Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

Six-day Hartal

Dhaka, Saturday, November 18, 1995

For six days last week, we counted our freedom in hours. For varying length of the day our freedom was curtailed, and we were denied our most fundamental rights of free movement. We were forced to keep our factories, shops, offices, etc., closed. Our airports and seaports were kept shut to international traffic. Imagine for a moment that our country was closed for one whole working week! All this we were forced to do at the call of the opposition. Now that it has all ended, opposition will have to assess what, if anything, it has gained by it, and at what cost.

We have said so earlier, and we repeat now, that work stoppage is a luxury we can no longer afford. We know of no other country in the world, to indulge in such luxury. Democracy has never been so widespread. More countries are now run by representative governments, which are subject to periodic elections, than at any other time in the history of the world. And yet nowhere is the democratic process so threatened by public agitation as here. The opposition claims that to call for strikes and 'hartals' are its democratic rights. We agree. But, we will hasten to add, these are democratic weapons of the last resort and not of the first. Look at other democracies, and we do not mean of the developed world, where such frequent work stoppage is being called for? When other countries find such a move suicidal, by what right do we subject our poor people to it, and so frequently at that?

Privately, most opposition leaders admit that hartal hurts the economy. But they say this the only weapon they have to fight against the government. Hartal is a moral weapon. For it to be effective, hartal must be observed voluntarily. Today's hartals are coerced, and as such are devoid of the moral strength of its historic predecessors. When hartals are being made to stretch as much as a week, is it not unimaginable that at some point people will just reject it outright. Then what will the opposition use as its weapon? Before we reach a situation like that of the proverbial 'last straw on the camel's back', the opposition should think of alternatives.

Shibir Attack on JU Halls

From reports of what is going on at the Jahangir Nagar University, it does not seem, as if, we have a government in the country. For the last several days, armed gangs of Shibir activists (student wing of Jamaat) have been trying to "capture" a few residential halls of the University. Members of the All Party Student Unity (APSU) repulsed these armed attacks with arms of their own. The whole episode sounds like a story from the Wild West of the American frontier days. How can any group think it possible to "capture" a student dorm with the help of arms? It is only possible if there is no government in the country, and where 'might is right' policy holds sway.

This is not a question of a few miscreants doing some mischief in an isolated place. This is a deliberate defiance of the law, of the government, and we think, of the state itself. Reign in these armed elements before it is too late. Today they are 'capturing' halls, tomorrow they will be capturing territory.

It is not only in the case of Shibir that we ask for such stern actions. We think all student gangs which are armed should be rounded up and given severe punishment. Here the government's record is abysmal. It is known to all that in number of armed gangs, or having members possessing fire arms, JCD's position is paramount. We have repeatedly warned the government that if its student and youth wings carry arms then it will be impossible to persuade other groups to give up weapons. There is still time. Without any partisan bias, government should allow the police to hunt down all armed gangs and clean up our educational institutions of all gangsters. Given its record of the last four-and-a-half years, BNP government will most likely ignore our plea, and turn a blind eye to its own armed gangs, and castigate those of the others. Such policy will breed more instances like that of JU and forces like that of Shibir will make best use of the situation to gain stronger position for themselves.

Golden Find

At 6 on Wednesday morning natural gas flowed out of one of two wells being dug for two years at Shahbazpur, only a short distance from Bhola town. Although prospectors were maintaining cautious optimism, it looked like Bangladesh has definitely struck another natural gas reserve — sizeable at one trillion cubic feet volume and worth around a hundred billion taka.

Only decades back the fact that this alluvial region was very poor in natural resources was a constant theme for lamentation. How could a state be viable here, thought many. Well, that is no more a fact. The Bhola strike confirms again that we are lucky in this most significant area - the area of energy resources. But the more important question has always been whether we shall be able to build national prosperity out of that or, through ineptitude of a hundred kind, we would let that luck to run out.

Our record so far is bad. We have not exploited our gas resource, quite big at over 10 trillion cubic feet, in the most economic manner. Most of it is being wasted on our kitchen needs on a scale that known reserve would be exhausted in another 20 years' time. The new find may push back that by a paltry few years. But can we not in the mean time develop better uses for gas — making it to yield more value?

The Bhola gas is till today a hundred per cent Bangladesh affair - investmentwise, prospectingwise. Can we not keep it up to regular production and distribution and even

industrial exploitation stages? The Bhola strike will certainly interest foreign prospectors. How shall we handle them? Let old bunglings in the matter not repeat and private pockets not lined at the cost of our nation's future.

Balanced-Budget: Trimming a Tall Tree?

E YES are now cast on the US the most powerful economic giant of the world - that apparently faces a financial flasco. The tug of war between the Republican dominated Congress and the Democrat dominated White House over the "balanced-budget" approach seemingly tends to cripple the functioning of the federal government. Already, some eight hundred thousand federal employees were laid-off, many of the "nonessential" services are either closed down or are on the brink of a closure. The pinch of the American budget cuts could also be felt in Bangladesh where the US government functionaries have already been downsized following the shortage of

services. Others Own, America Owes

funds to pay for those

It is, possibly, a surprise to note that America is the richest as well as the most indebted country in the world. In fact it is only the rich who can afford to be indebted too. Only last year, as the Economist showed. America's net external liabilities (i.e the value of America's bonds, shares, and physical assets owned by foreigners plus American's net debt to non-Americans less their own claims to foreigners) peaked from USD545 billion in 1993 to USD681 billion -

America needs an imminent solution to the current financial impasse since the world financial market is also linked to America's financial performance. Let politics alone not be the determinant of the "balanced budget" economics.

which is roughly one-tenth of America's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). And of all the contributors to the annual changes in net external asset (viz. current account balance, the flows of capital across borders and changes in the value of existing assets and liabilities), the current account deficit of USD151 billion last year is alleged to have mostly jerked the ship. Needless to mention, perhaps, that a deficit to America is invariably a surplus to countries like Germany, France, Japan and others.

Roots of the Row

The current row between the White House and the Congress relates to trimming down the budget

deficit. The Republicans tend to argue that such huge debts are the products of reckless federal expenses like on big federal bureaucracy, medicare, social security etc. The Republicans reckon that if things are allowed to move like as it is , it would mean that the future America is sacrificed for the present America, that a baby borne today has to bear the cost of butter and margarine that its forefathers. Therefore, America needs to balance its bud-

get over the next seven years - a budget that would allow Americans to cut their coat according to their cloth. To this effect the Republicans. by virtue of their majority in the Congress prepared a trillion-dollar deficit reduction bill that aims at slashing, among others, medicare, social security expenses one

dorse the same.

First. Mr Clinton, like his opponent Republicans, is also inclined to cut spending and taxes and hence balance the budget but he and his party would like to see the slash come slowly Second, the Republicans proposed trimming of spending on medicare the health programme

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

the one hand and ensuring heavy tax cuts on the other.

There is, perhaps, no doubt that the bill by the Congress is the need of the hour as far as America is concerned. It also seems bold enough in the sense that the attempt is the most serious effort in two decades to put Washington fiscal-house in order. But quite expectedly Bill Clinton used his veto power and sent the bill back for a reconsideration. There are a number of reasons for which the Democrats and other critics of the Republican bill do not appear to en-

for the old but, allegedly, bypassed the "whole forests of middle-class subsidies and tax breaks and thickets of welfare for business and other faourite constituencies. largely untouched by the axe" Third, the critics argue that if the Republican bill is accepted, the least affluent in the American society would bear a disproportionate share of the pain. "Congress's proposed tax-cuts worth over USD245 billion over seven years are unnecessary, badly targeted and over favourable to the rich." Fourth, the new proposals would usher

series of complicacies in the tax code that might breed tax anarchy in the whole system.

The veto on the bill exer cised by Mr Clinton seems to have allowed him to recapture some of his lost political support. As newspaper reports suggest, opinion polls tend to show that more than half of the Americans feel that the president is right in vetoing the Congress proposal, while one-third sharing that the Republicans are right. Again, more than half of the Americans tend to blame the Republicans for the financial stalemate while one-fourth hold the Democrats responsible.

Economics vs Politics

By and large, the Republican Revolution seems to hold less water as far as today's America is concerned. Apparently. Mr Clinton appears to seize the opportunity for a better sailing in the upcoming 1996 presidential election where the senior citizens and other beneficiaries of the current government expenditure programmes stand as vote banks. It is quite likely that as days roll. more and more Americans would value Mr Clinton's veto higher than the Republican's

attempts to erase the fiscal mess. The proponents of the slow and steady balanced budget might win the political race. That might mean. also, robbing the future generation of their due share. And in this showdown, a third party might crop up to salvage the nation from the tyranny of bi-partisan politics in America. Ros Peros are waiting on the sideline.

Soliciting Solutious

Neut Gingrich, the architect of the balanced budget thesis, should be counting his faults in the aftermath in the veto. He and his partymen. probably, thought that Bill Clinton might not dare to veto and, therefore, would yield some grounds to the Republicans. Unfortunately. what Gingrich and his team. Proposed, Clinton failed to dispose. If both the parties choose to stand uncompromising, then the existing financial chaos might lead to a financial catastrophe. It is hoped that the Republicans would share mild cuts in medicare and social security and the president would, in exchange, honestly share the proposed cuts in other sectors. America needs an imminent solution to the current financial impasse since the world financial market is also linked to America's financial performance. Let politics alone not be the determinant of the "balanced budget" economics.

Dialogue: Back to Square One

ORE than 20 months have elapsed since the start of the current political stalemate on March 1, 1994; and, now in mid-November 1995, we find both the party-in-power and the opposition parties are steadfast in their respective stands without yielding whatsoever. A lot of efforts have been made, internally and also internationally, to obviate the impasse, with no success, so far. The group of five distinguished citizens are now on the go to meet the Prime Minister and former Leader of the Opposition; the outcome of which is yet to be positive, in the interest of the people. While the the Election 91. Prime Minister and former Leader of the Opposition are engaged in protracted rrespondence on the proposed dialogue from October 28, 1995, the people are

reach a point of no return. Right at this moment a reevaluation of chronology of events is needed, not to find fault with others but to facilitate a tenable agreement. There is no doubt that if the

groping in darkness, as to

when a dialogue between

them will officially take place

to resolve the deadlock. Or,

whether it will be held at all!

The leader will have to meet

the expectations of the voting

population, at least. Else, any

ray of hope of settlement,

when the election is knoc-

king at the door, if missed

this time, the nation may

Election Commission could perform its duties independently, without fear or favour, then the crisis might not have arisen. Had there been mutual confidence between the government and the 'opposition', an Article to ensure free and fair election would have been inserted in the 12th amendment of the constitution. Surely, there was hope that election machinery from the secretariat at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar. Dhaka, to all the districts, covering all constituencies, will as clean as to meet the requirements of Parliamentary form of Government, on continuous basis, following

Unfortunately, the trendset to hold free and fair election in 1991, again faced debacle. The Chief Election Commissioner(CEC)was well aware of the inadequacies of Election '91 in terms of voter list and delimitation of constituencies etc. It is learnt that a report was prepared to overcome these shortcomings, immediately after the election, but to no effect. Even the preparation of fresh voter list, which had fallen due after census 1991, was not taken up. It is correctly said that neither the Election Commission nor BNP government took any initiative to improve and rectify the electoral system, before the main-stream opposition parties started movement for

by Muhammad Quamrul Islam tion. After the return of jusshook EC's credibility, for

tice Abdur Rauf to the High Court on 20 April, 95, on relinquishing the office of Chief Election Commissioner Justice Md Abdul Jalil took the acting charge. Justice A.K.M Sadek took the oath of Chief Election Commissioner on 27 April. 1995 Actually, after Justice Sadek beçame CEC, voter registration and preparation of Identity Cards, delimitation of constituencies, drafting code of conduct and relevant electoral laws etc. to facilitate free and fair election, got under way. He has assured to apply laws strictly to ensure fairness in the next election; in case it does not happen. he will quit the Election Commission. It is necessary to place the Election Commission's secretariat, directly under his control, instead of that working as part of Prime Minister's Secretariat. Let us see how the BNP government responds to the recommendations of Election Commission. Alas, all these happened in the last six months, when BNP government had already passed four years in power and political stalemate stiffened from March, 1994.

After the election '91, the opposition parties raised allegation of rigging in a byelection at Bhola; but with not much hullabaloo. The byelection in '93 at Mirpur constituency, Dhaka, first

wide-spread allegation of malpractices, manipulation in declaration of results and a mini-media coup. Question was also raised if fair election was possible under a partygovernment. Then, came elections to four city corporations in January, 1994. The opposition AL candidates were elected Mayors of Dhaka and Chittagong: which was perhaps not liked by the policy makers of BNP. Then again in Magura by-election on 20 March, '94, opposition would resign before 30 days of the election. The Speaker delayed and gave his decision on the resignation letters of 147 MPs, which was not anticipated as per Article 67 (2) of the constitution. On 27 July, '95, Supreme Court gave opinion, on the reference of the President, that the seats be declared vacant as per Article 67 (I) (b) of the constitution. The Gazette was published declaring the seats vacant from 20 June. In view of flood and opposition's natural reluctance to participate in by-election, the CEC extended the time limit of by-election as provided in the constitution, so that the government and opposition parties get breathing time to find solution to the political crisis. However, his wish is yet to be fulfilled, election date is fast approaching and

parties alleged wide-spread rigging, and other malpractices against the government party, observed half-day hartal on 23 March '94 and besieged secretariat on April, '94 for cancellation of the result of Magura by-election. The people, at large, assumably, lost confidence in the EC and felt that in case of future elections under party government, the CEC would leave the constituency like Magura. A bad precedence, compared to Ershad

regime, is continuing till to Presently, various formulas are appearing in the press, seeking to end the political deadlock. While doing so, one cannot forget the commonwealth brokered dialogue, when Sir Ninian left Dhaka, accepting failure. American and British Ambassadors held talks with the leader of the Opposition on 22 November, 1994 to bring the government and opposition parties back to discussion table. Sheikh Hasina gave ultimatum to the Government on 6 December, '94 that if the demand for neutral caretaker government was not accepted by 28 December, '94, the opposition MPs will resign en masse. When an agreement on the due date was about to be reached, the government party imposed an unnecessary condition, which led to the submission of resignation letters of opposition MPs to the Speaker. Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia declared in a meeting at Munshiganj on 29 December, '94 that she

considerable electoral procedural works are awaiting completion. The opposition programme to press their demand for neutral caretaker government, as announced on 21 October, '95, is in force and being ob-In search of a formula, ac-

ceptable to the government and the opposition, and to arrange a dialogue, one should not miss the vital point of ensuring free, fair and impartial election. We can hardly forget that the understanding between Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina is a means to an end, and not an end in itself. The objective is to ensure and make such arrangements, where the voter can vote freely, according to his/her own choice. There is not enough time left with the Election Commission and for having a neutral government, of any type as may be agreed upon, to hold the election, freely, fairly and impartially. May we remind the leaders, particularly those who are in power, about the commitments made in the declaration of three main political alliances on 19 November, 1990 and how much of those have been materialized in last five years by BNP Government! On the fifth anniversary of the declaration, we are again bogged down in questions. How long the nation will fight for 'free and fair' election?

The writer is an economist and Advocate, Bangladesh Supreme Court.

Hartal: What and why?

Sir, In Bangladesh hartal has turned out to be the most-used political lever; every now and then hartal is called by one political party or the other. The country is passing through a political deadlock emanating from the modality of the next parliamentary elections. The opposition political parties, mainly Awami League, Jamaat and Jatiya Party, want the next elections under a neutral caretaker government, and in their bid to press home their demand they have eventually resigned from the Jatiya Sangsad. The treasury bench views that the government cannot do anything beyond the Constitution. The wrangle is on this; and since the opposition has left the Parliament, streets are the hubs of politics now. Hartals are called day after day; street corners are jammed with pickets.

Mahatma Gandhi of India introduced hartal or "Bandh", as it is called in that country. as a political lever to make the British accept its de-

mand of Swaraj. In our country hartal paid off good dividend in the movement against Ershad in 1990. An elected government is now at the helm of affairs; but to be elected and to be efficient are not the same thing. The much-coveted parliamentary system of government has now hit serious snag: half the parliament seats are vacant, there is no opposition, let alone its leader in the House.

The Parliament at the moment is not full and sovereign in the sense that it does not have the strength to make an amendment of the Constitution; but we are for-

getting that the subject matter of the controversy are none other than the people; right to vote freely and fearlessly. If patriotism, service to the people, or welfare of the people are the objects of politics, there should not be

ensuring free and fair elec-

any hindrance to a consensus that cannot be overcome. Hartal as a means of political lever has been too used to be credible and efficacious; and when the country is run by its own elected people, it is suicidal in terms of production and social order. The politicians should ponder over this. They should hesitate to take up the programmes that would adversely affect the education of the children and would disrupt social equilibrium. The ideas of longmarch, large political meetings — instead of street-corner meetings. hunger-strikes by leaders. sit-ins, etc., should be considered for ventilation of political ideas and feelings. The opposition political parties, it is believed, are fighting for ensuring correct right to vote; it is a holy purpose but the people would like to hear more: we have myriads of problems in our national and social life; the problems of flood, drought of North Bengal due to Farakka Barrage, illiteracy, unemployment, low GNP, serious crisis of law and order, crisis of higher education are some glaring ones to mention. Politicians must tell us how exactly, when in power, they are going to tackle these problems

Al-Ameen Eskatan Gardens, Dhaka

for the benefit of the people.

We want to vote freely, and

vote only them to power who

now will convince that they

can really deliver the benefits

Murders up in city

Sir, This refers to your

monthly round up entitled "Murders up in city" of October 04, 1995. A month has passed by, so I think it is time we took stock of daily realities, rather brutalities. Three persons left dead in Dhupkhola Math, a bloody gunfight in the premises of the most popular vernacular daily of the country, the shooting of a student activist in the very premises of the Dhaka District and Sessions Judge Court and the most daring train robbery in recent memory, that too on an Inter-City train. The incidents go on and on with obvious impunity of the "parties involved.'

Does this cycle of violence reflect decay in our social fabric given the context of the present political and economic situation? Or is it just another manifestation of the painful transition from the Pakistani days of "basic democracy" to our current quest for real democracy that we seem to have accepted as a harsh reality for better days to come. Again, is it just formal/informal apathy paving the way for once a peace-loving people to turn violent and vent their long pent up emotions?

Ask a thousand questions and of course it is impossible to put one's finger on the cause or root of this "doomsday" phenomenon. More so because most of the time we hardly hear anything in the aftermath of such incidents. Both the authorities and media have their share to blame for keeping the general public in the dark. The authorities inadvertently fail to keep us informed on post-

incident developments and the printed media feel their responsibility ends after the

first day reporting. Incidentally hacking to death with kitchen utensils like 'dao', 'bothi' and of course the mastan's machete is currently in vogue for committing grisly murders. Mrs Nurunnahar and her daughter were hacked to death by their maid servant with a bothi in Lalmatia, Dhaka. Advocate A H M Mohiuddin of Faridpur was chopped to pieces by local mastans and more recently a youth tried to hack the members of a household in Mohammadpur with a dao. For God's sake, where are we all heading to?

In all the above cases motives behind the murders or attempts thereof are pronounced by the law enforcing agency(s) in the print media as 'hazy' or non-existent. Well then please follow up and keep the citizens abreast of what measures and actions are being taken to apprehend and rehabilitate such psychopathic killers, most of them seemingly at large. This might call for a tall order but my immediate circle of relatives and friends do not at all feel secured out in the once friendly streets of Dhaka. am gradually descending into the same syndrome against the best of my interests.

May be you, Sir, should organise a special roundtable with the current violent scenario as an exclusive priority agenda for 1996 to elicit public opinion and garner mass support to fight against this incomprehensible sort of pervasive violence.

Mohammad Saifullah Dhanmondi, Dhaka-1205.

UNB.

Buchwald's COLUMN

Whose God is It?

The people I worry about the most are those who commit acts of violence in the name of God.

The zealots maintain that people can do anything they want as long as they claim that it's God's will. The next question that must be asked is, "Which God?" It turns out that when a religious cause is involved, there

are different Gods for different people. I discussed this with a militant biblical scholar who worships a much more vindictive God than I do. I said, "You believe in one God, and I believe in another. That

doesn't necessarily mean that you can go around killing people you disagree with." "It depends," he replied. "Read the Bible, and you will discover that my God is the true God. He's a tough deity,

and nobody is going to push him around." I said, "I have read the Bible, and in it God says, ' Thou shalt not kill.' I certainly didn't find any mention about God wanting to assassinate political leaders.

"The Bible is very clear on this. It states that you have a right to kill someone if that person tries to give away your

land in Palestine." "You made that up. My God is the God of peace and your God is the God of vengeance." The scholar said, "My God will never let anyone take

our settlements away even if it means starting a Holy War. Your God would sell our people out for a dinner with President Clinton. "Tell me the truth. Was your God in on the killing of the

Israeli prime minister?" I asked. "Let's just say he answered our prayers. A religious person would never do it on his own. Rabin was negotiating

with the Arabs. What choice did our God have?" "I don't believe that your God is for real," I told him. "I believe that he is a figment of your fanaticism."

He said, "With God's permission I could kill you for saying that." "That doesn't surprise me."

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