

Unrest in the hills

Implement the CHT Accord expeditiously

WE cannot but be worried about the brewing unrest in the hills. The last thing that one would want to see is clashes between the tribal and Bangali population when the Accord should really be to implement the provisions of the Accord speedily. It is simply unacceptable that people should be subjected to arson and looting and forced to leave their hearth and homes under duress.

Clearly there are two points that have direct bearing on the matter that we would like to highlight; one has to do with the disputes and the other with the method of handling the situation as a consequence of the disputes.

As for handling of the recent clash between the tribal and Bangali settlers we suggest that a very thorough and impartial investigation be conducted to determine some important details. The investigation should find out whether it was at all necessary on the part of the law enforcing agencies to open fire? It is necessary to find out if the tribal people were armed, and, if so, did they resort to firing and was the firing directed at the security forces, and whether the security forces were subjected to any other form of attack from any other quarter?

We understand that the army was called in by the civil administration and that too they were in the spot after the police and other agencies. We understand too that under such a situation, the army plays two important roles that of providing security to the people who are under threat of force, and to establish peace in the area. And under those circumstances we understand that there are clear rules of engagement and the authority to order opening of fire does not lie with the army but with the civil authority. We wonder whether there are different rules of engagement in the CHT. Also we have reasons to believe that there had been disproportionate use of force and the investigation should determine whether that is so.

Reportedly, the recent clash had to do with land disputes between the two groups; and that is the nub of the issue we feel. We suggest that the CHT Land Commission do everything to complete its task quickly and it is for the government and all the other parties concerned to ensure that no impediment is put in their way.

The argument that the clash is a consequence of withdrawal of the army from the CHT is not based on facts, according to our understanding, since there are instances of tribal-settler clashes even during the peak of army presence there. Withdrawal of the army is stipulated in the Accord which should be followed, and no one should use the issue to play partisan politics.

It has been long 13 years since the CHT Accord was inked but the tribal groups are yet to get the full benefit of it. It is quite natural that their sense of grievances at non-implementation of the Accord may manifest at times. Implementation of the accord brooks no further delay and to this end all issues must be ironed out peacefully including the differences between groups within the tribal people themselves.

Too many unsafe level crossings

Corrective action brooks no delay

INCREDIBLE though it may sound, 75 out of 97 railway level crossings on Bangabandhu Bridge-Joydevpur railroad have no gates and gatemen! So, these crossings are veritable deathtraps for vehicles and pedestrians. Accidents at level crossings have claimed many lives ever since the route was opened. The problem is that there is nobody to attach due value to the lives of people using the level crossings.

Accidents at level crossings are taking place on a more or less regular basis, though there is no reason why the crossings should remain open or unguarded. The report published in this newspaper has made it amply clear that the railway authorities are not much concerned about keeping the level crossings safe for movement of pedestrians and vehicles. It is worrying to note that most of the gatemen are not regular staff of the railways. For, we heard many times in the past that the gateman was absent or sleeping when a mishap took place. It is obvious that the issue of manning the level crossings with trained and efficient personnel is still not high on the railways' agenda, not even after so many deaths under most unfortunate circumstances. Now the question is whether human life is such a cheap commodity that it admits of any casual approach.

A divisional engineer of the railway has stated that the department cannot afford to appoint such a large number of gatemen at the crossings. Besides there are no gates to the crossings. Why? If financial constraints are what he was referring to, then we have to conclude that the railway department has failed completely to arrange its priorities in right order. There cannot be any excuse for failing to eliminate dangerous situations that arise at the unguarded and open level crossings. If they want to seek people's help in manning the level crossings, they have to go beyond just talking about the matter.

Level crossings can not remain unguarded and without gates; it is the railway authorities that have to decide how they can ensure the safety of human lives. Talking about limitations and constraints is not enough.

Ah, here is your democracy, brother!

It is the ladder made of dead bodies that takes politicians to the citadel of power, isn't it? So, some faceless people will have to die. No big deal. They would die anyway ... in road accidents ... in launch capsizes ... of tuberculosis. Then, why not for the party?

SHAHNOOR WAHID

A good number of "highly democracy-minded" talk-show experts should be feeling mighty happy to see the matinee show of democracy ... the free flow of blood in the free-for-all show that is going on all over the country. It's a blockbuster, indeed.

So, here is your democracy, brother, that you have been waiting for and canvassing for, since the fall of the "un-democratic, autocratic government of General Ershad."

So, you must be happy now! Democracy let loose at last. Democracy gone berserk. From parliament to robber-infested parks, democracy is being practiced in full gusto in this country.

The deaths, you ask? Fallout of democracy, perhaps? You see, the more there is death, the more solid would democracy become. That is a popular notion here. It is the ladder made of dead bodies that takes politicians to the citadel of power, isn't it? So, some faceless people will have to die. No big deal. They would die anyway ... in road accidents ... in launch capsizes ... of tuberculosis. Then, why not for the party?

The beauty of politics here is that people are made to believe that there is glamour in dying for a cause like democracy. It would earn them the short-lived status of a hero, with photos coming out in newspapers for a couple of days. And electronic channels would show interviews with their wailing parents for the city audience. All for democracy, brother. Our right to know is ensured.

Come to think of it, in their oppressive and lacklustre life, violent death on the altar of politics is a big achievement. They get such massive coverage! But, wait a minute. Where was this beautiful, blood-spattering, all-problem-solving, all-disease-healing panacea called democracy all these years? Why didn't we have the opportunity of seeing those hand guns, knives, cutters, bamboo clubs, bricks and stones and the filmy-style action in real life fights and real deaths for some years?

Oh, I remember now! There was a lull for two years when the "most villainous," "non-

political," "corrupt," "inefficient," "opportunistic," "ambitious," and "illegal" caretaker government had ruled the country. They had the audacity to deny us our "democratic" rights and stop the wonderful and exciting shows; the real fights on the streets with blood-chilling calls to become "Gazi" or "Shahid" ... that we watched from the safe distance of our office windows.

Today, the whole world looks on in amazement at the demonstration of Bangladeshi brand of democracy. We may brand it "DemoBangla" or "Banglacracy," if you agree. It is indeed unprecedented ... unparalleled ... unbelievable ... and unheard of. The entire world sitting around the coliseum cheers the show of brute courage as party supporters club opponents to death ... the spilling of blood ... the chase and counter-chase on campus by over-aged student leaders and their supporters ... the eviction of one group from student halls by another ... and so on. All so familiar!

Don't these remind us of those democratic days that existed before the caretaker government? The days of exploding bombs in 64 districts ... blowing up courtrooms ... killing judges ... cracking skulls of opponents ... discovering Hindu-Islamic militants ... bricks and stones flying ... police batons breaking ribs ... mass arrests of ordinary workers going home ... and last but not least ... the inevitable "bibriti of Babor"?

Oh! How we missed everything! Thank you, God, that you have listened to our prayers and given us our wonderful democracy back once again! We were kind of suffocating in the state of tranquility ... in the state of no action ... no excitement during the caretaker government. They were such spoilsports, really. But now, after long 2-3 years, tendon cutters ... throat slitters ... suicide bombers ... black-marketers ... river grabbers ... graveyard robbers ... forest eaters ... toll collectors ... religion peddlers et al are back in business.

Now why shouldn't students of public universities do all these? Many of the senior politicians, especially those who were in student politics, have been unabashed toll collectors ... or indirect extortionists ...



Dedicated practitioners of democracy?

collecting monthly chanda from industrialists of Tejgaon, Tongi and Narayanganj and from those in their localities. Chandabaji had started on day two after our independence and it continues today.

These politicians and student leaders of yester-years were also great beer-buddies (Hotel Intercontinental later Sheraton, Ruchita, Nightingale, Chalet etc) of corrupt businessmen who made them drunk every night and then gave them bag-full of money to get an import licence for TCB, Tibet, BCIC, BADC, BTMC, BJMC quota/allotment. Those licences and quota/allotments used to be sold in the black market. Oh, sorry, you can't touch them because now they are big guns and big goons in some big political party ... hence above the reach of the very weak hands

of law.

Is the term "reform" in politics synonymous with "blasphemy" in this country? If religious edicts could undergo reforms, why can't stale, age-old political system do so for the good of the country? How long shall we remain hostage to this debilitating "politics"?

To march forward in the 21st century along with other developed and developing nations of South Asia, we need a modern, vibrant, inclusive, pro-people and pro-development politics to be carried forward by a new crop of educated and enlightened politicians who never did *chandabaji*.

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Politics of mudslinging

Posterity will not forgive the leaders of these two major political parties if they do not shun politics of mudslinging and hatred, and work hand in gloves to establish democracy and democratic culture in our politics.

SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

THIS AL-led grand alliance government, elected with a massive mandate about a year ago, and the BNP-led opposition in the parliament now look to be on a collision course dispelling all speculations and predictions to the contrary. The

cerely to establish genuine democracy and rule of law in the country this time around.

After all, viewed in hindsight, it was the deep-seated animosity between the then BNP-Jamaat alliance government and the opposition, each trying to finish off the other, and particularly the clear intent on the part of the government to cling to power by any means fair or foul and to put

led opposition in the parliament would not have boycotted the parliament session for almost a year on the flimsy ground of front row seat allocation fracas, and Sheikh Hasina would have played a far more positive and constructive role than she has in the parliament and outside it. One might as well say that for these two powerful ladies in politics, democracy and rule of law have never been a priority issue. In fact, both have been mealy mouthed as and when they spoke of democracy and rule of law.

Government-opposition relation, to be precise, the AL-BNP relation, has always been bedeviled by mutual accusations and counter accusations of mistrust, noncooperation, vilification of political

parties, from the very day the present AL government was sworn in, leaders of its youth and student fronts have systematically gone about their business of loot and plunder by collecting tolls from markets and bus terminals, occupying halls of public universities and colleges with a view to controlling admissions in halls and faculties, and manipulating contracts of development works in ministries and other government offices by driving out legitimate contractors and snatching away tender boxes. They have been simply unstoppable.

There have also been reports of these political criminals raping girls and making videos of their sinful acts. Police simply watched as rule of law was being mauled. The prime minister only warned these criminals and promised to take stern action. But sadly, nobody has been apprehended and punished. There has also been a spree of naming and renaming of public buildings, factories, bridges, airports etc. The opposition, far from cooperating with the government, hardly missed an opportunity to question the legitimacy of this elected government, and to threaten the government with mass anti-government agitation on the streets. This is nothing new for us. We have been seeing this sort of politics for the last two decades. The question is: Can we not break with this ugly past and make a new beginning?

With regard to the politics of mudslinging and naming and renaming of public buildings, let me say in fairness to the AL that it was the BNP which initiated this culture of hatred and vilification of political leaders. It was Ziaur Rahman who banned the use of the name of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on radio and television, and denied the iconic leader his rightful place in the history of this country. It was Ziaur Rahman who demonetised all currency notes with the picture of Bangabandhu embossed on them.

Let there be no doubt in the minds of anybody that without genuine democracy and rule of law we cannot pull this country out of poverty and think of graduating into a low middle income country status over the next three or four decades, no matter how many billions of dollars of aid we receive. Corruption and crime the two hydra-headed monsters will eat away all the development funds as they have done in the past. Posterity will not forgive the leaders of these two major political parties if they do not shun politics of mudslinging and hatred, and work hand in gloves to establish democracy and democratic culture in our politics.

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One may smile and smile ... !

government and the opposition members are engaged in trading slander so fiercely in the parliament that another spell of boycott by the opposition looks imminent. BNP came out on the streets in Dhaka on February 18 protesting the renaming of the Zia International Airport. A grand rally at Paltan Maidan and a month-long campaign against the renaming of the airport is scheduled to be held next month.

These are ominous signs for the country. Many people had thought and still think that wisdom would dawn on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia, who must have learnt lessons from what happened to them and their front-ranking party leaders following 1/11, and that they would work together sin-

in place a system of governance totally undemocratic in character, spawning corruption and crime including Islamist terrorism on a scale never seen before, which brought the country to the verge of a civil war and, ultimately, 1/11. Believe it or not, peace-loving people across the country, including the majority of the political parties, had heaved a sigh of relief and welcomed the new dispensation -- no matter what the detractors of 1/11 may be saying now.

It appears that neither Sheikh Hasina nor Begum Zia has learnt any lesson from the 1/11 experience. Had they done so, Begum Zia would not have said that the December election in 2008 had been state-managed to bring AL into power, the BNP-

leaders, corruption, nepotism, ruining of the economy, undoing of what the other did before, etc.

Ever since we began experimenting with the parliamentary system of democracy since early nineties, when one party has been in power, the other party has invariably been in the opposition, with the ruling party trying its utmost to perpetuate its power by whittling down the opposition, and the opposition desperately trying to bring the government down by mass agitation on the streets in order to capture power. In this tussle for power between the two parties, democracy and rule of law and political stability has been the main casualty.

True to the political culture of these two