

PM's Speech at the UN

BLANDESH Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in her address to the 54th session of the UNGA in New York on Monday made a call for peace, human rights, development cooperation in an interdependent world and regional initiatives. If these are welded into a strategy our capacity to meet the challenges into the 21st century will be enhanced.

The contents of the PM's speech at the UN can be seen in three parts: economic, political (in the international sense) and domestic in terms of reverberations they carry home. Economically, the Bangladesh leader has called for a reversal of the process of decline in commitments by the donor countries to the UN Development System and the UNDP in particular.

That the UN ought to be restructured and reformed in the changed global context has been rightly underscored by Bangladesh Prime Minister. After the detente, there has been a felt-need for a new international order. There ought to be no room for military interventions like the airstrikes in Sudan or Afghanistan that were carried out by the US trifling with the principle of sovereign equality of nations.

While complimenting the PM for delivering her speech in Bangla and making her points at the world body, we are hoping that some of her words will have a bearing on her domestic policies.

Please Mean Business

THE Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) was supposed to launch an 'anti-mosquito drive' in the Elephant Road area on Wednesday where three children tested positive for dengue fever. Experts assume that mosquitoes that act as transmitters of malaria, dengue and encephalitis are all found in urban areas.

Set against such confusing opinions about carrier of the disease and its origin, the DCC's anti-mosquito campaign is not ideally placed to prove effective. A limited operation cannot produce the desired result, more so if the insecticide used in the operation turn out to be adulterated, an allegation from which the DCC has not been immune.

Taiwan Tragedy

A month after Turkey had been hit by the deadliest earthquake in its history that killed some 15,000 people, it was Taiwan's turn to face the wrath of nature on Tuesday. The deadly tremor with a preliminary magnitude of 7.6 on the Richter scale—same as the one that hit Turkey late August this year—left 1712 people dead, some 4000 trapped in rubble, thousands of damaged homes and toppled buildings islandwide.

The world this year appears to have been on an unlucky run of deadly tremors. Bangladesh has had its share of earthquakes early this year when Maheshkhali felt the shock-wave no less than four times in a day. Notably, the epicentre was located right beneath the island, after a time lag of a few decades. The tremor at the seabed certainly shows that the country may be hit by a devastating quake any time in future.

While we mourn the deaths and empathise with the quake-affected people in Taiwan, our plea goes to the authorities to make building codes strictly adherent to international standard and enforce them. After all, strict building codes played a key role in minimising the impact of the deadly tremor in Taiwan.

THE recent BNP-led anti-government unrest that shook the nation with violence, death, collateral damages, beatings, arrests, injuries, and running battles between the police and agitators, brings at least two substantive inferences to my mind. First, politically speaking, the Awami League government is worse off than it had been before that street confrontation with its antagonists.

Secondly, and more importantly, Khaleda Zia's opposition alliance is making fresh strategic moves to counter the ruling Awami League's array of tactics including the use of police and armed activists to contain anti-government dissent and protest. The 60-hour hartal that paralyzed public life in its wake has undeniably punched fatal holes in the Awami League's vocabulary of pride.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's mindset that her political rivals did not have the craft or muscle power to organize street protest is also shaken. The deliberate disruption of the opposition's sit-down protest and Khaleda's public meeting allegedly by the ruling party's bomb-throwing hoodlums and indiscriminate police actions was the catalyst for the BNP-led retaliatory strike for three days.

Now the opposition-inspired long hartal has become a credible political weapon for the BNP and its allies who will escalate its use against the ruling Awami League in the future. In a show of self-confidence, the opposition is planning a 'Dhaka Chalo' (Dhaka march) agitation in November when the BNP and its allies expect hundreds of thousands of people assembling and demonstrating in the nation's capital. Evidently, they want to create enough pressure so that Hasina is compelled to step down handing over power to a caretaker government for conducting a new election.

More to the point, the opposition politicians of different stripes are descending into a protracted and bitter confrontation, potentially dangerous for the country unless moderated by accommodations between the two sides that is not likely to come by.

On her journey through power, Sheikh Hasina has been showered with a plethora of complaints that the Awami League in office is rediscovering the thrill of one party dominance. The critics are insisting that the Awami League government wants to impose 'one party rule' under a multi-party garb. Newspaper reporters confirmed that the police cordoned off the BNP offices to prevent the opposition leaders from joining their processions, meetings and picketing during the most recent strikes. More damaging is the accusation that the Awami League has also been orchestrating police actions with its armed activists to thwart

the party's reelection to office.

Although the local institutional elections are traditionally held on non-partisan basis, the Awami League expects to gain some political mileage from it by restoring the Upazila and Municipal elections, and eventually facilitating the party's reelection to office.

Prime Minister Hasina did not formally announce it, but the first shots of the millennial election seems to have already been fired! It is alleged that the 1973 politically recruited civil servants and the recently inducted police officers are already posted in sensitive positions from where they might help the Awami League win the Upazila and four Municipal elections, and eventually facilitate the party's reelection to office.

Opposition Politics Changing Strategies and Tactics?

M. Rashiduzzaman

When the chips are down, desperate minds may switch for desperate means. The BNP-led opposition cannot expect a sustained public sympathy if it exceeds the tolerable norms of democratic dissent and mass mobilization that should avoid bodily harm to people, armed insurrection, and destruction of public and private properties and a bureaucratic rebellion that we woefully watched in the past.

Even ordinarily peaceful demonstrations and assemblies. The seemingly well planned anti-hartal measures that the government applied recently and the forbidding of what might come in the future convinced the BNP and its partners that their very political survival depends on continuing protest and demonstration. We may debate the adverse fallout of frequent political unrest and shutdown, but there seems to be no farewell to hartal in Bangladesh, not in the near future!

The allegations of government sponsored violence and repression, denial of due process, denigration, humiliation, intimidation, contrived cases and harassment of the opposition leaders and their upholders, well publicized as they are, do not deserve any repetition here. Even the judiciary is under attack by Prime Minister Hasina and her Home Minister for granting bail to the political workers suspected of wrongdoing! While Hasina's election commitment to abandon the Special Powers Act remains unfulfilled, the Awami League government recently proposed the new Public Security Act 1999 that would authorize summary trial for some offences without any bail or appeal. Once the bill becomes a law, the opposition fears that it will be used against its supporters.

Besides the BNP complaints of outright coercive measures, the opposition is also under subtle but no less serious political pressure that the BNP-led alliance cannot afford to take lightly! 'Transit to India', a controversial issue, has been characterized as the Awami League government's capitulation to India's security needs. It has become a rallying cry for those who oppose the Awami League government, but what we are watching is a nation already divided on several fronts will polarize even further.

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The opposition is convinced and deeply disturbed that the ruling party, with help from segments of the bureaucracy, police, pro-establishment newspapers, loyal intellectuals, and the Mastanas would rig the future elections. It is doubtful if the BNP-led alliance can mobilize enough resources to neutralize those forces assumed to be working for the ruling party.

The parliamentary stalemate characterized by walkouts and boycotts and the conspicuous absence of any meaningful inter-party dialogue inside or outside the national parliament is also well known. Now the opposition's resignation from the Parliament is possibly imminent, another decisive step to isolate the government facing impending political movements. Khaleda recently told a delegation of business leaders that she was compelled to call for shut down since the government did not allow her to hold rallies, and moreover, the Awami League regime unleashed a 'reign of terror' on her party and her allies. Now there is another dilemma for her and the allies — to participate or not to participate in the local elections. The Awami League government's decision to go ahead with the Upazila and the four City Corporation elections is filled with trapdoors for the opposition that has been pressing for an early national election. The opposition alliance could be damned with or without participation in the local government polls. The government insists that it was a legal obligation to hold those local elections by the specified dates evidently before the national parliamentary poll, yet to be announced. But the BNP and its allies look upon the local government contest as a step in jeopardy unless supervised by an impartial authority, and surely not by the present Election Commissioner. However, except for political accommodation with the opposition, the Awami League government would have no legal obligation to postpone the local polls until the next Sangshad election.

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If the Awami League controls the four Municipal Corporations, it will give additional prestige to the party in those areas. But if the opposite is true, the Awami League's electoral fortunes may suffer a setback in the next national election. Speculation is growing that the Awami League is already hesitant to hold Dhaka Municipal election before the national poll. It will be an advantage for Hasina if the opposition shifts the present political trajectory and fritters its energy by contesting the Upazila and Municipal elections. Under the prevailing circumstances, however, the opposition leaders consider it more appropriate to invest their resources in the anti-government campaign that might swing a national victory for them.

The unpopularity of the Awami League government has perceptively increased in the last few months, and Hasina's policies, domestic and international, are under attack. Khaleda wants to strike down the Awami League regime at its weakest moment. That will not be a piece of cake for the opposition although Hasina's embattled leadership opens an window of opportunity to change the present government. According to some opposition leaders, the moment of that reckoning has arrived! Meanwhile, the BNP's decision not to contest the local government election may create some dissension among the party's local supporters who wanted sway over (local) resources through the new Upazila system. The Upazila and Municipal election issue might also adversely affect the relationship between the BNP and its opposition partners if some of them would go for the local polls. It is often difficult to reconcile the local leaders' aspirations with the national political expectations.

However, the BNP's ultimate political fate will not hinge on the local government contests. Nor will the anticipated government hold in the opposition-boycotted local elections be an unmixed blessing for the Awami League. Hunkered down behind the protective fences of local government laws, it will be Hasina's turn to aggravate a political stalemate by holding the Upazila and Municipal elections mostly shunned by

the opposition. If the past is any guide to the future, local government polls alone will not decide the future Bangladesh national politics. Without opposition participation and a rising political campaign against it, the Upazila election and the new institutional arrangement generated by it will be a minority sport! No matter how many Upazila Councillors claim to be Awami Leaguers, they may become the targets of local political tumult, and the city-based agitation may spread in the rural areas — an ominous prospect while the rural community is deeply split along personal, factional and partisan lines. Some of the gruesome political murders have been taking place in the smaller towns in Bangladesh!

Opposition-driven unrest, when it becomes a routine episode, erodes the quality of life. No doubt about it. But when the ruling party ignores the opposition leaders without a proven track of hartal, and when the ruling regime-supported goons assault the generally peaceful demonstrators, the forces of compromise fall apart, and constitutional politics becomes more of an academic thinking. Still, the opposition cannot use hartal as a game of tit for tat or an instantly gratifying revenge machine against the ruling party. Spare the ordinary people's discomfort by disciplined and peaceful protests. But it's a tall order; the struggle for power usually knows no limits! Public suffering unleashed by unrest and shutdowns is a double-edged sword — it can backfire on the agitators as well as on the government establishment unless they search for a give and take to avoid open challenge.

The recent unrest triggered by the attempted sit-down demonstration before the government offices has brought criticism for the government as well as the opposition but the frenzied retaliation (caught in photographs) by the ruling party did not escape censure from non-partisan beholders and international observers. Numerous watchers including the donor countries' representatives are worried about hartal becoming a daily offensive and they are urging Prime Minister Hasina to open dialogue with the leaders of the opposition. It has been reported that the BNP leaders have been lobbying the

foreign embassies in Dhaka about the provocation and harsh treatment that they received from the ruling party while initiating a peaceful protest in front of the Bangladesh Secretariat. The BNP along with its political partners will internationalize the treatment of democratic dissent in general, and the recent disruption of the opposition protests. Former US House of Representative Speaker Tip O'Neill used to say, "All politics is local", but now most 'local' politics, especially in the developing countries, is global!

The BNP leaders and their political allies announced that the 3-day strike was only the beginning of their one-point movement — a euphemism for oust-the-government agitation. In response, Home Minister Mohammad Nasim has thrown the gauntlet to the opposition leader: "Khaleda, you please announce a date... We will face you in the streets without the police!" One BNP firebrand retorted: "We have not even started yet! Such pompous bellicose rhetoric is an assault on political decorum, and when such vitriol is tossed around, only the unfortunate cycle of violent unrest prevails. The Awami League mostly defines itself as the party that has been victimized in the past, and there is some validity to this claim, but whenever it has been in power, it has not hesitated to victimize its dissenters! Sadly, the Awami League regime failed to give to others that they had demanded for themselves while struggling in the opposition."

So far, the BNP's agitation strategy is not very different from what was followed by the Awami League in its anti-government campaign in 1995-96 — first short hartals, duel with police, and a gradual escalation reaching a near-rebellion outbreak. The incremental approach has some tactical merit, but the circumstances are not identical, and may not produce the same results. Some hartals never ignite fire, and in politics, success is always relative. In 1999 Khaleda cannot swim in the same water where Hasina had swum in 1996! When the chips are down, desperate minds may switch for desperate means. The BNP-led opposition cannot expect a sustained public sympathy if it exceeds the tolerable norms of democratic dissent and mass mobilization that should avoid bodily harm to people, armed insurrection, and destruction of public and private properties and a bureaucratic rebellion that we woefully watched in the past. The BNP-led agitation need not be a vengeful Xerox-copy of what the Awami League did to bring down Khaleda Zia's government in 1996!

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Issues and Hartal: An Analytical Review

by A B M S Zahur

Hartal as a political weapon to embarrass the ruling party is no longer effective if used frequently without serious issue. It is harmful for all. It may vary in degrees. The major parties must learn to respect the opinions of each other. They must not underestimate each other's strength. They must be aware that in a democracy no major party can wipe out other major parties.

DESPIITE a long preparation the opposition parties' plan for sitting-in in front of the Secretariat could not be successful. This resulted in the observance of a dramatic sixty-hour hartal apparently to stop extending transshipment facility to India. How much damage they could do to the image of the ruling party is debatable. However, they have been able to do enormous harm to the development efforts of the government. As ordinary citizens we understand that following are the specific reasons of opposition parties against allowing transshipment facility to India:

(a) Government has already granted 'transit' facility to India and is about to allow her 'corridor' over Bangladesh without discussing it in detail in the parliament. The proposed discussion by the ruling party in the parliament is to regularise the decision already taken; and

(b) This government is to be ousted immediately to stop operation of transit facility. On the other hand the government repeatedly claims that there has not been any decision in regard to transshipment. They have only agreed in principle to allow transshipment facility to India in consideration of financial gain and generation of employment. The government also insists that transit facility had already been extended by Zia government in 1980 and endorsed by Khaleda government in 1993 and India is already using railway and riverine route over Bangladesh.

To an ordinary citizen the following questions arise and agitate the mind:

- (a) Will these intermittent hartals compel the AL government to abdicate? (b) Will the people believe in the old Muslim League style propaganda of the Pakistani days that Awami League may sell Bangladesh to India because it is a pro-Indian political party? (c) Do the people of Bangladesh like to live in isolation? Are they not interested in developing trading activities with the neighbouring states including India? (d) As the most active member of SAARC can Bangladesh be suspicious of the attitude of the biggest member of the SAARC? (e) If we could accept that Awami League was at the forefront of the struggle for freedom how can we believe that the same party will now act in the interest of India? (f) Bangladeshis who advised India to take back its army from the soil of Bangladesh immediately on his return from Pakistani jail? In fact his greatest mistake was to show undue lenient attitude toward anti-freedom activists. (g) Even after the attainment of freedom do we still believe in anything like the two-nation theory of Pakistan? Can we accept that Zia or Ershad were successful in converting Bangladesh people back into Pakistani thinking through tinkering of Bangladesh

Constitution? (h) Is it not true that Awami League sacrificed most for freedom movement? Are we now to believe that Awami League's sacrifice was only to serve Indian interest? How can we believe that the followers of BNP or JP or Jamaat are the only patriots in the country? If any political leader's conscience does not prick in occupying a government bungalow irregularly, it is difficult to accept that such a leader bothers much about high principles like patriotism or national security.

(i) A simple analysis of the above questions will prompt one to conclude that behind these hostile actions of the opposition parties lies the greed for power. Allowing the government to run the administration smoothly may reduce the possibility of the opposition parties to capture power. As the situation stands it appears that the possibility of defeating Awami League in the next election is not easy for the opposition parties in view of the following reasons:

- (a) so far no hartal could be observed on any national issue; (b) following the other party's strategy may not bring desired result; (c) using Pakistani style India-phobia slogans may not draw people's sympathy, particularly of the younger voters; (d) it is difficult to guess

whether BNP and JP may work together till the next election. Will JP be satisfied with any minor positions (say, as B members of BNP) in the future government if the opposition wins? Can the Jamaat followers improve their positions through attacking the NGOs which are making the poor aware of their strength and assisting them in attaining their economic freedom? Infallibility of the fatwas is no longer accepted with the increase in the rate of literacy.

(e) The strength of the JCD has reduced due to the retirement of the senior members of the cadre who built a good image for the party. JCD could operate more effectively (in the absence of a student organisation of JP) during the Ershad regime with direct and indirect support from BCL.

(f) The activities of the Jubo Dal do not appear to be impressive. How far is BNP effective in the labour front? As far as I know BNP does not have too many sympathisers among industrial workers.

(g) How about the voters in the agriculture sector? Could it wipe out its stigma of fertiliser scandal (killing of innocent peasants)? (h) How strong is BNP or JP among the business community? Apparently AL has more sympathisers than those of the combined opposition parties' there. (i) BNP's open invitation to

fused to abdicate in the face of en masse resignation by Awami League MPs. People voted Awami League because they wanted a change as BNP and JP seemed similar parties with similar objectives.

As we see the government is not going to concede the demands of the opposition. Perhaps it likes to face the opposition on the streets politically. In politics there is no final word. There remains always some scope for compromise and adjustment. The ruling party must accept the reality that adoption of political strategy of sixties or seventies will not work at the end of the twentieth century. On the other hand, BNP should also give up the outdated slogans of Pakistani days.

Hartal as a political weapon to embarrass the ruling party is no longer effective if used frequently without serious issue. It is harmful for all. It may vary in degrees. The major parties must learn to respect the opinions of each other. They must not underestimate each other's strength. They must be aware that in a democracy no major party can wipe out other major parties. They must have peaceful existence as far as possible. If BNP and Awami League could join hands in ousting the dictatorial regime to establish democracy there is no good reason as to why they should be have like sworn enemies. Let us hope that for the sake of firm footing of democracy in Bangladesh the parties will realise that practice of mutual tolerance must be developed without any delay.

The writer is a retired Joint Secretary.

To the Editor...

"Satan in Paradise" Sir, This refers to your editorial under the above heading published on 6th September. Your concern about the devils menacing the serene atmosphere in Ashulia area is hardly over-emphasised. Nevertheless, I am sure, your plea will not reach the ears it is intended for. They will never be able to contain the mastans in the area — the best you can expect them to do is curb the crime like they have done with the mosquito menace in the city! It is better for the citizens to think twice before going out there for fresh air!

for evaluation and examination of the national implications, on the other hand the government itself is carrying out publicity and propaganda in favour of the proposed tie-up, without examining the report. This inconsistency has to be explained to the public to prevent misunderstanding. Also the national decision-making culture in this country has some weak points in the sense that any report of any expert body may be shelved or ignored, or decision may be taken contrary to the report. Therefore the public is chary of waiting for each report for which proper official respect is not shown. In this case, there have been a number of press comments suspecting that the GoB might have already made up its mind what to do in the near future, regardless of the views of the opposition. Credibility and transparency has to be restored at the governance level. This has also been pointed out rather bluntly

by the World Bank at the recently concluded half-way appraisal meeting between the foreign aid and donor agencies and the GoB. Why cannot we have and protect ourselves in a formal way? Acute disagreements cannot be a sign that we have learnt to enjoy freedom!

carefully assessed by the GoB; as terrorist activities have become a common sight in foreign countries in different parts of the world (the latest is the blowing up of residential housing blocks in Moscow).

The condition of the tenants and the poor people is beyond description. It is live almost from hand to mouth. So, I urge the government to take immediate actions to distribute relief and micro-credit loan in this locality which would help the farmers to start a new life.

Faruk Ahmed, Brahman Khara, Debiduar, Comilla. Sirajganj TB clinic. Sir, Sirajganj district, inhabited by about 26 lakh people has only one TB clinic. Thousands of TB and leprosy patients come to this clinic for treatment. Many of them in critical condition need to get admitted and stay under close observation and continuous treatment. But it is a pity that they are deprived of such facilities as there is no arrangement for admission here. Therefore, the Sirajganj TB clinic is badly needed to be turned into a TB hospital without much delay. Would the authority concerned think over the matter?

Nargis Parvin, Jubly Road, Masumpur Uttarpara Siraganj. Bin Laden on India. Sir, It is disturbing to read in the press that Bin Laden has declared jihad against India (in addition to that on the US), Pakistan and Bangladesh are Muslim majority countries in the SAARC region; and that situation makes it more sensitive for the three nations as terrorists bases might be attempted to be set up in these two countries. It is hoped our government will examine the implications carefully and take necessary measures in the national interest.