

AL 'zero tolerance' of BCL criminality

Seeing is believing

THE 64th founding anniversary of the Bangladesh Chhatra League should have been an occasion for celebration considering the significant role the organisation has played in Bangladesh's history. Unfortunately, much of the joy was marred by the sudden surge in unlawful, indeed criminal activities by BCL activists at higher educational institutions across the country. At Buet, Jagannath University, Rajshahi University, Shahjalal University and Khulna University of Engineering and Technology, BCL men went on a rampage without any thought to the consequences. In Satkhira, the two top leaders of the BCL unit there have been accused by an artiste of attempting to rape her. One of the men is on the run. The Awami League has now informed the country that there will be zero tolerance over any wrong committed by the BCL.

We should have been pleased by such a decision. To our regret, we have to say that we cannot rest content with ruling party people trying to pacify citizens with platitudes and clichés any more. We recall that soon after the present government assumed office in early 2009, BCL activists indulged in activities similar to those it has lately been committing. At the time, some leading newspapers warned the prime minister that these unruly elements needed to be brought under control. The warning was not heeded. Worse, to the nation's discomfiture, the prime minister took umbrage at the suggestion. Today, three years after the AL's ascension to power, we can safely suggest that had that warning about the BCL been taken in good spirit, the criticism that the government faces today would not be there.

Senior AL leaders speak once more of zero tolerance. That is not good enough. The nation will not be satisfied with a mere expulsion or suspension of membership of the offending BCL men. People have always expected that the BCL men will be dealt with by the law for their criminal activities. The party may warn them and so let them off the hook. But unless justice is fully applied in these cases of criminal conduct, zero tolerance for the nation will actually mean zero action on the part of the authorities.

It is time for the ruling party to acknowledge realities as evidenced by the many opinion polls over the past few days. The government must convince the nation that it can and will take action against its own. But it can do so only when it wakes up. Will it wake up, now that it has a mere two years to pull itself away from the brink?

Tribute to Samson

We have lost a rare gem in the business world

A combination of ethics and innovation is quite an unusual one in the world of business. But for Samson H Chowdhury it became a recipe for a consistent ascent in entrepreneurial success.

The story of Samson's remarkable rise in the corporate world is an inspiring one indeed. The son of a medical officer of an outdoor dispensary in Pabna, Samson, in 1952, began with a small pharmacy in a village called Ataikula in the same district. In 1958 he started a pharmaceutical company with three friends. The four partners ended up calling their company 'Square' signifying both the number of partners and as Samson put it, "accuracy, perfection, meaning quality."

With this motto, Square Pharma became a market leader among both national and multinational companies.

Being a natural in building up a business and making it profitable, Samson ventured into a wide range of industries textiles, consumer goods, banking, insurance, agro-vet products, information technology, media, herbal medicine etc. Thus his contribution to the growth of local products was significant.

His long list of credentials include being president of the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, chairman of Transparency International, Bangladesh and the highest positions in many local and international organisations.

But perhaps Samson Chowdhury's most important achievement has been the love and respect he has won from people. His approach to business centred around public welfare; his was one of the first family-owned businesses to go public. He was a benevolent employer, an ideal client for banks. He was a quiet philanthropist and a charming friend to many.

His passing away marks the end of an era and a legacy of taking entrepreneurship to the highest level and giving it an honest face. He proved, and this proof is sorely needed, that you can remain honest and ethical, and yet be hugely successful in business in Bangladesh. No doubt he will be a great inspiration for the younger generations of entrepreneurs.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

January 8

1963

Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa is exhibited in the United States for the first time, at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

1973

Watergate scandal: The trial of seven men accused of illegal entry into Democratic Party headquarters at Watergate begins.

1978

Bowing to international pressure, President of Pakistan Zulfikar Ali Bhutto releases Bengali leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from prison, who had been arrested after declaring the independence of Bangladesh.

SUNDAY POUCH



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

retrospect (2009-2011)." Along with messages of good wishes from the president, the prime minister and the foreign minister, it was a narration of the activities of the ministry.

In some ways the supplement was informative. However, it failed to convey the impression that the ministry is moving strongly to showcase Bangladesh, protect its core interests and reach out to its neighbours and friends across the world to further its national interests.

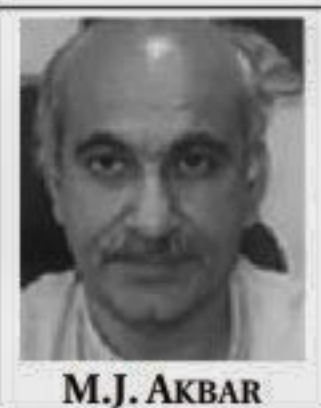
Let us consider the points raised by the ministry in the supplement. It said that "the government is taking every initiative to preservation of its overall national interest, ensuring socio-economic development, enhancing foreign trade and investment, expansion of overseas labour market and providing consular and welfare services to expatriate Bangladeshis."

To start with, the government has not identified what constitutes national interest. The Jatiya Sangsad is perhaps the only legally constituted body that can bring them to the public domain. Its Foreign Affairs Committee in the past three years is reported have met only 12 times instead of 36 times. The discussion centered round issues which did not address substantive matters of foreign policy. Do our parliamentarians find some of these issues too sensitive?

So who in the country is holding the can? Is it the prime minister or her advisors or the foreign minister?

But this is a matter where all sections of the government and the public, including the opposition parties, are stakeholders. With no discussion, national interests are

BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR

be much closer to the truth. Off-the-record does not mean outside-the-discourse; after all, the best way to keep anything to yourself is to remain silent. When a politician chooses to talk without attribution, it only means he, or indeed she, is sending a message with an in-built denial clause. Off-the-record is a means of placing frustration and anger into public play. This is par for the course, and far more fun than the carefully chosen phrases of official fudge.

One senior Congress politician has an extraordinary wish for 2012. He wants the opposition NDA to come to power in the new year for just one reason -- so that NDA might suffer Mamata Banerjee's tantrums just as the present coalition has had to bear them. His assumption, that no government in Delhi is possible in this Parliament without an alliance with the Bengal chief minister, is correct. He could think of no greater curse than survival with the support of Mamata Banerjee.

But give the feisty Banerjee credit for daring; with just 19 MPs she has defeated the 206-MP strong Congress four times this year, and each time in a crucial game. She tripped Prime Minister Manmohan

incorrectly identified or often wrongly prioritised (like emphasising on transit for India instead of sharing the waters of our common rivers, etc). Also, national agencies work without looking at optimum results (we are encouraging the export of our manpower, but do nothing to protect their interests when abroad).

Let us take the next objective as mentioned in the supplement: socio-economic development. The foreign ministry, in spite of its involvement with a myriad group of international organisations, has not been able to obtain any additional benefits for the people. In this respect the ministry of finance has been plodding on along with the ministry of planning to secure socio-economic benefits for our people. They have been proposing, negotiating and getting projects for

Our foreign missions as well as the foreign ministry, at no point of time, have any clue about what projects are being taken up, what items are being procured from abroad, which consultants are being recruited.

implementation from the traditional donor community and the international loan agencies.

Where is the foreign ministry in all this? Our foreign missions as well as the foreign ministry, at no point of time, have any clue about what projects are being taken up, what items are being procured from abroad, which consultants are being recruited. So let us be serious and not write things to impress our people superficially.

Now take the case of foreign trade and investment. On foreign trade, the line ministry is still our commerce ministry. It still has its own officers recruited from a panel of senior personnel, who are sent to the missions and who do their ministry's bidding.

Even these officers have little clue about the obstacles and opportunities for trading in their countries of accreditation. It is essentially the private sector and its dynamic marketing people who procure orders and also buy commodities.

Investments in Bangladesh have in many senses become comical. There have been several "road shows" and "investment promotion seminars" even when the prime minister was present abroad to make a case. But those are attended more by expatriate Bangladeshi businessmen than foreign entrepreneurs who can or are willing to invest abroad. The supplement mentions that in 2010-11 the country had registered Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to the tune of \$768 million. In 2009-10 it was \$716 million. But how much of the investment dollars have actually been

Our foreign missions as well as the foreign ministry, at no point of time, have any clue about what projects are being taken up, what items are being procured from abroad, which consultants are being recruited.

parked inside Bangladesh? So why quote such statistics?

Now let us look at the overseas labour market. The demand pull of labour is usually noticed/ discovered more by individuals working in that country or by private recruiting companies than by officials of the labour or foreign ministry. The human grapevine is the fastest conduit of such information. Some opportunities do filter through when foreign governments advertise. But these are few and far between. So when we put things in perspective, the foreign ministry's role is negligible. That is why there is an abysmal failure to secure new markets for our labour.

As regards providing consular and

welfare services, it is appropriate to give some credit to the foreign ministry. It has simplified many of its actions and foreigners and our nationals in most missions, as well as in the headquarters in Dhaka, are getting services swiftly. But the ministry's handling of the beheading of eight Bangladeshis by the Saudi government leaves much to be desired. Also the issue of "Akama" in Saudi Arabia has been so poorly handled that it has caused much distress to our citizens there. It has been a failure of our diplomacy as we had in the first instance used the good office of our prime minister, without knowing the implications.

One area our foreign ministry can claim some credit is its leadership role in protecting the interest of climate vulnerable countries. It has assumed the chair of Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) and has worked hard to coordinate and include the issue of "climate change induced displacement" in the discourses at Copenhagen, Cancun and Durban climate meetings. The ministry of environment and the civil society also played critical roles.

Last but not the least, the ministry has made a lot of noise about relations with India. Our prime minister has given a clear vision about what she wishes it to be. But due to the ministry's poor understanding of India's geo-political intentions and its past record of how it handles its neighbours, major issues between the two seem to be on hold. Can the ministry work its way out or does it have to depend again on non-professional advisors to get entangled further?

For much of the past three years, the foreign ministry has built castles in the air. Its work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now the government should put foundations under them.

The writer is a former Ambassador and Chairman of the Centre for Foreign affairs Studies.
E-mail: ashfaque303@gmail.com

On the record

Singh in Bangladesh by refusing to part with the Teesta river waters. She lassoed him at home over foreign direct investment in retail, and pensions. And she left UPA flat on its face on the Lokpal Bill. She understands a basic rule, that the best strategy vis-à-vis Congress is to replicate how Congress treats its allies. Congress does not consider an alliance to be a cooperative. It plays by what might be called the Frank Sinatra method: my way, or the highway. Suddenly, Mamata Banerjee is telling her senior partner that if it wants to stay in power,

know how to be meek; that particular gene was left out of her DNA. Congress is used to lambs in its fold, even when sometimes it feels that there is a wolf lurking inside in sheep's clothing. As long as the wolf bleats, all is well. Suddenly, Congress is faced with the prospect, in the words of the Urdu poet, of watching the house go up in flames because of a domestic lamp. It will burn slowly, corner by corner.

Congress politics, therefore, will be centred in the first half of the new year on a single objective: how

Mamata Banerjee may sometimes succumb to mistakes, but she does not believe in accidents. Her moves are deliberate. Her message for 2012 is obvious: her options are open. She has no reason to be as docile as the DMK, since she is not vulnerable on any corruption charge.

then it will be on her terms. She knows Congress culture intimately; after all, she has been there.

Mamata Banerjee may sometimes succumb to mistakes, but she does not believe in accidents. Her moves are deliberate. Her message for 2012 is obvious: her options are open. She has no reason to be as docile as the DMK, since she is not vulnerable on any corruption charge. She does not fear exposure because she has no great scam to hide from the CBI. She is not worried therefore about Delhi's blackmail. She doesn't

to find a hedge against Mamata Banerjee's 19 MPs. Congress does not necessarily want to replace Mamata; it only seeks to make her irrelevant. It wants honey without the sting. This is what makes Mulayam Singh Yadav so crucial to its prospects. In its ideal scenario, Mulayam would be the largest single party after the UP Assembly elections, but dependent on Congress MLAs for a majority. His MPs would be collateral hostage in Delhi, keeping Prime Minister Rahul Gandhi stable for two years

until the 2014 general elections.

Here is the nuanced sub-plot, a drama within the drama. Why have Mrs. Sonia Gandhi and Rahul been silent while Mamata Banerjee sabotaged the PM's initiatives? Because, wittingly or not, she did Rahul Gandhi a service by weakening Dr. Manmohan Singh. It is not easy to dislodge a strong and loyal PM, which is what Dr. Singh was in his first term. His helplessness on the night that Congress allowed the Lokpal Bill to wither in fomented confusion was visible to the country. Live television coverage is far more dangerous to government than any hostile news anchor. It is still a whisper, but the question being raised in Delhi recalls what that great cricketer Vijay Merchant once said: you should retire when people still ask why, not when. In politics, a whisper can turn into a clamour very quickly. All it needs is circumstance, and a puppeteer behind the curtain.

There are enough reasons for the senior Congress notable to prefer anonymity; verbal interventions have to be timed, as well as graded. Congress has given permission to its Bengal unit to attack Mamata Banerjee with vitriol, but it is only Delhi's acid that can burn relationships. Messages are flying in both directions, but the moment has not yet come to switch off-record to on-record. Wait another twelve weeks or sixteen.

The writer is Editor of The Sunday Guardian, published from Delhi, India on Sunday, published from London and Editorial Director, India Today and Headlines Today.