

Opposition takes dialogue path

We commend it

WE are heartened that the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has joined the dialogue with the president on Wednesday to ventilate its demand for restoration of caretaker system of government before the reconstitution of Election Commission.

We in this paper have been consistently saying that the government committed a mistake by annulling the caretaker system of government. At the same time it needs to be stressed that the path for settling the issue is not through conflict on the street, but through peaceful means like dialogues.

By boycotting the JS, the opposition has denied itself a powerful platform to make its case on the caretaker system heard. Now that they are hinting of joining parliament they should make it happen. That way they will be taking the issue to the people through a more effective means and put the ruling party to test on its assurances that the opposition is free to place its formula for the government's consideration.

And during the her talks with the president, too, the opposition leader has decidedly expressed her readiness to participate in talks with the government to resolve the standoff arising out of the abrogation of the caretaker system of government.

Only a couple of days back, the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had called upon the opposition to join the Jatiya Sangsad (JS) to present its demands for the caretaker government. We think the PM would repeat her offer to the opposition BNP and vigorously draw it to a process of engagement over the caretaker issue.

We think rather than waging a war of endless words with the opposition, the government will make bold moves to engage the opposition in constructive dialogues to bridge all the differences.

If both the ruling Awami League (AL) and the opposition BNP see each other's points of view and agree on a give-and-take mode, then only the people will be spared the turmoil and offer the political parties opportunity for a broad-based participation in the next parliamentary polls.

Ban on corporal punishment

After one year, still a long way to go

THE High Court (HC) on this day last year declared corporal punishment illegal and unconstitutional in all educational institutions throughout the country. Defining caning, beating or subjecting students to any cruel and inhuman punishment as 'misconduct' under the Government Servants Discipline and Appeal Rules 1985, it directed the education ministry to ensure dissemination of the directives and regular inspection to ward off occurrences of corporal punishment. It also directed the ministry to take actions against those in breach of the law. We considered it a historic move to ensure a decent atmosphere in schools for every child, which is a prerequisite for creative learning as opposed to learning by flogging. But we also believe that a law is as good as its implementation.

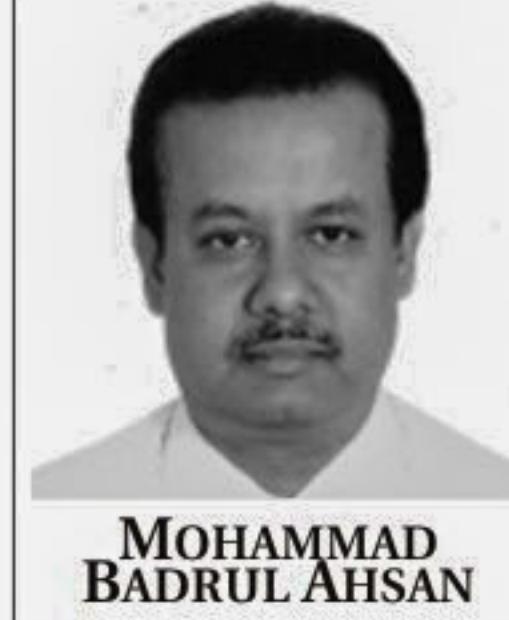
We have sadly noted that even after a year of the HC order corporal punishment has continued to be meted out in schools located especially in the capital city as reported in media. This owes much to the local government institutions and school governing bodies having failed to disseminate the guidelines provided by the HC. The HC order to form committees in every district to monitor actions in compliance with its directives has also not materialized yet.

We urge the education ministry to propel the local government bodies into launching an awareness campaign among teachers, guardians and students across the country. We emphasize the campaign because it is a commonly held belief that teachers are privileged to beat students to infuse discipline into them. Quite the contrary, it is not only a violation of children's right to equal respect guaranteed by a civilized society, it also leaves an indelible scar on their minds when they are subjected to flogging or any other form of inhuman treatment including verbal abuse.

Side by side with the campaign, formation of the national and the local committees ordered by the HC should be completed to ensure monitoring so that not a single act of corporal punishment goes unreported and

CROSS TALK

Democracy has shouted back



MOHAMMAD
BADRUL AHSAN

THIRD time in a row, after Chittagong, after Narayanganj, Comilla has proven it all over again. All these

three municipal elections have proven for as many times that when people don't like something, they can push back. In all three constituencies, notoriety of high profile candidates, all of them having the same bad reputation in common other than their party affiliation, led their voters to rebuff them. A hat-trick of good news, it has been tested three times lately that democracy in this country isn't dead.

Instead, it's still breathing inside our political system. People are still capable of making their choice. They can still reject candidates and eject governments. They don't necessarily vote by rote. They can still exercise precision in their decision. They can still transform outrage into courage. If the herd mentality is their weakness, it's also their proven strength.

All the more reason why the Comilla election has brought us one step closer to hope. Those who often wonder whether the fragile plant of democracy can survive in this arid soil should have a second thought, because people still matter when push comes to shove. The Lincolnian dictum of democracy still works in this country. We have the government of the people, by the people and for the people. If people may not get the government they want, they also may not want the government they get.

If anything, democracy shouted back in the last three municipal elections. In Chittagong, the voters chose a low-key BNP candidate in 2010 against a diehard AL juggernaut, the incumbent mayor who was elected three times before. As a matter of fact,



More than a party and more than a candidate, the voters in the last three elections have voted for change. People are seeking a new equilibrium with their government. Democracy isn't dead, politicians. Shape up or shape out, it has been breathing down your neck.

the BNP man believably was an AL sympathiser previously. He switched his loyalty and won a landslide.

In Narayanganj, people voted for a candidate who was dumped by her party, and she won by a huge margin. The voters wanted her to win as passionately as they wanted her opponent to lose. A similar thing happened in Comilla this month, where a rebel candidate defeated a ruling party stalwart by twice as many votes.

Who actually won those elections is a million dollar question. If AL has lost, did BNP win? Did people vote for the candidate, or did they vote for the party? It is clear that people have voted against the ruling party. Does

that mean they have voted for BNP?

It's hard to tell whether a rebel candidate would have won in Chittagong, but that election surely weighed somewhere between anti-incumbency sentiments and BNP popularity. In Narayanganj, where the rebel AL candidate won, the BNP candidate would have lost by all means. In Comilla, another BNP man contesting on the party ticket didn't stand a chance to win.

That tells us that people no longer like being caught in a vise between the two political parties. Two out of three times they went for candidates who were distanced from their political settings. In Chittagong, they went

for a subliminally political man, who was on the cusp of change.

Brazilian lyricist and novelist Paulo Coelho says that everything that happens once can never happen again, but everything that happens twice will surely happen a third time. It has already happened three times that the voters have voted against the ruling party. It has also happened all three times that the voters have sent a clear message against corruption and violence and in favour of clean image. They have also said it loud and clear by a whopping margin of their votes that they have not voted for the political parties but for the candidates.

Those who can hear, democracy has shouted back. Three times already people have tried to say that they want to take their country back. They have acted wisely, they have voted precisely and they have firmly said no to the godfathers and their goons. Once burned, they are twice warned. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Since 1971, people haven't elected either of the two political parties to two contiguous terms in office.

But never before has it happened that candidates who lost their party blessings got such overwhelming support from the people. If it has happened this time, it has its reasons. In the past, people had alternated one political party with another because they didn't have a choice. Every election time they had to pick one of the two political parties, and they picked the lesser of the two evils.

Now they want to break out of that frame. More than a party and more than a candidate, the voters in the last three elections have voted for change. People are seeking a new equilibrium with their government. Democracy isn't dead, politicians. Shape up or shape out, it has been breathing down your neck.

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| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

The forgotten wages of war

JOHN TIRMAN

THE end of the Iraq war occasioned few reflections on the scale of destruction we have wrought there. As is our habit, the discussion focused on the costs to America in blood and treasure, the false premises of the war and the continuing challenges of instability in the region. What happened to Iraqis was largely ignored. And in Libya, the recent investigation of civilian casualties during Nato's bombing campaign was the first such accounting of what many believed was a largely victimless war.

We rarely question that wars cause extensive damage, but our view of America's wars has been blind to one specific aspect of destruction: the human toll of those who live in war zones.

We tune out the voices of the victims and belittle their complaints about the midnight raids, the house-to-house searches, the checkpoints, the drone attacks, the bombs that fall on weddings instead of al-Qaeda. Gen. Tommy R. Franks famously said during the early days of the war in Afghanistan: "We don't do body counts." But someone should. What we learn from body counts tells us much about war and those who wage it.

More than 10 years after the war in Afghanistan began, we have only the sketchiest notion of how many people have died as a consequence of the conflict. The United Nations office in Kabul assembles some figures from morgues and other sources, but they are incomplete. The same has been true for Iraq, although a number of independent efforts have been made there to account for the dead.

But such numbers, which run into the hundreds of thousands, gain scant attention. American political and military leaders, like the public, show little interest in non-American casualties.

Denial, after all, is politically convenient. Failing to consider the mortality figures, the refugees, the impoverished, the demolished hospitals and clean water systems and schools is to deny, in effect, that the war ever hap-

pened. from the occupiers, the more ferocious their reaction.

Gen. David H. Petraeus recognised this and sought to reform army practice. In a field manual he co-authored in 2006, he explained that when "forces fail to provide security or threaten the security of civilians, the population is likely to seek security guarantees from insurgents, militias or other armed groups. This situation can feed support for an insurgency."

If our leaders are unwilling to grasp the scale of death and social disruption, and the meaning of this chaos for the local population, then American war efforts are likely to end badly and relationships with allies will become strained.

pened.

The American military cannot afford to be so cavalier about the dynamics of war. The consequences of how we fight wars reveal a great deal about how and why others fight us.

In Iraq, for example, the causes of the Sunni resistance were often attributed to lost social status; the role of American violence against civilians early in the conflict was rarely discussed. Yet many of the captured Iraqis said they were defending their communities by resisting the occupying forces. Roughing up, detaining or killing suspected enemy fighters -- as the coalition forces did in countless operations -- prompted some Iraqis to take up the gun, the I.E.D. and the suicide bomb. The more violence

In several opinion polls, Iraqis identified American forces as the primary cause of the violence besetting their country. And although the violence of war and occupation was a proximate cause of the Iraqi resistance, we have few metrics to understand its scope. WikiLeaks released military documents in October 2010 that included accounts of Iraqi fatalities, but such reports are incomplete and sometimes biased, and they reflect only what the troops actually witnessed. News media reports are similarly limited. And our political and military leaders barely consider these numbers anyway.

They dwell instead in a make-believe world of vastly less mayhem, oblivious to what actually besets the civilian population. In 2006, two sepa-

rate household surveys, by the Iraqi Ministry of Health and by researchers from Johns Hopkins University, found between 400,000 and 650,000 "excess deaths" in Iraq as a result of the war. At the time, however, the commanding general in Iraq put the number at 50,000 and President Bush had claimed in late 2005 that it was just 30,000.

If our leaders are unwilling to grasp the scale of death and social disruption, and the meaning of this chaos for the local population, then American war efforts are likely to end badly and relationships with allies will become strained, as has happened with President Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan.

Karzai's repeated complaints about Nato actions that cause civilian casualties are often dismissed in the West as political posturing, but his persistence on this issue indicates how deeply it resonates with Afghans. While we dismiss it, Muslims around the world take note.

Ignoring the extent of civilian casualties and the damage they cause is a moral failing as well as a strategic blunder. We need to adopt reliable ways to measure the destruction our wars cause -- an "epistemology of war," as another general, William Tecumseh Sherman, called it -- to break through the collective amnesia that has gripped us.

If we do not demand a full accounting of the wages of war, future failures are all the more likely -- and war-

rant.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

January 13

532

Nika riots in Constantinople.

1842

Dr. William Brydon, an assistant surgeon in the British East India Company Army during the First Anglo-Afghan War, becomes famous for being the sole survivor of an army of 4,500 men and 12,000 camp followers when he reaches the safety of a garrison in Jalabad.

1951

First Indochina War: The Battle of Vinh Yen begins, which will end in a major victory for France.

1953

Marshal Josip Broz Tito is chosen as President of Yugoslavia.

1964

Anti-Muslim riots break out in Calcutta resulting in 100 deaths.

1991

Soviet Union troops attack Lithuanian independence supporters in Vilnius, killing 14 people and wounding 1000.