

Watery Grave Again!

IN less than eight months of the launch named Deep Kanya sinking in the Meghna with 200 passengers we hear the shocking news of ML Falguni on Saturday capsizing in the same river with 300 passengers on board. Twenty-five of them met their watery grave instantaneously while, among the 100 missing, only a miracle could have saved a few on being picked up by a passing boat or two.

The most tragic fact to bemoan here is how basically avoidable these accidents keep looking on a hind-sight. What has been so far learnt about the ill-fated craft Falguni is that it was carrying passengers twice its capacity. It went on to hit a hidden shoal and was thrown further off-balance by high waves rolling in as a oil tanker passed it by. We also have it on the authority of BIWTA chairman that the operator of the launch who was plying it without a route permit had the temerity of committing another grave offence by navigating through an unclassified channel.

But is it not the responsibility of BIWTA officials to supervise compliance with the relevant laws regarding registration of river-craft and taking out of the required route permits to operate them? If we had learnt the lessons from the Deep Kanya disaster or a plenty of other happenings earlier on, we certainly would have been the gainer in terms of enforcement of rules.

Deep Kanya, an oil tanker-turned-passenger launch which was only found fit to ply on the calm waters of Buriganga, was reprehensibly put to the high rolling waves of the Meghna with the result that it drowned in deep waters killing passengers in droves. Not only was it unlicensed it was being driven by an assistant to the Sareng. May we ask the minister in charge of the inland water transport and the BIWTA chairman as to what has happened to the report submitted by the Principal Officer, Mercantile Marine Safety about the Deep Kanya disaster on May 8, 1999? What corrective actions have been initiated or taken so far in the light of his suggestions?

At least we can have lifebuoys, safety-jackets and minimum communication gadgets on board to put out an SOS call in time for a prompt rescue operation in place of a pitiable apology of it.

Nurtured Nonsense

WHAT the president of Surya Sen Hall unit of the AL-backed BCL did Friday night was more than flexing ruling party muscles. It was audacity consequent upon nonsense nurtured for a long time. Surely, it was not the first time that the hall administration was faced with, and forced to meet, such a ridiculous demand. Maybe, it wasn't ten meals a day; it was, nevertheless, pandering to undue 'requests'. It is the same story at almost each and every hall of residence of Dhaka University. The hall administration, however, has very little choice other than caving in. It doesn't have the brawn to match with that of the student organisations, nor does it have the support or protection the 'defaulters' enjoy. It is actually a lost war for them from the very beginning. Rules and regulations are there, but power, authority and protection to enforce them aren't. As a result, mortal fear often subdues moral responses and whims of student activists get catered to no question asked.

Ominously, it seems to have become an all-pervasive phenomenon. On Saturday, some 40 students of the Jahangirnagar University School and College exploded home-made bombs, locked the main gate and confined the principal for an hour to force the administration into allowing them to sit for HSC exams despite their failure to pass the qualification test. Here, too, the perpetrators tried to bludgeon their undue demands through.

On the whole, the students appear to have no sense of ethics and morality left in them and that is a scary proposition for the nation. There may be sociological explanation to the unrest now prevailing among students as to why crime and violence perpetrated by them are alarmingly on rise. However, we feel the tyranny has its roots in years of enforcement failure. We are sure that if the government had extended unconditional support and protection to the university administration instead of the student activists, it would have been a different story.

DCC and Mosquitoes

FRIENDSHIP between the Dhaka City Corporation and the mosquitoes infesting the city is a time-tested one. The occasional desperate activity of the DCC in the name of mosquito eradication drive is more of a show than a genuine effort. The total lack of perception and seriousness on the part of the DCC's Mosquito Control Committee (MCC) was revealed in a report published on the front page of this paper on Sunday. It demonstrated in detail the tendency of the MCC to put the cart before the horse at a huge cost to public money. Eight spray machines procured at a cost of about Tk one crore have been gathering dust for about two years now. The modern machines are supposed to be efficient provided the right type of insecticide is used. But the insecticide required for these spray machines is not even registered with the Plant Protection Department and is not recommended by the World Health Organisation either. The insecticide is available in the market only for agricultural purposes and not for public health programmes, which means that it can pose health hazards if sprayed by the machines in question. The most interesting point is about the decision taken by the MCC, headed by the Commissioner of Ward No. 36, to buy these machines at an exorbitant price. Knowledgeable circles allege corruption in the procurement of these eight machines by over-invoicing.

We strongly suggest that the LGED ministry institute a probe into the irregularities being alleged about the procurement of the spray machines in question. No one has the right to endanger public health and squander public money.

Iran's Khatami: 'A Man of his Time'

The crucial question, however, is whether Khatami can fulfil his promise to the electorate in the face of enormous odds he is confronted with. Khatami has been likened by many to Mikhail Gorbachev who aroused his people but could not contain their passion with his speed. . . Ayatollah Khamenei, the constitutional head of the state and spiritual leader of the revolution, will play a crucial role in determining whether Khatami is able to successfully implement his liberal programme.

not want to clash with the well entrenched conservatives who had all the levers of control in their hand. Instead, he wanted to invigorate the civil institutions like the press, judiciary, students' and women's organisations as well as political parties. Once these institutions were created or given fresh life they would have an impact on Iranian society and the whole system would operate under the rule of law.

As a result, there has been nothing spectacular in Khatami's reform and it obviously lacked a radical undertone. Because it did not envisage an overthrow of existing order. Fully aware that the conservatives had total grip on almost every aspect of Iranian society — controlling everything from the dress codes to strategic affairs — Khatami's reforms aimed only at a wide ranging programme for emancipation. If the youths, students' and women's bodies and trade unions were able to establish their norms in their respective spheres on rational grounds, then the restricted field left to the clerical establishment — Khatami appreciated — would be considerably circumscribed.

Khatami's calculation has not been entirely wrong. The fact that some young Iranians are now showing the temerity to question the religiosity of the clerics provides a significant benchmark. They are also questioning the omnipotence of Velayat-e-Faqih and the validity of the law of retribution. The one sector in which clear advances have been made is in the area of the freedom of expression. A number of pro-reform newspapers have proliferated. Most importantly the president

could, both before and after election, inspire the new generation of Iranians to join the political process and sound their voices for change. He could take major step in Judicial reform by appointing a moderate to head the judiciary after the retirement of a conservative incumbent. He has shaken the clerics' closed mindset by signalling his willingness to engage in a 'dialogue of civilisation' with the west, particularly the United States. His CNN address to American people in January 1998 has catalysed a fundamental change in

started unfolding his reforms agenda. A wave of protests to Khatami's reforms programme came from the Council of Guardians, the Intelligence Ministry and an unknown portion of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards corps soon after the election in 1997, for instance, a deputy commander of the Revolutionary Guards warned Khatami's liberals' not to oppose Ayatollah Khamenei and the roles of the clerics in the government. Two years since Khatami's accession to power have witnessed a spate of major and minor clashes between the

demonstrators serve warning not only to the conservatives but also to President Khatami. Elected by 69 per cent popular voters mainly comprised of youths and women, the President is already under fire for moving so slowly on his promised reform agenda.

The crucial question, however, is whether Khatami can fulfil his promise to the electorate in the face of enormous odds he is confronted with. Khatami has been likened by many to Mikhail Gorbachev who aroused his people but could not contain their passion with his speed. Kofi Annan has described Khatami as 'man of his time' and said something complimentary about his ability and determination. Yet, Ayatollah Khamenei, the constitutional head of the state and spiritual leader of the revolution, will play a crucial role in determining whether Khatami is able to successfully implement his liberal programme.

Khamenei controls most of the organs of power including security forces and the Judiciary. He, not the president, sets the broad policy directions. But here is where there appears to be a silverlining for the reformists in Iran. Although it is as yet unclear whether Khamenei and Khatami are working in tandem or have just found an accommodation with each other, the two have, of late, discreetly worked as a team. While Khatami remained loyal to the defining principles of the revolution, Ayatollah Khamenei has recently called the president a pious cleric who is working for the rebirth of Islam.

A little known factor in Iran's reformists conservatives

war is an unwritten quiet alliance between President Khatami and Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Indeed, without the Ayatollah's backing Mr Khatami might not have survived last summer's street riots which almost led the Conservatives to stage a coup against the reformist leader. Mr Khatami apparently enjoys invaluable support from the top because the supreme leader is hoping to restore a degree of unity through the president to Iran's antagonistic factions. His overriding aim is to save the Islamic system from total collapse in the event of a confrontational situation. He wants to disentangle the popular pressure from his more radical stance while meeting sensible demands of a changing society. As a matter of fact Ayatollah Khamenei has always been a pragmatic voice in the clerical establishment of revolutionary Iran. A poet and a literary critic he takes a relatively open-minded political approach. He was seldom found wanting in shielding the embattled president from the conservatives' ire.

But Mr Khatami also has had to pay a price for it. What- ever qualm he may have had, he supported last July's crackdown on the street riots, an action that has led to the arrest of hundreds of his pro-democracy supporters in the universities. This cost him the backing of the more radical dissidents, who had gravitated to him in the hope of breaking the hold that the conservative clergy have on power. But Khatami has always been aware of his limitations, knowing that any attempt to go it alone would be doomed to failure. Increasingly he has been sticking to the supreme leader and involving the latter with his own progressive agenda. In any case, he has already redefined political discourse in Iran and can afford to go slow but sure on his reform programme.



PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

post-revolutionary Iran's world view.

But Khatami's path of reforms, however modest they may appear, have been far from easy. Prior to election in 1997 Khatami had pledged his loyalty to Iran's theocratic system including its institution of faqih. This partly explains why his candidature did not draw much reaction from the hardliners who failed to anticipate his victory after his ignominious ouster from the Cabinet in 1992 for liberal leaning. Moreover, in a newly ushered pragmatism in post-Khomeini elements like Khatami could be accepted with relative ease.

However the problems arose and clashes between the reformists and hardliners became inevitable when Khatami

conservatives and reformists who have been alternatively enjoying supremacy in their struggles. As suggested by the emerging pattern and trend the tides, however, have been slowly but steadily turning in favour of the reformists.

Last summer the differences between the two spilled over to the streets where in the largest protests since 1979 Islamic Revolution tens of thousands of students demonstrated and demanded resignation of the country's parliament avowedly opposed to Khatami's reforms. At least ten thousand students taking part in a pro-democracy demonstration in Tehran University clashed with headline vigilantes from Ansare Hizbollah when the latter attacked the demonstrators. The student

How Many More Hartals Does the Opposition Require?

by Mansoor Mamoon

Much ink has already been wasted in delving on hartal. All pleadings for a dialogue instead of a duel in the streets have apparently fallen into deaf ears. In the meantime, the country is being marginalised.

THE four-party opposition alliance led by the BNP has again given the call for enforcing a ten-hour country-wide hartal on December 13 in protest against what it termed "unilateral announcement of poll schedule of the Chittagong City Corporation." In the port city, however, the duration of the hartal will be thirty-six hours for "resisting the submission of the nomination papers." Paradoxically, the same day the country's print media carried this news item they also printed side by side the messages issued by the opposition leaders for observing the sanctity of the holy month of Ramadan. How far extreme confrontational programme like hartal is tenable vis-a-vis the call for maintaining the sanctity of the holy month of fasting (Islam) is a pertinent question, especially in the backdrop of the pro-Islamic stance of the alliance.

The alliance might argue that the ruling party, in fact, compelled it to go for hartal by deciding to hold the Chittagong City Corporation poll in the month of Ramadan. The Election Commission reportedly requested for deferment of the poll through appropriate amendment in the relevant law since there is a constitutional obligation to hold it within the scheduled date. The government, being equally adamant and defiant, flatly rejected the plea of the Election Commission which, therefore, has no option but to go ahead with the schedule. Hence the die appears to have been cast. Because of the obduracy and intransigence of both the ruling party and the four-party opposition combined, the people of Bangladesh are going to step into the new century coinciding with the

Millennium 2000 through hartals and consequent clashes and bloodsheds, when the entire outside world will be jubilant and in a mood of celebration.

In bemoaning their pitiable fate the ordinary citizens are found to be asking — how many more hartals the four-party opposition will require to materialise its one-point 'oust the government' movement as well as to create the 'mass upsurge' at the crest of which the BNP and its allies hope to taste the flavour of power?

Probably the enforcers themselves have not counted how many hartals they have so far imposed over an unwilling nation and forced it to pay the prices dearly. According to an estimate given by a vernacular daily (Ajker Kagoj, December 5, 1999 plus the counting by the author) during the last three years and a half of the Awami League rule there have been as many as one hundred ninety-eight hartals (counting the hartal of December 13) and work stoppages for a staggering number of two thousand three hundred fifty two hours. Of these, thirty one shutdowns were countrywide and rest localised. Over fifty people have been killed and nearly four thousand maimed in the hartal related clashes. Exact figures, however, are not readily available. During all these hartals nearly three thousand different types of vehicle were smashed or gutted. Loss to properties, both state and private, due to looting, plundering and bomb blasts was, in one word, enormous.

The longest hartal was observed in Comilla town for five days (a record number of 120 hours) with effect from August 31, 1997 at the call of the BNP and the Jamaat.

It will be worthwhile to conduct an extensive research into the losses incurred by the country due to all these hartals. It might well beget a coveted doctorate degree for any aspirant. Our hartal-happy politicians will have good reason to gloat over their performance as to which alliance has the maximum number of hartals in its score board and wrought maximum damage and destruction to the economy. After the 1991 parliamentary elections the Awami League, then in the opposition, set a record of 173 nationwide hartals. The BNP-led alliance has surpassed the AL in respect of localised hartals but still lags behind in respect of countrywide shutdowns as the survey shows.

Supposing one single hartal costs the country four hundred fifty to five hundred crore taka as estimated by the country's chamber bodies, then what had been the total loss when the AL enforced general strikes and how much due to the current spree of shutdowns by the opposition? How many industries and establishments, educational institutions and social and physical infrastructural facilities like medicare, hospitals, bridges, roads etc could have been but not extended with the money drained out by hartals? How many slumber-

ing villages could have been electrified and economic activities generated for their poor dwellers? What could have been the percentage of literacy?

About three crore people are presently unemployed and nearly half of the populace are living below the poverty line bracketed as extremely poor. Had there been no hartal this huge figures could have been easily contained and poverty could have been alleviated to a large extent. Bangladesh missed the bus when the East Asian countries like Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan etc started their journey in the seventies towards progress and prosperity. We again preferred to remain helpless bystanders when in the eighties and nineties Thailand, Indonesia (albeit the disparities among income groups), the Philippines, Vietnam etc caught up with the locomotive of growth. In the sixties, the condition of these countries was no better than ours: Per capita income-wise our position was, in fact, better than theirs. But these countries could shake off their inertia and stood up with full vigour while we continued to grope in the wilderness.

Apart from loss sustained by the country due to hartals, according to an World Bank estimate about thirty per cent of the funds meant for implementing vital development projects are either plundered or pilfered with impunity. Accountability and transparency are rhetorics signifying nothing.

What Bangladesh lacked was forward-looking pragmatic and patriotic leadership. The way hartals are enforced in Bangladesh has been termed by the London-based Amnesty International as the flagrant violation of human rights since these very often result in clashes between the pro-and anti-hartal elements. Democracy invariably turns into empty hyperbole in an atmosphere devoid of basic human rights. If hartals could topple a government what then are the general elections meant for? And if parliament cannot be made effective but continually remains a one-party show with the opposition taking to streets and boycotting it, the people will then have every right to ask why should there be so much spending from the state exchequer on holding regular elections and eliciting public opinions? If democracy cannot

be effectively institutionalised what is the use of its facade?

Much ink has already been wasted in delving on hartal. All pleadings for a dialogue instead of a duel in the streets have apparently fallen into deaf ears. In the meantime, the country is being marginalised. Back in 1974 a London-based journalist wrote (Kevin Refferty in his book 'Bangladesh — the Test Case For Development') that if Bangladesh was to be erased from the face of the earth it would not have any impact whatsoever, both strategically and economically.

Do the masses deserve to be treated in such derision and contempt? The politicians may not have any stake, but the people definitely have. It is therefore time for the people to act, and act decisively so that the power-hungry hartalite politicians can no longer play foul and havoc with their destiny.

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OPINION

Let Wisdom Dawn on Us

Syed Abu Saleh

A news item from New Delhi said that Trinamul Congress leader Mamata Banerjee (presently Indian Railway Minister) shared the same date with West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu, her arch political rival, while discussing development projects in West Bengal. This was simply unthinkable even up to the recent parliamentary election during which, as usual, biting attacks between Trinamul Congress and CPI(M) became a regular feature. But when a delegation of senior left leaders from West Bengal met Ms Banerjee it was agreed by both the parties to clear all pending railway projects in the state and both CPI(M) and Trinamul agreed to move together when it comes to the development of West Bengal without mixing politics with it.

With the aforesaid picture in view let us now turn our eyes to the present scenario in Bangladesh. Only in the recent past our lawmakers on both the sides not only used unparliamentary languages but also uttered such filthy words which any one in the street will be ashamed of. Reasons or no reasons it has become compulsory for both the parties to heap blame on each other. It seems that both the parties have totally forgotten that they are human beings having feelings and sympathy for each other even in their personal capacity. Let me mention here one example. Only a couple of months ago Barrister Abdus Salam Talukder of BNP died after a prolonged 'coma' in the hospital. But none from Awami League, much less the Prime Minister, visited the elderly politician. On the other hand, Bahadur Bepari of Chhatra League was in the hospital only a few weeks ago and our Prime Minister went to the hospital to see him. What does it mean? Did Barrister Talukder play any insignificant role in political arena in comparison to Bahadur Bepari?

Suppose if our Prime Minister visited Barrister Talukder in the hospital or after his death went to his residence to console the bereaved family what would have happened? I am sure the image of our Prime Minister would have shot up. The civil society would have appreciated her humane gesture, her sagacity and political maturity. Courtesy begets courtesy and love infuses love. Winston Churchill said soon after the World War II: "In victory magnanimous and in defeat defiant". The Awami Leaguers are victorious party. The majority people voted them to power hence they should be magnanimous. Both the parties should cultivate this culture. Sheikh Hasina is the Prime Minister of the whole of Bangladesh of which Barrister Salam was also an esteemed citizen. In this connection our Home Minister Nasim deserves a thank having visited Khoka in BIRDEM.

Now let us turn to BNP. Without any rhyme and reason they are calling hartal harming the economic growth of the country, discouraging the foreign investors and disrupting the normal life of all residing also in the loss of valuable lives. Look to the ten year old girl Babul whose belly was ripped open with a bomb splinter while standing at Kakral crossing. Look to Nasu Mia, the truck driver and his helper Zakir and so many others difficult to remember.

In a recent seminar on "Bangladesh in 21st Century: Socio-Economic Perspectives" President Shahabuddin has correctly said, "in a democracy, political rivalry will be there but it should not degenerate into personal animosity". Unfortunately this is exactly what is happening in our country. Only the other day on the sacred floor of the Parliament the way our Prime Minister made an oblique reference to the Opposition Leader was simply of very bad taste and no noble person can digest it. Let us maintain a respectable level of modesty even when we criticise each other.

Can't we take a lesson from Mamata Banerjee and Jyoti Basu and say that politics must not stand in the way when it comes to the development of Bangladesh? If they can do it just across the border why can't we? Let us hope wisdom will dawn on us — the sooner the better.

To the Editor...

Caller ID in mobile phones

Sir, When an incoming call is received by a mobile telephone, the number of the caller (caller ID) is usually displayed. But in Bangladesh we only see the numbers starting with 9s (from BTBB) and all numbers from other mobile sets displayed. All BTBB telephone numbers starting with 8s (recently converted to seven digits) are not displayed; this is a frustrating nuisance not seen in other countries.

It is deplorable that the mobile phone operators and BTBB cannot come to an agreement to provide such primary services to users, even when the private operators are not providing basic services such as voice mail, roaming and cellular message transfer in their normal 'packages'.

A Disgruntled User
Dhaka

Transshipment facility to India

Sir, As global trading is increasing between and among countries, it is quite understandable why India wants to use Bangladesh roads as its route to its eastern states: to save time.

However, I believe that if India is going to use Bangladesh roads, it might as well pay for the road development of the country from the west to the eastern districts. This form of transporting is very familiar in South America. It is not similar but the principle is the same. However, Bangladesh should

note that no unauthorised or controlled substances are to be shipped through it and India should make sure of it. Or India will be held responsible.

The part that confuses me is that, is India allowing us to use its transportation route for Bangladesh trade with Nepal and Bhutan? If not, then this accord is really unfair and favours India. I really don't know whether our political leaders are conscious about the benefits to our country.

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Stop this war

Sir, Russia's brutal assault on Chechnya has turned the Chechens into a nation of refugees. But the world press seems to be toeing the Russian line about "anti-terrorist operations." To put the matter into perspective we need to remember several key points.

Before the latest Russian assault a peace treaty existed between the Russian federation and the Chechen republic. Signed in 1997, it ended the earlier war between the two nations. By breaking its word, Russia has raised serious doubts about its credibility. The charge of terrorism hasn't been brought home to the Chechens. Russia has ignored the question of proof. The Chechens on their part have always protested their innocence.

Even if a number of terrorist organisations operated on Chechen soil, does that justify

the Russian action? The equivalent of this would be for England to blast Belfast with bomber planes in order to subdue the IRA. How can any civilised nation pursue such a course of action and how can any person in his right mind condone it?

Russia is ignoring the laws of modern warfare. Remembering earlier defeats, they are shy- ing away from engaging the Chechen fighters. Instead, they are blasting towns and cities with long-range artillery and aviation. In all the towns that they have 'conquered' so far, the Chechen fighters withdrew to save the population from annihilation.

The Chechen conflict shames humanity on the eve of the third millennium. Although saddened by the loss of life, we are nevertheless bursting with pride at the heroic resistance put up by the Chechens against a vastly superior enemy.

Syed Zainul Akmal Al-Mahmood
Dhaka

Chechen conflict

Sir, I fail to understand why the so-called civilised world is always tough with the weak, but soft with the strong. This has reference to the recent happenings in Chechnya. The western world is giving lip-service to them while Russia is getting all sorts of financial supports from the same people who are showing concern over the Chechen conflict.

The same western people successfully conducted the ref-

erendum on East

Timor, but they gave deaf ear over the matters like Mindanao, Kashmir, Rohingya etc. This led us to believe that the Europe and Nato are maintaining a double standard.

What is preventing them to ask Russia in holding referendum over the issue in Chechnya, Kashmir etc? Are they too weak to ask these countries to behave in a civilised way? I think in this unpolar world we should maintain one standard for all — be it for the reach, poor, strong and the weak.

M.Saleem Ullah
Dhaka

Respect

Sir, Do the people of Bangladesh have respect for any group of people? For example, they think doctors are after money; they think police only take bribe; they think teachers are after private tuition; they think the engineers take money from the contractors who mix too much sand with cement; they think files don't move if they don't spend in the Secretariat; and they think custom officers are there to take bribe.

So, we all call each other thieves. But it is not helping us in any way. We must make us worthy citizens and that will be the best safeguard against corruption. There are people who are trying their best to help the people, we should try to respect and help them. I am sure all of us know one or two who deserve our respect.

Waheed
Dhaka