The Baily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali Dhaka, Monday, October 6, 1997

Why Hartals At All?

At the BATEXPO closing ceremony on Saturday opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia did only a part of what was expected of her: She declared production and export-related activities of the garments sector exempt from all future half-day hartals. To an applauding audience she went on to add that she would have consultations with other opposition political parties with a view to ensuring a wider reprieve from all agitational programmes.

This is only commonsensical, and to that extent laudable, but so long as sober alternatives are not chosen by her to hartals and barricades we cannot quite burst into an applause or a full-throated hurrah just yet. People are looking for responsible leadership, not any concessionary give-aways.

Begum Zia has all the statistics before her of losses suffered through hartals and oborodhs when she was in power. And we too have a catalogue of the sensible economy-friendly observations she never tired of making as she went through the mill of political agitations mounted by the AL. Heightened recriminations could not hide the fact that a sector which accounted for 68 per cent of the country's total export earning incurred a loss of Tk 7,111 crore due to political turmoil from 1993 to 1995. And continual abnormalcy between February 23 and March 30 alone robbed us of Tk 4.978 crore in garments export earnings.

How is this partial waiver to a sector going to be ensured in a chaotic hartal situation gone so awry these days that even 'journalist'-marked vehicles come under attack. Since no such fool-proof-guarantee can be given by a striking political party, let the whole range of industries be declared exempt from all kinds of political programmes. In fact there ought to be a completely uncomplicated straightforward withdrawal of hartals from the arena of economics.

We should be obliged now to chasten politics radically in consideration of the pressing circumstances: (a) the catching up we have to do against the backdrop of thousands upon thousands of man-hours lost through a thoughtless series of strikes, sieges etc. so far; (b) foreign and local investors keep shying away from unstable conditions made the worse by poor infrastructure; (c) hartals are completely out of steps with the global trends and; (d) why be ridiculed at the entry-stage of the 21st Century for not knowing where our interests lie?

Better Deal for Teachers

Ninety thousand teachers of non-government primary schools have gone on a 10-day strike. As a result some 28,000 such schools are now closed. There is no knowing as to how many students have been affected. For there is no reliable information on the roll strength of these schools.

The teachers on strike get a dismally low salary, far less than even half of what the government primary teachers get. The teachers at those private schools less than three years old are getting the rawest deal - he or she may be getting about onefourth of the basic of the government teachers, coming may be to no more than 600 taka.

The state of Bangladesh is committed to make itself a society of universal literacy. The government is duty bound to fulfil this obligation. The NGO schools and the non-government primaries together do fill much of the holes left by governmental literacy enterprise. The NGOs have funding sources. Who is the paymaster of the non-government primary?

It is a wonder that private primaries do at all tick on with paying students. Many government primaries exist only skeletally or even not at all except on paper. The private primary doesn't get a paisa if it doesn't exist. The private ones are in this sense one genuine and dependable pillar of universal literacy.

These schools do contribute to the national educational efforts as much as, if not more than, the government primaries — and the burden is borne mainly by the teachers accepting niggardly sums as salary. It is perfectly in reason that while they get at the most 61 per cent and in the least 51 per cent of the government teachers' basic as their whole salary, they be allowed all benefits admissible to those better-off teachers. This is exactly what's being done in the high schools. Why not extend the same, in the first place, to the teachers of non-government primaries? After that the question of teachers' salary at private primaries doing good should be addressed and there should be no problem in making their take-home pay at par with the teachers of the government primaries.

Not Just a Number Game

The barely six-month-old Lokendra Bahadur Chand government in Nepal has fallen, the fifth change of guard in the 7-year-old parliamentary history of the country. The instability should not be entirely attributed to a hung parliament. There is more to it than a mere number game. Just for the records though we grant that Chand's nemesis in the National Democratic Party (NDP) Thapa, reputedly a master of manipulative politics, fell out with him and broke away with 19 lawmakers to join forces with the Nepali Congress

In the 205-seat lower house, the major political parties are numerically so arrayed against each other that a small defection can topple a sitting government in a jiffy. But what is noticeable in Nepal's case is the exceptional difference its elected power structure has with those in other hung parliaments and yet the surprising smoothness with which political parties having diametrically opposite ideologies are forging coalitions.

The Chand government was a left-right coalition and the Thapa-led government will be the same. The NDP known as a pro-palace political party has had little difficulty in teaming up with the leftist Nepali Congress. In fact, there has always been a tall order confronting the Nepalese politicians: the changing equations among constitutional monarchy, panchayet system and parliamentary democracy, and the dichotomy between communist and rightist politics.

The Moral Dimension of Our Governance

A widespread graft culture filters down each layer of the administration as well as society and also horizontally spreads to engulf the secretariat, government departments, the police, the customs, the taxation offices, the PDB, the WASA, the T&T and what not.

PERSPECTIVES

▼N most of the developing countries where a civil Asociety is still in an embryonic stage, the governance is essentially the exercise of state power through its integral organs to achieve the state's overall objectives This universal arrangement did not however work quite satisfactorily in our country due, primarily, to the lack of political morality expected out of our leaders who in turn seized power to run the country's administration. They took for granted this state - endowed crude physical power bereft of its moral content as sole means for ensuring public obeisance to their governance. This could have worked for a while, but of ten backfired bringing to question the government's authority to rule them with its stained hand and tainted image. The public does not appear prepared to accept in silence the double standard of the law and its application, myriad dichotomies in the political conduct of the leaders, government's failure in dispensing justice and its inability to redress genuine grievances of the people. Inevitably there is a loss of public faith in government's sincerity, if not ability, to de-

As a result, there is a syndrome of public defiance to authority and an apathy to its writs. The manifest expression of this defiance abounds all around us and are all too familiar; the public taking law in their own hand, the mob dispensing summary justice to suspected offender, a blanket flouting of government orders and so on. The public concern over these chaos and anarchy is obvious. But at the same time. the government is also not unconcerned and its response also

is seemingly apt The government has promptly taken steps to arrest the trend. It has beefed up the law enforcing agencies, introduced and improved crime control gadgets and devices and also enacted special legislation to deal with certain categories of offenders. Its leaders have gone about exhorting docile people to be law-abiding. They have poured down plentiful of pet sermons about their obligations and virtues of a disciplined society. But there seems to have been few taker. The people, by and large, remain unimpressed and unconvinced.

In the meantime, public defiance stiffens and social disorder takes much more diabolical shape. If the government is perplexed at the development the people are in no pleasant situation when choosing between compliance with grudge and defiance with its accompanying risks. Those who are ruled find neither an example to emulate nor an incentive to comply with the dictates of those whom they consider out and out hypocrite. Also the commands of those who rule ring hollow unless substantiated by a moral authority.

At the core of our problems of governance today is precisely the absence of this moral authority — an authority only with which Bangabandhu, the nation's founding father wielded. during historic non-cooperation, power that had few parallel. His words became irrevocable writs without any state apparatus at his disposal because he spoke from a moral high ground. In contemporary politi-

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz cal history, it was a unique example of moral authority at work. Bangabandhu's magic. however, vanished and he stumbled even when he concentrated later all state powers in his hand while the

moral authority gradually

eroded Fourteen hundred years ago when the second caliph of Islam removed Khalid-bin-Walid - one of his legendary generals from the command and reduced him to rank it was instantly carried out. There was no revolt, no murmur and no finger raised against the action. None including the aggrieved general himself had either the courage or inclination to defy the moral authority exercised by the great caliph having little of worldly power or splendour. In contrast, when a general was removed from his command last year in our country, it was sharply reacted challenging the legality and morality of the presidential decision. It was because of the latter's dubious handling of the military on the eve of the country's general election. An incipient revolt in the military as a

result had to be brought down. In the developed countries having vibrant civil society institutions there exists a stable internal order only because of certain that standard in a country, there is a correspond-

ing decline in the quality of governance. In Bangladesh whereas we seldom had a chance to build up moral fibres in public life there is, on the contrary, a steep precipitation of existing ones inherited from our ancestors when one looks at the spectre of corruption and immorality that our leaders are steeped in. The corruption with its attendant evils is closing around us with a certainty that is frightening both for its intensity and its sweep. What the immorality leads up to is still more alarming. Taking it to be a phenomenon all too pervasive even if one wants to ignore it, can he really escape its equally pervasive effect on the whole spectrum of our life, society and polity as well as its governance? The persistent bad governance may one day earn us the ignominy of a 'failed state'.

A time has already come when even decent people have begun to question: why should they pay taxes as the proceeds are likely to be embezzled by their corrupt leader! Why they should hand over a criminal to

the police who can be easily bribed and the rogue would walk into freedom to resume his crime with vengeance! Why they should pay back borrowed money to the bank when another - a bigwig can manipulate its evasion! They helplessly watch how a VVIP with twentyone corruption and criminal cases against him continues to be a celebrity in this country. The former minister convicted of corruption can return home with impunity after his jaunts abroad under mysterious ar-

Other ministers equally corrupt with their records fraught with financial sleaze escape prosecution just by switching over to and taking shelter of the ruling party. It is an irony that none of the Ershad regime except Ershad himself and none whosoever of the BNP regime could be taken to task in spite of so much of outcry against the corruption of many of those regimes. It only gives an impression that they all, including the members of the incumbent government, belong to same privileged class and there exists an understanding among them to protect their class interest. Worse yet, there is no conceivable way of getting rid of them and their continuing hype because they so well nurse their electoral constituencies with public money that those virtu-

ally become their pocketborough. It is not only the political leaders whose hands are soiled with the dirt of known and hushed up scams. In fact, a widespread graft culture filters down each layer of the administration as well as society and also horizontally spreads to engulf the secretariat, government departments, the police, the customs, the taxation offices, the PDB, the WASA, the T&T and what not. Not only the people are held to ransom by the hydraheaded monster, the government also has been, as a result, failing to assert its authority. Some of our leaders occa-

sionally lament over the great divide between global North and South but seldom pointing, however, to the similar divide they themselves have created in our society. Our rich are world class and they are who sustain the country's politics, parties and government with their money and influence. Our poor are among the poorest of the world but hardly oblivious of the seamy way the wealth of the rich is amassed with government acquiescence, if not, abatement. Given this equation - the gimmickry, the trickery and the deceit are some of the devices with which the governance would perforce have to be managed until a moral standard is set at the highest echelon of the country's leadership. Only once it draws strength from a moral code of conduct much of the difficulties of government we witness today would be the legacy of the past.

Marching for rights

Sir, Simon Mollison's article "Children Demand Their Rights" appears at a time when organisations (be it NGO or IN-GOs) are caught up in a frenzy to collate children to walk miles (in rain or scorching sun).. and miles for their rights. At the end of it.. awaits a hearty meal or a gift for each child.

Children are clever "little people". They know they need the meal and the gift. They know they have to pay for it, so they accept what goes with it. They also by now, know that "rights" are something clever big people talk about in expensive workshops in country or bidesh wherever their fancy

Children or for that matter the deprived poor know little about 'rights'. It's something they hear over mikes and media on memorable weeks. It's something that gets suppressed for the rest of their miserable lives. while dodging threats from a bully on the street or running errands for the rich adult who is too slow to move.

Half in agreement with the author's argument,... I see children rally as a ceremonial metaphor to CRC principles. The formula of the rally seems contradictory when we think of the hundreds of 'Tokais' arrested at or before each hartal for reasons of safe custody! One wonders why this concession on the Child Rights Week when the children of the entire country are made to walk the streets with readymade slogans and sometimes holding questionable portraits of children. At one such rally (and this may be still be the practice) the bare bust of a girl child was carried through streets with a slogan 'AR'NA' (never again!) referring to the poor kid as a prostitute. In effect, the girl in question, is now married. She was a flower seller as a child and never a prostitute. She suffered indignity (and a hasty forced marriage in the bargain!) without protest because nobody would

have heard her anyway! However children's march do create some impact.. as all ralleys do. They are part of the culture of Bangali protest. Voices are raised. Slogans are heard. Some consciences are pricked. However transitory. some impact is felt. But of course a great deal depends on the quality, genuineness and the ingenuity of the slogans. Such rallies have been successful in women's movement and in asking for justice in a particular case of violence. Mostly adults took part in these rallies and children were not dragged into it as Tokais, to fill the

crowd. Simon Mollison has again raised a very pertinent question on the participation of children "Are the children consulted?" One cannot vouch for all NGOs but at Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), we did ask children. It was clear that they would like to go to a rally because all the kids were going and that they could possibly get good food and a useful gift like a T-shirt. However ASK took a stand for the children to withdraw from the rally but to take part in theatre, music and art exhibition in which they excell and enjoy.

As an afterthought, one might consider collating children's views with catchy slogans to be projected in the media rather than on the street. These views refer to 'early marriage, 'schoolling' and 'child labour.' Clever slogans assembled in Bangla, might infiltrate the following messages across Bangladeshi homes:

Give our parents employment: We will stop working. Give us the education we need: We will go to school.

Give us back our childhood: Stop early marriage. If rallies and slogans must have their way, then let's make

these meaningful, impact-creating and most certainly in the best interest of the child.

Ms Khursheed Erfarn Ahmed

Europe in the slow

Sir. The Perspectives column (DS. Sep 29) clearly analysed the economic predicament of decaying Europe, barely a decade after the eclipse of the

USSR. Western capitalism is under strain, thanks to the ruthless market competition and unabashed consumerism — hedonism at the nadir. The cracks would be visible soon. The green buck is a bit fidgety about the circulation of Emu (Euro-dollar) in the very near future (Britain's indecisiveness has increased).

The raids on the ASEAN money markets are bound to rebound, and send tremors up in the Wall Street — for the pound of flesh. The money, the circulation, and the action are in Asia, the world's fastest growing continent now, and during the next century. Liquidity travels fast these days in the global village, and Mathathir and allies have promised more silvery and golden sparkles, to take the shine off the synthetic satin glow of smooth operators and crooked and sleek manipulators.

Money is round and has no beginning and end. Hence the mantra is in the circles, holes. cycles and recycling. Nice way to meet once again — it is a small world. Money is round and made to roll, after the flat sides pile it high up, and then send it rolling down again. Note that water always seeks the lowest level. There is a message in the vapour.

Big socialism, or communism lasted about 70 years. Capitalism has lasted longer as more numbers, areas, and users are involved. But the potential energy appears to have dwindled; kinetics is dissipating the heat — the brakes might get overheated at the dizzying speed of the drivers of the markets. It just can't last, when the pace is to much for Mother Nature to

take care of her children. 'Mom, get lost!' is an unkind cut, aimed at the core of sustenance. Conservation is not consumerism. Fringe living disturbs the centre. CC (Coca Cola culture) leaves behind empty bottles, some returnable, the rest are bins of the dust.

A Husnain Dhaka

Names for identity

Sir, The other day, a letter crossed my eyes in one of the dailies that we are not liberated until and unless we use Bengali names, and not Islamic. What an outrageous thing to say! We are not only Bengalis, but Muslims too. That makes us very different from other Bengalis i.e., we are Bangladeshis and not just Bengalis. Being a Muslim, we have certain rules to follow that are demanded by our religion. First we've been told repeatedly to remember that all Muslims are brothers. irrespective of cast and creed. That is why our identity or names should be as Muslims. Also, on the day of judgement, all mankind will be arranged in groups according to their religion and they will be called by their names. Now, if a Muslim is named 'Vashkor' or 'Monosha', who would think that they are Muslims?

In medical science also, a doctor is taught to exclude or consider certain diseases in a person from his religion. And that, a doctor is taught to make out from a person's name, as it is impolite to ask about a person's belief. For example, if a male Muslim patient comes to a doctor with genitourinary complaints, then the doctor can immediately exclude certain diseases taking for granted that the patient had circumcision. But if the patient is non-Muslim, then he will have to consider certain diseases which, a person without circumcision can suffer from. Similarly in women also, the chance of cervical cancer is much less if her husband is circumcised. So from her name a doctor needs to know, whether she is a Muslim

When we were in Malaysia, the manager at the Birds Park gave his Muslim name to us and asked ours. Though we are of different nationalities, culture and appearance, we immediately felt a bond of brotherhood after hearing each other's names, which were Islamic. This would not have happened if we had given Bengali and Malaysian names. In Bosnia. the Muslims can be recognised only by their names, they know and remember nothing else of their religion. This is their only

Living in a country which is mainly Islamic, why do we need to hide that we are Muslims by keeping other names?

Dr Sabrina Rashid

The bridge over the Crescent Lake

Sir, The pontoon bridge over the Crescent Lake is very much in the news these days. But nobody has mentioned the fact that there are existing road connections on both sides of the Lake i.e.., on the eastern side and the western side to reach the Mazar of former President

In fact, Crescent Lake does not remain a crescent lake when the pontoon bridge is put across the middle of the lake and thereby spoil the show. The bridge was installed later on to shorten the walking distance to the mazar, no matter what happens to the beauty of the lake!

In order to visit the park and the mazar, people have to come either from the Bijoy Sarani side (eastern side) or the Mirpur Road side (western side) and there is no other way, and as I have already pointed out above, there are existing passages for the purpose. The pontoon bridge was apparently put there for the benefit of a handful of persons who find it beneath their dignity to walk in public! It is hardly necessary.

All the present hue and cry over its removal is simple political rhetoric.

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DU politics

Sir, Dhaka University is the highest seat of learning in the country. But politicisation among students and teachers of the university has come to a stage that it can hardly claim to be a respectable institution.

Vice-Chancellors are appointed politically and they remain subservient to politics on the campus. Politically appointed VCs have, in fact, degraded this institution the most. The students threw rotten eggs and broken the car of the present VC. The other day, police searched his office to find out a criminal.

These acts show how badly the VC is involved in dirty politics. Unless a respectable person is elected or appointed a VC, the sanctity of the institution cannot be restored.

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CHILD RIGHTS DAY Child Domestics Suffer Behind Closed Doors

HE middle-aged housewife looked upset, as she sat on A her kitchen floor and furiously worked to de-scale a huge hilsha fish on a sharp

"That traitor Shefali got too clever", she said, referring to her 13-year-old house servant. "She escaped last night"

The woman's two normally talkative children kept uncharacteristically silent. They knew their mother was lying. They also knew that the endless verbal abuse and threats of beating had finally got too much for Shefali to bear.

Escaped. That was the word she used, as do most middle class families whose servants walk out on their jobs without getting permission first. But the word is not a misnomer, since most servants, particularly children, are treated little better than prisoners and automatic suspects in any case of theft in the home.

"I am never allowed to leave the house, my employer doesn't even allow me to go to the shops", said Rina, a 10-year-old girl who's been working in a home in the Indira Road area for a year. "When the family goes out, they lock the door from the outside", she said.

The dilemma over employing servants and their tendency to "escape" has not caused the Bangladeshi middle class fami lies to search for alternatives. Instead, it has given rise to a tendency to employ younger servants, particularly girls, in recent years, as older women have began to find other forms of employment, notably in the garments industry.

There is no reliable figures for the number of child domestics in Dhaka, but a 1985 survey of some 315,000 households by the government showed 44 per cent employed full-time servants while 27 per cent had part-time workers. More recently, it has been estimated that the total number of child domestics in the country may be between 200,000 and a mil-

The only thing the government and development partners such as UNICEF can say with certainty is that the number of children working in urban homes has gone up sharply in

recent years. Children as young as seven or eight years of age are considered better choice as servants than teen-agers, since the latter are susceptible to "escape", either in search of a better job or as a result of a sexual affair. Younger children are also more manageable - most do not receive any cash payment, they don't answer back nor question the employers' orders and

"They are less likely to steal, they would not talk back to me and most important, girl children are less likely to create a scandal", said another housewife who claims to have had bad experiences with older women maids. She had to let go of two adult maids after her 22year-old son began to show interest in them; and a third eloped with the night guard next door, she said. She also admitted that child domestics cost little, since she only has to feed them and buy them new clothes

a couple of times a year. For some, like eight-yearold Ayarna who recently joined a family in the Mohamadpur area, domestic service can be an escape from a worse fate. Her relatives say she was being "prepared" for prostitution, and a number of men had already molested her in the Agargaon

slum where her family lived. This had infuriated the father so much that he took to beating his tiny daughter viclously — rather than confront the adult men who were abusing her. But an auntie intervened and persuaded the mother to send Ayarna to work in a home where she could be safe, both

from her father and the pimps. salary at all, with the average "I never went to school beincome for the lucky ones being fore, but my employer has arranged for a teacher to come and teach me how to read, write light till everyone goes to bed and count", Ayarna said. She late at night. Abuse and beatsaid she would never return to the slum, but insists on visiting ings are often administered in a her mother once a month. manner which suggests it is the

For other child domestics. the reverse is the case. Coming from caring but poor families who could not afford to raise them anymore, these children often find themselves at the mercy of the employers' wrath or sexual demands. Some, like Shefali, have to endure only verbal abuse and threats; others, like cases narrated in Therese Blanchet's landmark study "Lost Innocence, Stolen Childhood", experience sexual abuse and outright rape. UPL in 1996, Blanchet narrates

the story of Alea, a child maid who was first raped at the age of 11 by the master's 17-year-old son, and then by the employer himself. At the age of 14, the girl was raped again by her employer in a new home. In between she experienced physical torture and verbal abuse of varying degree in the different homes where she worked.

Alea's case is not unique. Out of the 71 child domestics interviewed for the book, 23.5 per cent reported to have been sexually abused, while 10 per cent said they had been fully raped by their employers. "Considering that the average age of the children interviewed was only 11 years, these revelations point to a serious problem". Blanchet writes.

The problems do not begin nor end with the odd rape or regular molestation. Most child domestics receive little or no

less than Tk 200 a month. They have no set working hours, and have to be on call from first employers "right" to treat the child in his or her "care" in such

manners The growing tendency to employ children as cheap, easilycowered domestic help has added a new dimension to the problem of child labour in the country. Unlike Ayarna's employer, most middle class families do not bother to ensure education for the children working in their homes. The hazards faced by child domestics have a strong psychological dimension which can leave them traumansed for years, say child

rights activists. "While we campaign for an end to child labour and sexual abuse of children, these things seem to be happening with extraordinary impunity in the very homes on which we rely for support", said a disgruntled activist long associated with

the Shishu Adhikar Forum.

Deprived of the love of their parents, children working as domestic hands are also denied their right to education and a healthy upbringing. The existence of such a large number of child domestics and their oftenbrutal treatment by employers go against virtually every tenet of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. But these violations, taking place in middle class homes behind doors that are closed to outsiders, provoke little concern and virtually no corrective action.

Unicef Feature

Buchwald's COLUMNI



Great Americans

don't like to use the words "Great Americans" because they sound so political, but what else can we call Charles Kuralt and James Stewart? In a country where our role models are dwindling by the day, Kuralt and Stewart exemplified the best in all of us

They represented the people we hoped our children would admire. They were men who loved their country and dramatized

it in the movies and on television. Generations grew up watching Jimmy Stewart and imitated him. He was the "aw shucks" guy of all time, the hero we most wanted to be.

The movie that assured him immortality was "It's a Wonderful Life," which has played Christmas after Christmas to the point that the audience can recite Stewart's lines with

He fought our battles in that film and also in "Mr Smith Goes to Washington." People are still searching for another "Mr Smith" to come to the capital, but they can't seem to find him.

In simple terms, Jimmy Stewart made us feel good about ourselves and the world we inhabit. Charley Kuralt came later into the entertainment spectrum. He achieved something that no other TV person had - Charley introduced his audience to an America that most of us didn't

know existed. "On the Road with Charles Kuralt" featured sheepherders on Montana, bricklayers in Texas, jumping frogs in California. He visited towns that no one had seen before and may never see

Charley and I were friends, so I used to kid him when I saw him: "Charley, what does Mrs Kuralt do when you're on the

He chuckled and said, "She stays with her mother." We will miss Charles Kuralt and James Stewart and their precious gift of talent, but we will miss them more because they

are irreplaceable. It's hard to think of two men today with their integrity, modesty and true grit. For the older generations Stewart is a deep loss because he was part of our growing up. He was a star and like the stars of his era we worshipped him

Charley made television-watching worthwhile. There is a lot of junk on TV, so his shows were even more special because they entertained and educated us like nothing else on the air. We can't stop anyone from leaving us, but we can be very, very sad when they do. Unrealistically, we wish that they were

with us, and we mourn because our country needs their presence more than ever. By arrangement with Los Angeles Time Syndicate and UNB.