

The Daily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

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Social Cost of Hartal

Socially, the ground under our feet is slipping away — thanks to frequent and prolonged hartals. This is already exacting a heavy and punishing price, but so much more seems in store. The process can be likened to the inching apart of tectonic plates before a catastrophic earthquake takes place to send the equilibrium crumbling down like the house of cards. So far the political and economic costs of hartals imposed on the people without any scruples have been emphasised without any effect on the callers' minds but now we delve into their social costs hoping that the way these are eating into the vitals of our society would prompt an early change of heart.

An aversion to work is fearfully on the increase. Where even a semblance of work ethics is difficult to keep in view of the long list of calendar holidays, pace of work slows down with the very call of hartal, stops ticking during the hartal hours, and not until a few days have elapsed would the flaccid threads be picked up at all. Be it in government establishments, private firms, banks, industries, utility organisations, travel offices, service delivery outfits, courts, schools, colleges, and universities people yawn, time-tables are upset, arrears build-up and get pushed to oblivion. It is never the same again. It can't be. Even when the rhythm and tempo gradually return during a reasonably longish hartal-free spell, these would be in a state of constant oscillation for the fear of being undone by another series of hartals. The apparently ingenious quick-fix of a formula that week-end holidays will be working days to make up for the hartal days is cancelled out by the opposition threat to call hartal on the weekend itself. The paranoia permeates the people and builds a withdrawal syndrome into the whole system. The body-clock is disturbed, the de-conditioning across the board takes a heavy toll of isolated islands of efficiency we have had in spite of the known systemic imperfections.

It is the children with their impressionable minds who seem to be the most adversely affected by the 'no-work-all-play' truancy induced by the hartals. What a dangerous value we are inculcating in them by our political bankruptcy that the small kids, and even the growing lads, have almost begun romanticising hartal as something of a prized holiday by fluke! The smaller siblings would be in too expansive a mood to do the make up on maths; lightheartedly preferring instead to watch cartoons on the TV at a time when they should have been at the class-room advancing along their given syllabus. And the adolescents are seen in the streets playing cricket in reckless abandon. What a way to rear up our future leaders!

The costs are incalculable, too, in terms of growing indiscipline in every sector of our national life and of break-down in the civic order itself. The divisive tendencies in the society which had remained confined to the political domain until recently is now hitting the municipal wards, public places, hotels, restaurants, and what is certainly far worse, the streets of Dhaka.

The pickets would go from shop to shop asking the owner to keep his shutters down presumably on pain of reprisal if he failed, and increasingly during hartals in the recent months Awami League has been taking out processions with a vengeance to persuade the shopkeepers and transport owners to operate their business. Even there are exhortations from the pulpit upon people to declare their areas 'hartal-free' to counter the opposition picketing in advance.

All these tend to panic the people, insulate them more than ever before. But, on another level, they are forced to partake of the political programmes of the opposing forces and thereby the whole situation turns dangerously incendiary and divisive.

Our impassioned call upon all concerned is, please call a screeching halt to this self-destructive cultural degeneration.

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East Timor: Politics at Command

Impressive physical infrastructure has been built up but the social, cultural and spiritual infrastructures have been systematically dismantled. The sense of belonging to a community has disintegrated. Even the social cohesion has been rent asunder by a policy of divide and rule. The pro-integration forces have been armed to the teeth to subdue the majority Timorese. Now that the question of extended autonomy and of independence of East Timor is being negotiated under the UN auspices will that mean further internecine conflict? True, with legitimate territorial claim over off-shore oil resources, East Timor can be a prosperous region in the future. But in the immediate future will there be a vacuum?

THE World Bank's annual economic survey reports: "No country in recent history, let alone the size of Indonesia has suffered such a dramatic reversal of fortune."

True, the economic and monetary crisis exacerbated by prolonged drought of 1997 and 1998 has hit the poor hard. "More than 45 million" as Curtis Ryan of World Bank notes "cannot afford their daily ration of rice, the country's staple. The soaring price of rice caused by shortages due to drought and the higher price of imports is at the heart of much of the country's current instability."

According to government estimate 80 million Indonesians, 40 per cent of the country's population subsist below the poverty line compared to the 22.6 million figure in 1996. The crisis is more visible in big cities like Jakarta, but concentrated in the countryside. An annual survey by the Bureau of Statistics found that "the number of people working in agriculture in early 1998 had increased by 15 per cent to 42 million, while the number in industry, transportation and finances had dropped by 10 per cent to 16 million." Many people are returning to the countryside from the cities. "But with two consecutive seasons of poor harvest, there is a limit to how much the countryside can take."

For the Timorese in East Timor the reversal of fortune started 22 years ago when Indonesia invaded the erstwhile colony of Portugal and annexed it by brutal force. Farming families in the valleys the mountains and the coastal plains have eaten bitterness ever since. Refugees pour into Dili and other cities. They are ecological refugees. They are fleeing from brutal repression, violence and quite often genocide.

Cararas is a village in BKK district. In 1983, the occupation army killed all male adults and adolescents above the age 12. Women were spared, but the young ones, violated. It is a widow's village. So is Lacio in Manatutu district. The women-headed household without adequate labour-force continue to till the soil, but malnourished and racked by disease, as they are, they can hardly obtain one meal a day. Their only imple-

ment being hand-hoes, prolonged drought has made the turning of the soil more difficult even when in 1998 rains came early.

There are other variations of such atrocities. Men in the family are often fugitives and hide in the mountains. The families that they leave behind are the victims of further military repression. Others in the community are afraid to talk to them. The unfortunate victims thus become socially isolated and ostracised. Their children are debarred from attending schools. Even if they are sick, mothers are afraid to take them to government clinics manned by Indonesian doctors. When the crippling drought made even one meal a day an impossibility for some Fokupers, a women's organisation working on the issues of violence against violence and reproductive health supported them with food and vitamins. This emergency support has been funded by Switzerland.

No, they have never received any food aid from government, nor have they been able to take advantage of subsidised rice sold by the government under Special Market Operation. Anyway given the fact that a family has to buy 10-kg. (now 20-kg) of such rice at 1000 rupiyah per kilo, it was impossible for them to access the marketed rice. Simply, they do not have the money or income to procure food, subsidised or not.

So for them hunger season stretched on till the rains came. Even then, much of the fields remain barren. Men in the households are often scared to go to the fields because army or their enemy militia are everywhere. Out of 80,000 hectares of rice fields only 20,000 hectares are under the plough now.

Beside the terror unleashed by the army, there is the problem of farming implements. Malnourished and further weakened by malaria and tuberculosis, it is difficult for women and men farmers to till the soil with hand-hoes only. The Silesian mission in Fuiloro helps 1000 families in ploughing their fields with 7 tractors. This year, that is in the wet sea-

son of 1998-99, rains came early. All the farming families were not ready.

So may be 500 families could till the soil and sow. Incidentally rainy season is short, so tractors are essential to quickly prepare the land. Father Hose Battaparambil showed us a vast tract of 20,000 hectares of low land lying fallow. There is also a lake there which could irrigate the land if a few low-lift pumps were available. This is an Asalinu area and if farmed can feed almost the entire Timorese population. The mission, during the difficult times provided 10 tons of corn to two of the most severely affected villages.

Similarly Father Locatelli's mission in Fakumaka is serving 15,000 people in 8 villages. Beside renting out tractors to the farming families, Father Locatelli is also providing support for supplementary irrigation with donated pumps.

But Fakumaka or Asalinu in Los Palos are isolated pockets where humane compassion has

perform the household chores. They also have to work in field along with men, so that the families can have at least one meal of rice a day. New born babies are weaned away from breast feeding within two months of birth. Mother's breast goes dry and the baby is given rice-water instead. Diarrhea is a killer-disease for children and the rate of infant mortality is unacceptably high.

Children, who are fortunate to grow up to school age, have to walk for an hour to the school in the morning and without any food. When they come back home, they are hungry and exhausted. When the mothers come to the polyclinic, they ask Sister Alma for vitamins. Milk is expensive, vitamins are cheaper. These who used to earn an income in Veni Lale or Walilae areas by selling banana-cakes in the local market cannot afford the run-away price of flour any more. The consequence is hunger and starvation.

If they or the children are sick they do not go to the government polyclinics. The Indonesian doctors treat them as less than human. Even if the doctor is there, they cannot afford to pay for medicines or injections which have to be bought from outside. No wonder that the polyclinic run by the missionaries received 600 out patients in the month of January 1999, alone.

Men who are wage-earners in construction projects or in industries have been laid off. The number of jobless in Dili is growing everyday. Is this due to the economic crisis alone? Yes and no. The fundamental structural dependency created over the period of more than two decades of hegemonic oppression must be recognised. Indonesians at every layer of governance and in the private sector have succeeded in securing for themselves a privileged position at the expense of the native Timorese through a process of subordination and in the name of security.

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nity has disintegrated. Even the social cohesion has been rent asunder by a policy of divide and rule. The pro-integration forces have been armed to the teeth to subdue the majority Timorese. Now that the question of extended autonomy and of independence of East Timor is being negotiated under the UN auspices will that mean further internecine conflict? True, with legitimate territorial claim over off-shore oil resources, East Timor can be a prosperous region in the future. But in the immediate future will there be a vacuum?

That question looms large. Because the cultural autonomy of East Timor has been seriously jeopardised. The Timorese cannot read and write in their own language, Tetum. Bhasha, an alien language is the medium of education. So in spite of investment in public education, the younger generation today is alienated from the knowledge power of a so-called superior race. The political and economic structure determining the ownership and allocation of resources and the knowledge-structure determining the control and dissemination of information have pervasive effects on all other structures of a society.

Together they create and use culture, including normative codes and religious values, to define and legitimise the dominant minority's particular concepts and practices of ownership and control, and the uses and reproduction of resources and knowledge. This complex interplay of political, economic and down-ward directed knowledge power must be recognised to understand the nature and dynamics of deprivation.

Hunger and poverty in East Timor represents not just crippling drought and economic recession but an exclusionary relationship of the Timorese from institutional networks sufficient to maintain survival and self-esteem. As isolated entities, their societal background practices, cultural memory and common social meaning have been inexorably eroded. A new set of meanings and institutions, distant from and alien to them, has disposed off many of their every-day knowledge and symbolic practices. The poor majority in East Timore politically disenfranchised, economically excluded and socially stigmatised.

EU Membership Issue: Turkey's Frustration Continues

by A S M Nurunnabi

The present period has been considered as one of the most difficult chapters in the European-Turkish relationship. The unhappy situation was reflected in a number of developments. First, there was the Turkish government's decision to end its attempt to join the EU, after years of constant rebuffs. Recently a trade war was threatened over Italy's refusal to extradite the Kurdish guerrilla leader Abdullah Ocalan. At that time the president of the European Commission said that EU would stand solid with Italy if Ankara should impose sanctions. It was earlier emphasised that not all EU member states necessarily regarded Ocalan as a terrorist, although his PKK organisation had reportedly killed thousands of civilians during a violent 20-year campaign. Europeans could not understand why Turkey should so misconstrue their reluctance to hand over Ocalan without due process of law to a regime which would like to hang him. For their part, Turks could not understand why the EU should spurn in this matter as in their bid to join the European Union.

TURKEY'S Bosphorus crossing links Europe and Asia, yet despite Turkey's geopolitical importance and long membership of NATO, it batters in vain on Europe's door. It is ironic that Europe's leaders chose to meet in Vienna lately to discuss the worsening relations with Turkey. Ever since the Turks first laid siege to the city of Vienna in 1529, there has been a legacy of misunderstanding, mistrust and mutual incomprehension between them and Western Europeans.

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spurn in this matter as in their bid to join the European Union.

It has been very deplorable that the position was ever like that. In the dictionary of quotations, from Shakespeare to Mozart, Dickens to Gladstone and Lloyd George, the Turks get insulting citations. Over the past years, contemptuous image, as noted by impartial observers, has been built up around a nation whose people are otherwise acknowledged to be both cultivated and friendly, living in a country with a long and civilised past and an economically dynamic and Western-oriented present.

Turkey has been waiting to join the EU now for nearly 40 years. It joined the queue in 1959, way before Britain, but following a decision at the Luxembourg Summit in 1997, it has been placed effectively last. It looks as if it will not be admitted until well into the next millennium after Romania and Bulgaria — countries with much less secure economic and political bases.

This is despite Turkey's important strategic position, no less so now than in the cold war. It controls the water supply to neighbours such as Syria and commands the likely pipeline routes for the world's next great untapped oil fields in Azerbaijan. Turkey's problem was that its latest bid to join the EU followed the end of the cold war. President Suleyman Demirel remarked during the defence of European civilisation (against communism) was at stake, they didn't say we were Turks and Muslims.

The European commission

concedes that the country is well on the way to qualifying for admission on economic grounds. Turkey has all the hallmarks of a market economy, possessing a well-developed institutional and legislative framework, a dynamic private sector and liberal trade rules. The economy has considerable potential for growth and has shown great adaptability, which has contributed significantly to its modernisation. As a senior EU diplomat remarked, "Turkey has proved a reliable ally internationally, it has adhered to United Nations sanctions against Iraq despite the cost. It is the world's only real Muslim democracy. It has a large and stable middle class. It is a consumer society. It would be a glittering prize for the EU."

Turkey's participation in NATO — it has the second largest army in the alliance and the pivotal location thwarting the Soviet Black Sea fleet's only exit to open sea — explains the long indulgence the country enjoyed throughout the cold war. The United States' subsequent devotion is based on Turkey's pivotal position in the Middle East, perfectly placed to dominate the eastern Mediterranean and Central Asia. It can launch airstrikes and patrols against Iraq, and provide pipeline routes for oil from the Caspian basin that will not have to use Russian pipeline monopoly. The discreet military co-operation between Turkey and Israel, with joint exercises and freedom to train in Turkish airspace is a recent bonus for Washington.

There is a further factor, as felt by Pentagon, which may be the most important of all at a time of American worries about Islamic fundamentalism. Turkey is a country where most people subscribe to the Islamic faith, but it is a secular state, allied and strategically oriented to the West, with elected civilian governments, democratic procedures, an independent judiciary, free market and a free press. This makes Turkey virtually unique in the Islamic world, and offers an important alternative model of pro-democracy to the growing numbers of Arabs who suspect that their countries do not have to run in the way they have been.

Turkey's long wait was not eased last year when Helmut Kohl, the then German Chancellor, announced firmly that as far as he was concerned, Turkey could never join the EU. "Turkish membership of the EU is not possible," he said. What he was really worried about was immigration. There was an estimated two million Turks living in the EU out of its population of 11 million Muslims. The Turks have not been made welcome, although there are signs that the new German government might be prepared to offer citizenship to some of its Turkish residents.

Greece remains implicitly opposed to Turkish membership of the EU to such an extent that it may block all enlargement if there is an accommodation with the Turks over Cyprus. It has already done its best to stymie EU aid to the old rival in contravention of the customs agreement signed three years ago. Turkish

occupation of northern Cyprus has given Greece an incentive to oppose Turkish accession; the prospect of (Greek) southern Cyprus joining the EU gives the EU its most knotty single problem.

The articulation of Turkish interests isn't helped by endemic political instability. With a track record of three coups in 20 years before 1980 and a strong presence since, the country's armed forces stand ready to intervene again. Non-religious parties are strong but unable to coalesce, leaving a gap for Muslim fundamentalists. Observers see recent support for Islamic parties as more of a protest than evidence of religious conversion, a strike against personal enmities and ambition. None of this helps Turkey in presenting a coherent image to the outside world.

The country, for all its desire for European acceptance, has been slow to acknowledge or appreciate genuine concerns, particularly over human and social rights. It is Turkey's human rights record that gives the EU every opportunity to block membership. It is the reverse side, as noted by some analysts, of the great westernisation process inaugurated by Kamal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey in the 1920s. He may have pledged the state to a secular, western future, but he also bequeathed a legacy of authoritarianism and intolerance of dissent. Although civilian politicians say they are committed to improving human rights, the legacy of distrust is said to be remaining.

Friday Mailbox

"A Match to Remember"

Sir, The captioned write-up by Mr Tawfik Aziz Khan published in the DS, dated February 2, '99 was a beautiful piece of literature and enriched by lucidity and artistry. We enjoyed the piece immensely also for it gave us a vivid and a picturesque description of the long-awaited cricket match between the two giants in the Indian soil.

Never before in the history of last 50 years or so of our listening to the radio commentary and later live viewing of cricket matches we cared to read the newspaper sport commentary on this sport, excepting for checking the score card. Now that we have read Mr Khan's fascinating commentary we vow not to miss his sports column on all cricket competition in the coming days that he would care to write.

Syed Waliullah
108 Ka, Mohammadpur Housing and
Pisciculture Society,
Dhaka 1207

Lalkhan Madrassa

Sir, As reported in the DS, in a recent prime minister's press conference after her triumphant West Bengal tour, a reporter asked whether the much publicised Harquatul Jihad campaign is a hoax or not, the prime minister reportedly remained silent to this query.

Now your superb investigative report on Lalkhan Madrassa seems to favour that view. Most of our liberal citizens harbour some degree of reservation towards the justification of madrassa education in this late 20th century.

There are some genuine grounds for this. An urgent modernization and overhauling is required for our religion based education. But using this sensitive issue for political gains is the last thing our poorly governed country needs now.

Shafiqur Rahman
1/6 Lalmatia, Dhaka

The JU malady

Sir, It is with gratitude that I read the write-up detailing the complaint by a member of the Jahangirnagar University syndicate against the Vice Chancellor for allowing the convicted rapists to sit for exams. So far the moral worthlessness of the VC has been obvious from his protection of criminals, but now we know that he is even guilty of violating University rules!

All concerned individuals and civic groups should question this.

Zeeshan Hasan
54 Dhanmandi RA,
Road 2A, Dhaka

We will decide

Sir, Hartal is a democratic as well as fundamental rights of the people, so a political party can call a hartal. But that does not mean the political parties will call hartals at their free will. We, the people, also have the same right either to observe or reject it. A political party can call a hartal on any issue. But it's us, the people, who will decide whether to observe the hartal or reject it outright. No use of force, i.e., no one will force us to observe hartal and vice versa. It's the people who suffer ten times more than the politicians during hartals. Our political leaders are economically very well off — to them hartal is a luxury or pleasure. But to us it's a question of life and death. So the choice is entirely ours.

Dear political leaders, please do not call hartals at your free will. It's nothing but a

crime against the people.

I like to mention another thing. It has become a fashion to break cars. I do not know what pleasure those rowdy elements get by breaking cars of innocent people. It's either a sadism or barbarism, or both. It must be stopped at once. Our political leaders must declare openly that they will not support the breaking of cars by their activists. If anyone does so, will be arrested. Compensation will be given for the damage done. Calling hartals at free will and breaking of cars crossed the limits during 1994 to '96. I would like to ask our PATRIOTIC(?) political leaders, that if we break your cars, destroy your properties, stop you from going to work and obstruct your sons and daughters from going their educational institutions or to appear in their exams, how would you feel?

Bangladesh is not the ancestral or sole property of any political leader or party. So (political leaders) try to understand the sorrows and pains of the 12 crore people of Bangladesh.

Iqbal Ahmed
Dhaka 1000

"Dhaka University Library on Internet"

Sir, The article in the DS of 8 Feb '99 under the above caption by Auddin Talukder is interesting and sounds mysterious at the same time. Who is the man behind "Dhaka University Library Automation Project"? What is the system and how many materials of the library collections have been covered by the system? What are its web site (WWW) and e-mail addresses?

How "DU Library linked with foreign libraries"? (Star news, 27th Dec '98). Readers and research scholars using computers and the Internet all over the world would surely be interested to know. Nothing is so far available through the Internet. Would the authority concerned at the Dhaka University Library please clarify the questions?

A. M. Rafiqur Rahman
Mirpur, Dhaka

The right approach

Sir, The fundamental teachings of Islam are present in the holy Qur'an, the final revelation from Allah. But we feel sorry to observe that many learned Muslim do not try to learn Islam directly from the holy Qur'an, let alone the common people. In their lifetime on earth, many Muslim scholars read volumes of books written by men but are not sincere enough to read the holy Book. I wonder how these learned people will face Allah on the Day of Judgement and what answer they will make before Allah if asked about their relationship with this revealed Book. Is it not wise for us to take a firm determination to read the Qur'an everyday? It is for want of proper understanding about the holy Qur'an among the people that many superstitions and wrong notions about certain issues that are prevailing in our society. People depend on the Alims to know Islam which is unbecoming of a learned man.

There are many Ulama in our country who are well-clad but ill-informed about Islam. And when such persons preach Islam, the spread of misconception and misunderstanding becomes tragic. So the educated people themselves should learn Islam reading the holy Qur'an and Sunnah.

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