

Opt Out of Hartal

The prime minister's recent, unconditional declaration that her party would never call a hartal again, had given a boost to civil society's appeal to political parties to forsake the use of this political weapon once and for all.

This paper has already and unequivocally welcomed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's announcement. However, we also acknowledge that it is far easier for a ruling party to eschew hartals than it is for a party in opposition which may see strikes as the only effective weapon against government excesses.

What we have now is a job half done. The Awami League may return to the opposition, but Hasina's commitment to the nation has to stand. But the BNP's position creates a sense of uncertainty, because "government behaviour" is an open-ended matter which can be interpreted in different ways.

CHT Outlook

Shantu Larma has made it clear that he has plans to organise rallies on December 2 to explain the PCJSS position on the status of implementation of the CHT Peace Accord.

So far so good. But if he should hold the peace accord so dear to his heart and be expressly so keen on implementing it at the earliest, then it definitely falls on him to keep from putting any spanner on the wheels.

The PCJSS enjoyed its first real taste of open political activity when it observed the death anniversary of Manabendra Narayan Larma. And the rallies on December 2 would give them another opportunity at it.

The liberal democratic atmosphere in which they are operating now obligates them to act with a great sense of responsibility, especially because the peace agreement is yet to be fully operationalised and that elements who are arrayed against it could be raring in the wings to sabotage the process.

The interim decision-making apparatus in the CHT, in whatever form it exists today, can put all the niggling conditions behind them by settling down to the all-important job of holding early hill district council elections to clear the course for an elected Regional Council to be put in place.

The Luminous Show

A regular pouring it would be newspapers had said. Wide-eyed reports of the shooting star fireworks on the previous night increased crowd of the curious to unexpected bigness. It was quite an event — witnessing a heavenly show without paying for the seat. The wait was killing and the show short.

For the nation it was a valuable change from the usual inertial occupation with very plain and mundane things. Russell valued things by their degree of uselessness. For the first time may be, people all over the land were training their eyes on the night sky for a show of hurtling lights.

Not all spectators know about shooting stars. Very few have any idea of the size of a star or how far it is. Still there is a stir, a kind of mental big leap. For lakhs the two nights' sky-fare came, for the first time in a million years that the Homo Sapiens have been here, without fear of some evil portent. This is a big shift. And newspapers can take deserved credit for kind of inviting the multitude to the gateless show on everyone's piece of sky.

How to Avoid Hartal? A Case Study and Remedy

The paramount need, devolves on the honest and total commitment of the major political parties to work sincerely for what they publicly state. Would it be too much to expect our political leaders, in the interest of peace, democracy and development, to sincerely adhere to and practice simple but effective modes of political behaviour?

HARTAL or a general strike as a political weapon is the most unwanted, unpopular and harmful one. It upsets life pattern of people, specially of urban people, causes immense distress to them and results in enormous economic and financial loss to the nation.

In the rich and developed world, hartal is unknown but partially used in a factory or establishment mainly to redress economic grievances. Of course, material prosperity and well-being make them relatively nonchalant for wasting time and energy for using general strike as a political weapon.

It is well-known that during the BNP regime of five years the Awami League held 173 days of hartals of different dimensions in order to achieve their principal objective of introducing a non-partisan caretaker government to supervise general election. They also boycotted en masse the parliament and later resigned from its membership.

A familiar picture is unfolded this week between the US and Iraq. The US invokes its military power backed by Britain and threatens military strike against Iraq. The UN Secretary General intervenes and Iraq allows the UN inspectors back to work in Iraq.

Iraq leadership ceased its cooperation with the UN inspectors on 31 October as it perceived itself as a subject of an endless game of UN inspectors at the bidding of the US.

The US and Britain claim that under the terms of its Gulf War surrender Iraq must prove to the UNSCOM that it has destroyed all its prohibited weapons before the sanctions can be lifted.

before election, to succeed. During the present Awami League regime of two and a half years the BNP held even less than a dozen hartals. Even these have given rise to huge clamour that hartal should be shunned, because of the consequent untold sufferings to the people and the nation.

The issues over which BNP called hartals included arrest on ridiculous charges of three of their leaders, who were later acquitted by High Court with unprecedented imposition of fine on the government, denial of permission to BNP supporters to hold fast in a venue away from and at a time much before a cricket tournament, breaking up of a public meeting on a day of special significance by Awami League hooligans and the police through bomb blast and firing of tear gas shells one of which almost hit the leader of the opposition and threatened her life, etc besides the basic issues of escalating price of essentials, increasing incidents of rape and repression on women, indiscriminate arrest and false charges against opposition members, economic and financial scandals and debacles, industrial and business stagnation, corruption and lack of transparency in gas exploration deals etc.

But there are, indeed, difficulties. As a matter of policy, everyone should and will welcome such a noble move, provided this could be translated into practice in full and adhered to scrupulously by the parties concerned. While every one can monitor the present situation, what will happen in future becomes a matter of conjecture and uncertainty. One has to say

the work of the UN inspectors was not completed and it appeared to them that it would not end in future. Iraq maintains that it has already complied with the UN resolution as the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) has accounted for 817 of Iraq's 819 Scud missiles and destroyed the weapons of mass destruction. Iraq argues that the UN should now conduct a comprehensive review of Iraq's compliance record.

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ration deals etc. Hon'ble Prime Minister came out with a proposal on the 15th with a host of distinguished editors and journalists to the effect that the Awami League will not call hartal in future, when in opposition, if the BNP will not do so at present. Her Finance Minister had already indicated such a plan earlier. Apparently, one cannot generally conceive of a better proposal. This will, inter alia, help promote a peaceful democratic process in the country.

The BNP Chairperson is also on record stating that she dislikes hartal. So, there should ordinarily be no difficulty to clinch an agreement.

ten agreement to that effect provide sufficient guarantees to ensure that the Awami League will not flout the agreement, as they have done now in the parliament and resume their previous practice of calling hartals once they are in the opposition? If the current proposal is excellent to them why was it no good for them in the past? In future, they can always take shelter under the excuse that a changed situation would call for a changed remedy.

However, this type of agreement holds good only in a situation of mutual trust and understanding after an atmosphere has developed wherein opposing parties respect each other's views, aspirations and commitments. Can we honestly say that we now find ourselves in such a situation? The answer is obviously an emphatic no, specially after recent incidents of the breaking up of BNP's public meeting and preventing them from taking peaceful processions by raising police barricades even far away from the destination. The harassment and the effort in evicting the leader of opposition from her residence and putting up barricades in front can generate many feelings but surely not those conducive to an atmosphere of mutual respect, understanding and accommodation.

In my opinion, the best and practical method of avoiding hartals is for all the political parties to adopt sincerely and I repeat sincerely the following policies and methods of action:

1) All political movements must be peaceful movements. No one attending a political rally or participating in a procession must be allowed to carry weapons of any type, including poles or heavy sticks.

2) Government party will not resort to violence and use police force to disrupt peaceful public meetings and orderly processions. The opposition parties will also undertake to do like-

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wise. 3) The ruling party and the opposition must not be allowed to hold public meetings and take out processions in an area and at a time where one political party or group had already announced its decision to hold a programme from before.

4) The government must refrain from rounding up opposition leaders and workers without valid and genuine charges and undertake not to harass them unnecessarily. It would also be most desirable that the Special Powers Act is repealed, in fulfillment of the pledge made by the ruling party in its election manifesto and repeated public pronouncements before elections.

5) The police brutality and torture must be stopped. There must not be recurrence of death and rape in police custody. Any further such incident should be severely dealt with.

If the above conditions are generally fulfilled, the opposition will have no reason to call hartals. However, the points noted above are also publicly shared, strangely enough, by all political parties. But they obviously do not act on what they preach. The paramount need, therefore, devolves on the honest and total commitment of the major political parties to work sincerely for what they publicly state. These represent merely some of the democratic norms, values and practices. Would it be too much to expect our political leaders, in the interest of peace, democracy and development, to sincerely adhere to and practice these simple but effective modes of political behaviour?

Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim



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Cat and Mouse Diplomatic Game between the US and Iraq

by Barrister Harun ur Rashid

Political analysts believe that we have not seen the end of this game as yet. Let me cite an analogy with an opera show. There is a saying that the show is not over unless the fat lady sings. The fat lady has yet to sing and we only hope that with the end of the song the whole theatre does not fall apart.

The US maintains that Iraq must demonstrate its "bonafide" behaviour with the UN inspectors for a length of time before the review can begin. Iraq on the other hand claims that the review should begin within seven days of the arrival of the UN inspectors.

The Arab world (except possibly Kuwait) do not approve of a military strike against Iraq and perceive the US hard policy towards Iraq as double standard while the US is perceived to allow Israel to flout the UN resolutions with impunity in respect of the Palestine situation. The more the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu pursues a strident and negative policy towards the Palestinian people, the less the US will receive support from the Arab world in pursuing its hard line policy towards Iraq.

There is a lurking belief in some quarters that so long as President Saddam Hossain remains in power, the US will not allow the sanctions to be withdrawn from Iraq. There is a view that the primary aim of the argument that no progress on weapons equalled no lifting of sanctions is designed to make President Saddam Hossain unpopular leading to his removal from power. The US appears to remain coy about the removal of President Saddam, although President Clinton publicly stated this time that the US would support the anti-Saddam forces in and outside Iraq. A major victory for the US diplomacy was the re-uniting the two factions of Kurdish leadership in northern Iraq which could provide a platform for opposition forces in Iraq to undermine the regime of President Saddam Hossain. A view prevails that the US wants a change of government in Iraq before sanctions are lifted.

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To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Is there any answer? Sir, Politics is a profession of suffering, and the number of martyrs is increasing day by day. The people are made to suffer for political reasons that appease the human gods at the pedestals.

The people must have realised by now that the tit-for-tat brand of local politics has now swung into planned operation during this winter season which is the third year of the present regime, despite the warnings from the mighty rivers and the tearing monsoon rains from the high heavens.

Political winners come into power with long Waiting Lists and Agendas, some known, and some hidden. The voters must bear the responsibility of choosing their representatives, presuming fair election procedures. We voters must be careful whom we vote for during the next General Elections. Looks like it is time for Earned Leave for some, who are surely overworked trying to save the country from ghosts, spirits and so many imaginary evils.

Why Bangladesh finds it so difficult to enjoy freedom? I wish I knew the answer.

A Zabr Dhaka

Six-day postal service Sir, Our well-established postal service, based on the empire traditional, needs to be modernised and updated to meet the faster services required in these days of hectic development and global trade. The pace of life and business have increased tremendously, but our postal service is reminiscent of the Age of Leisure, compared to the current information Age.

On Saturdays, the post offices may work for half a day, and/or the night PO may operate, with one mail delivery service on that day (in place of the usual twice-a-day delivery), since the private sector work on this day. As the NPOs levy a surcharge, the arrangement may continue, to meet the operating expenses, as usual.

Terrorising news Sir, Few days before the verdict of Bagabandhu Murder Case, a leading national vernacular daily published an alarming news of infiltration of large number of Taliban or so in Bangladesh. Since then, the news item is occupying the front page banner of that daily. The daily has even quoted the Detective Branch and the Home Secretary about a hit list of VIP prepared by that terrorist group. The matter should be taken seriously, if it is true. Be-

cause it is not only a matter of great concern for the VIPs, but also for us.

The DS which is very efficient missed the news. It is also surprising that our Home Ministry though aware of such presence, only confined with one particular daily, instead of releasing the details to all mass media for public alert and vigilance.

The DU Medical Centre

Sir, The Dhaka University Medical Centre is facing many problems. Only a shortlisted medicines are available here and the doctors are prescribing on the basis of these limited medicines. As a result many patients do not get proper treatment. If anyone suffers from any kind of fever doctors prescribe only Paracetamol, and Antacid tablet is another common medicine for gastric problems however serious the patient is! There are scarcity of specialists also. Many serious diseases are treated by inexperienced doctors and sometimes it creates grave problems for the patients. A few years back a student of Fazul Haq Hall died of wrong prescribed medicines. Besides, the doctors do not come to the medical centre timely.

We protest this deplorable state and demand specialists and better medical facilities. Also we want punctuality from them. The authority should take proper steps about it.

Hasan Sharif Ahmed Department of Physics University of Dhaka

The cat and mouse game between US and Iraq seems to have no end. The long-drawn-out weapon inspection by US (using the name of UN) has made the matter more complicated and cumbersome. Moreover, the recent attack on Sudan has made it clear that US is practising its power on any country it targets. How long Iraq will have to bear up with this oppression and how long the world community will take the role of silent spectators is the question now.

It is true that Iraq has recently denied offering any help to the UN inspection body. But we should not forget the fact that the UN inspection body has taken as much time as eight years to prove that Iraq has any objectionable weapon. But they failed to prove that Saddam Hussein though President Saddam Hussein allowed them to inves-

tigate his own palace which any other president might not have allowed. It cannot be denied that the Iraqi nation has undergone an embarrassing situation with the presence of the UN inspection. So now when the UN has failed to prove their allegation even after such a long time of investigation, it is natural that Iraq will want the matter to come to an end. As Iraq has given so much time to prove the allegation, it is pardoned that the time has come now for Iraq to be reluctant to give more time to UN inspection team.

The situation has been dragged to such an ominous position that the US and its allies seem to start a military action against Iraq. They have openly stated that all other options including military option is open which is nothing but a threat from a super power. Such threats reflect total disregard to international norms and exposure of muscle.

In such a predicament it is the moral responsibility of the world community to respond to the deplorable condition of the people of Iraq. I urge all the decent people of all the countries to come forward and voice against to end embargo on Iraq and force the UN to withdraw its so-called inspection team.

The local satisfaction is all the more deeper to find a young man originally hailing from Manikgunj and Dhaka (Wari) honoured by the world's most prestigious recognition. Such honours have no boundaries, and the Bengalees, Indians, South Asians, Asians, the developing countries all over the globe rejoice at the creativity and originality of man's mind, regardless of the background and surroundings of growth and development of the human faculties which take civilisation one significant step forward. Plain living and high thinking has once again asserted itself in this age of materialism, consumerism, cut-throat competition — aberrations coming out of the classical texts on economics.

The recognition of the subtle economics of poverty, famine, and deprivation has come at the right time during this age of change, now reaching the peak of transition, on the eve of the new millennium with the collected hopes of millions of the possible emergence of a new world order of peace and prosperity — and economic equality.

Lately the UN specialised agencies dealing with economics and financial matters were openly trying to come to terms with the gaps in the classical theories of western development aid packages which failed to address many aspects of lingering poverty even in the DCs and the LDCs — the increasing disparity of wider and wider gaps between the rich and the poor, and the continued sagging of the poverty line due to unbearable loads of economic distress. Amartya Sen appears to have the scissors to cut the Gordian knot.

Women's University

Sir, This letter is in reference to a letter written by Tanji Tanim, published in DS of 6th November, 1998.

The writer has rightly pointed out the need of a women's university in our country and I felt the necessity to write these few lines for your kind information, that in the year 1992 under the Private University Act and approved by University Grant Commission and Ministry of Education; Central Women's University, an institution for higher education, exclusively for women has been founded in Abhay Das Lane, Tikatoly, Dhaka by some renowned and dedicated educationists with sole aim of imparting higher education to women especially the middle class in a congenial and harmonious atmosphere. Experienced and experts in their own fields from Jahangirnagar University and Dhaka University have voluntarily extended their honorary services to this university.

The first batch came out in the year 1995 and since then four batches have passed out in different subjects — English, Geography, Political Science, History of Muslim World and Economics. Up till now 31 student excluding the present batch have passed and all of them are holding executive positions in banks and different educational and business organisations.

Prof. Mehrunnissa Ahmed Registrar Central Women's University Dhaka

The award of this year's Nobel Prize in Economics to the first Asian — and that too from a developing country — is a belated global admission, however indirect, of the limitations of the economic theories practised in the North which led to industrialisation and materialistic affluence, but the benefits carried its own shadows and shades of poverty which cast its umbra and penumbra in the Third World. It is ironical to point out that the sun also rises in the East. The good news is the belated recognition of an elusive fact of life and existence.

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OPINION

The bottomless baskets are very much there in the countries under the custody of two thirds of the world's population, but the stumbling blocks were how to recognise the symptoms, diagnose with the right analytical tools, and offer prescriptions which would work and show positive results consistently, generation after generation. It is hoped Professor Amartya Sen's findings would lessen the traditional burden of pervading poverty and deprivation in the Third World. It is a consolation that Bangladesh, another name comes to mind, mentioned by Sen himself at a BBC interview, his colleague Dr Mahbubul Haq of Pakistan who passed away recently after being associated for two decades with economic activities at the UN level. The UN Human Development Report creates a first impact not easy to shake off.

We are proud of the contributions of the great economists of South Asia. No Western mind could have drafted this HD Report, without living lifetime in the company of the poor and the impoverished, deprived, who are denied the benefits of economic development. The South labour market also has 'bottomless baskets' of the Kissinging kind.

Today economics and political stability go in tandem; a situation which defies coordination in the developing countries. The recent collapse of the ASEAN and Asian countries is a pointer toward regenerating and rejuvenating the economics of the poor, to reduce the gaps with the economics of the rich. The imbalance is too tilted to provide a stable centre of gravity. Dr Sen has appeared on the stage at the right moment, backed by years of thoughtful deliberations — lateral thinking was necessary in the field of economic theories, to break away from the acquired pattern of capitalist thinking.

During the next century, the South has to support the North, to provide and open the huge developing markets for the sustenance of the rich nations who are now sliding on a declining curve. Rise and fall is the cyclic order of Nature. The cosmic laws are kind, and provide opportunities by turn.

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The Economics of the Poor Recognised

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