

Abdication to Gun-runners

There are two aspects to the gun-toting man's charging image caught in a Daily Star front-page photograph of Tophkana Road scene during hartal Tuesday. The single snapshot pointed to a mind-boggling new down-slide in the profile of lawlessness: not just law but enforcement of law seemed taken into one's own hand, thanks to (a) an unbridled sense of immunity felt from 'favourable' connections, and (b) abdication of the special crisis-time street authority of the police to whoever dares testing it openly and wantonly.

That's what the desperado in the picture exactly did on the apparent strength of being an anti-hartal activist fighting the ruling party's cause given a somewhat publicised legitimacy by local chieftains swearing to 'declare certain areas hartal-free'. Suspected to be a local AL MP loyalist, he brazenly felt unafraid of the public exposure in the street.

But what is terribly more upsetting is the fact that he could so easily seize the weapon from an on-duty policeman and brandish it openly in full public view without any trace whatsoever of any uniformed personnel even attempting to retrieve the lost gun from the lone man or overpower and arrest him. The extrication of weapon from a lawman is the height of police callousness. Furthermore, how could a police contingent which must have been on hand be a mute spectator given its call of assigned duty and still they can hope to keep above criticism that they turned their tail and ducked for playing it safe when the chips were down.

We are hardly interested in 'cracking the code' about what the hartal or anti-hartal strategies were and how these might have vibrated locally, out suffice it to say that it's time the authorities have a stern impervious control of the streets during hartals. The policing failure at such times can prove disastrous.

Recently hartals are getting increasingly marked by processions for and against them, so that instead of any persuasive undertone of the atmosphere, there is a considerable heating up of the same as days wear on. Major political parties for their own sakes as well as for the country's need to put a brake on such tendencies towards staging slanging matches that evidently push things to direr straits.

Reduce Newspaper Holidays

It is a genuine feeling of frustration that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has expressed over complete newspaper shutdown during the Eid holidays. In fact, the confusion created by the late announcement of moon sighting further added to the problem this year and we had to go without newspapers for four days. We appreciate the concern of the Prime Minister whose suggestion for shorter holidays and thinner editions, if necessary, during these festivals, are well-taken. The workers in this industry produce 350 regular issues of different sizes in a year. In addition, a number of special issues on various subjects are also produced every year. The job is demanding and at the same time exciting and creative. So who will not like to have

a longish holiday and give time to his family and friends? But this is essentially a public service sector designed for the buyers who are also the readers and constitute the most important part of the operation. Hence the interest of these sections of people has to be served without interruption.

In pre-liberation days newspapers used to remain closed for the Eid day only. In Pakistan today, it is still the practice. The beauty in those days were that the publications had their own agents for the Dhaka city and they competed with each other. These agents had their own pool of hawkers' for distribution of the newspapers, so there was no problem in the publication and distribution of newspapers during the festivals. The scene has changed drastically. Today the distribution system of all newspapers in Dhaka city is concentrated in the hawkers' cooperative society. All hawkers have to be members of the society in order to sell newspapers and periodicals. Most of the members of the cooperatives come from far-flung areas of Bangladesh and on the Eid holidays they go home to spend time with their families. So the city remains without hawkers.

But the PM is very right when she observes that possibly nowhere in the world people go without paper for three consecutive days. It is time, therefore, for some arrangement to be struck between newspaper managements and representatives of the hawkers' unions to discuss ways to reduce holidays, and make special arrangements to publish newspapers on Eid and other holidays. The leaders of the industry must take a lead in this matter.

Oops, a Mistake!

Think about it — president of India is missing. That's what the Bangalore station of the state-run television Doordarshan reported in their regular Monday programme on missing persons. No, he was not kidnapped by any extremist or separatist group; nor was he out on an errand. In fact, on errand was, unfortunately, the station's sense of responsibility and on display was irresponsibility of the highest order. While the photograph of President K R Narayanan was being aired with the appeal for information as to his whereabouts, nobody at the station cared to look for the president at the Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi. The station must be facing the music for the mistake. They should be, indeed.

Such mistakes tell on credibility of the media. People start losing faith in their authenticity and, at one stage, they may not just care about the news and views they disseminate. On a less humorous plane, during last year's floods, the BBC predicted that a few million people could die in famine as logical consequence of the loss of crops in the prolonged and pervasive floods. They back-tracked, however, a couple of days later. The damage was already done. The cynics clamoured about another blow to media's credibility.

The Doordarshan slip should be a lesson for "our" state-run media on what should not be done. Many, however, fear it might generate a negative inspiration — well, if "they can, what if we do." Let's see.

Holy Eid-ul-Fitr: Confusion through Indecision

The time difference between Saudi Arabia and Bangladesh in astronomical terms, considering the longitude, is only three hours. In that case, if Eid is celebrated in Saudi Arabia on a particular day, Eid needs to be celebrated in Bangladesh only three hours later on the same day or, at best, within 24 hours on the next day. Under no circumstances, it can be observed more than 24 hours later or two days after Eid in Saudi Arabia.

HOLY Eid-ul-Fitr was performed generally all throughout Bangladesh in a belittling manner on the 19th instant. The date of holding this festivity, which takes place after month-long fasting in holy Ramadan is cognisant upon the sighting of the Shawal moon. This renders an element of uncertainty and raises curiosity among people, specially children, who make it a ceremonial occasion trying to see the rising crescent by their own eyes. Sighting of the new moon is heralded in a scene marked by loud and joyous sound and fury. The welcome news would spread all over the locality, region and even the country within minutes. Many families would then go out to market to complete their last bit of shopping in a festive mood.

The usual scene as described above witnessed a marked deviation on the eve of the Eid-ul-Fitr that we celebrated recently. On that occasion, many people went out just before dusk with the hope of sighting the wished moon. But they were disappointed. None in the capital saw by their own eyes the moon rising over the horizon in the sky. In view of the new moon's low elevation, the moon could be seen by naked eyes, if at all, only briefly for some minutes and certainly not for hours. If the sky was cloudy or misty, none would expect to sight the moon. We recall that in our young days, people were even made to fly in aircraft to sight the moon in a clear sky. But almost in all cases, the sighting or otherwise of the moon, even from the remotest part of the country, used to be collated on an urgent basis and broadcast

maximum within an hour or so after dusk.

In Bangladesh, no news came from anywhere of the country that the Shawal moon had been sighted. The national moon sighting committee, headed by the Hon'ble State Minister for Religious Affairs, was in session from dusk but got no news from any quarters in favour of sighting of the moon. As a result, government controlled radio and television broadcast at 8 P.M. that none had sighted the moon. The electronic media even gave out the timings of Sehri and Iftar for the following day. People had already gone to offer their "tarabi" prayers. Many even retired for the night.

Lo and behold, the 10 O'Clock radio and television news started with the newscaster greeting the viewers with the address "Eid Mubarak." People were stunned, bewildered and later amused. They had earlier heard the news that the moon had not been sighted and, as such, people were advised to fast for another day to complete 30 days of Ramadan. They wondered how it was possible for anyone to accomplish the extraordinary feat of watching the moon in naked eyes after 8 O'Clock at night, unless one had been equipped with parabolic infra-red telescopic eyes to project through a dark and distant sky. Any way, if someone was able to sight the moon before 8

O'Clock, no matter how far and whatever God forsaken place it might have been, in this age of advanced communication facilities, the news would have been received by the moon sighting committee immediately. The local authorities and Deputy Commissioners of districts, as per instruction and normal practice, would have informed Dhaka immediately after someone sighted the moon in their region. But this did not



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

Then came the decision of the famous committee to hold the Eid on the next day. A local Imam in Dhaka was stated to have sighted the moon. It took 4 hours for this news to travel from one place to another within Dhaka city and for the Committee to verify it. The situation appeared incredible, lent doubt in the minds of the people many of whom, specially in distant parts of the country, held Eid on a different day, according to the earlier announcement. People were perplexed, confused and grossly divided. Many of them reluctantly went

to markets for their last bit of shopping. Most of them were visibly annoyed. Cynics were highly amused. The whole episode demonstrated total failure of the State Minister and his committee in discharging their duties diligently and on time on such an important issue.

In the absence of a plausible clarification, one has to surmise as to what had actually happened. If the Hon'ble Minister

did not find any news by 8 P.M. about any reliable person having sighted the moon, he should have stuck to his decision that Eid would not be held on the following day. A dubious information supplied by someone at a much later stage was suspect and should not have been taken cognisance of by the Committee. Specially so, when an Imam, being well aware of the high significance of the issue, would have immediately informed the Committee. But, apparently he did not do so. Why? Again, how the vast multitude of Dhaka dwellers, except the Imam, failed to have a glimpse of the fleeting crescent?

Some people also go so far as to stretch their imagination by correlating sequence of events in that fateful evening. At 8 P.M., they heard from radio and TV that the moon was not sighted. At 8:30 P.M., they heard Hon'ble Prime Minister's speech ending with the greetings of Eid Mubarak. Shortly thereafter and at 10 O'Clock television news came the announcement that the Eid would be held the next day. This sequence of events makes one wonder whether a revision of the decision of the Religious Affairs authority was prompted by the indomitable urge to vindicate the Prime Minister, under all circumstances!

Notwithstanding the present case, one does have to think seriously about the anomaly, uncertainty and consequent inconvenience for all due to the absence of pre-determined date of Eid-ul-Fitr. One is made to believe that according to the holy scripture, the Eid should be held only after one person has physically sighted the moon in naked eye and that has to be corroborated by witnesses. In the past, this requirement resulted in holding Eid congregation on different days in the same country. The incidence has since been reduced considerably, though it does happen from time to time. Even in some remote areas of Bangladesh, this happens due to lack of communication facilities.

In the present age of advanced scientific accomplishments, it is incredible to assume that the exact date and time of rising of a new moon in different parts of the globe could not be ascertained well in advance. It is, indeed, possible. However, if one concedes to the argument that one must adhere to the dictates of the scripture, then one simple and obvious way of solving this perennially vexed problem is to follow the decision and practice of Saudi Arabia, the abode of holy Kaaba. The time difference between that country and Bangladesh in astronomical terms, considering the longitude, is only 3 hours. In that case, if Eid is celebrated in Saudi Arabia on a particular day, Eid needs to be celebrated in Bangladesh only 3 hours later on the same day or, at best, within 24 hours on the next day. Under no circumstances, it can be observed more than 24 hours later or 2 days after Eid in Saudi Arabia.

As for conformity to scriptures, if someone in Saudi Arabia has sighted the moon and it is corroborated by the authorities there, it should be tantamount to have been seen by the entire Islamic Ummah. In the olden days, news could not travel fast and that is why the practice of sighting moon locally was in vogue, for reasons of expediency. It should, therefore, be logical, easy and acceptable to all to celebrate Eid-ul-Fitr in Bangladesh on the day following it is observed in the holiest of holy lands, unless some one here has sighted the moon earlier. This would end all indecision, confusion and uncertainty.

BMW Hit-and-Run Case

Criminalisation of Our Elite

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

The message that is going out from the high offices of India is that thugs won't be punished if they are powerful. If this state of affairs continues, Indian cities will go the way of Chicago of the 1920s, Lagos of the 1980s or Karachi of the 1990s.

LIKE politics, our elite too is getting criminalised. Delhi's BMW hit-and-run episode is a revolting sign of this. Criminality pervades every bit of it: driving without licence; overspeeding (at 140 kmph); manslaughter of six; hiding and destroying material evidence; obstructing the police....

The Rs. 70-lakh car was even not registered in India — to evade import duty. Non-registration too is a criminal offence. And it is of course pure coincidence that the prime accused is the grandson of former navy chief S.M. Nanda, who embraced the noble profession of selling arms. It takes more than hubris to do what Sanjeev Nanda, Manik Kapoor and Sidharth Gupta did. You don't ram into a police picket, killing three, then hit four more individuals, and still try to cover up your crime — unless you feel you will get away. You need to have monumental callousness towards the non-BMW class.

The BMW episode is a class

crime. In Delhi, 93 per cent of all heinous crimes in 1998 were committed by young novices, many from affluent backgrounds. The pattern is repeated in other cities: men between 16 and 30 account for two-thirds of rapes, robberies and kidnappings in India. The most exclusive schools in our metropolises have become among the most violent. Carrying a gun ("hot lead" in slang) has become the ultimate status symbol and fashion accessory for super-affluent youth — like Cartier watches, cocaine or five-star discos. Today's typical young criminal is not a school dropout, or a frustrated man who picks pockets. He is more likely someone who speaks English, likes fancy cars, and uses a jacuzzi. He is infinitely far more purposive and profes-

sional than the petty thief. Economic offences are on the rise. In Delhi — our most violent and aggressive metropolis — 2,420 such offences were registered last year, 2.5 times more than in 1995. Delhi has rich kids who rob lakhs of rupees from their own homes. Many factors explain the elite's criminalisation. First, consumerism and ostentatious lifestyles. Consumerism has grown by leaps and bounds in the 1990s with higher executive incomes and freer imports of luxury goods and greater availability of status symbols such as branded garments and posh cars. Mumbai and Delhi's posh shopping malls crawl with youth for whom buying a pair of sunglasses for Rs. 5,000 comes as naturally as having a glass of water. Our youth's con-

science is becoming devoid of any notion of social responsibility. The entire upper middle class is inculcating an opportunist, instrumentalist morality among children. So exclusive has access to higher education become, that scoring high marks by whatever means is accepted. For a whole generation, education has less to do with understanding the world than with scoring marks. A "good" pupil would rather skip whole portions of the curriculum to concentrate on her "strong" subject, to score well. Our education is fast losing its ethical and human content. Under the influence of communalism, it no longer inculcates universalist-liberal values of responsible citizenship. Two other phenomena are central to the elite's crimi-

nalisation. The first is corruption and bribery. So widespread is this, that nothing, from arms deals to electricity bills, and from school admissions to oil policy, is immune from it. This produces moral dissonance. If everyone at the top is corrupt, why remain clean at the bottom of the pile? If money and lack of scruple are worshipped by the upper crust, why be honest? The example set by the high and mighty is wholly negative. It brutalises sensibilities and debases public conduct. Secondly, just as there are no inner constraints upon public misconduct, there are few external deterrents either. When there is no rule of law, when regulations are violated with impunity, the powerful do not fear punishment: they know they have the right connections. This society is grossly under-regulated too. In my 13 years in Delhi, my driving licence has not been checked once. In the U.S., by contrast, rare was the month when my papers were not checked. How can you have the incentive to learn traffic rules when you can buy a licence without taking a test? This breakdown of the crime-punishment link extends to premeditated murder. Fifteen years on, there is at best token punishment for the perpetrators of the anti-Sikh pogrom of 1984. No Shiv Sena leader has

been sentenced for killing hundreds of people in Mumbai in 1993.

The BJP's response to anti-Christian violence is to call not for punishing the guilty, but for a "national debate" on conversions (why not one on whether slavery is good?). Why should the Sena's goons feel deterred from terrorising all and sundry when the Home Minister genuflects before their chief to get the cricket ban lifted for a year? The message that is going out from the high offices of India is that thugs won't be punished if they are powerful. If this state of affairs continues, Indian cities will go the way of Chicago of the 1920s, Lagos of the 1980s or Karachi of the 1990s.

Growing lawlessness will generate pressures for draconian "correctives", with perverse consequences. For, criminalisation has not by-passed the police. There are 200 criminal cases pending in the country against IPS officers alone. In Karachi, the army, which has failed to control ethnic violence, has been given judicial powers to try civilians criminal and give a verdict within eight days! This spells descent into chaos, despotism and ultimately barbarism, with horrendously undemocratic and inhuman consequences. So the BMW case must become a litmus test for us. If our justice delivery system does not adequately punish the guilty, the criminalised elite will prevail. This can only be prevented if citizens remain alert and the media does not erase its own memory.

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.

Unfair

Sir, We are always not appropriate to blame opposition for the present impasse. Because AL government is not showing any tolerance to the opposition.

Do you think BNP, JP and Jamat all complaining false about this Election Commission? I personally do not think so. Recent court verdict in Narayngang election proves that election was not free under the EC.

What is the problem of the government to negotiate with the opposition? Here the government is not listening to the opposition complain and trying to flex its muscle through provocative statements.

Md Shams
USA

Heal the hartal wound

Sir, In order to corner Sheikh Hasina's government and to meet their 4-point demand the newly-formed BNP led by four-party alliance declared hartal on 26th January, '99, as a part of their anti-government agitation. On the contrary, a rumour was being aired that the countrymen would have to face an ensuing series of hartal called by the same party to go to power which appeals us very much. No doubt, Bangladesh type of hartal is no less mighty than any civil war.

Do not our political parties (ruling and the opposition) realise what hartal is doing to our country? If they do, then why do they damage our industries, trade and commerce, set our valuable vehicles on fire, get our educational institutions closed, make our day labourers suffer by calling hartal, although we, the peace-loving people are (as they chant slogan) their source of power. Then why will this power be weakened by hartal?

Shuaib Ahmed
132/Ka, East Raja Bajar
Farmgate, Dhaka-1215.

Licence to Live

Sir, With the revelation of more behind-the-scenes facts about the killing of Sohail

Chowdhury, we are now fully convinced that the criminals activities in the city are being committed with direct or indirect blessing and patronage from the law enforcing agencies. Not only that, the leadership of such activities come from few rich godfathers, who have accumulated wealth through illegal way. Both the parties are, in fact, holding the innocent citizens under duress and forcing everybody to lead an insecure life.

The present law and order situation of the country will not improve unless these undesirables are kept under check and gradually completely eliminated from the society. Short of this, the peace-loving tax-payers cannot expect due protection and help from the state authority to secure their life and property.

Kabir Chowdhury
House no 43, Road no 7
Dhanmndi R/A,
Dhaka

I'm dreaming! Nah!!

Sir, We are the happiest people in this world. Bangladesh is free of all sorts of problems. There are no natural calamities. The law and order situation is very good. There are no crime, terrorism, extortion as well as bribery and corruption. People can move freely without any fear. Campus is free of terrorism. Exams are held in time. No disturbances in exam halls. No mass copying. No admission problems in schools. We are free of diseases, epidemics, malnutrition.

We breathe fresh air every day, as the air is free of pollution. Water is also free of arsenic. There are also no traffic jams, load-shedding, and mosquito menace. T&T, Gas, WASA and City Corporations are doing fine jobs. No poverty as well as scarcity of food, and there are bumper crops every year.

The world unemployment is unknown to us. Standard of living is quite high. Economic condition is very good. So you see how fortunate we are! Is it really so? In reality it's just the opposite.

We are the most unfortunate, helpless, wretched people on earth because of the politicians. To them (politicians) elec-

tion as well as power is the only problem. I must win it at any cost. Can't lose. Why should? The election is free and fair if I win. If I lose then it's due to vote rigging, subliming rigging, evil forces (ghosts) influence the election results. The scared (?) duty and responsibility of our politicians of both ruling and opposition parties is to grab power and to remain in power by hook or crook. To them the only aim is power.

The country and the people may go to hell, but they want power at any cost and that's the bottom line.

Iqbal Ahmed
Dhaka-1000.

"Bacterial Disease"

Sir, We are delighted after getting a very important information about the deadly bacteria under the caption "The deadly bacteria" in the DS of 9.1.99. A major part of the residential students and many more common people in our country are suffering from peptic ulcer, stomach cancer and many other intestinal diseases.

The report unveiled that Helicobacter Pylori, a deadly bacteria, is responsible for all these health hazards. We are really terrified at their prolonged dangerous effects. We are, however, scared at the disclosure that the above mentioned bacteria can be eradicated within two weeks only by three drugs. We need more information about the symptoms of the diseases infected with Pylori, the way the patients can get easy access to the treatment and the persons whom they need to consult.

Hence, I fervently request you and authorities concerned to circulate full information.

Mohammad Eunus
JU,

Wake up, politicians

Sir, The attack on the poet shows how short some coterie has become of agenda issues. As if the country has turned into an (insane) asylum. Assault, brutality and death seems to pervade the nation.

We read and listen from the distant shores and wonder how everybody survives this plague of insanity that has gripped the society. Life has become so trifling.

Boy dies in Shiddheswari, Hasina comforts the parents, pledges justice but doesn't complete the investigation. The poet is assaulted, Begum Zia doesn't utter a word, she is busy parlaying with Ershad. An offender at the University once again

strikes on students, yet he has a 'sympathisers forum'.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's soul must be crying in pain to see his current Sonar Bangla. Zia must be in pain to see the jesters that represent his name. Have the politicians all gone sick?

Wake up, and see what's going on around the world.

Hauk Eye
USA

"What NATO really tells.."

Sir, Dr Fakhruddin's article 'What NATO really tells Slobodan.' was really a fine piece of art. He spoke out the truth boldly in such a spicy, funny way and a new way that it calls to appreciated and admired. Thanks to him for his nice piece. Most of his write-ups are very enjoyable and informative at the same time.

The best part is that he is an intellectual who cares for Muslims and Islam. Which most Muslim intellectuals find very outdated and old fashioned these days! But little do they realise that the best thing for us will be, as another intellectual from USA had put it, to try to Islamise our modern lives rather than modernise Islam!

Dr Sabrina Rashid
Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka

Shame

Sir, On 18.1.99 with one incident, India has gone back to two thousand years. The largest democratic country of the world is showing its freedom of expression in a violent way! Shame on those vandals.

Shikha Manson
Road #11 House, 25F
Banani, Dhaka.

Look! C's here!!

Sir, Ramadan concern shown by US in deciding whether to strike Iraq again or not is a hoax. If they truly wanted to respect the sanctity of the holy month, they should have restrained, their activities in "no-fly zones".

Mr Clinton and his lieutenants should understand that the day-long fasting during Ramadan does not make a Muslim weak. It rather hardens his body and soul.

Tanzia Choudhury
Comilla.

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

A Merry Merger to You

Art Buchwald

IT has just been announced that the Christmas season will merge with Valentine's Day in one of the greatest financial deals of all time. Originally, Christmas tried to merge with Hanukkah, but the Grand Rabbi of the North Pole turned it down.

So Santa Claus, the CEO of Christmas Inc., looked for another likely prospect and found one in Valentine's.

"It's a perfect fit," Santa said. "We both deal in love. They are big in greeting cards, and we are strong in Barbie dolls."

The price was \$40 billion. North Pole Christmas executives said there would be a big cost savings when they laid off those who worked at Christmas and Valentine's Day factories. "We don't need the number of reindeer that we have used in the past," said several executive vice presidents said.

"We also intend to buy our mistletoe from China and load our sleds with more eau de cologne from Taiwan. Christmas will be a slimmer but more successful holiday, and our profits are expected to soar."

The people at Valentine's Day are not as happy. A Cupid dolly maker told me, "Everyone knows that Christmas gobbles up everything. Valentine's Day will lose its meaning when the Christmas makers start cutting back on expenses. "Lovers are very sensitive people, and you can't treat them as you would the customers at Toys R Us."

A maker of chocolate truffles for candy boxes added: "The merger doesn't make sense. Christmas appeals to greed — Valentine's Day to affection and tenderness. We're heart specialists. All Christmas thinks about is the bottom line."

There is some question as to whether the Justice Department will permit the two holidays to merge. An antitrust attorney said, "I don't know if we are talking about restraint of trade or not. The Christmas people would like to have Americans spend all their savings in December. The Valentine holiday people have only one big moment in February, and that is when everyone goes to Hallmark. The concern is that if Christmas owns Valentine's, they could start marking up all the greeting cards, and with a monopoly on love it would no longer be good eat dog."

Santa angrily denied the contentions that the merger would destroy competition. "We're not trying to monopolize the holidays," he fumed. "Our only intention is to cut down on our labour costs. We can save billions of dollars if we dump enough people at Christmas. We also can be more efficient. We'll offer two bouquets of roses to be sent at Christmas and Valentine's Day — for the same price. We have to accomplish this merger so we can compete with the Chinese New Year."

We asked Santa what holiday Christmas would merge with in case the Justice Department would not allow him to buy Valentine's Day.

"We'd join up with Halloween. It's become a real money maker."

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