

## Kalapara arbitration

### Travesty of justice

THE justice meted out to the raped victim through arbitration organised by local Awami League leaders at Kalapara will surely not assuage the hurt feelings of people across the country. And there is reason why the gaping wound may widen further. It is evident that the arbitrators wanted to settle the matter locally, allowing the rapists to go virtually unpunished.

Rape, of course, is a crime that arbitrators, whatever may be their social status or political clout, are not permitted to deal with. Reports coming from Kalapara clearly indicate that the arbitrators tried their best to look tough and neutral and ruthlessly exploited the vulnerability and helplessness of the victim and her family. The 16 rapists had to pay Tk. 10,000 each for shattering a budding life. If paying money, that too a paltry amount, is accepted as due punishment for rape, rule of law will no longer have any place in our society.

The whole arbitration was stage-managed with meticulous precision, and the victim was made to say publicly that she had no complaint against anybody! What a travesty of justice! And to cap it all, the arbitrators turned their ire on the journalists who had reported the incident.

Reportedly, a minister of state was present in Kalapara when the farcical arbitration was going on to save the rapists. However, neither he, nor the local AL leaders found anything wrong in what was being done to hush up the case. And the law enforcers were on the sidelines all the time! And so was the local administration.

Now, anyone with a modicum of respect for and understanding of law will ask whether the local AL leaders were aware that they actually committed another crime by organising the arbitration meeting. Who authorised them to pass a 'verdict' in a rape case? And who assured them that they could get away with such gross violation of the law? As for the law enforcers, the less said, the better. They have actually become a party to the miscarriage of justice in the form of arbitration.

The BCL supporters, at least a section of them, have already done enough to create an embarrassing situation for the ruling party. All the warnings and exhortations that have come from the AL top brass appear to have fallen on deaf ears. However, the Kalapara incident has cut deep into the mass psyche, given the bestiality and enormity of the crime. So, the ruling party should do its bit to bring the culprits to justice.

## Pangu hospital's woes

### Its premises must be cleansed of dalals

LIKE any other public hospital, the National Institute of Traumatology and Orthopaedic Rehabilitation (Nitor), popularly called Pangu Hospital, too, is in need of urgent attention from the authorities concerned. Though from its very name, Nitor appears to be a very modern and specialised hospital, media reports tell quite a different tale. In fact, it has become a den of fraudsters, who are everyday taking many innocent patients for a ride in the name of providing different services for them from the hospital as well as touting for other substandard private clinics.

It becomes further evident from the admission of the Nitor director, as reported in this paper, that though the hospital authorities are not quite unaware of the activities of the touts and tricksters on the hospital premises, they are helpless due to various constraints, including pressure from an ever-increasing number of patients seeking services of the hospital everyday and the shortage of doctors and hospital staff in comparison to the need.

Understandably, in the ocean of corruption, mismanagement and constraints of every kind plaguing the public hospitals of the country, the Pangu hospital is not an exception. But what defies commonsense is that the hospital's proud possession, the closed circuit television (CCTV) cameras, installed at different corners of the hospital, to all intents and purposes have proven to be of little help to control the tyranny of the outsiders harassing the patients and their relatives day in and day out.

Given the resource constraints of the government, further improvement in the services of the hospital is contingent upon the presence of adequate number of beds, staffing the hospital's various sections with more doctors, nurses and other support workers and, last but not the least, having sufficient quantity of medicine and other equipment in stock. But this cannot be an argument against making the best possible use of whatever men and materials are already at hand in the hospital.

Unfortunately, the hospital is not able to deliver whatever potential for service it already possesses, if only due to the mismanagement and corruption it is suffering from.

The authorities need to put their foot down in the matter. First and foremost, the hospital premises have to be rid of the dalals and fraudsters and their cohorts among the hospital employees. The CCTVs, if those are meant to be of any service, should be used to identify those troublemakers on the hospital premises. The next steps of cleansing the Pangu hospital of corruption and improving its service to the patients will only follow.

# EDITORIAL

## Dysfunctional democracy

We recount this merely to put the matter in perspective, to show that our democracy will remain half-baked unless the much-vaunted change in political culture is brought about.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

HERE is very little to boast about what is passing off as democracy in Bangladesh. When 33 percent of the voters remain unrepresented in the parliament it is anything but democracy.

Public discourse on politics in the recent past has been focused on the need for a working democracy to be manifested in a vibrant parliament, which unfortunately has remained virtually non-functional with the main opposition boycotting it for a good part of its tenure since 1991.

There must be a feeling of *déjà vu* in the Awami League. In 2001 they did exactly the same, choosing not to take oath as MPs unless the "subtle rigging" they accused the establishment of was corrected. And then general secretary of the Awami League demanded an entirely fresh election.

This was taken as a tit for tat for the BNP's parliament boycott when it was in the opposition between 1996 and 2001. We recount this merely to put the matter in perspective, to show that our democracy will remain half-baked unless the much-vaunted change in political culture is brought about. The immediate reaction of the losing party since the 1991 election had been to instantly reject the result when, in fact, introspection and evaluation of the causes of defeat rather than rejection was what they should have employed their mind in.

They record of parliamentary boycott should shame anyone who takes pride as a democrat or a citizen of a democratic country.

The opposition had boycotted 521 out of

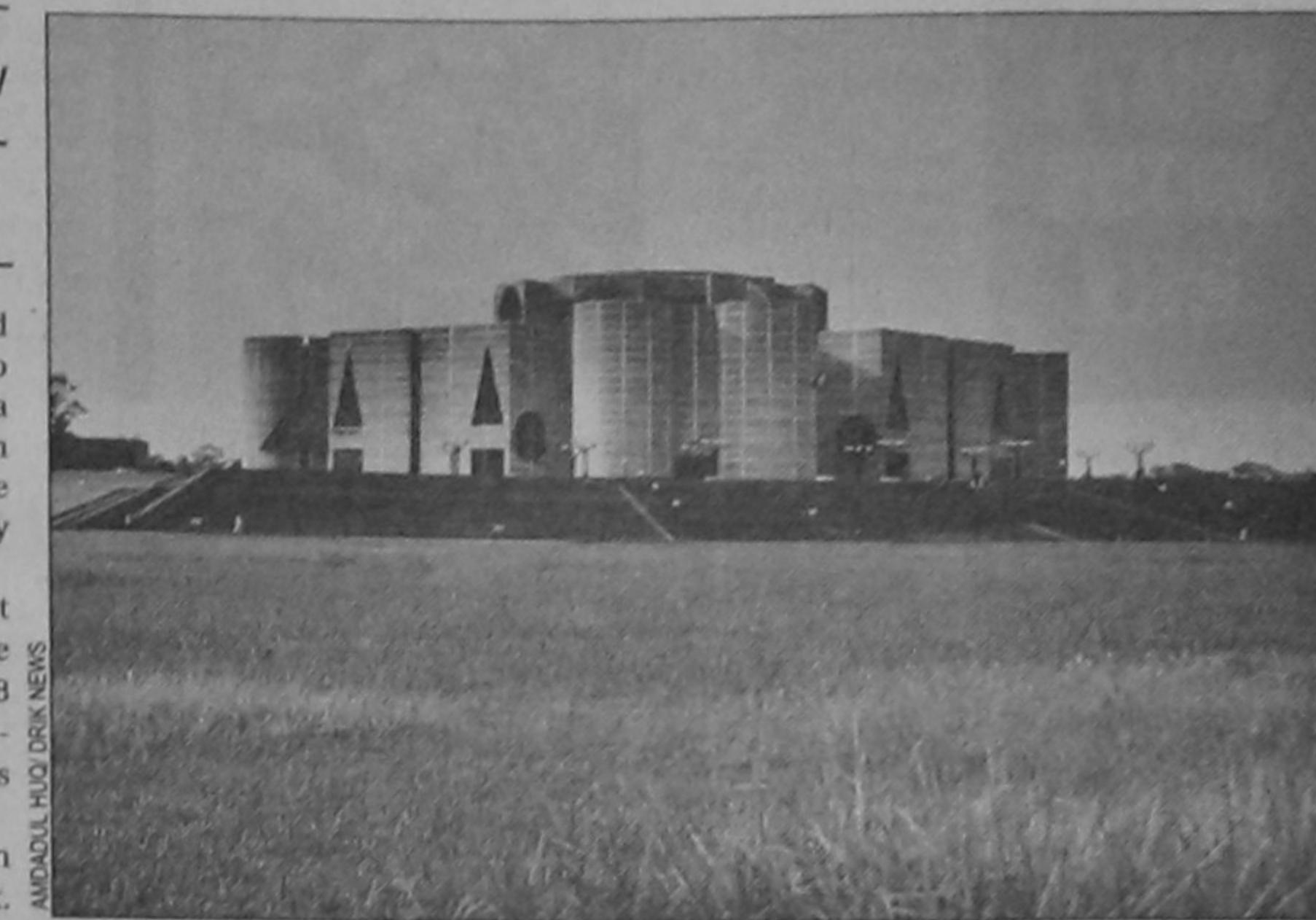
a total 1,155 sittings during the 5th, 7th and 8th parliaments. The AL had chosen to abstain from the parliament for 135 out of a total of 400 sittings while in opposition from 1991 to 1996, and the BNP had done likewise between 1996 and 2001, when they boycotted 163 out of 382 sittings.

34 out of 71 sittings of the 9th parliament have been boycotted by the BNP when we were given to understand during the 2008 election campaign that it would not boycott parliament in future. Perhaps it was too sure of winning the election.

One was very happy to see the BNP join the first session of the current parliament. But then perhaps it had a sudden brainwave and realised that it was breaking with tradition by joining the parliament and decided to keep away on a very flimsy ground. And since then the BNP has been laying down conditions that have accreted over the last nine months.

We have not heard of a situation when people's representatives, chosen by them through a free and fair election, are putting preconditions for joining the parliament -- a responsibility they are promise-bound to the electorates to fulfill. The number of conditions stands at nine as of today, and it is very clear that the nature of the conditions is more party, rather than people, oriented.

Are we to understand that the issue of the BNP party chief's cantonment residence, whatever the legal merit or moral justification the BNP's stand on it might be, is more important than the pressing national issues? Is it not absurd that there is none to ventilate the views of the 33 per-



ANDREW HODGKIN/REUTERS

cent of voters because their representatives would prefer to abstain on the ground that they have not been given the one extra seat that they wanted in the front row of the parliament?

It is a pity that people's interest has been given no priority at all when national issues were left unaddressed by the parliament. These matters were discussed everywhere except where these should have been debated first -- the parliament. Issues like Tipaimukh, the Asian Highway, transit, the visit of the foreign minister to India and the joint statement that followed, the so-called crossfire deaths, not to speak of matters related to the BDR killings and the galloping price hike, should have been thrashed out on the floor of the House. Talk shows and public statements do little justice to the people and the issues.

However, it would be crass injustice to put all the blame for the current situation at the door of the BNP and its alliance partners

alone. The AL has reneged on many of its promises and it appears that the ruling alliance is quite happy to see the BNP out of parliament in spite of the public utterances they are making. Otherwise, they would have accepted the demand of the opposition for the sake of the people. And when the speaker says that the BNP should put their demands in the House what does he have to say for rejecting all the 29 call attention notices by the BNP? Perhaps the speaker does not want to be outdone, and wants to follow the tradition of his BNP predecessor in the 8th parliament, who treated the AL's call attention notices in the same manner.

This is not one's idea of participatory democracy; and we are deeply disappointed at how the parliament has functioned so far. The onus, we feel, is on the ruling party to make the parliament and democracy fully functional.

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## Politics played out abroad

Politics played out abroad by the Bangladeshi expatriates often tarnishes the country's image. The squabbles between the supporters of AL and BNP on foreign soil create a very bad impression about the people and politics of Bangladesh as a whole.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

A report says that hundreds of ruling Awami League (AL) members and the opposition BNP staged demonstrations and counter demonstrations in front of the United Nations headquarters in New York on September 26, in a display of their usual domestic political rivalry. This event has been a cause of concern for every conscious citizen of the country.

The activists of AL and its associate organisations, led by the president and vice-president of the US unit of AL, had gathered there to welcome Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's speech at the UN General Assembly.

BNP's demonstration was led by the president and general secretary of the US unit of BNP and its allies, who chanted slogans against the government of Sheikh Hasina for considering giving transit facility to India, allowing the construction of Tipaimukh dam on the common river Barak and agreeing to gas exploration against national interest.

The supporters of the two rival parties staged demonstrations for more than two hours, creating a chaotic situation in front of the UN headquarters while some 100 heads of states and governments were

inside.

Foreign Minister Dipu Moni called upon Bangladeshi expatriates not to get involved in political conflicts that damaged the country's image abroad. She made this call recently while inaugurating a website of Scholars Bangladesh, an organisation dealing with various aspects of expatriate Bangladeshi.

The foreign minister said that there were many talented Bangladeshi working with prestige abroad, and they could join the politics of those countries to contribute to the development of both, their country of residence and of origin.

Politics played out abroad by the Bangladeshi expatriates often tarnishes the country's image. The squabbles between the supporters of AL and BNP on foreign soil create a very bad impression about the people and politics of Bangladesh as a whole.

Such squabbles are not confined only to Jackson Heights in New York and Brick Lane in London, where huge numbers of Bangladeshi are settled, but also in other countries where there are chapters of AL and BNP. Canada, Australia and Japan are a few examples where the general perception of Bangladeshi being a unified entity takes quite a battering through the activities of people from all strata of life.

The three major political parties -- AL, BNP and Jatiya Party -- needed to sever

some expatriate supporters of AL and BNP.

The expatriate Bangladeshi involved in partisan politics abroad have made it a business to create undue pressure on our diplomatic missions in the countries of their residence, whenever their party happens to be in power. Such an affair serves as a damper on the professionalism of Bangladesh's diplomats, who are often compelled to satisfy the demands of these political elements for the sake of their jobs.

The years-old belief that Bangladeshi are the most likable when they are abroad or in distress exists no more. Narrow partisan political interest has greatly destroyed the tradition that the Bangladeshi settled abroad would get closer to one another through a sense of national identity.

There are so many instances where expatriate Bangladeshi were found involved in partisan conflicts on foreign soil, damaging country's image. The parliamentary standing committee on expatriates welfare and overseas employment during the regime of BNP-led four-party alliance government took a serious note of it and asked the government to stop it.

The caretaker government of Fakhruddin Ahmed promulgated the Representation of the People Order (Amendment) Ordinance 2008 with a number of amendments, and the amended version of the RPO 1972 was put into force on August 21, 2008 with immediate effect. The amended RPO made registration of political parties compulsory and also banned their front organisations and chapters abroad, which was welcomed by the people from all strata of life.

The government now needs to ponder seriously whether it is at all necessary to have foreign chapters of the political parties, while the EC suggests stopping of expatriate Bangladeshi from doing partisan politics abroad.

It is really very shameful for the whole nation that when a visiting political leader from home is welcomed by his party men abroad, the supporters of another party try to disgrace their rival by staging demonstrations and raising slogans against him.

The government now needs to ponder seriously whether it is at all necessary to have foreign chapters of the political parties, while the EC suggests stopping of expatriate Bangladeshi from doing partisan politics abroad.

One really fails to understand as to why the political parties in Bangladesh are so interested in having such outfits outside their political horizon, while these outfits do not make any contributions to the national politics, but rather damage the country's image abroad.

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## Obama runs into foreign roadblocks

From the war in Afghanistan and his diplomatic overtures to Iran, to North Korea and the Middle East, Obama is confronted by what appear to be insoluble differences with foreign leaders who are not prepared to let the American president take them into uncharted territory.

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Nearly 10 months into his term of office, US President Barack Obama is being forced to rethink his major foreign policy initiatives. From the war in Afghanistan and his diplomatic overtures to Iran, to North Korea and the Middle East, Obama is confronted by what appear to be insoluble differences with foreign leaders who are not prepared to let the American president take them into uncharted territory.

This is not to say that Obama has nothing to show for his efforts. The international community has expressed support for extending olive branches to North Korea, Iran and Burma.

Furthermore, US relations with Russia have improved following his decision to

withdraw a European missile-defence system.

In response, Moscow reciprocated by throwing support behind Obama's call for tougher sanctions against Tehran should the regime there refuse to heed the demands of the world community over its nuclear ambition.

But while Obama appears to be hitting the right notes, disturbing developments emerge to throw it all off key. These include the recent revelation by the US and its allies that Iran is operating another clandestine nuclear facility. This came days after the White House completed fine-tuning a strategy for Middle East peace talks.

To make matters worse, a report by the US commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, giving a bleak assess-

ment of the war there, was leaked to the media. The general is asking for 10,000 more troops, a request that has yet to be agreed upon by the policy-makers.

To be fair to President Obama, some of these events are beyond his control. The previous administration took down tyrannical administrations in Afghanistan and Iraq and then decided to go the extra mile by playing nation-building.

On the Iranian front, there were high hopes that the mullahs would respond positively to Obama's gestures of goodwill. But with the return of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, that olive branch was more or less refused.

Americans were hoping that a new generation of Iranians would succeed in pushing through more progressive-thinking candidates into top government posts. Instead, the end result seems like more of the same.

The hard-line mullahs are not about to concede much of their power. Unfortunately, Iran is not a country that the US can afford to shun. Where US-Iranian relations go to from now is anybody's guess.

Obama's decision to disclose Iran's

uranium enrichment facility was a calculated attempt to get Tehran to respond. But the Iranian leaders are keeping quiet, regardless of how dishonest they may seem to the world.

In Israel, a right-wing government bent on building more settlements on Palestinian land was voted into office. It was a blow to Obama's hopes of a settlement freeze as a stepping-stone towards renewed talks between Israel and Palestinians.

Some think the US president should have known better; that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would have to agree to such a demand. But then again, given the fact that Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian land is the heart of the matter, a freeze on settlements shouldn't be too much to ask.

Besides a commitment from Israel to halt new settlements, Arab countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, must also be committed to the peace process. Without such commitment, Netanyahu is likely to take a wait-and-see approach to the whole thing.

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