

HEADLINES BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Dreadful spate of violence

Shun this path

Sunday's early morning violence took the city dwellers by surprise. A gathering by Jamaat-e-Islami activists after Fajr prayers ahead of a reception for freedom fighters by the BNP later in the day, turned into a crash and burn episode. This left one person dead, several injured and public and private vehicles damaged in the city centre. The police reportedly having prior information were out on the streets just as early and did their part to try and quell the violence.

A number of questions are raised by this incident, however, the key one is what was the opposition hoping to achieve from it? If it was their voices that they wanted to be heard, we have stressed time and again that the place to do this is the Parliament. If it was simply to be a peaceful demonstration and not an episode of premeditated confrontation, then it must be asked why and how the activists were in possession of weapons such as cocktail bombs, as if prepared for violence, which then went off in a series of explosions across the city centre. This found an echo in the torching of vehicles in some other parts of the country which left one dead in Sylhet.

This sudden eruption of violence stands in contrast to the generally restrained temper of the opposition demonstrations such as road marches and rallies. If this is the foretaste of what is to come, we can only express our gravest concern at what the country is heading towards in the coming months. The opposition has its right to dissent, as does any other individual or group in a functioning democracy and we cannot stress the importance of this enough. However, violence has never been the answer to anything and it never will be. We abhor this means of dealing with the nation's problems and urge the government, opposition and all other political parties to exercise restraint and, above all, democratic principles in resolving political problems as they should be resolved -- through political means.

End of US military mission in Iraq

What sort of Iraq will its people inherit?

With the crossing of the last US military personnel from Iraq into Kuwait curtains were drawn on the US military mission in Iraq. The world's bloodiest war since Vietnam is officially over and so is the occupation of a sovereign country.

While we welcome the complete withdrawal of US troops from Iraq we find it is as good a time as any to ask what the purpose of the venture was and what has been achieved. That is the natural question that would occur in everyone's mind given that a sovereign country was under occupation for nearly nine years for an operation that cost the US people nearly a trillion dollars, nearly 4500 dead soldiers and 30 thousand wounded. 100000 dead is the closest approximation of Iraqi casualties. The actual figure is many times that.

The war in Iraq may be over for the US, is it so for the Iraqis. It is difficult to agree with the views of the US Secretary for Defence that the cost in both American and Iraqi lives has been worth the effort, which was to establish a stable government in a very important region of the world.

The reality on ground would suggest otherwise. And without appearing to be pessimistic it seems to us that except for the US aim of removing Saddam precious little have been achieved... even less of democracy and stability.

The Iraqi's have got their country back and we wish them well in their arduous task of addressing a legacy they will inherit, a legacy of political instability, a future that shows the signs of volatility because of sectarian drift and ethnic hiatus, not to speak of a truncated economy. However, given the resilience of the Iraqis we are sure that

The misgovernance syndrome



HOSSAIN ZILLUR RAHMAN

MISGOVERNANCE is no longer only about rule-breaking. A new syndrome spreading its tentacles over society, polity

and the economy is partisan and self-serving rule-making, often with corrupt goals in mind. Whether it is in the manipulation of operational rules for the share market or eligibility criteria for new banks or changes in electoral rules to trade bodies or rule changes on appointments, corrupt rule-making has cast a blacker shadow than simple rule-breaking. This new syndrome poses a dilemma for the watchdogs and indeed for the democracy discourse itself because we are analytically unarmed against such misgovernance. What do you do when everything is being done according to "rules" but such rules are themselves the main problem because they have been framed with motivated and corrupt goals in mind? When have "rules" become divorced from "norms"?

The democratic discourse is thus gripped with a peculiar helplessness. The *misgovernance wallahs* are one step ahead of the good governance watchdogs. We cry ourselves hoarse for meaningful decentralisation and we get rules which produce precisely the opposite outcomes -- Union and Upazila Parishads under the thumb of the MP, fragmentation of Dhaka city, partisan administrators for Zila Parishads and so on. We call for saving our cities and we get the most brazen land-management regime possible where cutting hills, destroying wetlands, extreme inefficiency in land-use are more common-place than any semblance of sensible planning. DAPs are diluted or sent into cold storage.

The new twist in misgovernance is not a phenomenon for institutional



USA ZADOK

More than the economic ups and downs, more than the gaps in our social achievements, more than the unloveliness of our everyday landscape, the corrupting and the diminishing of our dreams is today's core existential crisis.

spheres alone. Collusive rule-making within the sphere of economic policy is fueling a new rentier class while the entrepreneurs sweat and persevere. The spectre of crony capitalism, the favoured few showered with land assets, contracts and unfair market advantages, but all of these sanitised through "rules," is casting an ever larger shadow. There is no hide-and-seek about any of this, only a brusque dismissal of any civic opinions on the issues. Against such misgovernance, simplistic calls for good governance are being reduced to mere *bhalochona*, intentions and words adrift in a feel-good discourse capable

only of producing toothless watchdogs.

Forty years after independence, there are many things we can be justly proud of. We have built solid economic foundations. The larger aspirations of 1971 -- of a humane, just and prosperous society -- have engendered a personality revolution amongst the common citizenry, urban and rural, young and old, literate and illiterate. But the misgovernance syndrome has not been far behind. And it is now mutating into a new brazenness that threatens our dreams. The departure of colonial rule was meant to transform

us from subjects into citizens.

Forty years after independence, nothing could be more ironical than the fact that our elected leaders are trying to turn us back into *prajas*. The Sangsad grounds are already off limits to the common citizen. Our architect friends tell us that our lawmakers are actively demanding a wall around the entire parliament complex for their "security." God forbid that this comes to pass but the symbolism will be lost on no one, least of all the countless martyrs of the independence struggle.

More than the economic ups and downs, more than the gaps in our social achievements, more than the unloveliness of our everyday landscape, the corrupting and the diminishing of our dreams is today's core existential crisis. The sense of freedom animating a society, one guaranteed by an institutional process and a political culture, is a resource far more precious than any resource balance-sheet compiled by the bureaucrat and the policy-maker. It is this resource that unleashes the latent potential within the people. It is this resource which has propelled societies to greatness. And it is for this resource, we need today to forge a new resolve and a new understanding.

The *misgovernance wallahs* may have pulled ahead but this is certainly not unalterable. For this, however, the democratic discourse has to break out of its feel-good cocoon. Ritualistic calls for transparency, accountability will not do. Corrupt rule-making has to be put on the spot as much as rule-breaking. This will require new analytical tools and new discourses. But the greater requirement will be for tenacity, political intelligence and social mobilisation.

(We are happy to announce that henceforth Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman will be a regular columnist for The Daily Star.)

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KALEIDOSCOPE

What is the truth?



SYED FATAHUL ALAM

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina on Saturday blamed the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its

alliance partner Jamaat-e-Islami for mysterious killings. The BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, on the other hand, put the blame squarely on the government for the death of Nazmul Islam, a leader of the party from Jessore district. Nazmul was abducted on the night of December 14 as he was driving his car to his Dhanmondi residence. His dead body was found lying on a highway in Gazipur the next day. Fakhrul Islam held the government responsible also for other such secret killings and enforced disappearances that have created panic among the public recently.

Home Minister Sahara Khatun, the person who is in charge of providing security to life and property and maintaining law and order in the country, on the other hand, told journalists on December 14 that her knowledge about such incidents comes from the media. That, in other words, is as good as saying that her ministry had no knowledge of such incidents of secret killings and abductions.

The suggestion of the Inspector General of Police (IGP) that the "enforced disappearances" may be a changed tactic of criminals, too, hardly helps matters. This kind of statement is short of the actual need of the moment -- concrete information on the disappearances and the killings.

What kind of a country and society are we living in where the home minister in effect admits to her, or for that

matter, her ministry's ignorance about disappearances and secret killings. Then all of a sudden we are assured by the prime minister that she is quite aware of not only those secret or mysterious killings, but also of the identities of those behind the killings.

Similarly, the secretary general of the main opposition, which in democratic parlance should perform as a shadow government, gives a completely opposite explanation of those secret killings and disappearances.

Are these national leaders aware that the common people, who have no other place to go, depend on the government to know what happened to those ill-fated people who disappeared without any trace or whose dead bodies were found days or weeks later? The flicker of hope that was still alive in their minds was extinguished after first hearing from the home minister and then from all the mutually contradictory statements from the head of the government and opposition leader. They are now totally confused.

Who then is telling the truth? Since the statements are contradictory both cannot be true at the same time.

The opposition leader's claim about those killings the people may be taken with a grain of salt, if only because the party's access to informa-

tion is limited compared to that of the government. The prime minister, on the contrary, is in a far better position to know the truth since, as the chief executive of the government, she has the police, the intelligence services and the entire state machinery under her command to give her the correct information about the identities of those behind the mysterious killings and disappearances. So, the prime minister should be the person who knows and her narrative on those

incidents must be well-substantiated by facts. Most importantly, there is no reason not to believe the prime minister of the country.

Now that the prime minister is convinced that the opposition and their allies are behind those mysterious killings, then why is she not telling the public about the identities of those

ill-fated persons? And why is she not asking her home minister to immediately order an investigation into all those incidents of enforced disappearances and secret killings and mount a nationwide hunt to arrest the perpetrators of those heinous crimes and their abettors and arrange exemplary punishment for those criminals?

In a similar vein, there is also no reason to think that the opposition leaders are so irresponsible as to mis-

guide the public with a wrong or motivated piece of information. And if they think that they know who in the government are behind the disappearances of its own leaders and workers as well as other such victims, then they should come up with their reports before the public.

But until now there has been no real progress on this issue of prime concern for the people.

Worse, everyone appears to be involved in, as if, a conspiracy of silence and keeping the family of the victims in the dark about the fates of their abducted or missing relatives.

While the public, to their dismay, are watching the strange slanging match between the government and the opposition about an issue that concerns their security and safety as citizens, streams of other disconcerting reports of abductions and killings continue to numb their senses.

An international human right organisation, the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD), has expressed deep concern about increasing frequency of disappearances in Bangladesh and asked the government to take action. It also urged Bangladesh to abide by the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.

The disappearances and secret killings should not be made an issue of cheap politics. The common people expect responsible response from the government and the opposition on this issue. They want to be assured that the government is serious and taking all necessary measures to arrest and punish the culprits as well as to stop recurrence of such disappearances and secret killings once and for all.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 20

- 1522**
Suleiman the Magnificent accepts the surrender of the surviving Knights of Rhodes, who are allowed to evacuate. They eventually settle on Malta and become known as the Knights of Malta.
- 1860**
South Carolina becomes the first state to secede from the United States.
- 1924**
Hitler is released from Landsberg Prison.
- 1942**
World War II: Bombing of Calcutta by the Japanese.
- 1960**
National Front for the Liberation of Vietnam is formed.
- 1989**
United States invasion of Panama: The United States sends troops into Panama to overthrow government of Manuel Noriega.
- 1995**
NATO begins peacekeeping in Bosnia.
- 1999**
Macau is handed over to the People's Republic of China by Portugal.
- 2007**
Elizabeth II becomes the oldest ever monarch of the United Kingdom, surpassing Queen Victoria, who lived for 81 years, 7 months and 29 days.