

Sanity Missing

A stumbling start to a week: following hot on the heels of hartals, an eight-hour road and rail barricade across the country on the very second day of our diminishing ration of working days! Although casualties as such were not high last Sunday given the provocation on both sides and the militant popular support that both ruling Awami League and opposition BNP wield, the country felt enormously terrorised and goes through great debilitating anxiety every time there is an occasion for political confrontation like this.

This confrontationist streak which seems to have coloured the imagination of our leaders of late is essentially a manifestation of their political bankruptcy. The fact that the end of politics irrespective of the element of acrimony and personal aggrandisement inherent in it, is after all to ensure the progress of the country and the amelioration of people's lot does not seem to register with them. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has trumpeted investment-friendly atmosphere in the country every time she has been abroad recently. Do we really have a political environment that can woo the veering foreign investors? Can, for that matter the opposition leader, Khaleda Zia vouchsafe that whatever her party has done lately in the name of opposing the government or its policies has been done by sparing country's interest, for instance, by keeping the businesses outside their programmes?

They do not have an answer. Common sense and logic would say if you do not have a sane and meaningful answer for what you are doing you had better stop doing it. Provocations will be there but that does not mean one has to go berserk from one's own sense of righteousness. People have not given politicians a carte blanche to toy with country's future. And every disruptive programme puts us that much behind the clock. Improvement or marching ahead will always be the Greek Calends if we are kept perennially in the cycle of going back to square one and starting all over again due to thoughtless and mindless politics.

Mind you, we are presenting the world a spectacle which is quintessentially and symbolically no more savoury and new than the oft-read and told tale of a monkey's futile endeavor to go up by an oily pole. Self-destructive how long shall we continue to be?

What a Habitat!

The nations yesterday observed the World Habitat Day '97. This was a day when our thoughts turned particularly to the present state of the habitat called Dhaka city and a prognosis of what will happen to it in the foreseeable future, say 20 years into the new century. The UN Conference on Human Settlements, at whose instance the Habitat Day was introduced and is being observed, has in a message painted an ideal city. And it has given us exactly what questions to ask of our dear snow-balling city. Is it a city without fear? No. Can its streets be walked freely by all, men and women, young and old? No. Is it a city offering relief from concrete and asphalt by way of green landscapes and silvery water-scapes? No. Is it a city without homeless people? No. Is it a city where water is available to all, rich and poor? No. With no for an answer for each of the queries, well, how is our city?

Water we get at half our requirement and the air we get is the most polluted in the world. Parks and ponds must also be record-setting among the world's cities — in the absence of them. Roads and transport facilities are already such that traffic jams are routine for daytime and unavailability of public transport seats a regular feature after dusk. Worse is the city's state in the intangible aspects of urban living. Freedom from fear and ugliness of all kinds has been unknown in Dhaka for over decades. Dhaka is very much in the throes of a mental and at times physical and violent grab mania — far from settling down.

The theme of the World Habitat Day '97 is 'Future Cities'. Quite appropriately. Perhaps there is a presupposition that the villages with a very sparse population in the next century will be far less problem-ridden than the towns racing towards becoming megacities. For Bangladesh this is not true. The villages are dying here and hence the crowding of the cities. Dying villages cannot make living cities. The former can only infect the latter with death. It is foolish to think of the city in isolation.

The day is observed with human habitat as its subject. Mother earth is habitat to all forms of life in universe already known. Man's habitat, in cities and villages, will not be congenial if it stands to harm the habitat of other creatures of the plant and animal kingdoms.

Redefine Its Job

It looks like there will not be enough books in the market for country's school students next year. Administrative indecision originating from vested financial interest and lack of accountability and clearly laid out policies have paved the ground for an impending text-book crisis. Authorities know best what they will do with an institution that has over the years been a den of flagrant corruption; but our question is why the National Curriculum and Text Book Board gets involved in the business side of the affair in the first place? Ideally, it should be dealing with the intellectual side of national education. Let some sort of a set-up take care of the business side.

Besides, the genesis of the National Curriculum and Text Book Board is an outcome of thoughts based on socialistic principles. Now that we are deeming the ideas of free market as the panacea for all our economic problems why should we stick to a foggy anarchistic piece in as vital a sector as our education?

From that point of view, the National Curriculum and Text Book Board needs to be bifurcated immediately so that its efficiency can be monitored and the present frightening scale of corruption brought down. We urge the government to have the issue of redefining the duties of National Curriculum and Text Book Board placed on its agenda.

Why cannot we have a system whereby the publishers are asked to print and supply five sets of books for the same class? This will not only offset the stereotype that the present system is affected by but also create the much-desired dynamism in our educational recipe.

"DEFENCE against whom?" This was reply to Pakistan's chief martial law administrator, General Mohammad Ayub, who had proposed on April 29, 1959, that in the event of external aggression both India and Pakistan should come together to defend the subcontinent. Nehru's 'no' was understandable but unfortunate because the beginning of a lasting friendship ended their and then.

Nehru had in his mind Pakistan's membership of the CENTO and SEATO defence arrangements against the Soviet Union, which was India's close supporter in its stance of non-alignment. Had the joint defence against forces coming from 'northwards', the word used by Ayub, been effected, India would have been better off three and a half years later when it was attacked by forces from northward, that is, China. When Ayub offered the joint defence, Islamabad and Peking stood apart, although Delhi was lost in the *Hindi-Chini bhai bhai* euphoria. But the roles changed a few months later, China becoming Pakistan's ally and India's main rival.

The proposal for joint defence died with Ayub. Yet the suggestion of a no-war pact has been renewed off and on. It is not one country but both of them have taken the initiative to propose non-aggression treaty over the years. But either procedural wrangling or just cussedness has come in the way of understanding on the banning of war. That may explain why there has never been a se-

Things as they stand today do not look healthy at all. There is mistrust. Whatever one side does is suspected by the other side. Motive are sought where there may be none. . . Meanwhile, both countries must seriously consider the proposal by Mahboob-ul Haq, a Pakistan expert, to scale down the military expenditure by five per cent and to divert the amount to the programmes to eliminate illiteracy.

rious discussion on the proposal. Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's suggestion can form the basis. At the UN General Assembly session he said: "I offer India today from this rostrum to open negotiations on a treaty of non-aggression between the two countries." He put no conditions. Nor did he say that the pact would be dependent on the solution to Kashmir.

It is not understandable how BJP spokesperson Sushma Swaraj has rejected the no-war offer on the ground that it presupposed a solution on Kashmir. In fact, that sequence is the other way round. Nawaz Sharif said that a non-aggression treaty should be signed to facilitate resolution of Kashmir dispute. This is how Lahore's daily, *The Nation*, has reported. How can the BJP twist words to suit its purpose? I expected a person like Atal Behari Vajpayee to welcome the proposal. I thought he would see the difference between the earlier proposal and this one. But the party's ideology is squeezing out liberalism from anything it has.

For the last few years there has been no progress on any front between India and Pakistan because the latter would make Kashmir the core issue. First Kashmir, then anything else has been Islamabad's refrain. The talks between foreign

secretaries of the two countries have again got stuck on Kashmir. New Delhi is willing to discuss the problems, along with the other pending issues. But Pakistan foreign secretary wants to make a show of talks on Kashmir. This is understandably difficult for the Indian government to accept because even the mention of Kashmir is not to the liking of

which Nawaz Sharif did while referring to Kashmir. Pakistan is spoiling the case. Carefully, the third round of talks in Delhi has been 'adjourned' not ended. The two sides are bound up to pick up the thread again, particularly after a meeting between Nawaz Sharif and Inder Gujral in the UK towards end of October. The two seem to be of the same

a new twist to Nawaz Sharif's proposal was not expected. In fact, they made fool of themselves in New York when they rejected the proposal. Islamabad had a propaganda victory when Indian officials were cool towards the proposal.

New Delhi should seize the opportunity with both hands. Any quibbling or further elucination from Pakistan may give it already under pressure at home. One Pakistan daily has written that 'the offer by Nawaz Sharif may attract some in India because it would appear to leave India in possession of Kashmir plus the freedom to continue the genocide of the Kashmiris. The offer is not as open-ended as many seem at first glance. The offer is for opening negotiation on a treaty of non-aggression, which is quite different from an offer to sign a no-war pact without pre-conditions.'

The mere holding of talks will be positive thing. It will open still another track. Suppose the talks between the two secretaries on various matters, including Kashmir, get derailed, there will be another track that of a no-war proposal, for movement. The effort to reach an understanding will not be stalled. Both sides will be talking.

Things as they stand today

do not look healthy at all. There is mistrust. Whatever one side does is suspected by the other side. Motive are sought where there may be none. True, the two foreign secretaries will resume the talks because both governments are determined to continue the dialogue, come what may. But the baggage of the past is too heavy. There is not much likelihood of progress on the actual problems between the two countries.

That is why the no-war pact offer assumes great importance. There is a possibility of the two countries coming to some understanding on keeping hostilities out while grappling with such issues as have defied solution for the last 50 years. Peoples on both sides will welcome a no-war pact because their present thoughts are dominated by the fear that there may still be another war if the Kashmir problem remains unresolved. A no-war pact will assure them that whatever the outcome of discussion on Kashmir, the two will not begin shooting. What a relief a no-war pact will be!

Meanwhile, both countries must seriously consider the proposal by Mahboob-ul Haq, a Pakistan expert, to scale down the military expenditure by five per cent and to divert the amount to the programmes to eliminate illiteracy. His estimate is that both countries will come to have at their disposal \$ 6 billion, more than Rs. 2,000 lakh. This is a lot of money. More than the money, the cut in defence expenditure may set into motion a process that may ultimately banish hatred, if not estrangement, between the two.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

the anti-Pakistan lobby which is quite strong in the country. Does Islamabad want a solution or the sham of propaganda?

Pakistan is, however, making a mistake by insisting on a separate, visible discussion on Kashmir. Once New Delhi agreed to discuss Kashmir in a substantive way, Islamabad should have left it at that. It is no use pushing it beyond a point. What is important is content, not the form. After a lapse of many years the talks have been held and Indian foreign secretary has given an undertaking that New Delhi would discuss the problem in depth, covering all aspects. By accelerating or by abusing India,

opinion that the dialogue should continue and they have brushed aside objections to the resumption of talks between the two foreign secretaries.

Yet the best thing that has happened since the last meeting of foreign secretaries is Nawaz Sharif's offer of non-aggression pact. And for the first time in the history of India-Pakistan relations, the pact is offered without any prior understanding on Kashmir. Even the Pakistan press has pointed it out. But it is not understandable why Indian officials are determined to sabotage the proposal. The vested interests of some of them is known. But that they would go to the extent of giving

Political Culture is Not Changing

by A Husnain

It is worthwhile to repeat the aphorism that politics is too important an issue to be left entirely in the hands of the politicians

the goods, and come up to the hopes, expectations and goals which are not extraordinary, but universal in consensus and practice. We continue to be poor, hence cannot afford continued experiments.

The whole world is unstable today, hence we, at our level, have to set up pockets of stability, to which the present generation can cling to, and the next generation can build up to their satisfaction. Aiming for basic stability and success is also a basic approach to life or politics.

Our negative records far outweigh the positive development of the nation. Incidentally, we may ask ourselves a searching and sensible question: Have we today become a nation, after so much suffering and waiting (on empty stomachs), or it will take us a generation or more, thanks to our dazzling political leadership?

The confrontation type of politics has to go, whether the politicians like it or not; and

violence, destruction and interruptions in work must stop. The solution does not lie in heaping accusations on the opponents, and believing in *mastaan-manship*.

The two main political parties are acting irresponsibly and against the interest of the progress of the country, stymie development, and create a go-slow environment, by taking up subjective stances in which the general public are not inter-

ested. The politicians should solve their professional problems themselves, without dragging in the non-politicians and the man-in-the-street into their fray, and without holding the country a hostage to their antics for two decades.

The terms and conditions of the informal contracts between the voters and the politicians are being flagrantly breached. Is it not time to think of compensation (when other sectors are doing the same)? The political parties are fighting amongst themselves on this issue. How about the claims of the civilian voters to exert their basic rights on the right type of governance? It looks like the time has come

for the people to review their verdict.

This syndrome of destructive politics is not practised in other countries, perhaps due to a sharper sense of patriotism. We all may ponder over the lessons of history which displaced the politicians from power and statecraft. We have to become more realistic and pragmatic. The political cracks are widening, and failures are strengthening the negative images.

There is still time to bring back sane politics and transparent democracy in this unfortunate society. Now transparency is desired, and not the *qurbani* that bleeds the limping nation to death.

OPINION

Hartal—a Democratic Protest?

Dr M Zahir Husain

It was good to see the BTV programme debating viewpoints on Hartal—now an all too familiar event in Bangladesh. True, this has been for years a ready tool with the political parties, but are the people really embracing Hartal? The answer is 'no', though it is not loud and clear.

The hartal we see is an instrument of protest by a few imposed on the many almost always by an underlying threat of violence and injury. Granted, under colonial rule the subjugated people had no other alternative but to inflict self-injury and self-denial. But what about now when we are supposed to be free and living in a democracy? For more than one reason, Bangladesh can ill afford the 'luxury' of work stoppage and colossal loss to economy that hartals cause. It is little comfort to argue that it is a democratic right. Hartal in a poor developing country is immoral;

it is also a gross violation of the constitutional rights and freedom to move, work and earn livelihood.

One wonders what would have happened if the parties giving call of hartal were made to pay for all damages caused by it? Would there be frequent hartals on grounds that are not even clear to the people? Most certainly not.

Having taken an unequivocal stand against hartal under any pretext, one has to concede that a political culture of tolerance, transparency, and free expression of contrary views would certainly provide channels of communication to let off the heat of arguments and relieve frustrations. That would minimise the provocation and consolidate public opinion against this outdated and menacing hartal culture.

There is unfortunately a

lack of robust political culture that can tolerate protest with cool and reasoned composure; that can inculcate a sense of humour and a wondrous face of hostile criticism, that can withstand storm of dissent with patience and readiness to retract steps if needed.

While an end to this practice of hartal is nowhere in sight, will the nation and its people remain hostage to self-destructive mode of political expression that is untenable and unacceptable? Where is that third force when the ruling and opposition camps chose to remain perpetually locked in a battle for power (by any means) while the country bleeds?

Will our new found democracy fail to generate a new political culture that is compatible with today's fast moving world of intense competition for social and economic progress? This is a prospect too fearful even to contemplate.

Crescent Lake Bridge: Some Negative Aspects

Md Shaikhul Islam

We the general people of Bangladesh are now in a very critical condition. It would not be an exaggeration to say that we are in a situation 'on the brink of a break down.' One may be surprised at such a statement, but perhaps it is the reality. It's a political insurgency that we have been experiencing particularly, I should say, since after Awami League has taken over the charge of government. Perhaps it is not due to the fact that Awami League has formed the government. Rather it is due to some impulsive decisions that the Awami League government has been taking off and on. The people of Bangladesh have given the mandate to Awami League by participating in a general election. It was a general hope and aspiration that Awami League will try its level best to run and govern the country with a gesture of good will to the main opposition party. But what we see in reality? Some of the decisions of the ALG have already created much controversy. Rather the decisions have pooled the main opposition party to a fresh agitational situation. However, I won't be going to point out the previous controversial decisions made by the ALG. Rather I shall try to highlight on some negative aspects of a very recent decision.

The government has taken an impulsive decision to remove the floating bridge on Crescent Lake (already removed) with a view to solving communication problem of a flood affected area. According to newspaper report the Khowai Bridge at Sayestaganj was seriously damaged due to the flash flood occurred sometime in July this year and now it is under construction. The Roads and Highways Department has arranged to place the Crescent Lake floating bridge on the river Khowai as an interim ar-

range. As it appeared from the statement of Communications Minister the removed bridge will be placed to its previous position within the first week of October. So, necessarily a question comes to our mind that why the ALG had taken such a sudden decision? Was it that much imperative?

The Crescent Lake bridge has its own history of birth. It was probably placed on the lake during the regime of Khaleda Zia. The bridge has made a short cut way towards the mazar of late President Ziaur Rahman and since then its strategic position is quite significant to the BNP. Combining all these factors, the bridge possesses an emotional as well as a communicational value to the BNP party men. In this situation, overlooking the emotion of BNP in the bridge the ALG has taken an unnecessary decision at a wrong time. The government should have refrained from taking such decision due to the following reasons.

Firstly, BNP has shown a clear attitude of difference against some decisions of the Awami League government (ALG) e.g. the Ganges water treaty, low price of agriculture produce, 2-day weekend, price hike of petroleum products etc. So, in this critical situation it would have been prudent, perhaps, for the government not to create any fresh dispute on an issue that could make the BNP men impatient and hence hostile. But unfortunately the government has done it and we all by this time have seen a battle between the BNP men and police on Crescent Lake bridge issue. I should say the ALG has been motivated by a wrong political decision albeit its good intention to solve the communicational problem over

Khowai river. It should have taken into consideration the reality that the Crescent Lake bridge itself would not be a problem rather its strategic and emotional significance to BNP would be rated as an issue.

Secondly, the fourteen months rule of the ALG is characterised by indecision, wrong decision, and, above all, perplexing standing on some national issues. General people do think that the ALG did not play an appropriate and justified role in the share market scam that has caused a huge loss in the context of our upcoming economy. Moreover, some of the decisions that the ALG has taken were not even discussed in the parliament, what ought to be. This avoiding tendency in such a matter that people do not consider going in favour of the ALG.

There exists no single sign of confidence today between the AL and BNP. Both the parties are rigid in their respective positions irrespective of feeling that in the outcome the people would suffer. They always take extreme opinions on different issues without a scope of minimisation. The ALG did have the scope of not taking such sudden decision instead of choosing any of the three options:

1. The ALG could have discussed the matter with BNP, could put its sincere effort to make them convince about the necessity to meet such an emergency as Khowai. If BNP agreed with the ALG proposal then there was no problem. If BNP did not agree then—

2. The ALG could have constructed another floating bridge on the river Khowai within a short span of time or could have prioritised repair or reconstruction of the original bridge on river Khowai.

To the Editor

Leaders of Our Country

Sir, When I read the book, *Bangladesh—A Legacy of Blood* written by Anthony Mascarenhas, published in 1986, I became very sad and also my heart bled with anguish. The history of first ten years of Bangladesh (from 1971 to 1981) is in it.

More than one million Bengalis of the erstwhile East Pakistan lost their lives in the Liberation War. At the cost of so many priceless lives Bangladesh was born. But why could we not find peace after such a massive sacrifice? Why did situations arise which prompted more bloodshed? It seems that we are indeed a very unlucky lot.

Our country is besieged with many problems including natural calamities. But man-made problems are topping the list. People are becoming sick in unhealthy surroundings, adulterated goodstuff and so on. Crimes of all sorts have become rampant. It is a great pity that our leaders are oblivious to all these and busy with petty matters.

In the preface of his book Anthony Mascarenhas wrote: "The people must know the truth about their leaders, and may we all take lesson from their mistakes."

Nur Jahar
East Nasirabad, Chittagong.

The right to hold public meetings

Sir, The statement of Dr Prof B Choudhury, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition, as reported in the DS on 18-9-97, makes an amusing rather intriguing reading. He asserted that there are provisions in the Constitution that 'anybody can hold rallies, processions etc., anywhere and anytime he/she likes'. Let us check what the constitution provides. Clause 37 in Part III under heading 'Fundamental Rights', the Constitution guarantees that 'every citizen shall have the right to assemble and to participate in public meetings and processions peacefully and without arms, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of public order or public health'.

Where is the unrestricted licence to 'hold rallies, processions etc., anywhere and anytime he/she likes' as claimed by Dr Chowdhury?

The exasperated common men on the Dhaka streets welcomed the DCC decision to earmark a few designated places in the city for holding rallies, meetings, etc., thereby sparing them of the untold sufferings of traffic jams which has already posed a great problem for them. We experienced the hardship, loss of time and money every now and then for anybody's rallies, procession etc., anywhere and anytime he/she likes. Most of the time, this 'anybody' is so far removed and unrelated to our every-day grim struggle for survival. The action of the DCC is absolutely in consonance with the letter and spirit of the relevant provision of the Constitution.

We request our leaders to hold meeting, rallies, bring out processions, deliver lectures and other political activities without forcing the poor country men to fall helpless victims to their political power game. The ordinary people have already suffered too much.

A Sobhan
House#18/A, Road#3
Dhanmondi R/A, Dhaka.

Cable phones

Sir, "Cable phones" are precisely what are being offered to customers. You make a down-payment of Tk. 5,000 to Tk. 3,000, based on what area of the city you live in. Monthly rent is roughly Tk. 300 and incoming calls are charged at the rate of Tk. 1 per minute at the end of 6 minutes. This charge is levied because your incoming call goes via a PABX. This means your caller has a choice of several numbers. But if there are too many subscribers and great gossips, then you better opt for some of the other available phone systems.

This PABX is open for 24 hours day. Your own calls are likely to be Tk. 3 for the first 5 minutes and from then on, Tk. 1 per minute. Your advantages are: a phone at home at a quarter the amount needed for T&T and other systems. No botheration of false or inflated bills.

Disadvantages include the one already mentioned and the fact that you have to be close to the neighbourhood firm offering the PABX line. This is because each subscriber has to have a separate line connecting the home and the control room. For cable TV the same line can be tapped into by as many subscribers as is interested. Why

the system applied by T&T cannot be practised here is a mystery of commercial proportions. Back to the disadvantages — if a truck tears off the overhead line or a branch from a tree does the same or if there is man-made sabotage, then you have to run to the switch room to get things operated again. This is supposed to be another reason for the line rent.

But right now the greatest problem is the Telecommunications Ministry officials and T&T who have cut off all connections until a settlement reached with the phone cable association. Tk. 50,000 per line is being demanded for commercial use instead of the previous Tk. 20,000 paid earlier. The association has accepted the demand as being reasonable. But licenses are not yet being issued as it is being insisted that Tk. 50,000 be paid right now. The puzzled and surprised association pointed out that as Tk. 20,000 had already been deposited, they should be submitting Tk. 30,000 more. Otherwise the total amount is coming to Tk. 70,000 according to simple calculation.

So now a stalemate has developed. It is alleged these delaying tactics are being played at the instigation of the large firms in the communications business.

Nahtasha Kamal
Bhujohori Shahar Street
Bhuter Goli, Dhaka.

The peace treaty

Sir, Human beings have caused their self-revelation as peace-loving since the second world war. It is a cosmopolitan saying that 'combat never brings peace but counsels suffer'. Today the people of Bangladesh comprising tribes people of the hill districts have been able to understand that it is only the peace treaty that can be the solution to rise brotherhood among them.

So, to terminate the two-decade-long conflict, a draft of the peace treaty on various topics of CHT problems has been made. So we congratulate the PCJSS chief Jyotirindriyo Bodhiyroy, the popularly known as Shantu Larma and NCCHT chief Abul Hasnat Abdullah on their great success.

Md Abidus Salam
475/Surja Sen Hall
Dhaka University.