

Better Use the Respite

THE air was rife with a dreadful apprehension of another round of countrywide strike. Relieved we certainly are by the latest tidings that the four-party opposition alliance has no immediate plans to stage a hartal. In place of the widely speculated possibility of a shutdown on February 9 and 10, the opposition liaison committee has decided to go for a token hunger strike and sit-in by their MPs today followed by a joint mass rally and procession in the city scheduled for February 13. We are taking hope in a certain combination of factors placing constraints on any agenda to step up the hartal frequency. The run-up to the 21st February and its aftermath, the SSC examinations commencing from March 3 and almost closing in on Eid-ul-Azha, due after mid-March, should keep most of February and March out of hartal calls.

The opposition can be rightly credited with having shown a discernible degree of sensitivity to important events on the calendar and getting seized of the palpable public antipathies to hartals. This is a silver-lining around the cloud, not just for the media people to read but for the ruling party to change its gears from what is acquiring the horrific proportion of a campaign to malign BNP as a party for the bomb explosion incident at its central office.

Whatever may be the reason behind the sparing use of hartal option by the opposition — explanations would vary depending upon which side of the fence one belongs to — the fact of the matter is people are happy whenever hartal is eschewed, even though another may be around the corner. And they, as one man, like to see this pause furthered to a point of some effective talks actually taking place to spare them the gnawing hostility of national politics.

The respite should be utilised both by the ruling party and the opposition to try and clear the deck for an early dialogue. The BNP has to take it to heart that minus some kind of a political understanding with the ruling party, on electoral reforms importantly, there is no way that the next general election will be free and fair. Basically in self-interest the BNP has to return to normal working relations with the AL. Similarly, the ruling party's self-interest dictates that it does what it takes to draw the opposition into talks. A positive gesture to release 'imprisoned' BNP loyalists coupled with the withdrawal of cases purportedly hanging against other activists of the same party could prove to be a clincher.

The Stinking Garbage

THAT the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) leaves 40 per cent of the total waste generated in the capital city to rot and reek is only a quantitative representation of a systemic disorder the residents are quite familiar with. There are many places in Dhaka city where heaped up garbage has become a regular feature under the very nose of the authorities and amidst a regional attitude of citizens.

The deeply troubling thing is the callousness of the city fathers in this regard. They appear nonchalant with their dismal performance. Some ward commissioners are reported to have engaged a substantial section of the 6,000-strong conservancy team in the 'lucrative business of door-to-door garbage collection'. Basically, the city-dwellers are made to pay twice to keep their neighbourhood relatively clean: first, as municipal tax every year and secondly, to the localised garbage collectors every month.

Garbage management has never been DCC's forte. It has experimented with its disposal methods quite a few times but to no avail. From aluminium trash cans to concrete dustbins to portable iron garbage containers, the city fathers have tried them all. Unfortunately, these experiments have had more to do with whims and money-spinning than their commitments to environment. These put strain on public exchequer without any commensurate benefit in the shape of an effective and efficient disposal management system.

Suggestions on conservancy services have been in abundance, too. We have always tried to follow the model used in other countries to cope with our problem, instead of figuring out a system of our own. However, until and unless, we rid the system of corrupt practices as reported in the media; whatever methodology we adopt would produce similar results. Six thousand members on the conservancy unit, some 150 garbage trucks, concrete bins and portable containers may not be enough for effective management of some 3,000 metric tonnes of garbage produced a day. But has there been optimum utilisation of the DCC resources? Certainly not. Let us first make use of what we have by ensuring that each and every worker in this sector delivers his bit.

In the Taliban Court

THE Taliban of Afghanistan, who have been associated with almost any incident of international terrorism in the West, is now at the receiving end of what they are blamed for. An internal flight of their national airlines Ariana which was skyjacked from Kabul airport on Sunday landed at Stansted airport in the suburbs of London on the following day.

On the way at Tashkent 10 passengers — sick people, women and children of the 178 on board the ill-fated Boeing 727 — were released. It was not known how many armed men have hijacked the aircraft but their demand is specific — they want the release of Ismail Khan, a former governor of Herat province, who has been in the custody of the Taliban authorities since 1997. Ismail Khan was one of the key figures in the resistance movement against Soviet occupation of the country during 1979-89. He is now in the militia's custody in the southern city of Kandahar which was the recent scene of the Indian Airlines Boeing 737 hijacking drama. From all accounts the Taliban handled that situation with tact that finally led to the release of all surviving passengers in exchange for the release of some Kashmiri militants.

We hope the Taliban, though not recognised by the British government, will display extreme caution and foresight in saving the lives of the passengers that must be their prime concern at the moment. This will, we believe, be a lesson learnt at both ends as far as the Taliban goes. What, however, makes us sit up and take note of is the shifting of the hijacking propensity from the western world on to our own region. This being the second one in a row in South Asia, let's raise our preparedness levels accordingly.

The West's Coming Clash With Islam?

There are also silver linings in the horizon as a result of which the incipient clash may as well turn into a dialogue of civilisations. Mr Muhammad Khatami the president of the Islamic Republic of Iran already gave a clarion call for such a dialogue. In the meantime Pope John Paul II sought cooperation between Islam and West in arresting the decline of the civilisations.

any, to the West.

Both of the discourses might have come in isolation of each other as their authors' most original works but together they are no less intended to consolidate the West's conquest in the Cold War. Then West, particularly the United States, faced two distinct challenges after it won the Cold War — a more assertive and independent Europe now left with no common threat with the United States and an increasing politicisation of Islam as an alternative source of legitimacy in the Muslim countries. Huntington's theory attempted to preempt both of these possibilities. In fact his thesis would serve two main strategic purposes in one stroke.

On the one hand it would remind Europe of an existing and exaggerated Islamic threat which would call for western unity and a continued American presence on the continent. Not only would this serve to consolidate American political and global influence, but more subtly, it would help preempt any European proclivity toward asserting itself on a competitive global scale. By playing the role of a 'benign' hegemony while at the same time projecting the perception of threatening international environment to its 'friends' the United States would render a polar European role superfluous.

On the other hand Huntington's theory would serve the strategy of creating an 'enemy

which would ultimately justify an expanding Pentagon and defence industry role. Soon after the end of Cold War there had been an acute dearth of 'demons', 'villains' and 'rogues' to confront and a growing clamour for creating ones. Thanks to Saddam Hussein's misadventure in Kuwait the West was provided with an ideal objective to target. But it needs to be an all-time opportunity. While efforts will be afoot in that direction Huntington's

treat mainstream Islam as his country's adversary.

Already the polarisation between Islam and the West appears to be crystallising at the level of core values. The American self-proclaimed crusade for democracy and human rights seeks to self-fulfill the conflict prophecy. Statements such as those made by US National Security Adviser Anthony Lake that the 'United States does not oppose Islam but only extremism' serves to enhance threat

perceptions rather than reduce them. Because definitions of extremism are, after all, concocted in America's own image and interests. Cloaked in the garb of fighting extremism and fundamentalism, the United States' hegemonic interests will remain inherently incompatible with Islamic values. By the same token the opposition to a regime of Islam anywhere in the world set it inevitably against Islamic values which reject separation of religion from the government.

Furthermore, the US House of Representatives' majority vote in June 1997 to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's indivis-

ible capital and its call for transfer of US embassy there does not bode well for its relations with Islamic world. Whichever way it goes and as long as the United States pursues a Pax Americana in the Islamic world the future trend of Islamic-American relation will invariably head towards collision. Nevertheless Islam and West are by no means doomed to perpetual conflict. But Islam and hegemonic interventions are.

Given the current civilisational balance the intervention is perceived as an American problem. The thesis of the clash of civilisations stands or dissipates depending on how America handles her problem of intervention in Islamic world where none of the US vital national interests is at stake. As against current American practices an ideal relational paradigm is provided by Japan which has been credited with military irrelevance, political neutrality and an absence of historical link to any country, say, in the Middle East leading to establishing an innocuous and successful trade relation there. With some variations the same holds good for Germany and several other European countries. In retrospect, no attack would have been launched against the US forces or interests in Saudi Arabia, had there not been a heavy handed American military presence in that country.

The West's assault on Islam's

core values is further taking a cultural and ideological twist. In a fashion reminiscent of ancient Rome's grand strategy of consolidating its empire through propaganda which would presumably inspire non-citizens' loyalty to a legal 'imperial ideal', democracy and human rights in an American image have currently come to play the same role. An imperial ideal helps reduce and economise costs of force and coercion by nurturing local loyalists. Similar loyalists are already embarking on disseminating the West's ideals among their compatriots. Democracy and its human rights appendage, as a threat to Islam's core values lies in its messianic justifications for domination in its ostensible mission to free, educate, elevate and convert — a variation, so to speak, of the British phraseology of the white man's burden during its colonial days.

But there are also silver linings in the horizon as a result of which the incipient clash may as well turn into a dialogue of civilisations. Mr Muhammad Khatami the president of the Islamic Republic of Iran already gave a clarion call for such a dialogue. In the meantime Pope John Paul II sought cooperation between Islam and West in arresting the decline of the civilisations. Recently he has helped form a joint committee of the Vatican and Al Azhar University of Cairo, to initiate a Christian-Muslim dialogue and to boost ties between the two religions. It remains to be seen which trend overtakes which one and whether the two great monotheistic faiths of the world can be deterred from an apparently inevitable clash between the two.

PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

theory would also serve the purpose of creating an opposing negative mirror image so as to consolidate identity perceptions among not only the American people but entire transatlantic community. It is here that Islam, its values and civilisation come handy in providing such enemy. Inherent in the structure of Huntington's article is a friend-enemy dichotomy in the framework of which the US identified the enemy in Islam by raising the stake to civilisational level. This is notwithstanding the assertion made by none other than President Clinton himself who even recently refused to

perceptions rather than reduce them. Because definitions of extremism are, after all, concocted in America's own image and interests. Cloaked in the garb of fighting extremism and fundamentalism, the United States' hegemonic interests will remain inherently incompatible with Islamic values. By the same token the opposition to a regime of Islam anywhere in the world set it inevitably against Islamic values which reject separation of religion from the government.

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Children in the Battlefields, Pinochet and Other Thoughts

If Pinochet is too ill to stand trial now, let him remain in the comfortable detention of the mansion where he resides until such time as he is able to answer for his crimes. And if he dies before that, few will mourn his passing.

THERE is a general consensus among decent human beings that innocent and defenseless children need special protection from the ravages of war. In too many parts of the world, children are thrown into war, not only as victims, but also as fighters. This atrocity — the use of child soldiers by governments and rebel groups — is the subject of a new agreement that ought to have been on the books years ago.

The agreement, which comes in the form of a protocol to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, applies to government, guerrilla organisations and others. Among other good things, it decrees that no one under the age of 18 may be sent to a battle.

At least for civilised countries, this restriction can hardly be called excessive or dangerous. Yet it was resisted for months by the US Depart-

ment of Defense, which sought the right to use 17-year olds in combat should the need arise.

Other nations dragged their feet, too. The protocol was under negotiation for six years while some 50 governments tried to reconcile their differences.

The final agreement was made possible last week when the US approved a compromise that allows Pentagon to train 17-year olds but compels it to take all feasible measures to keep them out of battle until they turn 18. The need to prohibit the use of child soldiers is urgent; experts estimate that as many as 300,000 children are soldiers in wars in Africa, Chechnya, and Latin America. The boys and girls who are not killed or maimed in these con-



licts are often traumatised by the horrors of what they see, what they do and what is done to them.

While the new agreement has no enforcement provisions, its enactment will nevertheless be a useful addition to the body of international law governing warfare. While such laws are often ignored by rogue governments and terrorists, they are adhered to enough of the time so

that they save lives. Were it not unlawful to bomb hospitals, for example, they would be bombed all the time, not just some of the time.

In addition, the protocol will deny legitimacy to the many outlaw regimes and groups that often seek such recognition. It will give the United Nations another weapon to use in the light to prevent the exploitation of children.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Inside and outside

Sir, Recently two bombs exploded inside the BNP offices — one in Chittagong and the other in Dhaka. We are confused who could possibly do it? We are pleased that Army is investigating the case. This is obviously better than the police investigation because police has lost its credibility as an independent investigating authority. It is reported in a newspaper that the OC of Ramna thana has already determined that bomb had been blasted from inside as a result windows and glasses fell outside.

Here is my view about this observation.

Any bomb that blasted inside a room whether it was tossed from inside or outside will have the same effect on windows and glasses. The glasses and windows are the weakest elements of a building. Therefore, if a bomb blasted inside a room, windows and glasses will always fall outside no matter how it blasted.

I think, in addition to examine how the bomb being blasted, investigating authority without any prejudices should put their efforts to determine who are the people behind this bomb blast.

Mohammad Sarwaruddin
Dhaka

SPA for whom and by whom?

Sir, Some governments passed laws having severe provisions for some offences, even laws existed to deal those. Necessity might have had arisen for legislating such laws for lapses in governance where timely and unfair actions led situations to go berserk. Or, largely public turned against governments for their failure to deliver what was promised earlier. So governments needed to do something to overcome it as quickly as possible.

But the Awami League is a popular party. After gaining the experience of forty-three months as the ruling party, and meeting all the election pledges, why does it need a new Act with special power, is a big question. However, the government needed such an Act when the Special Powers Act already exists. It has more gray areas that made it darker to black law.

Martial law often controls authority to protect life and properties. It may bring relief to

PSA and the Opposition

Sir, I welcome the Opposition Leader BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia's pledge that her party would scrap the Public Safety Act if voted to power (The Daily Star, February 2, 2000). But given the fact that her party had passed the Curbing of Terrorist Offences Act, while in power, this pledge is not just enough. She must say clearly and publicly that the BNP will never enact similar laws in the future. Otherwise, how can we convince ourselves that her party would respect human rights?

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Eviction

Sir, I read with great disappointment about the eviction of squatters from the Amtal and Jheelpar slums by Mohakali and Banani on 26th January. This action, which in view of the High Court rulings of August 1999 have no legal basis, seems beyond any moral justification. In fact, this reminds me of the actions of an earlier government that in January 1975 embarked on an ill-advised 'clean-up-the-city' drive that led to the forced removal of 173,000 squatters from Dhaka. I became so interested in the total lack of basis for this removal and the unbelievably inept steps taken to help the displaced that I actually wrote a book about this venture. This book, unfortunately, became a sort of classic in how not to go for urban development.

I must admit that I actually thought that your government, the Dhaka City Corporation, and even your police had learned from this earlier experience. The poor in your society are as entitled to a place to live, as anyone else in Dhaka. It is not the squatters that are at fault when they resort to illegal occupation of the land they need so desperately for their shanties and shacks. The fault lies with the urban planning system that is unable to include provision for the poor in their plans, the local government that has failed to regularize their tenure situation, and the central government for failing to provide alternative housing options. It is also the fault of the better off in society who are intent in becoming still better off than in sharing the national gain with all in society. Yet the poor, even though society seems

unwilling to respond to their basic needs, make perfect scapegoats to cover up these failures in governmental administration and society.

Hopefully, this is the last time this kind of squatter removal takes place in Dhaka. Bulldozing and burning them out is an unacceptable approach to urban planning in today's world. Other governments have devised ingenious solutions to providing opportunities for their poor. I know that your planners (after all, I trained a significant number of them) and government officials are capable of coming up with positive solutions to the plight of the squatters, and it is high time that this happened.

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Confusion over 'convergence'

Sir, With due apology to Mr. Abul Ashraf Noor, I would like to mention that according to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English by A.S. Hornby (1985 Edition, Pg 188) 'Convergence' is the noun of 'Converge' meaning lines, moving objects, opinions come towards each other and meet at a point.

In this regard, I may add that 'Divergence' means moving apart of two or more things starting from the same point and progressing along different lines. These two terms are quite commonly used in Physics and can be found in chapters dealing with light.

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Roadside illegal shops and workshops

Sir, Like illegally operated rickshaws there is mushroom growth of unauthorised and illegal shops, workshops and hotels on the roads and streets of Dhaka. Anyone can easily and freely erect a temporary structure and run a business or trade of his own choice without any obstruction or objection from the law enforcing agencies. These illegal and unauthorised shops, workshops and hotels are creating serious problems and nuisance in our day-to-day life.

Would the DCC and DMP kindly look into the matter?

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OPINION

Tying the Knot without any Dowry and without a Kazi

by A. H. Jaffor Ullah

Thanks to Islamic organization Tablig Jamaat and Bishwa Jitima (World Congress) for ushering a new way of solemnizing wedding in Bangladesh. With little help from them, no one will ever need a Kazi (literally a judge in Arabic) to solemnize any Muslim wedding.

On February 1, 2000, a section of press in Dhaka published a report entitled '90 couples get married at Jitima'. The best part of the news story was 'No Kazi is needed for such marriage ceremony'.

This year's Jitima solemnized about 90 Nikah ceremonies on the bank of Turag River in Tongi. This kind of community wedding en masse is becoming popular as far the as the trend goes. According to the news report, in 1998 about 71 pairs tied the knot on Jitima ground. In the year 1999, 71 couples were declared man and wife, although the brides were absent from the ceremony. This year the number jumped a hefty 28 per cent. At this rate, the Head Maulana at Jitima ground may have to solemnize 1,062 weddings in the year 2010. Quite an impressive number by today's standard.

One of the stipulations of Jitima-ground marriage is that it should be a dowry-free affair. On January 3, 2000, the main Maulana of Bishwa Jitima, Hazrat Maulana Zohayer of India, read aloud the sermons to the grooms after A s r (Afternoon) prayer while the brides were conspicuously absent. Islamic Shariah (custom) does not allow women to come into public gathering. The newspaper account describing the event mentioned that family members from both the bride's and groom's sides, who took permission from the bride on her behalf, were present at the Jitima ground while the Maulana officiated the ceremony. According to the news report, no Kazi is required for this kind of Nikah ceremony. It is uncertain where the marriage would be registered. Normally, government in Bangladesh has appointed Kazis whose job is to solemnize the marriage and

register it in his ledger. Not having a Kazi in the Jitima ground, who will do the documentation, and will it be legal in the eyes of the law?

There is nothing new about getting married en masse. Korean evangelist Reverend Sum Myung Moon, the head of the Unification Church, used to routinely perform marriages in the 1970s and 1980s. But I never thought this would be practiced in a conservative society as Bangladesh. Most people in our impoverished land are religiously bent. Therefore, it is most likely that people would listen to Islamic clerics. Jitima committee has most certainly shown creativity by incorporating 'Marriage En Masse' into their programme. In this respect, the secular organisations like the one who hosts Bangla Nobo-Borsho (Bengali New Year) may want to perform marriage ceremony en masse in Mid-April. There would be one exception though. While in Jitima, the brides were conspicuously absent (due to religious edict), in Bangla Nobo-Borsho festival, both the bride and groom could be present side-by-side wearing some colorful dresses. Although, the newspaper did not describe the austere look of the Jitima mass marriage ceremony, could imagine very well that the secular mass marriage festival won't be a dull ceremony. The time is ripe for throwing this new idea to them.

The traditional belief in Bangladesh that Mullahs are backward and their ideas are antiquated should be reexamined now that we know they are favouring dowryless marriage en masse and they are staging the ceremony under the scrutiny of million eyes. The college-educated modern secularist may swallow their pride now and learn a thing or two from them. We have to modernize our antiquated nuptials, which is quite wasteful. The sooner we do it, the better will it be for our society.

The writer, a senior research scientist, writes from New Orleans, USA