

Why Hartial ?

What we have been saying for more than six years now (ever since this paper was born) is that with a rickety economy and toddling democracy we simply cannot afford a call for strike or *hartial*. This we said when Awami League were in the opposition. They did not listen. But now that they are in power, they definitely understand the logic of our position.

Ironically, when in power, BNP were extremely pleased with our anti-*hartial* stance. Apparently they do not feel the same way today. As the party in opposition they are not likely to do so. They seem to have forgotten everything they said while in power and want to call for *hartial* at every possible opportunity. Let us not forget that Begum Zia, as Prime Minister, termed those who caused *hartals* as enemies of the country and of the people. Is *hartial* now a good thing just because she is calling for it? This question is as much valid and relevant today as it was when Sheikh Hasina was in the opposition.

Regardless of who is in power, we are going to oppose *hartals* as persistently and as vigorously as we did in the past, for the simple reason that it is bad for our economy.

Much, if not all, of the trouble the AL government is now facing is the crippling effect of the blows it gave to the economy while being in the opposition. Frequent *hartial* calls at that time created an environment of down-playing the economic impact of such action. The same thing is going on now. When BNP calls for *hartals*, their only concern is how hot can it make the seat for the ruling party, and not how much damage will it cause to the national economy. The tragedy, therefore, is that the leaders of the country which perhaps, more than any other country in the world, needs to focus on the economy most, do the least. It is all a matter of convenience. Our political parties do what suits them, not what suits us — the voters.

What is the reason for the *hartial* call next Sunday? Opposition feels that the price hike of fuel will adversely affect public interest. A very laudable sentiment. But why is BNP going for an action which will hurt people more? There is only one explanation for it. It is, as we said, politics of convenience.

We have already criticised the government for raising fuel prices radically. But we cannot, for the love of our people and our economy, support any call for *hartial* to negate the jump.

DCC's Radical Venture

Starting next year Dhaka will have 120 healthcare centres run by NGOs on behalf of the Dhaka City Corporation. The DCC will build another 70 healthcare centres in the other three corporations of Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi. We like the DCC idea of caring for the physical well-being of the residents of the four biggest cities of our nation, going rather out of the way. The plan seems to be well thought out and it features many radical departures and is well on its way to completion. The NGO idea is novel and worth trying.

The misgiving that comes pat to the mind in this very good sounding case is why is DCC dashing into new country when its own pasture is unkempt to say the least? It has great healthcare responsibilities, true. But all of it was traditionally discharged through carrying for the preventive side of healthcare — providing potable water to all residents and healthgiving surrounds and ample space and greens etc., all to the good of the residents' health. Sewage underground and garbage over must move fast to ensure the city's prevention of disease. Can anyone say the DCC had creditable performance in any one of these? So creditable that with this front well secured the DCC wants to work more and in unfamiliar and extra curricular country?

The cause for DCC's enthusiasm leading to incursion into curative medicine is not known. But an overdose of enthusiasm has made it blind to the unfortunate ends that agencies having exclusive charge of medical treatment of the people, have come to. Look at the government hospitals of all kinds, general and specialised. They are all ailing. Why? They have money and they have the facilities. They have even the required expertise. One reason is they are too much crowded. DCC's wild idea of helping the hospitals by freeing them of the outpatients — wild because this is simply not its business — is bad in the bargain for the hospitals are not going to improve a wee bit because of this relief. Hospitals here are hells not because of out patients but more because here is a moneymaking racket going on uproariously at the expense of the afflicted ones' helplessness and misery. Why is DCC jumping into this bad act in such a big way, forgetting its own cares? Is DCC confident that they can create islands of professionalism and humanity in a land infamously devoid of it in the medical sector? If not, please don't go for this.

But this is perhaps too late to change a committed stroke. Why didn't DCC talk earlier of embarking on such a high-minded thing? Because, it feared dissent coming from all corners? It will perhaps be two years before the citizens can enjoy the benefits of the centres. We hope to see DCC excel in its orthodox duties in the mean time.

Let Film Society Control Act Go

It is difficult to ignore the contribution of a film society in developing cinema lovers' faculty for appreciating the aesthetic imagination behind the whole art of cinema making. Particularly in our country where good film is a rarity in the procession of poor remakes from crass commercial exploitation on the celluloid.

As a forum for upholding the concept of film movement, the role of a film society is much appreciated and encouraged elsewhere. Calcutta Film Society is the oldest of its kind in the region. The first film society in this part of the world was formed way back in 1963. Drawing inspiration from that lone ranging act of the sixties, a number of film societies have sprouted since independence.

However, a law — the Film Society Control Act — was enacted in 1980 to bring this innocuous exercise of enlightenment under the shadow of an unnecessary statutory vigilance. Is film society big enough an entity to require a law to save the society from its 'ill effect'? Are the laws of the land not enough to deal with any cases of moral transgression by the film societies? They definitely are.

The present government has done a great service to country's culture by repealing the century old, colonial dramatic performance control act. Let it do way with this other instance of philistinism — the absurd Film Society Control Act as soon as possible.

The Rural USA : Welcome Changes

The development in rural areas in terms of infrastructure and other facilities are leading to reverse migration from urban to rural areas — a syndrome we are eager to see in Bangladesh.

RURAL economies are assumed to be dominated by agricultural activities or agriculture related activities. That was, probably, so in the US even in 1950 when farming contributed one-fifth or more of the country's total earned income. Today's rural economies in the US are more dominated by other activities and farming accounts for less than 2 per cent of income, farming provided 14 per cent of all rural jobs in 1969, that proportion dropped to about 7 per cent in 1993. Manufacturing, services or government jobs now lead US rural economy — especially the service sector. Retirement and recreation activities are particular bright spots in rural landscape.

Once upon a time, people from rural areas migrated to towns in search of better jobs, now the trend has reversed. During the first half of the 1990s, rural and small town areas portrayed a significant come-back in rural population: rural population rose by 5.1 per cent during 1990-95, nearly twice the rate of growth during the 1980s. "About 1.3 million more people moved from metro America into rural and small town areas than moved in the opposite way — a direction of net population flow contrary to that of any other time in the 20th century except for the 1970s and possibly the first half of the 1930s ...," says government documents.

Natural resources e.g. land, timber, water, reportedly, are exhibiting a new role for many rural areas. Natural resources have been important for their extractive values which, in the last two decades, have been replaced by amenity values to boost population and employment growth. For example, retirees are drawn to rural areas rich in scenic beauty and endowed with moderate climate.

Farm numbers are expected to go down by about 2 per cent or less per year for the rest of the decade reaching 1.6 to 1.7 million by 2000. The fall in farm numbers does not pose any threat to nation's food supply in the wake of increased labour productivity. The gradual replacement of older farmers by the new ones is contributing to the increased productivity. An increasing proportion of US food and fibre is reported to be generated by fewer and fewer farms. For example, the census of agriculture tells us that about 12 per cent of all farms (689 thousand) used to account for one-half of all sales of agricultural commodities in 1940. By 1992, the share dropped to 3.2 per cent (62 thousand). The growing concentration of production among fewer is expected to continue into the 21st century, at the expense of a decline in small commercial farms. However, although smaller

farms are losing significance as suppliers of food and fibre, they are still considered to be important actors in environmental and land use policies with a control over major share of US farmland.

The US farm commodity programmes evolved at a time when the average income of a farm household was about one-half that of all-US households. "About 30 million people lived on farms in 1930 — 24 per cent of the total US population and

Farm households, on average, depends more on income from off-farm sources for family living than on income from farming. Exclusive reliance of non-commercial farms on non-farm activities could be in evidence. Large farms, relatively, eke out a better income since from farming. Farming is capital intensive business and to generate average US household income, they need substantial assets.

There is no doubt that US

However, economic and policy environments have changed dramatically since 1930s and the 1996 Federal Agricultural Improvement and Reform Act (1996 Act) evolved mechanisms that tie price and income supports to production controls. It is being argued that "phasing out of commodity programmes is not likely to lead to any large-scale displacement of farm operators" on a sector-wide basis. First, contract payments will add to farm income and can be used by producers to facilitate whatever financial restructuring and rationalization that needs to take place. Secondly, the farm sector, in the aggregate, is currently financially sound.

US producers are already using many market risk management strategies e.g. keeping equity in cash and current assets, buying crop insurance and spreading sales over the year. Smaller enterprises with a

greater dependence on off-farm income are in a stronger position and, according to a USAID handout, have increased market volatility and income swings. Larger diversified operations are in a strong position to take advantage of production, marketing and financial strategies to manage risk. The medium size farm (smaller commercial farms) appear to be the enterprises most in need of timely market information and a research and education programme designed to identify alternative risk management strategies and to improve risk management skills.

By and large, the US farms are new rearranging their production structure in accordance with changing demand pattern of the US and the global concerns. Priorities are shifted in consonance with demand and supply elasticity of products. The development in rural areas in terms of infrastructure and other facilities are leading to reverse migration from urban to rural areas — a syndrome we are eager to see in Bangladesh.

Beneath the Surface
by Abdul Bayes

56 per cent of the rural population". The US farm commodity programmes aimed at raising farm family income eventually to ameliorate both US and rural poverty.

The low income status of rural households persisted well into the 1960s. The income level differences tapered off to a parity during the 1970s and have remained that way ever since. And improved access to rural non-farm jobs and income played an important role in achieving the income parity.

government policies were directed towards raising farm income. The 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) is construed as a landmark piece of legislation in the history of American farm policy. In fact, the 1933 AAA gave the US government a new role in the management of the US farm sector.

The AAA included production and marketing controls and prices and income support programmes for many of the most important farm commodities.

ASEAN's Role vis-a-vis Regional Situation

by ASM Nurunnabi

Washington publicly says that accepting Myanmar into the ASEAN fold gives the junta the legitimacy to continue or it will even worsen its despotic ways. If pressure were applied by neighbouring ASEAN countries, it could be far more effective than protests from the West.

THE Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) has indefinitely postponed Cambodia's entry into the regional economic bloc, originally scheduled for July 23 in objection to the violent change of government by Hun Sen, one of the country's two prime ministers. ASEAN has now sought a role in mediating the conflict and sent three foreign ministers to confer with Hun Sen. Initially Hun Sen spurned the diplomats. Subsequently, Cambodia, reversing the rebuff it had issued, said it wanted the ASEAN to mediate in the conflict between the two warring prime ministers.

"ASEAN's decision not to accept Cambodia as a full member was a big mistake because it may force the country to look its immediate neighbours for support and investment," second Prime Minister Hun Sen said. "I told them that the ball is at their feet." Hun Sen said referring to the visit there of three Foreign Ministers from members of the ASEAN. "Whether ASEAN plays that ball or passes it to others to play it is their own decision. We have to see whether ASEAN needs us

or we need another." Diplomats and analysts have noted that since the ASEAN decision was made, Hun Sen made several overtures to China including ordering the closure of Taiwan's representative office in Phnom Penh and cancelling a deal with a Taiwanese airline.

On the other hand, there were the indications from ASEAN that the recent coup in Cambodia did not go back and the old government restored.

ASEAN's role with reference to Myanmar was also looked upon with some misgivings in some quarters. Myanmar's new membership in the ASEAN has caused problems for the group's relations with the European Union and the United States. The United States had lobbied to keep Myanmar out of ASEAN, citing the country's huge heroin trade and repressive military regime, which had ignored the results of 1990 elections. Washington and some European leaders had called for isolation of the Myanmar regime, and the US government has banned new American investment in the country. The EU has said that it is not ready as yet to see Myanmar accede to

an economic cooperation between the two regional trade groupings. From the ASEAN side, it has been stated that "we might sit down with the EU and find out what kind of problems they have with Myanmar being in ASEAN." It was further stated that the nine-nation group also faced problems with the United States. That has something to do with the issuing of visas to senior Myanmar officials travelling to the United States. The 30-year ASEAN originally devised as a bulwark against communist Indochina, lately admitted also Laos to the group.

The US Secretary of State hauled Myanmar over the coals as ASEAN's newest member. Citing military-ruled Myanmar "an anomaly within ASEAN" the US Secretary of State said it was the only member "where the state and society are fundamentally at odds" and whose government "protects and profits from the drug trade." It is further stated that "Myanmar is inside ASEAN but it will remain outside the southeast Asia mainstream and isolated from the global economy until accountability is restored. That is not an admonition but an ob-

jective fact that must be acknowledged." A European source said that the reference to the long-held ASEAN policy of gentle persuasion was just a "smokescreen" since constructive engagement had so far failed to show concrete results.

In this context, the US Secretary of State urged ASEAN leaders to meet pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi when they visit Myanmar and give her support. "It is ASEAN's responsibility to convince the SLORC (Myanmar military junta) to open up a political dialogue with Suu Kyi's political party."

Observers also have indicated that though ASEAN insists that its policy of "constructive engagement" with Myanmar's generals was prompted by its eagerness to keep that country on the path towards democratic and free market reforms, Washington publicly says that accepting Myanmar into the ASEAN fold gives the junta the legitimacy to continue or it will even worsen its despotic ways. If pressure were applied by neighbouring ASEAN countries, it could be far more effective than protests from the West.

To the Editor...

What next?

Sir, Our leaders are busy celebrating different occasions/functions competing with each other at a time when the country is running through a deep crisis — one blaming the other for their faults and errors. The share market is at stake. The economy of the country has reached the point that it will be totally shattered even with another slightest touch. The saddest part is that nobody bothers to realize the problems of the common people. But still the commoners are carrying on. The deeper part of the crisis is that nobody seems to take up the leadership having due sense of honesty, integrity, morality etc. The country is being ruled just for the sake of it! The only thing being done is that some people are sitting in their chairs and taking advantages of their positions.

Sylhet is practically still detached from the rest of the country after the severe gas leakage. Those responsible for this major accident should have been taken to task; nothing has been done so far. Couple of months back without giving even 24 hours notice the office timing had been changed. One by one the names of most of the institutions, streets etc are being renamed. What is in a name? Will the tax-payers have to pay less tax than before or the prices of the commodities will come down or the majority of the population will have three good meals a day by calling a rose a tulip? Despite of what already is going on; again a disastrous thing took place — the price-hike of petroleum — which means a massive blow on the waistline of economically crippling nation. What next?

Munir
Dhaka

try club' being farmers smoking a 'hucca' under a banyan tree; and a 'school' is a chalk board nailed to a tree trunk?

It is amusing that the self-proclaimed social and environmental angel's objectives are to "Build a Better Dhaka" — probably it's the first time they even heard of the place. Are we to presume that the project is going to be a self-sufficient, independent cocoon — with no effect on the neighbouring areas and shall not be taxing on the already inadequate infrastructure? How naive can one be?

It has always been the tragic fact that we dumb 'Bangalees' need a smart "100 per cent foreign owned company" to tell us what's good for us. Many professionals, intellectuals and the community itself have expressed doubts about the project in question and none — including the "do-gooders" — have felt it necessary to discuss the matter with the very community whom the project is supposed to benefit.

Of course, I thank the learned advertisers for the comment, "utilise scarce government resources for other immediate purpose such as 'poverty alleviation, rural development etc.' Thank you Sirs! I think the whole two-page ad should have had this comment only and the readers would not question the purpose and intent of all concerned in the project.

Shamim Choudhury.
Banani, Dhaka.

A better Dhaka?

Sir, When a two-page four-colour ad converts "US \$" to "Taka" and "acres" to "bigha" it is obvious how much intelligence your readers are credited with. It is therefore not surprising that they have the gall to refer to "high class apartments", "boating club" "country club", "a school of international standard" and a hospital "managed by an American hospital group" — as being "for the benefit of the community"? Are we talking of the same community whose idea of a 'high class apartment' is a mud-hut with a tin roof; a boating club' a group of fishermen in their dingy boats, 'coun-

and no major natural disaster. Our minister might be complacent for achieving GDP growth at 5.6 per cent. This rate has been achieved due to better performance of agricultural sector (agri growth rate 5.7 per cent in 95-96 compare to 1 per cent in 95-96).

Each and every macro economic indicators showing dismal picture of the economy considering last one-year performance. This happened only for the government's wrong policy (to some extent) and inefficiency of some ministries concerned. In this context I like to focus on current liquidity crisis. Presently banks are suffering from the liquidity crisis and the reasons behind this are the government's lag in revenue collection, its excessive borrowing from various banks and cascading effect of last year's capital market scam.

Notwithstanding taking all favourable macro economic measures like currency devaluation, increase of bank rate, recovery of bank loan etc., and reduction in import expense should have geared up the liquidity of the banks. But things did not happen as it was expected.

As we know industrialisation is the only solution to relieve us from the curse of poverty. Large scale investment is prerequisite for industrialisation process and interruption in funding will hamper the whole process. The irony is that industrial growth was only 3.3 per cent last year compare to 13 per cent in 95-96 fiscal year, which has to be double digit in any way to reach GDP growth rate at 7 per cent. In current liquidity crisis, banks are unable to give industrial as well as business and trade loans. Money supply must be increased to give an impetus to the ailing industrial sector.

There is a direct relationship between money supply and inflation — increased money supply without productivity leads to inflation. In current context, government should inject more money to upbeat resource mobilisation process. There is an apprehension regarding inflation remains, but the spill-over impact will bring more good than harm in the economy. In this context, China could be an example for us. China experienced both double digit growth and inflation last year. But soared simultaneously and growth rate offsets the bitter inflation. In addition to that, China enjoyed huge Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the last

several years which is totally absent in our country. Amount of FDI shows more dreary picture, negligible amount of FDI arrived so far in Bangladesh. Even our neighbouring country Myanmar successfully fetched \$3 billion last year despite its controversial military rule, whereas we did only \$30 million.

Export earnings, FDI, remittance and all sorts financial assistance help to build up a handy foreign exchange reserve and liquidity as well. Overall export earnings and remittance are up but slashed revenue collection and increased public spending lead to current liquidity crisis and ever-lowest foreign exchange reserve in last seven years.

We need some bold, effective and charismatic steps from the Finance Minister which will stir the economy positively. The blames for failure in regulating this sort of economic issues must be shouldered by our Finance Minister as well as the government.

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Neither 'over' nor 'under'!

Sir, Dhaka's pedestrians do not prefer to use the over-bridges or the underpasses, according to press reports. The underpasses are said to be controlled by the denizens of the underworld of hoodlums and toll collectors, and the over-bridges are not attractive to a 'developing' society looking for short-cuts in life.

Before spending a couple of crore taka on these civic amenities, did the