

Happy New Year, Fetching New Century to All

This day dawns not only to a new year but also to a new century for the people of Bangladesh. The Pahela Baishakh of the year 1401 BS could well be the new century's most unique day for all Bengali speaking peoples of the world but for a dubious calendar reform proposed by an unexpert committee and accepted by a post autocratic regime. Calendars are not things to be tampered with every now and then. People all over the world go by the one reformed by Pope Gregory XIII more than five hundred years back. The solar Bengali calendar is much older than that. Akbar the Great only married this to the number of the Islamic lunar Hejira. That the change in the Bengali calendar did not generate any protest tells of only a sad aspect of our national life — very few people care for the Bengali calendar and use it. Let it be our concern in the new century — the Fifteenth of the Bengali era — that we desist from taking decisions that would involve hundreds of million lives and over centuries-long time without resource to their participation, in however token a manner, in the making of it. Autocracies always look for gimmickry, a democratic Bangladesh would never have gone for unsettling a calendar in use for hundreds of years and drawn the nation in yet another confusion.

A day is but like all others of God's days. Only man make them different by the use they put the day to. Pahela Baishakh for a Bangladesh citizen is not just a time counting, season marking device. There were firsts of Baishakh commencing a sub-continental year for over a millennium. But it is the people of Bangladesh who impregnated it with a special significance. This day and its celebration was an expression, perhaps the best among many, of the resurgence of love for the native culture, of a new awareness of one's historical, anthropological and cultural identity. Pahela Baishakh is the culture-day of the Bengalees of Bangladesh. And as Ekushey is being accepted by Bengali speakers around the globe as their very own, Pahela Baishakh is going to be the day of culture for all of the 200 million Bengalees of the world. We feel justified to be proud about gifting a language day and mother culture day to a people whose homeland is here but habitat is strewn all over the earth.

It is literature and the arts and deep and wide-ranging fields of learning bunched together as humanities that bind a people spiritually, by way of ethos and temper, that is, Pahela Baishakh should be the day we would celebrate our culture — by going deep into it, loving it and above all, by living it and being it. But an all enveloping darkness of illiteracy is making all our pretensions to culture devoid of all meaning. Culture, more than literacy, educates man. Let culture or the Bengalee people's inner persuasions educate us all of the shame of illiteracy which has the power to undo society all by itself.

Pahela Baishakh can hardly stand for harking back to the Bengali year — in the near future at least. This is, rather, symbolical of our renewed commitment to grow as a people into ever high levels of social harmony and individual creativity and fulfillment which is attainable only through ever greater and dynamic activity in the sphere of culture. Let the new century bring material and cultural fulfillment to our people. Our supreme challenge of population control is amenable only to a cultural awakening. Let us attain this through awarenesses dawning on us by celebrations such as the Pahela Baishakh.

A happy new year, a fetching new century to all.

Talk to Them, Now

Yesterday's issue of The Daily Star carries two news items of threatened impending strikes — one by the teachers of non-governmental schools and colleges, and another by Fuel Dealers Association. The former proposes to go on strike from 18 April to realise their 15-point charter of demands. The latter group has been a bit more generous. It plans a half-day strike on 12 May, to be followed by more action if necessary. What we object to is both organisations' approach to realising their demands is a threat to strike. Why is it that every demand we make must be accompanied by a threat to strike? Is there no other way of proceeding to get for ourselves which, according to the sponsors of the action, so very justified. For ultimately, it will be the students who will suffer when the teachers will go on strike and the consumers of fuel, like public and private transport owners, who will suffer when the fuel pumps will be closed. In neither case will the government suffer, in any direct sense.

The sponsors of the strike actions are quick to retort, with much justification, that unless they go for a strike action, the government just does not bother. In the particular case of the teachers of non-governmental schools and colleges, the demands were placed before the PM in early 1992. Two years down the road nothing has happened, hence the proposed strike. The fuel-pump dealers have a similar story to tell, and as such they are also going for a similar action.

This governments approach to demands by organised groups of this or that profession appears to be to ignore them till a crisis situation is reached. And when the crisis becomes critical then to go for some quick and unthinking agreement, which later the government is unable to fulfill. Take the nurses strike for example. Agreement was reached only after untold suffering was caused to the patients.

Why can't the government negotiate on the demands well ahead of time? If the government finds the demands to be unrealistic, or unacceptable for the moment, it should say so clearly and make the reasons public. In fact on several occasions this paper urged the government to go on the television and tell the nation why this or that demand of any particular group cannot be met. We are fully aware that often organised groups make unreasonable demands. But what we cannot understand is why the government handles things the way it does.

We now have these two new charter of demands — not to speak of all others by different groups.

Our plea to the government is, do not wait till the very last, or do not let these groups to go on strike first and then decide to talk to them. Such course of action does credit to nobody. Talk to them now. Give them a very serious hearing and tell them what can be done, and what cannot — and why not.

We are confident, such a course of action will be good for us, all.

Hurry up Self-rule — Situation Going beyond Control

The very idea of Palestinian self-rule — Palestinians running their own affairs will largely take away the present heat — the craze for revenge. At least change of target is likely...

PEOPLE all around me were burning, there were bodies. I did not look. It would be too hard. — said an Israeli resident who was waiting in the bus shelter nearby. A powerful car bomb at a bus stand in Afula, Northern Israel, ripped into the front part of an Israeli bus killing eight which included 'Jewish teenagers and at least one Arab' and wounding about forty. The Islamic militant groups reportedly claimed responsibility for the attack which they termed as revenge for Hebron massacre. Unfortunately, none responsible for Hebron massacre was in the bus. It was a ghastly act and it must be condemned by all peace loving people. As PLO is seriously and apparently irrevocably engaged in peace negotiations with Israel, it should waste no time in condemning such a terrible act which goes against the peace process itself.

However, while condemning the massacre, one painfully detects the sad and fateful decision of a young 19-year-old Palestinian who allegedly carried out the attack and blew himself up into pieces which he was absolutely sure of in advance. The question that the civilized world should ask is why such a young boy who is entitled to a prosperous, peaceful and enjoyable life got into the madness of extremist groups and went for a revenge and finished himself up. What was the revenge for? Was it the Hebron massacre or revenge for the humiliation and disgrace he suffered in Israeli jail? He was identified as 'Raid Zakama of northern West Bank

village of Kabatiya' and Israeli media reported that he served time in prison during Intifada — Palestinian uprising against Israeli rule — and had at one point complained to the Israeli human rights organization B'T selem about being raped in prison. Probably the boy was arrested while throwing stones at the Israeli troops during Intifada and was put in jail and there he suffered humiliation which threw him irrevocably in the path of destruction. Probably, may such sad stories of humiliations, human sufferings, abuse of human rights and above all loss of freedom and national identity were responsible for driving many, otherwise innocent young people, into the terrorist groups. Who is really responsible for this? The society, the nations, human rights groups and also the UN must find an answer.

The tension is mounting on both sides and calls for revenge are becoming louder. Unless serious efforts are made to settle all the remaining issues on urgent basis and Palestinian self-rule starts immediately, the peace process may suffer a serious set back.

In such a situation parties engaged in the peace negotiations will lose control and extremists will take over. Therefore, hurry up and sign the agreement and establish the self-rule. PLO and Israelis can continue to talk and take care of the remaining issues. The very idea of Palestinian self-rule — Palestinians run-

ning their own affairs will largely take away the present heat — the craze for revenge. At least change of target is likely; the PLO may have to face the extreme rightists. However, the situation may change dramatically if, among others, the following actions are taken:

It is known that the present scheme of limited self-rule in very limited territories — Gaza and Jericho — is not accept-

able to many of the Palestinian people. Even Arafat's own Fatah group is extremely divided on this. However, Arafat and his associates accepted this, though clearly unwillingly as an interim measure. The Washington agreement stipulates expansion of the self-rule over the occupied territories over a period of time. Negotiation on final determination of the status of the territory is also to be started in three years time. As the situation stands, this strategy has to be modified; expansion of the self-rule over most part of the occupied territories must materialise sooner rather than later. The idea of allowing time for building up confidence and gradual expansion has been shattered by Israeli settler Baruch Goldstein through Hebron massacre. Now, both sides are calling for 'blood for

blood' — 'death for death'. The closure of the occupied territories for indefinite period is neither desirable nor workable. Israel cannot keep nearly two million Palestinians indoors. The Israeli Cabinet decision to allow foreign workers into Israel to replace Palestinian workers may backfire. This will create serious social tension in Israel as unlike Palestinians foreign workers will reside within Israel

the future. The hope of early return of land to the Palestinians may start creating confidence in the minds of the majority of the Palestinians and foster a better feeling towards Israelis. This will gradually reduce the present strength of Hamas and other opponents of peace.

Arafat too must modify his plan of action and alleged apparent attitude of depending too much on his Tunis group for advice and also probably for running the proposed self-rule administration on a land from which he and Tunis group remained cut off for a very long time. He must take into consideration all Palestinian leaders of the occupied territories who have been facing the Israeli occupying forces for decades. Without the participation of majority leaders of occupied territories he cannot successfully run the self-rule administration. Last week there was a signal from Hamas Leadership that they would accept Arafat as chairman if he goes by their revolutionary plan of action and abandon the present peace process. Arafat, of course, cannot abandon the

peace process but he can certainly respond to this call and give them an assurance of mutually acceptable form of political accommodation and their participation in running the present self-rule and, hopefully, the future Palestinian government. It must be emphasized that he cannot run the self-rule administration by keeping them completely out and shut. The situation has made them powerful and so to say indispensable for his self-rule administration.

The US State Department's spokesman Mike Mc. Curry correctly said after Afula massacre that the 'best answer' would be to initiate Palestinian self-rule on the West Bank and Gaza. One hopes that the US would put appropriate pressure on Israeli government to allow self-rule without any further delay in Gaza and Jericho and also announce the schedules for early negotiations on expansion of self-rule on entire occupied territories. Let Palestinians take care of their own problems. Once Palestinians are in charge — they will be obliged to take extra security measures for the settlers. The condition is that the settlers must also accept and abide by self-rule.

"Children think this is normal because they didn't see another life," says Shehadeh. "To them, violence and occupation are normal."

Israel and the PLO signed an agreement last September designed to put an end to this deadly contest. Under the accord that has been troubled by negotiation differences and missed deadlines on implementation, a Palestinian police force is to replace the Israeli army.

It is then that Palestinians, as a society, may have to come to terms with the effects of 27 years of occupation and six years of violent uprising. Only then will they be able to confront the task of functioning as a normal society.

A call by young men in Fatah and Hamas, the two largest political factions in the West Bank and Gaza, to revive the intifada following the Hebron massacre may keep rocks in the children's hands a little longer.

But both Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO chairman Yasser Arafat say they want to implement the agreement signed in September. Dozens of praying Palestinians were massacred at Hebron last month by radical settler Baruch Goldstein, a supporter of a racist anti-Arab political movement.

Arafat has conditioned resumption of the peace talks on Israeli commitment to disarm Goldstein's fellow settlers and allow armed international observers in the West Bank and Gaza to protect Palestinians, demands Rabin refuses to consider.

But US President Bill Clinton has invited both parties to Washington to reach an agreement on Israeli withdrawal as soon as possible — and Rabin said that once agreement is reached, it could take as little as six weeks to complete the army withdrawal from Gaza and the West Bank town of Jericho.

Once that happens, a generation of Palestinians used to fear and occupation will have the chance to embark on a peaceful road. Says Shehadeh: "We hope to let the children come back to their childhood, because no Palestinian child knows what childhood is. We want to show them there is a better side of life, not only stones and occupation."

our society. Tolerance and free exchange of ideas are two of the most important pillars of democracy.

Those in opposition will someday be in power and vice-versa. Therefore can they not all come to a term to have a moratorium against the destructive politics for the good of the people and the country? Or is that asking too much from the politicians?

Akku Chowdhury
Nakhalpara, Dhaka

Gas cylinder explosion

Sir, Following the unfortunate gas cylinder explosion which recently took place at Narinda, killing a number of people 'including' children, consciousness about the danger and hazards of these gas cylinders has been aroused in the public mind. The authority has also banned carrying of gas cylinder for selling gas balloons.

We would call upon the relevant authorities to ban unauthorised use of all types of gas cylinders and to launch campaign for creating people's awareness about safety measures for using gas cylinder of any kind.

M Zahidul Haque
Press and Publicity Secretary
Bangladesh Society for
Conservation of Environment
(BSCE)

SPOTLIGHT ON MIDDLE EAST

Muslehuddin Ahmad

able to many of the Palestinian people. Even Arafat's own Fatah group is extremely divided on this. However, Arafat and his associates accepted this, though clearly unwillingly as an interim measure. The Washington agreement stipulates expansion of the self-rule over the occupied territories over a period of time. Negotiation on final determination of the status of the territory is also to be started in three years time. As the situation stands, this strategy has to be modified; expansion of the self-rule over most part of the occupied territories must materialise sooner rather than later. The idea of allowing time for building up confidence and gradual expansion has been shattered by Israeli settler Baruch Goldstein through Hebron massacre. Now, both sides are calling for 'blood for

and share accommodations, goods and services which are already in short supply. All these will add to the present tensions and bloodshed. The best course for Israeli government would be to install self-rule in Gaza and Jericho immediately and announce a time-table for negotiation of the expansion of the self-rule in other areas of the occupied territories. This may cool down the present emotion and indicate some form of hope for

The Stone Children

Palestinian children in 'the Occupied Territories seem to have lost their childhood — and their fear of death. Deborah Horan of Inter Press Service reports from Beit Jala, West Bank.

In the occupied Gaza Strip and West Bank, crowds of barefoot six to eight-year-olds carry stones the way other children carry dolls or toy cars.

With eyes trained at a young age to spot the colour-coded signs of the state of Israel, these children pelt any car with yellow licence plates, any bus that is red, and absolutely anything that is army olive green.

An entire Palestinian generation knows nothing but occupation — and a half-generation of children know nothing but the intifada, the uprising against Israeli rule.

It is a state of mind that has psychologists worrying that once self-rule begins, as outlined in the peace agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza will have a tough time adjusting.

There will be extreme difficulty making the transition, to put the occupation behind us," says Dr Edmund Shehadeh, director of the Arab Society for Rehabilitation, which counsels children and adults suffering psychologically from the effects of occupation, usually in combination with physical therapy.

Shehadeh says the most common psychological problems among children of the intifada include contempt for authority and an view that death at a young age is arbitrary, normal — and even desirable in a conflict that lionises the martyr.

"They live in an environment where being shot at by soldiers in normal," he says. "The situation is unstable and they know that even if they are not directly involved in a confrontation with soldiers, they could be shot accidentally."

Israel has strict open fire rules and soldiers are supposed to open fire with live

ammunition only when they perceive their life to be in danger. But the deaths of children seem endless. Recently in Gaza, soldiers in pursuit of wanted men accidentally shot and killed an eleven-year-old girl riding in a car. In the Negev, a 13-year-old boy standing at a bank was shot in the head and killed during a street protest nearby.

Shehadeh says these incidents teach children 'that life is fleeting. If at any moment you could be killed, death loses its meaning. He explains, "It will be difficult in the future to bring the value of human life — of their life — back to them. With occupation — and especially intifada — they developed a kind of 'no fear' that gave them the courage to face the Israeli soldiers."

"When soldiers just point the weapon it scares me," adds Shehadeh, who was born when his West Bank home town of Beit Jala was under Jordanian control. "But in Gaza, when the soldiers shoot, the children just keep running around, continuing. They lost their fear of death."

Boys as young as twelve and thirteen join the shabiba, the young men on the street who form the front line in confrontations with soldiers. With jagged pieces of sandstone and concrete in hand, they run toward the soldiers screaming 'Allahu Akbar! — God is the Greatest — in unison.

That leaves the younger children with the tasks of setting up road blocks, lighting tires on fire and breaking concrete blocks down to fist-sized ammunition for the older boys in the street.

Emulating what they see, these youngsters usually join in, throwing rocks and then running into shops and back alleys, when the soldiers retaliate with tear gas, rubber and plastic bullets and sometimes a live fire in a kind of high-risk cat-and-mouse game.

Flash Floods: We Must Develop Our Own Safeguards

by Amjad Hossain Khan

CONTINUOUS rain and onrush of water from the hilly slopes in India have inundated vast areas in greater Sylhet, Feni, Comilla, Kishoregonj and Netrokona districts.

Incessant rain supplemented by onrush of water from across the border have submerged vast areas in Feni and Comilla damaging irri-boro crops on about 10,000 acres of land. The 100 ft by-pass in the Parshuram bazar has been washed away. Flash floods in Narsingdi and Rajshahi thanas have damaged about 20,000 acres of standing boro crops in 10 unions. About 70,000 acres of standing boro have been badly damaged in Kishoregonj district due to rains and onrush of flood water from Meghalaya. In Netrokona, about eight haor areas have been submerged under flood water affecting 10,000 acres of crop lands. And in greater Sylhet region, about four lakh acres of crop lands have been badly affected. Sunamgonj district is worst affected with two lakh acres submerged. The other districts affected are Habigonj, Moulvibazar and Sylhet.

The flash flood vulnerable area in Bangladesh is about 8,214 sq km. The most affected regions are the north-east, southeast and the northern region. Locally concentrated rainfall of more than 300 mm in two to six hours in the basin within and outside the country causes flash floods. The most critical period for harvesting the HYV boro is mid-May. If the flash flood occurs before harvesting of crops, as happened this year, the damage to crops is total. It is reported that the crops and other losses amount to about Taka 100 crore.

Flash floods are recurring events every year. Depending on the rainfall in the upper catchments in India, they occur in April and May. This year it happened in late March. Although continuous rainfall of three to five days happen in most of the areas, but the major reason for flash flood is onrush of water from India.

Unfortunately, Bangladesh don't get any warning from India on flash floods. After 1987 and 1988 floods, the matter was taken up with India for quick transmission of data through BSF and BDR channel. Both the sides selected stations for exchange of data at known frequency. Bangladesh has been intimidated India the frequency of its stations for wireless transmission. India didn't supply any frequency for their stations till today.

The damage by flash flood is not only by water alone but the flood water bring in sand particles down to Bangladesh and damage land on both sides of the rivers. The affected land remains unfit for crop production for quite some time.

Flood information centres in BWDB started functioning from April this year. They may start giving forecast data from now on provided they get data from India on rainfall and discharge of the upper catchment regularly. If the climate is unusual, as was predicted by the Met office in Bangladesh earlier, there should be some arrangements to give timely warning to the people. It may not save crops but can save human lives.

The district authorities who are ravaged by flash floods every year should have their own preparedness programme to meet the need of the situation for mitigating the sufferings of

the people like evacuation, providing food and shelter and immediate rehabilitation.

The statement of damages in news paper are sketchy. Even the data from districts also may not be correct as they try to give figures of damages without assessing the correct position. Monitoring of damage assessment should be done by government departments and should be published. It is difficult to get data of damages due to flash flood on annual basis.

Flash floods damage crops every year thereby straining our economy. The problem of evacuation, shelter, relief and rehabilitation is also time-consuming and costly. While we are seriously concerned with disaster like floods, cyclones, tornadoes, and storm surges in the coastal area, we should also seriously consider ways and means to minimise the damage due to flash floods. We need cooperation of India in giving timely warning. But that does not solve the whole problem. We must prepare and take our own programme to save the irri-boro crops of a vast area and prevent damage to infrastructures.

A number of donors are funding projects in the north-east region with submersible embankments. The objective is to save irri-boro crops. But it is clear from the recent newspaper reports that they have not provided adequate measures to protect the crops from damage due to flash floods. It is time to review the design of submersible embankments in the north-east region.

The writer is former Chairman, Bangladesh Water Development Board and Managing Director, Approtech Consultants Limited, Dhaka.

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.

What Bangladesh achieved from new US regime?

Sir, CNN has inspired Bangladeshis, taught lessons to the viewers, eye-opened on cross questions. Now we discard cliches with searching questions. Some stalwarts still ruminate end of early 70s, while people examine realities of 90s and prospects beyond. A negative reaction also contributes to growth of Clinton fever. Bangladesh struggles with the broad message of commitment to world peace, environ and human and press rights. US is insular with its predominantly domestic agenda which was necessary to clean bowl a Bush-profile with 12 years Republican in Oval, but Democrats are addicted to aid to 3rd World LDCs as Edward Kennedy was in refugee camps in 1971 in Calcutta. Clinton already showed interest in pioneer social engineering to poverty alleviation. The regulated share of US market quota of Bangladesh exports is not reduced affecting some Asian

countries and Europe. Bangladesh has already drawn sympathy on its right claims against diversion upstream of its natural share of river water for maintenance of its age-old ecological biodiversity and for conservation and expansion of Sunderbans.

Although government was with Bush in Gulf war, commoners did not like Kuwaiti and Saudi pretensions. Even those who treated Saddam as a blundering windbag, hoped to avoid seeking the severity of punishment on Iraq. I don't know what government has achieved overtly or covertly from White House but do know that swagger of mighty power and high tech bravado did not appeal to Bangladesh commoners and perhaps a silent prayer invoking Divine wrath brought down Bush and Clinton answered Bush the other way round.

What we have achieved, truly speaking from US experience, is not White House announcement but what IFC, IMF, WB, Paris aid consortium meet had and have been doing

for Bangladesh, of course, with stringent ties and modalities attached to it as they don't follow Keynes, Adam Smith but only Baumol, Branson, Lipsy, Musgrave, Gould, Lazarus, Rudyer Dornbusch, Ferguson, Paul A Samuelson and Stanley Fischer — the planet's top development welfare, positive, mathematical, political macro-economists as of today, based in Boston, Chicago and Washington D.C.

Ghulam Murshid
Dhaka

On Her Majesty's support

Sir, The agreement on financing five Bangladesh projects, worth about 40 million pounds sterling, by UK underscores the bond of relations of over three centuries between the superpower and her former colony.

Following disintegration of colonial system, ties among British ex-colonies have been restructured in the form of Commonwealth with intent to promote the peoples' well-being in the British empire.

With about one-tenth Commonwealth population, and 9th largest in the world, developing Bangladesh uses aids mainly for the improvement of her infrastructures.

Like the British projects, all other ones, completed or on the table now, must have been

prioritised according to the importance or need regardless of size and support.

Good or bad, LDC Bangladesh has found herself now more dependent on over a dozen countries and agencies for her development than was Great Britain as a part of British India and even on West Pakistan as a wing of erstwhile Pakistan.

M Rahman
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Political maturity

Sir, We the people, hoped that as we were showing maturity as electorates in the election to give our full support to the democratic process, the political parties, their leaders and supporters will show responsibility and maturity in their conviction too.

Unfortunately we have to be disappointed; we are back to square one. The days of agitation and hartals are back. The days of suffering are upon us. Two innocent lives have been lost just recently for the gain of a particular interest group.

Many lives were lost and blood spilled for our liberation and to establish democracy. We make them martyrs and build shahed minars — but can anyone bring these lives back? Nor can they make their dreams come true. Even 23 years after our liberation we are still