

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 vitality 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 holiday's 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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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 Llyod 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 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 bitterly, "When 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 air-space is a recent bonus for Washington.

There is a further factor, as

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 not 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 Laclo in Manatuto 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 implement 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 rupiah 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 crony-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 pump were available. This is an Asalina area and if farmed can feed almost the entire Timorese population. The mission, during the difficult times provided 10 tons of corns 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 with supplementary irrigation with donated pumps.

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

performed 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 with

out any food. When they come

back home, they are hungry

and exhausted. When the

mothers come to the polyclinic,

they ask Sister Alma for vita-

mins. Milk is expensive, vita-

mins are cheaper. Those who

used to earn an income in Veli

Lale or Wallale areas by selling

banana-cakes in the local mar-

ket 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

to speak their own language.

Poverty, in the case of the rural

Timorese, is not the conse-

quence of the vagaries of weather,

nor of economic deprivations

alone. It is an unnatural and

demobilised state of existence

in physical insecurity — an

existence in political powerlessness

and spiritual despair.

The extent of physical depriva-

tion can be illustrated by the

case of a young mother in

Fatulila village in Veli Lale.

She used to come to the polyclinic

run by Sister Joe Anne and

Sister Alma. Malnourished as

she was she weighed only 29

kilos. She gave birth to a child

and within a month had to go

out to the farm to work. By the

next month she died.

Women in a typical family

work harder than men. They

cook, take care of children and

perform the household chores.

They also have to work in field

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