

AL Should Respond

It is really frustrating and sad that once again our exhortations against hartal have fallen on deaf ears. The BNP has gone ahead with its hartal programme for today. This is however hardly a new experience for us. Right from the very first day of its emergence The Daily Star has been tirelessly trying to impress the fact upon the political parties that hartal is not only an anathema on the economy but also an utterly undemocratic practice against the people. Both Awami League and BNP have come to refuse this point of view with an amazing degree of obsessive consistency.

But at long last some signs have appeared on the horizon that suggest we can look beyond hartal as a political tool to register protest. Hope lies in a recent statement by the leader of the opposition. To her credit, BNP chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia has gone on record saying that her party would consider abjuring hartal if the ruling Awami League gives an undertaking that as and when it is in the opposition it won't resort to hartal. Now this, on the face of it, sounds as a genuine breakthrough; an excellent opportunity to turn the attenuating course of our politics by its head. We think by putting forward this offer Mrs. Zia has really injected that element of grace which is badly missing in our politics. By being so tangibly clear with her position she has actually sent the ball to the ruling party's court. The onus is now on Awami League. In our view the ruling party should respond to it immediately. If it can't say an outright no to the proposal it should at least make it public that it is examining it.

The point we are trying to make is that it is imperative that political parties, specially the ruling party should build on it. And build quickly. Precious time may have already been lost. Every passing day will add to the hardening of stances of the respective parties. So act quickly.

Outrageous

Senator Akram Zaki of Pakistan was here last week to deliver to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina a letter from her Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif. He was invited to talk on the post-explosion situation by two very respectable fora: the Centre for Policy Dialogue and the Institute of International and Strategic Studies. He ably represented the Pakistani point of view on the subject. And then he did something else quite beyond his waters. Senator Zaki saw in the emergence of Bangladesh a handiwork of some lady Surgeon operating on a child born whole.

This was standard rhetoric of the perpetrators of the 1971 genocide, put out to justify a massacre that shamed Changiz and Taimur and even Haikaku. The rhetoric, in which those executioners did not themselves believe, was used also to deny the fact of the Liberation War and Pakistan's ignominious defeat at the hand of the freedom fighters and the rationale for the birth of Bangladesh. Akram Zaki has betrayed an ignorance of knowing no better than what has been discredited and dismissed as substandard propaganda. Or knowing everything he has chosen to articulate outright falsehood.

We shall urge our Foreign Office to see that Bangladesh does not become an open field for anti-Bangladesh propaganda.

We are outraged over the damage his indiscretion might have caused to the good trend that has been building between our two states over the last few years. Nawaz Sharif's ideas on repatriation of stranded Pakistanis and a Pakistani reassessment of that state's performance in 1971 contributed gloriously to this good trend. This is what we should build on without being irreconcilably atavistic.

Israel's Trickery Condoned

Just when a tough UNSC resolution seemed in the works against Israeli expansionism in Jerusalem the US has intervened with its veto threat up its sleeves to soften it into a vegetative version of reprimand. An Arab-sponsored bid at the highest council of the world to get a severe stricture in place with an accompanying demand that Israel annul its expansion decision forthwith has petered away. A compromise presidential statement dubbing Tel Aviv's action merely as 'a serious and damaging development' has been adopted more as an expression of concern than condemnation.

A resolution by consensus has locus in international law while a statement is devoid of it. Such is the vital difference between the two. By moderating the UNSC's final version the US has in effect bolstered the Israeli eye-wash of a stance that all they are doing in Jerusalem is a municipal matter, not a fit subject to travel to the UNSC.

The Israeli ruse is at once exposed by what exactly is at stake and where the Mideast peace process is imperilled. Tel Aviv is hell-bent to change the demographic and political content of the disputed territory of Jerusalem with an ulterior motive of prejudicing the final status talks with the PLO which is determined to make Jerusalem the capital of a future Palestinian state. The final status negotiations are due in terms of the Oslo agreement to which Israel is a signatory like the PLO.

So, Israel is in serious breach of an international agreement which should be actionable in law. If Israel cannot be made to step back from executing its plan it will sound the death knell to what little remains of the Mideast peace process.

HARTAL POLITICS

Unwanted Thanks Thickening, Wanted Services Thinning

by A R Shamsul Islam

Every hartal is followed by a downpour of thanks to the people by the callers and protesters of the hartal alike. The former for so-called "spontaneous observance" and the latter for so-called "downright rejection". The attendant miseries of a hartal are antidotes to services expected from the hartal callers by the millions unfortunate

Fortune seems to have persistently frowned at the people of Bangladesh from almost all possible angles. A vast majority of them are plagued by poverty, hunger, disease, uneducation, unaccommodation etc.

The government and the opposition are supposed to be the first and second to attend to those grinding problems. Unfortunately till now none of them has played true to it. So the people do not feel thankful to any of them. Curiously enough, the otherwise unenergetic and obdurate government and the opposition have developed a culture of profusely thanking the people for what they say the support they have given them (government and the opposition) in pursuing an action. As for instance, every following day of a hartal (mostly called by the opposition) both the opposition and government pay profound thanks to the people — the opposition for people's spontaneously observing it and the government for people's outright rejecting it. What a more farcical thanks-getting war the teeming millions can win without doing any battle!

Whereas both the government and the opposition are pledge-bound to serve the people.

It is their obvious election plank. Neither calling a hartal nor containing it by force can have any concern for the welfare of the people. They mostly add to the people's woes.

Hamida Banu is a school teacher of a mafassil district. Her husband is attacked with myocardial infarction. He is rushed to Dhaka Suhrawardy Hospital. Unfortunately the transit day coincides with a dawn-to-dusk hartal called by the opposition. Apparently there is no problem. He is ferried in an ambulance whose plying the hartal callers are considerate enough to keep beyond the purview of the hartal. Still the plying ambulance is intercepted on Farmgate road by armed hartal pickets and the vehicle is damaged. The argument upheld is that in the guise of use of ambulance for patients hartal-opposed activities are proved to be done by persons on board the vehicle.

Of course, the press vehicles are emphatically declared to be outside the gamut of hartal. But

in practice sometimes these are found to be marked out for pinch attack. And worse still, some particular press transports are carefully discriminated against. Newspapers following hartal day bring out pictorial details of damages caused to the vehicles by the pickets punctuated with the injuries of the pressmen on board the vehicles.

The other day hartal weirdly coincided with the HSC Examination. Examinees, guardians, educationists, conscious people made fervent appeals to the Leader of the Opposition, the announcer of the hartal, to shift the hartal day. But it was not waived. Compellingly the examination was pushed back. It must have immensely worried the examinees and others concerned. What a sod, the hartal authorities do not sometimes consult the calendar. Maybe hartal is sometimes called in the thick of emotion in a public meeting. Worse still, when they are apprised of the unsuitability of a day for hartal

they do not often tend to be disposed to rectification.

Anti-hartal processions by the ruling party are now on the scene. The ruling party is in full command of the parliament supposed to be the hub of all national political activities. Still the ruling party considers it expedient to control the streets. The old belief that street agitations are the deciders in the game of power ascendancy is yet to go. The Awami League was the master of holding hartals. It paralysed the erstwhile BNP government by the rigour of hartals. The opposition BNP may be tempted to play the same game in its turn. But the latter should not miss the truth that it is not so much the hartals as the issue (caretaker government) behind the hartals that fired the then government. But has the BNP been able to put forth any such powerful issue to ride upon the hartals to squeeze the present government?

While in the opposition the Awami League advocated hartals as a means to end the then

government to end exploitation of the people and to restore their basic rights, particularly the right to franchise, that government of the BNP wrapped up. But what mentionable benefits have now accrued to the people in the hands of the yesterday's advocates of hartals and now their antagonists is a matter worth pondering over. In fact, people's confidence in the callers of hartals has palpably received a severe jolt.

Hartal is a multi-tongued vice. It batters every part of individual and national lives. Commerce, industry, time-bound export, academic calendar, healthcare etc. are the particular fields worst wrecked by it. The vast multitude day labourers feel its pinch in their empty stomach every moment.

To an individual sick hartal awards no lesser than a death-warrant. Each government is in the habit of painstakingly painting the staggering national losses running into millions of takas of a single day of hartal. It is mystifying that

when a ruling party slips into the opposition it gets absolutely oblivious of the harms of hartal.

Practical experiences have now made people disenchanted of the charms of hartal. Yet whenever called, hartal is mostly observed. Transports go off the roads, sometimes the trains off the track, shops remain closed, banks, offices locked, educational institutions unattended by the students. This is not so much for the democratic choices of the people as for the coercive powers of the pickets. Who wants to court personal damages by challenging hartal? People's attitude is that let the hartal pass off without confrontation.

Almost every hartal is followed by a downpour of thanks to the people by the callers and protesters of the hartal alike. The former for so-called "spontaneous observance" and the latter for so-called "downright rejection". The attendant miseries of a hartal are antidotes to services expected from the hartal callers by the millions unfortunate

The writer is retired Principal, Govt Mohila College, Pabna.

Who's to Blame if Vajpayee Government Falls?

G S Bhargava writes from New Delhi

As long as the BJP leaders, including the prime minister, are unable to discipline the VHP crowd and make them think and act like sane human beings living at the dawn of the 21st century the party's problem will not end.

If as is being feared at June-end, the second Vajpayee government goes the way of the first, who is to blame? Not the opportunistic combine of the two Yadavs. Deva Gowda, et al bending over backwards to crown Mrs Sonia Gandhi as Prime Minister, with the two Communist parties unrolling their red carpet. Not even the obstreperous fair-weather 'allies' of the BJP notably Ms Jayalalitha's All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (A-I ADMK).

The fault lies in the BJP's recent penchant for riding more than one horse at the same time to be all things to all men, or being clever by half. The reference is not again so much to the party's unthinking electoral alliance with slippery bed fellows like Ms Jayalalitha and Ms Mamata Banerjee to a lesser extent. (Incidentally, if the State leadership of the BJP in Andhra Pradesh had not put its foot down, the national policy makers would have landed themselves in an equally messy situation vis-a-vis N T Rama Rao's widow, Ms Lakshmi Parvati, who would have made Atal Behari Vajpayee's cup of sorrow spill over.)

The reference is to the more fundamental issue of the BJP's identification with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Bajrang Dal and their likes who are counted as the Sangh parivar following its adoption of the Hindutva philosophy about a decade ago. True, the Jan Sangh, as the first edition of the BJP had organic links with the RSS, but when Dr Shyama Prasad Mukerjee launched the Sangh he rejected the Akhand Hindustan plank of the Hindu

Mahasabha. He envisaged the Jan Sangh as a right-wing national alternative to the Congress, even if predominantly Hindu, more like the right-wing Christian democratic parties in Europe which are secular notwithstanding their Christian label. His successors also did not toe a blatantly sectarian line even when persons like Vajpayee with RSS background assumed party presidentship.

Secondly, the RSS is a highly disciplined organisation and despite its hidebound outlook and involvement in anti-Muslim violence during the post-partition disturbances its political role had been limited. But the new entrants to the Sangh parivar like the VHP are ragtag and bobtail with their own axes to grind. Even if in a desperate bid to garner votes on emotional issues the BJP had opted for the highly divisive temple plank (that the mosques at Ayodhya, Kashi and Mathura had to be razed and supplanted by temple) it would not have by itself gone in for the vandalism at Ayodhya in December 1992. The VHP and its likes had hijacked the tactic and made a mess of it, for the country and the BJP.

In the 1998 general election the BJP tried to extricate itself from the predicament even if its manifesto mouthed the temple slogan in respect of Ayodhya. It had simultaneously committed

itself to abide by the judicial verdict in the Ayodhya case but the VHP is again out to preempt such a solution by its temple-building activities and intemperate talk about it. The idea is to subvert the judicial decision because in the light of the passions being roused by the VHP on the issue, any decision by the Supreme Court can touch off strife and worse. That is despite the prime minister's assurance to parliament that the government will honour the court verdict, whatever it be.

In the process the BJP has become a prisoner of its own political myopia on the assumption that its rapid and striking growth in electoral terms in the last three elections was on account of the temple slogan. More crucially, while the government has been succeeding in convincing unprejudiced international opinion of the security considerations behind the

Pokhran-2 tests of May last, the VHP is out to muddy the waters again.

Following the blasts, several leaders of the Indian Christian community including a few bishops issued a statement on May 12 pointing out, inter alia, that the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) by which the nuclear weapon States have been swearing "has failed to address the grievances and fears of many nations that it is discriminatory in nature and suberves the interests of only nuclear powers." It further implicitly calls on "all governments" to "address the fears and security perceptions" of the people all over the world. It has also aptly recalled the Rome Synod of Bishops of Asia against nuclear weapons on both social and moral grounds. In other words, it has reinforced the government plea to the international community, especially

the Big-5, about CTBT and elimination of nuclear weapons even while voicing its abhorrence of weapons of mass destruction.

Among the signatories to the statement are Bishop Vicent Concessao, auxiliary bishop of Delhi and a member of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Bishops Council of India. Bishop Karam Masih, Bishop of Delhi of the Church of North India and Bishop Pritam Sant Ram, retired bishop of Delhi and a widely respected Christian leader of the country.

One would have thought the bishops' statement was palpitatively patriotic and genuinely altruistic, but not the VHP. Ashok V Chowgule, president of the Maharashtra branch of the VHP, has published a statement asking the church leaders of India "to write to their mother churches and force the leaders of the US, UK and France to fall

in line with India's stand on peril of excommunication. First, there are no mother churches. Secondly, the three western countries are far from Christian in the strictly religious sense. Finally, it is the height of stupidity to think of forcing them to change their political stand through a religious instrument like excommunication. But the VHP cannot think beyond a narrow religious groove.

As long as the BJP leaders, including the prime minister, are unable to discipline the VHP crowd and make them think and act like sane human beings living at the dawn of the 21st century the party's problem will not end.

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BANGABANDHU MURDER CASE

Verbatim Text of Cross Examination of Investigation Officer

Q : Abdul Mannan of Tangail was also a member of Musharraf's cabinet.

A : Yes.

Q : Abdus Samad Azad, Abdur Razzaq, Tofael Ahmed, Zillur Rahman were Bangabandhu's political colleagues and now they are ministers.

A : Yes.

Q : Late Serniabat's son Abdul Hasnab Abdulla is now the Chief Whip in parliament.

A : Yes.

Q : Minister Mohammad Nasim is the son of late Mansur Ali, who was a member of Bangabandhu's cabinet.

A : Yes.

Q : Razia Naser was wife of late Sheikh Naser, who was also killed along with Bangabandhu, and their son Sheikh Helal is a member of treasury bench.

A : Yes.

Q : Present Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister Dr SA Samad was posted at Bangabandhu's cabinet and he later joined in Musharraf's cabinet.

A : Yes.

Q : Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury was a member of Bangabandhu's cabinet and he later joined in Musharraf's cabinet.

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