The Baily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

The ID Card Assurance

Dhaka, Sunday, October 8, 1995

Dispelling all doubts and confusions, the Election Commission has made it clear that voters will get identity cards by December 16. It will be a sterling performance - in a class of its own - by the EC if its decision materialises fully.

The EC's elaborate preparations include the opening of 86,000 camps for providing the whole electorate with ID cards. However, the formalities involved in the final preparation of the ID cards and their distribution to as many as five crore 60 lakh voters call for the individual voter's personal initiative. The process necessitates the unfailing presence of every voter at the camp of his or her locality to get the ID card prepared, and delivered to the right person.

The presence of such a huge number of people is not easily ensured even at predetermined venues. Some are likely to miss the chance that has come for the first time in the country. A camp remaining open only for three days may not cover all the eligible voters. We suggest that these stay pitched for a longer duration or we reopen it in the same locality after a gap of time, but within the 10week period stipulated by the EC.

Earlier, complaints were heard about people failing to register themselves as voters. Whatever lacunae remain in the voters' list can and must still be removed with the benefit of handling the matter at the locality or community level. The complex nature of preparation and distribution of the ID cards warrant extreme caution and sincerity on the part of those involved in the operations.

There should be no scope for manipulation and any sloppy performance by the camp operators since the basic papers are with them and what they have to essentially guard against is sneaking mismatches between the particulars of voters and their photographs. Supervision and monitoring are needed for a fool-prof cross-cheeking of all the details across the whole spectrum. We might as well have a complaints cell to ensure that not a single eligible voter is deprived of an ID card, because such a lapse would mean denying him his right to vote.

In their own interest, all our political parties should make it a point to extend their wholehearted cooperation to the EC in its onerous task of providing every single voter of the country with an identity card — his or her passport to so many things.

Inflation Control

The increases in the bank and deposit rates are evidently designed to bring monetary stabilisation and credit discipline in the economy.

The cost of funds goes further up. Lending rates having increased, not only is the banking system discouraged to borrow from the central bank, the private sector is also dampened not to take loans from the scheduled banks on the previous scale.

It is only logical for Bangladesh Bank to call a halt to credit expansion in a bid to contain inflationary pressure on the economy. Certainly the central bank should not be pushed to a point where it has to mint money with out productivity or supply back-ups. This point is well-taken, but what intrigues one is the laying of the blame wholesale on private sector lending without bothering to face the fact that there has been a high rate of government borrowing from the banking system.

So, the containment of the inflationary pressure had better begin in the state sector. Yes, the private sector has to account for poor loan recoveries in certain categories of credit distribution. Even there too, one be needs to be reassured that loans were not given on political or other uneconomic considerations.

Hence, for all practical purposes, the answer to inflationary pressure should have lain not in a credit squeeze but in the present public expenditure pattern itself. And if the central bank has any self-doubts that it would be difficult to stem the tide of overspending across the board in an election year, then what it should perhaps do is to advise the government on the wisdom of expenditure control and make itself heard on the overall question of putting limits on election-related

expenses. It makes robust economic sense that we try and control prices, especially against the back-drop of floods, to hold the inflation rate down instead of applying a contractionary measure, far less continuing with it well into the future.

A Flicker of Hope

The US-mediated ceasefire in Bosnia-Herzegovina has some if's and but's about it; but all the same it represents a break-through in more senses than one. First of all, hardly has there been a three-party agreement on ceasefire and none at all for the whole country since the conflict, regarded as the bloodiest in Europe since the last Great War, began more than three years ago.

Furthermore, the cessation of hostilities will be followed by proximity talks among the governments of Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia in Washington around October 25 and an international conference in Paris on a date to be settled later on.

The whole programme will be on course after the ceasefire takes effect from October 10, contingent upon a full restoration of gas and electrical supplies to the Bosnian capital Sarajevo. Basically though, it is the complete silencing of the gun that will matter most

during the run-up to the talks. US President Bill Clinton's timely intercesssion and his mediator Richard Holbrooke's shuttle diplomacy has brought the contending parties closer to each other. A list of common agenda has also emerged for the upcoming talks. Russia may be persuaded at this crucial stage to play a positive role. We suggest that a complement of OIC participation be considered for the upcoming international conference in Paris without making it into an exclusive affair of the fivenation contact group.

Violence and Lawlessness: Time to Call a Halt

The nation must call a halt to the slide to lawlessness. All our effort to build democracy and develop the economy will be in vain if the most basic task of a state, namely, maintenance of law and order, is not properly done. All the political parties, social and cultural organisations and local bodies must join in the effort.

newspapers published from Habigani - the district my family comes from. The local merchants, having reached but here there is a catch. the end of their tethers. stood up to the terrorists While the temptation to make quick buck by extertion who have been fleecing them seems to be present in every mercilessly. The merchants student group, it is the proorganized themselves to fight tection given by the ruling back the gangs masquerading as students who have been party to its student wing collecting tolls with increaswhich makes all the differing frequency under threat of ence in giving it a special adviolence. The extortions had vantage. While the students reached such an intolerable belonging to the Chhatra level that if the businessmen League are promptly taken did not fight back, many of into custody by the police, them would have been they turn a blind eye if the culprits happen to belong to obliged to go out of business. Common people of the town the ruling party. This is at joined them in their anti-terthe root of the evil. rorist campaign. Indeed, It is spreading rapidly like public discontent and frustration had almost reached the

was startled but also

pleased to read a re-

port in the weekly

level of Dinajpur. Thank God,

the situation in Habigani

seems to have been brought

under control before the

causes for such a situation?

Who are these mastaans?

How could they carry on such

extortions month after

month with impunity? Where

was the district's police

force? Sociologists and crim-

inologists will no doubt even-

tually find the correct an-

swers to these questions but

that may be too late.

Meanwhile, the nation must

deal with the problem if it is

not to be overwhelmed by it.

Many of the extortionists of

Habiganj, as indeed in most

other parts of the country,

are young men who claim to

be students. They also claim

to belong to the student

wings of different political

parties. There is no reason to

believe that any particular

students' organization has a

monopoly of the hooligans

What are the underlying

town exploded like Dinajpur.

cancer because the police protection to the Chhatra Dal armed cadres gives them a free run on the businessmen. Perhaps these young men are themselves surprised that such large sums can be collected so eastly and virtually at no risk. Even if one gets caught, a phone call from the patron minister or MP will set him free. As a result. those who could hardly find the money to go about in rickshaws are seen to be

driving Pajero jeeps! Let me illustrate the point by referring to a press report from Chittagong about a daylong armed battle between two Chhatra Dal factions. At about 9 am members of one faction armed with hand guns, sawed off rifles, bombs etc took up position in the Bayojid Bostami area, while the rival group, equipped with equally deadly weapons. assembled in the Sher Shah colony area. When the fighting began, the poor residents of the locality had to run for their life. In fact, one young

man was killed while trying to flee the battle front. The sharing of the spoils of toll collection in different areas of the city was the cause of the fight. As usual the police arrived late. They did make some arrests but they did not or could not stop the fighting. One wonders: why could not the police cordon off the area and arrest the whole lot? The answer seems to be simple; these armed mastaans belong to the student

in a round table discussion recently organized by The

wing of the ruling party.

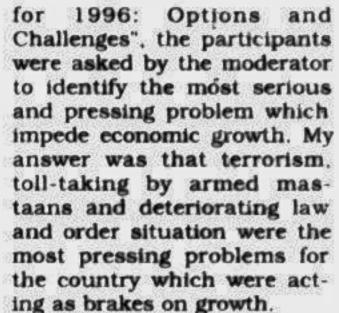
Daily Star on "Priority Agenda

the Finance Minister is blaming, by turn, the opposition, government officials. bankers, workers and the businessmen. In his eagerness to find scapegoats, he refuses to look at the real cause of the economy's

Why should any one set up an industry when he knows for certain that toll collection will begin from day one? Not only shopkeepers who have learned to live with toll payments as a part of the taxation system, any businessman with an office is vulnerable to threats and intimidation.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah A M S Kibria



The World Bank resident mission chief also gave the same answer. One often hears lamentations by ministers that although the macro-economic conditions are so favourable, they don't understand why the rate of investment is still so low. For this,

The director of a clinic, in my presence, was asked over the phone to contribute a large "donation" for celebrating some national event. ! could see the anguish on the director's face when he had to agree to make the "voluntary" contribution. An architect told me that every time the phone rings, he picks it up with trepidation because it may be a call to demand tolls. Contractors are an easy target because it is relatively easy to identify a construction site. The terrorists have to be taken seriously because they are heavily armed and they have no compunction in using the

arms on the hapless victims.

The question that naturally comes to mind is: why is the BNP government permitting this cancer to eat into the vitals of the nation? Few people in the country will believe that this is happening despite the government's best effort. In fact, it is doubtful if the government has made any effort to curb this particular mode of crime. Indeed, there is a general impression that the Chhatra Dal is basking under benign official protection. Prime Minister remarks from time to time reinforced this impression. Is she not aware of the depredations of her young supporters? If so, how should one interpret her remarks that her Chhatra Dal followers were enough to take care of her political opponents on the streets? Was it not an open invitation to violence? No one could take exception if she said that the BNP would confront the Awami League politically but what she said was clearly a threat - a threat of violence - at the opposition which her student wing will execute. Even a rhetorical comment can be deadly, as the murder of Archbishop Thomas Becket in the Canterbury Cathedral proved in the twelfth century. The nation was horrified to read reports about a recent statement by some militant Chhatra Dal leaders, in the presence of the Prime Minister, that all she had to do was to just give the order

and they would rid

Bangladesh of Sheikh Hasina!

Did she take the errant stu-

dent leader to task for making such crude threats? She does not seem to realize that in public perception it is she and her Home Minister who are held responsible for the pervading atmosphere of terror and violence that has engulfed the nation.

The nation must call a halt to the slide to lawlessness. All our effort to build democracy and develop the economy will be in vain if the most basic task of a state. namely, maintenance of law and order, is not properly done. All the political parties, social and cultural organizations and local bodies must

join in the effort. While the primary responsibility for the task rests on the government, the opposition parties must also demonstrate their commitment to this most urgent problem facing the nation. The British, in the early 18th century, if I recall correctly, suppressed the Thugs of central India most ruthlessly. The suppression of this evil. even by alien rulers, was welcomed by the common people. In Bangladesh today we have reached a comparable situation. The terrorists must be suppressed before many more public outburst like Dinajpur tear the society

The Prime Minister must dispel the suspicion that she is nurturing these armed cadres to fight her political opponents and "capture" polling booths for her and ensure her victory at the election. Such a course will lead the country towards chaos and anarchy. Faced with situations such as the one which prevailed in Dinajpur or Habigani, the people may take up measures in self-defence and if they do that, who can blame them?

ones. Even the parties who

call the hartal suffer in image

Hartal as a Political Weapon: Who is the Target?

explicitly, "বিকোভ-প্রকাশার্থ দোকান-হাট, কাজকর্ম প্রভৃতি সাময়িকভাবে বন্ধ করা।" (Sangsad Bangla Abhidhan, First

Bangladesh edition, 1989). The synonymous word 'বৰ' also means the same thing i.e. "ধর্মটা, হরভাল".

In English, the word 'strike' conveys the same meaning i.e. organized stopping of work by

employees (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, fourth edition). Example: They strike for

by T Hussain Hartal is a Bengali word, of which the dictionary meaning is dharmaghat (iotWa) or more

ONCEPTUALLY, the word 'hartal" or 'bandh' or strike originate from trade-unionism, related to a particular trade or industrial concern. Of course, the phrase 'general strike' has a larger or wider spectrum, sometimes covering an entire region or nation.

In these days, however, the word hartal or bandh has taken a political colour But there is no doubt that originally, 'hartal' or 'bandh' in the sense of 'darmaghat' was resorted to by trade unionists for a collective bargaining purpose. But to use this practice as a political weapon is more common in our country than anywhere else in the world. Even in our neighbouring country India. 'bandh' is not generally resorted to for achieving a political end. In Bangladesh, on the other hand, hartal is a readymade weapon used with the intention to harass a government in power. In the British or Pakistani period. hartal was a handy political strategy used to embarrass a government which had an alien or anti-people outlook. Moreover, at that time it was not a representative government answerable to the people. Such was the case in martial law days of Ayub Khan

and Yahya Khan and more recently of Ershad. Democracy was absent and people had no legitimate platform to express their grievances, if any. It was natural that an autocratic regime would have to be faced through demonstrations and general strike or nationwide hartal. But even in those stormy days, hartals were not preferred as a political weapon, simply because a hartal call brings in its wake unspeakable miseries for the poor people - more particularly for those sections of the general man who earn their bread by daily wages or daily earnings by pulling rickshaws, vans and push-carts or commercial earnings through makeshift shops or by hawking in the footpaths of city streets. The politicians claiming to speak for the masses appear to be unconcerned about this sce-

higher pay.

Obviously, the target of such hartals are now the political opponents in power. In

a democratic system, political adversaries are faced in the Parliament, and there are a hundred and one ways of routing them within the house. If this process alone does not serve the purpose, public meetings are there to address the people or voters directly and expose the activities of the ruling party as viewed by the other side. But when hartal is called, numerous sections of the people in general are affected, which the political adversaries are the least hurt. Apparently, a hartal call unleashes various social forces, some undisputedly evil, which try to make the best use of it to meet their own not-too-honourable designs. Instances of overzealous activities which can be termed as excesses — to say the least - are bound to occur, going beyond the control of the party stalwarts who give the hartal call. The claim that response to a hartal call is spontaneous and

not purely imaginary and anything but true. Shops are shut down to avoid looting attempts, cars and other vehicles are not brought out to escape serious damages to them. Very few people turn out in the streets, if they are not forced to out of fear of manhandling and falling in crossfire and in trouble areas. Office-goers abstain from attending their places of work and prefer to stay at home by taking leave, sometimes incurring the displeasure of their bosses. Government employees, for whom transports with protection cannot be arranged, have to walk down the whole distance from their home at consider-

able discomfort. Excesses of the extreme nature, some of which can be branded as acts of barbarism of the middle ages, did recently take place at the hands of political 'activists'. There were three or four incidents of stripping innocent office-goers, much to the

shame of the nation as a whole. It is very unfortunate that these shameful acts were brushed off by political stalwarts of a pro-hartal party as "expressions of wrath or anger", while outright condemnation should have been their proper attitude. This, naturally gives rise to a suspicion that the offending boys had the blessings of central leaders, as one of them confessed in course of a judicial confession before a magistrate recently. This has, of course, damaged the image of the party or parties who gave the hartal call.

So, in the last analysis, the real victims of a hartal and particularly, continuous (lagatar) hartal are the poor day-labourers, rickshawpullers, pushcartwallas, footpath hawkers and shopowners, low paid govt. employees and undoubtedly, the industrial enterprises, specially the export-oriented

OPINION

Congratulations to Mr

Mahfuz Anam on his wonder-

ful commentary in The Daily

Star on September 20, 1995.

It is indeed a shame that

politicians, expected to steer

the statecraft, have to be

taught dos and don'ts (like

errant school kids) by inno-

cent voters. Is is not ap-

palling that about 120 million

of the world's poorest are

hostage in the hands of these

elements? Going back in

time, the freedom-loving

Our Decadence Has Never

and popularity, while the really intended target (the political opponent) can afford to lie low and avoid any real harm. Thus, the actual beneficiaries are not the parties who give the hartal call, but their political adversaries, who reap the harvest by gaining sympathy and support of the directly affected people, who never believe in the spontaneity of any hartal called these days when the country is going through a democratic system. It is true that our people in general are firm believers in democracy and they will always remain totally antagonistic to any autocratic or totalitarian system. Our post-independence history from 1972 onwards has established this fact beyond doubt. A lagatar hartal lasting for 32 hours, 72 hours or 96 hours — which aims at forced abstention from dayto-day work for days together - not be acceptable to people in general. So, any repetition of such hartal calls may lead to some surprising reaction from the people. It will perhaps do the various political elements who call the hartals more harm than good.

Next election

Sir, All responsible persons in the politics of Bangladesh whatever party he or she might belong to, must learn to act with grace, dignity and moderation. There are, however, not too many persons in any political party who possess these qualities. This is a misfortune for Bangladesh, rather for its people. I personally believe that there is a solution to every problem, given the sincerity, the honesty, the patriotism and the nobleness for the purpose, which in our case at the moment, is the preservation of democracy which looks threatened here and is limping at present because of the lack of understanding among our political leaders.

I am glad that Lord Weatherill visited Bangladesh at this critical political juncture. I have seen him conducting his business at the House of Commons with great political skill and impartiality. However, in the political arena, I should not compare Bangladesh with the UK. Lord Weatherfll has explained the situation in the UK in the clearest terms, with occasional references to Bangladesh. I only hope that his words of wisdom will weigh heavily with those leaders who count in Bangladesh politics, irrespec-

tive of their political parties. In the UK the Cabinet, through an informal arrangement, virtually ceases to work for a period before the election, although its members do not go out of office, if

I am right. The Cabinet and its members remain in office only nominally. But this is the position in the UK for which Bangladesh will have to wait for some 50 to 100 years or so, with the present state of the maturity of our politicians. So the only alternative for Bangladesh is to hold the coming general elections under a non-party neutral caretaker government and the present Cabinet has to resign well before the polls.

I was wondering if this system of democratic election could be adopted as the permanent feature — a contribution of Bangladesh to the development of democratic process that can be emulated by other developing and less developing countries. This process will be a definite contribution to the development of democracy. It is really an admirable idea. However, in the future this kind of arrangement could be fruitfully adopted to Bangladesh Constitution on the basis of consensus of the political, parties. The Constitution needs changes

Finally, there are the parties (party) in power and the parties on the opposition. The leaders of all political parties need to behave with restraint and not in an unbridled manner. In fact, the party or the parties in power should be more restrained and behave more responsibly than the parties on the opposition. In a liberal democratic regime, as opposed to a totalitarian regime, the attitude should be flexible.

in many other respects also.

The September 1 speech of the Prime Minister, Begum Khaleda Zia, sounded dictatorial when she said that the election can be held only under the constitution, an attitude which, in the present context, means under the BNP Government. This can hardly work in a situation where there is a complete lack of mutual trust and con--fidence between the two political sides and when all kinds of corruptions are plaguing the country. M T Haq

universal is more often than

Dhaka Caretaker government

Sir, In a tug of war between ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party and opposition Awami League, Jamaat-e-Islami, Jatiya Party, the people of our country fail to understand the abracadabra or ABC of the caretaker government.

If the proposal of Sheikh

Hasina for a caretaker government headed by Chief Justice is unconstitutional, how and under what provision of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh the offer of Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia to resign 30 days before general elections, the President to run the affairs of the country with the help of secretaries and an advisory committee comprising representatives selected by the government and the opposition to advise the Election Commission for ensuring a

legal and justified?

Are the ruling BNP and opposition AL-JI-JP simply interested in kite flying?

The AL Chief insists: "We want a caretaker government headed by Chief Justice. We just want the replication of 1990 formula." "Caretaker government headed by Chief Justice cannot be inducted lawfully" says ruling BNP and five hundred sixty-nine lawyers of Dhaka and Supreme Court declare that it would not be right to form an interim government with justices to conduct election.

The Gano Forum leader Dr Kamai Hussain says the government and the opposition should work on agreed formula. On the one hand, the opposition AL-JI-JP go on holding one after another hartals, strikes, 'gherao' and 'moshal misil' for caretaker government, and on the other, the ruling BNP goes on failing to contain the opposition movement legally and constitutionally.

Why not Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina get together to get rid of political stalemate? If they can meet and greet each other on the occasion of marriages of their children why can't they meet each other in the national interest?

As public leaders it is the moral duty and responsibility of both Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina to ensure peace, progress and prosperity of the twelve crore people of the country, save our much-desired democracy and save our people from untold free and fair election stand sufferings

O H Kabir Dhaka -

Indians expressed their contempt towards the British rulers by referring to them as red-faced apes and their local accomplices as stooges of the same. Later on, politico-cultural storm swept over the then-East Pakistan when West Pakistanis were branded as tyrants and their Bengalee associates as chamchas of the Punjabis. After the liberation in 1971, a new coinage came in when any wayward person would be called Razakar. Even a father would scold a delinquent child that he was behaving like a Razakar. Thanks to our politicians, the latest coinage for undesirables is politician as though politics is something dirty pursued only by the same type of people. A disappointed elder brother now blames the younger for

The logic and truth besuch unfortunate coinage are not far to seek.

affairs.

doing politics in the family

Been So Pronounced by Kamol Siddigi, BU The newspapers on September 19, 1995 came out with stories of lawmakers defending the ghastly act of stripping a citizen as a result of people's wrath and of agitation against the government while the entire nation condemned it. And this is only tip of the iceberg. What is more ridiculous is that the entire population was congratulated by stalwarts on spontaneous participation in anti-government hartal. Thanks are also due to a section of the press who tried to justify the act by recalling history of stripping, ignoring the context.

> courageous commentary by Mahfuz Anam, there is another angle of concern. Total decadence of a society has never been so pronounced as in last two decades. Erosion of virtues is ubiquitous and values drained down the loos. This is amply manifest in frequently used slogans of these-days that "there is no last word in politics or politics makes strange bed-fellows" indicating total disregard to idealism of ideology and preference for convenience capture the throne, Pankaj Mallick, Abbasuddin and Saratchandra have been devoured by Michael Jackson and the kind. The habit of serious reading is now an orthodox and deplorable pursuit.

Notwithstanding the