

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Respecting parliamentary norms

Top leaders should lead by example

PRIME minister and leader of the House Sheikh Hasina, while welcoming the opposition to parliament did not hesitate to suggest that they returned to the Jatiya Sangsad (JS) to retain their seats. On the one hand, she never tires of urging the opposition to come to the JS to place their demands, while on the other, she could not resist imputing an opportunistic motive to the opposition lawmakers' return to parliament.

But was she not equally at fault for having set similar records when she herself was in the opposition? This kind of self-serving attitude hardly behoves someone, who served the nation twice as its prime minister on two other terms as the leader of the opposition.

The leader of the opposition, Khaleda Zia, on her part did not display the common courtesy of being present at the House to hear the prime minister speak. Actually, she hurriedly exited the floor of the House the moment the prime minister rose to speak. This is regrettable.

That apart, the way some women MPs both in the Treasury and the Opposition benches hurled unparliamentary remarks and abuse at each other amounted to desecrating the sanctity of the JS. It also brought down the prestige of the women of the country.

It was sad to note that the lawmakers of both the opposition and treasury benches thumped on the tables to express their support of unseemly remarks in front of their leaders.

Ironically, this is happening in a country where both the leaders of the House and opposition are women.

The leadership of Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (AL) at their highest levels should prevail upon their lawmakers to put a leash on their tongue in deference to the parliamentary norms.

The rod is yet to be spared

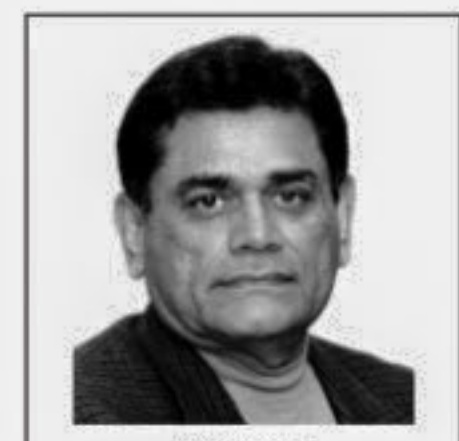
Corporal punishment at school continues unabated

IN January, one year into a court ruling banning corporal punishment at educational institutions, a survey conducted by human rights organisation Bangladesh Legal Aid Services Trust (BLAST) found that 59 percent of students are still subject to it at schools. Of the 59 percent, 21.3 percent are verbally abused.

The statistics are further reinforced by recent news reports -- of four in four consecutive days this month alone and one from last month -- on corporal punishment administered at schools outside Dhaka. A boy caned to the point of his eye being injured; a mother beaten with her son when she went to protest his being beaten with an iron rod; four girls who fell sick doing 200 sit-ups holding their ears. The list is endless and -- especially in this 'modern' day and 'civilised' society -- unthinkable.

This is despite the High Court ruling of corporal punishment constituting a clear violation of children's fundamental rights to life, liberty and freedom from cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. The court at that time pointed out the government's obligations under national and international law to prohibit, prevent and prosecute incidents of corporal punishment. It also issued a number of directives such as the dissemination of guidelines prohibiting corporal punishment in educational institutions and in the media, monitoring of institutions and training of teachers in this regard.

We strongly urge the authorities to investigate not only the incidents but also why they continue to occur despite such legal measures -- if they are even being taken, or, if not, why not. There is also the issue of awareness-raising of the fact that corporal punishment is an illegal as well as barbaric practice. It is highly unfortunate that it continues today and we must leave no stone unturned in ensuring a change in social mindset combined with strict enforcement of the law towards preventing and punish-



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NOW that the siege of Dhaka is over, but without it being really determined as to whom the capital belongs

-- the AL, or the BNP, or to the people who vote the parties to govern but have to endure the most unspeakable sufferings because of them -- the question is which way are we heading?

It is not only a foolish question to ask, under the present circumstances, even to express ones views of the likely scenario of the next few weeks and months may also invite the ire of the "big brother" and may even run the risk of being called an "anti-state" element. But that is exactly what the common person in the street is asking. And it is not difficult to predict, by the look of things at present, on the nature of things to come. Our fears have been caused by the way the two parties have been at each other inside the parliament from the very first day of the BNP's rejoining the parliament.

And if one has not been overwhelmed by a feeling of déjà vu at the boycott and rejoining of the parliament of the BNP, for whatever ostensible reasons, then perhaps one is being, very likely, caught up with what doctors might call a progressive decline of the cognitive faculty of the cerebellum.

Perhaps a look at the newspapers of June 16, 2004 would jog our mem-

ory. The previous day that year the AL had returned to the parliament full time after an absence of eleven and half months and after 152 sittings. And the reason for its boycott was the demand that the BNP call early elections, accusing the government of failing to crack down on crime and corruption.

BNP's joining the parliament was good news but, regrettably, one cannot be hopeful of an amicable resolution of a situation which may eventually create a political stale-

some of the opposition MPs to those belonging to the oldest profession. But that description was equally applicable to some comments of her party MPs too.

If one is looking for an answer to the oft-asked question as to why there is a general apathy towards politics amongst the youngsters and why the brighter and the good ones among them are so reluctant to join politics one has to only read the proceedings of the house of the last several days, or look at the TV

heads of the two major parties. While one is not certain that things would get better if both were to relinquish absolute power in the party, one can only hope that the new bloods without hereditary linkage may not have to carry the baggage of the past and would be able to place the interest of the country above everything else.

The prognosis of a peaceful outcome of the current impasse is rather bleak. With the AL and BNP lodged in a very inflexible position the prospect of a participatory and universally acceptable election, which is what the people want, is becoming increasingly remote.

Khaleda Zia has for the first time in floor of the House made the demand in very unequivocal terms for a caretaker system to run the next election. Sheikh Hasina did not respond to that demand, but she did not reject it out of hand either, as she has been wont to do even very recently. And, therefore, we are not sure how we should take it -- it may well be an indication of the party's unwillingness to commit one way or the other at the moment while it devises a strategy to address the issue. Can we take any comfort from that?

The AL should realise that a general election without the main opposition would be meaningless, futile and wasteful, even if it went ahead with it on its own. It should also sense the popular pulse that is overwhelmingly for a neutral dispensation to run the parliamentary elections.

The writer is Editor, Op-ed and Strategic Issues, The Daily Star.

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mate if the core contentious issue is not addressed pragmatically. While one had hoped that the BNP's rejoining the parliament would help calm the current combustible situation, one is disappointed by the way matters have transpired in the House.

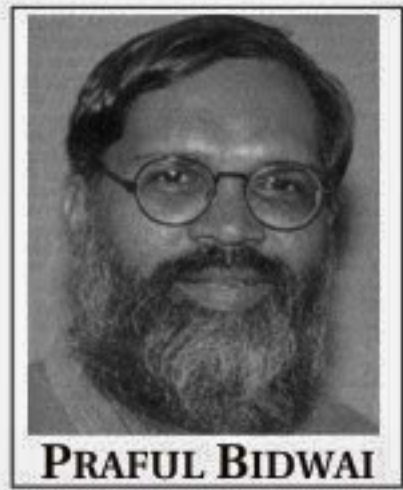
The fact is that the BNP leader had been targeted for personal attack by some ruling party MPs from the very beginning of the session, and the BNP felt inclined to return the compliments in full. It was a competition of who can sink to the lowest. The foreign minister, known for her sobriety, felt compelled to compare the comments of

replays or read the newspapers for the comments both in the parliament and outside it, to appreciate the level of depravity that politics and political culture have been made to sink into. That is enough to make any sane-thinking person stay as far away from politics as possible. Are these really examples that the youths of today can follow without putting their moral values in jeopardy?

But can we really do without fresh blood in politics? That is the point at issue. Politics being in the state it is in, can we remain captive to the kind of politics that has become hostage of personal animosity of the

PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

The end of the nuclear illusion



PRAFUL BIDWAI

A year after the Fukushima a nuclear catastrophe began in Japan, the world has a historic chance to end one of the big-

gest-ever frauds played on the public to promote a patently unsafe, accident-prone, expensive and centralised form of energy generation based upon splitting the atom to boil water and spin a turbine. Candidly, that's what nuclear power generation is all about.

The promise of boundless, universal prosperity based on cheap, safe and abundant energy through "Atoms for Peace," held out by US President Dwight Eisenhower in 1953, was deceptive and meant to temper the prevalent perception of atomic energy as a malign force following Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Eisenhower was a hawk committed to building up the US nuclear arsenal from under 1,500 to over 20,000 warheads. He sought to "compensate" for this by dressing up nuclear energy as a positive force and camouflage the huge US military build-up.

The nuclear promise was based on unrealistic assumptions about safety and being "too cheap even to metre." The US Navy transferred reactor designs developed for nuclear-propelled submarines to General Electric and Westinghouse for free. The US also limited the nuclear industry's accident liability to a ludicrously low level.

The world has since lost over \$1,000 billion in subsidies, cash losses, abandoned projects and other damage from nuclear power. Decontaminating Fukushima alone is estimated to cost \$623 billion, not counting treatment costs for thousands of likely cancers.

All of the world's 400-odd reactors can undergo a catastrophic accident. They will remain a liability until decommissioned (entombed in

concrete) at huge public expense -- one-third to one-half of the cost of building them. They will also leave behind nuclear waste, which remains hazardous for thousands of years, and which science has no way of storing safely.

All this for a technology which contributes just 2% of global final energy consumption!. Even the *Economist* magazine, which long backed nuclear power, calls it "the dream that failed."

Nuclear power declined on its home ground because it became too risky and "too costly to hook to a metre." The US hasn't ordered a new reactor since 1973. Western Europe hasn't completed a new reactor since Chernobyl (1986).

As a former member of the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission

Nuclear power cannot be a solution to the climate crisis. Its potential contribution is too small, it's too slow to deploy, and too expensive. By contrast, renewables have already emerged as a safe, flexible, quickly deployable solution, with a typically lower carbon footprint than nuclear power.

says: "The abiding lesson [from Three Mile Island meltdown (1979)]... was that... reactor operators... could turn a \$2 billion asset into a \$1 billion cleanup job in about 90 minutes."

Nuclear power is now on the run globally. The number of reactors operating worldwide has fallen from the historic peak of 444 (2002) to 429. Their share in global electricity supply has shrunk from 17% to 13%. And it's likely to fall further as some 180-plus 30 years-old or older reactors are retired. Just about 60 new ones are planned.

Post-Fukushima, nobody will build reactors without big subsidies or high state-guaranteed returns -- or unless they are China or India. China's rulers don't have to bother about democracy, public opinion or

safety standards.

Nor are India's rulers moved by these. They are desperate to award the reactor contracts promised to the US, France and Russia for lobbying for the US-India nuclear deal in the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Dr. Manmohan Singh has even stooped to maligning Indian anti-nuclear protesters as foreign-funded, as if they had no minds of their own, and as if the government's priority wasn't to import reactors.

Nuclear power is bound up with secrecy, deception and opacity, which clash with democracy. It evokes fear and loathing and can only be promoted by force while violating civil liberties.

A recent BBC-GlobeScan poll shows that 69% of people in 23 countries

oppose building new reactors, including 90% in Germany, 84% in Japan, 80% in Russia and 83% in France. This proportion has sharply risen since 2005. Only 22% of people in the 12 countries which operate nuclear plants favour building new ones.

Nuclear reactors are high-pressure high-temperature systems, in which a fission chain-reaction is barely checked from getting out of control. But controls can fail for many reasons, including short circuits, faulty valves, operator error, fire, earthquakes or tsunamis. No technology is 100% safe. High-risk technologies demand a meticulous, self-critical and highly alert safety culture, which most countries lack.

The world has witnessed five core meltdowns in 15,000 reactor-years.

At this rate, we can expect one core meltdown every eight years in the world's 400-odd reactors. This is simply unacceptable.

Yet, the nuclear industry behaves as if this couldn't happen. It has a collusive relationship with regulators, highlighted in numerous articles on Japan, including one by Yoichi Funabashi, chair of the Rebuild Japan Initiative Foundation: "We Japanese have long prided ourselves on being a society that provides safety and security... [But this] has been matched by our aversion to facing the potential threat of nuclear emergencies..."

He adds: "Any drills for a nuclear emergency were meticulously designed to avoid giving any impression that an accident could possibly progress to the severity of a meltdown... But avoidance ultimately translated into unpreparedness."

Nuclear power is bound up with radiation, which is harmful in all doses, at each step of the nuclear fuel cycle. Nuclear plants routinely expose surrounding populations to harmful radioactive and chemical emissions.

Nuclear power is costlier not just than coal- or gas-based electricity, but increasingly, renewable energy. The European Pressurised Reactor of the crisis-ridden French firm Areva, and earmarked for Jaitapur in India, is now quoting for \$6,500-plus per kilowatt, compared to under \$2,000 for wind turbines.

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The world needs a new climate-friendly, safe, decentralised energy system with smart grids and high efficiency. Nuclear power can have no place in it.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 22

1739 Nadir Shah occupies Delhi in India and sacks the city, stealing the jewels of the Peacock Throne.

1829 The three protecting powers (United Kingdom, France and Russia) establish the borders of Greece.

1916 The last Emperor of China, Yuan Shikai, abdicates the throne and the Republic of China is restored.

1920 Azeri and Turkish army soldiers with participation of Kurdish gangs attacked the Armenian inhabitants of Shushi (Nagorno Karabakh).

1945 The Arab League is founded when a charter is adopted in Cairo, Egypt.

2004 Ahmed Yassin, co-founder and leader of the Palestinian Sunni Islamist group Hamas, two bodyguards, and nine civilian bystanders are killed in the Gaza Strip when hit by Israeli Air Force AH-64 Apache fired Hellfire missiles.

2006 ETA, the armed Basque separatist group, declares a permanent ceasefire.