

ADB's Certificate

What the President of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) Mr. Mitsuo Sato said on Tuesday's press conference prior to his departure from Bangladesh was sweet music to the ears of the government, especially to that of the Finance Minister. Not only did he double his bank's lending commitment, from the average 270 million dollars to about 420 million, but also gave a near total endorsement to government's economic policies, in spite of widespread concern expressed within the country, especially by the heads of several leading chambers of commerce and industries.

Of all Mr. Sato's comments, the one we consider to be of most significance is the one that asks Bangladesh to seek hard loans for viable projects, in the future, because "availability of soft loans for development has shrunk sharply".

What the ADB's President was reminding us of is the growing reality that in a market economy, like everything else, we must also seek money in the market and multilateral bodies. However, in the medium term, he advised us to consider using Ordinary Capital Resource(OCR) window of the Bank at 6.5 per cent rate interest.

The message is clear. In the near and distant future money will 'cost' much higher than we are used to, and as such we must be ready and equipped to use money far more timely and efficiently so that not only the high cost is recovered but we also make enough profit to make the whole exercise viable. For this to happen we must dramatically improve our loan using capacity. Starting from being far more judicious and prompt in selecting projects, we have to learn to implement them faster and improve our management skills to manage them once they are completed. Only then can we take so-called hard loans and yet be viable. Are we ready to bring about such changes? If wishes were realities then we are? But since they are not, neither are we. And it is this basic fact that our government must face, and take urgent action to remedy.

We are happy at the upbeat comments of no less a person than the ADB chief. But we would like to caution the government not to make too much of what he said in public and pay far more attention to what he left unsaid. Recently, a lot of statistics are being thrown around. While statistics are important indications of performance yet they can also be misleading. We also know one can read them as one pleases, and governments habitually do. Of equal, if not more, importance is how the general public feels about the economy. Here the unanimous verdict is 'not so good'. Unpleasant as it may be, this is what we perceive to be the truth, and urge the government to pay heed to it.

Planning for Slums

Repeated attacks on Bhasantek slums by a gang of terrorists in the past few days have once again pointed to a chronic problem in the city. It is the unrestricted growth of slums on government lands. In most cases influential quarters or terrorist groups take lead in the occupation of such lands and help settle the migrant people from villages there. The benefit obviously is mutual. This time the terrorists carried out the attacks on the old Bhasantek slums because there was a clash of interests.

Happily, the slum-dwellers fended off the attacks quite well. What is however unacceptable is the mysterious police role. Not only the police of Cantonment thana, according to reports, failed to come in aid of the inhabitants of the slums under attack but also released the attackers who were caught red-handed at the time of attack. They lost no time to swoop once again on the slums after their release. This explains why slums problem is more intractable than it appears on the face of it.

With every passing day, the problem is mounting because of further addition to the slum population through migration from village to the city. So far, no government has come up with any plan for them. After the resignation of a state minister over the evacuation of the slums for setting up a *Benarasee palli*, the prime minister a clear instruction to look for locations where the slum dwellers could be resettled. Nothing is known about that. Clearly, this government too is little interested to make a comprehensive plan for the city's slums. There is no way we can do away with slums because the entire informal sector is dependent on inhabitants of those. So we need to formulate a clear policy about how to integrate them with the rest of the city. Apart from making a permanent arrangement for their settlement, there should be the minimum basic provisions for improving the quality of their lives.

Heat Stroke

Heat stroke, not to confuse with heart stroke, is taking its toll in the city. The rampaging heat of a couple of days has sent as many as 95 people to hospital. Indeed, the shooting up of mercury coupled with excessive humidity has made life unbearable in the city. We believe it is not very different in other cities of the country or even the rural parts of it. Reports of heat casualties from different parts of the country are yet to be received. Or, can it be that heat stroke is a speciality of this city alone? We must not imagine so.

We have known that in the country's north, people fall victims both to heat and cold. So the heat is not expected to give a demonstration of its predatory nature in the capital alone. How like the patients of heart stroke, people with certain physical symptoms are vulnerable to this disease. Doctors inform that the likelihood of its attack is expected at a particular time of the day. They advise people with weak hearts and blood pressure to avoid sunlight in between 11 am to 12 pm.

Well, it seems the dreaded disease has a few remedies within our grasp. But people must be informed through radio and television how well we can fight the heat. Drinking water is a good way of avoiding dehydration. But the message must be carried through to the people. After all, the projection that the heat wave might continue for a few more days makes it all the more necessary.

Hartal: Confiding in or Fooling the People?

by Nilratan Halder

Keeping people out of the process of arriving at some decisions may be an expression of autocratic attitude or foolish, but misinforming or misleading them for political gains is an offence of the worst type.

THE first countrywide hartal called by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has been successful in every sense of the term. The largest opposition in the country's history should feel more than satisfied. Why? Because it was looking for an appropriate ground for calling a nationwide hartal and had actually been rehearsing for one through registering some such protests at local or regional levels as in Laxmipur and Sylhet. The price hike of fuel gave it the right opportunity. The other reason is that earlier it was able to muster the support of the religious parties (in fact, it extended its support to the Islami Oikya Jote when the latter called hartal in protest of a Jewish woman's act of sacrifice in Israel) and now it led from the front to pull support of the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Jatiya Party. Politics for the first time in the second stint of the Awami League (albeit a changed one) rule has got the right polarisation.

The BNP's first shot has been on target. Too bad the ruling party did not quite grasp the consequences of its abrupt decision to raise the price of petroleum and by such a wide margin. At least three ministers — energy, finance and commerce — the energy secretary and the chairman of the Bangladesh Petroleum Corpora-

tion (BPC) have gone public to defend the government move but only after the decision has been taken. The arguments put forward by them are quite convincing and no one can deny the rationale behind an increase in fuel price. What most people resent is the way it was done and the extent of increase at a go. Clearly a public debate prior to the decision would have been in the fitness of things and surely have enhanced the AL government's democratic credentials. The way it was done is more Ershadian than democratic. The government introduced two-day weekly holiday similarly in the fashion of imposition rather than taking people into confidence. It has not gone one better too in this respect on its predecessor BNP government.

The problem with our politics is that political parties pose to be staunch defenders of democracy when out of power, but once in power they are at ease in continuing the style of governance they themselves had repeatedly attacked their opponents for. Our democracy is still carrying a strong legacy received from the long years of military rule. Otherwise, here is

a strong case favouring the government. Only it did not know how to present its case and make it acceptable to the people. Should we call it inexperience and ineptness on the part of the government? Many would love to think so and attribute the cause to its long stretch out of power. Maybe, or may not. But the more important point is how serious or not the political parties are in setting the democratic tradition. Both the ruling AL and the opposition BNP are at fault. The government may have taken a foolish decision but at least it cannot be blamed for misleading the people. However, the BNP's position cannot be defended so in this regard.

Why? Because like many of its untenable positions, unsupported by historical facts but religiously carried on by it as a crusade, here also it wants to present it as a people's cause. It does not contest the government arguments or the facts advanced in support of them. For example, a price increase of just 25 paisa on a litre of diesel is not even going to cover the annual economic inflation, much less adversely affect common people's lives. According to the

government estimate, the country's consumption of diesel is 16 lakh tonnes. Petrol and octane have had a big increase in price but their consumption amounts to two lakh tonnes and one lakh tonne respectively. More importantly, 60 per cent of the petrol is consumed by the government itself. Only 40 per cent is consumed by people who naturally belong to the affluent class. The government was obviously wrong not to raise the price for populist reason when the oil price went up in international market. The measure would have to be taken almost immediately after coming to power. Now the BNP wrongly projects it as a people's cause also for the sake of politics of populism.

How does it serve people? People have been swallowed a harpoon because the BNP knows that by doing so it definitely scores a point. The AL also did the same thing when in opposition. So it is all about politics of convenience. Informed and factual debates on an issue are what can really improve the quality of politics. The BNP in particular banks on misinforming and is responsible for introduction of gross distortion

of historical facts in politics. The latest controversy on the date of birth of Khaleda Zia is just one among many. Such exercises lower the quality of our politics. The foundation of democracy too wobbles under the pressure of contrived forces. Keeping people out of the process of arriving at some decisions may be an expression of autocratic attitude or foolish, but misinforming or misleading them for political gains is an offence of the worst type.

People must be given the facts for them to appreciate and reach their own conclusions. Developing democratic culture demands transparency both from the ruling party and the opposition. Any attempt to thrive on lies will not pay. The parties in power and opposition are treating people badly. One looking down from a righteous position and the other dismissing them as an ignorant lot who can be fed anything dubious of its choice.

This is a serious development in our still-suspect democratic environment. If the large political parties discredit themselves by resorting to factual manipulation, political

dishonesty and misgovernance, democracy becomes vulnerable. Do they realise or not? Why should they be driven by a kind of pathological hatred and not collectively find a workable formula to take democracy from strength to strength? It is the development agenda and the ability to deliver that should really make the difference between parties. Our political parties have got a unique chance at a most opportune point of time — when military coups appear to be an event of the past and the cold war is over — to prove themselves. If they miss this opportunity simply because they do not like each other, the country has long and difficult years ahead of it. Some wrong decisions by the government may be righted but the lack of vision of leadership can never be compensated. A nation's staying power is its value system and integrity. The moment we pull down values, we become smaller and discredited to perform any great job. Organised politics here is only disciplined for destroying values and demeaning the rational being.

Politics sans ideology has been criminalised to the extent where society now needs to exert pressure for its decriminalisation. Anyone who matters in our society should get involved with the process and do his or her bit of the job.

Thou Shalln't Hate

The effort at Wagah border was a gesture of peace and the candles lighted emitted the message of friendship. Some 4,000 people gathered on the Indian side and raised only one slogan: India-Pakistan Dosti Zindabad (Long live India and Pakistan friendship).

NEWSPAPERS from Pakistan were late to arrive. After reading some of them I have come to know why the people from Pakistan were not present at the Wagah border on the 50th night of independence. Many among them had phoned, written or talked to some of us in the Citizens for Democracy (CFD) group and we were positive that they would be there.

The reason, as a few Pakistani newspapers have reported, is a circular which their government issued on August 13 to advise people not to take part in the celebrations on the border. Before leaving Delhi I had feared that. But I had somehow convinced myself that the thaw in the relationship that Prime Ministers Inder Gujral and Nawaz Sharif had brought about would not let Pakistan's Punjab government to come in the way of people from one side trying to strike normalcy with those from the other.

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I must admit that an official from our External Affairs Ministry had warned me against building hopes on the Pakistanis coming to the border. He had heard that Islamabad was not in favour of celebrations on the border or anything that might give the impression of being joint. Some other officer had brought to my notice an editorial in an Urdu daily asking people to stay away from the border until the Kashmir question was solved.

I have not been able to understand the logic of such ad-

vice, or the Pakistan government's order to discourage people-to-people contact. That the Kashmir problem should be sorted out is a proposition which does not need selling. Everyone accepts it. India has itself agreed in the Simla agreement in 1972 to allow both sides to hold to their respective point of view until there is a final settlement.

Of course, it was not expected that Pakistan would conduct a proxy war. The agreement specifically forbids both sides from altering the border unilaterally. The ceasefire line has been converted into the line of control. For all intents and purposes, a new boundary has been delineated on the map and new markers have been erected on the ground except in the Siachen Glacier area.

Whatever the Pakistan government's position on Kashmir is not a matter which can be sorted out in a short time. And the territory is not a plug of tobacco which can be handed over to leaders of another country. India's secular polity has come to be linked with the valley. Many meetings between the two governments will be required — and the Kashmiris will have to be associated with the talks — before a common ground is found. What do we do in the meantime?

To deny contact to the people on both sides till Kashmir is solved may mean waiting endlessly. There is yet no acceptable formula on the horizon. It is unlikely that the group on Kashmir, set up at the instance of Prime Ministers of the two countries, will find a solution acceptable to both. Probably the matter will be referred to the two Prime Ministers who are, in any case meeting first at the

iron gate, the other side even switched off the lights which had illuminated the sign board: Welcome to Pakistan. I vainly looked for my friends who had earlier told me that they would bring *shaami kabab*. True, it was a hand stretch which they

Heavens would not have fallen if the gates on both sides had been opened to meet people. Islamabad turned out to be a big spoiler.

When I lit the candle on the iron gate, the other side even switched off the lights which had illuminated the sign board: Welcome to Pakistan. I vainly looked for my friends who had earlier told me that they would bring *shaami kabab*. True, it was a hand stretch which they

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

UN in September and then at the Commonwealth summit in Scotland. All this will take time.

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did not clasp, but that is the tragedy of India-Pakistan relations. They never catch the opportunity. Those who stretch the hand should not in any way feel humiliated. Nor should they give up the effort just because there is no response.

A gesture is always unilateral. It may look like a straw in the ocean of hatred and alienation, but this is what I have done, clutching to it in the last 50 years when I left my home, Sialkot city. There is no alternative to normalcy. Enmity is so consuming and so destructive. I often believe that the bureaucracy, the media and political leaders have come to develop a vested interest in keeping the two countries apart.

Atomic scientist AQ Khan has said that Pakistan had enough bombs to destroy 15 cities of India. How does it matter? The nuclear fallout will be enough to kill everyone in Pakistan. All that it means is that people in India die first and those in Pakistan later.

On the other hand, Air Marshal (retd) Nur Khan has said at a seminar in Karachi that there is not even a 20 per cent of chance of yet another India-Pakistan war. This, he said, made a strong case for a 20 to 25 per cent in defence expenditure over a period of time. Both Inder Gujral and Nawaz Sharif have also talked about scaling down the military expenditure. Why does not the process begin? Maybe, there should be an official group working on it.

The unfortunate part is that Pakistani bureaucrats, particularly from the Foreign Office, are under the impression as if the night vigil on the 14th-15th August is akin to the relentless efforts made to demolish the Berlin Wall. The analogy is wrong. Germany was partitioned against the will of the people, following the Cold War, and they always wanted to unite. India and Pakistan were divided on the explicit understanding and the agreement of Congress and Muslim League leaders at that time. People in what comprises Pakistan wanted to have a separate homeland of theirs and they are proud of their sovereignty and

identity. India respects that and even a lunatic fringe in the country does not demand *Akhand Bharat*. So why does Islamabad go out of its way to stop any contact of Indians with the people of Pakistan? Is it afraid that they would see through the smoke screen of false information and wrong propaganda that Pakistan has created if they were to meet people from India?

I am disappointed in the liberals in Pakistan. They do not want to cross the line the establishment has drawn for them. None of them dares to raise any voice against the hindrances created to prevent the meetings of people from both sides. Last year also, they did not come to the border. They were stopped by the government but they explained it as a gap of communication. This time they knew and it was as much their programme as ours. Still they were afraid lest they should displease the fundamentalists or the government.

Some of us are unashamedly in favour of contacts with Pakistan, whatever level and however tenuous, whenever possible. We are going to the border again on the next independence night, with candle lights to illuminate our gesture of peace. We shall continue to do so till people on the other side defy their government and come to light candles to show us that they reciprocate our gesture of peace and amity. And one day the borders will soften for the peoples of both countries to cross on the mere production of their passport. The two sovereign peoples will become friends.

OPINION

August 31st: Yasmeen's Verdict

Dr Naila Z Khan

August 31st is of vital importance to the women of Bangladesh. On this day, the verdict of Yasmeen's case will be pronounced at the Rangpur court. We shall wait for it with baited breath. Since the day Yasmeen was raped and murdered in police custody, allegedly by three police personnel, the streets of Dhaka and other district towns have seen many a protest rally demanding trial and punishment for the rapists and killers. August 24th, the day Yasmeen was killed three years ago, has become a symbolic day for resistance against all forms of violence and oppression of children, girls and women in Bangladesh. Sammilito Nari Shomaj and other women's resistance movements have proven that we will stand by this day and all that the movement stands for against all odds.

I never met Yasmeen. Yet they are names which will remain burning in

those in police custody everyday, they are all girls whom this land could not save. The women of this country are no longer willing to be made pawns in power games and political intrigues. Today, a common movement of the women, by the women and for the women of Bangladesh is evolving where we single-mindedly demand justice and punishment for crimes against women, and social marginalisation of the oppressors and power brokers.

BTB : Some Questions

A Husnain

Why the BTB continues to be smugly silent about its current and future telecom policies and services? Its Public Relations cell should be active telling the public and the users how this monopoly operator in the public sector is trying to improve the telecom services and helping the private operators in the cellular and other sectors.

BTB may issue, as other telecoms are doing globally, a series of PR stories and advertisements in the press trying to improve its shattered and battered image of poor services, and utter failure in improving the supply position to meet the skyrocketing demand for telephones and other services at popular rates. The Board is acting like a bureaucratic department isolated and insulated from the public.

In addition, to keep the Board busy, there are some questions in public interest:

• Where is the independent telecom authority? How BTB can act both as the regulator and operator? The Ministry cannot be the regulator in an

stall and maintain. Why the BTB still prefers to go underground (the pun is intended)?

• What steps are being taken for fixed and mobile convergence to provide one-stop service to the users?

• Any plans for Cordless Terminal Mobility (CTM)? The users may not be technologically duped, the regulating authority should see to that.

• For smooth future expansion of the modern telecom services, the local and international standards, and modular, integrated expansion procedures and practices have to be taken care of. The public may be kept informed about the constant hi-tech changes being discussed and thrashed out at the international platforms, that the users understand what the operators tell them, and offer them. The compatibility factor has economic importance, apart from the interruptions in the growing services.

• When to discard wire/cable copper and go all wireless? The copper tech is out of date and too costly to in-

Exchange rates

Sir, The newspapers, in the exchange rates printed for each working day, do not print the rates for Indian and Pakistani currencies (it did earlier).

Does it mean these currencies cannot be purchased officially/leg