

There's a time and place for everything

The BNP should focus on its constitutional role

BEGUM Khaleda Zia's visit to China is obviously a good indication of the importance the Beijing authorities attach to relations with Bangladesh. We expect the leader of the opposition to speak for Bangladesh, especially in terms of its foreign relations, when she meets the Chinese leadership. We are, however, quite intrigued that Begum Zia, just before her departure for China, made a demand for the Awami League government to quit office over what she called its manifest failure to govern. She, like everyone else, is entitled to her opinion on how she perceives the performance of the government at this point. But what we cannot quite agree with is Begum Zia's berating the government on an occasion which should have been focused on what she expects out of her visit. What kind of signal is she giving out on the kind of politics she and her party have been pursuing since the general elections of December 2008?

The demand by Begum Zia that the government quit clearly goes against some fundamental principles of democracy. Just in case anyone needs a reminder, this government, like Begum Zia's earlier, was elected to a five-year term and of that tenure three full years remain. Now, the point here is not whether or not the opposition leader and her followers should be asking for a change in the country. It is one of an observance of all those norms which keep democratic pluralism going in a country. Democracy is a whole lot more than charging a government with ineptitude and asking it to quit. In this context, one must ask why the Bangladesh Nationalist Party has failed to play the role it constitutionally should have played as the opposition after the last elections. In these past many months, the BNP has continued to stay away from parliament, thus effectively depriving its supporters of an active representation in the law-making body. The principles of democracy enjoin upon all parties in parliament the responsibility of engaging in healthy academic and political debate over issues of public interest and thereby keeping the nation abreast of developments on the political stage. Unfortunately, the BNP has failed to play this role. By not being in the Jatiyo Sangsad, it has deprived the country of an opportunity for purposeful debate on such issues as the economy, foreign policy, constitutional matters, law and order and a host of other matters. Which leads to the very important question: on what moral ground do Begum Zia and her party ask the government to quit, seeing that they have failed to engage it in debate or have not convinced the country that they are ready to serve as a government-in-waiting? The BNP has been pursuing a misplaced strategy by boycotting parliament, where it should have been, and agitating on the streets, where it was not elected to be. Since BNP has failed to play its constitutional role, should any one ask BNP to quit?

We, like the rest of the nation, still hope that Begum Zia will lead her party back to parliament and impress upon the electorate that they are ready to play an effective role as the opposition.

Another boat tragedy

Something quick must be done to prevent recurrence

ANOTHER tragedy has struck us. This time a motorboat carrying almost 100 people capsized after being hit by an empty cargo boat in the River Dhanu in Sunamganj. 35 bodies have been recovered, as of last report; most of the victims are women and children. Regrettably, accidents involving river crafts have been on the rise in recent times.

Given the predominantly riverine terrain of the country, the primary mode of transport happens to be river crafts of various descriptions. And given too the need to travel faster, with life becoming faster, and time being at a premium for every one, manually operated boats have given way increasingly to mechanized crafts, increasing the chances of accidents that much more. It is a fact too that river travel is not so much for pleasure as compelled by the need to seek livelihood. Reportedly, most of the passengers on the ill-fated boat were workers engaged in collecting rocks from the Surma, heading home after work.

What begs the question is, given that river travel has been the primary mode of travel for many years, we had not heard of so many river accidents in the past as now. Why so?

The need to find faster means to travel has compelled people to go for improvisations. And most of the river crafts are crude mechanical contraptions without caring much about the other factors that go into constructing a proper river craft. And these are fitted with shallow engines, those meant for irrigation. While these crafts have mushroomed all over the country, there is no monitoring, no control, no laid down standards for the boats, and the government seems to be pretty much out of the entire equation, either out of apathy or sheer helplessness.

What adds to the problem is that these boats are invariably loaded much beyond their capacity; even those crafts that are made to specifications will in most cases hit the bottom if overloaded. The situation is further compounded by the narrowing of river channels without markings, emergence of shoals and lack of night navigation facilities in these boats. These are all recipe for disaster.

We are constrained to say that there is lack of proactive response on the part of the government to ensure that such accidents are averted. Under no circumstances should a craft that does not meet the standards be allowed to take to the waters. There must also be strict load control, and the defaulters must be severely penalised. One thing that the government can certainly do is to help the local entrepreneurs to build river-worthy vessels with all the necessary safety features and navigational capability. Government's quick response is imperative if such accidents are to be prevented and precious lives saved.



Risking their lives to earn their livelihood.

The beleaguered garment sector

It is, therefore, understandable why the inferno at the Ha-meem group's sportswear factory had driven the survivors panicky or even hysterical. But what is still left to be explained is why should the workers be so susceptible to any hearsay or gossip and on an instant get distrustful of their employer?

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

AFTER the 14 December's devastating fire at the Ha-meem group's sportswear factory at Ashulia near the capital and the huge toll of life and property that it claimed, fear has gripped the factory workers. In consequence, on Saturday, December 18, workers of the factory were again in panic. Why so? Because some plaster and cement came off the ceiling of eighth floor and fell with a thud on the floor. A rumour that the roof of the building was collapsing also went the rounds pushing the panic button. As expected, there was a stampede and in consequence 25 workers were injured.

Small wonder after the dreadful experience of the blaze, the workers started to feel very insecure, which is why they were so crazy about escaping from the factory building at the slightest hint of danger. Again, it is due to a similar, if not identical, state of mind that in the past, especially during in the time of severe garment unrest in July this year, one would often hear of agitated garment workers holding protest demonstrations demanding that their colleagues, who, they feared, were killed and kept hidden by what they thought the 'hired goons of the factory management.

In a similar fashion, even after the work-

ers of the Ha-meem group's factory had gone to their workplace two days after December 14's fire, they did not join work. On the contrary, they held protests blocking the Dhaka-Tangail highway for two hours demanding explanation on the whereabouts of, as they claimed, their missing colleagues. Whether their claim of missing co-workers is something substantial or not is subject to verification through proper investigation. But the fact remains that, it is again the same fear syndrome born of distrust that had propelled the workers to behave in a knee-jerk fashion.

In fact, there are sufficient reasons for the garment workers to become so edgy and overly suspicious in the wake of incidents of violence or any accident at their workplace.

Why do they behave in this way? One may recall at this point that, according to the Fire Service and the Civil Defence Department as they had told the Asia Times Online recently, the garment sector had witnessed some 213 factory fires leading to at least 414 deaths between 2006 and 2009.

Add to these, the tolls taken by previous tragedies like factory collapse and violence during face-offs between agitating garment workers and the police. In the case of the violence-related deaths, too, workers would behave in an identical manner. So, it

is not hard to understand, over the years, a sense of insecurity has become deeply ingrained in the workers' minds.

It is, therefore, understandable why the inferno at the Ha-meem group's sportswear factory had driven the survivors panicky or even hysterical. But what is still left to be explained is why should the workers be so susceptible to any hearsay or gossip and on an instant get distrustful of their employer? This situation, too, has not been created overnight.

On the other hand, it is due to the absence of a proper mechanism to communicate workers' demands and grievances to the factory management that lies behind this situation. In course of time, the communication gap thus created between the workers and the management has also widened further. And as it takes two to tango, the management of the garment factories, too, have grown equally suspicious about the workers.

In the circumstances, is it any surprise then that outside forces with the sinister design to destroy our thriving garment industry may find such a condition convenient for their infiltration? And does not this atmosphere also provide the trouble-mongers with the ideal ground to create a smokescreen of more confusion, suspicion and distrust?

But such a state of affair is also apt to provide some, who are not very fair when it comes to paying their workers, in the industry with a cheap excuse to evade their responsibility towards their workers. They rather find it more convenient to dismiss any workers' demonstration, even those with genuine grievances, out of hand as the work of saboteurs out to destroy the garment industry.

Therefore, the untoward situation obtaining as a result in the garment sector calls for a clear understanding of what is really happening on the ground. The management needs to develop the mindset to realise that the workers are an integral part of the industry. The entire workforce of the garment sector should not be blamed for the misdeeds of a handful of troublemakers.

They need also to have the willingness as well as the ability to distinguish between the workers' agitations that go against the interest of the garment industry in general and those that involve genuine grievances and demands of the workers. And in the latter case, the management must be ready to hear what the workers have to say and take steps to address those with all earnestness.

The same attitude is also true of the workers. However, for the workers to behave in a more rational way, they will have to have their own institution and leadership to negotiate with the management about their problems. On this score, the government and the apex forum of the garment businesses will have to play a positive role in order that the garment workers can also form their own representative bodies to sort out their problems with the industry management.

This is a time-tested way to create the congenial atmosphere of talks between two sides of the industry -- workers and the management. The sooner the industry leaders, the government and all concerned come forward to address the issue, the better for the country's garment sector.

Syed Fatahul Alim is a Senior Journalist.

Who has the last word?

But of course the words survive because they are in character. The billionaire Hilton must have been obsessing about his hotel guests mucking up the bathroom; Groucho could hardly have resisted one last crack, or Thomas one last idle boast about the addiction that destroyed his talent.

M.J. AKBAR

DO we remember what we have heard or what we wanted to hear? Famous last words are tricky. Even strangers can get infected with nerves at the bedside of a dying man, not least because evidence of mortality induces depressing thoughts of your own inevitable departure. Relatives and friends are too affected by sentiment. Assuming that the deathbed utterance, if there is one, is more likely to be a mumble rather than oratory, the opportunity for tweaking is high, either in the interest of clarity or to improve the quality. Did Groucho Marx really say, "Die, my dear? Why, that's the last thing I'll do!" Or Conrad Hilton, founder of the eponymous hotel chain, depart on the less-than-grand note of "Leave the shower curtain on the inside of the tub." The great Italian traveller sounds far more credible: "I have not told half of what I saw." As does the brilliant Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, "I've had 18 straight whiskies. I think that's the record." Such pitch perfect sentences seem

edited by a benefactor for an anthology, which is where I have picked them from.

But of course the words survive because they are in character. The billionaire Hilton must have been obsessing about his hotel guests mucking up the bathroom; Groucho could hardly have resisted one last crack, or Thomas one last idle boast about the addiction that destroyed his talent.

Did Richard Holbrooke, the peripatetic czar of America's policy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan, really tell a Pakistani-origin doctor, as he went for the final surgery, "End that Afghanistan war?" Or did the Pakistani doctor, who has watched his country pay such a corrosive political, social and military price for conflicts imposed upon Afghanistan by the strategic interests of superpowers, hear what he wanted to hear?

Holbrooke was the sort of man who took no prisoners in his day job and dominated the room when off duty. His fascinating official career began in Vietnam, paused for a stint as editor of "Foreign Affairs" and would have ended as the peace-broker of

Bosnia if his friend and mentor Hillary Clinton had not given him diplomatic charge of America's latest war zone. He would have occupied her present office if Hillary had won the White House. While Holbrooke roamed the world, there was one indisputable theme in whatever he said or did: the American interest came first. He was a classical New York, liberal patriot.

Did he believe, therefore, that it was now in the American interest to stop the war? During the two years of his intensive engagement he had -- much to the dismay of Delhi -- bought into Pakistan's version of events. He became an advocate of Islamabad's "strategic depth" theory and put as much pressure as he could on Delhi to withdraw troops from the Line of Control so that Pakistan could shift its own forces towards its western front. He was the principal voice within the Obama administration urging the largesse that Pakistan has received in the last two years. George Bush was far more circumspect while signing cheques. Pakistanis fondly recall his role in the massive relief effort after this year's floods, when he personally took charge of distribution. [If Holbrooke was present he was automatically in charge.] But he would not want an end to the war if peace was primarily for Pakistan's well-being.

War is not a continuous activity; there are long fallow periods between battles, even in a guerrilla war. The Afghan is in one of its fallow periods but it cannot end until

one side accepts defeat or both sides agree on a ceasefire. America and Vietnam, uniquely, began peace talks without a ceasefire, so there is more than one model for termination of hostilities. Holbrooke was aware that, in a completely unstructured manner, a similar attempt was underway. This unacknowledged process has thrown up absurdities like the "Taliban" leader who was flown into Kabul by British intelligence for talks, before they discovered that he was a fake, nothing more than a provincial shopkeeper. Someone in ISI is probably still dining out on the true story. It is the sort of episode that makes Groucho Marx's last words relevant.

Somewhere in his ebbing consciousness, and perhaps rising conscience, Holbrooke knew that the Afghan war had begun as the right thing to do, but had driven into an abyss by mistakes. It was time for America to cut its losses, financial and political, and deal with the aftermath as best it could. I wonder if Holbrooke had time to tell his Pakistani friends that it would be a dangerous mistake if they rushed into space created by American withdrawal. Afghan nationalism is as hard as the Himalayan rock of its mountains.

It does make one wonder what George Bush's last words might be. Perhaps: Continue that war!

M.J. Akbar is editor of The Sunday Guardian, published from Delhi, India on Sunday, published from London and Editorial Director, India Today and Headlines Today.