

Time is Flying

Exchange of letters between Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and opposition leader Sheikh Hasina, initiated by the former at the instance of some editors, was designed to lay the ground for a dialogue between the two leaders. The exchange at this stage — Khaleda having written thrice and Hasina replying twice — is apparently going awry. Rather than leading to the dialogue, which may or may not have yielded anything, the letters are contributing seemingly to the stiffening of the position of both parties. And a moving away from the dialogue may anyday be clearly discernible. If in the mean time the exchange doesn't stop that is. And the way it is going, it may as well stop any moment.

This possible stoppage and the actually growing meaninglessness of the exchange are going to push the nation further down the labyrinth of desperation. This the nation can hardly afford. At one point five eminent persons of the society offered their good offices to facilitate a journey to the same dialogue. Their job from the outset was arduous and the two leaders were not making it any easier just for the love of them. A letter publicised before the message carrying the same content could be handed over by the G-5 and another message meaning less than nothing but a printed facsimile by newspapers were enough to subvert their high-minded mission. This another goodly opening to a dialogue was not greatly helped either by the angry attack on it by a very responsible opposition leader.

Letters and messages and a lot other means to make them sit together and talk will come to nothing as long as the two keep on believing that it is only stubbornness that will win the day and make the other party break — the one party thinking their prizing the Constitution will see them through and, with equal conviction, the other believing that popular movement would decide the fray.

While the jousting continues time flies. Healing becomes more difficult. Letters and messages, red roses and sweetmeat are windows allowing a breeze of sanity to waft in and help keep the hopes alive. Let the letters improve, the great go-betweens be acknowledged and the dialogue materialise.

A dialogue for what? For God's sake, not for restating their cases. But for an honest give-and-take.

Legal Cover Due

The latest edition of a commercial guide to Bangladesh issued by the local US embassy puts across some cautionary signals to potential investors in their home country. It pinpoints the inadequacies of our legal and auditing systems but positively assesses that political disturbances are unlikely to be targeted to business concerns, projects or installations. The expression of confidence in our political environment even when it is otherwise prone to commotion represents a healthy acknowledgement of a welcoming attitude prevailing in the country towards foreign investment. This should even take care of an earlier US advisory note on a fundamentalist streak here.

This positive view taken on the above count goes only to reinforce the US embassy's critical observations about our business laws being antiquated, methods of settling commercial disputes extremely delay-prone and auditing practices falling far short of international standards.

Our government has been aware of these shortcomings specially when they came to realise that despite the offering of a highly attractive incentives package to potential investors they were being put off by the lack of a legal cover. That's why we have heard the government say a few times over that they were alive to the need for updating the business laws and reforming the commercial legal procedures. A new company law came to be on the anvil; but on the whole, the reform process which should have begun right from the day we had announced the liberalised investment policy, remains to this day almost a non-starter.

Since there is a broad unanimity on the questions of market liberalisation and foreign investment in the country, a comprehensive legal framework should not be difficult to put in place by a newly-elected government.

Timely Follow-up

Just a month has passed since the Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's visit to Bangladesh that yielded a harvest of MOUs to expand the bilateral relations. And look, what is happening within such a short time to build up on that pervasive intent expressed by both sides to provide a fresh impetus to their networking for cooperation!

On Sunday, the second session of the Iran-Bangladesh Joint Commission was held in Tehran. Our Finance Minister Saifur Rahman discussed ways and means of implementing the MOUs with Iranian Foreign Minister Dr Ali Akbar Velayati. The modalities of Iran's cooperation in our energy sector was focussed upon, this being a pressing matter for Bangladesh.

As part of the infrastructural approach to cooperation, Bangladesh has made a deal with Iran to urgently purchase 60 railway coaches from her.

Essentially, however, we share the Iranian Transport Minister Ali Akbar Torkan's emphasis on an immediate establishment of air and shipping links between the two countries. For, its extended benefit will be the connection we forge with the CIS countries.

HARTAL (strike) is a form of protest against the authorities to realize certain demands or to demonstrate disapproval of certain actions of those against whom the hartal is directed. In a labour-management setting, strike is the last weapon that the labour unions may resort to in their bargaining with the management. Strike in factories, industrial or business establishments or other enterprises is a legitimate action by the workers if they have gone through the legal process of negotiation and conciliation and failed to realize their reasonable demands because of management's adamant attitude. The management on the other hand has also the legal right to declare a lock-out if they consider that the demands of the workers are illegitimate and that they have not followed the process of law and find it better to shut down their factory or establishment than to incur monetary or other kinds of loss or hindrance by yielding to the demands of the workers. Ultimately it is through negotiation and conciliation or by arbitration or courts' decision that such disputes are resolved.

Political hartal, on the other hand, is different in nature and take place on political issues that concern the whole nation and raise public conscience for or against the demands at issue. The only way to resolve political hartals is to reach understanding and agreement through dia-

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by Mohammad Siddiquur Rahman

logue and negotiation between the government in power and the opposition to resolve the issues that sparked off the hartals.

Historically political hartals started as part of non-co-operation movement by the people against the colonial rulers with the objective of realizing the goals of self-government, autonomy or independence. Since the interests of the colonial rulers and the people of the colonies were diametrically opposite, hartals were inevitably used as a major instrument to demonstrate the united action of the people in protesting against the arbitrary action and undemocratic rule of the colonial powers.

The national cause at that time was to gain freedom and independence and the effects of hartals were a demonstration of protest against the government and its failure to govern the country peacefully. Hartals in the colonial days were also meant to make the rulers realise that they cannot continue to rule the country denying the people their aspirations for democratic rights.

After the independence of the country and the emergence of Bangladesh the context has changed and the protection and promotion of national interest have be-

come the supreme concern for each and every citizen and more so for all political parties and the leaders in a constitutional and democratic system. However, in an autocratic and undemocratic regime where the government is not formed through the constitutional process by a fair and free election, hartal is recognized as a legitimate instrument to demonstrate people's protest against and disapproval of an undemocratic government.

In a democratic regime also hartal remains an instrument of protest against the ruling government to demonstrate disapproval of certain action of the government in power or to realize demands in respect of the political process. But the use of hartals must, at the same time, be viewed differently in a democratic system of government so that least harm is caused to the economy and the society. Here the objective should not be to take any means to oust the government which has got the legitimacy and the backing of the people. Hartals should not in such cases be observed in such a manner that national interest is severely damaged and the life and property of the people (or of state) are at stake. Here the purpose and the means cannot be the

same as is justified in throwing out colonial rulers.

In a constitutional government, hartals may be construed as a democratic right, necessary to demonstrate protest and disapproval and to register public opinion on certain demands. But, at the same time, hartals should not be undertaken in such a manner that the national economy is severely damaged and the life of the community seriously jeopardised. According to a newspaper report (The Daily Star Nov. 11, 1995), at least 144 hartals ranging from 6 hours to 96 hours were held between January to 1st October 1995. According to another news report the loss due to hartal comes to about 250 crore taka per day. The ill effects of such hartals are obvious. Classes are closed hampering education at all levels, movements of people is restricted, transportation of goods is stopped, shops and business houses are closed, small income earners, padiers, rikshaw-pullers, home-product sellers are deprived of their wages and incomes. Trade and industry are closed leading to loss of production, so no sale and no exports. The sick cannot have access to medical treatment and so on and so forth.

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In a constitutional government, hartals may be construed as a democratic right, necessary to demonstrate protest and disapproval and to register public opinion on certain demands. But, at the same time, hartals should not be undertaken in such a manner that the national economy is severely damaged and the life of the community seriously jeopardised.

It is, therefore, imperative in our national interest, for all political parties, to formulate and agree on a Code of Ethics for political hartals. Some ideas about such a Code of Ethics for hartals are given below:

1. Hartals should not be called for more than 6 hours a day.

2. Continuous or lagat hartals should be avoided.

3. Essential services like water supply, gas supply, hospitals, clinics, medical services, doctors, food-shops and restaurants, medical stores, fire service, newspapers, transportation and burial of dead, etc may be exempted (Already some exemptions are in force);

4. Major export industries like garments, jute and other export-oriented industries should be exempted;

5. Operations at international maritime ports and air

Ethics of Hartal

by Mohammad Siddiquur Rahman

tar bishoy.

Back to our point of ponder, with the number of disgruntled travellers who failed to travel, growing. Travel Agencies were closing down faster than planes taking off from Dhaka airport.

Somewhere in-between came the rage of the export-import business. Motijheel was teeming with roving exporters and importers, exporting-importing themselves out of banks, etc. They were easily identifiable from their black briefcases and the inevitable pack of "triple five" showing through their silken shirts.

Not for nothing though, because by then there was this "in" thing called Travel Agency business. So anybody who was not travelling himself, thought it wise to open a shop that would enable others to do the jet-setting. Nobody knew where anyone was going; until some hoodwinked passengers required travel agents to book them to places where they thought their travel agents had gone after giving them the slip. Then came the blacklisting in cyclic order, intervention by Biman and so forth.

I know a good number of people from then till now who would like to blacklist Biman for the filthy behaviour some of their crew and staff offer in the name of service in our "paid" home in the sky. But, that could be a separate story, another chin-

ta.

There has been no study to reveal whether the advertising firm owners became travel agents who became exporters to divert to being importers and exporters. But, what is known is that soon there was another *hujug* and the good thing about this was that our man-about-town had sufficient experience. You see, being a exporter in the recent past automatically qualified him to trade in Manpower. The advantage of this vocation was that by exporting manpower, the exporter could transform into

price per copy came down by half.

Business is so competitive that in some places, so I heard the photo-copyist invites you to his wedding if you order hundred copies or more. By the way, this photo-copying culture is in a way revealing our national occupation of imitating others.

Many went into the garments factory business because that was the *le dernier cri*. Not all investors in this sector have had Cinderella endings. For some, the shoe was lost forever.

There have been other fads (some sustaining, others dead) such as indulging in fast food restaurants, operating computer-related ventures, risking head and shoulders in beauty parlours, jumping into real estate dealings, playing with kindergartens, purr-fecting fashion shows, synchronising concerts, and so on. The idea is to do something your neighbour is doing. Don't worry about the economics, the

times' and another from Pakistan 'Dawn' have recently criticised in their editorials the political crisis of Bangladesh.

Md Mustafizur Rahman

Dhakmondi, Dhaka-1209

A small question

Sir, Our media reported recently that our Communication Minister has an ambitious plan to link Bangladesh with China and Singapore through road communication network. He is a capable man and I wish him luck!

Meanwhile, I cannot help asking him the small question as to why the railway track (one of the finest in the country) between Benapole and Jessor was allowed to be ruined? Particularly when Benapole is fast becoming the largest land port of the country. I am sure either he or his ministry has an answer.

M Imdadul Haque

Dept. of Sociology, Dhaka University

Bengali dubbing of English drama serial

Sir, I do not understand what prompted the BTV authority to introduce the Bengali dubbing of English drama serial titled 'Time Trax' and 'Dark Justice.' Both the serials in English were acceptable to the viewers.

Moreover, the BTV has introduced the Bengali dubbing at a time when everybody is emphasising upon the importance of learning English to keep pace with the modern world. If we see the ZEE TV, ATN, we can understand the magnitude of English learning in our neighbouring country. It is observed average people in India can communicate well in English. The English drama serial was a source to watch and learn

English. Many of our boys and girls were trying to understand the mode of English speaking. Listening to English conversations helps a great deal in learning English. These two drama serials though popular are not anything of historical importance. Bengali dubbing will not help anything to learn about the episode. Some of the Hindi dramas have been dubbed in Bengali. Some of the stories are historical in nature and very much known to us. As such this dubbing has not bored us. But in the Time Trax and Dark Justice exact meaning of English dialogues have not perhaps been maintained.

The lip-sync also is not always correct. Moreover, the sound system seems to be defective. It would have been better to give sub-title in Bengali keeping the English voice intact. That would have helped the viewers to learn English as well as enjoy the movie. The BTV authority can take a sample survey on the subject from the genuine viewers and take the appropriate course of action.

Mahbubul Haque Chowdhury

Sonali Bank H.O. Dhaka

Suggestions for political parties

Sir, The opposition political parties have once again imposed hartals to press home their demands.

This year the country has already sustained heavy economic loss due to drought and flood. In this situation if frequent hartals are observed then the entire economy of this poor nation may be crippled for ever.

So, it is sincerely expected that the democratic government will take pragmatic measures to resolve political crisis by holding dialogue with the opposition and by adopting appropriate ac-

tion plan towards ensuring political stability which is an indispensable factor for bringing about progress and development to this country. All the parties should give priority to the national interests and welfare ignoring their political race.

M Zahidul Haque

Asstt Prof. BAI, Dhaka

Islamia Eye Hospital

Sir, It is a good news that the government has constituted an enquiry committee for the recent infections that led to unwanted extraction of eyes of patients in the Islamia Eye Hospital. I had served in this hospital for about five years and have seen how Dr. Mostafizur Rahman has turned the character of the hospital from charitable one to a profitable and practising clinic.

It is sad that only seven or eight doctors are taking the full advantage of this depriving other doctors, staffs. Many such enquiries have taken place in the past but without any result.

I hope this time the government will take a serious step and bring the culprits to task.

Sk Md Abdul Matin

Farmgate, Dhaka

BR efficiency

Sir, The new Railway Authority is not likely to improve efficiency. "Old wine in a new bottle." Reminds us of the creation of DESA from PDB.

A percentage of senior staff may be retired to break the cartel inside, and change the climate. Foreign consultants may be made available laterally, as three Bengalees never concern.

Slogan: 1) "Show profit or get out." 2) "Reduce fare and remain profitable."

A Passenger

Dhaka

ports should be exempted. International air passengers should be allowed to travel from home to airport and vice-versa.

6. Train services, long distance bus and steamer/launch services should be exempted.

7. Patients should be allowed access to hospital, clinics and other medical facilities including necessary transportation.

8. Rickshaws should be allowed to ply (Already some are found to ply).

9. All kinds of violence should be avoided by all parties concerned.

Normally other means of protest like public meetings, processions, demonstrations, hunger-strike, media-publicity etc should be resorted to for securing political demands.

The above is only an idea. The important thing is for the political leaders and social thinkers of all shades of opinion to realise the situation created by hartal and to promote a national consensus for the establishment of the concept of an Ethics for hartal in the national interest. There is a need for national conscience in such hours of crisis.

After all it is through dialogue and understanding between the contending parties that political issues should be resolved under a constitutional and democratic system.

The writer is former Cabinet Secretary.

picked up by three policemen, followed by the inhuman torture of Marzina at Chaudanga again by some policemen. Then there was the devilish incident at Dhaka's Botanical Garden where some policemen tried to violate the wife of an employee. And, who can be blamed for suspecting that all the incidents are not reported in newspapers?

It apparently looks like one policeman trying to better the other, but for the wrong medal. If only the majority of policemen emulated some of the brave, sincere and dutiful ones. The same psychology that occurs in a *hujug* seems to be working here. Somebody should check their diet. It could be something they are eating.

OPINION

Not Another Algeria, Please!

I am a worried man. I have studiously read all the advices given to the position and opposition, in other words, to Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina. The latter wants to boot out the former for a Caretaker Government under a neutral person. Let us suppose that we bring God himself down to be that person. I may please be excused to call God in because the very very distinguished Chief Justice could not satisfy a defeated leader, she accused him also to have taken recourse to subtle devices (*Sukha karchupi*) to defeat her party. The Chief Justice did a thankless job, none but God can be unaffected by that, hence we need Him. May be there will be no *karchupi*.

Let us assume that an election satisfactory to every one has taken place, no mud slinging, no challenges as "I can enthrone and dethrone a Prime Minister" is shouted from the rooftop. At this stage we are all happy. From all signs it appears that no one party will get two-third majority. There is no harm in dreaming. The extra-constitutional methods taken to hold the dream election will have to be ratified by the Parliament. Let us assume again on the basis of opposition claim that Begum Zia's party has lost popularity and gets only 111 seats as against last election score of 144. One cannot expect that Begum Zia would be so generous as to cooperate with the strange friends of convenience i.e., Jatiya Party,