

Begum Zia's 'no' to talks She can only gain from joining

BEGUM Khaleda Zia's decision to boycott the proposed inter-party talks on constitutional amendments though not surprising, is certainly disappointing. The Leader of the Opposition has assumed, without any argument to back up her stance, that the talks proposed by the parliamentary special committee on amendments have something 'conspiratorial' about them. She suspects 'a dark design' hidden in the proposal. It is our belief that the nation as a whole -- and that includes everyone who believes in a maturing of democracy in Bangladesh -- is keen on seeing a consensus arrived at on the matter of the constitutional amendments. There can be no denying that the issue has serious ramifications for the future and it becomes the moral responsibility of all parties to come together on it in the interest of pluralism.

We think it is only appropriate that the BNP chairperson reconsider her position for some very significant reasons to get her ideas across. In the first place, she leads the opposition in the Jatiya Sangsad, which in essence means she and her party speak for a good number of people in the country. In the second, she has been prime minister in the past and, we dare say, certainly looks forward to holding that position again in future. In the third, and most importantly, it is the future of democratic politics which will be served by the ruling party and the opposition cooperating on such vital issues as constitutional amendments. Begum Zia owes it to the people to let them know her position on the constitution in a manner befitting her present position in parliament. Democracies are more than an exercise of power by the ruling party. They are also a demonstration of how a strong and effective opposition can keep a government on the defensive on matters of public interest, besides informing the nation on where it stands on national issues.

The invitation to Begum Zia and to other political leaders by the parliamentary special committee is surely commendable. The BNP, as the leading opposition, should now come into the public discourse on the constitution and enlighten the people on how it looks at the matter. Begum Zia must present her views to the committee rather than prejudge the outcome of the talks. She will then be in a position to gauge the government's seriousness on its offer to the opposition.

Stop corporal punishment Punish perpetrators

THE latest news of a student from an English medium school in the city being beaten and bruised by an administrative official is an eye-opener to the school children's vulnerability to ham-fisted treatment.

Corporal punishment has been banned by the government following a ruling of the High Court that declared it illegal in January this year. Yet we find that some individuals and institutions have not stopped using the cane defying the ban. It is evident that some reputable schools rather than that setting an impeccable example persist in student bashing as if it were a casual matter.

It is an accepted view that corporal punishment of students in the name of disciplining causes different types of emotional problems that could lead to permanent psychological scar on their mind. There have been instances of committing suicide due to humiliation before the peers. Thus not only the young student is affected; the whole family might bear the brunt.

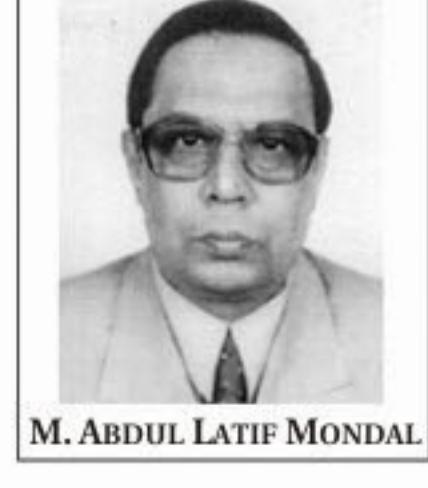
Some teachers and staff of schools still persist in the old-fashioned belief that if they spare the stick the students won't obey them. That is very wrong, for what a friendly teacher can achieve an ill-tempered teacher can only spoil.

However unpleasant the circumstances might get, it is the teaching and other staff that should show maximum restraint to bring things in order. At no stage should they resort to hitting or causing bodily harm to students.

It is time the concerned authorities took steps to identify the schools where corporal punishment is yet to abate. Then take a step to impart appropriate training to the teachers to help them understand and apply right techniques to handle students. Regular monitoring of schools in this regard should be introduced by the education directorate all over the country. The teaching and other employees of the school should be made to appreciate that soft and considerate approach can do miracles instead of applying force, which

BARE FACTS

Monitoring wealth statements



M. ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

THE government has recently constituted a five-member committee to devise a method for recording and storing public servants' wealth statements and to make recommendations as to how these could be used as an effective tool to check corruption and irregularities in civil administration. The committee, headed by the additional secretary of the establishment ministry, includes members from the cabinet division, finance ministry, law, justice and parliamentary affairs ministry.

The public servants are one of the three main actors in the corruption drama of Bangladesh, the other two being the politicians and the businessmen who may be importers, exporters, suppliers, construction contractors or otherwise. The factors that are generally considered responsible for the growth of corruption among the public servants include degradation in moral and ethical values, poor pay, lure of modern luxurious living, condoning corruption by the society, poor and delayed enforcement of laws, and absence of an authoritative and independent body like the office of ombudsman.

While a petty corruption is linked to an individual public servant, a big corruption is the result of a nexus between the corrupt political boss, senior public servant and businessman. Here the senior public servant often plays the role of a facilitator by misinterpreting the relevant rule, regulation or order either to get a share of the ill-gotten money, or to please his political boss for a prized posting, or for a contractual appointment after retirement.

In order to check corruption among the government servants, the government issued The Government Servants (Conduct) Rules, 1979. Such

conduct rules are required to be issued in the autonomous bodies, corporations and their subsidiaries.

When issued, rule 13 of the 1979 rules provided that a government servant shall make a declaration to the government through the usual channel, of all immovable and movable properties, including shares, certificates, securities, insurance policies and jewellery having a total value of Taka 10,000 or more belonging to, or held by, him or a member of his family, at the time of entering government service. Such declaration is to state the district within which the property is situated, show separately individual items of jewellery exceeding Taka 10,000 in value and

sations. An urgency towards this end was also not felt at the policy making level of the successive governments. This is because some leaders of the successive governments, elected or otherwise, were corrupt and they didn't want to antagonise the public servants through follow up actions over their wealth statements.

It was reported in some newspapers last month that the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) requested the Bangladesh Government in March for furnishing certain information in a prescribed form regarding corruption of public servants. Since Bangladesh is a signatory to this convention, she is under obligation to furnish information

The period of submission of wealth statements should be shortened to every two years. The present system of declaring assets, both immovable and movable, at the time of entering the service should continue.

give such information as the government may, by special or general order, require. A government servant shall submit to the government, through usual channel, an annual return of assets in the month of December showing any increase or decrease of property as shown in the earlier declaration.

With the passage of time, several amendments have been made to the 1979 rules. In respect of rule 13, jewelry value of "Taka 10,000" has been replaced by "Taka 50,000" while "submission of annual return of assets" has been replaced by "submission of return of assets every five years."

Monitoring of submission of wealth statements by the public servants and their scrutinisation has remained neglected in all these years. This has happened primarily due to shortage of logistics and qualified manpower in ministries and organi-

requested by the UNCAC regarding corruption. Accordingly, the cabinet division asked different ministries and divisions for the necessary information for the period from 2006-2007 to 2009-2010. A delegation of the UNCAC visited Bangladesh this month and held a meeting with the cabinet secretary to discuss the matter. It is apprehended that the visit of the UNCAC delegation has expedited the formation of the committee by the government which has to furnish information requested by the former. Anyway, constituting the committee to recommend measures for strengthening the monitoring of the wealth statements of the public servants with the ultimate aim to check corruption through punitive measures, where necessary, is an encouraging step.

The committee may suggest creation of a cell in every ministry and organisation, which will have all the

modern facilities and qualified manpower to collect, scrutinise and preserve the wealth statements of the public servants at certain levels under the ministry and organisation concerned. The wealth statements of those public servants who have reputation for corruption must be physically verified. If the wealth statement submitted by a public servant is found to be false in material particulars, he may be proceeded against for committing the offence of corrupt practice.

A ministry can review the findings of wealth statements of the public servants in the departments, autonomous bodies and corporations under it in quarterly meetings with the concerned agencies and suggest appropriate actions. The overall coordination may rest with the cabinet division which may review the situation every six months and suggest suitable guidelines.

It is too long a period to get wealth statements from the public servants after every five years. The period of submission of wealth statements should be shortened to every two years. The present system of declaring assets, both immovable and movable, at the time of entering the service should continue. Failure to furnish wealth statements by the public servants in time should be treated as misconduct under Discipline and Appeal Rules, which will make the defaulting public servant liable to disciplinary proceedings under the said rules.

To conclude, it may not be possible to have a corruption-free public administration. But, corruption in public administration may be reduced to the minimum if the other actors in the corruption drama can be tamed along with the public servants. This needs a united stand by the party in power and the opposition to eradicate corruption.

The writer is a former Secretary.
E-mail: latifm43@gmail.com

The revolution's missing peace

ABDULLAH GUL

THE wave of uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa is of historic significance equal to that of the revolutions of 1848 and 1989 in Europe. The peoples of the region, without exception, revolted not only in the name of universal values but also to regain their long-suppressed national pride and dignity. But whether these uprisings lead to democracy and peace or to tyranny and conflict will depend on forging a lasting Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement and a broader Israeli-Arab peace.

The plight of the Palestinians has been a root cause of unrest and conflict in the region and is being used as a pretext for extremism in other corners of the world. Israel, more than any other country, will need to adapt to the new political climate in the region. But it need not fear; the emergence of a democratic neighbourhood around Israel is the ultimate assurance of the country's security.

In these times of turmoil, two forces will shape the future: the people's yearning for democracy and the region's changing demographics. Sooner or later, the Middle East will become democratic, and by definition a democratic government should reflect the true wishes of its people.

Such a government cannot afford to pursue foreign policies that are perceived as unjust, undignified and humiliating by the public. For years, most governments in the region did not consider the wishes of their people when conducting foreign policy. History has repeatedly shown that a true, fair and lasting peace can only be made between peoples, not ruling elites.

I call upon the leaders of Israel to approach the peace process with a strategic mindset, rather than resorting to short-sighted tactical maneuvers. This will require seriously considering the Arab League's 2002

challenge and therefore believe that creating an independent Palestinian state is imperative.

In the coming 50 years, Arabs will constitute the overwhelming majority of people between the Mediterranean Sea and the Dead

The international community wants the United States to act as an impartial and effective mediator between Israel and the Palestinians, just as it did a decade ago.



peace initiative, which proposed a return to Israel's pre-1967 borders and fully normalised diplomatic relations with Arab states.

Sticking to the unsustainable status quo will only place Israel in greater danger. History has taught us that demographics is the most deci-

Sea. The new generation of Arabs is much more conscious of democracy, freedom and national dignity.

In such a context, Israel cannot afford to be perceived as an apartheid island surrounded by an Arab sea of anger and hostility. Many Israeli leaders are aware of this

challenge and therefore believe that creating an independent Palestinian state is imperative. A dignified and viable Palestine, living side by side with Israel, will not diminish the security of Israel, but fortify it.

Turkey thinks strategically about the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, not only because it knows that a peaceful Middle East would be to its benefit, but also because it believes that Israeli-Palestinian peace would benefit the rest of the world.

We are therefore ready to use our full capacity to facilitate constructive negotiations. Turkey's track record in the years before Israel's Gaza operation in December 2008 bears testimony to our dedication to achieving peace. Turkey is ready to play the role it played in the past, once Israel is ready to pursue peace with its neighbours.

Moreover, it is my firm conviction that the United States has a long-overdue responsibility to side with international law and fairness when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The international community wants the United States to act as an impartial and effective mediator between Israel and the Palestinians, just as it did a decade ago. Securing a lasting peace in the Middle East is the greatest favour Washington can do for Israel.

It will be almost impossible for Israel to deal with the emerging democratic and demographic currents in the absence of a peace agreement with the Palestinians and the rest of the Arab world. Turkey, conscious of its own responsibility, stands ready to help.

The writer is the President of Turkey.
© New York Times. Distributed by The New York Times Syndicate.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 27

1909

Sultan of Ottoman Empire Abdul Hamid II is overthrown, and is succeeded by his brother, Mehmed V.

1941

World War II: German troops enter Athens.

1945

World War II: German troops are finally expelled from Finnish Lapland.

1945

World War II: Benito Mussolini is arrested by Italian partisans in Dongo, while attempting escape disguised as a German soldier.

1950

Apartheid: In South Africa, the Group Areas Act is passed formally segregating races.

1987

The U.S. Department of Justice bars the Austrian President Kurt Waldheim from entering the United States, saying he had aided in the deportation and execution of thousands of Jews and others as a German Army officer during World War II.

1992

The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, comprising Serbia and Montenegro, is proclaimed.

1994

South African general election, 1994: The first democratic general election in South Africa, in which black citizens could vote. The Interim Constitution comes into force.

1996

The 1996 Lebanon war ends.