

Another Pointless Hartal

Barely a day passed since we ran a leader on the lack of direction in our politics the capital went through yet another pointless half-day strike. Despite being well in the know about the timing of the aid club meeting in the city and, more importantly, a last minute plea from the representatives of the donors community, BNP and its allies stuck to their half day hartal call. More than registering their protest against 'government repression' it was the thought of giving the foreign delegates an impression about the popular support behind them which seemed to have contributed to the recalcitrance of the hartal callers. But have they gained anything? Hartal is no longer a trial of strength. It is only because people want to stay out of harm's way that streets wear a desolate look during the hartal hours.

BNP has every right to register its protest but why does it have to be at the cost of national interest? Can a party as big as BNP avoid the responsibility by making reference that the party now in power adopted the same tactic to register its protest when out of power? What BNP is doing now stems from a pure revenge motive. The only rationale it can offer for this sequence of disruptive programmes is that it is paying back the ruling party by the same coin it was once paid. But then the question that stands unanswered is with whom does the buck stop? When does this suicidal streak of vengeful rivalry end?

We believe by making and sticking to Tuesday's strike call BNP has made its claims of national concern infinitely weaker. It has not only contributed to economic enervation of the country by robbing seven work hours' from a day but it has also conveyed an impression of its carelessness about country's interest to the outside world.

This destructive trend which is prevailing now in our politics originates from defeatist mentality and it has to end. Opposition has to rise to the occasion and challenge of constructive criticism and opposition. For its part the party in power must evolve better ways than 'beating' the opposition to acquiescence. The spate of unnecessarily oppressive police action that we saw specially in the last couple of weeks must not revisit us.

How to be A Good MP

Some international heavyweights are in the city. They are not here to make a splash of any kind. A very constructive kind of thing they are doing, quietly. They are giving a three-day seminar to our MPs on what may be phrased as 'After election what'. A very useful crossfertilisation of ideas is certainly taking place there, to the benefit of the participants from Bangladesh.

Thanks to the decision of televising Jatiya Sangsad sessions, the nation at large can now relate itself to the performance of the MPs as was never possible before. On the other hand the MPs have got an unprecedented chance to play to a nation-sized gallery. This is allowing the people a kind of peep that is contributing helpfully to the cause of transparency in governance. The MPs are by definition political animals and they have come to the Sangsad by dint of superior political performance in the constituency. But performance in Parliament is altogether a different game.

The problem we have here is the MPs, by virtue of whips and the anti-defection rules, are a prisoner to the party. More than representing the people and serving first their interest, the MP is a partyman totally given to serving the party's interest. A case of dual loyalty it is and this becomes a problem when, as in our case, the loyalty to the party precedes and far exceeds the loyalty to the people. Which is not a desirable thing at all and is contrary to the MPs' constitutional and moral obligations.

It can be argued that it is wrong to take national interest and party interest as not being always identical. But in practice the two had hardly ever fully coincided in our history. So? It is for the party and its leadership to encourage its member MPs to cultivate independence and be fully people-oriented.

They would get better MPs that way which would benefit the party. The MP has a covenant to fulfill with his constituency. That is his or her first obligation. Parties have come to loom larger than the country. A politician knows he or she can bully or beguile his constituency into winning the election but the party cannot be bullied or beguiled into giving a repeat nomination. For the practical minded MP the party continues to be the first or may be the only consideration.

This is one of many things built into our political practice that tend to undermine democracy from within. It the parties have the best interest of the country at heart, they must temper their overpowering presence before the MP. The MP in turn may come out of the rut by an eager and generous helping of knowledge and expertise.

Out to Scuttle

From being wary of the shockers interminably administered by the ultra-militants within Shantibahini ranks we have happily graduated to a congenial condition in which they seem to have fallen in line with the general tribal craving for peace in the CHT. While that negative factor is largely out of the way, it is our own political parties now which in a nexus are out to scuttle a peace accord that is all but ready for adoption.

BNP, Jamaat, and even Jatiya Party have taken recourse to rumour-mongering as a tactic to poison the minds of Bengali settlers about the ensuing peace accord. They are propagating messages despite repeated government disclaimers to the contrary that the draft agreement envisaged 'eviction' of Bengali settlers and withdrawal of armed forces from the CHT leaving the plainlanders there completely in the lurch. If these political parties are genuinely convinced that provisions in the 'treaty' are 'anti-Bengali', then why don't they allow these to be placed under public scrutiny after the signature ceremony and prove their point beyond any shadow of doubt to a greater damage of the ruling party rather than prematurely declare a doomsday which they cannot defend with hard evidence. In the process, they are only having a question-mark raised about their sincerity, credibility and seriousness about a matter of vital national importance like replacing decade-old turmoil and insurgency by normality, peace and reconstruction. Scare tactics and falsehood are not the stuffs a genuine debate is made up of.

Before the potentially turning-point meet between the NCCHT and the PCJSS takes place on November 16, there should be no further breach in the congeniality of the environment, either from our own political parties or from the Shantibahini by way of raising any fresh question on issues settled many times over.

Can You Promote Investment by Putting Old Wine in New Bottle?

If the previous experience of the country in the business of attracting foreign investment is any guide, it can be argued that the government lacks an up-to-date and efficient mechanism to make best use of the inflow of foreign capital.

BAKING is once again hosting an international investment conference in the capital city — titled A New Era for Growth and Investment — with an obvious goal to attract foreign capital for the development of its infrastructure as well as manufacturing and industrial bases. Managed this time by London-based Financial Times, this conference is primarily geared at enticing foreign direct investment (FDI), while the previous one, managed by Euromoney in 1995, focused almost solely on portfolio investment.

As usual, it will take some time to measure the outcome of this year's conference being participated by hundreds of local and foreign investors, and actively monitored by government as well as donor agencies. But one has to acknowledge that the organisers of this year's conference have avoided high-sounding titles like 'Bangladesh — Emerging Tiger' — which was the theme last time around. In sharp contrast to such a flowery melody, this year's theme is unquestionably a down-to-earth one. The organisers deserve credit for it.

Calling a Spade a Spade

Every knowledgeable person in this country knows Bangladesh is neither emerging nor a tiger. It is rather a land full of problems with little prospects to keep its head above the water. What it needs most is not poetic overflow of emotion or an elaborate orchestration of political rhetoric or an overt exercise of bureaucratic extravagance at state expense. As an impoverished people, it rather needs pragmatic and concrete measures to boost domestic as well as foreign investment in order to achieve 7 per cent annual growth rate before stepping into the next millennium. The sole objective of the conference ought to be to make it happen.

Of course, the galaxies of

domestic and foreign speakers — that are scheduled to entertain each other at this state function — will address wide-ranging issues and concerns, among which overall conduciveness of the existing investment climate in the country will most certainly receive preponderant importance. Yes, the organisers of the conference have toned down the rhetoric of the event this time around, but what has the nation did lately to stimulate new investments from domestic and foreign sources?

None should have any illusion about it — attracting substantial inflows of foreign capital would require not less than a herculean effort to stabilise the macroeconomic foundations, ensuring sound political stability, providing dependable infrastructural facilities, establishing well functioning administrative, legal and judicial systems as well as an ever vigilant civic society. None of these prerequisites are in place in the country today. That, however, doesn't mean that all developmental or business activities should be halted once for all. This only means that unless such a conducive investment climate is put in place, the country will continue to move in snail's pace.

Obstacles are Transparent

With all its backwardness and drawbacks, Bangladesh provides an essentially transparent case for potential investors — both domestic and foreign. For example, they don't have to conduct expensive research to find out that its an essentially corrupt society, that the bureaucracy here is the number one enemy of investment and growth, that the politicians are almost always up

for grabs, that most of the prominent business houses are nothing but looting complexes, that the universities here are producing non-employable work force, and most trade union leaders are nothing but organised gangs of robbers.

Of course, such a characterisation of the existing conditions of the society sounds cruel. But none should expect that the foreign investor don't know of these. Just two years ago, a South Asian desk manager of a reputed portfolio company cast aside all these as matters of no concern as long as profit margin remains sky-

rocketing. Everybody now knows why she said so. The shrewd international portfolio managers — in close collaboration of a section of greedy stock-brokers here — took advantage of the then burgeoning stock market of the country. No wonder, a big chunk of portfolio managers — representing many international firms — paraded at the Euromoney Conference in 1995.

As usual, one fine morning these seasonal birds disappeared. In the meantime, a large chunk of the meager resources of this impoverished nation was siphoned off to foreign banks. It is disgraceful that even one reputed international bank, which claims to be a development-partner of the country, took advantage of the then non-lock-in provision of the stock market, and made easy money knowing fully well

that it was nothing but broad-day robbery. Of course, it played by the rules. But as a development-partner, its responsibility was rather asking the government to change the rules, not to take advantage of those.

Different Focuses of Investment

Anyway, this year the focus of the conference is different — more on infrastructure development and financing, aimed at development of energy and telecommunications sectors, port facilities, roads and

of BOI. Of course, that goal was accomplished, somewhat. This time around, it won't be awfully out of sync to expect a little bigger accomplishment from such a state-sponsored and state financed carousel.

Create a MITI-type Ministry

Although the actual shape and size of the achievements of this conference can't be gauged accurately at this moment, given the kind of excitement that the western oil and gas companies have been demonstrating, it can be safely assumed that this time around foreign investment would be forthcoming in bigger chunks. Also, the World Bank's \$235 million credit for private sector infrastructure development and this year's donor consortium's main focus on this sector should help substantially in boosting overall investment in the economy.

But, if the previous experience of the country in the business of attracting foreign investment is any guide, it can be argued that the government lacks an up-to-date and efficient mechanism to make best use of the inflow of foreign capital. While flow of FDI to Asian countries increased in leaps and bounds over the years, Bangladesh almost completely missed the boat. One main reason was that this country failed miserably in marketing itself for attracting FDI. After all, no bird makes nest on empty trees.

Currently many organisations — such as BOI, BEPZA, EPB and PB — are working to enhance the nation's potentials for trade and investment, and they are often working under separate ministries. Why not put them all together, under one super ministry, which will also incorporate the current Ministry of Commerce. It can be

called the Ministry of International Trade and Investment as the famous MITI of Japan. Such a super ministry will be able to coordinate the trade and investment related matters more effectively than at the current arrangement, under which some of the concerned organisations are responsible for overlapping functions, powers and jurisdictions.

Moreover, just putting them under one umbrella like MITI will not do. Right now all these pro-trade and investment, pro-development and growth government bodies are manned by bureaucrats — more like new bottles with old wines. Scores of research-based reports suggest that the bureaucrats remain bureaucrats — doesn't matter whether they are working for export processing zones or collecting taxes or revenues for themselves or the government. It does not take a wizard to understand that you can give a Mercedes-Benz to a drunk driver, still it will not make you safe.

Therefore, the policy makers — if they are really serious about spurring economic growth of the country — must strive hard to put in place an extremely dynamic and energetic pro-business and pro-development workforce under a MITI-type ministry. It should be led by a far-sighted political leadership, who will be assisted by top brass of laterally recruited high-flyers and high-achievers. Then, assign the ministry with well-defined and quantifiable goals and objectives, and hold it responsible for accomplishing the missions as per schedule.

Only such a business-like concerted effort — nothing less than that — can lift the nation from the vicious circle of low savings, low investment and low growth that persistently paralyses the nation's growth potentials. Of course, nothing can be accomplished as long as the nation remains hostage to the vested interests of overtly self-seeking politicians.

BANGABANDHU MURDER CASE

Verbatim Text of Cross Examination of 35th Prosecution Witness

Continued from yesterday

Cross-examination of PW-35 in Bangabandhu murder case, Subedar Major (ret'd) Anisul Haq Chowdhury, began when the court resumed on Monday.

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

Q: Do you know that Col Farooq was a candidate in Presidential election during Ershad regime?

A: I can't recall.

Q: You can't recall as it was long ago.

A: I can't recall as I don't bother such matters.

Q: It means you are not accustomed to looking into the matters of others despite having news value.

A: I am not interested in digging about others.

Q: Is there any bar to meeting between two commissioned officers?

A: No.

Q: Do you know the wife of

Rashid saheb?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you ever see Rashid, Farooq and their wives altogether?

A: In Bangabandhu murder case.

Q: Did you witness the incident?

A: I watched some of the incidents and came to know about others from my troops.

Q: You are bound to inform the superior authorities if you find any subordinate committing crime.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you make any report to the higher authorities about the August 14 and 15 incidents done by your unit members?

A: The higher officers themselves were involved in the incident.

A: No, no such incident took place.

Q: In which case you have come to give witness?

A: In Bangabandhu murder case.

Q: Did you witness the incident?

A: I watched some of the incidents and came to know about others from my troops.

Q: You are bound to inform the superior authorities if you find any subordinate committing crime.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you make any report to the higher authorities about the August 14 and 15 incidents done by your unit members?

A: The higher officers themselves were involved in the incident.

Q: There was no necessity to report.

Q: Was there any military intelligence agency at that time?

A: Yes.

Q: How many?

A: That was not known to me.

Q: More than one?

A: I didn't know.

Q: Their activities are secret. But their offices are in public inside the cantonment.

A: Yes.

Q: It is your duty to inform them if you, specially the army personnel, see any act that goes against the state.

A: We have to go through proper channel.

Q: Was Lt Hasan your immediate senior officer in the unit?

A: I can't recall.

Q: Who was superior officer of your CO?

A: Commander of 46 Brigade, Col Shafat Jamil.

Q: Did you make any written or verbal report to your immediate senior officer about the August 14 and 15 incidents?

A: No, as the officers themselves committed the incidents.

Q: Did you tell the CID and magistrate, 'Ali Mia, driver of CO Rashid saheb, came at about 5 am by a jeep and informed that Sheikh Saheb had been killed. Martial-law had been proclaimed.

Hurry up, I went to the unit by my bicycle.

A: I can't recall whether I told them this.

Q: Had you have gun practice in Karachi?

A: Yes, by light anti-aircraft artillery gun.

Q: Were your CO was in India on a training till April, 1975?

A: Yes.

Q: Was his wife Zohaida Rashid and their cantonment house at that time?

A: I can't remember it.

Q: Did you tell the CID the story for the first time?

A: Yes.

Q: Did CID ask you to go to DGFI office for your statement?

A: No, as I was on pension.

Q: Don't you know that DGFI informed the police about you?

A: This is not known to me.

Q: Did you come to know about martial-law from Ali Mia at first?

A: Ali Mia told me that martial-law had been proclaimed. But it was not true. There was no martial-law before August 24.

Q: Were your troops on duty outside the cantonment since August 15?

A: Yes.

Q: They were posted to civil areas due to the martial-law.

A: No. They were deployed not for martial-law. They were sent to civil areas at the order of my CO Major Rashid.

Q: How old you were when you joined the army?

A: I joined the then Pakistan Boys Army when I was 14 years old.

Q: You were the senior most JCO in 2 Field Artillery while Abdul Wahab Joardar in 1 Field Artillery. Do you know it?

A: Yes.

Q: He was Subedar Major during the Pakistan regime.

A: Yes.

Q: Both of you served the army together for a long time.

A: Yes.

Q: Joardar was promoted to Hon Lt on December 16, 1976.

A: He was promoted, but I don't know the date.

Q: He was given the Hon Capt post when he retired on 27.77.

A: I can't recall the date.

Q: The promotions were made through Defence Ministry at the approval of the then Chief of Army Staff.

A: Yes.

Q: A bank gave Joardar Tk one lakh excess for the salary of troops on 1.11.76. But he returned the money. It was a much-talked matter in army and for this he was given an appreciation letter from the Army Headquarters.

A: Yes.

Q: A junior lawyer on behalf of advocate Sharfuddin Mukul, defence counsel for accused former state minister Taheruddin Thakur, declined to examine the witness.

— UNB

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

To the Editor...

Saidabad Water Treatment Plant

Sir, We the residents of Dhaka city feel pleasure to know that we shall be supplied enough water by WASA by the year 2001 through its Saidabad plant. The residents of Dhaka city note with gratitude, the directive of our Prime Minister to the WASA as to reduce the system loss at any cost. Moreover, she directed the WASA authorities to take strict actions against those responsible for losses caused due to negligence and ill motives.

Here, I would like to draw the attention of the readers and in particular the appropriate authority towards losses caused due to ill motive.

You are aware that there are multi-storied buildings in different areas of the city and there are such buildings which are having more than one connections to their underground reservoir. In case if a building is having two connections, one is of 1" (one) pipe which is duly approved by the WASA and billing for the same properly. The other one is of 1.5" or more and does not come under billing system. If any of the agencies undertakes investigation I am sure, this sort of losses will easily be detected and this will enhance revenue for WASA remarkably.

Abul Kashem Chowdhury
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Calling DCC

Sir, The city fathers cannot mother the growing naughty child known as the Dhaka metropolis. Here are Primary Stage projects which can be implemented without much expenditure from DCC budget, besides earning hefty fines and fees.

1) Parking: No double parking anywhere. No parking in 'No Parking' areas (mark the No Parking areas prominently). Uniformed personnel on duty to post fine notices under the windscreen. Not necessary to talk to the driver, or wait for the owner of the unattended vehicle to return. Next stage, tow away the offending vehicles without notice (it works in the foreign countries). Release after realistic heavy cash fine. Where to park? Park some distance away, and take a rickshaw. Be strict around schools, markets and shopping complexes. Offer plots for construction of multistory

Parking Lots all over the city on BOO/BOT basis, leased out to private contractors. Flood in-come spot, further levy on projects. Public vehicles: no parking or waiting 10 metres from any road intersection. Prosecution of unauthorised drivers and vehicles: cannot be done under any democratic regime, as political decision-making is weak-kneed, based on populism philosophy.

2) Remove all workshops (including motor workshops) from main and crowded roads. First, 7 days' notice, then fine, then lock up; then demolish; all within 4 weeks. Punitive action is the best deterrent.

3) Footpaths/pavements are for pedestrian use. Unauthorised use: repeated fine/s on the spot, further levy or destroy, if not removed instantly. No advance spot announcement in the locality. Structures to be bulldozed (as done recently, but why has the operation stopped?). Footpaths are primarily for the use of the pedestrians, and for no other purpose. Why this simple idea cannot be enforced? Fine the inspectors for dereliction of duty (amend the Service Regulations), and start disciplinary action and enforce every night and publicise in the media. Sack a few truants. Let them go to the court. Fight corruption, don't sit, discuss, stand and watch! The city's problems are not original!

A Resident
Dhaka

Thanks to Mandela

Sir, For the first time ever I have seen someone with some power and guts look into the problems of the Islamic nations and wants peace to exist amongst them. Though South Africa, frankly speaking, cannot care less what happens to Libya, but Mandela does care. For what? Because they are in the same continent as neighbours. What a noble gesture! I thought feelings like these only existed in fairy tales. I am not a radical fundamentalist who is screaming for blood. Neither am I saint who wants everyone to remain as brothers. Because theoretically none of those systems really work. I am simply looking at it from a peace-loving citizen's point of view.

To me really care what happens to our neighbouring countries? Do we think twice whether or not our neighbours might need our help at all? No.

New pay scale: Some suggestions

Sir, The government has recently announced the 5th National Pay Scale having the basic pay from Tk 1500 to Tk 15,000 (consolidated). The average pay-hike from the 4th National Scale is 1.5 times. The secretariat committee report on the scale prepared by the 5th Pay Commission does not contain anything on the percentage of house rent or medical allowance.

However, the government has decided to make the new scale partially effective retrospectively from 1.7.97 giving the employees savings certificates as arrears for three to four months (number of months is yet to be decided). Added to the present basic, only 60% of the enhanced basic will be given up to June 30, 1998 and the full enhanced basic pay from July 1, 1998 to June 30, 1999. The fringe-benefits based on the new scale will be given from fiscal 1999-2000. The process of realisation of the 5th National Pay Scale is rather ambiguous

and cumbersome. The employees' demanding revision of the new scale and rescheduling of the office timing.

I would like to suggest the following measures to effectively handle the ensuing crisis.

1) The earlier office-timing is to be declared effective as early as possible abandoning the present one which is unwanted and came abruptly. The government should not prepare a single more reason in support of its wishful office-timing having two holidays every week.

2) The 5th Pay Scale may be revised in favour of the lower scales from the 9th to the 20th so that the minimum basic pay stands at Tk 2000 making the lowest : highest pay ratio 1:7.5. If such a revision renders impossible, the tiffin allowance should be merged with the basic pay so that the government prepared ratio — 1:9 — comes true (the present ratio is clearly 1:10).

3) The percentage of the basic pay given as house rent is to be uniform and 50% is being suggested for every scale. The so-called city allowance is to be cut because most of the employees working in cities do this at their will and to be frank, most of them work in cities superseding the best and most meritorious ones by giving bribes of various categories. The uniform house rent would discourage, at least, the system unnecessary deputation and OS to stay in the cities, especially the capital, keeping some positions vacant in the periphery. However, a 10-20% Hill and Island allowance may be given for known reasons.

4) The medical allowance should be increased to Tk 250-300.

5) Hundred per cent basic pay of the new scale may be made effective from January, 1, 1998 (instead of 1.7.97) to June 30, 1999 and from July 1, 1999 including other benefits. This will help avoid the cumbersome calculation of 60% enhanced salary and also the troubles of arrear. The arrear system is troublesome for the government, the employees and also the economy as a whole. Besides, the senior employees might have a fear that the savings certificates would have to be burnt as was necessary in 1974.

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