

How to Start the Dialogue?

Whatever may have been the justification for the Awami League's hartal call of 10th April, we strongly feel that there was none for the one that brought the nation to a halt, except in Chittagong and Bhola, last Tuesday. If it was to prove that the AL still has the capacity to bring everything to a halt, than we feel constrained to add, that it did not need any proof. For nobody but the most ignorant would have ever doubted the biggest opposition party's ability for such action. Now that it is over, can we have some serious dialogue between the ruling party and the opposition about the political future of the country? Is it too much to expect from parties and politicians who profess to be our leaders?

For politicians, and more so for political parties, there are public postures and private positions. The public postures are designed as opening gambits in a political tussle. Behind these postures are far better calculated positions which the parties reveal only after a genuine dialogue begins. In our case we seem never to be able to go beyond, what the Americans call, the first base. What we now have are statements and counter statements of the political parties, in which they, each of them, express their extreme positions. And in the absence of any serious communication between the opposition and the ruling BNP, the extreme positions become the only known positions. As a result the public is getting increasingly perturbed about the country's immediate democratic future.

Given the present political context, the ruling party secretary-general Salam Talukdar's comment to The Star on Wednesday that the BNP will not ask the opposition to join the next parliament session, comes as a setback to the process of dialogue that this paper has been insisting upon ever since the Magura by-election brought about the present impasse. What the BNP leader's statement clearly brings out is that the ruling party has given up any prospect of the next parliament session to be of any worth. This obviously reduces the prospect of any serious negotiations taking place before the coming session. It has to be remembered under what circumstances the parliament was last adjourned. This paper expressed its dismay as to how the elected representatives themselves were turning the parliament sessions into meaningless events. Any further reinforcement of that sentiment in the public mind will constitute a severe setback for the strengthening of the process of democracy.

Now that the opposition is saying it will not return to the parliament unless the ruling party agrees to certain demands, and the ruling party is saying it will not ask the opposition to come to the House, then where do we go from here? There is now a tremendous amount of frustration in the public mind caused by the inability of our politicians to get along with one another. Their constant quarreling about everything, and each party's attitude that the 'other can do no right' is creating a sense of disgust among the public which both the AL and the BNP are ignoring at their own peril.

At the risk of sounding repetitive we reassert our position that the opposition and the treasury benches must talk. It is only through that process will they be able to differentiate between each other's public postures and real positions. And only when they get to that stage, will some understanding become possible. But for the process to start, the ruling party must first accept that there is something in what the opposition is saying. Some of the demands of the opposition verge on the extreme. But not all. Far from it, in fact some of it, like contention about adequate coverage of the opposition activities on the BTV and the radio, is indeed most reasonable. What the government can do, which is only ethical and democratic, is to unilaterally open up the TV and the radio to adequate coverage of the opposition activities. This will make these two state-owned media more acceptable to the public, and perhaps reduce tension and soften the atmosphere. That could be the point of starting a genuine dialogue.

Soccer vs Exams

That students go on hunger strike is not uncommon. The reasons most of the time are academic — more precisely concerning examinations. Most of the time the demand is for shifting the date of examination under a host of pretexts. Some of them deserve considerations, some do not. But almost always it is the protesting students who get their ways, finally. For the 500 or so examinees of Rajshahi University the issue is no different, for they too are emulating Mahatma Gandhi by opting for the famous form of protest, non-violence.

And why such a large body of students protesting through their refusal of food against holding the examinations due to start from June 12 next? The answer is plain and simple. June is the month when the greatest football extravaganza will be taking place in the USA. Well, the students have a point. Since the two finals — soccer and honours — have coincided, those 500 examinees are sure to suffer a bout of divided attention. One must not stand in the way of the other. The logic is simple. Since the World Cup cannot be postponed and the live televised matches will be available here, thanks to the dish antennae, it is the examination that must be made to wait.

Well, then, there may be arguments that honours final examinations are most important and come once in a lifetime. The world cup soccer will return after every four years. No question about that. Only the students want to have the best of both worlds. They are willing to sit for the examination but only at a later date, after the world cup is over. And by making their choice clear for hunger strike, they have demonstrated their love for the game, football, the most popular of all sports.

Sure enough, the examinees are making a choice between two things. But the issue has taken a different twist by the appearance of another group of students on the scene. They have submitted a memorandum to the Vice Chancellor demanding the holding of the examinations on schedule. Now, this will put the university authority in a dilemma. Clearly, to the second group of students soccer does not mean much. There may be yet another group who will join neither of the sides. They are likely to greet a postponement of the examinations with enthusiasm, but also will not be altogether displeased if the exams are held on schedule. We will be waiting for the verdict of the authority with interest. Will soccer win over exams or the vice versa?

With the retreat of communism, new nations, new problems, new tensions are bursting out everywhere, some of them presenting the greatest challenges to continued stability and prosperity of human beings around the globe. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its neighbours has thrown the East-European countries into a whirlpool of chaos, instability and anarchy. In a great area that stretches out from the Balkans and blood soaked Yugoslavia up to Ukraine and beyond, ethnic tensions are boiling over and mini-nationalism is beginning to run riot.

Sadly enough, getting rid of the communist dictatorship does not guarantee a ticket to pluralist and open free societies. This trauma of ethnic violence and unleashing of fundamentalism extends to the region of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and to some extent to this part of the world too. What an irony it would be and how furiously future generations would condemn us if, at the very moment, success in the endeavours like alleviation of poverty, eradication of illiteracy and setting up a pluralist democratic society which are within our grasp, allowed to crumble away, if we allow the narrow corners of community infighting to divert us from higher needs and goals.

Pertinently, the root cause of the liberation war of Bangladesh must not be lost sight of. An euphoric urge to use Islam to suppress our culture by the rulers of Pakistan, to an extent, hastened the demise of the then East Pakistan. The brutality and orgy of massacre unleashed by the Pakistani occupation forces at

Why this Attack against Women?

by Md Asadullah Khan

that time find only its parallels in the torture let loose on the Muslims by the Serbs in the Bosnia-Herzegovina. The horror of the four-year old unrelenting savagery unleashed by the Serbs has stunned the civilized world. Reports of torture and starvation in detention camps and also of emaciated Muslim prisoners give heart rending account of the atrocities still going on unabated. Despite the fact that the country has suffered so much so in human tragedy and economic ruin, and that any kind of fanaticism only enhances human misery, some self-centered politicians, after using religion as a weapon, are stoking the fires of fundamentalism and communalism to the peril of the Bangladesh's rise into a sustainable democracy.

We tend to forget very often that militancy has never paved the way for peace, stability and progress. Saner section of the people must come to terms with the truth that those who use communalism or fundamentalism in any form as an argument for stability or peace leave a legacy far more volatile than the disease they seek to cure. Civilian institutions that could lay the foundation of genuine grassroots democracy can never be fully developed by pursuing the politics of parochialism.

Recent trend of activities by some self-seeking or self-centred elements to restrict the freedom of women in job and literacy, points to the poignancy of the move. This must be brought home to all concerned with progress and develop-

ment of the country that Bangladesh is not an oil-rich country like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait or Iran, where womenfolk can afford to remain within the four walls of the house, relaxing or rolling in plenty of the petro-dollar. In Muslim countries like Iraq and Libya women work and study side by side with men.

The barbaric punishment and humiliation meted out to Nurjahan of Sylhet and Feroza Begum of Satkhira and hindrance created in performing the pre-burial Islamic rites of a young child of a woman working as an NGO worker in Bogra and many other stray cases in Sirajganj, Rangpur, Kaliganj and Feni are indications of the rise of a severe form of fundamentalism.

Islam, since the time of Prophet Mohammed (SM) has demonstrated superb sense of tolerance in the face of severest of provocations. But the stark fact is that, on the contrary, these days some extremist groups and fanatics masquerading as devoted Muslims are brandishing weapons and resorting to hate-campaign unleashing discord, enmity and fear which may ultimately endanger this fledgling democracy and tear the nation apart. That would mean a great catastrophe engulfing the country, and putting progress and stability at stake. We must take note of the fact that stability can be achieved by the cool wind of harmony. How can extremists and fanatics with typhoon of zealotry, hatred and

intolerance bring stability to a country already in a messy situation? The desperate need of the hour is a stable leadership capable of addressing serious problems both economic and structural with the strength to stifle the discord developing in so many ways that has bedeviled the country for the past few years. More than ever, we must fight divisive forces that thrive on the cult of violence and fanaticism.

Some fanatic groups here in Bangladesh or elsewhere in the world are eager to profit from a surge of sympathy by invoking the slogan 'Islam is in danger'. But let it be made explicitly clear to these protagonists of religion that never before Islam was in danger and never again will Islam be in danger.

What has happened to Nurjahan of Sylhet, Kado Banu of Rangpur, Feroza of Satkhira and some other women in Sirajganj is a sordid picture and a calculated attempt to keep the womenfolk of the country in perennial bondage to the utter disregard of the economic emancipation of the people at large. The question now that looms large in the public mind is the attainment of economic viability of the nation. But how can this be achieved? Only with the menfolk, leaving aside the vast majority of women that constitute 50% of the total population?

If it is a happy augury that after ignoring women for decades, aid organizations and prudent leaders of the nation

are now beginning to recognize women as a key to economic advancement in this developing world. Given the opportunity, women from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and other third world countries, have shown that they can run businesses and support their families.

What has most often been lost sight of is that women grow at least half the world's food, as much as 80% in parts of Africa. And as more men flee the countryside for jobs in the cities, women now head between a third and a half of all household in the developing world. We remain a passive and mute spectator to the grim sight of women, toiling in other people's fields for virtually nothing and languishing in squalor, hunger and poverty.

Ironically when in the changed circumstances new opportunities have brought them new fortunes, they are purchasing lands, raising livestock — our heart bleeds with resentment and anger. It is no exaggeration that the moment when Govt and other agencies have targeted women, development has come about. Village by village, women in the developing world are gaining the tools and confidence they need to provide for their families and to make their communities healthier places to live.

As these women in the developing countries acquire skills and influence, they are pushing for literacy drive, clean water and better nutrition. They are building networks and creating the kind of solidarity

that can ultimately spur greater political and social change.

Most shocking it is that we don't cry wolf when we see married woman-folk in our country subjected to torture, beatings and killings for their inability to meet the demand of dowry. Reports have it that there were about 15,000 divorce cases in Noakhali district last year. The recent happenings in various parts of the country are very ominous. Another report suggests that about 6436 members of the women-folk of the Mahamaya, under Chagalainya thana of the Feni District could not cast their votes in the UP election inspired by the Fatwa of late peer of the area and preached by the heir-apparent son of the late peer-shaheb.

All these activities and Fatwa preached by the self-styled, protagonists of Islam signal a potential crisis stalking the nation. This drive for so called Islamisation will throw the country in to a cul-de-sac and will tear a section apart from the other.

In a country where women literacy rate averages only 19%, this sort of cynical attitude towards women will invite gloom for the country. The so called fundamentalist and extremist organizations that are spreading across the country are the resorts of people who have been left without any better hope. To move the country towards stability and prosperity, Government and the political leaders will have to make a great leap of courage and persuade the people to do likewise. They will have to begin building for all instead of tearing one another.

At the headquarters of the Black Sea Fleet in this historic port city of Ukraine, the slogan 'Crimea — Our Motherland' emblazoned on the walls by its pro-Russian populace captures the divisive spirit here.

Nearly 140 years after the end of the Crimean War and 40 years after Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev gave it as a gift to Ukraine, the Crimean peninsula has become the source of a raging dispute between Ukrainian nationalists who see it as their sovereign territory and the Russians who consider it an indivisible part of their history.

During the March parliamentary elections, more than 60 per cent of Crimean voters took part in an informal plebiscite calling for greater autonomy from Kiev for the peninsula. More than 80 per cent of those who voted backed Crimean President Yuri Meshkov's demands for independent powers.

The plebiscite has no legal force, but it is expected to damage Kiev's relations with Moscow especially since the diamond-shaped peninsula's future is inextricably linked to the ex-Soviet Black Sea Fleet, which the two neighbours have also been bickering over.

Although Moscow had wanted to quarantine the question of Crimean autonomy from agreements for the Fleet's division and sale, disputes over the Black Sea Fleet's status may resurface now that the Ukrainian parliamentary polls have confirmed a split between the country's nationalist west and pro-Russian eastern provinces.

The Fleet was once a mighty maritime arm of the Soviet Union, its 350 combat ships seen as a counter-bal-

ance to the US Sixth Fleet patrolling the Mediterranean. It protected the Soviet Union's southern flanks while the northern and eastern shores were guarded by fleets based in the Arctic port of Murmansk and the Russian Far Eastern base of Vladivostok.

But the crumbling of the Soviet Union has meant that the Black Sea Fleet becomes subject to a tug-of-war whenever relations between Ukraine and Russia hit rock-bottom.

Now Russia is reasserting its role as a global power and it sees the Fleet as a symbol of its heroic military endeavours — especially during the Crimean War during which it fought valiantly against an Anglo-French alliance with the Turkish Ottoman Empire.

In 1853, Imperial Russia occupied Turkish territory in an effort to expand to Constantinople and gain access to Mediterranean ports. But England and France sprang to the defence of the Ottoman Empire and bombarded Sevastopol, laying a siege that lasted one year. The war dragged on with heavy casualties for four years.

Says Lt Cdr Andrei Grachev, head of the Fleet's press centre: "It is not merely the question of ships and bases. Sevastopol and the Fleet are a part of Russia history. Those who reject their own history can have no future."

Ukraine has recognised its inability to find the enormous resources required to maintain the Black Sea Fleet and has been trying to form a new national navy. It now has five combat vessels of its own.

Ukraine: The Crimean War II?

Ukraine and Russia are jockeying for control over the Crimea and the Black Sea Fleet in a tussle that harks back to a wasteful war more than a century ago. Rajiv Tiwari of Inter Press Service reports from Sevastopol, Crimea.

But Kiev wants Moscow to pay a fair price for the takeover of the Fleet, and its success in forcing the West to compensate for its nuclear disarmament programme has armed the Ukrainians with a confidence — which observers say may turn out to be misplaced. Warns Ukrainian Navy Rear Admiral Nikolai Kostrov: "Conflicts start from the clumsiest situations."

Last year, Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk met Russian President Boris Yeltsin in the Crimean resort of Massandra and agreed to sell his country's share of the Black Sea Fleet in return for US\$2 billion worth of debts accumulated for Russian oil and energy supplies.

Under the terms of the Massandra Protocol, Ukraine and Russia were to prepare an inventory of the fleet and its shore installations to fix a value on their sale. But Kostrov, who heads the Ukrainian side of the commission, now says the Russians are dragging their feet in the hope of gains to be made from Crimean autonomy. "The situation will not improve because of these plebiscites and politics," he adds.

Earlier in Yalta, Kravchuk and Yeltsin had agreed to divide the Fleet, valued at about US\$32 billion, on an equal basis. But Ukrainian naval officers

admit privately that a settlement of between 10-15 per cent of that amount is more realistic.

Perhaps to overcome lost national pride, Ukrainian officials disparage the Fleet's value. Kostrov says the last combat vessels were inducted in 1982 and most of the ships are on an average at least 20 years old. "The fleet is like a

floating scrap yard, it is absurd to compare it with the US Sixth Fleet," he adds. "The Black Sea Fleet is a paper tiger."

But Grachev says it remains a vital part of the strategic balance of forces between Russia and the United States. When asked why Russia needs such armed projection after the end of the Cold War, he shoots back: "Please tell me why does the US maintain its Sixth Fleet at our doors, who will it fight?"

Last year, Russia sent marines from the Fleet to protect key transport and communication lines during the final phases of the Georgian civil war between forces loyal to Eduard Shevardnadze and

rebel president Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

Most of the Fleet's sailors and officers are Russian and likely to have voted for greater Crimean autonomy and elected lawmakers from Meshkov's 'Russia' bloc. Sevastopol is also inhabited by a large number of retired naval officers who take an active part in demonstrations calling for union with Russia.

The Fleet is funded up to three-fourths from the Russian exchequer, but salaries and pensions are paid out in the worthless Ukrainian karbovanets coupon. Thus, living standards here are lower than five times to sailors' earnings in other fleets. Leading some observers to conclude Ukraine has already lost on the vital economic front in the battle over the Black Sea Fleet.

OPINION

Magura By-election and Democracy

While answering the points made by Mr Abu Imran on Magura by-election in the Daily Star of March 30, 1994, Mr T Hussain has made a number of assertions in your 'Opinion Column' on April 26, 1994. I would like to comment on some of the points he made.

He said, *inter alia*, that "It was assumed that both Awami League and Jatiya Party had joined hands together in opposing the BNP candidate." This assumption was made in the face of the fact that the Jatiya Party candidate, a former minister, and his party conducted a vigorous campaign and polled over 20,000 votes. Does it suggest to impartial observers that the Jatiya Party had "joined hands" with the Awami League? On the other hand, the alliance between the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami is a matter of public record. Did the BNP not come to power with the support of Jamaat? In recent months one noticed some signs of disillusionment with the BNP government but then the Jamaat is not alone in feeling disillusioned.

BNP's refusal to agree to have the observer teams gavel away the game. Mr T Hussain suppressed the fact that, in addition to the representatives of the three parties, the team was to have a representative of the Election Commission. Awami League was fully prepared to take the risk, which was considerable, that the govt. official who would have represented the Election Commission, might have been biased in favour of the ruling party. Why could not the BNP agree to an arrangement which, if anything, was tilted more in its favour?

The Chief Election Commissioner's abrupt departure by-election or not. But knowing the forgone conclusion, they should not cover their sure-failure in the name of caretaker govt. election as a smoke-screen to fool the people. If USA or UK also conduct election there, BNP will cake-walk.

Ghulam Murshid Dhaka

Inspiring records

Sir, The heart-breaking new records of individual highest score in a Test innings by a West Indian, the highest total Test wickets by an Indian, and the highest aggregate Test runs by an Australian mean something new the cricket-dom should have longed for.

Undeniably, the cricketers now owe the new heroes, as well as old ones, pride and prestige for their historic performances that will be inspiring the lovers of the Gentlemen's Game on and off the pitch until the time unknown.

Early this year has witnessed many sports records advanced or perfected anew. It's all been possible because of advances in technology and know-how (plus luck for some).

As a part of payback, all the greats, all-time and one-time alike, who literally made the impossible possible, created new histories, and set new standards without which the wide world of sports would not be as it is today, deserve to be remembered as best ways as can be, not merely to popularize the sports but to enrich each discipline with all the best in an individual sportsman.

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To the Editor...

'Research institute with unrealised promise'

Sir, My attention was drawn to a feature in The Daily Star of April 16, regarding the Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA) written by Mr A S M Nurun Nabi. Being associated with the Institute in different capacities for more than 18 years since its inception in 1973, I became the Director in 1992 prior to my departure as a visiting scholar to the Georgetown University Law Centre in Washington D C. I am, therefore, in a position to state that Mr Nurun Nabi (a former ad hoc Research Associate) has failed to trace the roots and causes of the present crisis that has gripped the Institute since 1992.

BILIA has a rich heritage of past achievements as a research institute in law and international affairs. The factors behind its glory lay in the initiative and dynamism of a high powered executive council comprising of honourable Judges of the Supreme Court, diplomats, and other senior high ranking officials. Researchers and officials of the Institute contributed in keeping the organization thriving with activity which included, among other things, holding of national and international seminars and workshops, maintaining a number of regular publications and conducting projects undertaken in different fields. During the period 1973-1992, the Institute earned fame both at home and abroad through various national and international programmes that it had undertaken from time to time. The question now arises as

to why this Institute over the last two years has come to a state of stalemate leading towards a slow death. Mr Nurun Nabi seemingly has evaded analysis of this most pertinent question as to why such a blooming organization has all of a sudden turned into a dying institute and why has the government withdrawn its grant after such a long period? Perhaps all this can be attributed to the loss of ethos of this research 'think-tank' that has fallen prey to a precarious tug of war. Obstinance and unfairness inside the institute has shrouded the once cheerful and regular activities of the organization. Mr Nabi's comment on BILIA projects is further apparent to be incomplete from his remark on the SAARC project (in which I was the Coordinator) which he termed as 'not being able to make a headway'. Being in no way ever involved in the project, the commentator appeared to be ignorant about the constraints and problems in implementing the SAARC project. Nor is he aware of the limited scope and cooperation that was available.

K M Haque Mirpur, Dhaka

Bogra-4 by-election

Sir, Bogra-4 constituency is a BNP dominated area where the BNP unfortunately died. It does not matter if some parties take part in the

Shah A M S Kibria

from Magura surprised the nation. But it is really not a mystery. A number of newspapers reported his comments to the press before his departure, when the BNP refused to accept his proposal for election observer teams, that he did not expect the election to be free and fair and that he did not want to be a party to such a situation. This is the reason for his sudden departure from Magura. But it is a matter of some regret that when questions were later raised on this and other related issues, the distinguished Chief Election Commissioner, instead of clarifying his position, chose to maintain an enigmatic silence. His silence naturally spawned all kinds of rumours.

Mr Hussain has faulted Mr Imran for pointing out the politicisation of the bureaucracy by the BNP government. One need not enter into a controversy about who is biased against who. Facts should be the criteria to judge the point. Can Mr Hussain explain why key police officers were transferred to the area just before the election? Is it not against the guideline set by the Election Commission?

Mr T Hussain's whole case rests on the claim that "If there be any specific case or cases of this nature, the Election Commission must be allowed to apply its judicious mind in deciding such cases, filed in a proper manner and under relevant rules/laws." The Commission's "judicious mind", according to Mr Hussain should be allowed to decide whether there was electoral fraud in Magura. Let me inform the readers of the Daily Star that the Awami League candidate and his

Comments on the Magura by-election by Mr T Hussain in The Daily Star of 26 April seem to be eminently pertinent and cover all points — almost. One aspect that needs to be dwelt on is whether the Awami League had exhausted all legal remedies before declaring that no fair election can be expected under the BNP Government and so the freely and democratically elected government must resign two years before its term expires and fresh elections should be held.

The Awami League which professes to have been outraged by the rigging practised by the opponents was so late in preferring an objection to the Election Commission that the Gazette Notification declaring the BNP candidate victorious had already gone to the press for publication. This was, however, no bar proceedings before the Election Commission which formally invited the Awami League lawyer to a hearing. The latter, nevertheless, refused to appear on the flimsy ground that results had already been gazetted and it would be of avail in legally pursuing the matter. This, notwithstanding the fact, that gazette notification did not debar the EC from invalidating the election if so justified as a result of the hearing. Further-

more, if no satisfaction was given by the EC, High Court and Supreme Court were open for pressing the matter home legally.

Since no such course was adopted, the conclusion becomes irresistible the Awami League was nearly seeking a plea, however flimsy, for destabilising the normal electoral and democratic dispensation to advance the party interests. This is surely tantamount to sabotaging the democratic process while paying lip service to institutionalising democracy. Abdul Momin House 73, Road 11A, DRA, Dhaka