

# A Hole in the Road or a Hole in the Sky?

by Derek Ingram

## The Spirit of Ramadan

Subject to the sighting of the new moon, the holiest month for the Muslims of the world will commence from tonight. It is for them the month of sacrifice and charity, of abstinence and tolerance. It is universally observed—so much so that, specially in the subcontinent where at least 300 million believers reside—even those who cannot say the compulsory five daily prayers, do not fail to fast for a whole month.

The ideas of sacrifice and charity and abstinence, perhaps to the point of continence, — all add up to the practice of austerity and desisting from all shows of ostentation. And all such attempts at lofty ideals are finely pinioned on the supreme value of tolerance. Not to speak of violence, bearing any creature ill will even in mind will lead all strivings after the Holy Ramadan virtues to crumble in a moment. Sharing our weal as well as in all others' woe is the true spirit of this month that has been ordained by Him so that erratic, and often foul, humanity can cleanse itself of all excesses and indulgences.

It cannot be said that the Almighty's gracious gift is being much cared. Fasting is there but making a strange bed-fellow of ostentation. A tidal surge for the goodies sends out a two-way expression of unmitigated greed. An unrealistic demand for food commodities invites in a diabolical fit of profiteering skyrocketing all prices. It is not either time that heavenly harmony and peace prevail throughout the month in the Muslim dominated countries. Here was a time of the year when Muslims of the world—the latest term shot with political undertone for which is the Islamic Ummah—could feel a tug at the heartstring for each other. That remains an elusive dream. The worst of the ways the spirit of Ramadan is insulted is the regular gushing of a spate of intolerance—in the name of keeping the sanctity of the Ramadan. This inhuman, unlawful, undemocratic and unfair hullabaloo over forcing all eating houses to close and compelling all non-fasting people of all communities and ages and health conditions to go without food specially when on travel or anyhow out of the house is anything but religion. It is rather anti-religion, specially when one takes into account the condition that this curtailment of human liberties creates for the wage-earners in the eating establishments. This thorny and delicate area was the best place to uphold the virtue of tolerance by those that believe in the spirit, significance and sanctity of Ramadan. The eating houses, of their own, must take care by catering behind shutters so as not to hurt anyone's sentiment. The spirit of Islam, the religion of peace, also reminds us that no one has any moral right, not to speak of the legal-constitutional one, to look into others' privacy and embark on an orgy of vandalism instead of pursuing a path of preaching. This sure is the way the fear of the mastan replaces the fear of God in the mind even of the "mumin."

Ramadan, if observed in its pristine purity, could help us a great deal in raising ourselves from the socio-economic as well as moral morass we are stuck up in. Let us all hark then to the true spirit of the month of fasting and act it out in our individual and familial lives.

## Silk Factory's Dismal Record

Silk production in the country is in a shambles. According to a report carried in this paper, the silk factory of the Bangladesh Sericulture Board (BSB) is pitifully in short supply of cocoon and running at a marginal strength of its full capacity. Indications are that the factory may indeed come to a grinding halt, if some urgent remedial measures are not taken. The fact that the factory has been running at a loss over the past 12 years — incurring a total loss of Tk 4.5 crore — is indeed baffling. But that is the hard truth.

Silk as a commodity is highly expensive and its demand abroad is considerably high. So the problems appear to be more intractable than they normally should have been. Even the domestic market for the item does in no way justify the factory's collapse which now looks so real and imminent. This time the problem has mounted due mostly to infectious diseases that caused extensive damage to silkworm. But administrative sloth and indecision are no less responsible for the worsening situation. Reports have it that the factory is virtually run by dual management throwing, as it is, the entire management into confusion. It is precisely for such an administrative laxity that the factory could not arrange for buying cocoon when it was available in the market in the months of December and January last.

Not that the problem just ends there. When the government-run factory continues to record so dismal performances year after year, it leaves its deleterious impact on the private enterprises as well. Production of quality silk-fabrics was one of the express aims of establishing the silk factory under the BSB. Now not only has it failed to serve that purpose, but also finds itself in the awkward situation of causing continuous losses to the government exchequer. Mismanagement of day-to-day affairs and the failure to evolve a long-term sound policy on sericulture have stood in the way of exploiting the huge potential of silk as an exportable item.

To develop high quality silk, the need for extensive research and modern sericulture method along with modern machinery cannot be over-emphasised. A tall order no doubt, but benefits expected from this is going to be highly rewarding.

WHILE British politicians were busy boring the pants off the electors arguing whether or not to put a penny on income tax, scientists predicted that within the next few weeks an ozone hole was likely to appear for the first time over the northern hemisphere.

They suggested that soon people might have to go about in dark glasses to protect themselves.

Was anyone listening? It did not seem so. Britain is just weeks off a general election — the favourite tip is for April 9 — and the two main parties are locked in tit-for-tat fighting that is addressing none of the great global issues.

It is the scientists who are to be believed. Rome is burning, but the level and content of debate in Britain's most-drawn-out election campaign for decades is doing nothing to enhance the reputation of Westminster as a found of democracy.

While Prime Minister John Major gives his Labour Party opponent Neil Kinnock labels like "economic illiterate", the level of debate is measured by the sort of remarks dropping from the lips of even as respected a politician as Conservative Party chairman Chris Patten, who said to the Tory faithful:

"Labour leaders keep telling us that we should kick-start the economy. They couldn't kick-start a tricycle."

Perhaps the tone will improve, for after 13 years of Tory Party rule, most of them under the formidable Margaret Thatcher, Britain is facing new political uncertainties reminiscent of February 1974, when a hung parliament led to a second election in October.

Then, as now, there was economic crisis. Prime Minister Edward Heath called a snap election in a fight over

**Prime Minister John Major of Britain has been waiting for an economic upturn to take the country to a general election. The upturn has not happened and now he is almost out of time. After the budget on March 10 he is expected to ask for the dissolution of Parliament. Already, the parties are deep into electioneering. Gemini News Service reflects on the parochialism of the campaign.**

miners pay, he lost by a whisker and Harold Wilson came back with the Labour Party. The Liberals almost held the balance of power.

The same could happen again. What is now called the Liberal Democratic Party has produced an attractive leader, Paddy Ashdown, and the voters in the centre, a concept Thatcherism long

decided, may once more be the deciding factor.

Time is short. The election must be held by July 9 at the latest and the Conservatives are already boxed in. They have been hanging on for better economic times, forecasting an economic turn for the better that has not come.

As unemployment rises towards three million, small

firm bankruptcies mount, and retail business remains flat, the surprise is that the Labour Party is not making a much better showing in the polls. The two main parties are running neck and neck, with the Liberal Democrats rising in the centre.

Public disenchantment with Tory and Labour is widespread. Feeling grows that Britain has been here so many times before. In 1979 Thatcherism had been seen as a once-for-all economic cure, light money, good housekeeping, a leaner-run and modernised industrial sector, an end to trade union strife.

In a few years things fell apart, just as they had done before. Inconceivably, Thatcher presided over a presided over a period in the later Eighties in which people were encouraged to go on spending as if there was no tomorrow. Britain was first into inflationary recession and suffered worse than most countries.

Thatcherism has been discredited and what comes next is far from clear. The Labour Party is having a hard time trying to convince the electorate that it has the answers. The Conservatives offer more of the same and show all the signs of an accident-prone and tired government.

Their best card is Major, whose easy, businesslike style and very ordinariness appeals to a wide constituency. The

contrast with the confrontational Thatcher is turning out to be his greatest asset.

It is a new face, while Neil Kinnock, who has now been Leader of the Opposition for eight years and lost the 1987 election, seems an old one, although he is still only 49. Major is just one year younger and — food for astrological thought — their birthdays in March are on successive days.

Major has taken full advantage of the dramatic international developments of the last year to build himself as a world player. His cool conduct in the Gulf War was impressive. He initiated the creation of safe havens for the Kurds.

He was up there with Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Bush, visited China and Africa, argued his way to the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, convened the first ever summit meeting of the UN Security Council. Beside him in all this was one of the most able Foreign Secretaries Britain has produced in recent years, Douglas Hurd.

But in the end, getting elected even in a supposedly sophisticated democracy like Britain is still about pensions, prescription charges, child allowances, jobs, taxes.

It is also about the condition of the national health service and children's education, a separate parliament for Scotland, the rundown state of Britain's public transport and financial scandals in the City of London.

Coming up fast — especially

if the election produced no majority — is the argument for moving to proportional representation. Britain being the only country in western Europe using the first-past-the-post election system.

It begins to look as if only fundamental electoral change will get Britain away from the ding-dong Tory-Labour confrontation that banks up the seats in Parliament for Left and Right and under-represents the Centre.

Neither main party wants change because it would lose a lot of seats to the under-represented centre. It is also argued that proportional representation will lead to coalition governments, as in many countries of Europe. The current system, the case goes, usually produce a clear majority.

However, it also usually means that a minority rules. In 1987 only 42 per cent voted for the Conservatives. They won a 100-seat majority yet nearly six people in ten voted for other parties.

Meantime, there is something profoundly worrying about the fact that the system for electing the government of a country like Britain remains so stubbornly parochial in its content.

Patten, the man who sneered about kick-starting a tricycle, is the same intellectual thinker who often spoke so eloquently about environmental threats when he was Environmental Secretary a year or two ago.

But in those days no election was around the corner. And holes in the ozone layer cannot be seen like potholes in the road in Islington. When people have to go around wearing dark glasses, they may not be able to see where to put their vote.

DEREK INGRAM is Editor of Gemini News Service.

## The 14th election

Next British election will be 14th since World War Two. Labour have won 5, Tories 7 and one produced no majority



| House at dissolution |     | How they polled in 1987 |            |     |      |
|----------------------|-----|-------------------------|------------|-----|------|
| Con                  | 367 | Con                     | 13,763,134 | 375 | 42.3 |
| Labour               | 227 | Labour                  | 10,033,633 | 229 | 30.8 |
| Lib Dem              | 22  | Liberal                 | 4,165,091  | 17  | 12.8 |
| Ulster Un            | 9   | SDP                     | 3,174,821  | 5   | 9.8  |
| Scottish National    | 5   |                         |            |     |      |
| Others               | 20  |                         |            |     | 25.7 |

# Wartime Documents Put Official Stamp on 'Comfort Women'

Haruko Watanabe writes from Tokyo

LIKE cattle, women in many parts of Asia were herded to "comfort houses" during World War II to cheer up Japanese soldiers by serving them sexually.

Behind the rape and forced prostitution of thousands of women is no small-time white slave trader or brothel operator. The "comfort" system was set up on instructions of the Imperial Military of Japan.

"I have never heard of any other government which was officially and directly involved in the flesh trade (in this manner)", said House Representative Hideko Itoh in an exclusive interview with *Depthnews*.

In Ms Itoh's hands was incontestable evidence — 52 documents consisting of secret cables, military diaries, medical reports and rules and regulations on "how to use comfort house," with official seals of commanders at the front lines and cabinet councillors of the Ministry of Army in Tokyo.

"I had a chill on my back when I read these documents," said Ms Itoh.

Such inhumanity, she said, was worse than the gassing by Nazis of Jews, who could die but once. "The Imperial Military of Japan killed these women 20 to 30 times a day by raping them that many times."

In secret cable No. 602 dated March 12, 1942, the military commander in Taiwan asked then Army Minister Hideki Tojo permission to transfer three managers of brothels from Taiwan to Borneo (now Kalimantan) to operate comfort houses with 50 "native girls" at the request of soldiers in the South Pacific

theatre. The cable said these men were selected by Kempitai (military police) in accordance with the army order transmitted in secret cable No. 623.

Three months later on June 13, the Chief of Staff-Officer stationed in Taiwan cabled for 20 more women to be dispatched to Borneo. The first batch of women, said the cable, "are not enough to accommodate local needs and some of them have become incapacitated (and unable) to meet heavy work."

The medical report of comfort women, dated May 19, 1943, by an army clinic in Hiloilo province, Central Philippines, and filed with the local Kempitai (military police) shows names of Filipino women such as Maria, Gloria and Margarita (names changed to protect their privacy). The military doctor indicated that nine were acceptable but two were not: one had vaginal inflammation and the other had her menstrual period.

"I felt sick in the stomach," said Ms Itoh as she showed *Depthnews* the documents. She exercised the special right of investigation granted to members of the Diet in uncovering the documents, but said she had to fight bureaucracy to do so.

The diary of a transportation corps in Singapore in April 1943 showed what may be called the origin of the packaged sex tour. The commander ordered soldiers to go in teams of threes or more when visiting comfort houses, to avoid being attacked by the enemy.

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## To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

### Islam's lessons

Sir, (By His grace) a Bangladeshi won the first prize in his group at the 14th International Holy Quran Competition held in Saudi Arabia recently. The prize worth about 6 lakh taka means a major religious award Bangladesh has achieved to date.

Perfection is what seems to underscore the purpose of such a contest on recitations from the holy book (Quran) emphasizing phonetics of the holy verses. The award, however, should enrich Islamic conscience of Bangladeshi Muslims attaching spiritual significance as the integral component of national life.

Accurate translation and interpretation of holy preachings may correctly guide Muslim Ummah in the pursuit of eternal peace and happiness, as intensive lessons on all aspects of pious livelihood may develop civic responsibilities in order

and populace of the world, why then there is no Muslim nation as a permanent member in the Security Council?

The movie "The Man Who Saw Tomorrow" based on prophecies of French physician Nastro Damas written 400 years ago was produced in USA, which predicts that the Third World War could take place some time in 1999 allegedly triggered by a Muslim nation from the Middle East is perhaps the basic logic of USA and Western nations not to allow any attempt by any Muslim country to acquire nuclear arsenal, while maintaining silent on Israel's possession of the same. Even like these — of not allowing a Muslim nation to become Security Council member, blocking any attempt by a Muslim nation to acquire nuclear weapons and maintaining low profile on the issue of oppression and repression against Palestinians, Kashmiris, Moros, Rohingyas etc. call Muslims could well become one day, reasons behind triggering World War Three by a Muslim country as prophesied by Nastro Damas.

We hope United Nations and Security Council members could come to their sense and create atmosphere of possible co-existence of World's one billion Muslims. The Arab investors should also consider seriously to invest some of their US\$ 670 billion in Muslim countries instead of concentrating such investment in the West only, so that majority of poor Muslim nations could expand industrialisation, programmes, which will help boost their GDP growth and export potentiality. This could be one solution for the Muslim countries not to be heavily dependent on Western aid. If the Arabs invest half of their staggering US\$ 670 billion in Muslim countries oppression and suffering of Muslims in the world could be narrowed.

Masud Hassan, Dharmadil R/A, Dhaka.

### Alien fashion

Sir, Bangladesh Biman recently organised a fashion show to promote tourism. While it is not at all clear what relationship tourism has with "Women's body display", I would like to point out that most of the dresses displayed are not the ones worn by our womenfolk but used mainly by western women.

Are we going to imitate the West in every respect? Is this the teaching of "Ekushhey"? Where are our national leaders now? How come they are not complaining of "alien culture"? Nasreen Akter, Dhaka.

Ms Kubota proposes to set up reception desks at Japanese embassies in Asia and an office at the Cabinet similar to "small claim courts" in the US, to expedite compensation claims. This way, the women victims in their old age will not have to go through the long judicial process in regular courts.

"I personally feel deep sympathy for these comfort women." But any governmental action should wait until the investigation by six ministries and agencies is completed," replied Mr Masamichi Hanabusa, new spokesperson of the Foreign Ministry when asked by *Depthnews*.

Meanwhile, the South and North Korean governments have decided to organise a joint front to seek compensation for the women.

— *Depthnews Asia*

## OPINION

### BRTC Needs Public Support

During the past few months there had been quite a good number of reportings in the dailies, weeklies and other publications on road transport situation prevailing in the country. Even prominent dailies editorially highlighted the chronic problem where BRTC also figured prominently. Some of the reports represent correct assessment of the situation while others, unfortunately, appeared to be partisan. In a democratic society, freedom of expression is guaranteed. But when such expression represents partisan views, it obviously creates confusion in public mind and gives rise to plenty of debatable questions.

One must have seen, in the columns of different dailies letters demanding introduction of BRTC service all over the country. On the other hand, the honourable members of the Parliament think that since BRTC is a government owned transport agency why does it not cover everyone's constituency. But unfortunately none made an in-depth study about the internal problems of BRTC, its operational difficulties, fleet size, etc. Under any pleas whether genuine or not, the workers, students, members of the political parties and their fronts, when resorted to strike/haltals for realisation of their demands, obviously make BRTC as their principal target and cause colossal loss and damage to revenue and property. Unfortunately, many of us prefer to remain silent on such an issue of national importance.

According to available information, during the past five years, BRTC suffered loss both in terms of property and revenue amounting to Tk 10 crore of which the extent of loss in 1987 alone was the highest on account of strike and haltals. Most of the vehicles damaged and burnt could neither be rehabilitated nor those beyond economic repair could be replaced by induction of new ones. Consequently the corporation is constantly burdened with surplus manpower and the extent of loss increased in manifold.

Nowhere in the world government transport runs in profit. In most of the developed and developing countries private sector road transport is highly subsidised whereas in our country not only the subsidy from the government is wanting, it is rather making

If BRTC is to be rescued from privatization or disinvestment, the well-hearted support and the well wishes of the public is highly essential. Let there be no more destruction of BRTC vehicles on minor pleas/issues. The public support will be to protest and frustrate the embarrassment caused to BRTC on the provocation of the private owners' associations. In fine, it is suggested that internal conflicts and weaknesses of the BRTC be identified and removed. Only then, despite of BRTC's public utility role, it can run in profit or go closest to it.

Md Martuf Hossain, Bara Moghbazar, Dhaka.