

Pulse taking before agitation

BNP should also assess its performance

BNP's reported move to assess public sentiments on different crucial issues before launching an agitation programme sounds positive in that the party is trying to be in steps with public opinion.

Senior and mid level leaders of the party will be given special assignments to speak to the people at union levels to assess public sentiments on various issues including prices of essentials and power shortage. Hopefully they will also try to assess public feelings on the role they have so far played as the opposition.

Going to the people at grassroots and gauging their mood is what democracy is all about. But this is what we don't practise. We lend our ears to what we like to hear. We hope this will be a successful interactive contact.

As it is, BNP should give a serious thought to its performance and positioning on various issues as well. The party needs a thorough soul-searching to give a better account of itself as a political party with longstanding political legacy. Eliciting public opinion on governance will be incomplete without the opposition participation in parliament as the law-making and oversight institution.

Government failure in many areas is conspicuous. The prices of essential are out of control, stock market is in a shambles, law and order situation is far from satisfactory and political high-handedness of the AL leaders goes on unabated.

For the opposition's part, we watch with sadness, how they have kept themselves away from parliament for days together depriving their constituencies of legitimate representation in parliament. Attitudes of and remarks by the ruling party lawmakers inside the house may be the cause for disappointment on their part; they should still attend parliament which is but the people's house, especially in the backdrop of their morale-boosting showing at the local polls.

Reaching out to the public on the ground and also taking their issues to the parliament for the nation to hear would be the best and the most acceptable move by the BNP at this moment.

That was no cricket!

High time for consistency

To win a game is always exciting. To lose it is again to be expected, for that is the rule with games, indeed with life itself. But when the Bangladesh cricket team put itself and the rest of the nation through misery on Friday, it was not winning or losing we were concerned with. It was something more. It was simple awareness of how much lower a team playing cricket on a global scale could go. To be washed out for a miserable fifty eight runs is deep embarrassment. On Friday, it was a whole country rendered immobile by images of Bangladesh's batsmen stepping on to the pitch and stepping off it in quick progression. It was not just bad cricket. It was no cricket at all.

The moment is therefore upon us to call for a serious reassessment of the entire cricket scene in Bangladesh. On Friday we were convinced that calling a team 'Tigers' when it is anything but is wrong, that wallowing in celebrations of rare triumphs (read the win over Ireland) is premature, that indulging batsmen and bowlers to the point of lionising them is something we should have waited for until an established pattern of performance emerged. These young men have disappointed us. Tellingly, when the captain informs us, perhaps without weighing the import of his words, that the future for our cricket could be even worse, it is time for the cricket authorities to weigh in with steps for remedy.

To be sure, we do not at this stage expect our cricketers to take the world by storm. But those thousands of people who streamed into the stadium in Mirpur and the millions glued to television at home expecting to see some interesting, if not terribly exciting, cricket simply went through an experience that was as disturbing as it was bizarre. Our boys did



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LAST week our government was in a pickle over the repatriation of Bangladeshis from Libya.

The political situation in that country had indeed deteriorated. Other than the capital Tripoli, most of Libya was in the hands of the revolutionaries. They demanded that the Libyan leader Muammer Qaddafi step down. There were fighting in several cities as Qaddafi held on to power with his fingernails.

Qaddafi threatened that he would start a house to house search and ferret out the rebels. He also warned that he would open the state arsenals and distribute the arms to his sycophants to kill the revolutionaries.

He sent his fighter aircraft and helicopter gunships over rebel held towns and bombed and strafed innocent people. There were numerous incidents of killing of civilians by his militia. In protest some of his ministers, diplomats and members of the armed forces defected to the rebels.

The revolutionaries, in the meantime, had taken over the second city Benghazi. They also freed many townships close to Tripoli. Many desert oases where tribes dwell went over to the side of the rebels.

A National Council with a military committee was formed by the former justice minister, who had defected to the rebels.

The United Nations Security Council swung into action and in an unprecedented Saturday evening session unanimously passed a historic resolution imposing an arms embargo on Qaddafi, and financial sanctions and travel ban on him and his close associates. The Council also referred the situation to the International Criminal Court for investigation and possible prosecution for crimes against humanity.

For the first time the Security Council also included a critical reference to Libya's "responsibility to protect" its own citizens from any mass atrocities.

Later in the week, in a larger meeting in the UN Offices in Geneva, the international community called on Qaddafi to step down. It also laid out plans for humanitarian assistance to all foreigners escaping the violence for their return home. The

International Red Cross, the IOM and the UNCHR were activated for this purpose.

In the meantime, several governments from around the world sent aircraft and ships to bring their citizens home or to remove them to safer places nearby. Many foreigners trudged to the border between Libya and

Tunisia or between Libya and Egypt with the intention of crossing over to safer places.

However, our government did not take a decision to evacuate 60,000 or more of our citizens stranded in violence-torn Libya. Most of our workers



The foreign minister and the expatriate affairs minister both need to tell Parliament why they could not assure our workers in Libya that our government, in these uncertain times, is able to take care of our citizens in Libya. Why do our citizens feel alone when they are faced with mortal danger abroad?

were abandoned by their Libyan employers and did not have food, medicine or even money. A few who were employed by Chinese and Korean companies were lucky to be repatriated.

The foreign secretary of Bangladesh categorically said that "our primary concern is the safety and security of the 60,000 Bangladeshi workers who are in Libya. Evacuation is an option." What this statement meant was that evacuation was not the government's priority. It wants the Bangladeshi's trapped in Libya to remain where they are till the situation improves.

The possible argument of the government is that once our workers leave Libya they would not be compensated for their loss and would not be able to get their jobs back. Finding new jobs for the returnees would become the government's responsibility. This would be a sticky proposition for the government.

But what happens if our workers in Libya are killed or maimed? Who will take the responsibility? That is why the government was perhaps in search of manpower companies who had taken them to Libya in the first place. The government perhaps wants these companies to take responsibility

citizens from foreign countries. In 1982, after the invasion of Lebanon by Israel, 600 Bangladeshis caught up in the conflict and kept in a concentration camp at Ansar in Israel were airlifted through the auspices of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent to Dhaka.

Again, after the First Gulf War 60,000 Bangladeshis trapped in Jordan were brought back by chartered planes hired by various philanthropic organisations. Our government is aware of the logistics, resources and manpower needed.

Our government should have chartered one or more Bangladesh Shipping Corporation ships or any other national or international vessels and, under naval protection, should have waited off the Libyan coast flying our flag. A government task force, after assessing the situation on the ground, could signal the start of the evacuation process. The ships could either bring them back or wait in a safe harbour nearby, depending on the situation in Libya. It could be a costly venture, but imagine the psychological and the long-term economic gain to our workers there.

It is now quite humiliating to watch news reports and pictures of thousands of our citizens massing on the border of either Tunisia or Egypt, huddling together waiting for some international organisation to rescue them; an image which we, as a democratic country, definitely wish to avoid.

When will our government send the correct signals to the international community that we are a responsible nation and can confidently look after the image and interest of our people.

The Bangladesh Embassy in Tripoli is a non-starter. It has only one diplomat there at the moment, who doubles as the ambassador. Why has this mission not been staffed properly? Is this the case with our other Middle East missions now?

The foreign minister and the expatriate affairs minister both need to tell Parliament why they could not assure our workers in Libya that our government, in these uncertain times, is able to take care of our citizens in Libya? Why do our citizens feel alone when they are faced with mortal danger abroad?

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EDITORIAL DESK: THE NATION

IF the upheavals in North Africa and the Middle East run out of control, global economic recovery will be put at risk from increased oil prices

Amid the growing tensions in North Africa and the Middle East, oil prices have been moving upward in a broader trend. The oil market is very complex, involving economic, financial and geopolitical factors, among others. Crude for April delivery, however, rose as much as \$1.86 to \$100.37 a barrel in electronic trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange and was at \$101.28 in Singapore yesterday afternoon. This followed reports that the Arab League was studying a plan to end the violence in Libya, which has cut crude supplies -- Libya is Africa's third biggest producer.

The crises in North Africa and the Middle East started off in Tunisia before spreading to Egypt and Libya and other countries in a domino effect. This has unsettled the oil market, which is nervous about the disruptions causing a threat to supply. The unrest in Egypt has settled down for the moment, but it remains highly uncertain about how the new government will restore full peace and stability to the country. In spite of the promise of free elections, Egypt won't return to normalcy soon, given the runaway inflation rate and high unem-

ployment. If the tension in Egypt fails to ease up completely, the Suez Canal, through which two million barrels of oil a day are shipped, might be in danger.

Protests are also beginning to occur in Algeria, where unemployment has hit 40%. Algeria is producing 1.4 million barrels of oil a day. Yemen and Bahrain have also faced protests, as has Oman, where there was also some looting last week. Saudi Arabia has announced financial benefits and social programmes to

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improve living standards, as a preemptive measure to maintain calm and prevent any dissent.

But for the moment, all eyes are focusing on Libya, which holds the largest oil and gas reserves in North Africa. It produces about 1.6 million barrels of crude a day. After 40 years of iron-fisted rule by Mu' ammar Gadhafi, the country is lurching toward full civil war, with rebel forces trying to oust Gadhafi and take control of the whole country. The inter-

ties of these workers.

In a number of ways, it is a matter of shame if the government had this in mind. How irresponsible to ask our workers to wait in Libya and wait out the storm. The very essence of good governance is being deliberately violated.

The government has a responsibility to secure the safety of its citizens. It must, through any legitimate means, obtain resources to do the needful. If it faces a policy dilemma it can always go to Parliament and seek wise counsel.

The Bangladesh government has past experience in evacuating its

national community has stepped up the pressure for Gadhafi to step down after reports of the government's violent crackdown against the protesters and rebel forces.

The violence in Libya has certainly caused disruption to oil production. Many foreign oil companies, including BP of the UK, Statoil of Norway and Eni of Italy, have suspended their production or exploration. However, at this stage it is not known exactly to what extent Libya's oil production has been affected.

The upward movement of the oil price now reflects serious concern about the uprisings in North Africa and Middle East. The head of oil research at Barclays Capital, Paul Horsnell, was reported as describing the current situation as potentially worse for oil than the Iran crisis of 1979. "That was a revolution in one country, but here there are so many countries at once. The world has only 4.5 million barrels per day of spare capacity, which is not comfortable,"

he said.

We have to be prepared for the stark realities.

First, oil prices might run out of control again. As supply shrinks, prices will rise. If Saudi Arabia were to face an uprising, the uncertainty will worsen.

Second, money managers are speculating on oil assets, as the oil price is on the uptrend now. This has nothing to do with demand and supply. As investors have lost confidence in paper assets, commodities such as oil and food have made an upward climb.

Third, Europe is heavily dependent on oil from North Africa and Russia. Russia is now exporting seven million barrels a day, equivalent to 10% of global production.

Fourth, the US and the rest of the world are banking on cheap oil to fuel the economic recovery. This recovery is at risk of being stalled by higher oil prices. This will aggravate the financial crisis in the developed world.

And finally, Thailand will have to brace itself for higher oil prices. Fuel subsidies won't last very long, as they are putting a great burden on the country's public finances. It is time to face the reality of higher oil prices through efficiency management.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 6

1946

Ho Chi Minh signs an agreement with France which recognizes Vietnam as an autonomous state in the Indochinese Federation and the French Union.

1953

Georgy Malenkov succeeds Joseph Stalin as Premier of the Soviet Union and First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

1957

Ghana celebrates independence. The people of Ghana celebrate the end of colonial rule and the dawn of their independence.

1957

United Kingdom colonies Gold Coast and British Togoland become the independent Republic of Ghana.

1971

In the face of widespread protests in Bangladesh, General Yahya Khan broadcasts to the nation and announces that the National Assembly will meet in Dhaka on 25th March. However he pins the blame for the escalating crisis on the Awami League. The Awami League says that its response will come at a public meeting at the Race Course the next day. Meanwhile Lt. General Tikka Khan is appointed the new Military Governor of East Pakistan replacing Admiral S.M. Ahsan.

1975

Algiers Accord: Iran and Iraq announce a settlement of their border dispute.

Birth

1927

Gabriel García Márquez, Colombian writer, Nobel Prize laureate.