

by M Masum

No to Hartal

A survey conducted by the Bangladesh Human Rights Commission says 90 per cent of our citizens are against hartal and aborodh. Only a paltry 9.5 per cent has supported these as valid instruments of political action.

This overwhelming rejection of hartal-aborodh in fact vindicates the position of The Daily Star on the matter. We opposed it as a political weapon during the BNP dispensation and we now oppose it while AL rules. We have never questioned our people's right to these but have contested the wisdom of resorting to these without caring a fig about the price these exact by way of vitiating the very viability of our state.

Almost all medicine in the modern doctor's prescription are poison. The stronger the medicine, the stronger the poison. Hartal-aborodhs are the strongest of all social and political medicines, but they are also the strongest of poisons that can kill a state from within.

For years these shutdowns have been imposed on them. A hartal, successful insofar as no shop opens and no vehicle moves, has for long been a silent and passive protest against hartals.

Now the HRC survey says people are themselves abdicating their power to lawfully strike and agitate. The wanton abuse of that right and power by interested quarters has led them to do so.

Child Trafficking

Child trafficking as a serious social problem is showing no signs of abatement. Sunday's Star report on a very well equipped trafficking network at Shahidnagar of Narayanganj and a vernacular daily's news item on the spotting of some 30 odd Bangladeshi children in a remote village of India's Tamil Nadu leave us with the realisation that perhaps something has gone awry with our level of consciousness and seriousness regarding the problem.

The problem with our recent awareness against crime in child trafficking is that all our cries stop with the mere reference of bigger forces or the cliché of godfathers behind the field-level perpetrators. It is a no-go situation after a small fry is nabbed. Why it has to be like that?

The confessional statement of one of the arrested traffickers in Shahidnagar quoted in the Star report gives one the picture that with their access to all modern information technology how organised and well-equipped these human smugglers are. What chance the law enforcing agency has against these criminals with their outmoded pattern of operation? The fact that the concerned police officer felt the need of the CID to join forces with them in order to ferret out the big bosses or big brothers shows how many miles we are behind in grasping the problem in its totality.

Service or Disservice?

BTV's issue-based reporting programme Poriprekthit on Sunday gave a perfect window on the kind of mess the telephone department is in. It was no revelation since it would be well nigh impossible to find a subscriber without his or her share of affliction, thanks to the T&T authorities.

Some of the complaints aired in the programme for an immediate response from the authorities as represented by the minister concerned sounded absolutely scandalous negating the rationale of a public service institution rightaway. Can a modern mind conceive the phenomenon of a telephone connection remaining suspended for nine years? It is a tribute to the shock absorbing ability of that subscriber's heart who received a monthly bill for over six lakh.

If service is the missing idea with T&T when it comes to its behaviour with its 'valued and honourable' clients, short-changing the national exchequer by rampant corruption is the other unbearable reality of this government agency. The report showed visuals how in exchange of a fixed monthly payment under a 'contract' some private subscribers are using their telephone sets for commercial purpose. The government and the rightful subscriber are footing the bill for these 'illegal and unreal offers' which is a violation of all norms of service in a civilised world.

Telecoms Minister Mohammed Nasim saw things for himself on Sunday when after several attempts he failed to get through to 17—the number of the enquiry section. Mere replacement of analogue lines with digital ones would not fulfil the challenges of modernisation. Client service has to be addressed on a priority basis.

ONE of the reasons why people voted Awami League to power in the 1996 election was its pledge to present to the nation an efficient and honest government — free from corruption of all forms. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, immediately after assuming office, also categorically stated that her government would take stern measures against all corrupt practices. She even cautioned her cabinet colleagues that anyone found involved with corruption would immediately be sacked. In order to monitor activities of her cabinet colleagues and also of the party MPs in this regard, she directed statements on their assets and liabilities and suggested that such statements would have to be submitted every year so that anyone amassing wealth disproportionate to his/her known sources of income could immediately be detected and be punished by appropriate authorities.

The Prime Minister's declaration was welcomed by everyone. The Press also published stories about the submission of the asset statements by the given deadline and who failed to do so. A number of corruption charges were also framed against some ministers of the BNP government by the Bureau of Anti-Corruption.

But since then, it seems that the Awami League Government has totally forgotten about its pledge to eradicate corruption from the society. When on TV the Prime Minister faced the nation on completion of her first year in office, she, on her own said nothing about steps taken to rid the society of corruption; nor did the veteran journalists and distinguished panelists ask her any question

regarding this. The statements relating to assets and liabilities of the ministers including the Prime Minister and of Awami League MPs, even if submitted earlier were never made public. And we also did not hear of any directive from the Prime Minister's office to Ministers and MPs regarding submission of statement of assets and liabilities on expiry of the first year of Awami League in office. So the people at large have no way of objectively assessing the track record of the government with respect to corruption i.e. relating to being involved with or in dealing with corruption.

Regarding dealing with corruption one must recall, the Awami League while in opposition charged the then Agriculture Minister of corruption highlighting his alleged role in the 'fertilizer scandal'. So immediately after Awami League's assumption of power when a case was instituted against him it was expected that the charge would relate to his alleged involvement with the 'fertilizer scandal'. We were however surprised to see that there were no such charges. The charge brought against him related to misuse of official vehicle which almost all ministers and public officials do. Although people in general disapprove of such misuse, they do not see it as a serious offence.

Recently, however, when in the face of mounting agitation by the opposition a number of corruption cases have been filed

against the former BNP Minister and some Prime Ministers, if people think that all these charges are essentially fabricated primarily to harass the opposition, it is difficult to blame them, even if the charges are valid ones which can be substantiated with adequate evidence in a court of law. People may simply treat them as expressions of political vengeance. Thus wrong timing may be of the right action in dealing with corruption taken by the AL Government may receive scant popular support.

On the question of AL Government being involved with corruption, however, it is difficult for people to judge. Occasions sometimes arise offering test cases. The classic test case is the allocation of plots at 'Nikunja', a residential project developed by RAJUK Long back in 1992, the project was announced. More than 5000 people applied for less than 500 plots each of 5 kathas. On some plots only single storeyed while on others only two-storeyed buildings could be constructed. During the next four years under BNP regime, for a variety of reasons including inefficiency of the government, not much progress could be made. Immediately on assumption of office, AL government seriously took up the project, developed it, framed rules for allotment (published in the Daily Ittefaq on 29/30 June, 1997), however questionable (ref: The Daily Star, August 15, 1997),

and finally published the list of successful applicants on Sep 29, 1997. The AL Government, particularly the minister concerned deserves congratulations for an efficient job.

The number of plots were increased to 646 by reducing the plot size to 3 katha each to allow a larger number of people to benefit from the scarce public resource — another commendable job in my opinion — though in violation of the original provisions of the project.

The list of successful applicants as published in the Daily Ittefaq provided just the names and respective addresses. The previously declared rules mentioned that each applicant would be considered against a specific category to which he/she belonged. The total number of plots were allocated amongst different categories. Against the number of plots allocated to a particular category, some applicants on the basis of their status were to receive priority treatment while others would try their luck through lottery. There was, however, some vagueness in the rules e.g. it was mentioned that secretaries and additional secretaries would be allocated plots directly, but it was not clearly spelt out how would applicants serving autonomous bodies (according to warrant of precedence) or pay e.g. Vice Chancellors/Selection Grade/Senior Professors of public universities, MDs of

NCBs, chairman of public corporations would be treated. It was not also clearly spelt out whether the status of applicants at the time of application i.e. in 1992 or the current status would be considered for which however it was necessary to solicit relevant information from all applicants by issuing public notice. But no such thing was done. It seems that without removing the ambiguities, mentioned above, plots were distributed.

As the list of successful applicants does not mention one against a particular category and also does not indicate whether one succeeded because of being in the priority sub-category or through lottery, one cannot form a clear idea about how the plots were actually distributed.

Glancing through the list of successful applicants one can see names of MPs high ranking government officials, prominent journalists and noted singers. It seems that possibly some rules were followed. But one cannot be sure. I know of some one who would possibly have received a plot (e.g. a selection grade professor) had some rule been followed but he did not get one but someone much junior to him got one. A Commissioner of Customs, Excise and VAT failed to get a plot while a number of inspectors succeeded. Had there been a lottery for allotment of plots such outcomes were possible but no newspaper had reported hold-

ing of such a lottery. Then, how were the plots actually allotted? Under these circumstances if the Prime Minister really believes in presenting to the nation a corruption-free government which she promised to mobilize support in favour of her party she should immediately try to find out how the plots at Nikunja were actually allotted and if she finds it to be fair, the rules should be made public in clear terms. Otherwise the allotment should be cancelled and a fresh allotment be made in a transparent way on the basis of appropriate rules duly formulated by people who can see beyond their narrow group interests.

Of a corruption-free government, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also needs to oversee how the contracts in the energy sector are actually being awarded or how the privatization deals are being negotiated. Who are the beneficiaries? Are the processes transparent? It is also extremely important to reintroduce the system of submission of statements relating to assets and liabilities of all ministers and MPs of the ruling party on a regular basis. Such statements also need to be made public, so as to enable the people at large to objectively assess the government's performance and not be misguided by baseless propaganda.

Awami League came to power after long 21 years. People have high hopes centering this government. Such hopes will surely be shattered if Awami League fails in establishing an efficient and transparent government.

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OPINION

Ershad Owes an Apology to Women

Syed Badiuzzaman writes from Boston

AT a time when women are standing on the threshold of a new millennium — put their best foot forward to lead in every field of national life alongside their male counterparts with an equal confidence and pride, soldier-turned-politician Hossain Muhammad Ershad of Bangladesh suggests that leadership be off-limits to them in his country.

Ershad's distasteful and discriminatory suggestions clearly reflect his anger against the two most powerful women in Bangladesh — Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and opposition leader, Khaleeda Zia — who spearheaded a massive movement that ousted him from power in 1990. The word of his heart finally came out through his mouth loud and clear after he tried hard to suppress it for seven long years.

What the former military ruler of Bangladesh opts for his country today is a notion the world buried at least half a century ago. Over the past several decades, the whole planet including General Ershad's homeland went through a revolution — sometimes quite, sometimes noisy — that challenged the centuries-old traditional men-dominated societies and put women at par with men in all walks of life — from kitchen to combat zone.

Britain's iron lady Margaret Thatcher, India's Indira Gandhi, Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto and Bangladesh's Sheikh Hasina and Khaleeda Zia make up only a partial list of world's brigade of outstanding and powerful women leaders of this century who have proven beyond doubt that they are as good as men when it comes to running a country. In conservative Islamic nations as well, women are coming forward in large number to take up leadership in various fields today.

Ershad's reported remarks that women should not be in leading roles and politics sharply contradict the provisions of Bangladesh's constitution and the spirit of democracy and freedom. His unguarded comments also undermined the significant and glorious part women played foot-to-foot and shoulder-to-shoulder with men in all the greatest movements

for rights of Bengalis that began in 1952 centering a language and culminated in the historic war of independence in 1971 creating a separate homeland.

Clause one of article 28 under Fundamental Rights Section (Part III) of Bangladesh Constitution (amended as of October 10, 1991) clearly mentions: 'The state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.' And the clause just immediately follows under the same article says: 'Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and public life.'

So, the constitution is quite explicit on the status and rights of women in Bangladesh and what it says is the supreme law in that land like all other nations in the world. This constitution is, as the solemn expression of the will of the people, the supreme law of the Republic, and if any other law is inconsistent with this Constitution that other law shall, to the extent of the inconsistency, be void,' according to clause two of article seven that confirmed the

supremacy of the nation's constitution.

Ershad is the chief of the third largest political party in Bangladesh who also happened to be the longest-tenured — albeit self-installed — president of that country. He is expected to speak the language of the constitution. Likewise, other politicians who frequently talk about freedom, democracy, people's rights and so on should also be well conversant with various provisions of the sacred constitution that guides the state in all affairs.

The reaction to Ershad's remark from Samanvaya (Nari Samaj), an umbrella organization of women's bodies in Bangladesh, was instant. Leaders of left-leaning Democratic Front also blasted Ershad for what they called insulting women and making anti-constitutional statement ignoring their equal rights as men. There is no doubt that his remark has offended especially the educated and politically conscious women of Bangladesh. Ershad does owe an apology to them.

Ershad's statement — 'Islam does not allow women politics' — is irrelevant and out of context in case of Bangladesh

partly because Bangladesh is not an Islamic republic and partly because the existing constitution of Bangladesh does not prevent women from joining politics. His statement has only given an energizing shot in the arm of right-wing Islamic parties including Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh. By making such a statement, he portrayed himself as a confused politician with a blurred vision, further affecting his already troubled political career.

Women make up half of Bangladesh's total population. This means the development of Bangladesh is closely linked to the development of its women. Bangladesh cannot reach its cherished goal of development by keeping half of its population out of the nation-building activities. However, the women need to arm themselves with appropriate education and knowledge and come forward side by side with men — breaking the barrier of backwardness — in all fields like their partners in other developing countries of the world. And of course, leadership cannot be a men's-only-affair that leads to gender discrimination.

As Gen Ershad discouraged Bangladesh's women to participate in politics, a crusader for

women rights American First Lady Hillary Clinton called upon women around the world to take part in the political lives of their countries. 'Democracy can only achieve its fullest potential when women are not barred by law, by ignorance, by tradition or custom, or by intimidation from making their voices heard at the ballot box. No nation can hope to succeed in our global economy if half of its people lack the opportunity and the right to make the most of their God-given potentials,' she told the women leaders from North, South and Central America recently.

The good news is that women of Bangladesh have already started tearing off the chains of backwardness and setting themselves free from the long hands of conservative traditions. They are making their mark in various fields both at home and overseas bringing into a greater focus themselves as well as their beloved nation. With the root of democracy going deeper and deeper each passing day into the soil of Bangladesh, the caravan of women will continue to move on until they hit the highway to success and jointly cry 'nothing is impossible.'

US Senator in jail

Sir, Here is a news from Texas which will delight some notorious Bangladeshi politicians. The US politicians are also like them!

The State Senator of Texas Mr. Drew Nixon has been sentenced a six months jail and \$6000.00 fine on October 1, 1997 by the Travis County Judge Mr. David Furey. He was soliciting prostitution and he was caught with illegal arms by the police. The Judge has allowed him a strange way to serve his imprisonment. He will enter the prison at 6.00 pm every Friday and will come out at 6.00 every Monday. Therefore he will be in jail for next 72 weeks unless good behaviour reduces the punishment a little bit. Republican Senator Mr. Nixon is not interested to resign and desires to continue his remaining tenure until 2000 AD. He has admitted his crime and he has said that he would compensate for that.

Here is the lesson for Bangladeshi politicians; they are convicted many times, they go to jail, frequently (of course come out earlier) but they never admit their crimes.

Hasnat Alamgir (By e-mail) WTAMU Box-62684 Canyon, TX-79016 USA

Future of cricket

Sir, We hardly get news about cricket in China. Thanks to Star Sports, they show the highlights. For us, we get news from the BBC World Service and Bengali News Service.

On October 18, a Saturday, I was lessening to the BBC's evening programme in Bengali. It stated that Bangladesh Cricket team was nowhere in the cricket match in Nairobi! What a shock!

The propaganda after the ICC '97 was too much. When we heard about the ICC success, we Bangladeshis in China were very happy. Later, the joy was vanished when we watched the Pepsi Asia Cup from Colombo. The performance of our team was very poor. I don't say there will be a dramatic change in the performance. But what seemed to me and to my fellow citizens here was, the players could not yet come out from the previous practice of catching

'kol' fish!

Few years ago, the football was the hottest topic amongst us. It was 1995, or so and we, the Bangladeshis, prepared to see our heroes with SAF Football gold. Alas, that remained as a dream! And it was because of exaggerated exposure of our strength. That killed our football.

Now turning to cricket, I think the same history is going to repeat. If it happens so, it will take another 25 years to regain the ODI status. And the alarming sign that I noticed was that the cricketers got more and unwanted exposures than the booters. And are we going to banish our last hope in the sportsarena?

The bowling is very bad, and I feel sick even to talk about fielding. Batting line is fair, still requires a lot to work out. But what will improve the major parts: both bowling and fielding? Alone Mr. Gordon Greenidge can do nothing. If the players don't feel to improve, and think themselves still invincible, then we may lose not only the ODI status, but should also forget to play tests within two years.

I thank Mr Towfik Aziz Khan for his comments on that evening. I humbly add: 'Please don't exaggerate the real strength of our cricketers.' Nothing is to be explained for this comment, only look at the results and performance of our cricketers.

Sajjad Waheed (By e-mail) Box 532 Hangzhou 310027 P.R China

Banking on Saturday

Sir, Enough has been said about weekly holiday on Sunday and the merits of worldwide synchronisation of the weekend since February 1997 when Pakistan reverted back to weekly holiday on Sunday after more than 20 years.

Now, another issue in hand is about the frequent advertisements especially by the different banks of the country announcing the addresses of particular branches kept open on Saturdays.

We, the general public, are not computers to keep the name of bank branches open on Saturday's in our memory bank. So, may I humbly suggest to the

authorities to withdraw the banks from the purview or weekend on Saturday. Or, alternatively, to make a blanket announcement e.g. all branches of certain bank will be kept open during normal hours on Saturdays.

This will save the confusion and the bank clients will be able to plan better and efficiently.

K Anwar Dhanmani, Dhaka

DCC's road construction works

Sir, Round the year we always see DCC busy with destruction and construction of road islands. We wonder how many crores of taka is being wasted every financial year from our public exchequer for the un-planned works and blunders by DCC?

Further public road-repair maintenance and carpeting works which are taken in hand by DCC after each rainy season every year are also found damaged and perished and filled with pot holes, scars, cracks and bumps within weeks of completion of the development works.

We strongly feel that the planning, efficiency, quality of work and work procedure of DCC are imperfect, defective, fragile and very poor.

We suggest that road development, construction, repair and carpeting works of Dhaka city may be looked after by a committee headed by the Chief Engineer, DCC, Ward Commissioner, and three elderly respectable persons of the area concerned would be the members of the committee. They would jointly certify the road contractors bill for payment after three months of the completion of the work on the basis of quality of materials supplied and the quality of the work done.

We would also request our government to bring transparency and accountability in the road construction works of Road and Highways Department and Union Councils, stop irregularities and corruption, and to utilise public money for the welfare of the people.

O H Kabir, 6, Hare Street, Wari, Dhaka-1203

BANGABANDHU MURDER CASE Verbatim Text of Cross Examination of Twentyfourth Prosecution Witness

Continued from Sunday

Cross examination of PW-24 in Bangabandhu murder case Havildar (ret'd) Aminur Rahman began when the court resumed on Sunday.

Following are the excerpts from examination by advocate Khan Saffur Rahman, defence counsel for accused Lt Col (dismissed) Syed Farooqur Rahman:

Q: Was there any mention about the ousting of government when you took oath of service? A: No, there was no such mention. But it was mentioned that we would have to carry out the orders of seniors. Q: When did you hear the firing? Before reaching the house of Serniabat or after? A: We heard the firing after starting duty on road in front of the house. Q: How long you discharged duty after hearing the sounds of shots? A: 10 to 15 minutes. Q: Either you took part in the killing at Serniabat's house or you discharged duty of martial-law on August 15 morning. Which one is true? A: I only carried out the orders of officers.

Examination by advocate TM Akbar, defence counsel for accused Lt Col (LPR) Muhiuddin of Artillery: Q: You didn't tell the IO that you saw Major Muhiuddin while entering the road station. A: I can't recall it.

Examination by advocate Abdur Razzaq Khan, defence counsel for accused Lt Col (ret'd) Sultan Shahriyar Rashid Khan: Q: You concealed the name of Havildar Major who asked you for fall-in and examined your arms. A: I couldn't recall his name. Q: You didn't tell the IO his name as his statement would

prove your witness false. A: This is not true. Q: How long the briefing took place? A: 8 to 10 minutes. Q: You can't recall the briefing other than the two sentences. A: I could recall the sentences only. Q: The senior officers didn't order the sepoy directly. A: Usually they don't make order directly to the sepoy. But the exception took place on that night. Q: You didn't serve under the command of Shahriyar. A: I discharged duty under him on that day. Q: What was your conception about the meaning of word 'government' at that time? A: I was a sepoy. By the government I meant higher officers. Q: This government has failed to protect the dignity of our mothers and sisters, what did you understand by this? A: I understood nothing. Q: Martial-law court was set up after August 15, 1975. A: I don't know about it. Q: What did you understand when at the briefing it was said that 'people were dying of starvation'? A: I didn't understand anything. Q: Did you understand the meaning of 'we liberated the country at the risk of life'? A: No, I didn't understand. Q: Did you understand the Liberation War? A: No. Q: Did you have any idea about the situation of the country in 1974 and 75? A: I resided inside the cantonment. So, I had no idea. Q: Didn't you go to your village home? A: No, I used to go there on leave. Q: You started with taking the responsibility to oust the government. Did you later enquired whether the government

was ousted or not? A: This is not true. Examination by advocate Sharfuddin Mukul, defence counsel for accused former minister Taheruddin Thakur: Q: Were you continuously in army till 1991? A: Yes. Q: There were several Chiefs of Army Staff since 1975 to 91. A: Yes. Q: You were not awarded any punishment for your duties on August 14 night and August 15 morning. A: No, I was not given any punishment. Q: You passed the SSC. Would you read newspaper while in service? A: Occasionally. Q: Was it known to you that Serniabat saheb was a minister on August 14, 1975? A: I came to know it later. Q: Hadn't you come to know that he was also a close relative of Bangabandhu? A: No. Q: Do you know that his (Serniabat's) son Abul Hasnat Abdulla is now Chief Whip of the Jatiya Sangsad? A: I don't know about their relations.

Further texts of cross examination will be published as and when received.

was ousted or not? A: I didn't know whether the government was ousted or not. But I came to know that Bangabandhu had been killed. Q: There was no police guard at the house where they went and you heard the firing. A: I didn't enter the house. So, I can't say. Q: Do you know who is the plaintiff of the case? A: No, I don't know. Q: Was there any court since August 15, 1975 till filing of this case? A: I don't know. Q: You identified Shahriyar before making deposition to the court. A: This is not true. Examination by advocate Taheruddin Mukul, defence counsel for accused former minister Taheruddin Thakur: Q: Were you continuously in army till 1991? A: Yes. Q: There were several Chiefs of Army Staff since 1975 to 91. A: Yes. Q: You were not awarded any punishment for your duties on August 14 night and August 15 morning. A: No, I was not given any punishment. Q: You passed the SSC. Would you read newspaper while in service? A: Occasionally. Q: Was it known to you that Serniabat saheb was a minister on August 14, 1975? A: I came to know it later. Q: Hadn't you come to know that he was also a close relative of Bangabandhu? A: No. Q: Do you know that his (Serniabat's) son Abul Hasnat Abdulla is now Chief Whip of the Jatiya Sangsad? A: I don't know about their relations.

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