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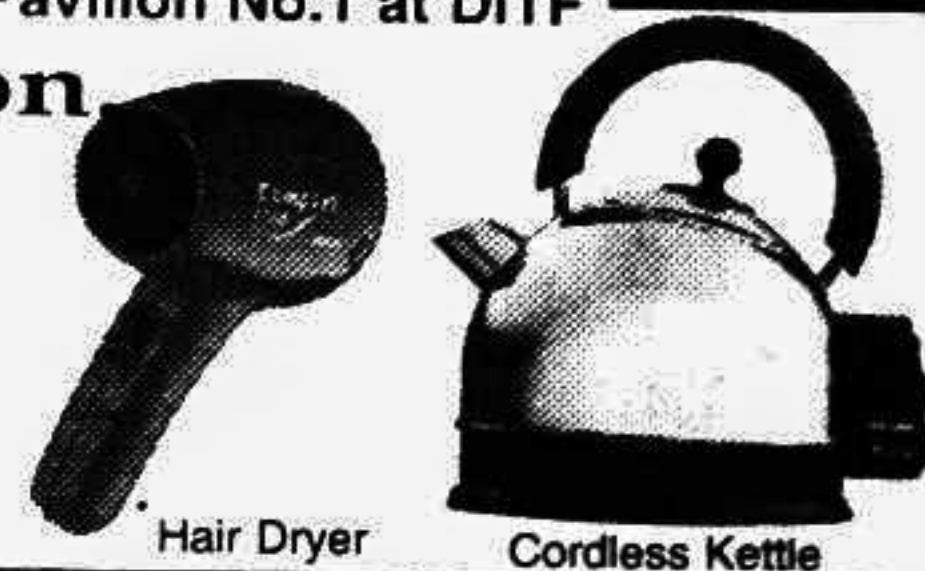
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For some, there's delight in disorder

By Mir A Zaman

"When will be the next hartal?" asked Krishty. Her father was surprised. When the whole country is desperately seeking a way out of the apparently endless series of opposition-enforced shut down, his little school-going daughter's eagerness for more, pronounced in her tone, fascinated him.

"Why? Why do you ask?" he queried.

"Hartal is fun, daddy," she made no attempt to hide her excitement. "No school, no homework. It's a lot of fun."

Indeed, hartal is fun for school-goers like her. When in the traditional trouble spots of the capital — Topkhana Road, Purana Paltan, some parts of the old city etc. — the pro- and anti-hartal activists are engaged in fierce face-off, the apolitical youngsters make the motorised vehicle-free, quieter streets of the capital their own Oval, Lord's, Eden Gardens, MCG or, for that matter, Bangabandhu National Stadium.

The residents of the capital have, more or less, become used to the life in hartal hours.

The first couple of hours in the morning is a little dangerous," said Azam, a resident of Mirpur. "That's when the activists bring out processions. There is always the chance of street-fighting. But as the day wears on, things get normal."

Normal it gets, indeed. At some parts of the capital, one finds it hard to believe that there is a hartal going on. The difference with any 'normal' day rests in the fact that there is hardly any automobiles.

"It's better in a way," said Raihan, who lives in the Dhanmondi residential area. "No smoke, no honking, no minibus, no tempo, no scooter... on the whole, it's a pollution-free city."

Pollution-free, indeed. The only mode of transport is the rickshaw. The rickshaw-pullers charge little more than usual in the hartal days, many complain. But the rickshaw-pullers have their reason.



Hartal chaos

Dhaka's Farm Gate has forgotten how to be strike-bound.

"With the offices and markets closed, we find a few passengers," said Rahmat Ali. "I started at noon and now it's nine o'clock, I have earned only eighty taka."

While hartal gives relief to middle-income families, it is certainly no fun for the low-income groups. One rickshaw-puller said he worked as a day-labourer, but he had no work for three days, and was forced to pedal a rickshaw.

"I am very ill, but there is no food for my family at home, my children are starving, I have no choice but to pedal this rickshaw," he said.

The city comes alive in the afternoon. With the scorching sun swaying to the west and gentle breeze blowing, people come out on the streets in

search of some recreation. Fortunately for them, this time around, there are two fairs going on — the Dhaka International Trade Fair at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar and the Amar Ekushey Book Fair at the Bangla Academy.

On the first day of the latest edition of opposition-enforced hartal from February 23 to 25 people were a little apprehensive and the crowd at these fairs was thin. However, the second day was just like any other day.

No one would believe that there is a hartal going on," said the man, selling tickets at the trade fair. "We sold tickets worth nearly 300,000 taka."

Ten taka per ticket that means 30,000 tickets and that too from one booth. Inside the fair arena, there they were, people of all ages; a happy, care-free lot, not even the slightest trace of apprehension on their faces.

"We came all the way from Uttara," said the man in his late thirties. With him were his wife and two children. "There are so many people on the streets, you don't feel scared. It seems everything is all right."

It was quarter past ten Wednesday night. On the rickshaw van were a young man and his wife. They were sharing jokes with their co-passengers and bursting into laughter. On the Rokeya Sarani, there was festivity in the air. Rickshaw-pullers whistling, singing loud, racing each other. Not quite a regular day. In the country-wide disorder, there was delight for them. Delight in disorder.

— Star Photo

Dangerous new elements added to futile hartal

By Nazmul Ashraf

The 66-hour hartal that ended at midnight last night was phenomenal on several counts. The opposition-sponsored shutdown could neither stop holding of the municipal elections nor could it make the desired impact on the people at large.

But the three-day shutdown introduced a new and dangerous element to the street agitation — bomb attack by snipers — that caused all the three killings and injuries to most of some 250 hartal victims across the country.

BNP and its allies called the countrywide shutdown vowing to resist the municipal polls which they "boycotted". They had planned a big showdown with larger number of activists on the streets to force the government accept their demands including fresh municipal polls under a new Chief Election Commissioner.

But the hartal passed off, in relative peace, with the three-day polls held without much trouble. Postponement of balloting, a key indicator of the extent of violence and disruption, occurred at only 20 centres out of 2,078 in 136 municipalities across the country.

Turnout of voters in the

elections was much more (official percentage was not available until last night) than the opposition prediction and claims during hartal-day briefings, according to independent reports.

Worse, a considerable number of opposition leaders and activists defied their parties' call by contesting the local polls. Some of them even got elected.

According to reports from across the country, the hartal call was totally ignored at some places, even at the targeted ar-

ers were hurt in careless handling of the homemade crackers.

Bomb hurled at an anti-hartal procession killed a ruling party activist in the capital on the first day while such action from hideouts hurt most of the some 250 hartal victims across the country.

The pro- and anti-hartal campaigners aside, bomb victims included commuters in public and private buses and other vehicles, drivers, rickshawpullers, pedestrians, office-goers, policemen and fac-

few such incidents were reported from some places outside Dhaka in the three days.

In a surprise move on the last hartal day, Jatiya Party chief HM Ershad led a procession in the trouble-free Mirpur Road in the city for some time in the afternoon.

Pickets were small in number in the capital, so were their opponents. As a result, clashes between the rival groups were almost absent in the capital while such events were very insignificant in other parts of the country.

Throughout these three days, opposition top notches were found absent from the streets but some of them attended the routine press briefing at the end of the day to claim "all-out success of their agitation and blame the government for police atrocities and going ahead with the "voterless" municipal elections.

The three-day shutdown halted businesses, disrupted communication and work at government offices.

In another rare move on the last day yesterday, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina addressed a public meeting in the capital, apparently to highlight the opposition failure.

News Analysis

Sniping at the opponents with crackers was the most alarming trend of the latest shutdown, especially in the capital where "bomb scare" gripped the people everywhere.

Street protests during the shutdown were almost absent. In reality, such protests were confined to selected spots only with a few mid-ranking opposition leaders guiding their small groups of followers. Protesters confronted the law enforcers only once in the capital and a

tory workers.

When contacted last night, ASI Julfikar Ali, duty officer at Dhanmondi thana, said their official record showed that none was arrested so far in connection with the murder of Sajal.

Niaz along with his accomplices had attempted to attack two markets and different shops in the city's Sobhanbagh area and exploded four crackers at about 6:30 pm Wednesday.

Slain BNP boy's brother-in-law arrested

By Staff Correspondent

Niaz Ahmed, brother-in-law of Sajal Chowdhury who was shot dead during hartal hours on February 9, was arrested from near his West Dhanmondi residence in the city late Wednesday night.

Niaz was arrested as an FIR-named accused in two cases lodged with Mohamadpur thana on Tuesday and Wednesday, police said.

Sajal Chowdhury, 25, was shot from a point blank range

by armed men from an anti-hartal convoy of motor vehicles led by local MP of ruling Awami League.

Shahidur Rahman, father of Sajal, told The Daily Star last night. "Police could not arrest any of the killers of Sajal even in two weeks after the murder."

He further said, "I do not know whether Niaz was arrested as he is the husband of Sajal's sister and he knows many thing about Sajal's

killings".

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police said quoting an FIR. In the other FIR, it was mentioned that Niaz and his accomplices on board a microbus intercepted a minibus near Mohamadpur post office at about 9:30 pm Tuesday, police said.

Police produced Niaz before the CMM's court yesterday evening and prayed for a twelve-day remand for interrogation. The court placed him on one day's remand.

BNP calls polls a 'farce' Opposition demands cancellation of results

By Staff Correspondent

Opposition leaders yesterday warned that the government's failure to cancel results of the just-concluded municipal polls could have grave consequences. They repeated their threat to launch an all-out movement to topple the government unless their demands were met.

"Everybody witnessed the voterless and farcical polls. People will never accept this one-party election," BNP secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan said while briefing newsmen at the Minto Road office of the Opposition prior to the conclusion of 66-hour countrywide shutdown.

"The current agitation will turn into one-point movement to topple this anti-people government," he said, warning that the consequence might be "very dangerous if the government failed to cancel the polls results and accept the 4-point demand."

Bhuiyan dismissed claims

that elections to 136 municipalities held over the past three days had witnessed a large turnout of voters despite a boycott call by the BNP and its allies. Bhuiyan said most of the pictures that were published in newspapers were "stage-managed photos". He reiterated his claim that turnout in the polls were less than 10 per cent.

He announced that opposition parties would arrange a gayebana janaza for the Juma prayers today to pray for the salvation of the departed souls killed during the hartals and observe a countrywide protest day tomorrow to decry the government's "repressive measures" on the opposition.

Bhuiyan alleged that armed terrorists belonging to ruling Awami League in direct patronisation of police launched "unprecedented" attacks on opposition activists and obstructed the opposition to observe the hartals.

"Country's scenario could be completely different if we tried to counter the ruling party during the hartal, but we observed the hartal in support of the people with a high degree of tolerance. But it does not mean we are weak... we avoided a confrontation considering the future of the country," the BNP secretary general said.

Bhuiyan said even the elected MPs were not spared from police repression. Police beat up parliament members, including Joyntal Abedin Faruque in front of BNP office yesterday (Thursday), he added.

The BNP leader strongly condemned arrest of brother-in-law of Sajal Chowdhury, killed on February 9, without any cause.

On movement of plainclothesmen with open arms, Bhuiyan said that law does not permit them to move openly with arms. "We have our doubts about whether they are Awami League terrorists or any other

private force."

Speaking at the briefing, Jatiya Party leader Kazi Firoz Rashid said police along with armed plainclothesmen attacked JP activists at Purana Paltan in the morning without any provocation and opened fire on activists leaving some 30 workers injured. Police also arrested some 30 JP activists from the spot, he added.

Jamaat leader Mohammad Kamruzzaman flayed the role of some newspapers, including the Daily Ittefaq, for publishing "misleading reports". "We are very much scared of this type of misleading reports and this kind of reporting are dangerous for the nation," he added.

He alleged that terrorists belonging to the ruling Awami League on Wednesday night attacked at Jamaat central office, and police instead of arresting the attackers fired teargas shells at Jamaat and the Daily Sangram offices.

Hasina asks Khaleda to give up politics of conspiracy

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday advised her arch political rival Begum Khaleda Zia to launch socio-economic movement giving up politics of conspiracy, reports UNB.

"Your dream of getting back power through conspiracy will never succeed. People will not allow it. Better do politics for economic development and gain people's trust before trying for power," she said addressing public rally at Mirpur Outer Stadium in the afternoon amid hartal.

In her scathing attack on the opposition for calling repeated hartals and boycotting municipal elections, which concluded yesterday, Hasina said they chose the path of killing and conspiracy to regain power through ballot are bleak power.

The Prime Minister said people rejected outright the hartal call and joined the non-party local elections to elect their representatives for overall development in their localities.

"People want peace, stability and development. They don't like to see blood and bodies."

Castigating the double stan-

dard of BNP, Jatiya Party and Jamaat, Hasina said they gave the call for boycott of the municipal elections on the one hand and the candidates of their parties contested the polls on the other.

"She told the rally that a number of BNP, JP and other party candidates were elected chairmen and commissioners in different municipalities."

The Prime Minister dismissed as a blatant lie Begum Zia's claim that voter turnout was 10 per cent. She said BNP candidate in Bagerhat won the election by securing 73 per cent vote. The turnout ranged from 70 per cent to 73 per cent, Hasina said.

She said the municipal elections were completely free, fair and peaceful. Polling in only 18 centres was postponed following clashes between the supporters of candidates.

"Since all opposition parties were in the race, what's the reason for calling hartal," she questioned.

Referring to the tragic incidents that happened during the hartal, the Prime Minister in her emotion-charged voice said some rickshawpullers and scooter drivers lost their lives,

some lost their limbs or some were burnt with petrol in last three days.

She urged the people to guard against these quarters who do not believe in ballot, democracy and peace in the country.

The Prime Minister reiterated her allegation that the current opposition agitation was to protect the self-confessed killers of Bangabandhu, who are facing death sentence given by the court.

In support of her contention, Hasina accused General Zia, General Ershad and BNP chairman Begum Zia for politically rehabilitating the killers. She alleged that Zia gave the killers jobs in foreign missions. Ershad allowed Ctd (Rtd) Farooq to run in presidential election while Begum Zia made Ctd (Rtd) Rashid Leader of the Opposition in Parliament through a farcical election on February 15, 1996.

She ridiculed Begum Zia for "hobnobbing" with Ershad and questioned how Begum Zia could shake hands with Ershad whom she publicly branded as killer of her husband.

"I like to tell BNP leaders and workers to ask Khaleda Zia why she is hobnobbing with her husband's killer? Why Begum Zia maintains silence about it?"

Presided over by Kamal Ahmed Mahmud, MP, the meeting was also addressed by Awami League president member Amir Hossain Azu, Water Resources Minister Abdur Razzak, Commerce and Industries Minister Tofail Ahmed.

Nasim ready to initiate dialogue with opposition

Telecommunication Minister Mohammad Nasim yesterday said he felt that it is now time for the opposition to reach an understanding with the government through dialogue, reports UNB.

After peaceful holding of the three-day staggered municipal voting, the opposition must have realised that there is no alternative to election, he said while talking to a group of newsmen at his Secretariat office.

"Now they should come to a dialogue with the government," the ruling party leader said. He added: "If necessary, I am willing to contact the opposition leaders for such a discussion."

When asked if he would take any initiative for the government-opposition dialogue, Nasim said: "Always there was initiative on my part."

He said spontaneous participation of the people in the municipal election proves that the people, who shed blood to establish democracy and realise their right to franchise, are equally committed to protect the voting rights.

"We've repeatedly said the municipal polls would be free and fair... threat to boycott election and the imprudent hartal would in no way stop the people from exercising their right to franchise."

"Peaceful holding of the three-day municipal elections and people's spontaneous participation in the voting proves what we said is correct," he said.

No on-arrival visa for foreigners till March 4

The authorities have decided not to issue on-arrival visa to foreigners at Dhaka International Airport till March 4 in view of the coming D-8 summit, reports UNB.

The decision has been taken considering the security of heads of government and state attending the conference.

The foreigners, who intend to visit Bangladesh, have been requested to come with visas from their respective countries, said an official handout yesterday.

Heads of foreign embassies and missions in Dhaka have also been requested to inform their respective countries about the matter.

Bangladesh has no dues to UN

NEW YORK, Feb 25: Bangladesh has been placed in the select list of seven member-states of the United Nations which have no outstanding dues to the UN at the end of the year 1998, reports BSS.

The UN secretariat has identified seven countries out of 185 members which have paid their assessed contributions in full as of December 31, 1998. The countries are Bangladesh, Canada, China, Colombia, Monaco, Slovakia and the United Kingdom.

The contributions include the UN regular budget, UN peace keeping operations and UN crimes tribunals for 1998 and prior years. The UN rules require that all member-states should pay their contributions in full, on time and without any condition.

Bangladesh has achieved this distinction for the first time this year since it became a UN member 25 years ago. This action by Bangladesh has been recognised by the world body as a sign of the country's resolute commitment to the United Nations and its charter.

Over 100 shops, 6 rice mills gutted in Ctg

From Staff Correspondent

CHITTAGONG, Feb 25: Over 100 shops, six rice mills, two biscuit factories and some dwelling houses were gutted in a devastating fire that broke out in New Chaktai area early this morning, police and fire brigade sources said.

The loss of property could not be ascertained immediately. The origin of fire that began at 5:40 am, could not be known, fire brigade said.

Twelve firefighting units rushed to the spot and extinguished the blaze at 10 am.

UNB added: At least 10 shops were gutted in a fire at Muladi thana headquarters under Barisal district early today.

Local people said the fire broke out at about 3:30 am gutted valuables worth about Tk 50 lakh. Local people brought the fire under control.



Flying the flag

Dhaka Sheraton bedecked in colours of the D-8.

— Star Photo: AKM Mohsin

Dhaka Declaration being readied for D-8

By Staff Correspondent

Senior officials from D-8 countries yesterday began a two-day meeting and started drafting the Dhaka Declaration that would be adopted at the end of the D-8 summit on March 2.

The Dhaka Declaration will reflect the progress made by the D-8 and chart out the future strategy of the organisation, launched by eight nations in Istanbul in June 1997.

Addressing a press briefing, Additional Foreign Secretary Toufiq Ali said commissioners from seven D-8 countries were present at yesterday's meeting. Nigeria remained unrepresented.

After the Dhaka Declaration is "negotiated" at the Commissioners Meeting, it will be placed for approval at the Council of Ministers Conference participated by foreign ministers of the D-8 countries tomorrow. Ali is the D-8 Commissioner for Bangladesh.

Responding to a question he said that the budget for the D-8 summit was "quite nominal" at Tk 2.44 crore. Cars for the conference were purchased under a different budget. He said that the budget for the SAARC conference in Dhaka in 1993 was Tk 8 crore.

Toufiq Ali said Nigeria has still not informed about its participation. The country was having elections until February 27, said that could be a reason for its absence.

Asked if there was any effort to contact Nigerian officials, he replied in the negative.

When asked why only three heads of state or government would participate in the sum-

mit, he replied, "Many of them cannot come because of domestic preoccupation. We have been informed only recently about absence of some of the heads of state or government."

In response to a question suggesting that initiative was lacking from Bangladesh side as host country in extending invitations to all heads of state or government and securing confirmations, T Ali said that the procedure followed in inviting leaders was similar to that of the first Summit held in Turkey. Invitation letters, he said, were handed through the embassies of the respective countries in Dhaka, with the exception of Nigeria, which does not have a resident mission here.

The Commissioners Conference now in Dhaka is a "resumed meeting" of that held in Istanbul on January 26 and 27. The Dhaka meeting is the sixth meeting of D-8 Commissioners.

Faced with a barrage of questions as to why on arrival visas to foreign nationals had been denied without prior notice, the Additional Foreign Secretary avoided giving any reply and said, "I do not know. I was occupied with the meetings."

He said D-8 has achieved considerable success since its launch only a year and half earlier. The organisation has charted thirteen areas of cooperation and identified six projects.

Bangladesh, he said, is looking after Rural Development and Micro Credit

Secretariat staff demand protection

By Special Correspondent

Government employees demonstrated at the Secretariat yesterday demanding security after one of their colleagues, Shahana Begum, 30, was wounded at Paga in the city in a bomb attack on an auto-rickshaw on her way to work during the hartal yesterday.

The employees were agitated as a rumour spread that Shahana Begum, a Farash of caretaker wing of the Public Works Department, had died of bomb injuries.

Later it was known that she was admitted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

The employees staged demonstration near the Home Ministry and moved towards the Establishment Ministry, raising slogans demanding adequate security.

Their leaders met the Establishment Secretary and put forward a number of demands.

They also held a rally, chaired by Nurul Alam and addressed by Abdul Khaleque, Abdul Kuddus and Abdul Mannan. The speakers demanded that government employees be provided adequate security and transports to come to office during hartal. They also demanded risk allowance, change in office hours and 30 per cent Dearness Allowance.

Tension prevailed in the Secretariat for a brief period when two groups of employees led by Shah Alam and Mujibul Hq gathered near the 20-storey building.

Editor: Mahfuz Anam

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