

Does the Govt Have Any Answer for This?

TO what kind of meanness some ruling party members can stoop in an attempt to foil the opposition's agitational programme was brought vividly home yesterday. Newspaper reports were rife with eerie details about a hitherto unheard-of obstructionism practised at all highway entry points to Dhaka to emasculate the opposition's sit-in rally around the secretariat. Inside the city one saw cordons raised by the police and BDR a fairly long distance away from the secretariat building. These could be termed as 'precautionary' by the government although their failure to rein in the violence against what began as a peaceful sit-in demonstration by the opposition cannot be that easily explained away.

The government's omissions and commissions on that day inside the city must pale into insignificance before what happened at the gate-ways to the capital city. At Savar, Dhamrai, Nayarhat, Aminbazar, Tongi, Ashulia, Kaliakoir transporters were placed haphazardly to prevent BNP supporters from entering the city. Barricades were put up at seven places along Dhaka-Aricha and Dhaka-Nabinagar highways by none other than pro-AL transport workers' unions. Blockades were engineered in an orchestrated fashion along Dhaka-Chittagong, Dhaka-Sylhet and Dhaka-Mawa-Khulna highways. At the Kanchpur bridge point the lead was given by UP Chairman Nur Hossain who had deserted the BNP to join the AL only a year ago.

While the barricades were being laid across the highways, in a close proximity to the metropolis, the police did nothing to stop this highly illegal act of obstruction. What is even worse, they played a mute spectator to the systematic looting of the passengers' belongings by terrorist gangs making a bonfire of the booty. The totality of the government's credibility looks badly scarred. In a deliberate attempt to shut off the communication arteries to the Capital city the government showed disdain for the citizens' right to movement, the security of their life, limbs and possession, law and order on the highway and economic necessity of people, leave aside the civic and political rights of those who might have set out to join the sit-in.

If the opposition tried to lay a siege to the secretariat the ruling party surrogates can be accused of actually laying siege to the city by stopping the inter-district communication for hours. We may not know how the violence started in the city centre. But we do know how and who started it on the outskirts. Will the government explain how such things could occur under the very nose of the police?

Shorten People's Suffering

WE find no justification of the opposition parties' calling for three days of hartal across the country following Sunday's fiasco around the Secretariat. This paper has always been against such decisions which are harmful for the country and, in the present context, redundant and superfluous because of the following reasons: First, the opposition sit-in was disciplined and peaceful; secondly, supporters were obstructed to join the sit-in through violence and barricades by ruling party activists in various points; thirdly, Leader of the Opposition was not allowed to speak before the congregation; fourthly, BNP and the opposition alliance have drawn enormous public sympathy. In other words the opposition, especially BNP's programme was a success. It is our considered view that the long-drawn hartal will have a souring effect on the gains of the opposition. The amount of goodwill and good work that have gone into creating a reputation for the opposition in the face of intimidation by the ruling party will all be lost in the wilderness of unpopular and suicidal decisions such as the one to go for a three-day hartal.

Instead the opposition must draw strength from their other experiences like the road march and cultivate these experiences with sagacity and far-sightedness. They should try to benefit from the knowledge of other alternatives to hartal in the greater public interest. They, by following such alternative programmes, have earned enormous goodwill, which no doubt will serve them well during elections. It does not speak well of the acumen to the opposition leadership to push the people to the brink because in the long run they are not going to be benefited by it. By the time this writup will see the light of the day, more than a day of the three day shutdown will have passed. Even then we will advise the opposition to call a meeting of the liaison committee to shorten the strike in view of the tremendous difficulties faced by the people, people who decide the fate of political parties in a democratic society. On the face of it, such a move may appear to be a step backward. We not only disagree. On the contrary we think that such sensitivity to public welfare will greatly benefit the opposition.

Hope for East Timor?

UNREST in East Timor looks somewhat manageable following President BJ Habibie's acceptance of the UN-proposed presence of an international peace-keeping force in the island province. However, in the midst of intense diplomatic manoeuvres for protection of the East Timorese from the marauding pro-Jakarta militiamen, the issue of implementing the people's verdict for independence in the UN-brokered referendum appears to have been shelved, if not buried altogether. With matters relating to formation of the peace-keeping contingent set to dominate talks for the present, we urge all concerned to see that it is mandated to create conditions congenial to the implementation of referendum results.

At this point of time, though, peace and protection for the hiding and terrified thousands should top the agenda of international intervention; and thankfully, it is. Side by side, the situation there also demands humanitarian assistance, especially in the form of emergency food supply. Later on, once the trouble-mongering militias are forced off the streets in the provincial capital and other major towns, there will be the need for reinstating refugees in their homesteads. Also needed will be renovation and restoration of buildings razed by the anti-independence elements during the bloody violence before and after the referendum. On the whole, a Herculean task lies ahead towards bringing normalcy back in East Timor.

By no means should efforts towards restoration of peace and order be allowed to circumvent the question of settlement of the independence issue. The East Timorese want freedom and there is no question about it. Realisation of their overwhelming verdict for independence remains the ultimate task for the international community.

THE barbaric killing of Catholic priest Father Arul Doss in western Orissa is a black mark on Indian society and its claim to be tolerant, even civilised. That it happened a week after the murder of Sheikh Rahman, and within eight months of the burning alive of the Rev. Graham Staines, points to growing communal terror in Orissa. It may only be a coincidence that Doss was killed on the eve of Jannashthami, Rahman on Raksha Bandhan day, and Staines during Saraswati Puja. What is definitely not coincidental is the Hinduva inspiration behind the murders.

It is wrong to lay the blame for this mainly on the Orissa government. It must, of course, be condemned for inefficiency, lack of coordination between the Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar police, and failure to apprehend suspect Dara Singh. But this must not be confused with the causative agency behind the killings — the sangh parivar with its rabid anti-minority ideology and organisation. The BNP, Orissa unit, brazenly claimed that Doss was killed because he was 'an outsider', he was young and... had several habits which the local tribals didn't like. Its official statement did not even regret the ghastly killing, but rather

analysed it as the local Adivasi's resentment over 'interference in their cultural life'. The BJP, on the other hand, accuses Doss of having built a popular base among the Adivasis; yet, on the other, it claims the same Adivasis killed him. Worse, it justifies the murder because Doss was 'an outsider'. This speaks of fascist xenophobia. Orissa police chief D.K. Mahapatra too did himself no credit by saying Doss was killed because he practised religious conversion. As DGP, Mr Mahapatra's job is not to make academic analyses of the causes of crime, so much as to control it. It is a pity that the Election Commission stayed his transfer.

This will not embolden Orissa's terrorised public. It bears recalling that only one person of the 300 who watched Rahman's broad-daylight killing in a bazaar agreed to stand witness. Behind the communal prejudice in Orissa was the misplaced view that

religious conversion — the Church's main preoccupation — is semi-legal or illegal. In reality, the Church is involved in running schools, colleges, hospitals, and community centres. Religious instruction is only a minor component of its agenda. The right of religious conversion derives from the freedom to 'practise and propagate' one's faith, a fundamental right, itself part of the unalterable 'basic structure' of the Constitution repeatedly laid down by the Supreme Court. Those who rail against 'forcible conversions' to 'alien' faiths are either confusing today's (marginal) phenomenon with early colonial practices in

Goa or Mangalore, or elitistically arrogating to themselves the right to decide what's best for the 'unwashed' masses who don't know they are being 'duped'. Never mind who kept them 'unwashed' and 'ignorant' for centuries! Or that they don't complain of coercive

conversion! It is hard to argue that the fundamental right to proselytise be restricted. Nor are India's religious minorities 'outsiders'. Christianity in India is centuries older than Christianity in Europe, now considered its 'home'. Kerala's Christians embraced their faith 800 years before Brahminical Hinduism was born. Indian Islam evolved through rich interaction with many faiths and cultures and as integral to Indian society as Hinduism. As for the way indigenous faiths like Buddhism or Jainism were banished and persecuted by casteist Hindus, the less said the better.

A truly attractive feature of most South Asian societies is that they have no permanent 'outsiders'. They have generally been open, porous, and compellingly plural, and respect a multiplicity of faiths. There is thus a healthy kernel from the past which we can build on. Our modernist-secular Constitutions mandate just

this. Forces like the sangh parivar oppose this with false notions of homogeneity, 'unity', uniformity, suppression of difference — in the name of national glory. Such notions trample upon minority rights by invoking the majority. This is not democracy. It is majoritarianism. Democracy is, of course, about the rule of the majority, but this is not a permanent majority, based upon religion or ethnicity, but a changing entity, pertinent to issues. Democracy is about universal rights and freedoms too. In their absence, majority rule can become authoritarian. Minorities, including religious minorities, are vital to democracies. As Gandhiji often said, the real test of a civilised society is not how it treats its majority, but how it treats its minorities. Harassment and intimidation of the minorities speaks of democracy's poverty. To put this in the language of modern ethics, the litmus test of fairness is to ask not how a democracy's average or privi-

leged members function, but how well-treated its underprivileged and weak feel. On this principle, the security and well-being of the minorities becomes absolutely crucial. That is precisely what the sangh parivar has systematically done.

The past 17 months have been marked by unprecedented communal insecurity, attacks on artists (M.F. Hussain, Ghulam Ali and Dilip Kumar), frenzied activity to complete a prefabricated Ram temple, and attempts to communalise defence and national identity. The BJP promised there would be no communalism. We have had them in Gujarat, Andhra and Tamil Nadu. The BJP said the minorities have nothing to fear from 'tolerant' Hinduva. Today, after the Wadhwa Commission cover-up, it justifies their butchery. Mr L.K. Advani, the self-proclaimed Guardian of the Nation, promised a White Paper on the ISI and its 'subversive' local collaborators. It is nowhere to be seen. Today's communalised situation is a direct consequence of Hinduva prejudice, hatred, and resort to deceit and violence. The election campaign, and the low poll turnout, shows the BJP has failed to drum up a wave of enthusiastic supporters. It has little to offer. So it is cynically sowing prejudice and hatred.

Security Concerns for Bangladesh

by Maj Gen Z A Khan (Retd)

We have to involve survival strategies which would largely depend on the efficient management of our meagre resources and our people's ability to cultivate to work hand in gloves to ensure that our sovereignty is not tampered with by forces of evil.

implies states' desire to protect their territories and border from external invasions which have been the centuries to the creation of ever larger standing armies and development of ever more sophisticated weapons.

Unchecked skewed pattern of distribution of wealth generated by external invasions challenged the principal aim of development which is growth with equity. Wherever growth with 'modest equity' was impaired, social turbulence ruled the roost and people suffered from insecurity. Resource depletion by way of soil erosion, deforestation, unchecked population explosion, riverbed siltation have adversely affected economy and stalled development. All these contribute substantially towards a feeling of insecurity. If the goals of the nations are peace and development, these are unlikely to be achieved till the time we are able to identify our chief premise of development which is human security. The 1994 Human Development Report points out, "It will not be possible for the community of nations to achieve any of its major goals: not peace, not environmental protection, not human rights or democratisation, not fertility reduction, not social integration except in the context of development that leads to human security." It is an irony that there is dire poverty in the midst of huge wealth and that there is non-

development in the wake of extraordinary development. Are we aware of the area of development where most of the wealth is being invested? One of the major areas of massive investment is armament related industry which hardly has any direct contribution to the development of the means of human security at large. Why then are the arms merchant rushing from countries to countries like 'vultures to carcasses'? Answer is not far to seek.

It is to perpetuate their hold on the market and keep the supply flowing. Whenever they appreciate potential decline of sales, they create flash points or crisis so that arms sale is not halted. Today we are living in a region where essential equivalence is far from being in existence. If we, for the time being, forget the entire region and look around, we will notice a vigorous endeavour to make believe that the 'language of military power is the only language which decides of power politics' and that probably is the motivation behind arming their forces to the teeth.

Have we made any substantive effort to identify where they might use these ordnance? What fall-out effect will its use have on the developing countries? It is about time we made some serious effort to identify the countries that might resort to the misadventure of showing their teeth to their frightened neighbours. We are aware that

our two neighbours are fast developing their military might and the concomitant of this possession will be their extended capacity to intervene in the affairs of neighbouring states, a capacity which hinges on a sort of imperialism. They even demonstrate immense indifference to the susceptibilities and sensitivities of smaller or less powerful neighbouring states. Bangladesh taking the tone from her peace loving people continues to radiate serenity albeit little decayed. Bangladesh in the political parlance is a minor power because she is just about capable of putting up resistance to invasion, while we are surrounded by a medium power that exercises considerable regional influence and the other neighbour is another fast developing military power. Therefore, we must guard against any gambit that is fraught with potential danger. One may wonder what really is security. Succinctly, it is the protection or protective ability covering military to economic to political threat. Our traditional security concerns stem mostly from military and economic threats from the stronger neighbours.

It is known to all that 'there is no permanent friend but only enduring interest especially in the realm of politics and diplomacy'. Good relation between and among neighbouring countries is considered as a watershed in history and hope and

in hindsight this is on a diminishing trail. Therefore, will any apprehension with regard to our security be wrong?

Although much has been written on the territorial (traditional) security of Bangladesh, much needs to be done to ensure physical security of our territory. One might find it interesting to note that during the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 some arbitrary decisions were taken while mapping a new country called Pakistan on the basis of religion. Some non-Muslim inhabited (or Muslim minority) areas like Chittagong Hill Tracts, parts of southern East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) were to go to India while some parts of Muslim majority territory were to go to East and West Pakistan.

Although both the post-independence governments accepted the partition as *jai accompli*, they castigated each other and even fought brief wars over the issue of territorial dispute. Even today, Bangladesh has a few unresolved land disputes with India. Who can say that India, our stronger neighbour, would not stake claim over some such areas in distant future? Recently earned fragile peace in CHT may become even more elusive if the newly refurbished Regional Council failed to ensure there. Let us not forget to take lessons from the happenings in erstwhile Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. We should remain alive the distant possibility of any thing emerging as a bone of contention with today's friendly India. Myanmar, allegedly, is on record to have claimed parts of CHT as part of former Arakanese kingdom. All or any of these issues may snowball into flash point for conflict of a sort as we march forward to make our country economically or environmentally viable. Therefore a strong, well trained, well armed and committed (to the country and the constitution) armed force would be necessary. One may wonder that while our

nation is busy grappling with problems of paucity of fund, how can this area be given enhanced budgetary allocation to raise a sizable force to be able to effectively resist an aggressive design of an inimical adversary?

A political decision, however unsavoury, will have to be taken to ensure that we either have enough traditional troops or multiplier alongside a large citizen's militia (to be available on call) to guard against possible infringement on our territorial sovereignty. We also have problems with our neighbours concerning territorial maritime boundary. If 200nm Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) agreement, of which we are a signatory, is to be implemented drawing line from the baseline then we will be zone locked and this will affect about 95 per cent to 98 per cent of our commerce which is dependent on this Sea Line of Communication (SLOC). If our maritime outlet is denied when balloon goes off then we will be subjected to immense economic suffering. This issue too will entail parley of a kind with both the neighbouring countries. One suspects that neither country will accommodate us during adversity. Our inland waterways are easily accessible by hostile elements and our recently raised Coast Guard is not equipped enough to even chase out the maritime intruders. So this area too needs to be reckoned with while planning our security.

Let us not forget that Armed Forces have been and still are the instrument of confidence against any show of belligerency at any point of time as 'Armed forces are established principally to deter or meet perceived external threat to the interest of state or citizenry. We have to involve survival strategies which would largely depend on the efficient management of our meagre resources and our people's ability to cultivate to work hand in gloves to ensure that our sovereignty is not tampered with by forces of evil.

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To the Editor...

Is our banking sector Y2K compliant?

Sir, The year 2000 is knocking at the door. At the same time a new problem is also approaching. The problem is called the 'Millennium Bug', better known as the Y2K problem. Due to this problem, millions of computers will be out of order after the midnight of 31st December, 1999, as the computers will show the year as 00 instead of 2000. For this, many big companies especially those who are using computers for quite a long period will be affected.

In our country, computers are mostly used in the banking sector. So, the Y2K problem will affect this sector most. But, is our banking sector Y2K compliant? Are the authorities concerned aware of it? If we cannot solve the problem before the 31st of December, what will happen?

We should keep in mind that a few months back, the C1H Virus created panic throughout the country and many people faced irreparable losses. But, the effect of the Y2K problem will be more destructive.

So, we, the clients of various banks are expecting a declaration from the banking sector and the government of Bangladesh that the banking sector of Bangladesh is totally Y2K Compliant.

Ahmed Imtiaz
Dhaka

Retirement age

Sir, Turkey's parliament has adopted a bill raising the retirement age from 55 to 60 for men (an increase of five years) and from 50 to 58 for women (an increase of eight years). Why cannot the same kind of revision be made in our country? Already we have a retirement age of 57 years for both genders. At present due to improved nutrition and medicare facilities, the life expectancy rate in Bangladesh has increased significantly. Therefore, to increase the retirement age by three years for both male and female should create no problem.

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

Currency

Sir, Recently a relative of mine returning from an official trip to Nepal narrated how most salesmen there are more interested in getting Indian currency rather than their national one! This gives us reason to worry that we might get ourselves into a similar situation in a few years time, if things keep on going the way they are going now. Rampant smuggling and flooding of our markets by Indian goods has led to sharp decline in demand for our locally produced goods, which in turn is leading to the closure of our mills and factories or pushing them to the verge of closure, as mentioned in the newspapers. This again is resulting in rendering thousands jobless. Who finds anything else to do turn to smuggling and other crimes. For smuggling or buying goods from India you need their currency. Therefore as its demand increases our own currency will lose its worth. Amazingly in India we found that none was interested in Bangladeshi currency to such an extent that even its exchange value was not mentioned in the list of dozens of other currency values. This is very much, that our currency is not even worth a penny to them!

Sabrina
Dhaka

Merit list

Sir, In our schools and colleges, are we not least bothered about educating our children properly? Very confidently, we cultivate the exams and not our children. Consequently, when the results of the SSC and HSC exams are out, the main attraction is the merit list which is virtually advertised in the press and mass media with right earnest. Isn't this merit list, in fact, an index of achievement of most of the privileged people who invest a lot in various ways for entry of their children into the 'prominent' institutions which are strictly selective? In many of these institutions even when a large number of students fail, this is not very much counted if there are a few places in the merit list. One place in the list can wash away so many failures! What a craze for publicity and popularity!

F M Abdur Rob
Dhaka

English-medium education

Sir, As Bangladesh is a developing country, we should put maximum emphasis on education especially in Bengali and English language. But till now, the government is busy establishing Bengali-medium schools which are very essential as Bengali is our mother-tongue. But for a third world country like Bangladesh, the government should not neglect English-medium schools, as English is the only language which is used and understood worldwide to communicate. At present, there are no government English-medium schools in our country. All such schools are run privately often feel really sorry talking to Bengali-medium students, their English is in fact very poor and most of them don't even know how to write standard English. I would not say that its their fault rather the governments'. For the government don't really care much about this problem. However, this creates a gap between English and Bengali-medium students and surely we don't want this gap to widen up.

Rizwan Hussain Jabbar
A Level Student
Dharmond Tutorial, Dhaka

Traffic congestion & troop deployment

Sir, I just returned to the UK after a four-and-a-half-week stay in Bangladesh.

My last trip was in 1997. This time around, I noticed a remarkable increase in traffic congestion. The situation was intolerable until September 7 when I noticed, in the morning, a contingent of the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) assisting the traffic police at the Road 3/Mirpur/Green Road junction in Dhanmondi. Throughout the day, I continued to observe members of the other three services assisting at various locations around the capital.

The following day, I read the reasoning behind the troops deployment and the Hon. Khalea's comments in your esteemed daily. As an occasional visitor to Bangladesh, I found that since the deployment of troops around the city, the flow

of traffic improved dramatically and the criticism by the Leader of the Opposition was totally unwarranted and uncalled for. Rather than playing politics with our forces, they should be commended for their role in facilitating smooth flow of traffic.

Abdul M. Ismail
Liverpool, UK

We demand explanation

Sir, The news of death of two tigers and their cubs at the Mirpur National Zoo is alarming to say the least. The alleged mysterious assassin, Trypanosoma, is a parasite of phylum protozoa, subphylum Mastigofora. The fact that the zoo officials considered it a virus makes one wonder whether these officials know their work properly. An other added worry is that some species of the genus Trypanosoma attack humans, causing the dreaded 'African Sleeping Sickness'. Therefore, we would like to know how this parasite and its carrier the infamous 'Tse Tse fly' — both natives of tropical Africa — came to Bangladesh. The zoo authorities owe us an explanation.

Syed Zainul Akmal Al-Mahmood
Sylhet Medical College
Sylhet

"9.9.99"

Sir, Recently a pre-millennium bug "9.9.99" created panic among computer users. The four '9' digits can create problems with the programming codes written in the early 60's because a 'Cut of Code' or 'End of Program' was declared in this pattern. But there is a difference between the 'Four 9' theory and the date format of the computer. Any educated programmer will understand that there is no strong background for this bug.

However, the Bangladesh Computer Council in their statement, advised the Internet and network users to keep their computers off, which has no relation with the 'Four 9' theory. I wonder how educated and experienced are the BCC members?

Waqar Mohiuddin
Telgaon.

OPINION

Sept 9, '99: A Jinx, or a Paranoia?

Dr. A.H. Jaffor Ullah

A news published in a section of press in Bangladesh on September caught me by surprise. Bangladesh Computer Council (BCC) had requested the computer users throughout Bangladesh to stay away from their PCs on September 9. They even urged the PC users not to log-on to the Internet for the fear that the users may run into trouble because of the impending glitches. The executive director of the Council reiterated that 9 and series of 9 are being used to shut down computer systems.

I am appalled by such claim of the BCC and its executive director. In the West we haven't come across any such claim from computer or any silicon experts. This appeal from BCC sounded like a hoax to me and it happened to be that. People in South Asia are very prone to superstitions. Since September 9, 1999 may translate to 9-9-99 (in a date format), some may have opined that this would be a bad day for working in e-machines.

Since a new millennium is almost knocking at the door the West is also being bombarded with all sorts of hoax. I have heard couple of good ones through the grapevine already. Some charlatans are claiming that the stock market will collapse before January 1st. Some biblical prophecy is also being hard from time to time. The world may even collapse before the year is over!

Thus, it does not surprise me that someone from Bangladesh warned us about the impending PC problem on September 9, 1999. The scientific basis for such crisis to appear is a remote

one. Computer is run by digital codes comprising of zeros and ones. Thus, how 9 or a string of numbers with 9 could call for an early demise of PC or any network, is anybody's guess.

In Bangladesh we have surplus soothsayers. We do not need anymore technologically oriented charlatans. If the computing community had listened to the call of these soothsayers and stayed away from the PC, then they would surely have missed one valuable day from their active life. A total wastage.

Reading the news of impending cyber disaster on September 9 as opined by BCC made me mad because I thought they were living in the silicon age but surely acting like folks of last century. Surprising that they still believe in jinx. I thought we came a long way from that. These jinx-prone experts should know that microprocessors are run by flows of electrons and not by some gremlins.

If the PCs all over the globe came to a screeching halt because of 9-9-99, then the folks at BCC would have won. However, when everything is normal and as usual, then the charlatans must have been eating their words.

I did not, however, rule out the outbreaks of some sorts of computer virus on September 9. The virus developers always look for some publicity all across the globe. The date having far too many nines in it might have given them just that.

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