

Another tragedy on highway

Put highway safety measures without much ado

FOLLOWING the tragedy at Mirsarai, where 44 students were killed in a truck accident, now we have another gruesome bus-truck collision on a highway at Bogra that killed 18 and injured 21. The image of the smashed bus carried by this paper tells you all about the horrifying impact the commuters must have experienced.

After every mishap, we mourn the tragic deaths of hapless passengers and keep urging the authorities to come out with effective measures to put a halt to these preventable accidents but they just wait to happen, which the inaction points to.

This time too, it was purely the driver's fault, by all accounts. An injured passenger said the driver seemed drowsy and was driving recklessly. In spite of warnings to drive carefully, clearly he looked the other way.

It beats all imagination, as to how could the drivers, after hearing of all the accidents that have been taking place all over the country, afford to be so utterly negligent of the simple fact that safety of the passengers was in their hands?

Reckless driving by unskilled drivers, that too with fake licenses; over-speeding and indifference to road signs are the established reasons for accidents to happen.

Now a word about the highway patrol police. This seems to be on paper only because lack of their visibility on highways is conspicuous by itself. The authorities must get a move on this with highway patrol organized along the standard operational practices. Given the rate of accidents this aspect should receive top priority.

Is it that difficult to bring discipline on the highways? Can we not motivate the drivers to be careful, law abiding and sensitive to passengers' safety? This is where the private and public transporters will have to come in a big way to roll back indiscipline on the highway.

The communications ministry, the associations of transport owners and operators and members of the law enforcing agencies should immediately sit, devise effective measures and coordinate to save the lives of a growing number of commuters that hit the streets everyday. The impunity with which the killer drivers escape the hands of law must be put to an end.

Billboards all over

Contain the rash

RAJDHANI Unnayan Kartipakhya (Rajuk) last week knocked down over 12 billboards of illegal private housing projects in the city. While the step is appreciated, Rajuk has a long way to go to sustain the campaign and make a marked difference in the billboard-scape.

Hoardings set up haphazardly all over the place are first and foremost an eyesore. Secondly, they are a veritable danger to the passers-by and also vehicles.

A country that prides itself on its greenery and beauty loses out in argument when the cities are rife with jarring billboards. We project our country to the rest of the world as beautiful and friendly and yet the very cities that the visitors land in have a skyline that is dotted with rectangular scraps. Crores have been spent on city roundabouts; there are many elaborate sculptures like that in Kawran Bazaar of Dhaka, yet our eyes are assailed by those contraptions that ask you to simply buy something. It is an insult to our aesthetic consciousness indeed.

There have been countless instances of billboards not standing up to the elements. Lives have been lost due to advertisements that come plummeting down. People walk under signs stuck to walls that usually have not been strength-tested. Some are placed precariously on the edges of old building and markets.

Illegal billboards also fuel illegal trade. They are encroaching on public space whether it is a footpath, the side of a building or even up in the air. We live in consumerist times, yet we miss out on the very fundamental consumer right, that of a skyline free of obstructions. While this may seem trivial at a time when medical malpractices, political strife and price escalation run rampant, it is one of those little things that can

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

July 30

762 Baghdad is founded by caliph Al-Mansur.

1945 World War II: Japanese submarine I-58 sinks the USS Indianapolis, killing 883 seamen.

1956 A joint resolution of the U.S. Congress is signed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, authorizing In God We Trust as the U.S. national motto.

1969 Vietnam War: US President Richard M. Nixon makes an unscheduled visit to South Vietnam and meets with President Nguyen Van Thi and U.S. military commanders.

1974 Watergate Scandal: U.S. President Richard M. Nixon releases subpoenaed White House recordings after being ordered to do so by the United States Supreme Court.

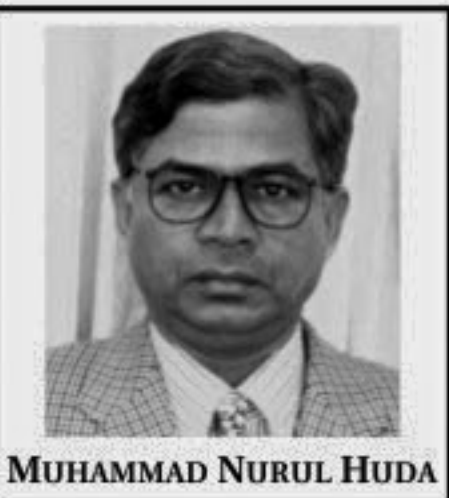
1974 Peace deal for Cyprus. Greek, Turkish and UK foreign ministers sign a peace agreement for Cyprus.

1980 Israel's Knesset passes the Jerusalem Law

2003 In Mexico, the last 'old style' Volkswagen Beetle rolls off the assembly line.

STRAIGHT LINE

The pardon controversy in perspective



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

UNFOR TUNATELY for the Bangladesh polity, the presidential prerogative of granting pardon to a convict has once again generated a lot of unseemly heat; and sadly the propriety and motive of such action from the most exalted public office has been questioned in unbecoming language. Readers may recall that in late July 2005 similar unease and discomfiture was experienced on account of a presidential clemency shown to a convict of a double murder case.

It would thus appear that the political parties accusing each other of grossly misusing the presidential prerogative for partisan political interests do not stand on a high moral ground. To retrace our steps, we would find that in 2005 there was justifiable indignation at the indecent haste that characterised the processing of the case for clemency. Newspaper reports of the relevant time indicate the bionic speed that the clemency proposal gathered in its journey from initiation to ultimate disposal.

The grant of presidential pardon to a convict is undoubtedly an issue of significant public concern and the said concern finds editorial expression twice in The Daily Star (July 22nd and July 25th). The premonition is that in the fitness of things the clemency in question and that of 2005 do not appear to be the "Rarest of the Rare" variety where the use of presidential prerogative was necessitated by public interest, notwithstanding

the accusations and counteraccusations of lawyer-politicians across the political divide.

Repealing of the presidential pardon has been suggested as a remedy and the attention of the jurists and constitutional experts has been sought for a healthy resolution. Legally speaking, the government retains the authority to exempt accused persons from criminal prosecution at different stages of trial and also show mercy to the convicted following the conclusion of the trial.

It is, however, desirable that in case

complainant, according to a considered view.

It would be worth remembering that our socio-political situation turned for the worse with tragic murder of the Father of the Nation and four national leaders. For many years these offences were not legally and appropriately treated by the establishment till a favourable political scene unfolded. Such realities do have substantial impact on the enforcement and adjudication temperament and culture. Between 1976-1979 many heinous criminal cases involving

called dynamics of electoral adjustment and understanding.

As of now, doubts have been expressed as to whether a precedent is being created to believe that the executive branch can do what the judiciary should be doing and consequently there is not much wrong if desired distinction between the two vital organs of the state is blurred; and exoneration from criminal charges should be easy when political control is assured.

The ground reality is that in the past thousands of criminals were let off by the government as a matter of political expediency and opposition party workers were falsely implicated in criminal cases to settle political vengeance. The matter becomes delicate when one realises that in our less than healthy political environment it is extremely difficult to differentiate a political act from a criminal act.

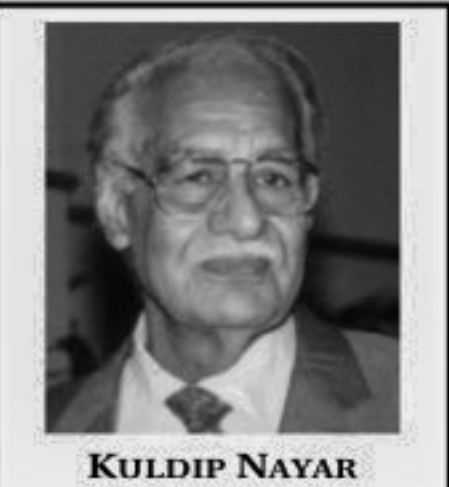
The moot question is, should standards of justice vary with variance in political establishment? The crux of the subject is primarily rooted in our political culture. The politicians have to decide whether they need rogue and criminal elements in furthering their so-called political objective even at the expense of their public image and social acceptability.

The citizens should know whether political opponents should continue to be harassed by institution of palpably false cases and whether purely criminal elements should be allowed to masquerade as party operatives. The politicians should take the lead in the gradual decriminalisation of the political process and ensure its sanitisation.

The writer is a columnist for The Daily Star.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Corruption still haunts India



KULDEEP NAVAR

Political equilibrium has got a jolt and all traditions and conventions have been thrown to the wind. The two main political parties, the Congress and the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), which are at daggers drawn, are so engrossed in running down each other that they are not even conscious of the harm they are doing to the polity. They have come to even politicise corruption. It looks as if they are determined to make India a banana republic, if not economically but politically and socially.

Lack of consensus among political elements led to a military coup in Pakistan. The National Assembly and the Senate had lost relevance. Similarly, perpetual fighting between legislators of different persuasion in India both in Parliament and in the state legislatures has put a question mark against the system itself. We have established in the country a system where the will of the people prevails through the elected representatives. There is little room either for dictation or for demonisation of policy.

Yet the increasing doubts about the viability of the system, although born out of disappointment, are not good for the country's health. Dissent and criticism are an essential part of parliamentary democracy. But at some stage, there has to be a consensus to let the chariot of governance wheel further. Elections are nearly three years away. The situation cannot remain as it exists today because both the Manmohan Singh government and the system have been battered beyond repair.

It is no use reminding the two parties about the basics. They know what they are. Still they indulge in we-the-holy attitude and transcend the Laksman rekha all the time. It is for the different political parties to see the rot

setting in and wake up to corruption, which has gone so deep in the administration that honest bureaucrats or, for that matter, politicians can be counted on one's fingers.

It is their tribe that helped Karnataka chief minister B.S. Yeddiurappa to subvert rules and procedures to begin illegal mining. His corruption was palpable long time ago. But the BJP, his party, kept quiet because he was sharing the booty with some in the high command. Even after his exposure, his reluctance to go is an affront to democracy. The support of the majority in the house is necessary. But of what use is it when the chief minister's image is that of a corrupt person?

In his report, Justice Santosh Hegde, Karnataka's Lokayukta (ombudsman),

rulers saw the remunerative side of illegal mining because of China's interest. It offered many a time more price than what prevailed in the Indian market.

The practice of illegal mining was perfected by the two Reddy Brothers -- one of them is a minister in Yeddiurappa's cabinet -- who accumulated thousands of crores of rupees through illicit methods. Their interest in politics began when they found that most members of the state legislature were purchasable, nothing alarming in modern India. They have the credit of converting the minority BJP into a majority party. It won 109 seats in the election but now has 120 members.

The BJP is bound to act against Yeddiurappa. The party has no face to

It is no use reminding the two parties about the basics. They know what they are. Still they indulge in we-the-holy attitude and transcend the Laksman rekha all the time. It is for the different political parties to see the rot setting in and wake up to corruption, which has gone so deep in the administration that honest bureaucrats or, for that matter, politicians can be counted on one's fingers

has left no room for Yeddiurappa to escape the responsibility of illegal mining of iron ore in the Bellary district of the state. Still the chief minister says that he is not guilty. No one can catch him with his hands in the till. Yet Hegde has laid bare the modus operandi of illegal mining going back to the time when the Congress government was in power.

Hegde told me at Bangalore this week that he concentrated on Yeddiurappa regime because he is more concerned with the present, not the past. However, he pointed out that the illegal mining went on increasing with every new chief minister, Yeddiurappa reaching the maximum limit. Sadly, Hegde's tenure is over. Otherwise, he may have gone up back to 2000 when

talk against corruption. The Congress defended its scams on the ground that the BJP had its skeleton like Yeddiurappa's blatant corruption in its closet. The party was always caught on the wrong foot.

However, the 2G spectrum scam has hogged the spotlight now. The scam has come in handy to the BJP to ask for the resignation of the prime minister and former finance minister P. Chidambaram. Former communications minister A. Raja, the accused who played havoc with the licence procedures and pricing, has named the prime minister in the court of the Central Bureau of Investigation of having known everything.

True, an accused says everything to save himself but Raja's allegations

against the prime minister and the former finance minister cannot be brushed aside easily. Raja has talked about the noting he forwarded in letters and files to the prime minister. Since the Supreme Court is monitoring the whole case, it is but fair that the outcome should be awaited before forming any judgment.

What is intriguing in this developing case against Raja is the open support by the DMK, a Congress partner in the ruling coalition. One senior member of the DMK, T.R. Balu, was present this week at the hearing. The Congress cannot take any action against the DMK lest it should rock the government which has the support of party's 16 members in the Lok Sabha.

The comical aspect is that Yeddiurappa has said that since the PM does not resign, why should he? What he forgets is that he has been found corrupt by the state ombudsman while the PM has been only named by the accused, who has been sent to jail because of proven charge of corruption.

In parliamentary democracy, there are certain procedures which have to be followed. What Yeddiurappa or his party, the BJP, has been doing amounts to sabotaging the system. Arun Jaitley, the opposition leader, has rightly said that certain issues should be kept above politics and should be viewed from the national point of view.

But then he is the same person who picks up trivial matters to attack the integrity of activists and human rights workers who have kept away from politics. But Jaitley sincerely believes that people listen to his glib talk attentively. The sooner he comes out of his make-believe world, the better it would be for him and his party. He should seriously ponder over the allegations by Home Minister Chidambaram that the BJP has increased its attack against the Congress because cases against Hindu terrorists are reaching the final stage. The boot is on the other foot.

The writer is an eminent Indian Journalist. Visit my website: www.kuldeepnavar.com