

A Summit for Prosperity

A summit meeting of the Developing Eight, or the D-8, is round the corner. This important gathering of the top eight countries of the OIC in Dhaka will be a high point diplomacy. Five heads of state or government have already confirmed their participation in the Dhaka summit: President of Indonesia B J Habibie, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad of Malaysia, President Suleyman Demirel of Turkey, President Mohammad Khatami of Iran and Prime Minister Mohammad Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak is also expected to attend, and Nigeria, which is preparing for general elections on February 25, is to send a high-ranking representative.

Together these eight very important Muslim states account for a population of 900 million and command around nine per cent of the global GDP. These facts are good enough reasons for Bangladesh to feel happy and important in bringing about the summit. During the two-day conference the host country will have ample opportunity to enhance bilateral relations with the guest countries on the one hand, and, on the other, it will be a good occasion for Bangladesh to emerge as a player in the international arena by way of facilitating the harnessing of real potential of the new economic alliance and 'set it rolling in a focused direction'. There will be many important issues like rural development and micro-credit, establishment of joint business councils, launching of a shipping line, selling of agricultural products among member countries and developing backward linkages for ready-made garments in the post-Multi-fibre Agreement (MFA) era on the table. These are matters of utmost importance to Bangladesh also.

But we are concerned about the confrontation between the major political parties of the country. The positions they have taken against each other and the chaos that have been let loose by the opposing forces during the past hartal can only send a wrong signal. We expect that all parties to the chaos and confusion will exercise restraint and will not start anything which causes disrespect to the international community for the country. The leaders must uphold the interest of the country before everything else.

Good Neighbours

The meeting scheduled for February 20 between Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterpart Mohammad Nawaz Sharif aboard the Delhi-Lahore bus apparently heralds a new era in Indo-Pak relations. The meet has manifold positive implications for shaping the future of both countries. A direct bus link itself is a sign of mutual understanding and cooperation between the two, which kept themselves antagonised against each other for more than five decades. This is for the first time leaders of these two arch-rival neighbours are meeting on each other's soil. The two prime ministers are preparing to "probe" the issue of nuclear weapons, followed by that at the core of antagonism — Kashmir. Most important is the fact that the two will discuss and try to resolve their long-standing problems without any third-party intervention.

However, there are reasons to look at the upcoming Indo-Pak cordiality also negatively given their long history of suspicion against each other. More so when both are acting against their political opponents at home. But both Vajpayee and Sharif know that ice has already started to melt, and this prime minister level meeting should not be allowed to be an exercise in vain. The bus travel is more than a symbol: good neighbourliness and stability in bilateral relations is the essence of today's changing global and regional scenario.

Also, the two leaders are not in a position for tall-talks, since a lot depends on their wisdom, because the peoples of the SAARC nations no longer wish to remain in a political concavity as they are in a changed new world of economic advancement.

Avoidable Tension at Border

Even before the battalion-level flag meeting could begin on Saturday's skirmish, the Jaintapur border in Sylhet was rocked once again by exchange of fire between Bangladesh Rifles and Indian Border Security Force (BSF) on Wednesday. Trouble began at around noon when the BSF purportedly opened fire at BDR personnel and the labourers in the stone quarry. BDR fired back immediately. For the next one-and-a-half hours, the area became a virtual war zone. Panic-stricken labourers at the quarry and local residents ran for their lives. Uneasy silence prevailed. When the two sides eventually met at the flag meeting, several hours later than scheduled, the problem was far from over. Just a kilometre away, at Mokampunji, the BSF opened fire again.

Tension along the border is nothing new. Battalion-level flag meetings between the BDR and BSF have so far efficiently handled the situation. This time around, too, we believe, the matter will be settled in similar fashion. However, the reasons that usually trigger off such exchanges of fire between the border security personnel of the two neighbours are often localised like Saturday's 'trespassing by some Khasias into the Bangladesh territory across the border'. Sometimes the border security personnel's patience is stretched to the limit by provocation from the local residents. The irritants in such cases should be locally solved.

On the diplomatic front, India and Bangladesh share friendly relations. Recent visit of our prime minister to inaugurate the Calcutta Book Fair was another step forward towards strengthening the ties. Against this backdrop, skirmish along the border is just an avoidable thorn in the flesh. A small tiff should be nipped in the bud, locally.

Sonia Believes People have Forgiven Congress

Some financial heads within Congress have reportedly advised Sonia Gandhi to let the BJP-led government present the budget so that Congress, if it comes to power, will not have to take unpopular decisions. However, once the budget is presented, the situation can change.

WHAT Congress president Sonia Gandhi has said to underline the shakiness of the Vajpayee government is nothing new. It is as much a truth today as it was after the November assembly elections in Delhi, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, where the BJP lost to Congress. Even then, it was evident that the saffron tide was receding and Sonia Gandhi's advancing.

Last winter session of parliament did provide the government with an opportunity to throw out the Vajpayee government. Failure at the polls had made the BJP downcast. Its allies in the coalition could see that the party had the feet of clay. Opposition parties offered Congress the support and the communists went to the extent of accepting Sonia Gandhi as the next Prime Minister.

Still she tarried. She did not want Congress to precipitate matters. She wanted the government to fall under the weight of its own contradictions. True, some allies in the coalition too expressed unhappiness with the government. But theirs were even restive. But theirs were postures, not signals of revolt. None of them ever quitted government or the front. Even now, whatever their rhetoric, they remain part and parcel of the coalition.

Then why has Sonia Gandhi hinted that the Vajpayee government can "fall at any time"? It is not because of any change in configurations of politics but because of relentless pressure on her to oust government. Communal forces rearing their head and attacking a microscopic minority of Christians

have shaken the confidence of the society. Sonia Gandhi is no exception. Economy is worsening day by day. What probably counted with her the most is the government's ineptness to handle the situation. The culpability of Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal is clear. Sonia Gandhi has been threatening to walk out, has managed to get cases of corruption against her transferred to regular courts from special courts. The Centre's order through notification is considered an affront to the Supreme Court, which is seized of the matter. Still the Vajpayee government has done this to placate her. Mamta Banerjee, who has equation with Sonia Gandhi, has also given a call to strengthen Prime Minister Vajpayee. This makes things difficult.

Sonia Gandhi has two options: One, Congress can form its government with outside support. Two, she can extend the support of Congress to a non-BJP government from outside. Both are not easy options.

In the process, she may have to make compromises, which are not good for the Congress image, particularly when she proposes to go it alone to the polls.

As regards the first option, without entering into controversy on whether she wants herself to be the Prime Minister or nominate someone from the party, Congress will require the backing of 133 more members to have a majority. The party has 140 out of 544 seats in the Lok Sabha. The simple majority means 273. From where can she find the rest?

Laloo Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal with 17. Congress has called the first 'casteists' and the second 'corrupt'. Theirs 37, plus six of the Janata Dal and five of the Bahujan Samaj Party make 48. There is still a gap of 26. Orissa's Biju Janata Dal (9) — some of its members have links with Congress — may split. Even if it does not and support Sonia Gandhi, nine members narrow the gap to 17. There are six independents and 47 others, who constitute the one or two-member parties. They can probably provide the 17 votes.

Congress pulled the rug from beneath the feet of Deve Gowda first and Inder Gujral later has left all groups and individuals wiser. They will not come forward to be sacrificial lambs. They know that even after supporting them, Congress is capable of using their rule as an example to tell the electorate that they too did not perform.

True, Deve Gowda has been forming the government with the support of Congress. He has also the promise from so many groups and individuals to make him believe that he can prove a majority in the Lok Sabha. It is still only a promise. Even then the parties joining him will want to make sure that Congress does not stab them in the back again. Can he give such an assurance?

Left to Sonia Gandhi she would like to go for a mid-term poll. She believes people have forgotten and forgiven the sins that Congress committed in its earlier rules. She is also convinced that the anti-incumbency factor will work in favour of Congress. Therefore, she wants to encash on the mood quickly. Since her advisers are those who are not MPs, such a thinking has got strengthened. But the reality of the parliamentary party is different.

Most Congress MPs do not want to go back to the polls. They have not even finished one year of their term and have

no certainty that they will be returned again. On an average, they have spent Rupees one crore each. They cannot imagine how they can raise that much money again to contest election. Some of them have even hinted that they would rather defy the party discipline than allow the dissolution of parliament.

The BJP and its allies are conscious of their reluctance to face elections so soon. This feeling is being exploited to the hilt. Opposition leader Sharad Pawar, a tall Congress leader, is being quoted that a new government cannot emerge from the house but elections can. Dispersed as the Lok Sabha is — there are 20 odd parties — he is probably right. But the alternative of letting the BJP continue is also not to the liking of Congress and other opposition parties.

In any case, some financial heads within Congress have reportedly advised Sonia Gandhi to let the BJP-led government present the budget so that Congress, if it comes to power, will not have to take unpopular decisions. However, once the budget is presented, the situation can change. The BJP and its allies feel that they will have enough time to plan their strategy to stall Sonia Gandhi.

What happens to her threat? Will she reconcile to the present situation for some more time, realising that the undoing of the present setup may initiate forces beyond her control? Some are guessing she may not act. But there is no doubt that Deve Gowda is working overnight to add up the numbers.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

The BJP's 182, the Akalis' eight and the Shiv Sena's six are ruled out because they will never support a Congress government. In other words, she will have to book 133 more members out of the remaining 208. Presuming Jayalalitha ditches the BJP despite what it has done for her, she brings only 18 to Congress. Even if Mamta Banerjee comes along, her Trinamool Congress has only seven. Communist members totalling 41 are firmly behind her. She still needs 67.

But Congress may not be willing to pay the price they want to exact. Also, if the new combination is whittled down to a rag-tag, what face Congress will have to go before the electorate? Sonia Gandhi looks like choosing the second option, that is, supporting a non-BJP government from outside. This proposition can work provided Congress is serious about sustaining the government that comes to power. But it is an open secret that she wants the arrangement to continue till such time as she decides to go for fresh elections.

In Bangladesh, Laws are Made to be Broken ...

The World Bank said in a recent report that air pollution in Dhaka was estimated to "cause 15,000 premature deaths and several million cases of sickness every year, much of it stemming from vehicles." Blood samples from children admitted to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital with abnormal behaviour showed the presence of lead at eight times the World Health Organisation's limit.

DURING my first trip to London about two decades ago I was overwhelmed by two things.

The first was that I felt at home maybe because I loved the fresh air along with the great number of relatives.

The second was during a very late night drive from Somerset to London. My car came to a crossing and the driver quickly stopped as the traffic light changed to red. I looked around and saw that there were no other vehicles coming from any side. "I think we can go ... no traffic in sight," I told the driver quite normally and of course to his surprise.

"No, I can't go, there is a red light ... You should know the traffic laws if you want to drive around here," the middle-aged driver said. I explained red-faced, "Sorry, of course the red light."

I felt so good that how a very average citizen was respecting the simple laws, the traffic laws, and remembered how careful I myself have to be when driving in Dhaka.

Dhaka's traffic woe has become the most notorious along with lethally poisoned air and the pollution had a significant contribution to my recent illness. Thank you the anti-pollution law.

I often wonder what has gone wrong with us all. We all try to ignore simple laws, simple systems and simple ways of getting around things. Are these all too simple that encourages us to be so complacent with all of these?

If we start the traffic problem from the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) — the king of all vehicles they survey. The king is greedy and ignorant about the welfare of the kingdom it surveys as long as it has bagful of gold.

It is no secret that smoke-emitting vehicles or those which have run out their life span get out "fit" with the blessing of king called the BRTA. How both sides break the law? The superintendent who is paid by the government to check the vehicles and the owner of vehicle always reach an understanding — live and let live, satiating reciprocation. Thus both sides break the law quite gleefully.

The BRTA also issues (the right to kill?) certificates called driving licence. Of course those issued after legal practices do not get the 'certificate' and it is only for the few who choose to ignore the law giving a damn to the very word 'law'. As they merrily set out on the roads,

they quench the life out of the ignorant people on foot, on another vehicle or on the certificate holder's vehicle itself. However, the "certified killers" always manage to flee and return with another more bona fide certificate due to past experience.

Speeding trucks have one sitting on their left who dishes out 'favour for favour instruments' without even stopping when the uniformed men appear. They are more used to forgetting who was on the driving seat because after an accident that seat is found mostly empty. Have you

there, but who cares. The Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (RAJUK) chairman's house itself is located on that road.

The Executive Director of Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association, Salma Ali in a paper presented at a recent global conference against sexual exploitation said, "The Women and Children Oppression (Special Provision) Act, 1995 was not being implemented, despite the fact that girls in prostitution were below the legal age of 18 years.

So, what do we do, we do all know this. Why repeat, one might ask me.

Well, the answer is like this. We who ride on the vehicles must first test by ourselves to respect the law. Ourselves include the owner, driver, wife and children. On the other side the authorities must rescind the idea of trying not to offend one of their men, after all, their men. If an offending official sitting out days as an officer on special duty (OSD) suddenly finds a lucrative posting, he may also think "crime pays." If not anywhere else, but of course in Bangladesh.

The authorities must first hand down harsh punishment to their men and it is high time as far as Dhaka's pollution is concerned.

The other side is, of course, it is a shame that the bustling capital city is slowly becoming a huge garbage can, despite the fact that it is being charged on its helpless residents.

The other major step is to get the two-stroke "baby taxis" (health-wise monsters) and tempos off the streets speedily as these three wheelers are responsible for 80 per cent of Dhaka's air pollution, with controlled operation of the environment friendly pedal-driven rickshaws.

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The sooner we act instead of delivering speeches, keeping aside the political stakes from such ventures or reaching a bipartisan agreement on the problem, we will have a healthier nation in the future. It is never too late to start.

IN FOOL'S PARADISE?

by Nadeem Qadir

Next comes the Department of Environment, which with much publicity started its great venture of booking vehicles emitting smokes. The unlucky fella who got caught when the television camera was rolling were fined, but the rest — oh too many, let them break the law!!! Meanwhile, one just cannot overlook large number of police or government vehicles emitting black smoke, too.

ever heard an absconding driver caught and punished? A few more examples of either laws being broken or ignored:

1) Sale of migratory birds. Where are the law enforcers to stop the menace? When I told one of the vendors yelling "pakhi, hash" (birds, ducks) that selling the birds were punishable offence, he quipped "I know. So what. You don't like it, don't buy..."

2) Filling of Baridhara, Gulshan and Dhanmandi area lakes. At the end of Road - 6, Gshn, the entire lake has been taken over by some who have placed logs and bamboo poles

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Is BNP a Soberer Political Party than AL?

Sir, The Daily Star editor is highly revered for his unerring and impartial stance against hartals. It is his query, in response of which Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina promised that AL would abjure hartals even if it goes to opposition in future. No matter how trivial the Prime Minister's promise was, it created enthusiasm in hartal-stricken people and we strongly believe that Mr. Anam played a crucial role in that achievement. His "commentary" and "Topic of the Week" in the DS are always top the list and rate as most acceptable in Bangladeshi expatriate groups' discussion forums. He contributed his latest commentary on February 8 titled "These hartals will do BNP no good." One observation of the commentary has grabbed my attention. He tried to portray BNP as a far better political party compared to its arch-rival AL. The way Mr. Anam was extolling BNP is as follows: "As we had said earlier, one of the major attractions of the BNP in the public mind was that it is a far sober party compared to the AL? It was considered to be less aggressive, less imposing, less self righteous and definitely less muscle flexing than the AL. Except for some instances in the case JCD the general impression of the BNP was of a party which could be reasoned with. This was also supposedly the party of the business people and as such was expected to understand the needs of the economy far greater than others. This image became particularly stronger while it was in power." I think Mr. Anam has endangered his much-adored neutrality by injecting such an unnecessary comparison between BNP and AL into his otherwise important commentary. To any neutral observer, it is not possible and desirable to show BNP soberer than AL. If I am not mistaken, Mr. Anam was so confident about the sobriety of BNP from two events: (a) its acceptance in 1991 election and (b) it talked less foul, when it was in power. About the first

event, it can be argued that, it was more of AL's inability than BNP's ability, which led BNP to power in 1991 election. Ershad was a factor before 1991 election. People taught AL a good lesson for its softly-softly attitude against autocrat Ershad. Obviously, in absence of any better alternatives, protest votes against AL went to BNP. It does not necessarily make BNP a soberer party than AL. About second event, real test of sobriety of a political party is determined by how it does when in opposition. Does not Hasina look soberer than Khaleda now than when she was in opposition? The unfortunate but true (Sukkhia Karchupi) or unfortunate behavior (not to exchange pleasantries with Khaleda in her daughter's marriage ceremony) emanated from Hasina when she was in the opposition. Similarly, Khaleda, who looked soberer during power has already proved how intemperate she really is. Termining ruling party lawmakers as 'Beyadab', 'Ashovya', 'gob-response in Hasina's Salam' are a few examples. By termining BNP a soberer party than AL, Mr. Anam indeed has done a disservice to his own observations. In the very commentary I am referring to, Mr. Anam has seriously and rightfully condemned Khaleda's public remark to portray herself as Prime Minister and Hasina as Chief Minister. I can remember Mr. Anam's another commentary where he strongly protested BNP lawmakers (including some like B. Chowdhury and M.K. Anwar, who we knew to be very sober) attempt on speaker inside the parliament. Mr. Anam is equally vocal against BNP's using of religion, Indophobia, tacit support of Bangabandhu killers and so on. Then what soberer BNP he is talking about? It is just the next of day (Feb 9) of above commentary. Daily Ittefaq reported a BNP meeting at Engineering Institute, where Mayor Mirza Abbas told that someone brought the title 'Deshi-Kutta-Uttam' from India and those 'Kuttas' be driven out from the country. What can be the meanest utterance than this from a leader of the so called soberer party? The inspiration

is definitely from his sober leader, who used to threat AL leaders (including second-in-command of our liberation struggle) to drive to India. Sobriety of BNP can be examined in light of the present political impasse. There is every reason to believe that Seikh Hasina's 'Sukkhia Karchupi' was a fleeting comment emerged from debacle in 1991 election. Otherwise, she should not have chosen the very person as the honorable president of the country, under whose leadership that so called 'sukkhia Karchupi' had occurred. But BNP has taken an intransigent stance after 1996 election debacle. It has always held then caretaker government, CEC Abu Hena and most interestingly India responsible for its defeat in 1996 election. The present political impasse of the country is a continuation of the prejudiced stance BNP had taken before two and half years ago. Will Mr. Anam still want us to believe that BNP is a soberer party than AL?

Inshallah, I am really excited to meet them in Dhaka during my visit. Would really appreciate any response regarding my request.

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Hartal and pollution

Sir, Our country has been preoccupied with two problems: Pollution and Hartals. Hartals — an "entrepreneurial nightmare" or perhaps the opposition's way of helping solve the pollution problems of our city in an attempt to kill two birds with a single stone. Absurdly far fetched? Maybe, but remember, there are countless actions which appear ridiculous, whose hidden motives are very wise and weighty."

I can realize the negative economic implications of calling an hartal, and sympathize with the entire business sector, but admit it, a lot of look forward to clean, lead-free air which is something we don't get too often.

Asif Zaman Dhanmondi, R/A., Dhaka

To help a hartal victim

Sir, I am a regular reader of The Daily Star (Internet Edition) from US. Of all the internet papers available from Bangladesh, I found yours to be neutral on publishing local news. I appreciate you and all for taking such a stand. Anyway, the reason for my writing is about Mr. Mohammed Ali, the rickshaw puller who died from the burn injury on "hartal" day. It just broke my heart that innocent people have to give their lives for these sleazy politicians, whose only interest is to grab power by any means.

Thousands of miles away from home, tears roll down my eyes when I read the news about his death. I am wondering is there way I can help the poor family? Within my limited capacity, I like to help the family financially. It was said Mr. Ali had a four-year old brother who was going to school. I like to send money for the sustenance of the family regularly. Is it possible to get an address of them? I am planning to visit Dhaka in March, Inshallah to attend a family function for a week. I like to meet the family also. Is there a way to communicate this to the family? I am helping two other poor kids in Bangladesh for their education. I like to continue that too.

that most of the world is dominated first by super wealthy oligarchies, but by the one and only ethic of GREED. The capitalists are motivated by greed for more and yet more wealth. I see only the expansion of ethical and environmental darkness ahead, because not enough of the people in power are willing to give up their individualism and the cravings it engenders — for more wealth, power, etc — in order to act for the benefit of the community — and the world as global environment — at large.

Joanna Kirkpatrick

USIS Library

Sir, After long 20 years recently I went to the USIS to procure some information regarding Operation Restore Hope. From outside Mymensingh House is awesome, surrounded by thick high walls like a fort. The first shock I got was at the gate itself. Armed with batons and guns the security personnel fired a barrage of questions to me. After satisfying them and passing a well manicured lawn, I entered the building to encounter another hurdle. More security guard, metal detector etc. For a second I thought where am I? What am I trying to do? Visit a library or the Pentagon? Instantly my memories went back to USIS of Chittagong (Jamal Khan Road). Spiral three storied building a landmark of a sort, a nerve centre of the youngsters of late 70's and early 80's. A cultural and social site of that time. Beautiful library well stocked with a cross section of books, enough to rouse interest even for a reluctant reader. It had a lovely auditorium where with Leo Club we staged "Shyama" dance-drama of Tagore. The place was full of life. The gentleman who was in charge always had a smile in his face and was ever helpful. From 96-99 I was doing my Masters from Dhaka University so the British Council became a must place for me. A book worm, thanks to my father, a library is a very important place for me to visit whether it is South Shields, Melbourne or Malmo. British Council is a very lively library with its colonial prim and proper attitude. It also has its own security system in a very subtle way.

Correct me, if I am wrong. To me a library is a place where civilization is kept alive by the non-living-matter — books. And by their absence with computers and disks can you create the magical atmosphere that

even the most averse person will be bound to flick through. But the USIS library has become a grey grim place with an eerie atmosphere — hardly any one would like to visit a second time. Maybe because of the deteriorating American image in most of the countries in the world which has changed from a peace makers to the policeman. I hope that USA will be able to break away from this tourniquet in the next millennium.

Shikha Mansoor House F25, Road #11 Banani, Dhaka-1213

No more hartals, please

Sir, I am a student of Scolastica School in Dhaka and am really concerned about my education. But if our Opposition team goes on calling hartals like this I guess we will have no choice but to go abroad which is only a wishful thinking for many as they simply cannot afford for good as these hartals are really affecting our daily activities.

Our senior leaders always say that they want to make this country livable and make our father of the nation's dream come true. But how? Instead of trying to improve this country, they are destroying it totally. We are the only hope of our country and these leaders are even taking this hope away from the country or burying it for good. What do they think, is this only their country? Well no, this is our country and these people are snatching this right away from us. Why don't they just give us a chance to make this country better? Why don't they stop thinking about themselves and think about us, about the country, at least for once? They always keep on saying they are going to make this country a better place to live in. They are going to call all these hartals and then expect this country to grow better by itself! GOOD JOKE. PLEASE, why don't they just try to understand.

My request to the senior leaders is, in being a good citizen, PLEASE stop all this rivalry, enmity and grow a nation of love, peace and prosperity for yourself but for us and the generation after us and for the other fellow citizens of the country. PLEASE, this is a request to make our father of the nation's dreams come true and make this country a place of friendship and harmony. Shamsul Hadi Mukl Dhaka