

PM's open door on CTG

Opposition must reciprocate gesture

THE intensity with which both the ruling party and the opposition are focused on the caretaker government issue says something about their attitudes to the problem. The prime minister has in these past few days been reiterating her position that the door is open for negotiations between the government and the opposition on the ways and means of arriving at a solution. It is certainly appreciable that Sheikh Hasina has now assured the opposition that no one-sided solution will be imposed. Her invitation to the BNP to return to the Jatiyo Sangsad and present its own formula towards finding a way out of the crisis is perfectly in order for the simple reason that at this critical moment both sides need to reach a compromise in the larger interest of our future.

The BNP, which has already observed a hartal on the caretaker issue, is keen that the system should stay in place. The Supreme Court has already spelt out, that the next two elections may be held under caretaker arrangements. However, given that the SC has also made known its reservations about judges being part of the caretaker government, it is extremely important that the BNP join the ruling Awami League on the format of the next caretaker administration or two. The BNP is in opposition and has been vocal about its opposition to any scrapping of the system. But politics is also about coming up with alternatives, in all their substance and formality. Since the BNP has a significant presence in parliament, it remains its responsibility to present its own formula in the JS and engage in a meaningful debate with the ruling party over it. The prime minister's flexibility is an opportunity the opposition ought not to miss.

Begum Khaleda Zia has reportedly asked for formal communication from the government on the latter's proposals vis-à-vis a solution. The government, in light of the prime minister's recent pronouncements on the issue, can surely oblige the opposition here. For the BNP, the important thing is to acknowledge the primacy of Parliament rather than a deliberate ignoring of it. Let it return to the JS and test the sincerity of the ruling party.

Protecting whistleblowers

Law by itself not enough

THE parliament has passed a bill titled Public Interest Related Information Disclosure (Protection) Act, 2011. Although enacted by a voice vote, hopefully, all clauses of the bill have been carefully crafted to make the law into a user-friendly piece of legislation. That is where the law's efficacy will be tested in the first place. So, the enactment of the law, though highly welcome as catering to a long-felt need, may not be enough by itself.

It will have to be accompanied and underpinned by awareness-building among the public about the law, procedure for disclosure and mechanism whereby a protective umbrella will be cast around a person or persons volunteering disclosures.

Where genuine witnesses shrivel from helping prosecution build up its case or where prosecution depends on procured or so-called professional witnesses encouraging whistleblowers to come out of their shells is not going to be an easy job.

This is not being cynical but merely pointing at the challenges of implementation which require to be met in order to derive optimal benefit from the law. Yes, the majority of the citizens being victims of wrongdoing by a miniscule minority have an inherent motivation to spill the beans for common social good. They abhor corruption, abuse of power and poor delivery of public services while keeping lot of leads and incriminating information close to their chest for fear of stirring the hornet's nest or outright reprisal. If they are assured of protection of their lives and limbs or against any harm-doing in concrete visible terms, there is no reason why they would not come forward with information of any foul play. The latter may not directly relate to them yet it afflicts the society. More than provision for incentives we need providing an infrastructure for protection.

The law will have the best chance of implementation if people can be motivated at the community, NGO and

Bangladesh and high-level meeting on AIDS

PROF. A.F.M. RUHAL HAQUE

FROM June 8 to 10, world leaders will convene in New York City at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) High Level Meeting on AIDS. The gathering of heads of states and other leaders from government, the scientific community, civil society and the private sector offers a unique opportunity to review progress, share lessons learned and chart the future course of the global AIDS response.

The meeting comes at a pivotal moment in the history of the epidemic: Thirty years ago, in June 1981, scientists in the United States identified the first case of an immune system failure that would later be defined as AIDS. Ten years ago, at a landmark UNGA Special Session on AIDS, world leaders declared that AIDS was a "global emergency" and called for an "urgent, coordinated and sustained response" to the epidemic.

Now, three decades into the epidemic, what is the global scorecard for the AIDS response? According to a recent report of the UN Secretary-General, more than six million people were accessing lifesaving antiretroviral treatment in low and middle-income countries at the end of 2010 -- up from just 400,000 in 2003. Over the past decade, the number of people newly infected with HIV declined by nearly 20%. And, for the first time in 2009, more than 50% of HIV-positive women were able to ensure that their babies were born HIV free.

However, the report underscores that the gains are fragile. The HIV epidemic continues to outpace the response, with an estimated two new HIV infections for every individual starting treatment. Global AIDS resources have flat-lined, and critical sources of leadership and account-

ability remain untapped.

To accelerate progress in the AIDS response, the secretary-general has called on the global community to adopt six goals for the year 2015 -- targets that will be reviewed and endorsed by participants in the June High Level Meeting on AIDS:

- Reduce by 50% the sexual transmission of HIV -- including among key populations, such as young people,

children and families.

- Ensure equal access to education for children orphaned and made vulnerable by AIDS; and

- Reduce by 50% the number of countries with HIV-related restrictions on entry, stay and residence.

In recent years, Bangladesh has made significant progress towards these goals. From an early start, even before the first HIV infection was

have ensured that people who require antiretroviral treatment get them, and the school textbooks have included HIV and life skills education for all school children.

Despite these achievements, there is no room for complacency. Bangladesh has a young population and HIV awareness levels among them are often low and substantial numbers of people including international migrants are vulnerable. Vulnerability increases when women are not in a position to exercise their full rights or when they are subjected to gender-based violence. We are committed to ensuring universal access to services for these young and vulnerable populations. The AIDS response requires a long-term commitment and for this we must ensure predictable and sustainable sources of funding.

The government of Bangladesh is committed to ensuring universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support services to everyone in Bangladesh. We must promote evidence, informed and rights-based approach that is responsive to changing dynamics of the HIV epidemic in Bangladesh. We would ensure that women and people from marginalised sections of the community are given priority in the national AIDS response that is part of the country's Sixth Five Year Plan.

Our government will move to integrate AIDS services in the community clinic service delivery mechanism in phases to benefit the rural population. Most importantly, we shall try to minimise stigma and discrimination that is rife against people living with HIV and other population groups who are vulnerable to HIV infection.

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men who have sex with men, and in the context of sex work -- and prevent all new HIV infections as a result of injecting drug use;

- Provide HIV treatment for 13 million people;
- Reduce by 50% tuberculosis deaths in people living with HIV;
- Eliminate HIV transmission from mother to child, keep mothers alive, and improve the health of women,

detected in the country, Bangladesh has made remarkable strides in keeping HIV infections low. We started our response with quality targeted interventions for most at risk populations, implemented through a human rights based approach and partnering NGOs and civil society. This has helped us keep HIV infection levels low for more than twenty years since the infection was first detected in the country. We

GROUND REALITIES

A brief history (ours) of irony



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

OUR history, Bangladesh's history, is somewhat rich in irony, assuming that you have cared to notice.

Observe the defiant manner in which Sheikh Hasina argues today in defence of an abolition of the caretaker form of government. She bases her logic, of course, on the recent Supreme Court pronouncement that the caretaker concept is a violation of the law and therefore cannot stand.

We understand that, to be sure. But even as we do, we recall the vociferous manner in which Sheikh Hasina and her party, back in the mid-1990s following the fiasco of a bye-election in Magura, campaigned successfully for a renewal of the caretaker system that had engineered our progression from military rule to government by popular consent in early 1991.

And that stretch of irony is not all. In the mid-1990s, Khaleda Zia, then in her first stint as prime minister, laughed off the whole idea of a caretaker government as either naive or insanity. In the end, in March 1996, she did hand over the reins of office to a caretaker regime. Today, she and her party are determined defenders of the caretaker form of government and have made it absolutely clear that they will not take part in any elections held under the present "partisan" government.

And so irony remains a potent presence in our collective life. You wish it were not like this. You wish it were an aberration in our scheme of things. Unfortunately, irony is what we have lived with for as long as we

care to remember.

How's this for one more study in irony? Back in mid-December 1971, the Mujibnagar government led by Syed Nazrul Islam and Tajuddin Ahmed decreed, to loud public acclamation, a ban on religion-based political parties in the country. These parties, it was truly and credibly put across, had waged war against their own people in collaboration with the Pakistani occupation forces.

For three and a half years, until the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the murder

of the Mujibnagar leadership, we were happy. Yes, we were clawing our way to the top of the hill, in however tortuous a manner. But we were happy. That happiness was soon reduced to ashes when, in the protective shadow of the nation's first military regime and in the name of a restoration of multi-party democracy, all those collaborationist parties and politicians emerged blinking from their dark caves, happy to be allowed to do politics in a country they had once tried murdering with the help of crude men come from alien land. Irony was getting to be quite thick for us.

A tragic irony we have been assailed with came from the Awami League in early 1975. For a party that had historically waged a tireless movement for a democratic polity in

Pakistan and for full, purposeful autonomy to be granted to Bengalis, indeed for a parliamentary system of government in the country, its shift in January 1975 to a one-party system in the country was pretty ironic.

The Fourth Amendment to the constitution disappointed and embittered all of us. The ruling classes of the time may have tried to put a spin on it by calling it the Second Revolution. The truth was that it was political regression, something we did not expect from the Awami League.

Our struggle within Pakistan and then against it was focused on according preeminence to participatory government, one in which the people would matter. A tight lid, we assumed, would be put on extra-constitutional means of political change. That did not happen. In proper Pakistani fashion, we began to have our own ambitious military officers informing us on murky dawns that they had taken over, that Bangladesh was under martial law, that the eventual goal of the new regime was to take the country back to democracy.

Irony once more; and yet again when, following in the footsteps of Field Marshal Ayub Khan, our indigenous military rulers tried donning civilian clothes, formed political parties and informed us in grandiose terms that democracy had returned to

the people. It was nothing of the sort. As a matter of fact, our coups d'etat were a huge "improvement" on Pakistan's coups d'etat. None of the four army takeovers in Pakistan caused the death of any senior military officer or even a low-ranking soldier.

In Bangladesh's instance, beginning in 1975 and going up to 1981, scores of respected officers and hundreds of soldiers, both in the army and the air force, were murdered, either in the fiery confusion generated by a takeover or through the dictatorial fiat exercised by a triumphant coup maker.

And that is not the end of irony. The Awami League goes on enlightening the nation on the secular principles, as enshrined in the constitution adopted in 1972, it means to restore as a follow-up to the annulment of the Fifth and Seventh Amendments to the constitution.

That is cheering news, until the leading lights of the government proclaim loudly that while the state will be a secular entity once more, nothing will be done to do away with such factors, injected into the constitution per courtesy of our military rulers, as "Bismillah" and "Islam as state religion."

The Sector Commanders' Forum has promised to go on a fast unto death if those two thematic ideas remain in the constitution. Notice, though, that one of those commanders is an influential minister in Sheikh Hasina's government.

Irony? Or are the gods being unjust to you and me?

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

June 8

793 Vikings raid the abbey at Lindisfarne in Northumbria, commonly accepted as the beginning of the Scandinavian invasion of England.

1191 Richard I arrives in Acre (Israel) thus beginning his crusade.

1690 Siddi general Yadi Sakat, razes the Mazagon Fort in Mumbai.

1941 World War II: Allies invade Syria and Lebanon.

1967 Six-Day War: The USS Liberty incident occurs, killing 34 and wounding 171.

1968 Robert F. Kennedy's funeral takes place at the Basilica of St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York City.

1992 The first World Ocean Day is celebrated, coinciding with the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.