

Scope for Dialogue

Yesterday we urged the government through this column to immediately initiate a dialogue with the opposition for an early defusion of political tensions that threaten to mount to disastrous proportions. Today our focus is on the undercurrent of positive signals for talks that remain muffled by the heated, sometimes highly irresponsible, utterances of both sides across the political divide but which preeminently merit recognition and follow-up to make the dialogue happen. The fact that the current hartal has been marked by violent encounters, death and injuries on an intensified scale only reinforces the urgency for talks.

BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan has been quoted by the BBC on Tuesday night as saying that his party was prepared to consider having dialogue with the ruling party if it came in the shape of a formal proposal from the latter. He was not being insistent also on any preconditions to the dialogue. A prominent Bangla daily, however, reported on Wednesday that BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and Jatiya Party Secretary General Nazir Rahman favoured dialogue only after the municipal poll dates have been shifted to enable their participation.

Awami League leaders Md Nasim and Zillur Rahman sounded stridently uncompromising on the municipal poll dates vowing to see these take place on February 23-25 as announced. But the AL Presidium member Amir Hossain Amu who is in charge of holding talks with the opposition said, if the opposition showed its 'eagerness' his party would sit in a dialogue with them. This approach from the AL, to our mind, is half-hearted, if not totally negative because our considered view has been that as the ruling party it is the AL which ought to make the overture first, in a meaningful and engaging way.

The CEC whose removal is the fulcrum of the opposition's current movement suggested on Monday that even though the municipal polls are held on a non-party basis, he sought the broad-based cooperation of all political parties to conduct these in a congenial environment. The postponement of the municipal poll dates is a political matter to be settled politically. And a view has also been aired by some that if need be the High Court could be approached for a change in the stipulated dates.

Set against the President's own initiative for bringing the government and the opposition across the table, the above should stimulate an immediate dialogue in view of the axiomatic truth that political inflexibility does not work.

Transport Uplift

Involvement of private sector in the Greater Dhaka Transport Planning and Co-ordination Project (GDTPCP), we believe, would expedite effective implementation and subsequent management of the 234.2 million dollar programme designed to improve the traffic situation in the capital and its adjacent areas. Underpasses and over-bridges have been widely viewed as a way out of the persistent traffic congestion in the capital. However, the two underpasses at Kawran Bazar and Gulistan, and several overbridges at different key points of the city have so far failed to make any positive impact on the overall situation. Management has been poor and the resultant inadequacy in maintenance has left the facilities in a shambles, almost unusable by the pedestrians. The planners, we hope, have taken this into account otherwise the proposed 10 overbridges and three underpasses will face similar fate and the purpose of the project will be defeated.

The GDTPCP is a big project and will certainly require involvement of several service providers. The Dhaka City Corporation and the Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakka (RAJUK) have already been brought under the project, and it is imperative that the city traffic administration be involved as well. Unless and until the pedestrians are made to use the overbridges and the underpasses, they will continue to sprint across busy streets.

One significant aspect of the project, relates to construction of multi-storied and multi-purpose bus terminals at Kamalapur, Mirpur, Amin Bazar, Gulistan and Jatrabari and handing over of their management to the private sector. Presently, the so-called Sramik Committee, in charge of management at different bus terminals across the country, has made travelling a nightmare for many. They make the rules and ruthlessly enforce them, as the helpless passengers pay the price. Private ownership of the terminals can make the management more responsible and truly commuter-friendly.

Attack on Press Vehicles

The torching of an auto-rickshaw with a 'press' sign, parked in front of The Daily Star office on Tuesday represented the height of hartal related rowdyism. During political hartsals since the restoration of democracy in 1991 moving press vehicles have not infrequently been the targets of such uncivilised behaviour. But this time a stationary one has been set afire featuring an added lack of control on the part of the political parties which called the strike.

Each time a hartal is called, a small list of exemptions including that of transports carrying newspaper workers is announced through the media. But such directives have hardly had any influence on the pickets. More often than not these transports are stopped and their passengers, the on-duty journalists, harassed and the transports set on fire.

Neither now nor in the past, the political parties or their leaders have had the courtesy to say 'sorry' to the newspapers for the misdeeds of their supporters, far less pay any compensation to the vehicle owners. Instead they always tried to pass on the responsibility to their opponents. We demand that the parties calling for hartal in future should instruct their workers and activists to be more responsible and careful in dealing with the essential services that are exempted from the purview of hartal. Those who fail to desist from breaking party directives need to be screened out for the future. We strongly condemn the dastardly acts of political hooligans.

BNP's Continuous Hartal : Who is Responsible?

The opposition's 4-point demand, which could and should have been resolved through discussion, was left for a month with the ruling party for consideration. But they summarily rejected the demands and made no serious efforts for discussion with the opposition. It is strange to assume that the ruling party was not able to discern as reasonable even a small element of opposition demands.

PESTERING the newspaper yesterday (10th instant), one naturally was overwhelmed by the news of previous day's hartal with accompanying violence, killing etc. One cannot but help visualise two contrasting scenarios by reading reports and seeing photographs. One report depicts the picture of a ruling party member of the parliament riding high in a Pajero, leading a procession of armed companions in a convoy of dozens of cars and minibuses that paraded streets of Dhaka in an anti-hartal rally. All of a sudden, some gunmen emerging from one or more of those vehicles chased a group of young BNP activists standing in the street, hit one of them on the head with revolver and shot the other point blank in the chest. The dead was a degree college student and son of a lawyer. A police officer with a dozen well-equipped policemen stood by, dispassionately witnessing the crime. The legislator disclaimed any involvement in the incident.

At the other end of the city, one sees a published photo of an opposition parliamentarian being beaten up mercilessly by the police. He was the BNP leader of Dhaka city, who was picketing in a city street in support of the hartal. There was no official restriction against picketing in the street, provided it was

peaceful. It was indeed peaceful, until bombs were thrown over them from a nearby building. It does not take much of one's imagination to establish whose supporters had thrown bombs, but it was obviously not BNP's.

The above two scenarios speak volumes about the current political culture in our budding democracy. Firstly, it substantiated the contention that the Awami League wanted a policy of violent confrontation with its political opposition and Tuesday's naked aggression on peaceful demonstrators was a vivid manifestation of the determined pursuit of that policy.

In contrast, BNP, as a matter of principle, had refrained from allowing even peaceful anti-hartal demonstrations in Awami League's 173 days of hartal during the past BNP regime.

Secondly, it transpires the extent to which the law enforcing agencies of the country have been rendered impotent in performing their duties and made fully subservient to the whims and caprices of the ruling party.

Everybody is well aware that police, as a rule, has been in-

clined to favour members of the ruling party and to serve their interests. But not to this extent when killings and serious crimes were being deliberately ignored and condoned. This makes one wonder how much of inducement and intimidation had to go for the process.

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of political prisoners. The first three demands were directed against independent and impartial functioning of the Election Commission and to prevent impersonation and false voting by voters and, thereby, to ensure a free, fair and impartial election. The reluctance of the ruling party to speak anything about these points, most of which they themselves are in principle committed to, questions their integrity to conduct fair elections and manifests their obduracy to pursue this policy.

People have now reached a stage of frustration at the seemingly attempt of the ruling party to throttle opposition movement by force. Unfortunately, people learn little from history, which repeats itself. Violence breeds violence and cannot finally attain its goal. People, who have little means but plenty of strength through conviction will be the ultimate victors. Time is more than ripe for a dialogue and it always devolves on the ruling party to initiate it. Perhaps, an appropriate third party mediation

Thirdly, the evidence creates an impression that the BNP led 7-party opposition alliance wanted to promote hartal in a peaceful way, without much of intimidation. But the occasion turned violent with the planned attempt of the ruling party to forcibly thwart opposition attempt to conduct hartal.

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