

Concern About Image is Futile Unless the Actual Situation Improves

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A report dated 22 August said, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has called upon the people to speak up against those who are damaging the image of the country. She made the appeal when a delegation of the Hindu community from Chittagong called on her at her office. Her insensitivity to Hindu sentiment was remarkable. Perhaps she believed that the memory of the minority communities is so short that the gruesome murder of Principal Gopal Krishna Muhari and the senior Hindu priest have been forgotten. Have the Buddhists forgotten the sensational murder of the Buddhist monk in Raujan ? In fact, reports about the possible connection of senior BNP leaders with the murder stirred people's conscience both at home and abroad. Ignoring these crimes against the minorities, the Prime Minister wants everybody to suppress these reports in the interest of projecting abroad a bright image of the country. Begum Zia, who is serving her second term as prime minister, surely knows how 'images' are created and destroyed. Was the image of her government brightened when the Police entered the women's dormitory of the Dhaka University at midnight and assaulted the girls by pulling them out of their beds? Who ordered the Police to enter the women's dormitory at night? Thanks to the internet, the report has been seen by both foreigners and expatriate Bengalees all over the world. It is no secret that the vice chancellor and the proctor were made the scapegoats for a scandal for which, in all fairness, the government was responsible. In fact, no responsible Police officer would dare enter the women's dormitory in the middle of the night unless the raid was authorized by the highest quarter of the government. The government may think that by directing the student's wrath against the vice chancellor they have 'managed the crisis' successfully. Actually, they are just kidding themselves. The common people are not so dumb that they would not see through their clever public relations game. The incident has exposed the real character of the repressive government. Instead of getting embarrassed by such barbaric conduct of her Police force, the Prime Minister is anxious to promote her image. What about the wheat scandal or for that matter, the jet fuel scandal? No one but the head of the government can make a special allocation of Taka 100 crores for untimely procurement of wheat that was just not there with the farmers! Attempts are afoot to pass the buck on to some MPs and officials. The image of the government cannot be enhanced by such scandals that daily fill the newspaper pages.

Blinded by power, the ruling alliance is unable to see the image that they have projected in the last ten months. Brutal repression of political opponents, persecution of the minorities, extortion by the armed cadres of the BNP and gang rape of women have contributed to tarnishing the peaceful and democratic image of the country. Do the leaders and policy makers believe that the rape of Mohima and Fahima and their tragic suicide have faded from public memory? The picture of baby Nawsheen dead in her father's lap is indelibly engraved in public memory. The common people have not forgotten the heartless comment by the Home Minister who consoled the bereaved family

by suggesting that he was helpless before the ruling party thugs whose gun killed the baby. Many more incidents of crime perpetrated by the BNP-Jamaat musclemen under the patronage and protection of the government are piling up in people's collective memory. All this is creating an unflattering image of the ruling alliance. Expressions of prime minister's concern or anger will not erase the image that has already been created by the misrule over the last 10 months. The significance of the golden crown on the head of a ruling party MP was not lost on the common people. The crown was the visible icon of brazen and cruel extortion of the business community by the ruling party musclemen. It attracted the unkind attention of the press because of the ostentatious and tasteless display of power. But it was not an isolated incident. The wealth that has been amassed by the BNP stalwarts within a short time will not remain a secret. They seem to forget that millions of eyes are watching them.

The BNP-Jamaat government would like to cover up the grim reality of the law and order situation in the country by rhetoric and clever public relations exercise. They will simply deceive themselves but the image will not change. Like ostriches, they are seeking to hide their heads under the sand and live in a make-believe world while the situation continues to deteriorate. Take, for instance, the article by Bertil Lintner in the Far Eastern Economic Review about the growing threat from militant Islamic elements. The government sent a spirited protest. A number of our patriotic editors wrote highly emotional editorials excoriating Lintner. Did it cut any ice? Instead, the Wall Street Journal reprinted the same article reiterating the points made by Lintner. Instead of making the fuss, the government ought to have looked at itself in the mirror. With two ministers belonging to a party that has a record of participation in the blood bath of our valiant freedom fighters in 1971, the government's protest sounded rather hollow. We have seen how the Pakistani dictator Gen. Musharraf is suppressing in his country these very militant Islamic groups. The Americans are lionizing him for his stand. Instead of reacting angrily against Lintner it would have been better to go into the issue in depth and come up with all the relevant facts on the militant fundamentalists who do not believe in Western liberal democracy and who are secretly working to promote a regime in Bangladesh similar to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The echoes of the slogan, "We are all Taliban, Bangla will be Afghan" have not yet fully faded. For tactical reasons they are lying low but it is only a tactical pause. They are waiting for the American attention to be diverted elsewhere.

Let us review the incident of the Danish under-secretary's public statement, making allegations of corruption against the minister of shipping. Did the government's angry reaction save our image? Obviously Hansen did not observe protocol in making the allegation publicly; he should have respected the confidentiality of bilateral relations between two friendly governments. The Danish government might have conceded a protocol mistake but did they say that the accusation about corruption was a mistake? No. Thus the damage to the image of the country was done. Instead of the nervous and angry reaction, the government could order an impartial inquiry into the allegation. Regardless of the outcome of the inquiry, the image of the country would have improved if it were seen that the country was capable of an independent and impartial inquiry to combat corruption. On the allegation corruption, the BNP-Jamaat government may try hard to

console itself by pointing the finger at the previous Awami League government. They should realize that the foreigners do not look at the picture in such watertight time frame. By throwing mud at the previous government they are blackening their own face too! The latest report of the Transparency International should convince Begum Zia and her cabinet colleagues that they laughed rather too early last year when the TI report on corruption was made public. They thought such a report would damage the Awami League's electoral prospects. Perhaps it did damage the Awami League. This year it is damaging whose image? It has damaged both the image of BNP and of Bangladesh. This will not only undermine our prestige abroad, it might adversely affect the prospects of foreign investment in Bangladesh. BNP leaders were too shortsighted last year and Awami League leaders will commit the same mistake now if they try to make political capital out of the TI report. All the political parties, in fact the entire nation should seriously reflect on the reasons for such a dismal record and jointly declare war against corruption that is giving our nation such a bad name.

Corruption is not only damaging the image of the country, it is sapping the strength and vitality of the economy and slowing down our growth and progress. Investors are frightened and discouraged by the prevailing environment of lawlessness in the country. As soon as the foundation stone is laid for a new factory premises the local ruling party bigwigs appear with their demand for 'contribution' to some 'worthy cause'. The guns are barely concealed. The latest episode of 'Pran' is fresh in our mind. Government leaders talk about the high priority being given to agro-based industries and want to give special incentives to such industries. When the demand of the BNP leaders of Natore for 'contribution' was not met, the factory had to be shut down. Has the BNP-Jamaat government responded to the appeals by the management of 'Pran' for help? No. It seems the government 'respects' the local BNP leader's 'right' to extort money from such enterprises. The Finance Minister in his usual garrulous style is blaming the bankers, government officials, businessmen and even foreign donors for the failure of the economy to move out of the grip of deep recession. Exports are falling, industrial production is slowing down, unemployment is rising, revenue collection has fallen short of the target and to cap it all, the prices of daily necessities of life are rising. It is indeed a grim picture. In order to justify his failure to stimulate the economy Saifur Rahman even blamed the State, which was, according to him, the biggest terrorist organization. The Prime Minister is reported to have reprimanded him for his tactless comment but given the performance and track record of the Police force his comment was not fully unjustified. Prime Minister Begum Zia does not seem to realize that the image of a country is the end result of the subjective impression in peoples' mind that is formed on the basis of the actual events. Repressions of political opponents and minorities, extortion by BNP-Jamaat musclemen, murder and rape have contributed to creating the image of the country as one that is on the brink of anarchy. When Policemen are sent into the women's dormitory of the University at dead of night and women students are manhandled, do we project the image of a civilized liberal Muslim democratic country? Rampant corruption at the highest level has added to the image of a corrupt nation. Unless she is able to stop the repression, persecution and lawlessness and put an end to official patronage of corruption, the image will neither change nor improve. Is the government trying to deal with the wheat scandal truthfully? If so, the government should

tell us who authorized the allocation of 100 crores to purchase additional wheat at the fag end of the season. Blaming a few members of parliament, or officials, will only deepen the suspicion that the real culprits are being protected. Begum Zia will run after a mirage if she thinks that the image of her government can be artificially created, promoted and protected without any significant improvement in the objective conditions. Image is nothing but the reflection of the objective truth and if the truth is ugly the image is surely going to be ugly too.