

How Did the Long March Go? BNP's Hope and Happiness

As to what would follow on the political arena of the BNP, one could speculate that the BNP would not only bask in the glory attained by the Long March but will strive to accelerate the tempo of anti-government movement by way of fomenting feelings on the other significant national issues

Privatisation Soup

Air is rife with lamentations whenever there is any stock-taking of disinvestment performances. But you ought to be genuinely disappointed with something only if in all seriousness you had pursued it and yet ended up drawing a blank. The same cannot be obviously said about the perfunctory privatisation process. The sincerity of purpose has been grossly lacking so that when we cry our hearts out over only 12 out of 72 listed state owned enterprises having been disinvested so far or over the loss of Tk 25 billion being annually incurred by the SOEs it sounds like a rhetoric admission of failure or at best a desperate expression of concern.

We know the main hurdles to privatisation like the thumb of our hand. They are all on our finger tips: lack of political commitment and vested interests of the bureaucracy and trade unions. But the question is what are we doing to neutralise these negative factors? The government's will to carry forward the programme is cognisant of the socio-political cost entailed in executing it too hastily. In new budget the government has come out with a safety net provision for those who would be retrained upon privatisation. If their needs for rehabilitation and retraining for fresh employment are catered to then what we would be left with is the job of separating the amenable workers from the resistive trade union leaders. After that sifting we shall be in a position to handle the trouble-makers with a firm hand. The government had also offered some disinvestible units for sale to the workers on a first priority basis inviting a take-over by them. It would be in the fitness of things if the government let the public know as to where the matter rests now.

All these show that the government has taken the necessary steps to protect "the legitimate interests of the workers" which is uppermost in the mind of the Finance Minister. Now they should push the moribund disinvestment process in earnest.

Nothing short of depoliticisation of labour unions through a cast-iron reform package will keep extraneous political interferences at bay. With such big steps taken the ministry or corporation officials' vested interests in the extended pastures provided by the SOEs will die their natural death.

A Triumph of Endurance

Two teenage Chinese girls have taken the world by surprise. In a paean of human endurance before which even some of the best survival stories pale into insignificance, Li Qingzhu and Liang Xiaofei lived 42 days only on water after an adventurous group of four from a school in China's southwestern province Guizhou lost their way in a maze of caves. Two died out of thirst, hunger and exhaustion as the intrepid quartet literally groped in the darkness in their bid to get out of the labyrinth as a sudden rush of wind blew out the candles which happened to be only source of light in a zone of molten darkness.

It is true Li Qingzhu and Liang Xiaofei would have met the same fate as their dead peers had another exploring party not reached there fortuitously at the right time.

It is no doubt a magnificent epinikion of man's endurance and courage but what in this whole saga of bravery, suffering and rescue strikes as wondrously unique and expansive is the echo of Diogenesian philosophy: how much we can do without or how little we can do with! Most if not all of us are unduly finicky about our daily intake. A sense of inadequacy seems to run through our consciousness making huge impact on the socio-economic reality around us. We forget the immense potential of endurance man is endowed with and drown us under the deadweight of our own fear of inadequacy. It is only in these tales of man's survival in extreme conditions that we get to know what we can do without and what some of us are actually doing without.

Diarrhoea Holds

Diarrhoea, a routine health scourge in the summer has held on rather too long this year for the comfort of complacent, smug mind. Usually it breaks out towards the end of April and dies down by June. Heat and humidity of unhealthy proportions, lack of safe potable water and few other typical Third World syndromes are responsible for this enervating, if not fatal, gastrointestinal complication.

City's hospitals including ICDDR, the lone specialised medical facility for this purpose are all awash with diarrhoea-stricken patients. The rush has been so much so that ICDDR authorities could not accommodate the patients inside the rooms and as one national daily reported yesterday arranged treatment for the less fortunate patients in tents pitched outside the four walls of the hospital.

Although its a seasonal health hazard that would taper off in due course of time we feel its prolonged tyranny this year demands that the authorities take one or two things related to its outbreak and spread with more seriousness than they are wont to do. Diarrhoea is an out and water-borne disease. And the quality of water supplied in the city is not beyond suspicion. There have been frequent reports on the presence of hazardous elements in the Wasa water. Health problems having to do with water have only risen in intensity. Indeed we have received complaints from authentic sources that purification process of Dhaka Wasa is suspect. One reason has been attributed to the marginalised role of relevant experts, say microbiologists. Sanitation engineers with little knowledge of deleterious organisms in water call the shots in the process. We feel this is an ominous sign for a growing city like Dhaka. Authorities should remember that with the rise in population health hazards will also increase. And if a vital utility sector like water supply fails to ensure safe potable water just because of organisational inefficiency then we had it.

ONE, two, three, four, five, six, seven, ten, twenty, thirty, forty. No, I can see no more, the boy on the roadside spoke in exasperation for his failure to count any more due to the unending sight of the assembling caravan of cars, buses and trucks that were moving at a snail's pace on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway in the morning of 9th June. The scene represented the initial stage of the Long March organised by the seven party opposition led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

The declared objective of the Long March was to register a very strong protest against the Chittagong Hill Tracts Treaty signed on the 2nd December on account of many unacceptable provisions contained therein and to demonstrate support for their demand to cancel the Treaty provisions and its enabling legislation. Another purpose was to generate greater awareness of the common people about the objectionable character of the Treaty and to muster larger support for the common cause.

The assembled transport and the mammoth participation numbered, according to BNP workers, about 2,000 vehicles and 200,000 people. The government's estimate constituted half of these numbers. But the overwhelming support and participation received from many different parts of the country, specially from the distant north and the west, joining the march at different parts of the route, added to its strength. The hundreds of thousands of people lining up the long route and the spontaneous

offer of food and drinks many of whom made caused immense satisfaction to the participants and helped them relieve many of their woes on the long trail. The episode resembled a great occasion of festivities, despite usual as well as unanticipated travails on the way.

The BNP leaders had time and again reiterated the policy that the Long March would be a peaceful march and suggested to the government not to put up any obstructions on the way. Fortunately and commendably, the Prime Minister also made a public declaration that no obstruction would be put up against the Long March. Peace loving people heaved a sigh of relief. But, lo and behold, the opposition caravan met the first and formidable obstruction near the Kanchpur bridge, less than an hour after its commencement from Dhaka city. Dozens of trucks and buses were found parked, astride, out of order, many of which having had holes in their tyres or tyres removed. These vehicles blocked the road and the mode of their deployment left no one with any doubt it was done on purpose. The police and local administration did not come forward to respond to the request for lifting the barricade.

It transpired that on the previous night a group of hooligans

went on rampage near the bridge and started immobilising a number of buses and trucks, ostensibly to put up a barricade. They forced many drivers abandon their vehicles and riddled them with bullet holes. In the process, they also looted many of the passengers and went to the extent of abducting some of the female pas-

sengers. There were also attacks on the marchers, causing injury to some. All these happened after the BNP Secretary General had earlier requested in writing the Home Minister, Home Secretary, Inspector General of Police, concerned Superintendent of Police and other officers to remain specially vigilant on the route of the Long March and to guard against any attempt to breach the law and order situation as well as to help marchers to proceed peacefully.



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

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We would wait here indefinitely till we are allowed to proceed," she declared. This firm declaration was the last straw on camel's back, as the government became deeply but rightly concerned at the prospect of indefinitely blocking the arterial national highway, consequently laying a practical seize on the national capital. The orders came from Dhaka, reportedly from the Prime Minister herself, and the barricade was lifted within an hour. This unfortunate episode reveals certain important postulates. It projects once again the

OPINION

Hunger Strike and Long March Against Peace?

by Dr Mozammel H Khan

I AM in total ignorance of the historical evolution of hunger strike or long march. But both are symbol of recalcitrance — although their inner purports are diametrically contradictory. In our subcontinent, possibly, the hunger strike was initiated by Mahatma Gandhi in his much-famed non-violence movement. He has successfully used it on many occasions to create mass opinion and awakening to fight against the evils of injustice, subjugation and communal fanaticism. Even the fateful day he met martyrdom in the hand of a communal lunatic, he was on hunger strike as the protagonist of peace against the backdrop of communal discord and violence which was the order of the day. In the great religion of Islam, fasting symbolizes peace, harmony and self-control and it reflects an essence of tolerance and self-sacrifice. Why this great symbol of peace, and harmony was exploited by the Leader of the Opposition in Bangladesh Parliament to denigrate the existence of peace and reinitiate the decades long war is a bewildering phenomenon indeed.

I have no knowledge of any instance in history where one has ever individually or collectively participated in hunger strike to annul an agreement of peace. Sitting on rubbles of the harrowing experience of two decades of bloody conflict between the citizens of the same country, the peace accord has been signed on the 2nd of December 1997. Since the day, not a single life has departed to eternity as a result of the conflict. The red-green flag of Bangladesh, the symbol of our sovereignty, is now proudly hoisted in every nook and corner of that region. For the first time in the last 20 years, the warring men of our armed forces are enjoying a respite. Huge sum of money which so far was being drained every day from the national exchequer is now being spent not in skirmishes that took human lives but towards alleviation of human suffering.

The leader of the opposition observed hunger strike to disrupt the existing environment of peace and harmony. It is needless to elaborate that the

abrogation of peace treaty will immediately spark the resumption of hostility. But why the leader of the opposition wants to restart it? I will try to analyze these mind boggling questions later.

Historically, Mao Tse-Tung was credited with the initiation of Long March. He conducted the five thousand-mile long march with his foot soldiers to capture the last stronghold of Chiang Kaishek. Mao Tse-tung achieved success in that historical mission in Bangladesh. Long March was first organized by Moulana Bhasani — the so called Farakka Long March. I did not know if he wanted to capture the Farakka Dam. However, that was not possible either. If he organized his long march to create people's awakening about Farakka problem, that was redundant. Since Farakka was the most vital problem for the people of the country, the awakening was already there. But solution was dependent more on the goodwill of a neighbouring country rather than their own desire and expectation. Proficient diplomacy, not long march, was required to create the goodwill of the government and the people of that neighbouring country for the resolution of that problem which was to both the parties, to some extent, mutually exclusive in nature.

His much publicized long march did not pave even a lone stone towards solving that problem, rather an anti-India sentiment was created in the country and the cruelest casualty of that was the life-long progressive and non-communal politics of the Moulana, who was so revered for his dedication for the oppressed and the down-trodden.

The greatest beneficiaries of his long march, unfortunately, were the defeated anti-liberation, anti-people and reactionary forces. The leader who once erected 'Gandhi Gate', 'Nehru Gate' during his famous Kagmari conference, had taken a few critical decision at the fag end of his life, perhaps prompted by ill-advice of a few of his political colleagues with vested interests. Those decisions proved simply detrimental to the cause of the progressive and non-communal poli-

tics of the country. The most obvious result was the absolute nonexistence of the Moulana's own political party, which once was one of the largest in the country. Such selfish colleagues of the Moulana are now disgracefully located in different reactionary parties of the country. The leader who himself was accused more than once as 'Indian Agent', created an India phobia through his long march that ironically contributed to the demise of his life-long political conviction.

And now came the long march of the leader of the opposition. The objective of her long march was not very transparent. If she wanted to occupy CHT, following the foot steps of Mao Tse-tung, to bring the region under the sovereignty of Bangladesh, that step was no longer required as the area is already remains an inseparable part of the country. One does not need to occupy a part of his/her own country. Before the signing of the peace treaty on December 2, 1997, the region was not in full control of the Government of Bangladesh. I do not know if the leader of the opposition as Prime Minister was ever able to visit that area. However, in 1994, when our armed forces were in the most formidable position to crush the rebellion, it would have been more appropriate for the then PM to organize the long march, in order to bring the region under full control of Bangladesh authority. In that event, she could have been showered with the bravo of all our citizens and well wishers alike. Instead, as alleged by the present PM, she directed the armed forces to stop the whole operation. She owes an explanation to the nation as regard the invisible forces that influenced her to make that decision.

CHT is now under the full legal and administrative control of the Bangladesh Government. As a political leader of the country, it is her democratic right to organize any congregation anywhere in the country. However, one does not have to go there through long march; congenial environment has been created as a result of the

peace treaty whereby any citizen can go there just like any other location in the country. As she was able to go therewith scores of her followers without any resistance from the rebels bore enough testimony to the sensible assertion that the region is under full and absolute administrative control of Bangladesh. If the region would have been under the control of Indian authority after signing of the peace treaty, as repeatedly alleged by her, she and her big entourage would have been stopped as soon she crossed Fein.

The main concern of the leader of the opposition is that the peace treaty runs contrary to our constitution. The government, on the other hand, is assuring that the treaty is in total compliance with the constitution. Common people like us do not understand the complexity of the constitution; its critical interpretation is beyond our reach. Only the highest court of the land has been endowed with the authority to interpret and act as an adjudicator of the constitution and this court is, presently, not pro-administration by any account. A bulk percentage of our citizens is opposed to any kind of agitation against this treaty. Their views have been reflected in a recently conducted poll in Dhaka city. The result of the poll indicated that 82 per cent of the people are opposed to any kind of hartal, hunger strike or long march against the treaty. If the leader of the opposition had an iota of respect for the people's judgement and the highest court of the land, she would take her case to the court, leaving aside the ridiculous hunger strike and tiring long march. The court would give the verdict.

The leader of the opposition has a lot of concern about the power of the Regional Council. It is an undeniable fact that power of this council is much more than any other local body of the land. But one has to take the fact into consideration that CHT is a special area within Bangladesh. Its inhabitants, their culture, heritage, language and the whole social system are radically different from the people of the rest of the country.

Following the age-old tradition, the system of 'king' and 'subject' to an extent is still prevalent in the region. Historically, from ancient time, the ownership of this land was vested on the tribal people. The biggest apprehension of the leader of the opposition lies in her ceaseless accusation that the Regional Council might demand and declare independence in course of time. If the conjecture of the leader of the opposition becomes true, the Bangladesh Government will be able to exercise all moral and legal rights to abolish the Regional Council and resort to appropriate military measure to quell any rebellion.

Regional Council is not vested with any power to form any military or paramilitary forces. Our armed forces in the three cantonment situated in that area will have enough power to punish the unarmed separatist for abrogating the peace treaty. In addition, no provisions of the treaty will be able to restrict our armed forces from conducting any operation in that region as necessitated by the situation and as desired by the Government, just like in any other region of the country. Needless to say that the international border of that region will be, as usual, manned by our BDR and the armed forces. Moreover, by abrogating the internationally-acclaimed peace treaty, if the regional council (whose one-third members would be Bengalees) takes the self-inflicting decision, they will be totally deprived of any external assistance in their adventure. It will be too naive to assume that the tribal leadership are not aware of this fateful eventuality.

On the basis of these analyses, one does not have to be a Bertrand Russell to comprehend how unfounded the conjecture of the leader of the opposition is, on the one hand, the leader of the opposition is airing her continuous apprehension of secession as an apostle of our sovereignty, while her provocation is also there to the tribal people that they have been deceived by the treaty. In the realm of her diabolical opposition to the peace treaty, she has perhaps failed to realize that these two assertions are

the original plan was the practical inability of the marchers to spend the night in Chittagong due to loss of time on the way. But the Long March kept its stipulated meeting in Kharate and after holding the stipulated meeting in Kharate on 10th it was disbanded. The meeting was well attended, in spite of nefarious tactics adopted by the administration to dissuade people from joining, by way of turning back their transport and by providing them enticement with the promise to grant them ration cards.

The Long March accomplished not only the limited objective it set before itself. It achieved more. By way of putting up futile obstruction on the way, contrary to what they had pronounced, the ruling party lost much trust among more people the party would realise. That would be an indirect or negative gain for the opposition. If the government party wishes to absolve itself from their alleged complicity, it would be appropriate to set a high powered judicial enquiry about the incidents near the Kanchpur bridge both on the 9th and on the previous night. Otherwise, people's doubt would be deep rooted more firmly. As to what would follow on the political arena of the BNP, one could speculate that the BNP would not only bask in the glory attained by the Long March but will strive to accelerate the tempo of anti-government movement by way of fomenting feelings on the other significant national issues on which the BNP claims that the government has failed.

very much contradictory. The tribal groups who are opposed to the treaty have complained that the treaty even does not recognize the autonomy — the independence is a far cry.

Let us now focus our attention to the reasons behind the leader of the opposition's desperate antagonism about the peace treaty. Firstly, the treaty is a milestone of success for the present Awami League Government, which may not be a delightful news for the main opposition BNP did not at all wish such a treaty signed during the present regime and to that end, two of its MPs did not participate in the CHT parliamentary committee. On the other hand, two AL MPs participated in that committee during BNP's tenure even after tendering their resignation from the Parliament. Secondly, the treaty will have a positive impact on the economic development of Bangladesh. But that during the rule of AL? Thirdly, after the resolution of CHT problem, BNP leader would lose a strong element of her desperate anti-India rhetoric, a factor always attributed CHT problem as a product of the evil design of India. Fourthly, a number of opinion polls showed that the treaty carried the support of the bulk percentage of our population. It also includes the feelings of the members of our armed forces who fought for years an unwinning war of attrition. It is quite natural that they feel relieved. Lastly, through this treaty, Bangladesh has presented herself to the international community as a nation with the identity of sustenance of human rights able to manifest her affirmation as a civilized and democratic society. But that too during the rule of AL? This naturally may not generate any pleasure in the minds of those who unfortunately placed themselves in the wrong side of our glorious history. Hunger strike and long march against peace, again unfortunately, reflect influence of those elements in the organisation.

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To the Editor...

Social prevention against violation

Sir, We should take some effective measures to prevent brutal violations. And they are:

Religious practice: I believe firmly that only religious practices can ensure the banishment of mental perversion like 'sadism'. In all the religions, punishment is proclaimed against adultery and sex-related crimes. Only holy scriptures will make them realise that this act is a 'great sin'.

Banishment: Those animals are to be expelled from the society and we should avoid them scornfully in all social gatherings. This may arise in them the sense of penitence and reduce sadistic tendency.

Punishment: Capital punishment should be announced and fructified without giving the scope of getting bail through vigorous application of the law. The government must be just and impartial to detect and punish the real rapists. Such steps will purge the perversity from doing 'sadism' as everybody fears death.

Education: All the female members of a family have to be imparted proper education. An educated woman knows how to save herself from undesirable nuisance. She would be conscious of all kinds of trapping temptations.

Sense of Decency: It cannot be denied that dress of women

provokes men's sexual desire.

So women should be decent in dress and manner. Stimulative clothings must be avoided. It should be borne in mind that only 'get up' does not make one agreeable. Try to be rich in 'sartarun' in place of 'display'. Arun Kumar Biswas Dhaka

Rape and punishment

Sir, Sexual intercourse without consent, in other word rape, is becoming a common norm in Bangladesh. What is the cause of this? Some of us will say the law does not give severe punishment to the rapist. Some of us will say that our education system does not encourage us to honour others. Some of us will blame it on TV/Cinema. Actually all of the above are correct. It's the combination of all three. But what can be the solution for this kind barbaric act? A simple answer could be — tougher law for rapist. But is that enough to stop rape? The simple answer would be, No.

It might reduce the rape count, but would not stop it altogether. Another answer could be, tougher law and education. Well, 70 per cent of our population are illiterate and among them 65 per cent of male are illiterate. Then how can we stop rape and who are doing the crime? If we look at the offend-

ers, in most cases, the offenders are at their 20s. In some cases the offenders are older than that.

This young generation is not influenced by Hollywood and Bollywood. The cultural attack from both these groups and cultural restriction imposed on them by Bangladesh culture and the war between the two is one of the foremost causes of this problem. Some of this generation will ask for more freedom from this cultural restriction. But not knowing the true picture of the West and influenced by Hollywood and Bollywood, this generation does not know what they really want and where they are heading. If they look at the West, they would see that just in the USA rape cases everyday exceed the combined number in the planet.

First of all let's start with law. This will be easy to implement. Let's give capital punishment to anyone who commits rape. Second let's put restriction on Hollywood and Bollywood movies. We need to create a board to analyze all the movies from Hollywood and Bollywood before they hit the market. Anyone with illegal movies should be given severe punishment, in some cases, capital punishment. Let's stop all production and distribution of adult novels and fictions. I am mainly concerned about the cheap books. Let's also stop all X-rated film in Bangladesh. Third we need to impart sex ed-

ucation. All the TV channels should censor violent scenes especially of rapes.

Only these can reduce if not eliminate rape from Bangladesh. Imran Chowdhury New Brunswick New Jersey, USA

Shohag — a wretched kid?

Sir, There has been an age-long convention of the conflict between oppressed and oppressor that sometimes takes an inhuman form. Recently an unfortunate boy of 10, Shohag, was persecuted severely that arises a question: is the world going back to Middle Ages again? I can't even imagine how a motherly heart can be turned so callously to maternal appeal. I am quite astounded as well as pessimistic about humane qualities among us.

I would like to say that these inhumans should be given exemplary punishment. A K Biswas Jagannath Hall, DU

The one-billion market

Sir, The UNSC is in a fix on the imposition of stiff sanctions on India and Pakistan, the new non-members of the elite club. The hesitancy is obvious: the adverse effects on the

market of one billion developing humans (the needs of the developed are much less).

The signals are already coming in: the students of an university in India have 'banned' the sale of two mighty American cold drinks. When Mahathir twined the lion's tail the '80s with the terse slogan 'Don't buy British', the lioness came down to KL.

It remains to be seen how far the renaissance of old Asia could be contained by the setting sun in the West. Nuclear deterrents won't stand in the way of the inevitable cycles of Nature. God is kind, and does not discriminate. Africa for the 22nd century. What's wrong with this type of recycling? A Zabr Dhaka

Involving foreigners in internal affairs

Sir, Non-interference in internal affairs is an accepted principle of international relations. Sovereign countries, regardless of their size of political, economic and military strength, are expected to adhere to this principle in conducting inter-state relations.

In keeping with this principle, Bangladesh has never interfered in other countries' domestic matters. Unfortunately, however, our leaders themselves have at times invited foreign dignitaries to get in-

involved in Bangladesh's internal affairs.

In a not too distant past, the Awami League and the BNP, having failed to resolve their differences over the issue of holding general elections ahead of the schedule, had approached the Commonwealth Secretary-General's good office. The result was the mediation efforts of his Special Representative, Sir Ninian which did not produce any tangible outcome.

The government resorted to the same practice few days ago. Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad briefed Dhaka-based foreign envoys on the government's position concerning the opposition BNP-led 'long march'.

It is an irrefutable fact that the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord, which prompted the opposition to stage the 'long march', is very much internal affair of Bangladesh. What was the rationale behind involving foreigners in it? What purpose did it serve? Did it enhance our country's image at home or abroad?

I appeal to our leaders, belonging to both the ruling and the opposition parties, to abandon this shameful practice and to conduct themselves in a responsible and dignified manner.

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