

Plight of Chittagong Port

The country's main seaport in Chittagong seems to be star-crossed. It cannot simply overcome the malignant malady called congestion. The opposition-enforced 66-hour hartal has only added to its woes. Latest figures show that nearly seven lakh tonnes of import cargo have been stuck up due to suspension of delivery. On the jetty yards, 14,000 containers are piled up, 4,000 more than their capacity. In the queue are four thousand more. Eighty-three sea vessels are stranded at the outer anchorage, 37 of them loaded with food-grains. Disruption in offloading has also delayed shipment of export goods. Besides, operational cost of the stranded ships is going up every minute. It certainly is a big mess out there at the port. The result: a big negative for our ailing economy.

Disruption in cargo-handling activities is a recurrent syndrome as far as the Chittagong port is concerned. Just a few days back, the port avoided a shutout by workers. On the international scale, the port doesn't quite inspire confidence among the port-users. In fact, so cross the shippers had been that, at one stage, there was widespread apprehension of a possible blacklisting of the port. Although that was averted, the port still is a suspect. The opposition programmes in general and the endless sequence of hartals, in particular, have made the situation desperate. With an end to the prevailing political impasse out of sight and more hartals on the cards, a bleak future awaits the port, indeed.

The garment sector, which accounts for more than seventy per cent of the country's exports, is certainly the worst affected. Canada and the United States have increased the garment quota by 10 per cent. To make most of the opportunity and pave the path for more, the sector needs smooth shipping of its merchandise. Political think tanks, in the ruling and opposition parties, should immediately devise a way to keep the port out of their political manoeuvrings. They should realise that a dead port means a dead economy, especially in a developing country like ours.

Infringement of Journalistic Rights

Newspaper workers have been susceptible to manhandling by pro- and anti-hartal activists and, unfortunately though it may sound, sometimes policemen on duty. This has been going on under-terred for quite a long period of time now and the most alarming trend is that the incidence of violence and terrorism against journalists, photographers and other workers of the industry is on the rise. Attacks on vehicles carrying newspaper workers have increased in recent times making a mockery of the 'exemption' list. None seems to be playing by the rule.

More disconcerting is the fact that journalists covering hartal and photographers taking snaps of incidents are dragged out of vehicles and beaten up with their cameras snatched away and broken in front of policemen. These are done by activists of all parties and none responsible, it seems, cares to restrain their workers or apologise for their misdeeds. On the contrary, they just pass on the buck to their opponents. The situation is further aggravated by inaction of the law-enforcing agencies in certain cases and their overaction in others.

Police played the role of dummy soldiers when the photographer of an important Bangla daily was attacked and his cameras smashed at Sayedabad on Wednesday, thereby indirectly helping the hoodlums in their rampage against an on-duty journalist. But the scenario was quite different in front of the Press Club when photographers tried to photograph an injured person. Some policemen purportedly went into action without provocation and tried to stop the photojournalists from performing their professional duty.

These incidents clearly indicate the unfriendly situations in which the journalists have to work during hartals. In a democratic society nobody has the power to deny people's right to move freely, work freely and express freely. It seems that all these basic rights are being infringed upon with vengeance by the tripartite conglomerate. But this has to stop. There must be an end to the persecution of journalists.

Iran-Bangla Trade Ties

If Iran has read the global reality correctly, it has been showing its millennium vision for the last couple of years. This oil-rich Gulf country has acknowledged its recent wisdom through its gift of 2000-metre land in its prime Free Zone at Kish Island to Bangladesh. In Iran's history of pairing up with countries for better trade ties, Bangladesh is the eleventh in the queue to earn a "twinship" in the second largest province of Kerman. The concept on the part of the Iranian government embodies in tying economic and cultural knots with friendly nations. In implementing this goal, Tehran has already done its homework. Experiencing spectacular results in the past, it has completed raising of infrastructure facilities for the investors from "paired-up twins" to flow in the allotted Free Zone and establish industrial units with qualitative results.

Alongside Bangladesh's existing trade and diplomatic relations with Iran, this drafts another new chapter in Iran-Bangla bilateral relations on the one hand, and unfolds an array of other opportunities for Bangladesh on the other. If Bangladesh can utilise this offer in a realistic manner, this Persian bounty would generate employment opportunities for our labour force in Iran, and for that matter, may be, in the entire Gulf region.

With such concrete and far-reaching fortune in the offing, both public and private sectors of Bangladesh should concentrate on how to energise themselves, enticed by bilateral spirit, in setting up business units that can benefit both the countries.

INDIAN Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's recent bus journey to Pakistan could well turn out to be an important milestone in the chequered history of Indo-Pakistan bilateral relations. It is yet too early in the day to make an assessment of the overall impact that the trip will have, but there is little doubt that Vajpayee's bus journey has been a bold and imaginative one. The sceptical view, that given their respective internal political predicaments, both Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterpart, Nawaz Sharif, needed to perform something dramatic such as their recent encounter in Lahore, does not in any manner diminish the positive significance of the visit.

Over the last half a century, Indo-Pakistan relations have followed a predictable pattern of alternating episodes of conflict, followed by periods of comparative peace. But these periods of peace, often marked by bickering and tension have not been long lasting. The 1948 Kashmir war brought about the now famous cease-fire line, the Tashkent declaration followed the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war and the Shimla agreement was signed and sealed after the 1971 war. And in between all those bloody conflicts there have been declared or undeclared armed encounters of varying dimensions followed by efforts at establishing peace, but permanent peace between these two countries, enjoying a kind of love-hate relations, has remained elusive. The foremost reason for this is the unsettled issue of Kashmir. Pakistan has held that there cannot be any meaningful improvement of relations till such time there has been a satisfactory solution of the Kashmir problem. In diplomatic moves, at times dictated by internal political

compulsions, Pakistan has raised the Kashmir issue, in season and out of season. On its part India has behaved ostentatiously, denying that such a problem, except that a part of that land remains under the 'occupation' of Pakistan, at all existed. In that respect the Lahore declaration, that makes a special mention of the Kashmir problem, underlining the need for its solution along with that of other bilateral problems, is indicative of a more realistic approach.

Circumstances were different this time compared to those of the peace initiatives of the past, if only because India and Pakistan are now nuclear powers, possessing the capability of hurling nuclear missiles at each other and beyond. This new found balance alone has lent a fresh dimension to the relationship between the two countries, creating in them a sense of realism that has earlier been non-existent. That is why, unlike the peace efforts of the past, rather than following an armed conflict, this effort has been prompted by the desire to completely obliterate the possibility of a future conflict. The Vajpayee-Sharif declaration does contain the possibilities of opening a new chapter in Indo-Pakistan relations.

Vajpayee's visit to Pakistan has not been the result of an emotional decision taken on impulse. This has been the result of a well-considered political decision taken at the highest level, no doubt encouraged by a great deal of international interest, including that of the

United States. Intensive diplomatic ground work at the bilateral level went into the preparation of this visit. There are vocal opponents of this peace process in both the countries and they had to be largely contained. A number of steps like cricket and hockey games had to be taken to arouse public interest and enthusiasm, not the least among them being the

coming as it did, only days prior to the Vajpayee visit, was unexpected.

I happened to be in Delhi when the story broke attending a seminar on the subject entitled, "SAARC - from Association to Community". Mr I K Gujral inaugurated the seminar, attended among others by a number of Indian personalities, who have been, over the years,

neighbour to Pakistan that the world witnessed the shameful behaviour of a section of Calcutta spectators of the Indo-Pakistan Test cricket match towards the dignified and determined Pakistani side. Even a section of the Calcutta press displayed a mentality that was difficult to condone. The fact that Bal Thackeray has expressed his joy at the incident explains it all. This was in stark contrast to the crowd at the Chennai Stadium which had in a delightfully sporting spirit, applauded the victorious Pakistani side, only a few days earlier. Pakistani press and the public reacted to the incident at the Calcutta Eden Garden stadium with the contempt that it deserved, but it had hardly any effect on Mr Vajpayee's epoch making visit to Lahore. In short a new balance and maturity now mark Indo-Pakistan interactions that augur well for the future.

The Vajpayee visit has attracted a great deal of public interest in the recent evolution of Indo-Pakistan relations. This, if properly nurtured and developed, may well one day contribute to a mutually acceptable solution of the Kashmir imbroglio. The first half of the twentieth century saw two world wars commence in Europe on territorial disputes. In Europe today, wars based on territorial claims by nations will be unthinkable. Disputes among developed countries are now solely centred around economic issues and the possibilities of armed conflict among the European nations have forever receded. Even in the sixties

and the seventies, nearer to us we have seen territorial disputes turn into blood wars that now are very unlikely. Public awareness about the essentials of economic development has brought about this happy situation. Kashmir has a strategic location both for India and Pakistan. In the future the realisation may dawn on the contending parties in the dispute that an acceptable solution of the problem may not necessarily be dependent upon the physical occupation of a chunk of territory by one nation. Peaceful solution of difficult and intractable political and territorial problems is not beyond human ingenuity, based not necessarily on the ideas of conventional nation states. A public awareness about the fruits of peace will only hasten the process. The Vajpayee visit may well be a first step in that direction.

An improvement of Indo-Pakistan relations will contribute to peace, stability and progress in our region. Bangladesh, in the seventies, had mooted the idea of a regional cooperation in the form of SAARC. Both India and Pakistan are not chary of admitting that persisting differences between them are mainly responsible for holding back a meaningful progress within SAARC. The SAARC countries have more in common with each other than have members of any other regional association. An Indo-Pakistan rapprochement will help unleash the latent capacities of this region that can indeed contribute to radically changing the quality of life in the subcontinent. Hence, Mr Vajpayee's bus journey to Pakistan and its fall-out are of much more than academic interest to us in Bangladesh.

The Bus to Pakistan

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Frankly Speaking...

by Faruq Choudhury

visit to Pakistan of a high level multiparty delegation of distinguished Indian parliamentarians. The last mentioned visit that took place only days prior to the Vajpayee visit, only brought home the delicate state of Indo-Pakistan relations. At a luncheon party in Islamabad held in honour of the visiting Indian parliamentary delegation, Mr Sartaj Aziz, the Pakistani Foreign Minister, referring to the Kashmir problem, in his speech on the occasion, said that peace could not come to South-Asia without its resolution. There was indeed nothing new in this statement, for it was only a reiteration of oft-repeated and well-known Pakistani view on the subject. But the timing of the statement,

associated with the formulation and execution of India's foreign policy. I was struck by the calmness and maturity with which almost all of them treated the statement. The Indian media, in general, also reacted in a similar fashion. For instance, a commentary by the daily, *Indian Express* entitled, 'Don't puncture this bus' was not aimed at Mr Sartaj Aziz but at the apprehended hostile Indian reaction to his statement. 'Rome was not built in a day' - the second heading of the editorial said more about the newspaper's reaction to the statement. In the pre-nuclear days of India and Pakistan this reaction would have been too much to expect. Then, it was on the very day of Mr Vajpayee's jour-

It's Fundamentalism versus Liberalism

Strange, every religion has noble teachings and lofty moral goals. Yet in each religion these high standards are often far removed from what that religion seems to be in actual thought and practice. A few zealots disfigure the religion, as Tohra, Ranjit Singh and their associates are doing to Sikhism.

han Singh is untenable. One, he is nobody to name his successor because the appointment is done by the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC). Its executive has already turned him out. Two, Mohan Singh, whom he has named, was the first choice but militants abroad have threatened to kill his son. That is the reason why Mohan Singh first accepted and then declined the offer.

Ranjit Singh should introspect why he was suspended. The Akal Takht issues *hukam-namas* on political matters. But he summoned Punjab Chief Minister Prakash Singh Badal to explain why there was no separate personal law for the Sikhs and why the Anandpur Sahib Resolution on autonomy has remained unimplemented. This is the matter, which the Akali Dal should address to him, not a priest.

What is disconcerting is that the extremists whether in India or in Canada, America and the Great Britain, have once again joined hands to serve their personal and political ends in the name of religion. They are the same people who had instigated terrorism in Punjab and had used religion for their gain. It is, however, not surprising to see Gurcharan Singh Tohra on their side. He has always encouraged them. He was the one who, as the head of SGPC, had allowed Bhindranwale to carry arms to the Akal Takht which was converted into a state

within the state. Tohra would have staged a repeat if Ranjit Singh had been allowed to continue.

This has divided the Sikh community between the militants, 30 per cent, and moderates, 70 per cent. What is new about this rift is the determination by the majority of Sikhs to stall the situation, which

groups sprang up then to claim the leadership of Sikhs. And they used all methods to win. Mixing religion with politics at that time was of no avail because the Sikhs could vote only for Sikh candidates.

Yet there were no ranks in the community when it came to struggle for independence. The Sikhs were part of the main-

stream. Estrangement came only after partition. Sikh leaders tried to have a separate country but the British rejected the demand. And the East Punjab at that time had a preponderant majority of Hindus, who did not even consider Punjab as their mother tongue although they spoke it.

How to get a state, which will have a Sikh majority or, more so, how to gain power was the dominant feeling in the community. *Morchas* (agitations) were launched to pursue that end. Religion was now mixed with politics without compunction so as to prove to the Sikh masses that their religion was endangered without political power. Religion got furrowed deeper when the agitations were started from the Golden Temple

at Amritsar. Wittingly or unwittingly, they boiled down to the Sikhs versus the Delhi durbar. New Delhi had to play the role of adversary because the Punjab government had no authority to accept or reject the demands made. At times, the Government of India interfered for political reasons. The ruling Congress party at the centre did not want a political adversary. The Akali Dal, in Punjab, came to power. Operation Blue Star in 1984 was the culmination of militant challenge by Akali extremists to the exasperated Congress and the state. Many Sikhs blamed Bhindranwale for the situation but the Operation Blue Star hurt the community so much that it too came round to believe that the attack was a deliberate act to water down the Sikh's entity. The killing of 3,000 Sikhs in Delhi alone confirmed the doubts. The moderates in the Akali Dal and the Sikh intelligentsia realise the mistake of mixing politics in religion. But the violation of Golden Temple's sanctity had made them so angry that they sank their differences.

What will happen if the extremists continued playing the religious card and moderates pointing out that it was wrong

to do so? The outcome will depend on who reaches the Sikh masses and how. Does it mean that the confrontation will end up in terrorism in Punjab? No, it will not, because the terrorists were primarily rejected by the Sikh masses, who refused in the end to give them shelter or succor. They have seen through their game of using religion for political objective. Religious zealots may not influence them. Tohra too realises it because terrorism exacted a heavy toll from them. But his problem is that he has no other way to stay before the public eyes since he is also being removed from the presidency of SGPC. He will continue to play on the sentiments of Sikhs and that is the reason why he says again and again that the problem is religious, not political.

In fact it is once again fundamentalism versus liberalism. Badal and his men should be supported because they are fighting the forces, which are trying to deform the Sikh religion with a vengeance and also endangering the country's secular ethos. Strange, every religion has noble teachings and lofty moral goals. Yet in each religion these high standards are often far removed from what that religion seems to be in actual thought and practice. A few zealots disfigure the religion, as Tohra, Ranjit Singh and their associates are doing to Sikhism. Someone should tell them that they have played this game before and have failed miserably.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

may lead to the Bhindranwale days. They do not want the misuse of religion. Tohra has picked up on their behalf the gauntlet thrown down by fundamentalists. Till yesterday he was quiet and played a second fiddle to Tohra, with whom he differs in thinking, so as to keep the community united. Today, he has opposed him because he knows that Tohra wants only to stoke fires of confrontation and put the Sikhs against the state once again.

Hence, factions within the community are nothing new. They have been there for decades, particularly after the formation of the Shiromani Akali Dal in 1921 when the separate electorates were introduced in the country. Several

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To the Editor...

Oh, Eden!

Sir, If we compare the cricket loving crowd of Dhaka with that of Calcutta what do we see? The Dhaka crowd is very sporting. They understand cricket and appreciate and applaud good batting, cricketers present as well as the commentators profusely praised the Dhaka crowd. All the Test playing countries expressed their willingness to play in Dhaka in the near future. On the other hand the Calcutta crowds are not only unsporting but also become hostile and try to do anything to disrupt the match when India faces defeat or their star batsmen get out cheaply. To them cricket is India's victory. They will only applaud good batting, bowling and giddling of the Indian players. Dhaka crowd is an example for Calcutta crowd.

Iqbal Ahmed
Dhaka - 1000

Directly elected Speaker

Sir, The right to strike is as old as democracy itself. Hartal (strike) is a time-tested democratic method of expressing protest against the misdeeds, inactivity and excesses committed by the government and their agencies. No doubt, this is an extreme step taken when all other democratic methods fail. While 'hartals' observed in earlier times were peaceful, these are, nowadays, associated with killings, burnings and the like, more or less, in keeping with our present day education, thinking and attitudes.

The best place to express indignation against the misdeeds of the government and their agencies is the floor of the parliament. If the members of the parliament are not allowed to express their views in the parliament what is the use of their sitting there? What for the people have elected them?

We have been observing the activities of the parliament. There has been a continuous deterioration in the quality of the activities of the Speaker. The reason for this deterioration is that the election of Speaker has always been on party basis. The post is a very dignified and responsible one. It demands that a man of highest integrity of character and judgement should hold this post. With the exception of a very few, no Speaker could rise above the party he belonged to. What happens, the ruling party, with brute force of majority, selects a Speaker who may be their 'yes' man, without any consideration of strength of his character and judgement. The Speaker, thus elected, cannot rise above his party. He never thinks that all members in the House have equal rights. The result, when the members from the other side cannot express their opinion in side the House, is 'Hartal'.

Perhaps, everybody can recall that, in late fifties, there was an unfortunate death of a Speaker in one of the parliamentary sessions held in Dacca, which was the result of a controversial ruling from the Chair. In my opinion, in order to stop the frequent 'Hartal' the country needs an impartial and judicious Speaker who can conduct the business of the House efficiently. So, it is suggested that the country's Constitution be amended so that the House Speaker is elected by the direct vote of the people during general election.

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A prayer for Sajal

Sir, My deepest sympathies to the grieving family. The country mourns the mindless loss of another son. The fears that we try to push away about the fate of the nation become more pervasive everyday. It's starkly evident how criminal-

ized politics has become, and how close we are to the abyss of moral degradation.

It's unfortunate that educated people who fervently believe in the country can do nothing for it because power is in the hands of the lawless and the barbaric.

What is this government doing? Has the law and order situation ever been worse? If the BNP were smart, they would see how unnecessary hartals are, because its obvious AL is shooting itself in the foot. Just let them self-destruct, and be there to pick up the pieces.

Sadat Omar
Dhaka

W B for cleaner air

Sir, I am delighted to read World Bank expert's report on 'cleaner air' published on 20 Feb. Air pollution problem in Dhaka is the worst man-made environmental catastrophe which has now taken the shape of a national emergency situation. On an individual level I have been crusading against this serious problem for more than 10-years now. During this period whenever I visited Dhaka found the air pollution problem of the city getting from bad to worse. I have talked over the situation with ministers, secretaries and other bureaucrats, anyone whom I knew and or who mattered. This year I found that the situation has reached the worst level. People around were having difficulty to breathe the smoke-charged air.

It's heartening to note that World Bank has at least taken some initiative to address this serious problem. As reported, the problem can be tackled effectively with strict adherence of the following:

- Introduction of better lubricants (not recycled) and unleaded fuel
- Not certifying vehicles to ply on roads that are over 15-years old
- Conversion of buses.

trucks, autorickshaws to CNG. Bangladesh is fortunate enough to have good amount of natural gas reserve. Let us use it effectively in an environment-friendly way. Thanks to the DS for its relentless fight against this man-made problem.

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Is flying feasible?

Sir, The civil work of Bogra airport is on progress over hundred acres of priced paddy land. It is located by the side of Bogra-Santahar road at a distance of five kilometres from Bogra town. Airways are generally utilised for quick movement in modern communication system. In our country focal point of air traffic is Dhaka airport wherefrom travellers are to avail of aircraft for different destinations and also returning point from other domestic airports.

For a passenger travelling to Bogra from Dhaka by air it will be required minimum four hours (city to airport-one hour, reporting time-one hour, boarding take off, air journey, landing-one hour; from airport to destination-one hour).

On the other hand after commissioning of Jamuna bridge it costs Tk 150/220 for travelling to Bogra by ordinary/air conditioned bus and coach which also takes four hours time. The air ticket between Dhaka and Bogra will not cost less than Tk 1000 for one way journey. Under such situation it will be very difficult to get air passengers for Bogra airport? It may be mentioned that after opening of Jamuna bridge a good number of aircrafts seats remain vacant for want of passengers in Saidpur-Rajshahi route.

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OPINION

The Triangular Battle

A Husnain

The extract (DS Feb 17) on American Capitalism from AKN Ahmad's forthcoming book 'USA Today & Tomorrow' is refreshingly different in approach from the usual run-of-the-mill articles on modern capitalism. As the former governor of the Bangladesh Bank looked, at the millennium cross-over point, at this giant global economy from outside the system - the proper perspective, and that is from the eyes of an expert working in the field in a developing country in the Third World.

Thinkers outside the periphery of the technicalities of modern economics have now got some concrete basis to confirm their nagging feeling that all was not well for the modern western type of capitalism based on consumerism as practised globally in the world today. To survive during the next century, the current 'dollar economies' approach has to undergo several basic changes in approach by the economists, politicians and the bureaucracies influencing or controlling the decision-making at the State level practically anywhere in the world.

AKN Ahmad's book comes at the right time, once the gateway was opened by Amartya Sen, and which was recognised later as the contribution of a Nobel laureate. The special UN agencies and the donor agencies dealing with funds and financing have been sensitised to some extent, and hopefully new stances would be adopted focussed on the right economics for the poor and the deprived - the victims of the markets for the affluent, and living in the vales of economic indifference.

Musing on the local and other implications, some cursory questions might be posed. As economic values dominate today's politics (thereby the democracy is illiberal to that extent); as the former has only price but no value, and the market ignores the social and moral worth of 'development'. As Ahmad observed, the market imparted a dangerous momentum to the social process. How

the state and the bureaucracy are to combat or contain this trend in the interest of the majority of the citizens, half of whom hover around the poverty line?

When the moral stick is missing in the market, how to depend on ethical principle without seeking the validity of the market? Why these questions are raised in Dhaka? As per press reports, three are about dozen families who are controlling the economy, and indirectly the politics of the country; and, quite a number of these are bank-loan defaulters. Local politics is 'Taka-oriented or Poor-oriented? Apart from the democratic regimes, the autocratic regimes were also secretly swearing allegiance to Mammon. These implications and ramifications have to be brought out in the open, to open the eyes of the electorate to good governance, and its stable mechanism.

Besides the seductiveness of capitalism, the politicians have to face the 'state' (there are the public institutions and in the private sector (the market). In this triangular fight, the continuation of cycles of political instability in the developing countries could be understood more clearly. It appears that the politicians have a major homework before them: how to stand up to the eroding economic capitalism during the next century (of changes). As the century closes, there are too many variables and pressing points operating simultaneously in different sectors of life-style.

Therefore it is not easy to predict stable outputs. One more additional problem for the South.