

Political unrest

Threat to foreign investment

THE business community has been crying hoarse, and one cannot emphasise enough the need for both the major parties to ensure, that nothing by way of political programmes or counter programmes undertaken by them should impede the normal economic activities in the country. And very few would disagree with our businessmen that given the current trend, the business environment might get worse with the deterioration of the political atmosphere. And from all indications there are very little signs of a let up in the restive situation on the political front.

And in this regard one would like to most strongly reiterate the comments of the FBCCI President that political uncertainty creates fear and thus discourages new domestic investment. And when such is the case where domestic investors do not feel confident, it would be unwise to expect foreign investors to sink money under uncertain circumstances. Reportedly, the net FDI in the first half of the current fiscal year is USD 375 million, which one feels would have been far more had the situation been more conducive. At a time when we need to create more jobs, diversify exports and become a part of the global supply chain, external capital being shooed away due to political uncertainty is calamitous.

As it is, there are several avoidable impediments that exert negative influence on foreign investment in Bangladesh; the rather high cost of doing business, red-tape, inefficient and bad management of our ports are but a few of them. And in Bangladesh where poor domestic saving doesn't make for high domestic investment, and where some other positive factors, like cost of labour, should make Bangladesh a good destination for foreigners to do business in, it is the political situation that works as the greatest disincentive. This particular situation has also been highlighted by our development partners and friends as well.

It is a matter of regret that our politicians are unwilling to comprehend the situation. Had that not been so they would have ensured that the most important prerequisite for economic progress, a peaceful political environment, was not disturbed. That has not been the case, and the country is very much the worse for it.

Arsenic contamination

Puts over 7 crore lives at risk

THE recent reports on arsenic contamination throughout the country are alarming. Over 7 crore people are said to be at risk from arsenic contamination, while over 2 crore people are actually drinking unsafe water. Though the current government in its last election manifesto had promised arsenic-free water supply to the people, it is yet to fulfil the promise. In fact, while more people have access to arsenic-free water due to safe water supply projects from the government, there are currently no projects directly related to arsenic pollution, and committees which were formed to deal with the problem have been inactive for years.

Neither are we clear on the actual extent of the problem and, even more so, that of the health repercussions. The 2010 figures of 56,758 patients suffering from arsenicosis may be an understatement. For, while some people are visibly suffering the consequences, reflected in skin problems including skin cancer, others may well be suffering unknowingly, with the contaminated water aggravating conditions such as cancers of the bladder, kidney and lung, diseases of the blood vessels of the legs and feet, diabetes, high blood pressure and reproductive disorders. These figures are unknown and excluded from government statistics, making it even more difficult to actually do something about it.

While the problem is, literally, deep-rooted, there are ways out. Safe water supply is the first and foremost necessity in countering arsenic contamination, for many people in the country knowingly drink contaminated water simply because they have no source of safe water. Committees must be reactivated to investigate the current extent of the problem and identify and implement solutions, such as installing deep tube wells wherever necessary. The government must go all out to tackle the problem which is putting crores of lives at risk. What can we claim to have achieved as a nation if we cannot provide our citizens with a need as

KALEIDOSCOPE



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina, at the closing of the winter session of the Jatiya Sangsad on Thursday (March 29) last week, fired a broadside at the print and the electronic media for propagating what she termed "an admixture of truth and untruth" at their whim.

It is not for the first time that the government from its different levels has expressed its unhappiness with media reports. The difference is that this time it has come from government's highest position.

In her speech in parliament, the PM did not mention which report or reports irked her in particular, though. But one thing that has been made clear from the PM's speech is that this time she was displeased with the entire media, both electronic and the print.

We are not surprised. The media people's very job is to report and comment on the day-to-day goings-on in the corridors of power, in parliament, in business and industry, at meetings and rallies of political parties, civil societies, or groups and in society at large, and dish them out for the audience every day.

The government also wants to know what is happening where through the media. And it certainly wants to know the truth. And the media tries its best to do the job.

Then why this resentment? What untruth or concocted half-truth has the media disseminated that might have aggrieved or hurt any quarter

in the government? We would be willing to know that from the government.

It would be worthwhile at this point to make it clear once again to the government, the general public and all others concerned that the function of the media is not to create, but only to carry the news. Even so, people in authority are often not so happy with the media.

It must also be admitted that as it is with any other areas of human endeavour, it is not that the media is not susceptible to errors. Mistakes may occur in reporting, in the process of its treatment or analysis of information that is disseminated in print or on the ether.

And if someone is aggrieved at such wrong dispensation of news, there is the provision of rejoinder to express their grievance. The media house responsible for the misinformation will correct that.

Still, the media is always the favourite whipping boy.

But one thing the media people know for sure; they will never be able to make the establishment happy. The media people know that very well from their long experience in the profession.

PM in her parliamentary speech

also made an oblique remark about media freedom during the last government under the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which is now the main opposition.

If truth be told, such comparison, too, does not hold water. All through, it has been more of the same; the journalists were never better off carrying out their tasks.

But what makes us most concerned is when leaders of a democratically elected government

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attempt to remind the people and the media that in their time the media has had more freedom, or that it was more tolerant to the media. What does that really mean?

It sounds strange to hear such things from the leaders of any democratic government. The fact that the people had voted a political party into office is because it promised to ensure all the constitutional rights of the people including freedom of the press. And wherever democracy has become the way of government in Europe, North America, or in other continents, it has come with the freedom of the press. So, if it is really a democracy, then the question of giving press or media freedom cannot and should not arise.

Unfortunately, many among our

political leaders, who had embraced imprisonment for the cause of democracy and press freedom under dictatorial regimes in the past, conveniently forget it once they are in power. And we cannot believe our ears when they try to show their 'generosity' towards a very fundamental condition of democracy -- freedom of the press. One wonders if our leaders come out with such statements wittingly or unwittingly!

Though the media in Bangladesh has earned praise for its objectivity and courage from abroad, the government has hardly ever been that generous to recognise that at home.

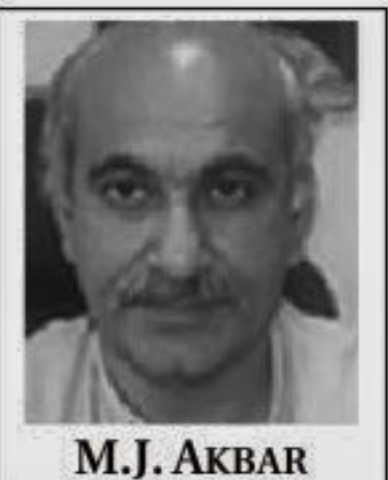
And at the end of the day, it is disappointing indeed for the workers in the media to know that, far from getting recognition for the hard work and risk they have been taking to bring out the truth, it is only its wrath that they have been able to draw from the establishment.

Notwithstanding that, in the beginning, the media had reasons to become more optimistic about the incumbent government, especially after it passed the Right to Information Act (RIA) and created the constitutional body, the Information Commission, to look after the Act's implementation.

But like any other good laws, the RIA is still mostly a lameduck law. The media people's access to various government offices for information is strewn with many hurdles. And once the government begins to earnestly remove those hurdles, that will go a long way in bridging the present gap between the government and the media.

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BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR

IT must be a bit galling for Mrs. Sonia Gandhi to kowtow before a politician who sabotaged her personal bid to lead a Congress coalition government in 1997, and then minced her son Rahul's ambitions in 2012. But a political heart pumps both warm and cold blood. The best politicians park emotions in an attic when there is the business of give and take to be done. Mrs. Gandhi is a good politician, and memory no longer has a place in her equations with Mulayam Singh Yadav. She cannot win the July elections for Rashtrapati Bhavan without his support.

Mulayam Singh has paid a sharp price for standing in Mrs. Gandhi's way. His party has supported the UPA government consistently since 2004 without being permitted a share in power. He has been humiliated at ritual dinners. He set aside what hurt he might have felt and supported the passage of the Indo-US nuclear bill in the Lok Sabha in 2008, preventing an early general election. There was much talk of an appropriate reward, possibly the defence ministry, for him. Nothing happened. After 2009 the Congress had less need of his support, so there was little question of any quid pro quo. But after his overwhelming victory in this year's UP Assembly elections, his help is once again crucial to Congress sur-

vival. If the Congress candidate for president cannot win, the UPA government in Delhi will lose its last claim to credibility.

The best deal for the Congress would be to get Mulayam's votes in return for an IOU. Since secrecy is unknown in Indian politics, Lucknow is already humming with talk that Congress has offered Mulayam Singh Yadav the vice-president's position tomorrow in return for his support today. The vice-president's election is scheduled for August. The earlier buzz was that A.K. Antony would be elevated to president and Mulayam given

results, he would still be waiting.

The problem between Mulayam and Congress is a trust deficit. More specifically, Mulayam does not trust the Congress, and it is only political compulsion that keeps him within the UPA. His support base will not permit him to join the BJP-led NDA, and an alliance with the Left within a Third Front makes little sense. It will not gather much moss at the national level, and the Left has nothing to offer in Uttar Pradesh. It is a Congress presumption that Mulayam has nowhere else to go, and that while he may feint and twist he has little option except to

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that portfolio. But that has dimmed with the sudden daubs in Antony's saintly image after the fiasco with the army chief V.K. Singh.

If nothing else, this indicates the mercurial shifts that occur at a time of turmoil. You can trust tomorrow if you can be reasonably certain about what tomorrow will bring. But with circumstances lurching around like a raft in high waves, give and take must occur at the same time. Ajit Singh, who is now civil aviation minister, was smart enough to insist on being sworn in before he did the electoral deal in Uttar Pradesh. If he had waited for the

queue up behind the Congress in any stand-off up between UPA and NDA.

That is a mistake. A seeming dead-end can bring out the creative in a skilful driver seeking a way out. There are all sorts of deviations that open alternative routes. Mulayam, for instance, could place a simple but eminently logical condition: if the Congress wants his support, it will have to consult him on the candidate. Five years ago, Mrs. Sonia Gandhi pulled out an unknown rabbit out of an obscure hat at the last minute, and we got what he have.

One of the more amazing facts is

that Congress does not seem to trust its most obvious, and ablest, candidate, Pranab Mukherjee. Pranab Mukherjee has everything on his side, except the support of his party. It would be a fitting pinnacle to an extraordinary career. His personality, and the respect he commands in Parliament and the country, would ensure a reasonably easy victory. His election would stabilise the UPA, albeit only until it managed to destabilise itself once again.

Mamata Banerjee, whose alliance can never be taken for granted, could hardly object to the most distinguished Bengali of this generation. Stalwarts like Mulayam would be comfortable with Mukherjee in a way they could never be with those of far lesser stature. But the Congress seems to believe that Pranab Mukherjee should always be put in charge of cooking the meal but never given a seat at the head table. There is a second distinguished candidate, Vice-President Hamid Ansari, but his disadvantage in these partisan times is that he does not belong to any party. Mulayam Singh Yadav could make the running in the presidential stakes by proposing Pranab Mukherjee's name and then dare the Congress to reject it. The debate would move outside the confines of curtains and enter public space. And about time too.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 3

33 Generally agreed-upon date for the historical crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, the central figure of Christianity.

1922 Joseph Stalin becomes the first General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

1948 President Harry S. Truman signs the Marshall Plan, authorizing \$5 billion in aid for 16 countries.

1969 Vietnam War: United States Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird announces that the United States will start to "Vietnamize" the war effort.

1973 Martin Cooper of Motorola made the first handheld mobile phone call to Joel S. Engel of Bell Labs, though it took ten years for the DynaTAC 8000X to become the first such phone to be commercially released.

2004 Islamic terrorists involved in the 11 March 2004 Madrid attacks are trapped by the police in their apartment and kill themselves.