

## Critical state of power supply

*A matter of concern for the nation*

**F**REQUENT load shedding and short supply of electricity, both for domestic and industrial consumption, have been a constant source of misery for the people for quite some time. So long the problem had been confined to the urban areas, but now it has hit the farmers, which may hamper seasonal crop production.

Various media reports indicate that the worst case exists in the rural areas. According to the System Controller of REB, irrigation of agricultural lands all over the country is being hampered due to inadequate supply of electricity. For greater part of the day, which includes the most important part of late afternoon, most of the farmers are not getting electricity for running irrigation pumps.

It is shocking that during its tenure of office this Administration has been able to add a meagre 100 megawatt of electricity only. Admittedly, there has been a continuous rise in the demands for electricity, but there is absolutely not much reason for this huge gap between the actual demand and supply. In fact, meeting the demands of electricity was at the top of the BNP election agenda in 2001.

During April of last year at a high level meeting held with no less than the Prime Minister in the chair, discussions were held covering the many facets of emerging and continued crisis in the power sector. Following this, a high-powered Committee was also formed. Regrettably, no real progress is yet palpable. We feel that given the proper strategic planning of production and distribution, coupled with intensive monitoring, things could have been considerably improved, and such critical developments could have been avoided.

The Administration should also have taken two simultaneous measures like repair, maintenance and putting back into operation repairable production units that have remained unusable, alongside creating new sources of power supply through the private sector. Had this been pursued during the past four and half years with some degree of sincerity, the situation would have certainly been much better than what it is today.

However, the suggestions by the business community for specific measures to tide over the crisis should receive serious consideration. In the meantime we should not lose our focus on the needs of farmers all over the country where it appears critical for the coming three weeks or so.

## Iran's threat to pull out of NPT

*Diplomacy must be given a chance*

**T**HE on going nuclear stand off may have compelled the Iranian president to threaten pulling out of the NPT. But Ahmedinejad's threat to revise Iran's policy, if it considers the action of the US and the West an attempt to violate the rights of the Iranian people, must be seen in the context of the West's stand on nuclear issue globally, which betrays a degree of double standards.

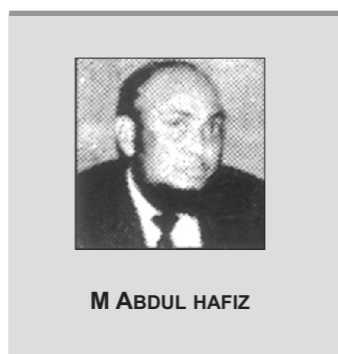
The West may have pushed Iran just too hard to compel it into actions that will be precipitative which, among other things, may cause the NPT to lose its clout while leaving the US and the West ruing the inefficacy of their motivated and one-eyed policy on nuclear issue that demonstrates a lack of consistency in their effort to halt the global proliferation of nuclear weapons. The fallout of reporting Iran to the Security Council we have already witnessed in Iran's making its nuclear installations a 'no go area' for the IAEA inspectors, and also expressing their intention to start uranium enrichment.

We believe that Iran has all the right to go for peaceful use of nuclear energy. However, she is a member of the NPT which also obligates a member state to subject itself to the conditions laid down by the regime. But Iran has repeatedly stated that her renewed nuclear programme is not for weaponisation but only for energy production.

For all too long the efforts of the US and the West have been concentrated on fulfilling but one aspect of the NPT, proliferation. There seems to be no efforts to suggest that the world is moving towards total elimination of nuclear weapons. If anything, newer entrants have not only been accepted into the fold of the 'nuclear Brahmins,' the Americans are even planning to undertake programmes of civil-nuclear cooperation, which some characterise as ambitious.

There is much at stake, most of all world peace, in this issue. Thus, what is needed is not rhetoric or threat of military action but phlegmatic diplomacy that would take into account the interest of all the parties.

# The long march and its aftermath



M ABDUL HAFIZ

**A**S the marchers in the end reached their destination Dhaka, defying all hurdles on their way, the much touted long march, a showdown of sorts for the AL and its allies, principally to press their demands for electoral reforms, could be termed a success.

But the mass movement expected to be sparked by the event did not quite gel and remained a non-starter. Before the momentum gathered during the long march could be brought to a crescendo, the long march itself petered out. The march that began with a bang ended in a whimper, and there was hardly a tangible achievement in term of mass upsurge in its aftermath. The huge body of the marchers lay exhausted like a lumbering giant at Paltan Maidan, the finish point. And when they departed they did so with an agonising question in their mind unanswered: what next?

Yet the long march has been a significant feat of political maneuvering against the familiar back-

drop of the country's crass and puerile politics of speech making and blaming each other. The marchers who came from the country's far-flung areas and braved the hardships encountered on their way did so because of their commitment to the agenda of the long march and concern for the country's slide towards authoritarianism and obscurantism, lately evident in the conduct of the ruling dispensation.

and mercurial party leadership has eaten into the AL's vitals, reducing it to a shadow of its past. It seldom introspected to discover what really ails the outfit, neither did it recognise its deficiencies when pointed out. It lacked the chemistry of absorbing in its ranks the promising and talented young activists.

On the other hand, its opponents consist of diehard opportunists, collaborators from the liberation war, and disgruntled politicians

and then boycotting it indefinitely, or sometimes taking to the streets and at others going into slumber, with the party supreme leaving the country for a seminar abroad or treatment in US.

The AL once prided on its grassroots organization, which is now all but in tatters. Bangabandhu was known for his proverbial organisational skill, the imprint of which is no more in today's AL. Now its organisational ability is at the best

The long march notwithstanding, only a few understood what was it all about and what was at stake in a free and fair election that the long march primarily aimed at. This partly explains why the AL's repeated exhortation to rise against the government in a mass upsurge falls on deaf ear. It is also because the people are not adequately primed for a spontaneous explosion.

The AL has since jettisoned its

## PERSPECTIVES

**It is a harsh reality that the opponents of the AL are at the moment far superior in organisational ability, alliance management, and election strategy -- all indispensable ingredients for an election victory. This is not, however, the last word on the inter-party election prospects. The time has arrived when they will change from moment to moment. It is not known what will be the AL's next move on the issue. Whatever direction the events take and whether the AL quits the parliament again and takes to the street, it will still be organisational strength with which it will have to proceed.**

Can AL profitably make use of the fire still left in their hearts to promote the cause of a credible election that the long march primarily aimed at, or for that matter to uphold the larger issue of national catharsis for reintroducing a progressive strand in the country's body politics?

The AL has missed umpteen opportunities in the past and failed to cash in on mass dissatisfaction with regards to the alliance's corruption, terror, and the formidable price hike prevailing in the country. The party has been in the political wilderness for long. An impulsive

from the far right and extreme left, eager to rehabilitate themselves in politics. They are acutely conscious of their vulnerability and the stakes involved. Obviously they keep themselves constantly equipped with the necessary tools -- both tangible and intangible -- for survival, the most important tool being their political guile. Moreover, by virtue of their being in power, all the political aces are held by them.

A vastly decimated AL can hardly make dent in their power structure just by blowing hot and cold, now joining the parliament

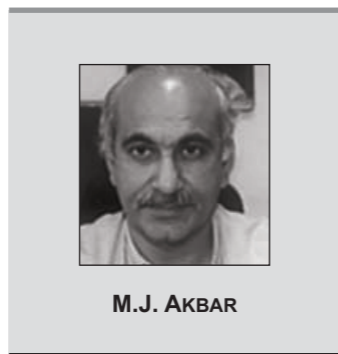
confined to declaring or approving the committee decisions and occasional visits outside the capital to settle disputes. Few disputes are however settled due to endless infighting at the local levels. But the AL organisation once meant constant mass contacts and establishing everlasting rapport with the public, in addition to its routine management of the party.

Bangabandhu, it may recalled, undertook countrywide tour to introduce and explain what his six points were all about -- which is why they became the magna carta of our struggle for emancipation.

organisational nitty-gritty and resorted to a proclivity to accord preference to the fence-sitters who loiter around the AL high command, seeking party tickets at the cost of the party's loyal veterans. The AL tends to look at their purse and not their political conviction. Some of these pseudo-ALers do win and also enjoy ministerial berth, before quitting the party following any of its debacle. It is an irony that today's AL is not capable even to differentiate between friend and foe.

It is a harsh reality that the opponents of the AL are at the

# The answer is Gandhi



M.J. AKBAR

**S**EQUENCE and consequence do not always follow the same logic: the publication of the gratuitously offensive cartoons against the Prophet of Islam (you can translate that, literally, to the Prophet of Peace for Islam means peace) has already resonated through contemporary events. It will also echo far into the future. Any single day's newspaper was sufficient to indicate that simmering resentment against the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan, for instance, found a reason to escalate into anger. There are too many questions around this conscious provocation by an irresponsible Danish newspaper, fuelled by a less than comprehensible Danish government, and not enough answers.

The first question must surely be the simplest one: why? More than one answer has been offered. One editor of the paper appeared on European television and said, so primly that he was on the verge of sounding pompous, that the cartoons were not meant to hurt Muslims but only to represent, through an image, that a number of Muslims had become terrorists. This is the sort of argument that sounds reasonable to a neutral mind until you pare open the first layer of deception. If that was the purpose, why not use an image of Osama bin Laden? Why

use the image of the Prophet, which by itself is offensive to a faith that rejects, very strongly, any iconography or deification? We have published cartoons on Osama fairly regularly in our papers without anyone raising any objection.

This is buttressed by the "freedom of press" argument, a view endorsed so strongly by the media of continental Europe (but not, repeat not, by British media) that sensible publications like Le

140 adds, "Those who publicly mock or insult the doctrines or worship of any religious community that is legal in this country, will be punished by a fine or incarceration for up to four months."

This is as civilised as it gets. The reason for such legislation is not a history of abuse against Islam, but a history of virulent anti-Semitism, for which Europe holds some kind of pernicious record. I warmly applaud such laws which protect Jews from

who is desperate for a peaceful dialogue now, held no press conferences then. Eleven ambassadors of Muslim countries wanted to talk to him. They got a polite letter which they construed as a snub.

One reason for the anger is the conviction of gratuitous bias against Muslims. It has now emerged, thanks to a story in the Guardian, that the same Danish newspaper rejected a series of cartoons against Jesus some

that Flemming Rose, cultural editor of Jyllands-Posten (the Danish newspaper that started the controversy) told CNN that his paper was ready to publish cartoons of the Holocaust that were being encouraged by an irresponsible Iranian newspaper, as if two wrongs added up to a right. His newspaper, however, quickly denied any such intentions.

I was in Britain last weekend when this storm was raging. I don't think that British newspa-

with one another as long as Muslims and Christians have. You can go through the literature, popular songs or journalism of India and you will not come across a Hindu writer insulting the Prophet of Islam or a Muslim writer insulting a Hindu God. This does not mean that either has changed his faith. It merely means that in India we have a culture that respects the right of another to believe in a different creed, and values a neighbour's sentiment as much as his own.

The Danish Prime Minister began to perspire only when Muslims across the world started to boycott Danish products. His God is commerce, so the only retribution he understands is an insult to that commerce. Muslims who think that violence is the answer, have got it wrong. Violence is wrong in itself, and counterproductive. A boycott of Danish products is far more productive.

Who did we Indians learn this from? Mahatma Gandhi, of course. His challenge to the British empire began with a boycott of British goods. It is only when he made a bonfire of the coloniser's cloth did the world's mightiest empire begin to shiver. It is not too difficult to live without Danish cheese, or even Bang and Olufsen. One would, in fact, like to extend the logic. If you have to buy a European product, buy British. That would be a nice way of saying thank you.

The Danish Prime Minister is searching for answers. But in order to get the right answers you have to ask the right questions. Here is a suggestion, Mr. Prime Minister. Do not worry about the enemies Denmark has made. Worry instead about the friends Denmark has lost.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

## BYLINE

**Hindus and Muslims have lived with one another as long as Muslims and Christians have. You can go through the literature, popular songs or journalism of India and you will not come across a Hindu writer insulting the Prophet of Islam or a Muslim writer insulting a Hindu God. This does not mean that either has changed his faith. It merely means that in India we have a culture that respects the right of another to believe in a different creed, and values a neighbour's sentiment as much as his own. Who did we Indians learn this from? Mahatma Gandhi, of course.**

Monde have reprinted the cartoons twice. Far be it for me to decry press freedom. It is my bread and butter. But I have yet to come across a nation or society that offers freedom of expression without the qualification of libel or similar safeguards. One of our editors asked the Danish embassy in Delhi to let us know if they had any libel laws. They promised to get back to us. We are still waiting. But text is not difficult to find in the age of Internet. I quote from Section 266B of the Danish penal code: "Any person who publicly or with the intention of dissemination to a wide circle of people makes a statement or imparts other information threatening, insulting or degrading a group of persons on account of their race, colour, national or ethnic origin, belief or sexual orientation, shall be liable to a fine, simple detention or imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years." Section

verbal and image-barbarism. There are laws in Europe by which anyone denying the Holocaust can end up in jail, and a poor British historian is in an Austrian jail at the moment for doing so. Excellent. Then why is the Danish Prime Minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, pleading helplessness? He did not have to convict anyone himself, for the very good reason that he cannot. But he could have easily referred the matter to his own country's judiciary and awaited their decision. During the long months when nothing happened over the cartoons this would have been sufficient to calm Muslim unease over the insults. The cartoons appeared on September 30, 2005. There was no public reaction in October, November, December and most of January. But there was official reaction. The Saudi and Libyan governments withdrew their ambassadors. The Danish Prime Minister,

three years ago because they were deemed to be offensive. It was the correct decision. Journalists like the editor of the German publication Die Welt, who has gone on record to say that the publication of the cartoons is "at the core of our culture" would not find enough freedom in his press to publish a cartoon (produced in a British newspaper, the Independent, in January 2003) showing Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon dining off Palestinian babies. I am a journalist too, and would not publish it either. But the editors of continental Europe have suddenly broken into paroxysms of moral indignation at any attempt to question their right to publish offensive cartoons against Islam. Freedom of press was not trotted out to defend nastiness against Jesus or indeed Israel's Prime Minister. To do so now is mendacity.

The International Herald Tribune of February 9 reported

pers have any less desire for a free press than their Continental counterparts. And yet, none of them published the cartoons, although there was doubtless pressure to do so. The BBC (more accurately known as the British Broadcasting Corporation) did a typical weaselly sort of fudge, showing a bit and then removing the image so that it could claim to have it both ways, but no one was very impressed. Instead, newspapers from across the ideological spectrum, from the Observer on the left to the Sunday Telegraph on the right, published powerful and moving accounts of what it meant to respect the faith of the other. The British media, which is not wimpish and which can be the most aggressive in the world, can today claim the respect of Muslims because of its restraint. British Muslims today feel closer to their country.

Hindus and Muslims have lived

## OPINION

# Let sanity prevail

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

**A**WAMI League's decision to return to the Parliament is one of the most positive signs in recent times, in our otherwise volatile political environment. For both the Ruling Coalition and the Opposition it is a "make it or break it" situation. Though at the surface it looks as though any and all political conflicts are on way to be solved and resolved. I have my reservations. The so-called preparatory arrangements for the run up to the Parliament by both the Ruling Coalition and the Opposition still smell fowl. The attitude on both sides appear to be "who defeats whom and how?" Let us not turn the sacred platform of the parliament into either a Paltan Maidan or an office of the PM.

I am somewhat concerned when the venerable Opposition Leader says that she and her party would resign if her party's proposal for amendments to the Office of Caretaker Government were not accepted in full. If this is the mental frame then why go to the Parliament? After all the declared purpose is to "discuss" and not dictate. This attitude is rather preemptive. On the other hand when the Ruling Coalition urgently sends a signal to all its lawmakers to be present at the Parliament when the Opposition is there on the grounds that they would be required to "face" the Opposition in the Parliament, it appears to me that both has the undertone of being highly preemptive and combative in nature.

Both the Awami League and the Ruling Coalition must arrive at the

**Rightly or wrongly there has been many questions both in the minds of the Opposition and the people at large about the neutrality and the integrity of the Speaker of our Parliament. The Ruling Coalition therefore has to pay much attention to this aspect should it hope to achieve any tangible result out of the present session of Parliament with the Opposition participating.**

venue with an open mind and imbued with the spirit of reaching a consensus on the contentious issues. One way to do that would be for both the Ruling Coalition and the Opposition is to stick to the core issues and not wonder away to some other issues that have the possibility of raising high emotions and conflicts ultimately resulting in losing sight of the "business at hand." Both the parties including their respective lawmakers must take special care so as not to use any unsavory or provocative

remarks against each other particularly against any one personally.

Awami League and the Ruling Coalition must remember that all eyes are on them and people of the country will be eagerly waiting for the outcome of the result of their debate and discussions in the Parliament scheduled to take place. People are considerably tired of the highhandedness of the Ruling Coalition as much as they are tired of Opposition's relentless street agitations and frequent call for hartals. If any of the parties like

the party in power and the Opposition measure each other's popularity by the number of the people it can muster in its Mahashambesh, both of them are sadly mistaken. A lakh of people here and there every now and then indeed hardly proves anything. To day nearly all parties have lost touch with the people at large.

In all parliamentary democracies the spirit of tolerance for each other for the parties both in the Opposition and in the seat of power is absolutely mandatory. It is more

so for the party in power.

I do not know as to how others feel or they would agree with me or not but I seriously feel that this is "indeed the last bus" for both for our political parties and the nation. If our political leadership fails this time the future of our nation will be in serious jeopardy. Protest marches and processions aside, Parliament must be the focal point of all our political activities if we dare call ourselves a nation that believes in democratic practices.

Permit me to cite the example of

our neighbor the largest working democracy in the world. India is no less volatile in its political activism by various parties yet the resignation or the fall of a government has always been with the Parliament playing the key role. How sad that while we are struggling to manage the running of a single Parliament India with its much larger population and diverse cultural traditions is running several of its Parliaments in various provinces including the central one in the heart of the capital successfully and harmoniously.

We could also take a few lessons from the Indian experience with regard to the role of the individual Speakers. It may be worthwhile to note that unlike here in Bangladesh, seldom questions have been raised about the integrity and neutrality of a single

Speaker. Rightly or wrongly there has been many questions both in the minds of the Opposition and the people at large about the neutrality and the integrity of the Speaker of our Parliament. The Ruling Coalition therefore has to pay much attention to this aspect should it hope to achieve any tangible result out of the present session of Parliament with the Opposition participating.

It is also of paramount importance that no less than the PM and the Leader of House does play a proactive role and actively participate in the debate. If need be also be ready to mediate and act as moderators of any hard line or unreasonable voice or voices of dissent.

Shamsher Chowdhury is a freelance contributor of The Daily Star.