

Initiate Dialogue, Now

The 48-hour hartal has now been turned into a 60-hour one following widespread violence yesterday which left one young man dead and a policeman critically wounded. It probably matters little whether the hartal is 12 hours longer or shorter, because the loss of a young life would never be recouped. The opposition parties have apparently embarked on a path of vengeance, calling hartals at the drop of a hat and unleashing its hooligans to intimidate the public; the ruling party has chosen to get just as vengeful, bringing out its own thugs in the streets in anti-hartal processions and provoking the opposition marchers. The result is an intensification of the politics of hate. Yet, in a civilised society, which prides itself for being 'democratic', this is not the way politics is supposed to be conducted.

It is rather extraordinary that the opposition's hartals are being conducted for a four-point demand, the most important of which is the resignation of the Chief Election Commissioner. How they can justify the socio-economic hardship imposed through hartals and the harsh intimidation of the public, for the resignation of an officer of the State appointed by the president, defies logic. It is also extraordinary that the elected government has chosen to confront the hartals through muscle-flexing in the streets and instigating violence through provocation. It would have been logical to expect any government worth its democratic credentials, to address the demands and initiate dialogue with the opposition in order to find ways to defuse the tension.

However, there is still time to pull back from the brink because disputes, no matter how mundane or fundamental, have to be resolved through dialogues, through compromise. There should not be any scope for either side to impose its will, either through intimidation or power of majority, on the other. This is what ensures stability of a political system, and a lack of this tolerance is what is pushing Bangladesh towards yet another period of confrontation. The prime responsibility for showing tolerance and initiating dialogue rests with the government, for the simple reason that it has the mandate to govern and maintain stability. So far, the government has failed to live up to the task, but the public expect and demand that the ruling party began shouldering the responsibilities of governance.

Fresh Hope for CHT

The CHT affairs have come under a sharp focus. PCJSS chief Shantu Larma who had been insisting on an exclusive meeting with the Prime Minister pulled it off on Monday. And this, quite significantly, coincided with the visit of a high-level EU delegation to the hill districts, aiming to gather first-hand knowledge about the post-accord situation and the prospects for an all round development of the region they are keen on financing. The two developments should impact favourably on carrying forward the process of implementation of the one-year-old CHT peace accord and addressing the agenda for rapid development of the hill districts.

We remember such a PM-Larma dialogue once helped cut the Gordian-knot while negotiations of the peace deal itself were at an advanced stage. We expect the same thing to happen now after Larma's exclusive talks with the PM to step up the process of implementation. The PCJSS leader is understood to have again asked for "more powers for the regional council, amendments to the three Hill District Council Acts, more help for the rehabilitation of the former Shantibahini members, release of PCJSS activists and withdrawal of cases against them." These points are under active consideration; but suffice it to say though that it might sound like a breach of trust if new demands were made beyond what remain covered by the peace accord which both sides are pledge-bound to implement in letter and spirit. This is not to rule out differences in the perception of how best to implement the accord but in no way such differences should be allowed to obscure the principal elements of the accord. One such element is evidently the regional council that must start working without any further ado because it is pivotal not only to the devolution further but also to the actual exercise of autonomy agreed upon within the limits of Bangladesh's Constitution.

An early economic development of the region is a pressing necessity that can no longer be held captive to political semantics. The EU delegation members while assessing the development needs and prospects of the CHT sounded highly positive when they identified their primary task as development of the socio-economic status through the establishment of small industries and family-income enhancement projects. All concerned need putting their best foot forward.

Leave Osmany Uddyan Alone

Soil testing for construction of a massive international convention centre at the Osmany Uddyan has begun. The centre is designed to seat five thousand people and is likely to be opened before the conference of Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) to be hosted at Dhaka in 2001. This huge centre, which will require 14 acres of prime land at the Osmany Uddyan will be constructed with Chinese help. A local Bangla daily has reported the story elaborately in its issue of Tuesday. As it is, there are very few open spaces and parks in the city in which people can relax and enjoy fresh air. Osmany Uddyan is one such place which has been developed over the years. The lawns of this garden can boast of a large number of trees of different species specially planted and nurtured in them. If the proposed centre is constructed about 300 trees are likely to be felled, as the report sees it. This will be a great blow to the environment of the metropolis which is already polluted beyond redemption. Although Dhaka City Corporation which is at stone's throw from the garden has been in charge of the garden since last year, nothing effective has been done by them so far to prevent the land grabbing spree. A number of unauthorised offices including that of the ruling party's ward committee have reportedly come up. But the DCC has hardly been interested in its proper maintenance.

We would like to remind the ministry responsible for the construction of the convention centre of the Prime Minister's directives against construction and erection of any kind of structure on open grounds or parks.

We would like to suggest the railway land east of Fazlul Huq Hall of Dhaka University or some land in Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, or the space on either side of Rokeya Sarani as possible alternative sites for the centre. Let the landscape of the Osmany Memorial Hall remain intact.

Post-flood Economy Waits for Stimulation

The question that would be exercising the finance minister's mind is whether to try to stimulate demand through a sizeable injection of money into the economy through infrastructure projects along with rehabilitation programmes.

IN an abnormal year, the Bangladesh economy does not have any reason to behave in a normal manner. But since 'normalcy' for Bangladesh means a ponderous pace of growth, stagnant resource mobilisation, high current expenditures and low foreign exchange earnings, the current fiscal is turning out to be little different.

Another 'normal' thing that routinely contributes to the maintenance of overall 'normalcy' is the predictably volatile political atmosphere. The current round of street agitation, violence and threats of toppling governments has come as yet another reminder as to why the economy is the poor cousin in the extended Bangladeshi family. This is happening at a time when all-out efforts are needed to rehabilitate the economy following the battering dished out by the floods of 1998.

The floods, which raged through nearly the entire period of the first quarter of the current fiscal, have caused colossal damages. Estimates range from the government's own figure of 10 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) to a more modest 6.6 per cent calculated by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies. Agriculture, which lost over two million tonnes of crops, has borne the brunt, while industrial production has suffered considerably.

Recovery from such losses, while maintaining fiscal discipline and sound macro-economic fundamentals, presents the country with an enormous challenge. But economists, who are not habitually given to reflecting on political matters, are fairly unanimous that politics is likely to have a major impact on economic recovery.

"The political atmosphere is now critical", says Dr KAS

Murshid, Research Director at BIDS. "A long drawn-out political squabble at this point would be the unkindest cut for Bangladesh."

What worries economists at the moment is the impact the floods would have on economic growth, and the effect of political turmoil on rehabilitation efforts. According to Dr Debopriya Bhattacharya, senior research fellow at the BIDS, growth prospects are now basically dependent on the success of rehabilitation efforts.

"The immediate growth prospects of the economy will be increasingly defined by the intensity of the rehabilitation programmes so that production activities may recover the losses and resume pre-flood normal output", Bhattacharya writes in a recent paper on the post-flood macro-economic outlook.

Murshid points out that, although agriculture remains the largest sector in the economy, it is no longer preponderant. Agriculture's share in GDP has declined to 30 per cent, while that of industry has gone up to 18 per cent. Services now account for 50 per cent of GDP. Therefore, Murshid says, impact of the flood should be less today than what it would have been 15 or 20 years ago.

However, Murshid says that the flood's impact on employment and household income has been severe, particularly as agriculture is by far the largest provider of jobs in the country. He says that price of rice in the market has remained high despite major import operations by both the government and the private sector, in addition to early shipment of food aid by donor countries. The demand

for labour in rural areas has been low which has depressed wages. Lending rates in the informal markets have also spiralled upwards.

"The situation requires drastic re-orientation of government expenditure plans", Murshid says. "The government has to also maintain operations to ensure household food security at least until April", he says.

The government has certainly focused on the rural economy as its primary target for channelling credit and food support operations. It has al-

ready extended the time period for vulnerable group feeding (VGF) programme till April, and food for work programmes are being lined up to generate employment. Agricultural credits to the tune of 3,000 crore taka are being channelled through commercial and specialised banks to farmers.

While rehabilitation efforts may succeed in turning the economy around in a short space of time, the impact of the floods on the overall economy is already being felt. Results from the first quarter paint a fairly dismal picture, much of which has been attributed to the effects of the flood.

One key macro economic indicator that the finance minister may harbour some worry

over is the budget deficit. Over the past two fiscal, Shah AMS Kibria had successfully managed to bring the deficit close to five per cent of GDP. It was expected that the deficit would come down further, to around 4.5 per cent, this fiscal. But the pressure on expenditures and decline in revenue earnings due to the floods may result in pushing the deficit above five per cent.

Industry leaders claim that production at factories declined by five per cent in July-November '98. Chamber leaders are worried about the stagnation in

row heavily from the commercial banking sector.

It is now accepted by most economic observers that GDP, which registered five per cent plus growth in the two previous fiscal thanks to tight fiscal operations, agricultural expansion and export upturn, may stagnate around four to four and half per cent in 1999. But this modest growth - which is fairly 'normal' for Bangladesh even in a normal sort of year - would also depend on effectiveness of the government recovery package.

There is little doubt that stagnation in demand is having a depressing effect across the whole of the economy. Manufacturing industry can not recover unless aggregate demand increases substantially. Such demand cannot increase unless employment and income are generated rapidly in the rural areas. Such employment creation is moving at a slower pace than is desired, particularly in the absence of large scale fresh investment in infrastructure projects.

The question that would be exercising the finance minister's mind is whether to try to stimulate demand through a sizeable injection of money into the economy through infrastructure projects along with rehabilitation programmes. This would carry some serious risks of inflation, but industrial leaders feel the negative effects of inflation would be offset by the positive boost to manufacturing and services, which together account for nearly 70 per cent of GDP. But while such stimulation would be desirable, given the depressed state of the economy, it would be advisable to generate the money through savings in current expenditures and re-allocation of resources from politically-dictated projects in the annual development programme.



The Outside Story

BY SABIR MUSTAFA

It is clear that, a liberal credit policy or a credit policy dictated by political considerations can breed long-term ills for the economy as a whole. The finance minister, who routinely points to the banking roots of the East Asian crisis as an example not to follow, appears to be sticking to his policy of increasing the quality rather than volume of private sector credit.

However, the government itself has again become a major borrower in the banking system, which industry leaders say may squeeze private sector credit even further. One reason is that the floods have impacted heavily on revenue collection. The collection for July-November '98 fell nearly 11 per cent short of the target set by the finance minister. This, coupled with the added resource requirement for relief and rehabilitation programmes, has forced the government to bor-

row heavily from the commercial banking sector. It is now accepted by most economic observers that GDP, which registered five per cent plus growth in the two previous fiscal thanks to tight fiscal operations, agricultural expansion and export upturn, may stagnate around four to four and half per cent in 1999. But this modest growth - which is fairly 'normal' for Bangladesh even in a normal sort of year - would also depend on effectiveness of the government recovery package.

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Dismal and Degrading Politics

by Dr Syed Jahangeer Haider

The need is to come out to form groups of activists continuously supporting to combat not hartal alone but the root causes which give birth to such a menacing outcome for the nation.

really pursuing for a solution; and solution did not emerge. What emerged from the conference is a very short-lived sensitisation of a section of people against hartal. One may believe such interventions would lead to something, but they do not. In other words, no effective solution emerged; because all the participants were looking for a definite panacea (solution) to the trap of hartal.

Efforts to solve social problems can succeed only if they are based upon indisputable facts and an adequate understanding of their background; in-depth problem analysis is one of the alternatives to seek the ultimate desiderata. No comprehensive analysis was attempted in the Daily Star conference to diagnose the factors leading to the political impasse that Bangladesh encounters today.

Easiest way out is to blame the politicians of a kind (at a given point) as the agents creating the nuisance. Blaming the politicians, who are initiating the call for 'hartal' can hardly be rationalised. Why are the general mass participating in the process and who are actually participating - do we have the clear answers to these queries?

A section will say that people are participating as they are afraid to act otherwise. The

other players are saying that people support the cause of hartal. But the 'people' know that these are either half or segment of truth, not the whole truth.

The hard core poor - are they willingly participating? During hartal thousands of rickshaws are found plying on the street. They are desperate and even if they are afraid, they cannot afford to be participants to this lunatic behaviour of refraining from normal functions of not seeking their livelihood.

Even the Holy Quran, which guides the lives of a great proportion of people, discourages directly to be absent from one's own pursuit for livelihood. It even discourages the believers to remain in the mosques beyond the normal period of prayers and encourages them to rush for the pursuit of livelihood. How is it that day in and day out open declarations are being made in favour of observance of hartal?

Any sane intellectual would hardly believe that one conference will find the right solution to a complex problem like hartal, which is not only political; with it is interlinked our cultural, economic and political set-up (mindset) gradually turning into a negative norm. So it would take long arduous struggle for the whole nation to come

out of this trap. If ever we come out of this, it can eventuate or even accelerate the process of our national development.

Every one is assuming that hartal is a fleeting phenomenon without understanding as to how grave this single trait could be and what national disaster this could earn for us. One very eminent personality was estimating enormous economic loss that are being inflicted. Could one measure the loss that this habit (norm) is leading the whole nation to? If it is internalised, which is not totally unlikely, as a routine stimulant to refrain from normal functions, what identity this nation would ultimately project to the global society?

Already Bangladesh is a haven for donors' piety; what more degradation we as a nation are waiting for? Should this behaviour be erased over a given period of time (shortly) with simple and direct interventions, like consensus among only the political activists. Such notion is neither scientific nor would it hold any prospect for us to come out of the trap. Every morning we expect that the politicians will eke out a solution out of this trap. It is difficult to understand why and how should they reach to a solution unless there is extensive social pressure co-

ercing them to abandon the irrational path.

Why should the politicians abandon the path of hartal as an effective instrument of achieving their positive ends, which is to gain control on the rein of power not people? In the context of Bangladesh, any political group would take recourse to such method, unless they are disinterested to gain material benefit.

Where shall we find such group of people, who would renounce power and authority? It cannot be expected from a large number of politically (in our context) motivated activists. So let us abandon the idea that politicians would act sanely, when all other groups of individuals are also not acting sanely in their respective domain of occupational existence. Are the professors sacrificing; business people abandoning the path of shameless profit making; are the bureaucrats managing the government functions rationally; if not then why ask only the politicians to become noble and love people and the nation? The critical intervention has to emerge through a concerted process of total national sensitisation and engagement to generate a socio-political pressure resulting to denunciation and alleviation of the menacing trap of hartal.

It is not easy to identify solutions and not even hundred conferences will possibly take us to that status. What then is the solution? Solutions will not precede the process of realistic and complete understanding of the causes of hartal. If any single or group of individuals project themselves as the modern messiah and claim that they have all the answers to the national problems, then we are certainly misled.

Before this deliberation be-

comes too intellectual and simplistic, it is now appropriate to attempt to suggest some of the ways that this problem could be addressed. The misleading assumptions currently are that the problems of hartal are solved just in a short while by urging the politicians to solve the same for the people. In the ultimate analysis people lead the politicians not the politicians guiding the people; they, like many others, serve people's wishes provided they (politicians) are true representatives. The other realistic assumption is that without efforts and resources of all kinds (money, time, energy and intellect) invested this menacing national problem would not leave overnight.

The need is to come out like The Daily Star, as it has to some extent demonstrated, to form groups of activists continuously supporting to combat not hartal alone but the root causes which give birth to such a menacing outcome for the nation. Cross section of the people are to be mobilised to stand in unison and raise one national voice against hartal and resist it. One may say, who would provide the resources and engine to drive the groups of tiny activists to become conscience of the nation in size and intensity to launch the struggle against negative national disposition not only hartal? If such a move has to come from a single source, the movement would possibly not succeed; instead the effort has to be broad-based and some core individuals (who assembled in The Daily Star conference to find solutions) may take the lead with patience and perseverance with long term objectives (ensuring continuous follow-up actions), not a short-lived pursuit for quick solutions, even though that is what we always pray for and dream about!

The writer is the Executive Director, Research Evaluation Associates for Development - READ.

To the Editor...

Gas metres must be installed

Sir, The government has increased the price of gas by fifteen per cent, but we think instead of increasing the price, the government should install metres for gas consumption because a huge amount of gas is being wasted and we are afraid that in the near future the country may face shortage of it.

Even if the gas burner remains on for twenty-four hours, one has to pay the fixed amount. So to save the price of matches and to avoid the botheration of turning the burner on and off, many people keep it burning continuously and in rainy season in many homes wet clothes can be seen hung above gas stoves. These acts not only result in wastage of gas in massive amount but also increase the risk of accidents.

So, we think that if metres are installed, people will become conscious as they will have to pay more money if the burners remain on for a long time.

We hope the government will consider the matter with due importance and take immediate steps to install gas metres.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Consumers cheated

Sir, As a retail consumer, I have a query for the Ministry of Commerce and the DCCI. The currency of many countries have devalued, some drastically, such as in Pakistan, India, the Asian countries, S Korea to a much greater extent than that in Bangladesh, but the retail prices of the imported goods sold in Dhaka have not come down, compared to the original prices a couple of years ago.

It means that the consumers are not getting the benefit of the devaluation, and the extra profits are being absorbed by the importers, the distributors, and the middlemen. Officially

it is not being pointed out.

The monitoring agencies are silent about the issue. Who looks after the interest of the consumers? The CAB is a body in name only. The situation should be explained to the public by the agencies concerned with the 'free and open market'. It is not the job of the consumers to catch the manipulators.

Would it be impolite to ask for an explanation or 'clarification'?

A Zabr
Dhaka

Educational institutions, or rip-offs?

Sir, As the title indicates, I write the following passage in order to give the reader a vague, if not clear, picture of the prevailing situation in the burgeoning number of private universities in Bangladesh, especially the financial aspects. I realise that the numerous patrons of these institutions will not enjoy the details.

All educational institutions, public and private, have the duty to provide students with an opportunity to educate themselves. It is not that private universities do not provide this service; it is just that they charge exorbitant prices! The most talented students - those with outstanding HSC results or excellent 'O' and 'A' Level grades - cannot avail the opportunity offered by the private institutions due to the lack of finance. Most students avoid Dhaka University due to its various political problems and session jams. So where do these students go?

I mentioned 'exorbitant prices' but one cannot imagine the extent! In one of the well-known private institutions a student has to pay about Tk 11,000 per subject in addition to 'other charges' while in another, one has to pay about Tk 10,000 per subject. The 'other charges' in both universities vary, ultimately resulting in

almost the same amount being paid in both universities! To study 4 or 5 subjects, a student has to pay about Tk 50,000 to Tk 60,000 per semester! Yet some teachers have the audacity to say that their respective institutions are non-profit making organisations! Unimaginable for many, nevertheless, this is the reality! This 'other charges' constitute mainly the use of the computer facilities, facilities like the library etc. But if you enter the computer lab of any private university you will find 'ancient' computers either full of virus or having a worthless mouse attached to it!

The worst part about these institutions is that even with such a huge amount of money being paid, the education standard is not up to the mark! By now it must be obvious to the reader that at one time or another, I was, unfortunately, part of one of these institutions. I would like to share a personal experience. I had a Math Course which mainly covered Calculus and Coordinate Geometry. At the end of the semester I passed out with an 'A' grade; but today if someone asks me to explain or solve even a basic problem regarding calculus, I will fail miserably!

Nowadays it is a fashionable trend to join these private institutions. Students can exhibit their expensive cars, mobiles phones and designer wears. The universities need not have card phones to facilitate the students!

For students who plan to join any private university in Bangladesh, all I can say is, "Think twice!"

Starbright
Dhaka

To the NU

Sir, In order to cater to the need for English knowing people in the country many ways have been attempted both in the private and the government sector institutions. Among the steps taken is the private sector in the mushroom growth of

coaching centres from the city of Dhaka to the thana headquarters attracting the students through colourful advertisements. Failing to manage a suitable job educated people here resort to setting up English coaching centres with the objective of becoming rich overnight. Some of them have already reached this goal successfully. "Get admission and speak English after two hours" reads an advertisement. I don't know which magic they apply to do so. One of my friends has established an English coaching centre in his house. He did master's in Geography and has a very poor knowledge of English. It is, however, interesting that he has earned a lot of money through this business.

At the government level, English is taught as a compulsory subject from Class III to XII. Recently at a seminar it was discussed that English should be introduced from Class One. It is not known when and how this decision in going to be materialised.

National University on the other hand has introduced English as a compulsory subject for all Degree and Honours students irrespective of their disciplines. Although late, at least national awareness about an international language is felt. But the condition to obtain pass marks in this subject is rather discouraging. We do hope it will be modified in the years to come.

The introduction of Honours in English in the government and the private colleges by the National University is rather embarrassing. There is hardly any competent teacher in most of these colleges to teach Honours courses. Moreover, the shortage of teachers coupled with political chaos in these colleges has given a golden opportunity to the students to copy en masse in the examination halls. The invigilators are silent spectators there.

Is the NU aware of this fact?

Ms Masum Billah,
BELT Programme,
Bangladesh Open University.

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

A Record for Crazies

GOOD evening, this is Harry Morrison of CNN. We are in the living room of Andy Haas in Queens, New York. Andy has just broken into the Guinness Book of Records by watching every principal in the Senate presidential impeachment trial make his presentation.

Haas vowed he would watch all of the Senate prosecutors, as well as the president's defenders, without going to the bathroom.

Doctors, psychologists and political experts said it was impossible to listen to all the speeches and maintain one's sanity. With Andy are his wife, Dahlia, and his children, who witnessed Andy's feat and begged him not to continue.

As you can see, after his ordeal, Andy is not in goods shape. He is mumbling to himself, and there is foam on his lips.

"Andy, you have heard 12 speakers. Do you believe that President Bill Clinton has committed a high crime or a misdemeanor?"

"Hrrrrrrmmhrrum."

"What did you say?"

The doctor rushes over and takes his pulse. "He's getting dehydrated. Give him water."

"Dahlia, are you proud of your husband?"

"I think he's crazy. No one could listen to that many speeches and hope to come out of it the way he went in."

"Andy, since you are the only viewer left who has heard all the presentations, do you have a message for us?"

"I regret I have only one life to give to my country."

"Very good, Andy. Do you plan to listen to the witnesses as well?"

"Give me liberty or give me death."

"Now let's go to the children. Kids, what do you think of your father's determination to listen to all the prosecutors' cases?"

"He lost his job because he won't go to work. His eyesight is shot and so is his hearing. But that's the way Dad is. When he puts his mind to wanting to hear all the facts concerning alleged sex in the White House, he's a real Larry Flynt."

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