

## Why This Hartal?

WE are at a loss to understand why the BNP and three other co-travelling political parties have called today's hartal. Their officially cited reasons for it are indeed so many that one cannot be too sure where the focus lies or indeed how to separate the chaff from the grain. It reads like quite a litany of protests: tax burden imposed by the budget, 'conspiracy' to give transit and gas to India, subservient defence purchase policy, deterioration in law and order, higher prices and corruption in government. Longer a government stays in office its list of sins grows bigger and bigger in the opposition eyes, so that an escalation of protests to pin a government down on new issues is to be naturally expected. We have nothing against the opposition grilling the government for its failures; in fact, we welcome it as a sign of vibrant opposition playing its legitimate role. But it is the choice of the medium that we find not only atrociously expedient but also tyrannically imposing on the rights of the citizenry.

It is a pity that we have to remind this to the opposition so soon after they themselves had realised the irrationality of hartal and set a pattern of using alternative avenues for agitation. Begum Zia and other top leaders of her party taking cognizance of a growing public appreciation for BNP's gradual switch-over to hartal alternatives like rallies, processions and sit-in demonstrations publicly swore by a continuation of the process. The opposition's standing with the people improved considerably when they showed signs of opting out of frequent hartal calls.

Unfortunately they seem to have all but reverted back to square one without allowing the hartal alternatives to yield them maximum political dividends that was round the corner.

Only a month ago they went for a dawn-to-dusk hartal following the announcement of the budget and they are resorting to it again on the issue of taxes, some of which have been waived by the government. We stood by the opposition when the ruling party rejected all the two hundred amendments moved by the former.

There will be no dearth of public and media support for the opposition now if it shows consideration to the citizens by applying utmost discretion in calling hartal and being creative with their politics.

## Good Work, Keep It Up

A ruling party terrorist of Chittagong has been arrested by police in Dhaka Tuesday morning. The dreaded A Z M Nasir, a former central committee vice president of Bangladesh Chhatra League, was wanted in seven criminal cases including that of a triple murder in which a doctor was killed at the Chittagong Medical College in 1993. Nasir reportedly was also implicated in the double murder at the Islamia College in 1995. But he was so powerful that he avoided arrest until the police apprehended him on Tuesday.

Speculations have it that on last Sunday terrorists of Nasir group attacked Mogaltuly area and fired around 250 rounds of ammunition. Though there was no casualty, what nudged the authorities into action was the use of the modern assault rifle AK-47. The arrest, however, may have come as a sequel to intra-party rivalry or some other reasons best known to the party stalwarts. This arrest must have had a soothing effect on the nerves of the peace-loving people of Chittagong. But no sooner had Nasir been picked up than 'godfathers' in the party scurried around to have the notorious terrorist released. It is strange that he was not arrested during the BNP rule in connection with the triple murder he committed then. He was alleged to have struck a bargain with the then ruling party stalwarts. We live in a society where our representatives sacrifice the interest of the people they represent in lieu of transient personal and party gains.

We strongly support the Home Minister in his drive against the terrorists and urge him to act more by the dictates of his conscience. We will be badly disappointed if the culprit gets away before he is taken for trial.

## Community Policing

IN the early hours of Tuesday, a gang of twelve broke into the residence of the dean of the law faculty of Dhaka University, manhandled him and his son, and looted jewellery and other valuables worth around six lakh taka. The university campus, hitherto perceived as a protected territory, seems no less vulnerable than other residential enclaves. Disconcerting it is though, the underlying message is that the extant law enforcement system is either inadequate or inefficient to protect the citizenry. On both counts, the issue demands serious rethinking, beyond an iota of doubt.

Over the last few months, despite much-hyped police activities, crime has steadily been on the rise. Households in the absence of their male members during working hours are becoming targets of daylight robbery. In some areas of the capital, the residents have hired round-the-clock services of private security guards. Brittle it may seem, this rather localised version of community policing has paid dividends. Given the inadequacy of preventive policing, the drastically deteriorating law and order situation demands a complementary protection mechanism and, we believe, community participation holds the answer. Instead of expecting police protection day in and day out, residents should themselves devise ways to beef up security of their neighbourhood. The community can be organised at the ward and union council levels to combat crime in cooperation with the police force.

THE energy experts of Bangladesh are convinced that in the light of existing future demand and supply of natural gas, its export is out of question. We need all the gas for our domestic consumption. Gas export is too serious a business to be left to the experts. Ultimately, it should be a political decision and the current unanimous opinion boils down to a big No. The Prime Minister has already said No and in a rare display of unity, no export is the option supported by the Leader of the Opposition as well.

The yes party seems to be the foreigners only. The multinational oil companies, international donor agencies and important aid giving countries like United States, United Kingdom, the Netherlands etc. All of them, in one voice are saying, yes. Bangladesh must export natural gas in order to generate foreign exchange earnings in particular and building up capital base for economic growth in general.

Why the national and the international views are opposite to each other? Of course, the decision of the sovereign government is final but it ought to be based on firm as well as convincing grounds. Neither emotion nor political expediency should dominate the vital national interest. On the other hand, composition of the yes party tends to give rise to the East India Company syndrome.

It may be recalled that the infamous East India Company originally came as simple traders bowing down to the wishes of the Moghul rulers. But they quickly changed their colour and exploited us thor-

oughly for long 200 years. It is therefore not unnatural for a lay man to conclude that foreigners would like to suck us dry of natural gas and make tons of money in the process. We would be left high and dry with no indigenous energy resource of our own. What are we going to do then?

Moreover, we have to pipe the gas to India — too big a neighbour to deal with. Once there is a pipeline across the border, they would pump away all of it — much more than their quota. We cannot stop them. They are too big and powerful. The conclusions are not based on usual bilateral relations. At the same time, the fear and suspicions are lurking behind the minds of many citizens of this country. Why not solve the problem by avoiding it? If there is no head, there will be no headache (a popular saying in Bengali). We may pursue a headless course of inaction. In fact we are doing so at the moment. The energy experts of the country wish to put some head into it and rationalize on the ground that we do not have enough gas to export. According to them, it is not even enough to meet our own requirements for the next 20 years. According to a report published in the daily *Sangbad*, dated 3 July, 1999, 925 million cubic feet (mcf) of natural gas is currently being supplied from 44 gas wells. By next year, the demand for gas will increase to 1235 mcf while the possible supply will be 1000

mf only. The deficit will be 235 mcf. Given the present reserve of gas, supply of gas at the rate of 1000 mcf per day will be possible until the year 2015 and the deficit would increase to 2800 mcf. Therefore, until we have been able to meet this deficit, export of gas cannot be justified.

On the other hand, the World Bank is of the view that if we export two trillion cubic feet (tcf) of gas to India during the next 20 years, export earn-

ings would amount to Taka 2,500 crores or half a billion dollars per annum. It is necessary to increase such earnings on two grounds within next few years: (i) our garments exports would face stiff competition after 2004 due to withdrawal of quota under WTO rules; consequently expansion of the industry would be hindered; and, even for increased domestic consumption of gas, payments in dollars should be made to multinational oil companies, responsible for developing the gas fields. Where are the dollars for such payments? Our foreign exchange reserve position, currently at 1,500 million dollars is not adequate for the purpose;

The limitation, if any, of a single monopoly buyer would not be there. But experience so far with the lone export oriented fertilizer factory called KAFCO has been very bitter. According to the minister for industries, instead of earning foreign exchange from abroad we are losing heavily from the factory and it is likely to continue till the doomsday. This further strengthens the East India Company syndrome.

The KAFCO experience confirms the view in the public mind that the battle of Plassey was lost because of collaborators who were sons of the soil. Such Mirzafars are not in short supply in our country today

who would be willing to connive and adopt any means whatsoever to offer natural gas to the foreigners on a silver (if not gold) platter. The national interest will simply be slaughtered. The primary objective of KAFCO was to pioneer the development of fertilizer export industry and attract more investment in such gas based factories. But where are the millions of dollars of either export or investment? Our foreign exchange position remains dismal.

The problem is much more deep seated than the simple yes or no to export of gas. If KAFCO proved profitable, the foreign exchange situation would have become as bright as gold by this time. If system loss in electricity was reduced to 20 per cent then additional generating capacity would have been funded by the World Bank which has not disbursed a single cent since 1991 for this purpose. If subsidies paid to loss ridden public enterprise could be reduced by 50 per cent and 40 per cent of the amount thus saved invested for exploration and drilling of natural gas, then such investment would have amounted to Taka 500 crores by this year. If non-performing loans were reduced by say 50 per cent, additional investment by private business enterprises would have ensured a higher rate of domestic utilization of natural gas than what is being estimated by the energy experts of the country today. Perhaps the

question of exporting gas would not have arisen at all or export of gas would have been considered on the basis of substantially higher levels of proven reserves — made possible by the desired levels of domestic (and not foreign) investment. The government would then be at the command post — seeking the best possible deal that the nation deserves.

The reluctance in the public mind to export gas is the offshoot of bad governance. The major use of gas will always be for generation of electricity. If the system loss remains at the notorious level of 40 per cent and if only 60 per cent of the electricity bills are collected, then how the gas bills will be paid, either to Petrobangla or foreign oil companies? The sad conclusion is that due to monumental inefficiency of public sector agencies, we are even incapable of using the natural gas ourselves.

If the existing anarchy in national economic management continues, government will be forced to close down KAFCO, PDB and Petrobangla since government will run short of money to cover the losses or pay the mountain high subsidies. As a result government may start printing money and run the risk of a runaway inflation.

What would then happen to us? We would return to our primitive glories using kerosene, firewood and cow dung. After all, vast majority of our population still do that. Why should we bother about petty middle class aspirations? Back to the basics. It would be wonderfully friendly to the environment all around.

# Export of Gas: Yes or No

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## Window on Asia

Shahid Latif

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## LETTER FROM AMERICA

### Those Adorable Serbs!

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

**It is worth remembering that, there were ground troops in Kosovo that aided the Allied victory — Kosovo Liberation Army. The Serbs would hunker down, making them invisible to the Allied bombers. It's only after the KLA engaged them in battle that the Serbs had to come out of their bunkers, and expose themselves, their tanks and heavy artillery to the eager NATO bombers.**

loans, so that when the Russian economy finally turns around, the country will be in the western camp.

In the short term that portends trouble for the allies in Kosovo. Russia is in Kosovo to do exactly the opposite of what the Allies want to do. Russians will only encourage Serbian intransigence in Kosovo. That will not sit well with the Kosovar Albanians, who now constitute 95 per cent of the population of Kosovo, and who may

take up arms against the Russian contingents. In the recent past, the Kosovar Albanians have taken out ads in American newspapers to warn the Allies that Russia is not an honest broker. Further, they have furnished evidence, including bodies of dead Russian soldiers, that the Russians have been fighting the Kosovars alongside the Serbs!

As far as the Albanians are concerned, the Russians will be fighting a proxy battle on be-

half of the Serbs. To put it in another way, the Serbs are hoping to get back through Russian peacekeeping what they lost on the battle field.

And what about those adorable Serbs? They almost to a man, still insist that the reason for Albanian exodus from Kosovo was NATO bombing! Even after watching hundreds of hours of CNN coverage of Serb atrocities and mass graves in Kosovo, they refuse to concede that the Serbs did any-

thing wrong! As the Americans like to say, "There is a sucker born every minute!" The Serbian Orthodox patriarchs, many of whom had supported the indicted war criminal Milosevic and had no use for Albanian sufferings, are now urging NATO to protect the Serbs in Kosovo.

In a Press conference, after his return from visiting Kosovar refugee camps in Macedonia, President Clinton reflected on his earlier meeting with

Milosevic in Paris. The reason for western intervention in Kosovo was the lesson they learnt in Bosnia, he said. According to Clinton, Milosevic denied any link with Serbian extremists in Bosnia, and promised good behaviour. Upon his return, he would do the whole thing all over again in Kosovo! Answering a question from a Serbian reporter, as to why Serbia will not receive aid, President Clinton could not hide his anger: "The Serbian people have to come to terms with Milosevic. If they believe that it is all right to kill 10,000 people, drive hundreds of thousands from their homes because they are ethnically different, to rape ten-year-old girls, it is up to them. But, I don't think it is all right, and I am not going to give Serbia one red cent until they change their behaviour!"

One has to stretch the limit of incredulity to imagine Kosovo remaining a part of Yugoslavia even after Milosevic. Unfortunately, because of European Islamophobia, the West is going through that motion. It is worth remembering that, there were ground troops in Kosovo that aided the Allied victory — Kosovo Liberation Army. The Serbs would hunker down, making them invisible to the Allied bombers. It's only after the KLA engaged them in battle that the Serbs had to come out of their bunkers, and expose themselves, their tanks and heavy artillery to the eager NATO bombers. And it's only after such losses became heavy, that Milosevic capitulated.

Encouragingly, America is now grooming 30-year old chief of the KLA, Thaci, to run Kosovo democratically. Through Thaci's intervention, the KLA turned over their weapons to NATO, up to NATO's satisfaction. The peace accord that ended the bombing stipulated that the KLA had to be "demilitarized," but not "disarmed." This too is bizarre. What got the Kosovars (and the Bosnians) in trouble in the first place is the fact that they did not have arms! Here is hoping that America has better sense than to hand over their hard-won prize to the enemy on a silver platter. William Safire of *The New York Times* asked an army officer whether he would like to make a distinction between "demilitarized" and "disarmed". The soldier replied, "No Thanks!" or did he say, "No Tanks!"

## To the Editor...

### In search of leadership

Sir, I congratulate Dr. AH Jaffar Ullah of New Orleans, USA, on epitomising very precisely and politely the political situation and administration of our country. I also thank the DS for publishing such valuable and worthy opinion on June 25, 1999 without fear, favour or ill will towards anybody in the greater national interest.

We are afraid we are moving towards a catastrophe due to lack of competent leadership in our country. From 1991 to date we have practically seen and experienced the BNP government led by Begum Khaleda Zia and now the current AL government led by Sheikh Hasina.

Dr Zaffar Ullah has rightly quoted Dr. Wajed Mia, former Chairman Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission and the husband of PM Sheikh Hasina who has said, "My half-educated wife is not fit go govern... she is running the administration in a free style and that is the reason why the whole country is in such a mess". The learned writer has also correctly quoted Dr. Wajed Mia that "The other woman who ruled Bangladesh with iron grip from 1991 through 1996 is quarter-educated".

What we find in our Jatiya Sangsad is both AL and BNP MPs simply engaged in diatribes using obscene and unparliamentary language against each other wasting time, energy and

public money at the cost of unfounded sufferings of the people. Don't we have any intelligent, sincere and capable leaders in AL and BNP? the two major political parties of our country?

We strongly feel that it is imperative that the leadership of both AL and BNP may be peacefully and democratically handed over to educated and capable hands.

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