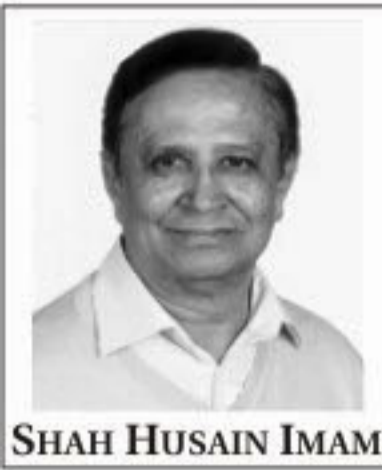


PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

Perhaps time for a people's charter



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

THE AL held a conference of Mohajote inter-parliamentary bodies last week, its first ever in two years. That

by itself was news, but there was infinitely more -- sycophantic, spiced, bitter-sweet and strident flavour of it all. It began on a minimalist note of expectation as a ruling party office-bearer observed that "it was a big thing" having face-to-face talks with the prime minister.

Jatiya Party chief's pleasantry sounded like making amends for his earlier observation that some of the criticism against the government has got stuck to his party. He said, apparently to ingratiate himself: "Just call us up for five minutes every month over tea and that will do." He even pledged to keep unfaltering company with the Awami League.

Nevertheless, the hugely belated Mohajote meet stood in stark contrast to the regular frequency of formal engagements that coalition partners in Britain and India have even in normal circumstances, let alone to deliberate on an emerging national issue. Basically, coalition governments do operate on an agreed minimum common programme.

Unfortunately, our Mohajote government or the preceding BNP-Jamaat coalition for that matter, have had little use for any agreed common

programme once they had ascended to power. They would have just had common understanding (maybe on some vague principles) but that solely centered on seat adjustments keeping in view a general election. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the practice of coalition governments has not struck any roots in the country, and the dominant two-party political culture is an inherent weakness of our democracy.

Overall, the Mohajote conference's outcome couldn't be viewed through any prism of resolutions since there were none adopted through a formally issued declaration or statement. Actually, what the whole show boiled down to were three emphatic observations coming out of the plenary: First, the distance between the ruling party and the government is growing (perhaps happily!); secondly, the 1996 Awami League government with much less number of MPs was strong while the current one having the largest number of seats in parliament is weak (that again is explicable!); and thirdly, the Mohajote coalition is on a sickbed, gasping in the ICU (this to be sure, is a reflection of their felt weight vis-à-vis the reality of the AL's overpowering and self-clinching majority).

Understandably, the ruling party MPs were raring to ventilate their pent-up grievances, emotional as well as material. Some samples: party people are not getting government jobs, especially those of teachers -- with 30,000 vacancies on the



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platter. They complained of ministers insisting on taking written tests by candidates to qualify (rather than doing outright favour); local development activity being at a standstill, the ministers neither listening to them nor doing their work (read their bidding) and to add insult to injury they have to be met through "slips." One MP voiced the ultimate in frustration: they would have perhaps liked us to be assistant private secretaries (APS) rather

than party MPs. This is not to trifle with the complaints of indifference on the part of some ministers. But then as far as nurturing constituencies goes, some conflict of interest could occur making all the difference between yes" or "no" or yes-no tantalisement or between patronisation and self-expediency. The MPs needn't have been all that critical; they too have their prerogatives in the local bodies; but of

course, it is the release of funds for development work that is awkwardly gingerly even though procurement policies have been relaxed. On a serious note, public spendings are still at a low ebb as the poor utilisation of the annual development project would suggest.

But the "distancing" between ruling party and the government should be music to ears of those who believe that the line between the government and the ruling party has blurred as party government has morphed into partisan government. The local party leaders are increasingly meddling in the day-to-day administration and shielding criminalities. The casualty is governance, whether taking law into one's own hand, free-for-all-wheeling and dealing, guaranteed impunity by flaunting connections on terrorisation by abusive law enforcement. More to the point, service deliveries are severely affected through absenteeism, lack of accountability and absence of supervision.

Given poor service deliveries across the board and denial of rights to the vulnerable and the unconnected, it is time we have a people's charter handed to all agencies of public service -- secretariat, police stations, courts, financial houses, utilities, educational institutions, healthcare, local bodies, even private sector -- by way of a new social contract. They should set for themselves specific tasks and goals and deliver accordingly. This should be workable

if conceived in microcosms and effective decentralisation of authority and power is provided. Each office should display score cards quantified in measurable terms for public knowledge and satisfaction. RTI could be of some help but all the same it should be mandated through an appropriate legislation.

In all fairness, some ministers like Motia Chowdhury, Nurul Islam Nahid, Abdur Razzak, Dilip Barua, G.M. Quader have set goals to work towards. Accordingly, secretariat officials, directorate chiefs and outlying agencies under them feel tasked to fulfill specific targets. But most other ministries don't have specifically set goals so that their subordinate offices are working perfunctorily and listlessly. The foreign minister stands out for the frequency of her overseas trips without any visible commensurate benefit to the country. The home, communications, commerce, shipping and energy ministries have had their share of criticism. The finance minister started out on a methodical note, but seems to have lost his way.

Several important ministries are notorious for corruption; it is all in the public domain -- thanks to media exposure. But just how much gets reported is the question. That is where regular submission of verifiable wealth statements, which the finance minister has called for, can be an aid to transparency. But just, so much more would be needed!

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Living through an earthquake and tsunami

S.M. HAIDAR

I am an engineer at Sony Chemical & Information Device Corporation. I was in my office when the tsunami hit. After being rescued, I thought I should share with my friends what I saw and felt then.

First of all, I'd like to say thanks to my Lord for keeping me safe. I live in Sendai, the largest city in Miyagi. My office is in Tagajo, a coastal city, about 20km north of Sendai. The Sendai-Shiogama Sea Port is very near (about 1 km) to my office.

On March 11, the earthquake hit after 2:30 p.m. It was the longest earthquake I've ever experienced. After the shock, some parts of the ceiling cracked and the lighting and some covers were displaced. I was on the 3rd floor. At that moment, we had no idea about the casualties or calamity around us. Later, I saw that a huge portion of ceiling on the 4th floor had collapsed totally.

After the first shock we immediately left the building and followed the regular drill. At first we had a head count to ensure that everyone was safe. Then, the buildings were checked to see if they were safe to enter.

There are 18 buildings in our company area, so it took a little time to confirm that everyone was safe. The local people left their houses for shelter in higher areas because there was a tsunami alert. We were watching live broadcast on our mobile phones. The safety checking and head counting were going on simultaneously.

At first, the alert was for 6m high tidal waves, followed by an alert for 10m high waves. Our chief in charge of safety then postponed head counting and checking inside the building. He ordered everyone to take shelter in the nearest buildings and stay at least above the 2nd floor. Twenty to twenty-five minutes later, the tsunami hit our area.

I saw the tsunami from the 3rd floor. It was so devastating that it looked like a movie on a large 3D screen. The first thing that came to my mind was "laugh." Although I was not laughing loudly, I was smiling. It was not like "what an interesting view" or "what a great show." I had totally different feelings.

We are so small, so tiny compared to Allah, God, Jehovah, Ishwar or whatever we may call Him. He can do anything at any time. Cars, trucks and containers from ship were floating

like paper origami and smashing into each other like plastic toys. In Tagajo, the tsunami was about 12m high. Our office is 10m high, so the entire company area and 1st floor went under water. Everything happened in around 2 minutes.

I saw a few unfortunate people who were trying to escape by car, but could not make it. When their cars were stopped by the pile they came out and climbed the trees. To make things worse, it started snowing. They were rescued when the tide stopped. I also heard that some people got stuck inside their cars and could not come out. They were screaming for help but we had no way to help them. At midnight the Japan self-defense force rescued them.

You may have seen the huge fire in oil refineries. As far as I know, that happened in two places, one in Chiba prefecture and the other just 700 to 800 meters from our office. There is also a large oil refinery in Sendai port. I saw fire in six places. Two tankers started burning immediately after the tsunami. After couple

prefectures were also hit by a strong earthquake, and the costal area of Niigata was under tsunami threat too. At noon, when the water was at knee level, we got the green signal to leave our building.

I'm writing just about our place. There were some areas where the water could not move and the height was still at chest level. Only those who lived around the downtown of Sendai and other highlands where tsunami did not hit were permitted to leave. I left for Sendai with a few of my colleagues at 12:15 p.m. We received some water and rations from the rescue team.

On the way back home we saw the huge destruction. There were piles of cars, broken houses, wooden bars and beams, road blocks, uprooted trees and so on. Fortunately, the only missing thing was dead bodies. The whole area was totally destroyed. It was so unbelievable that I felt like I was in a movie set. After two hours, we got a taxi to go back to Sendai.

Although there was no tsunami in Sendai main city, the earthquake was stronger than in Tagajo. So, obviously my house was a bit messy. I collected water and bought some food. Thankfully, my wife and daughter were in Bangladesh. Since I was in the missing list for more than 24 hours, my family and my friends were extremely worried for my safety.

Although we didn't have gas supply and our food-stock was running out, we were safe. A lot of people had lost everything. The danger was not over yet. There were still two big alerts. One was about the Fukushima atomic power plant. The government was trying every option to prevent the reactor from exploding. At noon yesterday we learned that it was safe. The other danger was that there was 70% possibility of another earthquake in a few days, and we were experiencing continuous aftershocks.

We are stuck here in Sendai. Sendai port and airport have been destroyed. Highways are either damaged badly or in danger, and gasoline stations are closed.

So, please dear readers, please pray for the safety for all of us (affected people, rescue teams and everyone in Japan). "O Lord! Please save us and give us strength so that we can rise strong and follow your path."

The writer works for Display Film Business Group, SONY Corporation.

Libya crisis

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

AFTER the fall of Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak it was anticipated that there might be mass uprising in some other Middle Eastern countries. Now mass upsurge has started in Libya, which has been ruled by a military dictator, Col. Gaddafi, for the last 42 years.

All the dictatorships in the Middle East could crumble one after another. No longer are the common people afraid of rising against repressive measures of their government. The people have made it clear that only bread is not enough for living as a human being. They need freedom of speech, respect as citizens and participation in the affairs of the state.

It is not yet clear which brand of democracy will suit the genius of the Arabs. It is, however, clear that they want to change the old system. However, the majority of them appear to have realised the strong necessity for maintaining good relationship with the western world, particularly the US and EU countries.

The agitators in Libya have set fire to the Parliament Building. For silencing the agitation the administration has used the military force, resulting in killing of several hundred people. It is reported that there was even bombing on the agitators.

The nominated heir of Col Gaddafi, Saif-al-Islam, in a statement on state television, warned about the possibility of a civil war, which may result in blood bath. Thus, it can be concluded that the present government of Libya will not hand over power soon. On the other hand, people are reluctant to tolerate the present regime any longer.

In 1995, there was a student uprising in Libya. It was mercilessly silenced by Gaddafi's forces. About 1,500 students lost their lives in the rebellion. At present, both sides, the people and Gaddafi's forces are determined to fight each other. The government is gradually becoming weak because of desertion of some ministers and diplomats.

It may be pointed out in this regard

that Tunisian dictator Ben Ali transferred power to the people and took shelter in Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt tried to remain in power through force for some time more. However, he failed to do it. The armed forces in Egypt promised revival of democracy through election within six months. How far this election will be successful is a moot question.

World leaders have advised Gaddafi to step down to avoid a catastrophic civil war. The UN refugee agency stated that about one hundred thousand people have fled Libya to neighbouring countries. UNHCR emergency teams are working with Tunisian and Egyptian authorities and NGOs to support these people. The refugee agency urged foreign assistance for Egypt and Tunisia to cope with the exodus.

US President Obama's advice to Gaddafi to step down has not been accepted by Gaddafi. UN Security Council sanctioned an arms embargo, asset freeze abroad, and travel ban on Gaddafi, his family and 16 of his cronies. The council also put his close associates under investigation of the International Criminal Code.

So far, no consensus has been reached on imposing a no-fly zone over Libya to save civilians from air strikes. The bulk of Libyans who came out to the street to end the Gaddafi regime are fighting against air strikes. Such state of affairs is due to weakness in western democratic system and market economy.

The present tempestuous situation in Libya has special significance for Bangladesh due to (a) direct impact on remittance (b) employment situation (c) energy crisis, (d) foreign aid and (e) export receipt.

We are very hopeful that with international and bilateral assistance the Libyan crisis will be overcome peace will return to the Middle East particularly and the world in general.

The writer is a former joint secretary.