

PM on caretaker government

Let the system be reformed

THE prime minister's 'no' to the caretaker system of government opens up a new debate on the future of politics in Bangladesh. To be sure, Sheikh Hasina has based her opinion on the recent judgement by the higher judiciary to the effect that the caretaker system lacks legality. We recall too that the judiciary has also suggested that the next two elections may be conducted under such a system. Obviously, the prime minister felt it necessary to emphasise the clear verdict of the court rather than its observation on elections in the immediate future.

When the judicial pronouncement on the caretaker system was made early last month, we at this newspaper noted that the efficacy of the system had been proved by the fact that the country has had four good, credible elections under it. The nearly two-year tenure of the last caretaker administration was certainly a breaking with the norm, but that it delivered a good election has never been in doubt. It is for these reasons that the caretaker system, in a reformed form may be considered to allow time for mutual trust to develop between the political parties to settle for the standard interim arrangement in elective democracies. But of course this will require further strengthening of the EC as an independent body. Besides, one cannot quite ignore the fact that the opposition BNP has been rejecting any idea to do away with the caretaker system and has made it clear it will not take part in elections under what it calls a partisan government. We thus have a confrontational situation here, one that could create a whole new crisis unless both the ruling party and the opposition engage in a dialogue to resolve the issue before the next general election in less than two years' time.

The idea of a reformed caretaker system comes in light of the reservations voiced recently on whether judiciary should be part of the process any more. Our experience of the past few years shows that the immediate past chief justice poised to head a caretaker administration becomes an object of political controversy one way or the other. Which is why the option of eminent citizens heading such a government as well as being part of it should now be seriously emphasised. Additionally, a balance needs to be struck in the power relationship between the president and the chief adviser to caretaker government.

New health policy

Well intentioned but challenging

THE much awaited National Health Policy, 2011 aimed to ensure good health for all has been approved by the government. Although it is a belated fulfillment of one of the AL government's major election pledges it is to be commended for some of its good, forward-looking features.

The policy envisages introduction of homoeopathy, unani and herbal treatment in all public hospitals alongside the allopathic medicare. Given the proper opportunity to flourish alongside the allopathic mode, the alternative streams should become more popular among the poor to middle income groups in the country and receive the recognition they deserve.

A bold decision has been taken to ban private practice by resident doctors, emergency medical officers and 'non-clinical' doctors of government hospitals. This is to ensure round-the-clock health service to patients who are in many cases made to suffer due to absence of doctors at public hospitals. The government has decided to provide additional allowances by way of discouraging private practice.

The introduction of health insurance for public and private service holders and distribution of health cards among the poor to ensure free health care to them at all government hospitals augur well. It promises service delivery to people who have the greatest need for it.

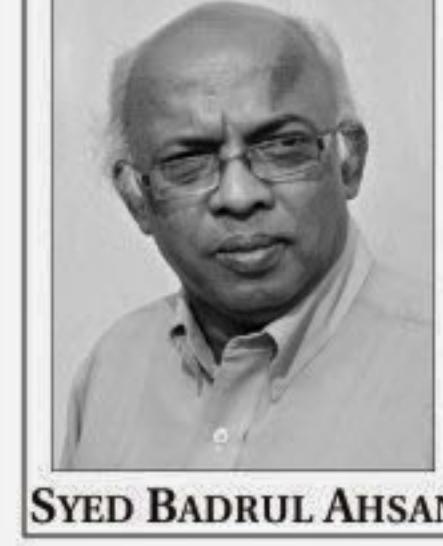
The policy also aims to control medicine prices, coordinate family planning programmes, reduce child and mother mortality rates and modernise medical waste management. This is where the implementation capacities of the government will be really tested.

Since this sector is a huge one and calls for participation of all individuals and organisations, the NGOs should come in handy to work alongside the government in achieving the targets.

We hope the health council to be headed by the Prime Minister will play a decisive role in implementing policy measures to ensure health for all.

GROUND REALITIES

The untruths around Bangabandhu



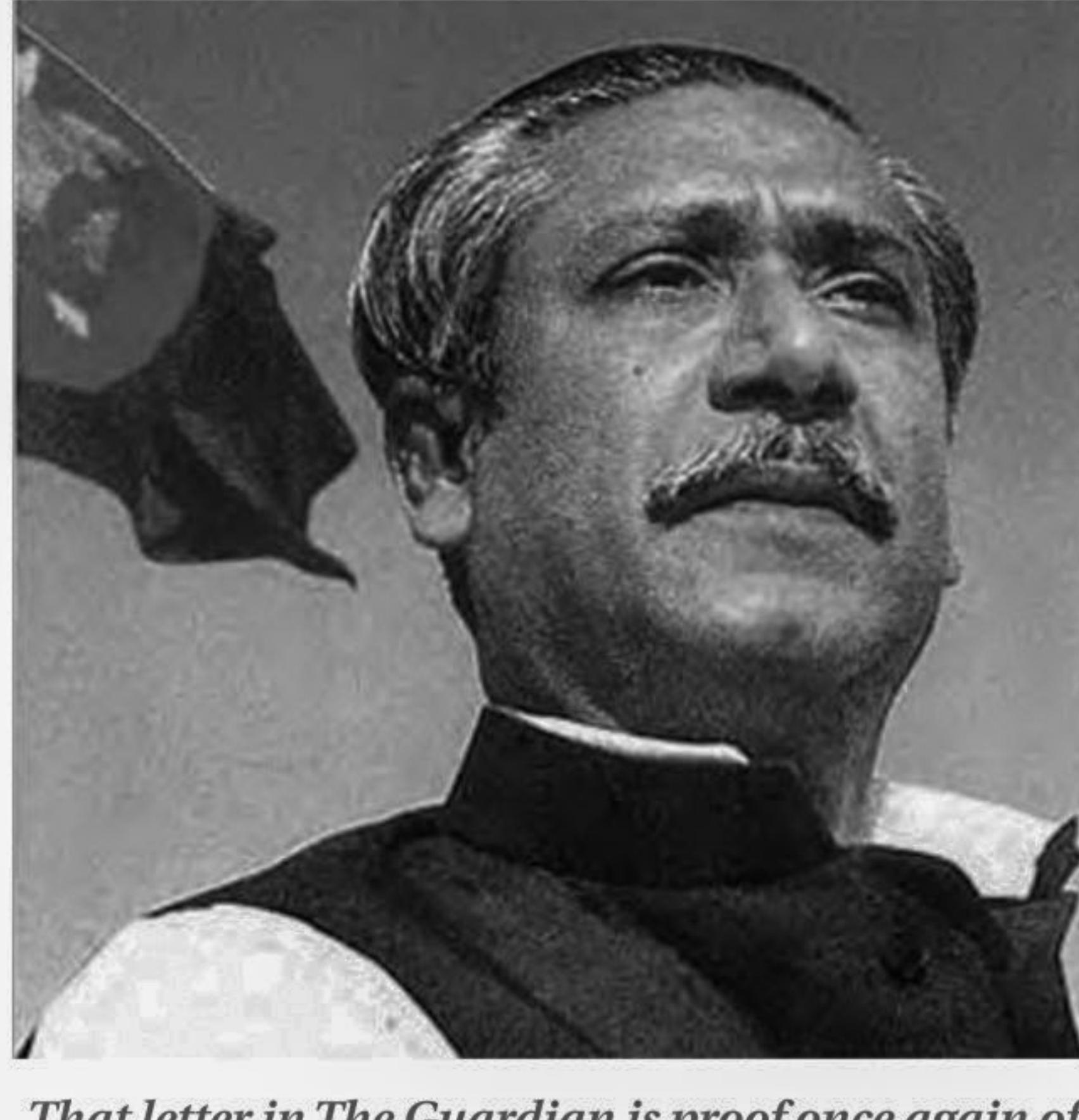
SYED BADRUL AHSAN

A retired deputy head of the BBC's Bengali Service last week gave a new twist to Bangladesh's history through a letter to *The Guardian* newspaper in London. He was responding to an article by Ian Jack on Bangladesh, which article we will, if we so wish, deal with later. At this point, note what this Bengali gentleman had to say about Bangabandhu's arrival in London on January 8, 1972 following his release from Pakistani detention by the government of President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

On his arrival at Heathrow, said this long-time BBC broadcaster, Bangladesh's founding father was received by Apa Panth, the Indian High Commissioner to the United Kingdom. When Panth addressed Bangabandhu as "His Excellency," Sheikh Mujibur Rahman appeared surprised. To all intents and purposes, he had thought that he had been freed by the Pakistan government after full regional autonomy had been granted to East Pakistan. He had absolutely no idea, implied the veteran broadcaster, that Bangladesh had become a free country. And that was not all. This journalist also peddled the untruth that he was the first Bengali to meet Bangabandhu once the latter had checked in at London's Claridge's Hotel.

That letter in *The Guardian* is proof once again of the persistence with which Bangabandhu's detractors -- and sometimes his followers -- have been trying to undermine his place in history through their imaginary tales and concocted stories. Let the record of Bangabandhu's arrival in London in January 1972 be set straight.

At Heathrow, the Father of the Nation, accompanied by his constitutional advisor Kamal Hossain and Hossain's family, was received by John Sutherland, a senior official at Britain's Foreign Office. Also on hand was the senior-most Bengali diplomat in London at the time, M.M. Rezaul Karim. In his account of the day's events, Karim, now deceased, left behind a clear narrative that no one



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has questioned till now.

Bangabandhu hopped into Karim's car (and Karim himself was at the wheels) rather than take the limousine the British government had placed at his disposal and on the way pelted the diplomat with endless questions about the just-concluded War of Liberation. Crowds of Bengalis began to gather before Claridge's once word began to get around that Mujib had arrived there. Our veteran journalist happened to be one of many who turned up there.

Hours later, Bangladesh's leader spoke at a crowded news conference at the hotel on the matter of his imprisonment in Pakistan and the manner of his release by the Bhutto administration. Prior to the news conference, he had spoken to Prime Minister Edward Heath and Opposition Leader Harold Wilson, both of whom motored down to

Claridge's to greet Bangladesh's founder-president. Bangabandhu had also spoken to Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed and his family as well as Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi soon after stepping into Claridge's.

His performance at the news conference was a clear demonstration of his command of the situation.

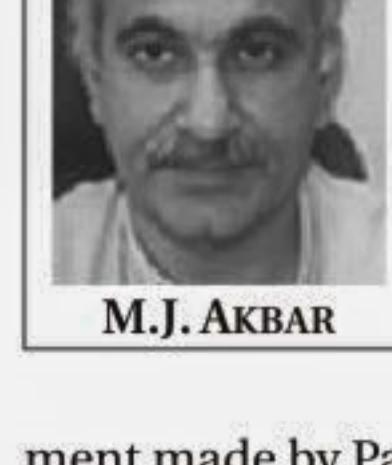
Besides, his meetings with Bhutto between the end of December 1971 and his release on January 8, 1972 were crucial: Mujib was informed by Bhutto of the new realities in the subcontinent, of the fact that there was a government at work in Bangladesh. The Pakistani leader wanted, though, guarantees from Bangabandhu that Bangladesh would maintain some kind of link, even a loose one, with Pakistan.

Bangabandhu made no response.

And that is the story of January

BYLINE

Many degrees of separation



M.J. AKBAR

UNCERTAINTY is the chaotic force-multiplier of insecurity. That is the only explanation, if there is one, for a curious statement made by Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousaf Gilani. When Gilani clammers aboard, he does tend to go overboard with a consistency that is clearly becoming a comfort to foes and an embarrassment to friends.

Pakistan's foreign policy is guided by professional diplomats who have, in a sense, no option except to be exceptional, given the scale and continuity of the challenges they face. But when politicians rush into space where diplomats fear to tread, there is a lot of cleaning up to do for the service.

Gilani topped off a four-day visit to China with a claim that will surely enter the history books. Pakistan and China, he said, were "like one nation and two countries." We shall not discuss the fine distinction between nation and country, except to note that the prime minister could have easily interchanged the terms without significant loss of meaning in his personal political dictionary. For mere outsiders, a question is inescapable: has Pakistan re-positioned itself as the new Hong Kong?

Beijing has not let us know whether it has accepted this generous offer by the world's most powerful Islamic republic to become an associate member of the world's most important

atheist state. But it has given a "back-present" to Gilani of 50 fighter jets, which may or may not be a symbol of shared nationalism.

Perhaps there was a spirit of competitive genuflection in the Gilani delegation. His Defence Minister Ahmad Mukhtar told media on his return to Islamabad that his government had gifted an entire naval base to China, at Gwadar, on the mouth of the Gulf. His exact words left no room

there is nothing called a free lunch, or indeed a free naval base.

Pakistan has sought to outsource its security from its inception. This was understandable, since fear of a larger neighbour was a logical outcome of partition from India, which could not, and cannot, accept a two-nation theory inspired by the thesis that Hindus and Muslims cannot live together in one country.

But the premise has taken a total

The bottom line is a basic law of international relations. A sovereign nation cannot purchase security in the marketplace. Otherwise, it may remain a nation but it will be neither sovereign nor stable.

for confusion: "We have asked our Chinese brothers to please build a naval base at Gwadar." He added that China had been invited to manage the port's commercial operations as well, despite the fact that a Singapore company has a multi-decade contract for doing so. When Mukhtar gets generous, Singapore becomes irrelevant.

Similar passion and clarity were missing in the Chinese response. Jiang Yu, a spokesman of the Chinese foreign ministry, responded with a far less dramatic "I have not heard of it. It's my understanding that during the [Gilani] visit last week this issue was not touched upon." Since the time of Confucius the Chinese have given us so much wisdom that it is perfectly likely that they, rather than the Americans, warned the world that

somersault from what it was in the 1950s. The meaning of security has altered completely. The threat to Pakistan is not India-centric any longer. India has become a status quo-ist power. It will not surrender any part of the geography it possesses, but it does not covet any more land, in Kashmir or elsewhere. India has not engineered the daily havoc that is Pakistan's narrative of 2011. India did not mastermind the attack on the naval base in Karachi.

This is the first, but fourth such attack on the Pak navy, and military authorities have picked up and are interrogating their own navy personnel to find out more about previous assaults. Pakistan's crisis emanates from a civil war with organised militias who have launched a "jihad" not only against the United States and India but also against their own home-

1972. But when you seriously reflect on the many ways in which certain individuals have endlessly tried running Bangabandhu down, you cannot but be appalled at the depths to which they have gone to denigrate him. There are yet Bengalis whose sense of history and understanding of Bangabandhu's political career come across as pitifully poor. They will raise the question of why Bangabandhu "surrendered" to the Pakistan army in March 1971. It is then that you are compelled to remind them that Bangabandhu's politics had always been based on constitutionalism, that fear was never a part of his character, that he did not have it in him to run for his life.

In this country, we have had men, some of them well-known freedom fighters, who have gone around screaming their refusal to honour Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as Bangabandhu. When they do that, you ask them a couple of questions: If you do not honour Bangabandhu, why did you join a war that was waged in his name? And, more significantly, when an entire nation calls him Bangabandhu, who gave you the right to deny him his place in our consciousness and in our history?

There are then a few others who have sought to profit through alleged association with Bangabandhu. A veteran journalist, now living overseas, penned a book on his dealings with the Father of the Nation more than two decades ago. You would think, as you go through the work, that this newsman was the only individual in Bangladesh to proffer words of wisdom to Bangladesh's founder.

He informs us, to our disbelief, that in the late hours of the night and buffeted by crises, Bangabandhu would seek his advice, call him and ask him to come over to 32, Dhanmondi. Of course, nothing of the sort happened. There is then the story of another individual (and he too lives abroad) who has tried convincing people that in the heady days of March 1971, he was press secretary to Bangabandhu. He was not. No one recalls him in that position.

Lord, forgive them, for they know not what they do!

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

June 1

1869

Thomas Edison receives a patent for his electric voting machine.

1879

Napoleon Eugene, the last dynastic Bonaparte, is killed in the Anglo-Zulu War.

1963

Kenya gains internal self-rule (Madaraka Day).

1979

The first black-led government of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in 90 years takes power.

1990

George H. W. Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev sign a treaty to end chemical weapon production.

2001

Nepalese royal massacre: Crown Prince Dipendra of Nepal shoots and kills several members of his family including his father and mother, King Birendra of Nepal and Queen Aiswarya.