

BITTER TRUTH

Is there any light at the end of the tunnel?



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

HERE are times when some event is so enormous in terms of the attention it needs that everything else pales in comparison. The dialogue between the two mainstream political parties over the formation of a government for conducting the next parliamentary election has assumed such significance.

With unremitting political violence and subsequent killings, and arrests of BNP leaders continuing on one hand, and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia talking on different wavelengths on the other, the prospect of a dialogue that will usher in a congenial atmosphere for holding the forthcoming parliamentary election is eroding fast.

Pragmatic leadership could possibly put the country on the right track and pave the way for political and economic stability that it so direly needs at this critical juncture. It is worth recalling what American President Abraham Lincoln had said about political wisdom that must guide the leaders in all countries in critical situations. Lincoln said: "You have to find facts for yourself and many of the good ones come from outside your circle. There's much you miss if you don't forage around yourself." Could there be anything more revealing that should be brought home to the leaders squabbling on contentious issues? Can't they place the country above self and party?

We must recall what Justice S.M. Murshed said in reply to a Full Court Reference after taking oath of office of the Chief Justice of the then East Pakistan in 1964. He said: "The judiciary is in a high sense the guardian of the conscience of the people as well as the law of the land. It sits aloof and detached from the political arena or the seats of executive business -- away from the storms and stresses which so often assail them. Its decisions are, therefore, more apt to reflect unbiased justice and traditional impartiality than political expediency and arbitrary action. Justice has nothing to do with expediency or the dictates of political exigencies. Justice Murshed further said: "The Court that cannot stand before the unjust fury of an

impassioned mob or the arrogant high-handedness of misguided authority is not worthy of its great tradition." In the light of Justice Murshed's pragmatic observation, we must subject ourselves to critical analysis in the functioning of the state business and judicial interpretations.

Evidently, as the tragic drama of power struggle unfolds, violence erupts, property gets damaged and business activities come to a grinding

halt, what we witness is that common people who are not at all involved or have no stake in this bruising power struggle are becoming victims of the Titanic clash. Since most people are mute spectators, politics, perhaps in its worst form, is a free ground for many whose vision does not go beyond their personal gains. The potential for progress that was envisioned is fading out, giving in to chaos and violence everywhere.

The stakes are too high to leave the contentious issues unresolved. Leaders running statecraft or those in the opposition BNP and Jamaat and other wings of the new-grown Islamist parties will not remain immune to the pain and destruction going unabated for the last three months. The stark reality is that, aggravated by self-anointment and party interest and hardening extremist lines, party feuding and violent clashes throughout the country have already wreaked havoc in the country.

The birth of Bangladesh in 1971 brought an end to



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not to destabilise the government but to kill and terrorise people, disrupt business and snatch an individual's right to earn a living.

Why should these Jamaat-Shibir activists be killing people in such a cold blooded manner and damaging public properties without any provocation? And why should BNP, a responsible political party, support them? On the other hand, the ruling party's inability to arrest this mayhem does not inspire confidence of the people in the government.

Admittedly, a democratic government has to bring prosperity, create stability, and ensure violence-free streets, market places and safety of the citizens within the boundary of their houses to keep people drawn to the democratic ideals. Unless people's safety, rights and interests are taken care of, chaos, resentment and conflicts will mount up in ever increasing dimension, throwing the nation in the web of danger and destabilisation.

communal strife, political chicanery and religious dogmatism. On that historic day of December 16, 1971, people of Bangladesh pledged to practice their faith in peace, not in the shadow of violence, but the brutality unleashed by the arsonists belonging to Jamaat-Shibir cadres since February 28 has seared the conscience of the sensible citizens.

In a democracy, hartal is used as a weapon to challenge the government of the day, but it is now being overtly used

To call hartals day in and day out, unleash violence on the streets, kill people without provocation and cause damage to public properties in a bid to oust a democratic government before it has completed its full term is totally undemocratic and sets a bad precedent. The economy of the country that belongs to AL, BNP and Jamaat and other political parties has suffered a lot. With market mechanism not working and economic slowdown gripping the country, donor countries' generosity or assistance comes hard, especially when donors fear that this country's political and economic chaos and unbridled corruption would swallow up limitless fund.

According to World Bank update, the targeted GDP growth of 7.2% will now come down to 5.8% because of the political turmoil. RMG, the country's biggest forex earning sector, has suffered the brunt of the loss with about Tk.50 thousand crore lost in the meantime. Nobody should harbour any illusion that the country would be flowing with milk and honey the day some other party or parties come to power.

People at this critical moment of national history, plagued by high prices of food items, job cut and deadlock in business and new investment, want an election participated by all the parties as much as a fair and credible election, to avert further chaos and a crisis situation in the country. True, as our experience of February 1996 election suggests, without some major party or parties joining the election, the poll's victory will rob the winners of their legitimacy and power to push forward their agenda. There will also be an overriding fear that the political feud that has now engulfed the country will assume a more severe form taking.

The politicians, especially of the ruling party, steering the nation's ship through a turbulent sea with dark clouds looming over the horizon have to show their prudence, charisma, patriotism and commitment to national goals and aspirations of the people. As things stand today, people have discovered that democratic institutions alone cannot bring prosperity and stability. The need of the hour is for both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia to display maturity and statesmanship and ward off confrontation.

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Black Rain: Radioactive fallout from atmospheric nuclear detonations

QUAMRUL HAIDER

SINCE the end of World War II, nuclear weapons were developed and indiscriminately tested in the atmosphere, underwater, and in outer space by the five nuclear powers - China, France, UK, USA, and the former USSR. To date, total number of nuclear tests carried out by these countries exceeds 2,000. More than 500 of these were "atmospheric tests" conducted above ground mostly in the '50s, '60s, and '70s.

After a nuclear explosion, residual radioactive nuclei attach themselves to atmospheric dust particles that eventually fall to earth as radioactive fallout, also known as "Black Rain." Since 1945, these five countries have released into the atmosphere umpteen tons of radioisotopes. They are now widely dispersed and deposited all over the world.

An isotope is a nucleus containing different number of neutrons, but otherwise identical to the regular nucleus. An isotope that disintegrates spontaneously giving off radiation is called a radioisotope. Longevity of radioisotopes is measured in terms of half-life -- the length of time it takes for half of their radiation to dissipate. After one half-life, one half of the radiation will be left; after two half-lives, one half of one half or one fourth of the radiation will be left, and so on. As a rule of thumb, a radioisotope becomes harmless after ten half-lives.

Two of the radioisotopes in the fallout that are of most concern to us are strontium-90 and cesium-137, each with a half-life of approximately 30 years. They are also produced as radioactive waste in a nuclear power plant and are considered extremely hot in the radioactive sense. They are the most troublesome waste to dispose of.

Strontium-90 mimics calcium and cesium-137 mimics potassium. The former is transmitted to humans via plants, cow's milk, and various cereals including rice. Mistaking it for calcium, it is taken up by plants, especially in soils with low calcium content.

When we breathe or eat strontium-90, it will do what calcium does to our body, namely, migrate to our bone marrow. Since marrow is the principal site of blood cell production, white and red blood cells will be irradiated by the radioactive strontium-90, adversely affecting their reproduction. Internal exposure to strontium-90 is linked to bone cancer, cancer of the soft tissue near the bone, and leukemia. Asians who have abundant rice in their diet have a strontium-90 uptake six times that of people in western countries.

Cesium-137 is immobilised by the clay found in most soils but when as fallout it settles on the leaves of plants. It can be absorbed and translocated to the rest of the plant and even concentrated in some tissues such as those in potato tubers.

Since cesium-137 mimics potassium which is involved with the process of muscle contraction, after entering the human body most of it gets more or less uniformly distributed with higher concentration in muscle tissues. It affects the chromosomes within tissue cells, but the injury to the body is caused primarily

by interfering with cell biology. Like most radioisotopes, exposure to radiation from cesium-137 results in increased risk of cancer. If exposed to very high level of cesium-137, serious burns, and even death, can result.

In the 1950s, adverse effects of strontium-90 on mother's milk and babies teeth made us aware of the danger to which we were subjected. This led to the signing of the Partial Test Ban Treaty in 1963. Showing total disregard toward human life, France and China did not sign the treaty and continued with atmospheric tests until 1974 and 1980, respectively.

All of us born in the first half 1950, irrespective of geographic location, have received a "healthy" dose of radiation from the fallout. Those of us who live near or work in nuclear facilities may have increased exposure from routine emissions. The accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in 1986 aggravated the problem by introducing a large amount of strontium-90 and cesium-137 into the environment.

We do not know for sure the number of fatalities that could be attributed to radiation exposure from the tests. It is, however, believed that hundreds of thousands of people born in the '50s and '60s may have died of cancer caused by fallout radiation. In a 1991 study, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War predicted that about 2.4 million people will "eventually die from cancer as a result of atmospheric testing."

The short half-life of strontium-90 and cesium-137 does not mean that they become harmless after 30 years. As mentioned above, it merely means that after 30 years they remain half as radioactive. Produced almost two half-lives ago, both the isotopes will remain dangerously radioactive in the atmosphere for at least another 100 years. So, the figure of 2.4 million fatalities seems attainable!

Here is a Catch-22 situation. Caribou and reindeer in the arctic tundra feed extensively on lichens in the winter. Lichens accumulate cesium-137 to a level well above that of other plants. When these radioactive lichens are eaten by caribou or reindeer, the cesium-137 makes its way into the meat of these animals.

Consequently, in the winter, caribous have only lichens to eat and the Eskimos have only caribous to eat!

Pro-nukes argue that harnessing of nuclear power is a quintessential demonstration of the brilliance of the human mind. Environmentalists and anti-nukes on the other hand contend that this brilliance lacks wisdom, and that these minds are personification of Stanley Kubrick's *Doctor Strangelove*.

Atmospheric nuclear tests may have stopped decades earlier, but we are still living under the Damoclean sword of radioactive fallout. It is impossible to avoid the leftover radioactivity from atmospheric testing that is present in the environment. Hence it is not only our generation, but many more generations to come that will continue to live under this sword because of the malevolence shown and sins committed by the "high priests" of the atomic cult.

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Congressional award to Prof Yunus: Its implications for us

S.M. RASHED AHMED

IT is truly an event of historic magnitude for Bangladesh -- presentation of Congressional Gold Medal award to Prof. Yunus. It is not only a personal honour for Yunus and Grameen, it is also an unprecedented honour to all our people, irrespective of political affiliations and background.

Nothing can be more fortuitous than the timing of the award. One can sense the unseen hand of divinity as it were, at a time when the nation is plagued by almost unprecedented despondency, despair, talk of civil war; a gathering storm on the horizon; if it comes it will imperil our freedom and democracy. The bestowing of the highest civilian US award on Yunus has lifted our sagging morale and spirit -- a rekindling of the spirit of our Liberation War. Yes! We can do it again. Our Nobel Laureate has once again shown the way.

The significance of the Congressional Award to Yunus can hardly be overemphasised. At a time when we are knocking the portals of

foreign countries to help resolve our internal conflicts, the message is clear: A country which can produce the likes of Yunus should need no foreign counselling to solve its problems, which is its own making. The solution has to be indigenous and through our own initiative; our inherent talent; our ability; and the collective wisdom and will of our people. This can be realised with the support of the silent majority working in the fields, factories and our homes -- the backbone of the nation. They are also the constituents of Yunus.

The silent majority have so often in history became vocal when required and were in the forefront of the movements which shaped and changed our history. It is time to act on our own through unity and consensus. It is time to find a lasting solution to the political impasse. It is time to find an acceptable modality for a free and fair election, a functional democracy to achieve a stable and self-reliant Bangladesh

on the bedrock of good governance, rule of law, zero tolerance for corruption, strong economy, purposeful diplomacy backed by a first class professional defence force, among others. This would safeguard our sovereignty and protect us against man-made and natural disasters.

I, like so many, believe that the best of Yunus is yet to come. Following the worldwide acceptance and success of his revolutionary innovative, the microcredit system, he has now offered another innovative concept of Social Business to overcome the global financial crisis as capitalism in its present form has failed to meet the challenges of time.

The concept of Social Business is increasingly being embraced by the world. It is time for Bangladesh to adopt it, to lift the country from its present status of an LDC to a middle income and developed economy. The growing unemployment of the youth, among others, with its potential for socio-political instability calls for immediate measures.

It is time to rise above petty mindedness. By trying to denigrate Yunus, we are not just humiliating ourselves but also lowering the image of our nation to the international community. There is need for a consensus to utilise his services for the larger national interest, given his extraordinary international standing as well as achievements at home, to strengthen Bangladesh at this crucial point of time.

History is not likely to forgive us if we fail to respond to the demands of the time.

It will not only be a betrayal of the people, but also of the ideals for which we fought the War of Liberation.

The much-needed consensus on Yunus will propel Bangladesh to move forward to a future of indefinable promise and dignity harnessing the enormous latent potential -- both human and material.

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