

## BNP's return to JS imperative

*It takes all concerned to make parliament functional*

FOR some time now the BNP has been sending out signals about the possibility of joining the parliament. The positive vibes are very welcome indeed, and we would like to think that the motive behind the intention is to fulfill their obligation to their voters and not to save their seats in the parliament that might fall vacant by default of their absence of 90 days.

It must be added that the long boycott of nearly 70 days has done nothing to enhance the party's image. Neither was their cause helped with the number of pre-conditions for joining the parliament getting longer every day. We couldn't agree more with the statement of the Chief Whip of the party that the BNP would rejoin the parliament to address the critical issues facing the country. Indeed their abstention was not only a great folly it was also a great disservice to their electorates and to the nation, because on so many critical issues the BNP could have taken issue with the ruling coalition, but did not. We wish that the idea to rejoin the parliament had dawned on them much earlier.

It needs hardly be repeated that the BNP is under close scrutiny of the people, particularly those whose votes had helped them win seats in the parliament, and who would be unwilling to countenance any further continued boycott of the Sangsad. And neither should it try to find excuses in future to keep away from the House.

While the onus is on the BNP to rejoin the Sangsad much will depend on the attitude of the ruling coalition led by the AL to make it happen. Having such an overwhelming majority the AL can afford to be more magnanimous and go beyond the call of duty by giving the BNP more space, both literally and metaphorically, than the number of its parliamentary seats would otherwise entitle them to. We call upon the AL to shun its characteristic proclivity to provoke the BNP to react negatively. It must act prudently so that no opportunity is provided to the opposition to find any excuse to abstain from parliament.

The role of the Speaker in smoothening out the angularities in the way of the opposition in resuming its due role in the parliament is also very important. Admittedly, there are issues that occur outside the parliament which is beyond his control, but within the parliament he can use the weight of his position to influence the ruling party to go beyond its remit and accommodate as much of the requests of the opposition as possible for the sake of a worthwhile parliament.

We would hope that the change of attitude of the BNP is genuine; and given that, no opportunity should be lost to make the parliament truly the people's house.

## Rising costs and the mentally ill

*The issue must be a major priority in health care*

ONE does not require much wisdom to know that the issue of mental health is rather low on the list of national priorities. It has been that way for years together. In all the discussions on health policy and the like, little, if any, focus has been placed on the pretty large number of mentally challenged people in the country. And now it appears that whatever degree of care there has been for such individuals is under threat of hitting a new low owing primarily to the costs of treatment involved. As a report in this newspaper makes it clear, the rising costs in treatment has compelled patients to leave the National Institute of Mental Health in recent months. Obviously, most patients at the institute and at similar institutes come from not very well-to-do families. Add to that the rise in treatment charges imposed by the government in September last year, which were without question a damper on health care.

Now, where mental health is concerned, there are quite a few serious problems that are beginning to come to the fore. And that condition only adds to the stigma traditionally attached to the mentally ill in Bangladesh. In the first place, a big scale of ignorance about mental health or its symptoms still prevails in the rural areas, as a result of which many victims remain beyond treatment. In the second, the mentally ill, even in the urban regions, are by and large prejudiced against. In so many words, where concrete programmes should have been in place for the treatment of the mentally ill, there has generally been a hands-off attitude. Observe the problems now. Of the 150 million population in the country, as many as 60 million happen to be under the age of 18 years. And of these young, close to 18 per cent suffer from mental disorder of various degrees. Altogether 16 per cent of the overall population is prey to mental problems of the various kinds. Compounding the problem is the sheer inadequacy in the number of psychiatrists and psychologists. As a health expert informs us, there are only 150 psychiatrists and psychologists for a mentally challenged population of 15 million in Bangladesh.

These are facts the government must take into immediate consideration. As for patients being discharged from hospitals because of rising medical costs, there are clear risks involved here. It has to do with the fact that those discharged go back home only to have their conditions worsen. The health authorities have a responsibility here in much the same way that they have a responsibility to crack down on corruption in the mental health care system.

In plain terms, there is a huge need for a policy on mental health, especially where treating the mentally challenged is concerned. Looking away from the problem or pretending that it does not exist can only worsen the existing difficulties.

## Searching for the truth

Let us remember that we run the grave risk of putting the future generation and ourselves in peril by our inability to ensure investigation in accordance with the dictates of law. The actual facts and circumstances need to be ascertained and placed before the court for adjudging the guilt. Mr. Kibria's killers need to be punished.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

AN inordinately long five years have passed since the assassination of Mr. Kibria, the former finance minister, but the nation, including the grieving family, is not sure that the ghastly tragedy has been fully and comprehensively looked into.

Allegations are there, and perhaps rightly, that the planners and the mischief-makers behind the scene have not been located and booked.

There are further allegations to the effect that investigative functionaries who have faltered and misled deliberately have been rewarded. In addition, the probe report initiated by the then political government has come under adverse scrutiny for alleged partiality and ill motive. All these make very disturbing reading and create a sense of despondency and helplessness that do not augur well for a supposedly democratic society.

Five years ago in this column this writer expressed the premonition that we have not been able to take a long hard look at the compounding tragedy that had a crippling effect on the body-politic and was impairing our democratic credentials. It was felt that all these talks of ensuring good governance sounded hollow if the state could not ensure unbiased and impartial investigation of criminal cases.

It indeed is a sad commentary that even now it needs to be remembered that in a criminal case the state is the complainant and the executive has to see that the ends of justice are met. When shall we realise

that the inaction and incapacity characterising incidents like Mr. Kibria's murder hangs heavy on the national scene and raises concern beyond?

To recollect, the murder of Mr. Kibria has had ominous portents for politicians of the desired breed in Bangladesh polity. For Mr. Kibria had impeccable credentials in a scenario where many politicians have not been able to endear themselves to the community. His was a soothing presence in a culture of high emotion and garrulity.

The cruel annihilation of Mr. Kibria did send a disturbing signal to those who were desirous of taking to public life. In fact, well-meaning individuals who felt inspired to shake off their ambivalence and join public life experienced a rude jolt in his violent death, and were led to believe that politics uncomfortably remained the preserve of ill-gotten money and muscle.

It is in the context of circumstances stated hereinbefore that the proper investigation of politically motivated murders, especially that of Mr. Kibria, acquires special significance in that it establishes our credibility as an orderly and law-abiding society. Therefore, the pernicious slide towards an environment of pervasive lack of trust and confidence in the ability and impartiality of our investigative apparatus has to be halted.

Once again the obvious needs to be stated because we appear to be forsaking some of the primary state functions. The political executive must understand in no uncertain terms that investigation has to



The Kibria case needs a closer look.

be the unaffected and unfettered jurisdiction of the investigator. The requirement is the empowering of investigators by lawful directives.

Our badly bruised administrative ethos needs to be repaired and restored to its rightful place. Insofar as proper investigation is concerned, concrete actions like proper registration of the case, apolitical energising of the intelligence network and unencumbered evidence gathering are the essentials. This is possible if political executives show adequate determination and agree to go by the book.

It would not be out of place to mention that institutional capacity building, insofar as it relates to scientific investigation,

has not been accorded the due priority. This is also responsible for the demands raised for investigation by foreign agencies. Supportive action in this regard is urgently necessary for halting the disgraceful public admission of our operational inefficiency.

Let us remember that we run the grave risk of putting the future generation and ourselves in peril by our inability to ensure investigation in accordance with the dictates of law. The actual facts and circumstances need to be ascertained and placed before the court for adjudging the guilt. Mr. Kibria's killers need to be punished.

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## Bringing down the mountains

The Himalayas are the world's Third Pole and Asia's Water Tower. They feed seven great river systems, including the Ganga, Indus and Brahmaputra. Himalayan glacier melting will have dire consequences.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

THE world's worst polluters -- the oil, coal, automobiles, chemicals, cement and steel industries -- and their climate change-denying supporters must feel elated at the many recent developments, including disclosures about flaws within the scientific assessments of the severity of climate change.

Their greatest joy must come from the failure of the Copenhagen UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

obligations and will probably lead to a 3.5° to 4° C temperature.

Now, errors have been detected in the 2007 Fourth Assessment Report (FAR) of the UN-sponsored Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The FAR draws on research by 4,000 scientists worldwide. All assertions must be supported by rigorously-scrutinised references to papers published in peer-reviewed scientific journals.

However, one of the FAR's statements, on Himalayan glacier melting, it turns out,

Russian scientist's conjecture that the Himalayan glaciers might disappear by 2350. The figure was transposed as 2035. Third, the IPCC didn't cross-check the source. Finally, the FAR says the Himalayan glaciers occupy an area of 500,000 sqkm -- 16 times higher than the scientifically-accepted figure.

The IPCC issued a retraction. But the damage was done. These errors are significant, even if they're the only ones in the 3,000-page FAR. The IPCC must tighten its peer-review norms.

Of all the methods used to study glaciers' behaviour, estimating their mass balance is the most reliable, more so than visual imagery or remote-sensing. But it has been applied to very few Himalayan sites. So, scientists can't predict the precise death-date of even some of the Himalayas' 12,000-15,000 glaciers.

Yet, there's strong evidence that most

One cause for the snow to melt is the incomplete combustion of diesel, coal and biomass, which generates Black Carbon or soot. It accounts for one-third to one-half of glacier recession, according to an estimate.

In South Asia, cookstoves burning fuelwood, twigs, vegetable residues and cowdung are major black carbon sources, and create respiratory problems for women working in unventilated kitchens. This annually kills an estimated 400,000.

Most of our rural households use primitive biomass-based cookstoves because they can't afford clean fuel like liquefied petroleum gas. They must be helped to shift to efficient cookstoves -- by redeploying the existing subsidy on kerosene (Rs.30,000 crores in India) to provide LPG to villages.

Simultaneously, kerosene lamps must be displaced by solar home-lighting. In India, this is cheaper than extending the grid to the 1-lakh-plus unelectrified villages (of a 6-lakh total).

However, instead of doing this, Indian policy-makers are playing blame-games. Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh claims that the IPCC's retraction "fully vindicates" his position.

However, he has not one, but three positions on the issues. One, they aren't melting at all -- it's all Western propaganda; two, some glaciers are retreating, but some are expanding, so there's no clear trend; and three, the glaciers aren't retreating, but they are in "poor health."

Science runs against the first two propositions and doesn't vindicate the third. "Poor health" is related to glacier recession.

Mr. Ramesh has a mixed record, including negotiating the Copenhagen Accord with US and other leaders of BASIC (Brazil, South Africa and China). BASIC has since decided to reaffirm CBDR and the Kyoto Protocol and demanded deep, binding cuts from the developed North. This means rescinding the Accord. But US is unlikely to do that.

India blundered in Copenhagen by yielding to US and its own myopic anxiety to avoid climate-related commitments.

India should see the glacier issue not as a western conspiracy, but a reality whose worst victims will be India's own poor. It should quickly take remedial action.

IPCC chairman and The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) director Rajendra Pachauri has been charged by two major British newspapers with abusing the IPCC to get favours for TERI and himself. One paper is sympathetic to climate change-deniers. Britain's Department for International Development, which makes grants to TERI, wants to investigate some charges.

Transparency, and the spirit of scientific inquiry, which the IPCC should uphold, demands that Dr. Pachauri disclose all the relevant information.

The Himalayan glaciers badly need healing. We can fail them at our own people's peril.

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We need to freeze the flow.

conference to produce a legally-binding agreement which imposes deep emissions-cut obligations on the industrialised countries.

The outcome was the so-called Copenhagen Accord -- an ineffective, non-binding agreement between less than 30 countries among the 193 present. This undermines many gains made in the UNFCCC process, including the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" (CBDR) and the Kyoto Protocol.

The world needs an agreement to peak greenhouse emissions by 2020 and then reduce them sharply to limit global warming to 1.5° to 2°C. But the Accord absolves the major polluters of their climate-related

is unsupported by robust evidence. It says there's a "very high" likelihood of these glaciers "disappearing by the year 2035...". This was drawn from a report by the advocacy group WWF, which based it on a British popular-science magazine New Scientist report published in 1999.

It quoted Indian glaciologist SI Hasnain as the source for the year 2035. But he says he told the New Scientist that glaciers are melting rapidly, but didn't mention the year -- which is "speculation." The magazine stands by its story.

Whatever the truth, Prof. Hasnain didn't contradict the magazine report until now. He even cited it in recent presentations. Second, the "speculation" originates in a

glaciers are shrinking. A study of 1,317 glaciers documents a 16% area loss since 1962. Important glaciers, including Pindari, Gangotri and Dokriani, are annually retreating by between 5 and 49 metres. Their mass balance has decreased.

In the Himalayas, the warmth is two to four times higher than it is on the plains. As glaciers shrink, black rocks are exposed which reflect back only 5% of sunlight, compared to 80% from snow/ice. This accelerates melting.

The Himalayas are the world's Third Pole and Asia's Water Tower. They feed seven great river systems, including the Ganga, Indus and Brahmaputra. Himalayan glacier melting will have dire consequences.