible, incentives could flow in later on for the RMG sector, also as dictated by the depth of the crisis.

But any package of incentives must be pitted against the possibility of its proper implementation. It is necessary to have such package; the sufficient condition being its quick and proper implementation.

For example, the Tk.1,500 crore stipulated as farm subsidy plus Tk. 500 crore for agricultural loan recapitalisation should see that the real farmers benefit out of the programs.

System losses should be carefully monitored and political interference should be minimised as far as possible. Again, it is not clear how and when the Tk. 600 crore stipu-



A steady hand.

lated for the power sector would be disbursed. The power sector is already in shambles and unless this sector gets streamlined, it would be difficult to attain the objectives of the announced package.

And finally, all that glitters might appear gold, provided all the proposed projects are prepared and implemented through high-level bureaucratic efficiency and political sagacity.

The finance minister is faced with a formidable challenge of pulling the economy out of recession, and the incentive package that he announced recently

might help the sectors at a stake.

We can only hope that necessary arrangements will be made in strengthening the monitoring and evaluation wings of the respective departments. Red tapeism should be reduced vastly and severe penalties should await the defaulters. The slip between the cup and the lip is not new in this country and we want to see an end to that this time. The tree will be known by the fruit it bears.

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Changing times, changing minds

Citizen-based initiatives like Facebook Agriculture Group and Jagoree will surely keep tab of that using the power of technology and so will NGOs and individuals. To me, this is at the core of our nation's progress towards the vision of Digital Bangladesh.

MRIDUL CHOWDHURY

A farmer from Gaibandha, locally known as Helal Member, summed up a grave looming national crisis in simple words: "The price of what I have to buy is increasing, and the price of what I have to sell is decreasing."

Helal Member was part of a group of activists who stood in unison on a sunny morning on April 24 in front of the National Museum demanding fair price for the farmers. He was one of two farmers who came from outside Dhaka to participate in a human chain that was far more than just about fair prices. It was about saving the very fabric of our economy. If the farmers lose money on rice production this year, many of them will inevitably turn to other crops next year potentially pushing our food security to an extremely precarious position.

The human chain organised by

Facebook Agriculture Group and Jagoree, both non-partisan platforms to mobilise citizens for ensuring government accountability, had clear demands: fair price of rice (at least Tk. 500 per maund), interest-free loan to farmers to ensure they can choose to sell when they want to, fair distribution mechanism to ensure that the subsidies reach the farmers directly instead of benefiting the middlemen, government purchase directly from the farmers, subsidised pricing of agricultural inputs, development of a farmer database as an integral part of creating Digital Bangladesh, and formulation of an agricultural policy that will be based on national interests rather than donor preferences.

While the group felt that government's efforts in announcing agricultural subsidies and increasing agricultural loans were laudable, they expressed their concerns about past shortcomings when it came to execution of policies and taking these

benefits to actual farmers.

One by one, students, teachers, young professionals, economists, agricultural researchers took their turns in expressing their opinions, ranging from suggestions of avoiding bad donor recommendations to the importance of food self-sufficiency.

To the casual observer, the chain was like any other, but a closer look would reveal the seeds of a new kind of citizen campaign that is in initial stages of development one that has its roots not in the physical world but in cyberspace, not over tea at Modhur Canteen, but over chat on Facebook.

The internet helped turn the fight of a lone passionate individual named Murtoza Lodi into an army of warriors organised through Facebook and then subsequently a human chain organised with support from another non-partisan group called Jagoree, which also relies heavily on the internet for communication, strategic planning, and organising. While the government makes plans for Digital Bangladesh, a silent revolution is taking place among the part of the citizenry that is fortunate enough to have internet access.

This is a phenomenon that is sure to find increasing reach in the near future. While I stood in that human chain not knowing whether our voices will ever reach the government, I knew one thing for sure:

We are now living in a rapidly changing world, where an increasing number of youth are using Internet tools for social causes and carrying their fights to the physical world. They will use the tools not only to organise campaigns and voice demands, but also to track whether government policies taken at the top level are being executed on the ground.

The day may not even be too far away when Helal Members will use the internet to let others know whether they have got access to subsidies or agricultural loans as promised by the government.

We hope that the government will take the demands from citizens, particularly farmers, seriously. While the government has shown good intent and commitment by announcing agricultural subsidies and loans despite discouragement and sometimes threats from some large donors, the real challenge will be in ensuring that they actually reach the farmers.

Citizen-based initiatives like Facebook Agriculture Group and Jagoree will surely keep tab of that using the power of technology and so will NGOs and individuals. To me, this is at the core of our nation's progress towards the vision of Digital Bangladesh.

Mridul Chowdhury is a co-founder of Jagoree and CEO of ClickDiagnostics.

New parliament's first session

We may say that we see some change among major parties. They are realising the need for cooperation in pushing forward the development programs of the country. But as no mutual trust and confidence has yet been created among them, the progress is slow.

A.B.M.S ZAHUR

THE recently concluded parliamentary session appears to be ushering parliamentary democracy into Bangladesh. The lawmakers of the ninth parliament deserve commendation for making the people hopeful about parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh again. For successful completion of the session, special thanks go to the PM and the speaker who played pivotal roles in developing a friendly atmosphere among the government and the opposition members of the parliament.

The new parliament has some special features. Firstly, it consists of elected members who were elected through delayed election. Secondly, for the first time since independence in 1971 its members were elected in a fair, free, and credible election

that no one could complain about. Thirdly, it was attended for the first time by both the major parties.

People are eagerly looking forward to a successful run of parliament because past parliaments from 1991 to 2006 could not operate properly due to bad relations between the two major political parties who appear to have become wiser and more tolerant because of their (belated) realisation that without proper parliamentary activities, the strengthening of the democratic base of a country is not possible.

The first session of the new parliament started on January 6 and continued till April 7. It ran for 92 days with 39 working days. Out of a total of 122 ordinances of the CTG, it approved 32, sent 8 of them to the permanent committee for examination, and the fate of the remaining 82 ordinances

is unknown

This may be considered as weakness of the government. However, credit goes to the government for successful constitution of all 47 permanent parliamentary committees. Another striking event in the first session was that the leader of the opposition took a lot of interest in the president's speech. In the discussion on the speech 171 members (152 were from AL, 13 from JP) of the government parties took part, apart from leaders of government and opposition parties. These may be considered as good signs for future of Bangladesh parliamentary practices.

Among the bills that were passed in the session, the Citizenship Act, Protection of Consumer Rights Act, Begum Rokeya University Act, Padma Multi-purpose Bridge (land acquisition) Program, and Criminal Procedure (amendment) Bill are worth mentioning.

There was general discussion on three subjects under parliamentary rule 147. The parliament also approved some transactions of CTG, its two budgets, along with other related matters. In fact, the parliament deserves credit for completing its responsibilities within only 39 working days.

It has to be admitted that despite various

odds, the first session was completed well. This was possible due to sincere effort of the leader of the house and the speaker, because at the start of the session 17 days were wasted on solving ticklish issue of allocation of seats in the parliament. Another seriously disturbing incident was the Palkhana carnage.

It is not correct to expect change overnight. Though we have passed through three parliaments since 1991 we are still at infancy of parliamentary democracy. We have to wait for some time more for gradual and slow change in attitude and capability of our lawmakers who will have to play much greater role in policy formulation and in facing intricate challenges in future for setting up strong parliamentary democracy.

Whatever we have gained in the first session is certainly better than any previous parliamentary session of Bangladesh. In conclusion, we may say that we see some change among major parties. They are realising the need for cooperation in pushing forward the development programs of the country. But as no mutual trust and confidence has yet been created among them, the progress is slow.

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