

Is Passport Saleable?

Is passport a saleable commodity? The answer obviously ought to be a big NO. But universal laws that protect the security and sanctity of the passport can get compromised in our country.

To get an international passport within specific periods, as the rules go, all one has to do is to submit fees that vary according to the stated urgency of the demands. But this normal process is hardly allowed to work.

When shady deals like this can make a passport available to anybody, it exposes the vulnerability and the danger we invite for our national security.

What is needed is to completely do away with the brokers at any point of the issuance of passport. A foolproof passport book, as the authority claims, is going to be introduced soon with such a built-in security mark which cannot be tampered with.

Repatriation Bottle-neck

The repatriation of tribal refugees from India to Bangladesh has, it seems, hit a conceptual snag even though the process had made a headway in two phases under a concrete agreement signed by all concerned early last year.

This flow through the normal channels having stopped since August last year, around six hundred refugees subsequently decided on their own, it is learnt, to cross the Ramgarh and Panchhari border over to the Bangladesh side.

The hitch seems to have developed in separating the chaff from the grain. More precisely it lies in the garbled approach adopted to the entire gamut of the issue. Repatriation, extension of ceasefire in the CHT and peace talks between the government and the PCJSS, the political arm of Shantibahini, need not be mixed up.

Disaster in ROK

The Friday morning gas blast disaster at a subway construction site in the South Korean city of Teagu overtook us with grief. It took a toll of 109 including 56 middle school students, on preliminary estimates which are bound to be surpassed after the last count is made of the trapped underground construction workers.

The impact of the explosion is gauged from the fact that steel sheets and beams, the former weighing 280 kilograms each, were thrown asunder 50 metres away and up atop buildings.

By all accounts, carelessness caused it. A gas supply line leak resulting from welding work was cited as one possible reason for the explosion. It has also been reported that since excavators were at work on the construction site they could have accidentally holed up the gas line.

THE news from Sylhet was most disturbing. The anti-liberation forces there have had a field day. They frustrated the initiative taken by a cross section of the people of Sylhet to give a reception for poet Shamsur Rahman.

The ugly episode is not only a matter of shame for the people of Sylhet but also a matter of deep concern to the entire nation. Are we going to accept such assaults on our culture and on our freedom of thought and expression? The forces of reaction and obscurantism are seemingly on the rampage.

The key factor in the episode is the failure of the administration to provide protection to the organizers of the reception. Was it really a failure or refusal to take effective

Disturbing Signals from Sylhet: Are We Going to Give in to Fanaticism and Intolerance?

Our credulity is being over-taxed when we are asked to believe that an administration which could mobilize thousands of security forces to provide protection to Golam Azam's public meetings could not deploy the required police force to curb a few marauding hooligans. The identity of these anti-liberation elements is well known to the authorities.

steps? According to some reports, the deputy commissioner phoned Mr. Shamsur Rahman to tell him that the administration was unable to give him any assurance of protection. This is indeed a very serious matter.

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country's politics. What happened in Sylhet is thus following a familiar pattern.

Poet Shamsur Rahman, one hardly needs to point out, is a source of the nation's pride. He is acknowledged today as the greatest living poet of Bangladesh.

read in West Bengal where he is held in high regard. His immortal poems on our Liberation Struggle are like precious gems which will continue to inspire the nation for generations to come.

His poems are widely read and loved by the people at all levels of the society. He combines in him both talent and character. He stands, rock-

like, against communalism, bigotry and intolerance. He is no politician and does not belong to any political party but he did not compromise with military rulers. He had to sacrifice the security of a good job for the sake of his intellectual and literary freedom.

Intellectual freedom in the country. He is, beyond a shadow of doubt, one of our greatest national assets. He has been in poor health for quite some time. His eye sight has been affected by glaucoma.

According to press reports, the over-whelming majority of the Muslim community of Bengal did not take the 'fatwa' by these Maulanas seriously. Far from boycotting Nazrul, the Muslim community fell in love with his poems, songs and ghazals.

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those who agitated against Shamsur Rahman are the remnants of the moribund Muslim League, the Nezame Islami, Jamaate Islami, the Islami Chhatra Shibir and Yuho Command who ganged up to launch these attacks.

This is not the first time that the fanatics struck at a great poet. In the twenties and thirties decades they attacked Kazi Nazrul Islam and declared him to be a kafir.

How can we, as a nation, respond to the fanatics and other assorted bigots? Surely not by indulging in hooliganism as the anti-liberation coalition in Sylhet have done but by organizing a national reception for Shamsur Rahman.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah A M S Kibria



Rome-Dhaka Relations

Affinity of Two Civilizations

by Waliur Rahman

When the city fathers of Rome decided in October 1991 to christen an important plaza and road in patrician Parioli after Bangladesh, it was a relatively modest affair. But the symbolism was not lost on the Bangladesh Foreign Minister when the Lord Mayor of the eternal city likened the event as an important occasion linking the two ancient civilizations!

of the eternal city likened the event as an important occasion linking the two ancient civilizations! The Lord Mayor was not wrong. The city father's journey along with the Bangladesh Foreign Minister from the historic seat of Campidoglio (the field of sorrow) to the river side square in a ceremonial motorcade was itself a re-creation of the tradition of Rome that was.

It is no surprise, therefore, that Rome and Dhaka didn't take long to discover in each other the affinity of the two civilizations, one on the Tiber and the other on the Ganges. The paintings of Qamrul Hasan and Shahabuddin representing two modern day spiritus of Bengal can be likened to the two phases of Roman history: Whereas Lorenzetti's frescoes represented an eternal dilemma for mankind, Michealangelo's figure of Liche de Medici, seated on his tomb in the Medici Chapel in Florence, expresses the brooding melancholy of 16th century Italy.

Guilio Andreotti, the last Renaissance man in Europe (the French politician Andre Malraux was the second, but last), did perform a historic responsibility as it were. He assisted Bangladesh, the new nation, with support of presidents Cossiga and Scalfaro, to find a place in Rome. The politico-economic-cultural contacts developed at such break-neck speed that within a course of five years, the Latin-Italy overtook Metropolitan Britain, Gaulic France and

Tutonic Germany in trade and economic relations with Bangladesh. At one time Bangladesh export to Italy was equal to our total exports to France and England together! No mean achievement.

As legend goes the Roman Caesars liked to see their ladies dressed in Gossomar — thin Dhaka Muslin! The transparency accounted for better governance! In later days, the Venetians were importing Bengal spices through Bombay to preserve their precious export merchandise — meat. The Venetians were supplying meat to most of the kingdoms and principalities in Europe.

The location of the largest number of Bengalis in Italy, second only to Great Britain, underlines the ability of the great historic nation which is Italy, to absorb citizens of other countries. Doesn't it remind us of the heady days of the Roman Empire which welcomed in its fold the diverse and heterogeneous nationalities of other countries? This

eclecticism of the Roman Empire permitted us to have slave-turned-philosopher Epictetus. Today, the expatriate Bengal community in Italy (about 30000) is remitting around 100 million dollars to Bangladesh. When there was a move in 1991 to deport some Bengalis, we moved fast and sensitive our friends, including Martelli, Minister in charge of Immigration. It worked. The Bengalis are working there to the full satisfaction of their employers and contributing to the economic growth of Italy, the 5th largest industrial power in the world.

In spite of the ongoing political crisis in Italy, their economy is not shrinking. Its growth has maintained the 2 trillion dollar mark — much above the UK. While the search for buon governo goes on, the Italians are surging ahead in every possible area of human endeavour. The outgoing Italian Ambassador in Dhaka Claudio Pacifico has very ably followed the footsteps set in motion by such mandarins of Roman diplomacy as Ruggiero, Bruno-Bottal, Saleo, Brunetti and Quaroni in sustaining the level of relationship with Bangladesh. His successor Ambassador Miniero would be equal to the task; he is no stranger to this land.

The finest example of the common effort of Dhaka and Rome, in spite of some constraints, both endogenous and exogenous, is the 91km Dinajpur-Panchagarh highway built with Italian donation. The announcement of emergency grant made on the podium of UN General Assembly in September 1988, following the devastating flooding in Bangladesh, now found expression in this road — that runs athwart the strategic north-western flank of Bangladesh. It is a good example of work of men of goodwill of the two continents. Luigi Berzini was correct in addressing Italians 'the very active, energetic, inventive, resourceful and spirited...' We Bengalis are also known to have similar attributes.

Claudio Pacifico ought not to forget to convey to the Italian leaders that we remember them.

As a result, due to ignorance and carelessness of the consumers of gas and also on account of dereliction of the concerned authorities two grievous fire mishaps have taken place in the city one after another at Rampura and Lalbagh.

We would request the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources, Titas Gas Company Ltd and Fire Brigade to kindly take all steps including necessary surveillance, inspection, training and creating mass awareness to avoid gas fire accidents in the future.

OH Kabir Dhaka-1203

GIORGIO Bocca, one of Italy's best-known journalists, thought that Italians excelled in preserving their own private truths. But in public life they do well in maintaining double-entendre.

All roads lead to Rome. While in Rome, we invariably imbibe the spirit of Rome that was, the classical Rome which gave us Law, Town Hall and Infrastructure: the three essential ingredients for a modern nation state.

To the Editor...

Biman's Hajj flight

Sir, Biman Hajj flight leaves Dhaka at one am every night. That means Hajjis would have no sleep that night. It is also learnt that return flight also has been planned to leave Jeddah at an equally inconvenient time. It is not understood why such odd time has been fixed.

If it is due to shortage of aircraft, then an aircraft can be chartered by Biman for this purpose. Present departure time only demonstrates that Biman authorities have little human consideration for the Hajjis.

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka

Gas fire accidents

Sir, It is estimated that about four million people in Dhaka use natural gas for cooking their food and most

Art Buchwald's COLUMN Running for Office

Gene Korth was thinking of running for Congress. He sat at the kitchen table with his wife Forsythia. "Financially I don't know if we can pull it off or not," Korth said.

OPINION

More Focus on the NGOs

There are more grey areas in the otherwise good activities of the NGOs (local and foreign) in Bangladesh in the development and social sectors than covered by S A M S Kibria in his column of April 23.