

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 Najim Rahman favoured dialogue only after the municipal poll dates have been shifted to enable their participation.

Awami League leaders Mohd 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 (GDTCP), 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 GDTCP is a big project and will certainly require involvement of several service providers. The Dhaka City Corporation and the Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (RAJUK) have already been brought under the project, and it is imperative that the city 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 rowdiness. During political hartals 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.

OPENING 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 but 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 inclined 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.

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.

It is most unfortunate that the political scene in this infant democracy would turn violent and become inimical to the healthy growth of a democratic practice and tradition. 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.



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

At all surprising that last Islamabad talks on Kashmir held in November last year, ended without much progress. It was also not supposed to overcome the issue at 'one go' in the renewed talks with a new regime in New Delhi. But they have agreed to meet again on Kashmir some time this year. It was a good point for Pakistan, that now 'clear-eyed Indians realise that it is very much in India's interest that Pakistan remains stable,' he perhaps echoed the feelings of India's Prime Minister Vajpayee who had earlier made a similar statement.

So goodwill is there, both at home and abroad, to bring the two countries together through 'confidence-building measures step-by-step, to achieve a greater unanimity among them for establishing lasting peace not only in the sub-continent but in the whole of the South Asian region.

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But a spade must be called a spade for hard ground reality. To ignore it would be fallacious, if not disastrous. In the whole process of Indo-Pakistan talks, which has been continuing from time to time during the last fifty years, the Kashmir issue has always been a stumbling block rather a pricking thorn, on its way. So it was not

easy to bring the horse to the pond, but it is difficult to make it drink. But in politics, which sometimes is more flexible than a punch on the sponge, this can be achieved, if the man behind the horses has a strong arm.

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Indo-Pak Relations : Ice is Melting at Last!

by A M M Shahabuddin

Let Pakistan and India row to achieve their most-coveted goal of establishing lasting peace and amity not only in the sub-continent, but in the whole of South Asian region. Cricket fans have shown the way, let the leaders follow it.

ploratory talks between Vajpayee and Nawaz Sharif on the side-line of the last UNGA annual session in New York and the recently concluded visit to India and Pakistan by US Deputy Secretary of States, Mr Talbot.

'Cricket Diplomacy'
Meanwhile, the current cricket test series between the two arch-rivals has added a new dimension in the fast-moving events centring Indo-Pak relations. No doubt, 'cricket diplomacy' has a sharper edge over other diplomatic efforts and it has already proved that to the amazement of the people of the two countries. The Daily Star, in its editorial (30 Jan. '99), had rightly emphasised 'the theme', saying, 'there is hardly anything more powerful than people-to-people contact for defusing tensions along the borders of these two warring neighbours, and cricket, perhaps, is the best vehicle.' The cricket fans and enthusiastic spectators of Madras have shown the 'cricket way' of achieving the objects where politicians have failed during the last five decades. Despite India's narrow defeat by 12 runs, after a thrilling and eventful series at the Chennai Stadium, the victorious Pakistani team was given a standing ovation exhibiting true sportsman's spirit by the Indians. Pakistan cricket team officials were all praise for the Indian gesture as it was a victory of the cricket, not of any country. In a game, either of the contesting countries will win. But the ultimate victory goes to the game itself and that spirit was shown by the defeat of cricket.

A Stable Pakistan is in India's Interest
At last the curtain has been raised and the show is on for the benefit of all concerned. There is a popular saying that it

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Better prospects are expected to emerge in due course from the other issues discussed such as, border demarcation dispute over Sir Creek, flowing into Arabian sea; sale of electricity by Pakistan to India, stoppage of terrorism and drug trafficking; cultural ties; and a liberal trade policy which would grant each other a 'most-favoured nation' trade status.

There is no sense in following a rigid trade policy between the two neighbours when the cross-border smuggling of goods, carried on by the patriotic people on both sides, is estimated to be at three billion US dollars, as against official (of two countries) total of about 161 million US dollars only. Then why this 'shyness' to call a spade a spade?

Where there is a strong political will, there is undoubtedly a highway to better understanding and peace. Let not the political leaders play any more to the gallery to 'spoil the broth'. Let Pakistan and India row to achieve their most-coveted goal of establishing lasting peace and amity not only in the sub-continent, but in the whole of South Asian region. Cricket fans have shown the way, let the leaders follow it.

So the progress that has been

OPINION

We Want Clean Air, Now

Dr. Sabrina Q. Rashid

Let us all, the citizens of Bangladesh or at least those of Dhaka, the worst affected place, join hands and raise our voice against pollution. This oppressive pollution is ever on the rise in our capital city and is slowly but surely poisoning us all, including our innocent little children. Haven't we got this much of responsibility towards our future generation to give them clean air to breathe so that they may grow and develop in a healthy and safe environment, free from all the toxins?

But nobody seems to care or give a patient hearing to the experts who are warning again and again against this menace which is enveloping us all with each passing day. How gray the streets of Dhaka look with thick black clouds of noxious fumes spewed out by most vehicles. But what one sees is not even half of the toxins that one inhales! As most of the toxins that we take into our system and absorb are colourless and odourless.

These toxins are killing us slowly but before that they are making us very sick indeed. And these sicknesses caused by the inhalation of polluted air are incurable even in this modern era of science and technology. So we are here back to the ancient medicine of 'Prevention is better than cure'. And when there is no cure at all, prevention is the only way to save ourselves from ill health, caused by the inhalation of so many kinds of toxins. A brief idea of how we can get sick by inhaling these, is given below.

Lead: It is a heavy metal present in petrol and octane, more in the later one. It is very harmful to human beings as it affects the intelligence and blood synthesis. It also harms the body organs e.g., liver, kidneys, reproductive system etc.

Children and malnourished are more at risk, but no one is spared who is exposed to its high concentration in the air, as in our city, especially when there is no rainfall to clean the air.

Carbon Monoxide: It reduces the ability of blood to carry oxygen as it has more affinity

for haemoglobin in the blood than oxygen has. So the vital organs like brain and heart and other organs too receive less supply of oxygen. The affect of this on them is grave. This harmful affect of carbon monoxide is seen even more on children and pregnant women. When absorbed by a pregnant lady it has sub-lethal injurious effects on her foetus. The concentration of this toxic gas in our air is way high compared to other cities because our streets are crowded with two or three-wheelers driven by two-stroke engines, which burn the fuel incompletely, thus producing large quantities of this lethal gas. It can cause death too, in a closed place e.g., garage.

Sulphur dioxide: When oil, gas, and coal burn any sulphur in them forms sulphur dioxide. Oxides of nitrogen and sulphur are the cause of acid rain, which kills the fish and trees. When the trees die the birds and little animals living in them are left shelterless. In human beings sulphur dioxide affects the upper respiratory tract and causes blocked nose, cough and bronchial diseases. In cities its main source is diesel fumes and emissions from factories.

Suspended particles: Industrial emissions and vehicle exhaust contribute to accumulation of particles of dust and carbon, contaminated with toxic gases.

On entering our lungs through the nostrils they cause respiratory diseases e.g., chronic cough, throat irritation and can aggravate asthma, in those who are already suffering from this disease.

Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons: It causes cough, drowsiness and irritates eyes.

It may even cause cancer. So there should be no presence of it at all in the air. Even smallest quantity of it in air is unsafe. Oxides of Nitrogen: It is formed during the combustion of fuel in factories and in vehicles. Nitrogen dioxide causes running nose, head aches, eye irritation and bronchial diseases.

Benzene: It is emitted from

would be able to help avert an impending national catastrophe.

A word of friendly and respectful advice to the suave and bright Chief Election Commissioner. He wanted to resign his post, if it were warranted in national interest. If the range of killings and violence that have already taken place and are about to take place in future due to his adherence to the post does not constitute national interest, what is it then? One fails to understand. There is some parallel to his case, when his predecessor Justice Sadeque resigned his post at the teeth of opposition demand, though the ruling party had no complaints against him. He, like incumbent CEC, also stated that he had done whatever he was permitted to do in accordance with laws and rules, but he could not go beyond its periphery. In his opinion, he had committed no wrong and the government was on his side. Yet he resigned. He leads a respectable life. Friends of present CEC would also like him to do so.

Finally, who is responsible for the hartal and the consequent loss of life, property and to the economy — is it the opposition, the ruling party or the Chief Election Commissioner? It rests solely with the people to judge.

The author is a member of the BNP Advisory Committee.

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made during the week-long Delhi talks on seven different issues, particularly the decision to run the New Delhi-Lahore bus service shortly, leaves much more to come up during next rounds of talks, sufficient enough to 'mend' the fences of the two neighbours. The new bus-service will be the 'third channel' of people-to-people contacts, besides the existing air service and 'sonjhoti train' (train of understanding). But the two governments would have to be more 'generous' and 'liberal' in issuing visas to the intending visitors. This would, undoubtedly, be a bold and big step as a good compliment to the proposed transborder bus service.

Better prospects are expected to emerge in due course from the other issues discussed such as, border demarcation dispute over Sir Creek, flowing into Arabian sea; sale of electricity by Pakistan to India, stoppage of terrorism and drug trafficking; cultural ties; and a liberal trade policy which would grant each other a 'most-favoured nation' trade status.

There is no sense in following a rigid trade policy between the two neighbours when the cross-border smuggling of goods, carried on by the patriotic people on both sides, is estimated to be at three billion US dollars, as against official (of two countries) total of about 161 million US dollars only. Then why this 'shyness' to call a spade a spade?

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