

Couldn't the Hartal be Avoided?

This hartal has two aberrant features. Firstly, it is being staged on a Sunday adding a day more to the two-day official week-end to make it into a three-day vacation. The long-stretch 'standstill' may give the four-party alliance, which imposed it on the people some feel of power; but we can assure them that it is a false sense of power they are allowing themselves to be deceived with. If they had scheduled the hartal for Thursday, the day after the fall-out of their Wednesday's programme for laying siege to DC's offices became public knowledge it would still have had the same effect of a three-day disruption with Friday and Saturday included. But the opposition did not opt for it presumably because they needed some 'preparations' and that, is what raises the dreaded spectre of counter-preparations by the activists on the other side of the political fence. All in all, it is keeping the bellicosity alive. That is why we have been a consistent critic of hartal culture on top of demurring over the fact that it is an outright imposition on the people, an evil influence on work ethics, and that it wreaks havoc on the national economy.

Sufficing the hartal day to the week-end has no novelty about it as far as the opposition goes — thanks to their deliberate mischief in having the office-goers, who had left Dhaka on a week-end, stay put in their village homes on the hartal day. But what strikes as something new this time around is the increase in the duration of the hartal, from the originally-announced six hours to twelve hours as of now. This stands in stark contrast to some earlier instances in which we have seen the length of hartal being shortened from the declared level in an apparent recognition of people's predicament in drawn-out shut-downs. So, it is not merely the decision of the four-party liaison committee that has made the people suffer, its in-decision has also had the same effect on the citizenry.

The events of last Wednesday raised questions in the public mind about the government's handling of the law enforcement agenda on the day. That itself could have been regarded by the opposition as 'a success' of their agitational programme obviating thereby the necessity for the hartal call. They did not have to go for hartal to make their points or mourn the losses; their purpose would have been much better served if they just held rallies and processions eschewing the hartal option altogether like they did a few months ago with acknowledged success.

Streets without Lights

ANOTHER feather to the already overfeathered cap of the Dhaka City Corporation. The Daily Star report on Saturday unearthed a story of theft and pilferage of the metropolis street lighting equipment and accessories.

Dhaka city is reported to have 75,000 street lights, including 10,000 sodium lights, each costing Taka 1600 and supposed to last 9000 hours. Compared to this a tube light costs less than Taka 100 with a street life of 3000 hours. But the linesmen responsible for the maintenance of street lights complain about the poor quality of tubes and accessories. They also blame low voltage and regular interruption in power supply for all the ills. It is true that the tubes and accessories lend better service at home. The maintenance crew purportedly lost interest in their job since these materials are bought from Senakalyan Sangstha instead of Eastern Tubes. But the DCC had provided about 50 per cent extra lights and accessories to the linesmen during May and June resulting in a huge additional expenditure. Pilferage in this department is reported to have reached a staggering 70 per cent in which even the Chief Engineer is alleged to have been involved. It is evident that the linesmen are in a tussle with DCC because the materials supplied to them do not have 'much resale value'.

All this maladministration has led to a deterioration in street lighting for many areas of the city with an attendant rise in street crimes. The citizens are already living in almost dustbin-like conditions as is evident from the thoroughly inefficient scavenger service of the DCC. Added to this has been the street lighting problem. The DCC administration is all over the place at the same time and on top of this we have the smoke and lead pollution to live with. What an ideal living condition for 8 million people of Dhaka! Is the Mayor listening?

Pay Heed, Please

THE lady's yell for help was certainly courageous when she was intercepted by four muggers near Rajarbagh Police Lines on Friday. But it could be fatal for her. We shudder at the way she risked her life, much as we marvel at her exemplary deed. However, the police 'rescued' the alleged muggers from public wrath and took them into custody, but not before they were beaten up by the angry mob who also set an autorickshaw afire.

We have noticed lynching in public of criminals a few times over in the recent past, and editorially condemned such a tendency. The public, under no circumstances, should go violent and take the law into their own hands, especially when, the criminals have been caught by them, only to be made over to the police. Because, by doing so, they are violating the law when they need not do so. The Friday's incident should be enough of an eye-opener for the government. People in charge of governance should realise that the citizenry have run out of patience with a prolonged and pervasive era of lawlessness. It is high time to put a brake on this.

The government should also realise — and admit — the fact that crimes are on the rise and the people's confidence in the law enforcement agencies is badly shaken. The government should take some concrete measures to curb crimes: increase patrol and see that the arrested muggers are punished and not allowed to slip through the fingers.

The War was Handled Well, but Not Peace

The government over-reacted when it brought down the Pakistan naval Atlantique plane. No country will undertake surveillance over India, much less Pakistan, with 16 persons on board.

SENATORS in Pakistan, who are like the Rajya Sabha members in India, were privileged to be briefed by their government on Kargil. Military officers explained to them the situation with maps and charts. For eight Minister Sartal Aziz had a session of questions and answers. Nothing like that happened in India. The Rajya Sabha members' demand for a special session to discuss Kargil was rejected. They still do not know anything about the operation from official quarters. I understand that the BJP led alliance was reluctant to convene the Rajya Sabha on the ground that the hostilities at the border could be converted into a political warfare. But this is no reason to treat Parliament shabbily. The Rajya Sabha is the house which represents Parliament after the dissolution of the Lok Sabha. Why couldn't the members be kept in the picture, when the BJP executive and the selected leaders were given regular briefings? The real reason is that the Rajya Sabha might have brought the government down to earth from the dizzy heights of victory where it is still flying.

There is no doubt about the success at Kargil. The war was handled well, but not peace. For example, the government over-reacted when it brought down the Pakistan naval Atlantique plane. No country will undertake surveillance over India, much less Pakistan, with 16 persons on board.

More over, both Delhi and Islamabad have an agreement from 1991 that forbids any military action within 10 kilometres of airspace in each other's territory. There is also a high level contact between the Indian and Pakistani Directors General of Military Operation. In New Delhi felt that the air craft was flying within its territory. It could have contacted Pakistan on the hotline. Washington too has said that "In the event a violation occurs, a prompt alert is to be sent through diplomatic channels to the headquarters of the other country's air force."

True, our annoyance — and it is justified — is over the shooting down of two Indian MIG fighter planes in the beginning of the intrusion. Pakistan has rubbed salt on India's wounds by honouring the two air-defence men, who did the shooting. Still it is the restraint which won us acclaim in the world. Despite every provocation and despite the military pressure on Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, the government did not violate the Line of Control (LoC).

That restraint was not shown when the naval plane was brought down. The inter national opinion too reacted unfavourably. Washington, which has supported India, all through the war at Kargil, ticked it off by saying that both should 're-institute' the 1991 agreement.

Churchill once said: "In defeat, defiant, in victory, magnanimous. New Delhi seems to have hardened still more after Pakistan's defeat at Kargil. India's reply to the repeated pleas by Pakistan for a dialogue should have been accommodating. Perhaps it could have said that the talks are deferred till after the election. It was not fair to bind the next government on such a matter as Kashmir.

India should go to the farthest extent to make peace with Pakistan, however intransigent our neighbour because we have to live with it. Even otherwise, war is no solution to the problem. That Islamabad has betrayed our confidence goes without saying. So did Beijing. Still we have mended our fences with it without getting any part of the territory which China occupies.

However, the reason for New Delhi's tough attitude may be quite different. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which comprises the government, feels that any hint of talks may affect its electoral prospects. However, this posture insults a nation which seeks to string together all the countries in the region for common cooperative efforts towards development and the peoples' well-being.

Unfortunately, the atmosphere in the country is that of jingoism. Patriotism of the government's critics is being questioned. In fact, it was sad to see that at midnight on August 14-15, there were few people at the Gandhi Smriti where Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated. The function was a

candle-light vigil for India-Pakistan peace and amity.

Pakistan should also create conducive conditions for talks. What purpose will a dialogue serve if Islamabad does not realise the futility of cross-border terrorism? Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif says peace but he has to act peace.

Four jihad groups are functioning in Kashmir with headquarters in Pakistan. They are: (1) Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, the militant wing of the Muridke-based Markese-e-Dawat-ul-Irshad (centre for the propagation of Islam) under the leadership of Professor Mohammad Sayeed, also the chief of the Jamaat Abi-e-Hadis; (2) Harkatul Mujahideen, which is the revival group of the late Harkat-ul-Ansar, listed by the US as a terrorist organisation for its alleged links with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan reportedly harbouring Osama-bin-Laden; Maulana Fazlur Rahman, chief of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) is the Amir-e-Aala of the Harkat; (3) Al-Badr under Maulana Amir Hamza and (4) The United Jihad Council under Maulana Salahuddin, who was in the limelight during the Kargil incursion.

It is difficult to say how many of the Mujahideen under the four groups are native Kashmiris. Probably very few. As a Pakistani newspaper has admitted, they are "the mixed bag of those generally identified as Afghans, Pakistanis (Maulana Fazlur Rahman Khan's men), Arabs, etc. In Kargil, it is

established by now that the Pakistan army forces led them to the Indian side of the LoC. When Pakistan explains that the Mujahideen are from Kashmir, it wants to fend off the responsibility — and humiliation — which has been heaped on it for the failure.

One thing which still remains unexplained is who planned and authorised the Kargil launch? Were the Mujahideen an autonomous body of the men outside the operational command and control of the Pak army and the political hold of the Pakistan government? If so, what is going to be the nature of their equation with the army and the government in the future?

When Sharif agreed to withdraw the Mujahideen from Kargil under agreement in Washington, he destroyed the alibi which Pakistan gave in the past that it extended only diplomatic and moral support to the Mujahideen, they are not under Pakistan control. How could have Sharif made them withdraw? New Delhi knows now whom to address its complaint when their activity increases.

One interesting comment in Pakistan is that the Kargil operation in 1999 is perhaps similar to "the mock war of 1971." East Pakistan was lost then; it may be Kashmir's turn now. The Kargil operation, according to the comment, was meant to prepare the Pakistan for the loss. An article published in a Pakistani newspaper describes the mood thus: "An evil spirit now hangs over Pakistan. The people are too tired, too disappointed, too often betrayed and too ill-informed to comprehend the tragedy of Kargil.... And whatever Islamabad may say, the Kargil incursion has sanctified the LoC. It has come to be recognised as the international border. It may be de facto at present. But it looks like becoming de jure tomorrow.

No power would like either of the two sides to cross the LoC and fight all over again. New Delhi may not have made the proposal of converting the LoC into an international border officially, but it has hinted at it many a time. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, then Pakistan Prime Minister, reportedly accepted the proposition at Shimla in 1972 and promised to implement it. But he went back on the undertaking.

Pakistan refuses to accept the LoC on the logic that the integration of Kashmir is the unfinished agenda of partition." How can India agree to the proposition which means the acceptance of the two-nation theory? However imperfect its secular polity, it cannot go to a situation where religion determines the nationhood and becomes the basis for the division of Jammu and Kashmir. If New Delhi was to accept the thesis, it would deliver a fatal blow to its pluralistic society.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

Political Agenda

The last most vital issue is that of "proportional representation" (OM) in a democracy. The "run-off election" ensures a majority but it does not cater for smaller political parties, minorities and women representation.

NONE of the manifestos floated by the many political parties in Pakistan contain anything that is radically different from each other. At most priorities differ as does the language spelling them out. Certainly emphasis on many issues may be wide apart, yet ideologically they remain similar. Most agendas are nationalist in nature with "caring" capitalism posing as a soft form of socialism. The two prominent political parties in Pakistan are the PML(N) and the PPP, followed by the regional MQM and ANP, yet a number of other parties have come up to join Air Marshal Asghar Khan's Tehreek-e-Istiqal (TI), among them Pakistan Tehrik-I-Insaf (PTI) of Imran Khan and former President Farooq Leghari's Millat Party.

A strong minority is formed of a group of religious parties with the Jamaat-e-Islami prominent among them nationally, yet it is the factions of Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) and Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Pakistan (JUP), along with other religious parties, that are stronger in terms of voting power that translates into seats in certain regions. As we approach the new millennium, we must first define and implement the macro issues that are a must for good governance and structure them to the benefit of the country, setting in place positive micro-management.

Given that all of us love democracy, what is stopping us from following democratic practices? That the will of the majority must prevail over that of the minority but that the minority must have some voice to register their legitimate rights? None of the manifestos define a practical solution of overcoming a situation where a minority exercises its will over the majority in the name of democracy and the majority rarely can protest. How has this paradox come about? The fault lies in our voting system which follows the "first past the post" system i.e. whoever gets the most vote gets a seat, even though, in many cases his percentage of votes may not be more than 20 per cent of those voting. This system envisages an educated electorate and a maximum of that electorate turning out to vote and even then this system has been seen to be faulty in the US whenever more than two candidates vie for votes. Any organised minority of even less than 10 per cent of the population in any constituency can get their candidate elected under this defective process.

Since a major part of the population is not registered as voters, these are effectively disenfranchised. For good order's sake, let's say half the population is not registered, the 10 per cent thus becomes 20 per cent of the voting electorate. The last three elections have shown that since more than half the voting public do not go out to vote (it is becoming smaller every time), that 20 per cent becomes 40 per cent of the electorate.

An analysis of the polls shows that in at least 80 per cent of the electoral races for National (NA) and Provincial (PA) Assembly seats, the winning candidates were those who got between 25-35 per cent of the votes cast (or 12-18 per cent of the people eligible to vote), far less than what an organised 10 per cent of the population requires. Besides being unjust it also breeds apathy and frustration among the electorate, the silent majority deciding that since they can never get to the seat of power they go in lesser numbers each election year to the polling stations, resigning themselves to perennial rule by the organised minority.

This gradual sapping of the will of the public not only erodes the foundation that holds the Republic together but it inspires a simmering resentment that lies still like a dormant volcano for many years but may erupt and spill over in raging frustration, maybe once in many decades. Such a revolution can act as a cleansing mechanism, it can also destroy the fabric that holds a nation together. To unite our fractured society, there is no substitute to evolving a system where a real majority rules over the electorate but gives a voice to the minority. The electoral game must be changed from one differing on personalities to a fight between ideas and objectives. If we were to have elections on a "run-off" basis, the two candidates having the maximum votes, i.e. the first two candidates in any constituency will be pitted against each other in a "run-off election" in which the first candidate does not get more than 50 per cent of the vote. In a "run-off election", one candidate has to get more than 50 per cent of the vote

to get elected. To get 50 per cent or more any candidate who wants to get elected will have to reach out to heterogeneous elements in the electorate from outside his hard-core supporters, maybe of his Baradari, his religion, sect etc whatever. Moreover if a majority of the electorate do not like a particular person they can vote for the other candidate to keep such a person out of office.

The elected candidate will be the one representing the majority of the electorate in a constituency and thus the norms of democracy will be served in reality and not in an absurd abstract way as is being done now. A "run-off election" unites the people. The elected candidate has to care for the whole constituency during his/her term instead of looking after only a significant minority. People of different religion, ethnicity, sect etc are thus drawn into one united cauldron through necessity. Unity can be made real by making it a necessity. When the majority of the electorate realise that their individual vote matters, they will come back to the voting booth to register their ideas, overcoming voter apathy and getting the people involved in governance at the grassroots level.

A lot of our citizens are public-minded and want to serve the nation in a no-win situation. They should they participate in a no-win situation. They should they participate in a no-win situation. They should they participate in a no-win situation.

knowledge that "special interest" groups have not "locked" up a seat can be overcome, better candidates will be encouraged to come to the electoral fray and the public will get a far better quality of leaders. The next part of the process, to decentralise authority to the lowest electoral unit.

The people must be involved in governance at the grassroots level. It is strange that we allow un-elected people to take major decisions concerning the nation and we cannot trust decision-making about their immediate surroundings to the public for their own benefit. Power is nothing without the authority to spend. The basic formula for taxation can be laid down at the federal level but the present system of centralised revenue collection and spending thereof is counter-productive to good governance and fosters inefficiency and corruption.

The authority for collecting taxes as mandated by the Federation, Provinces and even the Local Bodies themselves, must be the prerogatives of the Local Bodies who must also have the power to spend part of what they collect on their own constituencies, proposed is 50 per cent of what they collect, giving 25 per cent each to the Federation and the Provinces as their share. Instead of disbanding the Central Board of Revenue (CBR), a reduced staff thereof can be used to audit revenues and spending thereof at all levels of collection and spending.

The last most vital issue is that of "proportional representation" (PR) in a democracy. The "run-off election" ensures a majority but it does not cater for smaller political parties, minorities and women representation.

A perfect solution may not be possible, however one proposal goes along the following lines, viz (1) the number of seats filled by direct election will be increased by 50 per cent, these will be allocated on the basis of PR based on the percentage totalled by the parties; (2) 50 per cent of the seats thus filled by each party will be filled by women nominees of the party; (3) 40 per cent of the seats must be taken by those losing candidates of the party who have the highest percentage of votes in priority, the choice with the party if there is a tie and (4) 10 per cent of the seats must be filled by minority candidates, the larger parties distributing it carefully, among Christians and Hindus etc, with the religious parties surrendering or transferring to smaller party their seats if they do not want to appoint any minority or woman candidate. The surrendered seats must go to the larger parties as per their percentage of votes. PR in the electoral system will ensure participation by all sectors of the electorate.

The whole idea is to ensure all political parties have some say in elected bodies commensurate to their vote. But this is a complete subject by itself. If we can implement the logical ideas set forth in my submissions, we will go a long way in ensuring true democracy for the people of Pakistan. The only salvation for Pakistan lies in a true democracy being implemented in letter and spirit.

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

To the Editor...

Fight the real terrorists SAARC, thy name is 'peace'?

Sir, I am surprised by the move of the government to destroy slum in an effort to arrest terrorists. May I ask the authority concerned of the government where the "godfathers" of terrorists are living? Are they living in the slum or in the areas (such as Dhamondi, Gulshan, Banani) where the top politicians living? Do the pro-independence government has the honesty and courage to fight against those "godfathers" or is it that the government with all its power is afraid of them? Finally, I would like to know who are going to occupy the land left after evacuation of slum dwellers? If those who become friends during elections and terrorists after elections. Dr. Mahboob Hossain 19, Zigatola Dhaka-1209

Concern for BUET

Sir, Suddenly while switching channels the other evening I came across a programme on the BTv where a Professor of the Department of Architecture BUET was speaking on Architecture in general (so it seemed). At one point while talking about the National Assembly Building in Dhaka he mentioned the "rigidity" of concrete as a material. As a professional I found this comment interesting.

I, and I am sure many others related to the construction and design profession, will agree that concrete is known for its plasticity i.e. concrete can be given any desired shape which the building in question also demonstrates. Since I do not consider myself as knowledgeable as a "Professor" I was also confused. Perhaps many others have misunderstood the property of concrete. But in the wrong that I am right and he is wrong then this comment partially explains the state of affairs as BUET in the recent past.

I am also very concerned about the quality of education the bright young students of BUET are receiving. Someone should take notice. M. Masudur Rahman Dhaka

M Zahidul Haque BAI, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar Dhaka-1207

Will Planes Fall from the Sky on August 22?

by Sabbir Ahmed Rahman

THERE has been much discussion, especially in developed countries, on the year 2000 computer bug and its possible consequences. The debate is ongoing and often heated. At one extreme there are those in a state of complete denial claiming that it is all a hoax and that nothing will happen, and that everything will be fixed on time. At the other extreme there are the millennial doomsayers claiming that the result will be nothing less than the global collapse of civilisation and a return to the dark ages. And of course there is the whole spectrum of opinions in between these two.

The year 2000 bug harkens from the early days of microprocessors at a time when memory and storage space were very expensive. To reduce costs it became customary to allocate only two digits to store the year — so that 1971 was stored simply as 71, 1999 as 99, etc. Although storage costs are no longer an issue, the habit of using two digits remained a kind of programmer's shorthand. The problem is, of course, that when at the end of this year the clocks reset themselves from 99 to 00, the latter will likely be misunderstood as the year 1900 as opposed to the year 2000. This misunderstanding may trigger off a host of unpleasant consequences including malfunction, or perhaps worse, complete shutdown.

There are two major aspects to the problem which can affect any system — one software-related and the other hardware-related. To fix the software problem, it is necessary to check, and if necessary, correct, every line of code in every computer programme used by the system — all without introducing any new errors. This is tricky enough to perform for even relatively small programmes, but with some of the most important mission-critical programmes — such as those running the power grid or the telecommunications systems — having often tens of millions of lines of code — the debugging problem becomes unimaginably complex. As if the software problem were not enough, the hardware problem — namely,

which they know will eventually snap.

The full extent of the Y2K disruptions remain to be seen. Yet the public remains apathetic, imagining that there is no need to worry about the problem until some time late December. However, it is a little known fact that there exists another problem, very similar in nature to the Y2K bug — and potentially just as lethal — which is scheduled to strike on precisely midnight of August 22nd 1999.

This so-called "GPS end-of-week (EOW) rollover" problem affects the set of 21 Global Positioning Satellites which were placed into orbit and put into commission on January 6th 1980 by the United States navy for various defence-related applications. These satellites contain hardware clocks counting the number of weeks since the date of initial operation. Only 10 bits were allocated for this purpose, meaning that at the end of the 1024th week, which falls on this August 22nd of this month, the clocks will reset themselves to zero. This may confuse the software and hardware both on the satellites themselves, as well as any ground receivers communicating with them, resulting once again in malfunction or shutdown of the relevant systems.

While there is cause for great concern in that the nation's defence system may become vulnerable to attack, there is also a much greater worry owing to the widespread use of GPS in day-to-day commercial applications: On account of their extremely accurate onboard atomic clocks, they are now used by airlines, and shipping for navigation, by banks for interest calculations, by large scale networks such as telecommunications for timing and synchronisation, and for an uncountable number of less major applications.

So this gives us a glimpse of the potential scale of the problem. Should even one of these major subsystems fail, their overwhelming interdependence may result in the hasty collapse of the entire system in charge of running our daily lives — the

so-called "domino effect". Indeed, the horror-stories related so frequently by the millennial doomayers may well come true. (One may refer to the website http://www.garynorth.com for an excellent and thought-provoking example.) And worse still, it will have taken place four months before anyone had expected or prepared for it.

Although the general public remains largely ignorant of such possibilities, the governments of developed nations are in general fully aware of the problem and are preparing contingency plans to cope with impending disaster. Indeed, the evidence strongly suggests that countries such as the US and Britain are preparing to impose martial law in the very near future in order to contain the widespread civil unrest and chaos which will inevitably occur.

Despite the numerous official claims and statements to the opposite, it is clear that the nations which will be hardest hit by the GPS EOW/Y2K problems will be those nations most dependent upon technology — nations such as Japan, Malaysia, the United States, and the more affluent nations of Europe. While all countries are expected to suffer calamities to some extent, those which are likely to fare best include the technologically backward developing nations, especially in Africa, Asia, and some parts of the Middle East.

One would expect that in such countries — Bangladesh included major problems will tend to be restricted to urban areas, whole rural areas, which were almost devoid of modern technology, may provide a temporary safe haven where people may be able to adapt more quickly to the sudden adverse conditions.

No one can predict in advance how severe the problems associated with GPS EOW rollover or Y2K will turn out to be. However it is a matter of common sense that we as a nation should "prepare for the worst and hope for the best". Our lives may well depend on it. The writer is a doctorate in Theoretical Physics.