

A shock surpassed by outrage

BNP shows its hand, shamelessly

WE are appalled by the leading opposition political party BNP publicly demanding an immediate halt to the proceedings of war crime's tribunal which are otherwise firmly in progress. We are left with a feeling of consternation by the opposition calling on international community to raise objections to the trial process and put pressure on the government to stop the tribunal's proceedings. More than the shock, we feel outraged at the BNP's blatantly reckless positioning.

This is highly irresponsible on the part of BNP, grossly out of remit, pathologically disrespectful of the law of the land, and patently denigrating to the moral obligation to bring those accused of crimes against humanity under trial. Whatever rhetoric the BNP might have hidden behind thus far, its latest action lends itself to an unsailable interpretation of the party having been against the war crimes trial as such.

We, in the media, and the jurists, have been constantly emphasising the need for the trial to be transparent and fully in consonance with international standards, the best practice methods of which are available and accessible. And the government has also subjected itself to scrutiny from time to time. Pointing out the flaws, if any, and setting these right have of course been legitimate concerns and these have been voiced, as well, but nobody ever questioned the fundamental motive and necessity of the trial.

By all means, have concerns for removing imperfections and give suggestions for improvement, if you have. But to say that the trial process must be immediately stopped is not just to seek its discontinuance but its wholesale derailment. BNP says that those accused are being victimised and should be released, how can it be victimisation when the charges made against them have all been in the public domain? And the legal process mounted against them is all about proving guilt or innocence in accord with normative principals of the law.

Therefore, our counsel to the BNP is withdraw the demand for a stoppage to the process while giving your inputs to improve the process, if you have respect for public opinion and the countless victims of the genocide and crimes against humanity in 1971.

Relocation of chemical factories

Another jolting wake-up call

CHEMICAL factories and depots are not permissible in residential areas. The government has clear policies on the matter and the High Court had issued stern directives in this regard. However the reality of the situation is far from ideal.

After the Nimtoli inferno last year, authorities called for the immediate relocation of chemical depots situated in residential areas of Old Dhaka, but till date there has been no progress in following these instructions. The Nimtoli incident is a blazing example that remains etched in our minds reinforcing the fact that combustible chemical factories in crowded residential areas like Old Dhaka can be like sitting on time bombs about to ignite without any prior warning.

In close succession to the Nimtoli incident, there have been others too which have accentuated concern about the issue. The recent clash in South Keraniganj that led to the blockade of Dhaka-Mawa highway is another example which shows that residents are not sitting idle on matters of relocation of the chemical factories from their locality.

After scores of people had fallen sick in that particular area from inhaling toxic gases emitted from the factory and having witnessed several explosions in the recent past, locals began to fear an impending explosion. As a result of restlessness due to sluggish or little progress in matters of relocation, the residents have taken the law in their own hands, which cannot be condoned.

The demand that chemical factories and warehouses be removed from residential areas should be responded to on a priority basis. That is the message that rings out of the Keraniganj issue. Local residents dissatisfied over the location of chemical factories in their areas would do well to bring pressure on ward commissioners and environmental authorities seeking urgent relocation of the factories from their habitats. Vandalising public and private property or wreaking havoc in the locality could do more

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 5
1936
The Soviet Union adopts a new constitution and the Kirghiz Soviet Socialist Republic is established as a full Union Republic of the USSR.
1976
The United Nations General Assembly adopts Pakistan's resolution on security of non-Nuclear States.
1977
Egypt breaks diplomatic relations with Syria, Libya, Algeria, Iraq and South Yemen. The move is in retaliation for the Declaration of Tripoli against Egypt.
1978
The Soviet Union signs a "friendship treaty" with the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.

KALEIDOSCOPE



SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

decision to split up the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC).

The government has been showing signs of distrust even in its close allies once they try to disagree with whatever it thinks right. As result, recently its tested friends among the intellectual community and in civil society are slowly getting alienated from it.

The opposition-called hartal on Sunday against the government move has been supported by some intellectuals, who, in the past, were vehemently against hartal as a political weapon of protest. These intellectuals, who are active members of a newly launched citizens' movement for democracy and human rights, have even written a post-editorial in 'Prothom Alo' on its December 4 issue justifying their support for this hartal. Oddly enough, many of these intellectuals were sympathetic to the incumbent government after it assumed office in 2009.

Of late, the government has become insensitive towards any opposition to the decisions it takes on major issues of politics and governance. But it is certainly not a very healthy sign for a government that sees wolves in every bush.

By riding roughshod on every dissent and not caring a damn about

even good criticisms, the government is not at all demonstrating any strength. Rather, this strange behaviour is rather betraying its weakness.

There is no question that the capacity for taking strong decisions is the hallmark of a leadership that is best placed to deliver public good. But strength should not be confused with stubbornness. And history has no end of evidence of how a false sense of strength is apt at taking a leadership up the garden path. And the huge popular mandate that the incumbent Awami League (AL) government had received in the last general election does not also guar-

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antee that whatever decision it may take now after three years in office will get the amount of popular support that it might enjoy at the beginning of its tenure. It may be recalled that French President Charles de Gaulle was a very popular president of France. But he failed to recognise the fact that personally he was losing his popularity, though the Gaullists' bagged 352 out of the 487 seats in June 1969's parliamentary elections. He became so confident of his popularity that he vowed to resign from presidency, if the referendum he called to push through his proposal to reform the Senate and the local

governments failed. But to his utter dismay he failed and he had to resign at the end of April 1969.

The main opposition is now challenging the government to prove its popularity by holding a referendum on its decision of bifurcating the DCC. Though this may be purely a case of the opposition's calling the government's bluff, still the government should take a serious note of it. For as in the French president de Gaulle's case, popularity of a government cannot always be taken for granted.

The way the government passed the Local Government (City

Corporation) (Amendment) Act, 2011 to split Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) in the Jatiya Sangsad (JS) on November 29 within a short time and President Zillur Rahman gave his consent to it to make it into law on December 1, has taken the whole nation by surprise. Why is this rush? What does the government want to prove by this haste? Would it lose anything, if it waited a bit to have the common people's view on the decision, or hear what the members of the intelligentsia have to say about the division of the four centuries old capital city, a home of more than 10 million people?

It appears the government has become very desperate about pushing whatever idea it thinks right by fair means or foul. Strangely, it cannot anymore tolerate the members of the civil society and the intelligentsia, because they have not come forward to extend instant support its move to break DCC into two.

Considering the confrontational nature of politics in the country, the AL-led may have its reason to take any criticism or protest from the BNP with a grain of salt. But why cannot it take even its alliance partners in the government into confidence over such an important issue of national significance?

The ruling party did not even care to pay heed to the opinions of its grand alliance partners in the Workers Party led by Rashed Khan Menon or those of the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) led by Hasanul Huq Inu. The MPs of the large alliance partner Jatiya Party (JP) led by Ershad, too, could not voice their opinion, even if they wanted to. That is, however, another story, if only for their leader's non-committal attitude towards the issue for reasons best known to him. The lone independent lawmaker Fazlul Alim could not register his protest against the bill to split DCC.

But is the incumbent aware that it is not only its friends, it is also losing a large chunk of its constituency by these apparently bold decisions? We hope, it will be able to mend its ways and see reason, before it is too late.

The writer is Editor, Science & Life, The Daily Star.

Myanmar's Mann in the house meets Clinton

LARRY JAGAN

HILARY Clinton's historic visit to Myanmar will certainly strengthen the hands of the country's liberal-minded president and ministers. It is likely to encourage the reformers to push on with their planned political and economic changes, according to senior sources in the government. President Thein Sein assured his American guest that the changes were real and irreversible.

While the exchange between the US secretary of state and the Myanmar head of state has overshadowed almost everything else, except of course the meetings between the two ladies -- Aung San Suu Kyi and Hilary Clinton -- the discussion between the US diplomat in chief and the speaker of the lower house, Thura Shwe Mann, was just as important. It was between two parliamentarians candidly exchanging views, according to notes from the meeting.

"We are history makers," Shwe Mann told Clinton at their meeting. "We will continue our work, reform is irreversible," he stressed. Clinton, on her part, emphasised the need to push democratic reforms further. "Laws are written in accordance with the voice of the people in our country," she told Shwe Mann. "And they are approved by the parliaments." "It is encouraging to see that Myanmar is on the road to democracy," she said.

"It is not easy to get everything right within one year," Clinton acknowledged. The US is heartened by the progress made so far. The registration of all political parties, freedom of association, labour rights and the start of the release of politi-

cal prisoners are very significant, she said. But Clinton went on to highlight the areas in which Washington wanted to see further progress. The forthcoming bye-elections must be free, fair and credible. All the remaining political prisoners must be released.

Peace and national reconciliation throughout the country -- especially in the ethnic minority areas -- is essential for Burma to progress; humanitarian assistance must be sent to refugees displaced by the fighting, she urged. This would show that the government really cared, she added. Though she did not specifically refer to it, the US is particularly concerned about the situation in Kachin state, where there is continued violent incursion by the Myanmar army into ethnic villages; more than 30,000 Kachin have been displaced in the last six months, according to the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) which is demanding greater autonomy in the region.

And finally she insisted that the laws that parliament had passed must be implemented, respected and strictly enforced. "Taking these steps is not only the right thing to do, but it is a very smart move as well," she concluded.

Thura Shwe Mann responded warmly, according to government sources. "These are our promises," he replied. And assured the US secretary of state that all four concerns -- especially the release of political prisoners -- were an integral part of the country's reform agenda and would be put into practise as soon as possible.

Clinton sympathised with the government's dilemma -- there were forces that wanted to slow the pace of change. "It is very important to listen to different perspectives and finally reach an honourable compromise," she told Shwe Mann. "But a firm commitment is very important. You all have a chance to make history and to leave a lasting legacy to your children and grand-children."

In return for further progress, Washington stood ready to help. "We will match your action, step by

step, action by action," she told Shwe Mann. She promised to help open all possible doors for programmes to reduce poverty and improve people's lives, including through the World Bank, IMF and the UN.

"We are also ready to help with educational scholarships, student exchanges, health-care and micro-finance schemes," she added. She also proposed parliamentary exchanges and offered to provide US

experts. "We want to be your friend and partner," she stressed. "We respect your relations with your neighbours and the other nations in your region. We want to be an additional friend and be part of your reform process."

"I am here because you are on the right track and what you've started is achievable," she said. It has worked in other countries -- notably Brazil, Argentina, Chile, South Korea, Thailand and most recently Indonesia. "It can work. It's not going to be easy but it is achievable."

Thura Shwe Mann was obviously enthusiastic and encouraged by the US's offers of support, according to senior Myanmar sources. But there have to be results first. "We will match your actions," he promised. He stressed that his commitment and the US offers were promises -- promises that must now be realised.

"We'll look for the opportunities to work together," he said. "There will be an ongoing dialogue between us, I hope, as part of our partnership," he concluded. Although Clinton did not mention it during her talks with the speaker, she did tell President Thein Sein that Washington was considering upgrading their diplomatic relations, and appointing an ambassador to Yangon. Currently, the top US diplomat in Burma is a charge d'affaires after the US downgraded their representation in 1990 in protest against the bloody military coup in 1988 and the failure to respect the results of the 1990 election.

This may yet be the first concrete result of Clinton's visit, and would certainly be the final key to the release of more political prisoners.

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