

## JS in session again, without the opposition

**BNP must end its boycott**

THE Jatiyo Sangsad began its third session on Monday. To no one's surprise, the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party kept up the boycott of proceedings it began months ago as a way of highlighting its grievances. Among those grievances are the grouse of the party's lawmakers about seating arrangements in the House and about the notice served on the leader of the opposition relating to vacating her cantonment residence. It is now quite clear that on a solution to these problems, one to the BNP's liking, hinges the question of its return to the House. For the nation as well as for those who voted the party's lawmakers into legislative office, it is a most unfortunate situation. For the nation, the boycott is increasingly looking like an attempt to make the JS an ineffectual and therefore an uninspiring body. And for its supporters, the BNP by not going to parliament is giving out the negative message that its politics has taken on a cavalier hue and that it pays little or no heed to their interests.

We at this newspaper have unflinchingly believed that the Jatiyo Sangsad must be the focal point of politics and governance and that all parties represented in it must ensure that they debate the issues on the floor of the House. Unfortunately, since the restoration of parliamentary government in 1991, the opposition, be it the Awami League or the BNP, has demonstrated an inexplicable tendency to stay away from the House every time it has not agreed with the ruling party.

To be sure, it falls within parliamentary norms for parties and lawmakers to walk out of the chamber, and that as a last resort, when the ruling party is unable or unwilling to accommodate their points of view. But what has been happening in Bangladesh is a wholesale boycott of parliament, for months together. That not only has been raising questions about the seriousness of those involved with the boycott but also causing worries for citizens, who cannot be blamed for thinking that the boycotting politicians are doing things less than ethical. And let no one forget that in the years prior to the imposition of emergency in January 2007, the emasculation of parliament through an opposition boycott led to little of note being done by the JS. For this reason, it was expected that after the elections of December 2008, having gone through a tortuous period under the caretaker dispensation, the political parties would set a new and dynamic political process in motion. That has not happened.

And because it has not, such issues of grave national interest as the budget, Tipaimukh, the environment, right to information and the BDR tragedy have not been focused on by the opposition. The loss has been the BNP's. At a sadder level, it has been the nation's.

If democracy is to set deeper roots in the country, the Jatiyo Sangsad must be made a vibrant and responsive body. That calls for a swift and meaningful return to it by the BNP. If its lawmakers can take part in the deliberations of the various standing committees and sub-committees of the JS, what prevents them from returning to the House proper?

## Spate of promotions

**Bureaucracy set to be weakened further**

IN a sweeping move, the government has promoted as many as 494 officials to positions of additional secretary, joint secretary and deputy secretary, ostensibly for the purpose of injecting dynamism into the administration. But it could have contrary results and we share the concern of experts over the development.

Vertical mobility in a career is a natural and necessary entitlement that officials should enjoy by way of bringing out the best in them in the service of the Republic. So, promotions should come as a boon not only to the promotees but also for the administration as a whole. Can we say the same thing about the mass promotions announced on Monday by the government? Hardly.

The elevated officials have been asked to join as officers on special duty (OSD) at the establishment ministry and await their placements. But the stark reality is that a very large number of them are likely to cool their heels as OSD because there are not enough posts to move them to. Aside from idling away their time, as an old bureaucrat has pointed out these newly promoted officials in their bid to get postings of their choice could breathe restiveness into the upper echelons of the administration. Let's not overlook the fact that some 526 officials have either been superseded or denied consideration.

Most of the promoted officials are said to have been sidelined during past governments. It is stated that one of the criteria for their selection to higher posts has been how unblemished they have been by partisan bias. The question is hasn't the government been influenced by a slant of its own? The issue here is two-some: fair play and recognition of merit and ability. True, during the two terms served by the BNP since 1991 elections, promotions, postings and easing out as OSDs were largely governed by political considerations. The AL government undertook a reversal process. How long these changes and counter-changes in the administration will continue as the services of the Republic remain in a perpetual state of disequilibrium?

## The state in its fearsome symmetry

It all says something about the state we have given ourselves, particularly in the post-1975 period. Before the murder of Bangabandhu and then the assassination of his colleagues in prison, the Bangladesh state cared for those who constituted it. Between August and November 1975, light gave way to sinister darkness.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE sight of Professor Anu Muhammad lying prostrate on the street, his young camp followers trying to protect him from the blows of policemen gone berserk, was something we had come across before. Remember the moment when a police officer, fury pushing his facial features into contortion, landed his fist in the face of an elderly photojournalist and sent the poor man tumbling? And do you recall how a whole phalanx of policemen swooped on Sohel Taj (and he was a lawmaker), back in the days when the country seethed in fury at the misrule of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party-Jamaat government, and left him with a fractured arm?

Go back in time. In the early days of the Ershad military regime, trucks were simply let loose on university students who dared to question the legitimacy of the coup makers of 1982. Come back to times closer. Every time the opposition called a general strike or sought to enforce a siege of the capital in the days when Khaleeda Zia ran things, it was not uncommon for the police to seize anybody and everybody they could lay their hands

on, dump them on to trucks and simply whisk them off to prison. It did not matter at all that all these hapless men were innocent citizens trying to go about their quotidian business of earning a living. The state ignored their innocence.

It all says something about the state we have given ourselves, particularly in the post-1975 period. Before the murder of Bangabandhu and then the assassination of his colleagues in prison, the Bangladesh state cared for those who constituted it. Between August and November 1975, light gave way to sinister darkness.

The welfare-oriented state of Bangladesh with alacrity mutated into an insensitive one. Two military administrations, one cabal of killer army officers and two periods of putative rule by the BNP (it was anything but) were all that was needed to inject fear into the minds of citizens. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of men in the armed forces perished in the five years of the Ziaur Rahman regime.

In a political dispensation where transparency and accountability were expected to be the underpinning of governance, it was fear of the state that began grinding citizens'

rights into pieces. No wrong, no act of immorality could be questioned. None was. Colonel Taber was hanged in the dark loneliness of prison. Not even the uncertain interregnum that was the Sattar presidency demonstrated any inclination to be a little more sophisticated than its predecessor. Military officers charged with planning and carrying out the Zia murder were put to death in dubious circumstances.

Military rule was brought to an end through popular struggle long ago. The elements of fear consequent upon such rule have remained, though. That much was made obvious in the times of the Fakhruddin caretaker administration. The frontal assault made on Dhaka and Rajshahi universities in August 2007, through the arrest and remand of some of our respected and reputed academics, remains our undying shame. It was, in many ways, a throw-back to the Pakistani occupation in 1971, when academics were shot and bayoneted and then flung into mass graves. Of course, no graves were dug in 2007. But is that any consolation, knowing how a group of men in the service of the state and its people blindfolded these teachers and subjected them to indignities of the sort we have a hard time trying to imagine? That humiliation (and it was also meted out to leading politicians and students) was a reminder that the state had come to acquire a fearsome symmetry.

Today, now that an elected government is in place, it becomes the nation's collective moral responsibility to identify the men, be they in the armed forces or in the intelligence structure of the government, who so happily demeaned and diminished all these respected citizens. If you believe in the rule

of law, if you think crime must be handled with a firm hand, you need to hunt down these men and haul them up before the law.

It is not just Anu Muhammad's state-backed assailants who need to answer for their criminal conduct. It is not enough that a minister or two will visit the injured academic and say sorry. More crucial is the job of liberating the state from those who, ruffian-like, have come to identify themselves with the state in all the crudity that Louis XIV once gave voice to. If you can go so purposefully into bringing to justice the barbarians who put all those brilliant army officers to death at the BDR headquarters in February, you can very well do a similar act through having these truncheon-wielding policemen face the music.

Democracy goes beyond the exercise of choosing a government. It is, in the broadest sense, the instilling of the idea in the minds of citizens that they matter, that the state is theirs to nurture, modify and make substantive in their interest as well as in the interest of the generations to be. Fear that the state has symbolised in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and among the various indigenous denominations in the country militates against the principles of the twilight struggle we waged in 1971. And as long as you do not go back home to secular politics, you will be an alien in your own land.

An Anu Muhammad under siege by the state is reason enough for us to reclaim the state as our own. And for a government, which professes faith in democracy, it is time for less volubility and much hard thinking.

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## Is Myanmar acquiring nuclear weapons?

The recent aborted voyage of a North Korean ship and photographs of massive tunnels have raised concern in many Western countries that Myanmar may be aspiring to join the nuclear club -- with help from Pyongyang.

HARUN UR RASHID

THE foreign media is awash with news that Myanmar is building a secret nuclear reactor and plutonium extraction facilities with North Korean help, with the aim of acquiring its first nuclear bomb in five years, according to evidence from key defectors revealed in an exclusive *Herald* (Australia) report on August 1.

The recent aborted voyage of a North Korean ship and photographs of massive tunnels have raised concern in many Western countries that Myanmar may be aspiring to join the nuclear club -- with help from Pyongyang. China and other Asian nations had recently helped persuade Myanmar to turn back a North Korean freighter, the *Nam Kam 1*, that was being shadowed by US warships on its way to Myanmar with an unknown cargo.

It is further reported that two defectors were extensively interviewed separately over the past two years in Thailand by the Australian National University strategic expert Desmond Ball and a Thai-based

Irish-Australian journalist, Phil Thornton, who has followed Myanmar for years.

One was an officer with a secret nuclear battalion in the Myanmar army, who was sent to Moscow for two years' training; the other was a former executive of the leading regime business partner, Htoo Trading, who handled nuclear contracts with Russia and North Korea.

Professor Ball said that a Moscow-trained Myanmar army defector was picked up by US intelligence agencies early last year. Some weeks later, Myanmar protested to Thailand about overflights by unmanned surveillance drones that were apparently launched across Thai territory by US agencies.

In June, photographs, videos and reports showed as many as 800 tunnels in a mountain at Naung Laing, some of them vast, dug in Myanmar with North Korean assistance under an operation code-named "Tortoise Shells." The photos were reportedly taken between 2003 and 2006. The secret complex runs parallel to a civilian reactor being built at another site by Russia that both the Russia and Myanmar say will be put under interna-

tional safeguards.

A spokesman for the self-styled Myanmar government-in-exile says that, according to people working with the dissident movement inside the Myanmar army, there are two heavily guarded buildings under construction "to hold nuclear reactors" in central Myanmar. Villagers in the area have been displaced, said spokesman Zinn Lin.

Sometime at the end of June, Japanese police reportedly arrested a North Korean and two Japanese for allegedly trying to illegally export to Myanmar a magnetic measuring device that could be used to develop missiles.

In a rare comment from inside Myanmar, Chan Tun, former ambassador to North Korea turned democracy activist, reportedly told the Thailand-based *Irrawaddy* magazine: "To put it plainly: Myanmar wants to get the technology to develop a nuclear bomb."

Washington is increasingly concerned that Myanmar could be acquiring nuclear technology from North Korea, after Israel destroyed a reactor the North Koreans were apparently building in Syria in September 2007.

A recent report from Washington-based Radio Free Asia and Myanmar exile media said senior Myanmar military officers made a secret visit late last year to North Korea, where an agreement was concluded for greatly expanding cooperation to modernise Myanmar's military, including the construction of underground installations.

Observers believe the hints emerging from various accounts and sightings of North Korean delegations in Myanmar sharply focuses the fact the Myanmar leadership is seeking a deterrent to any foreign-inspired "regime change".

The reported story, if true, will have serious repercussions across Asia, in particular in South East Asia. "The evidence is preliminary and needs to be verified, but this is something that would completely change the regional security status quo. This nuclear weapon move jeopardises the security and wellbeing of its immediate neighbours," said Thitinan Pongsudhirak, the head of Thailand's Institute of Security and International Studies.

It is reported that Democrat Senator Jim Webb of Virginia, who visited Myanmar on August 15-16, reportedly said that while he did not discuss the nuclear issue directly with the top leader Senior General Than Shwe: "It was communicated to me that there was no truth to that from a very high level in the government."

Myanmar is a party to the 1972 Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, and under a safeguard agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency, it is obligated to let the UN watchdog know at least six months in advance of operating a nuclear facility. IAEA spokesman Ayhan Evrensel said.

Barister Harun ur Rashid is a Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

## Exporting rice

It is too early to forget the situation of 2008 when the government was facing difficulty in importing rice due to restrictions imposed by most of the rice exporting countries, which resulted from the worldwide shortage of food grain and their very high prices in the international markets.

M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

MINISTER for food and disaster management, Dr. Abdur Razzaq, recently disclosed that the government was considering allowing export of rice, both aromatic and non-aromatic, and the final decision on the issue would be taken after observing whether any natural calamity affected *aman* production. The minister said that, at present, the private sector exports over 150,000 tonnes of rice.

The disclosure came following a meeting on August 30 of the Food Planning and Monitoring Unit chaired by the food and disaster management minister Dr. Abdur Razzaq and attended, among others, by the minister for finance A.M.A. Muhith and the minister for agriculture Matia Chowdhury.

The arguments put forward in favour of exporting rice are: one, the government has a comfortable stock of food grain (rice and wheat) amounting to 12.56 lakh tonnes; two, the coming *aman* production will meet the target; and third, export of rice will enhance the country's image.

Let's see as to what extent these arguments for exporting rice hold good.

One of the arguments put forward is the

comfortable buffer stock of food grain amounting to 12.56 lakh tonnes at the end of August. The database of the Ministry of Food and Disaster Management (MOFDM) shows that in August 2002, when the writer was the food secretary, the government food grain stock stood at 11.64 lakh tonnes. The difference is only 92 thousand tonnes after a period of six years or so.

A good harvest of *boro* during the last two seasons (177.62 lakh tonnes in 2007-08 and 180.11 lakh tonnes in 2008-09) and a declining trend in the prices of different varieties of rice in international markets have contributed respectively to the augmentation of the government food grain stock to some extent in 2009 and the lowering of prices in the domestic market.

A visit to the website of the MOFDM shows that against the total food grain production of 274.42 lakh tonnes in 2003-04, the total food grain production, including 10 lakh tonnes of wheat, in 2008-09 stood at 325.18 lakh tonnes. The difference is 50.76 lakh tonnes after a period of five years, when the total population stands at about 150 million against the total population of 135 million in 2003-04. A comparison of annual domestic food grain production rate and

annual population growth rate in the last ten years shows that the growth rate of population is higher than the growth rate of food grain production. Thus, the present production of food grain does not give a very rosy picture in comparison with population growth rate and the total population.

Regarding the meeting of *aman* production target, it may be said that we are uncertain about natural calamity that may affect *aman* production. We have seen in 2007 how the countrywide floods and the cyclone Sidr on November 15 in the coastal districts seriously affected *aman* production. *Aman* production stood at 96.62 lakh tones only against the target of 130.45 lakh tonnes. Moreover, total food grain production in the country lacks consistency.

Total food grain production in 2000-01, 2001-02, 2002-03, 2003-04, 2004-05 and 2005-06 stood at 267.58 lakh tonnes, 259.05 lakh tonnes, 266.94 lakh tonnes, 274.42 lakh tonnes, 261.33 lakh tonnes and 275.90 lakh tonnes respectively. This shows the inconsistency in the growth of food grain in the country.

The June, 2009 issue of *Food Outlook*, a biannual publication of FAO, forecasts a modest growth in rice production in Asia in 2009-10 after two years of fast growth. A few countries, including Bangladesh, "may experience a contraction in rice production, as less attractive market conditions depress plantings."

Quoting the Indian food and agriculture minister Sharad Pawar, the Indian media recently reported that production of rice in India may be reduced by 10 million tonnes this year due to drought, compared to last

year's (2008-09) production of 99.15 million tonnes. Rising price of rice is hitting the common people of India. Reference to India is made because India has traditionally been a big exporter of rice.

*New Age* wrote on August 31 that the government was considering rice export at a time when many countries, including neighbouring India, are reportedly pursuing a wait and see policy about exports in view of unfavourable weather conditions affecting output. According to FAO, the world production of wheat in 2009-10 will also decline by 4%.

It is too early to forget the situation of 2008 when the government was facing difficulty in importing rice due to restrictions imposed by most of the rice exporting countries, which resulted from the worldwide shortage of food grain and their very high prices in the international markets.

Regarding the food and disaster management minister's assertion that rice export will enhance the country's image, some knowledgeable people say that by joining the club of rice exporting countries the Awami League-led alliance government wants to make some political gains. They ask how Bangladesh can export rice when it is still receiving food aid and importing foodgrain, particularly wheat.

It appears from the above that the time is not yet ripe to go for exporting rice. However, exporting limited quantity of aromatic rice may not pose any problem.

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