

Withdraw Feb 28 Hartal

THE opposition alliance has announced a dawn-to-dusk hartal for February 28 which is a Monday. This marks a departure from the previous pattern of things in two ways: first, this hartal is neither being prefixed nor suffixed to the official week-end holidays. Secondly, it is a 12hr hartal for a single day in contrast to the continuous 36hr - 60hr variety which we have only known to dread as a sudden-death syndrome in civic life.

It seems the repeated criticism of the opposition's deliberate choice of hartal days in conjunction with weekends has had a dent on their mindset. Somehow though, the opposition alliance is still clinging to the hartal option. They know it fully well at the heart of their hearts that they have no genuine reasons, especially at this point in time to go for anymore hartal programme, even though they may otherwise have legitimate grievances against the government to be chagrined about. The Public Safety Act is being amended through an ordinance at the instance of the President. If it should be abused by the ruling party then the opposition's point of view would be more genuinely vindicated than by any imposition of hartal which only creates revulsion in the people's mind. As a matter of fact, when they persist in calling more than one hartal on one particular issue what they are doing is punishing the people for as many times as the hartals were called; and secondly, by making the shut-downs themselves into an issue at the expense of the real issue at hand which is soured by repeated doses of forced breakdowns.

What also steals, or shall we say, robs the thunder off the opposition's so-called agitational movement is the extremely limited time left for the next general election, which is effectively just over a year. This is not the span of time to misspend on hartals or calls for ouster of an incumbent which is expressly willing to discuss early elections with the Opposition.

The opposition is being considerably sensitive to the SSC examinations, Eid-ul-Azha and President Clinton's visit to Dhaka while chalking out their future hartal programmes. Are we to think that the rest of the time in national life is so unimportant that it can be riddled with shots of hartal every now and then? Please withdraw the hartal on February 28. You have already shown a partial sensitivity to public suffrage; do go now the whole hog with your consideration to shun the hartal path altogether.

Far from being a loss of face it will go down with the people as a proof of your love for the country.

Will to Deliver, Matters

FINALLY the notorious crime baron Ershad Shikdar has been sentenced to death by a special court in Khulna. We take this opportunity to compliment the speedy dispensation of justice in a matter of supreme public interest. This is the first among pending sensational murder cases that has been settled in the lower court. The accused has been granted permission by the learned judge to appeal against the judgment before a higher court as per the provision of law. It is interesting to note that the murder case in which Shikdar and his close associate Farooq were accused has been disposed of by the special court in only six months' time since the arrest of Ershad Shikdar on 11 August 1999. This was possible mainly because of the fact that the agencies responsible for investigation and other related matters worked energetically and sincerely while the special court was itself insistent on speedy hearing and progression of the case. As we sincerely commend the learned judge of the special court for disposing of the case within reasonable time we would like to know what happens to similar cases when they are tried in normal courts. We know of a lot many cases which are taking a huge amount of time to even reach the courts and once they do reach the courts they usually take a long time on various pleas either by the prosecution or defence and drag on for a number of years before a verdict is delivered. And then there is the process of appeal which takes its time. A case in point is the Shazneen murder case, the crime having been committed in April, 1998 and the accused being in custody for long. Another is the Humayun Zahir murder case which has been hanging for eight years without the main accused brought to justice. The Rubel murder case is another such example of foot dragging.

Let the quick disposal of the case in regard to Ershad Shikdar's doings set an example for the rest of the murder cases.

Solid Waste Management

ADMITTEDLY, the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) has so far failed to come up with an effective and efficient solid waste management system. Graduation from concrete bins and covered trucks to iron containers and their carriers did not have any positive impact on the overall scenario. Still, only 60 per cent of some 3,000 metric tonnes the capital city produces every day is disposed of, the remainder left out in the open to rot and pose serious health hazard for the residents. With 410 containers, 150 carrier trucks and some 6,000 men, the conservancy team of the corporation, on paper, appears well-manned and well-equipped; on the ground, however, its performance gives out a diametrically opposite impression. One of the major reasons for the failure could well be ascribed to planning inadequacy on the corporation's part. Corruption and lack of accountability are inevitable by-products of inefficient, or absence of, planning.

One key aspect missing from the DCC's waste disposal outlook is the involvement of private sector, non-government organisations (NGOs) and, more importantly, communities in the whole exercise. A recently-held regional seminar in the capital on *Community-based Solid Waste Management*, attended by representatives from nine countries, suggested that we go for such a private sector-oriented approach. Given our space constraints for waste dumping and apparent failure of the city father to handle the situation effectively, this appears to be a potent solution to the waste management crisis. Community participation, as the seminar perceived, would surely relieve the DCC of the pressure to enable it to attend to regulatory and monitoring imperatives. Also such an arrangement would surely generate jobs.

PRESIDENT Clinton said on 17th February that he was willing to intercede in the 52-year-old Kashmir dispute. He was of the view that if the tensions between India and Pakistan could be resolved, the Indian sub-continent might very well be the "great success story" of the next fifty years. President Clinton's readiness is not new and a repetition of the earlier US position on mediation on Kashmir dispute.

First, let us be clear about what mediation is. Mediation is one of the recognised methods of settling of disputes if negotiations between the parties fail to resolve a dispute (Articles 33 of the UN Charter). Mediation is to be distinguished from 'Good Offices'. Good Offices consist in tendering suggestion or advice on the part of a third party to narrow down the differences with a view to bringing the two parties into negotiation. For example, Algeria used its Good Offices with Iran to settle the hostage of American nationals in Tehran for more than a year after the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979.

Mediation, on the other hand, partakes more of a character of active involvement on the part of a third party as a "middleman" and the mediator suggests his/her own mechanism to resolve the dispute. Good Offices is a mere go-between the parties while mediation involves the person in the participation of negotiations and offering suggestions to resolve the dispute.

The US has put India on notice that India must play a positive and constructive role to resolve the dispute so as to become a "good international citizen."

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move the sticky points to resolve the dispute. The person acts as a neutral friend and is anxious to effect a compromise to secure the settlement of a dispute. The role of the former US Democratic Senator George Mitchell to arrive at the Irish Peace Accord (Good Friday Agreement) on 10 April, 1998 may be cited as an instance of a mediator.

By offering himself as a mediator, President Clinton stepped into a raw nerve of India's sensitivity in the involvement of a third party in the Kashmir dispute. While Pakistan is keen to embrace a third party, India has been opposed vehemently to third-party interference.

The question that arises is: Why is India opposed to a third party intervention in Kashmir? It is not that India never accepted a third party interven-

US President's Visit to South Asia

Why did President Clinton Offer to Mediate on Kashmir?

by Harun ur Rashid

It is interesting to note the Chief Executive General Musharraf of Pakistan in a recent interview with India's state television (Doordarsan) made a direct offer to meet the Indian Prime Minister for mutual talks but only on Kashmir "to break the logjam." Prime Minister Vajpayee was reported to have replied that: "If he talks about Kashmir, then he has to talk about that Kashmir which Pakistan has been occupying." The statement and the counter-statement by the heads of the governments of India and Pakistan demonstrate how far they are apart on the issue of Kashmir.

President Clinton is making a historic to the sub-continent between March 20 and March 25. The visit is highly anticipated in India which has not hosted a US President's visit since President Jimmy Carter in 1978. His offer just weeks before the visit assumes significance in many ways. The President must be aware of India's objection to a third party's intervention in Kashmir dispute.

Then why did the President make the offer? There are several possible reasons. First, there is a view that the US wants to make it clear that President's visit does not approve the stance of India on the Kashmir dispute. India claims to be the largest democracy in the world but its action on dispute appears to be contrary to all democratic norms and practices. The US has put India on notice that India must play a positive and constructive role to resolve the dispute so as to become a "good international citizen."

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Second, if India wishes to seek close relationship with the US, it must create a climate of harmony in the sub-continent and the present state of tension, flux, distrust and discord prevailing in South Asia ought to disappear. India, being the largest country in this region, should make the appropriate move first towards the elimination of the causes of armed conflicts.

Third, the offer of mediation provides a signal to Pakistan that the US has not forgotten the one-time close ally - Pakistan. The country has not lost importance in the eyes of the US. That's the reason why the President did not rule out a visit to Pakistan. In this context, President Clinton said that "I will make a decision based on what I think will best serve our long-term interests." This position kept both India and Pakistan guessing as to whether the President will visit Pakistan or not.

India perceives that if President Clinton does not visit Pakistan, it would be a diplomatic defeat for the military regime in not earning its legitimacy from the US. However, the mediation offer puts India in a tight spot and it reflects that Pakistan is not only the "villain" in the sub-continent and the import is not lost to anyone as to the identification of the other "villain".

Itinerary should not Disturb Existing Regional "Balance of Power"

by A R Shamsul Islam

If Clinton's March itinerary skips Pakistan it will be a matter of disappointment to that country and great furore to India. The latter may try to play upon this lone-shared privilege to tilt the balance in her favour and put her arch rival Pakistan into a tight corner.

SPECULATIONS are at work if Pakistan will really be dropped from the programme of President Clinton's South Asia tour in the coming March. New Delhi has got Clinton's a five-day stay in India. Pakistan has till now gone blank.

The problem is created by Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf. On the one hand, he has said that he would restore democracy in Pakistan, but on the other, he is not giving any time-frame for it despite insistence from the US. Whereas the US professes to be the only superguardian of democracy across the world, how can her President visit a country where a democratically elected government was ousted by an army general?

The political 'pundits' have observed that in the prevalent circumstances Clinton's visit to Pakistan will send a wrong signal. Wrong signal to where and for whom? Is it to the fledgling democracy of this region (except India) in particular and across the world in general? If Pakistan is ultimately dropped from the itinerary will it give a right signal to the preservation of stability of South Asia which is more or less based on a 'balance of power' built by two arch rivals - India and Pakistan. In fact any situation created or purports to be created that gives a long rope to any of the two powers in preference to the other may blow away the state of equilibrium of this region.

Pakistan is more or less branded as a hot-headed coun-

try. For a greater length of time the country remained under army rule. Elected governments surfaced now and then, but their activities, too, hardly proved better than the whims of military rulers. So Pakistan's leadership qualities may not have touched a sound and sober grade.

But nowadays what better is found in the leadership of India, the biggest democracy in the world? What actions the Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has now resorted to? Isn't he whipping up war hysteria against Pakistan in a mouth no less fouled than that of a military ruler? The other day he roared: "They think that they will drop one bomb and they will win and we lose.... They are wrong. We have said we won't be the first to use nuclear weapons, but if any one uses them against us, we will not wait for our annihilation."

When Musharraf proposed a talk with India focusing on Kashmir, Vajpayee billowed with a counter proposal for a dialogue with Pakistan on enlarged claim that would focus on how Pakistan vacates Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

The much-hyped "soft", "sober" face of Vajpayee in an otherwise fundamentalists coalition government of India has started to expose his inner

self. This poses a new threat to the stability of South Asia.

The stance that the US took in the Kargil war of 1999 has unhappily and maybe unknowingly attributed, directly or indirectly, to the rise of two important phenomena of the South Asian region. One is the rise of military dictator of Pakistan General Pervez Musharraf by ousting Pakistan's elected Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif who faced massive resentment of the people for his humiliating U-turn from Kargil under the pressure of Clinton. The other is Atal Behari Vajpayee's winning the Indian polls of 1999 by the wave of sentiments of the people that he deftly got mixed up with utmost jingoism and chauvinism. In a sense, the emergence of a military dictator in Pakistan and a hardcore jingoist prime minister in India were the by-products of the Kargil war, the results of which were largely dictated by Clinton.

It could have profoundly promoted planting peace in South Asia had Clinton declared that he would exercise his good offices to eke out a settlement of the Kashmir dispute. If he could broker between Israel and Palestine and again between Syria and Israel in the settlements of their disputes in the Middle East what harm and hesitation he may have to play

a similar role in the Kashmir dispute?

Musharraf is desperately trying to include Pakistan in Clinton's itinerary of South Asia to win some sort of respectability and legitimacy to his administration and to enervate his bellicose move to face belligerent India. Clinton's visit to Pakistan is being decried by Musharraf's avoiding to give a time-table for the restoration of democratic government in Pakistan. However, Clinton seems favourable to visit Pakistan. So various options are being worked out. One such is to make a brief stop-over in Pakistan on way to India or in default to draw a programme of Clinton's visit to Pakistan some time later before the end of his presidential tenure.

India is watching carefully the actions the US takes in regard to Clinton's visit to Pakistan. In the event all diplomatic furries end up by dropping Clinton's visit to Pakistan in next month, Vajpayee will obtain another plus point to blow out his war trumpet louder and louder to put pressure on Pakistan's nerve for breakdown.

It is alleged that India is possessed of a 'big brotherly attitude' towards her neighbours in the South Asian region.

Smaller countries of this part have occasions to complain against India for what may be called her overbearing behaviour. Of the South Asian powers it is only Pakistan that India has not been able to dominate over. Pakistan always poses and preaches to be an equal force to India. This is what India feels most injurious, to her prestige.

Pinched with such peculiar complexes India and Pakistan have taken to building up heavy war arsenals including nuclear weapons at a huge cost though a vast multitude of people of both the countries are languishing under poverty line. Late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's jingoist rhetoric, "Pakistan will wage war against India for a thousand years by eating grass if necessary", and India's bellowing grandiloquent gimmick: "India can beat Pakistan in war time and time over" are but manifestations of a peculiar feeling that the two countries have learnt to nurse against each other.

A "balance of power" has thus come to be formed in South Asia. This power equilibrium may have served as bulwarks of stability in this region.

One historic need led the US to destroy the "balance of power" of the world. This was for putting the crown of the lone

superpower of the globe on her head. The US did this by doing a lot for dismemberment of the USSR. Interestingly, another historic need impels the US to guard up for the preservation of "balance of power" in South Asia. This enjoins on her not to do anything that may help either of the two powers - India or Pakistan - to gain in power at the cost of the other.

The last time a US President visited India and Pakistan was the stormy days of 'cold war' when the US was one of two greatest powers of the world. By now her hegemony has greatly risen marking her as the only superpower of the world. India and Pakistan consider it a matter of great pride and privilege to receive Clinton in their countries as the Guest-of-Honour. If Clinton's March itinerary skips Pakistan it will be a matter of disappointment to that country and great furore to India. The latter may try to play upon this lone-shared privilege to tilt the balance in her favour and put her arch rival Pakistan into a tight corner.

This is not only a question of gaining supremacy of a power over the other. This is more a question of risking the preservation of "balance of power" in this volatile region by letting down one power in lieu of strengthening the other. This is not a question of pre-eminence. This is a question of highly aggressive pre-dominance. The US is hoped to dispassionately weigh all these related factors before finalising Clinton's itinerary of South Asia in coming March of 2000.

Is a Breakthrough Possible in Sri Lanka?

What about the chances of the dialogue, producing a tangible result; and how the opposition in Sri Lanka is looking at the new indications for a breakthrough? And of course, finally, will the island-state which is otherwise a prospective developing country and possibly most advanced in many ways in South Asia but ridden by the internal conflict, can heave a sigh of relief?

FINALLY, a glimmer of hope is being observed for a settlement of the 17-year-old conflict in the island-state of Sri Lanka. The conflict has claimed more than 60,000 lives since the minority Tamils in the north-east of the country began a struggle for a separate homeland for an estimated 3.2 million people in a nation of 12 million.

The government of President Chandrika Bandernaike Kumaratunga and the Tamil militants known as the "Tigers" have shown their readiness for talks in settling the seemingly endless civil war following the mediation efforts by the Norwegian government. Given the complexity of the ethnic Tamil issue and the demand for a separate independent state for the Tamils, any solution to this lingering crisis is difficult. Even the talks on the issue are expected to be marked by wide differences and in all likelihood may be bogged down without making much headway. But the very fact that the two sides have expressed willingness for dialogue is certainly a big step forward and it is possible that this may eventually lead to cessation of the conflict or at least abatement of the acrimony between the two warring sides even though the task is quite difficult.

What is the basis of this positive sign in the otherwise complicated scenario in Sri Lanka? Why the government and the Tigers - both so far showing stubbornness in their positions for a solution - are now ready for talks and demonstrating signs of reconciliation? What about the chances of the dialogue, producing a tangible result; and how the opposition in Sri Lanka is looking at the new indications for a breakthrough? And of course, finally, will the island-state which is otherwise a prospective developing country and possibly most advanced in many ways in South Asia but ridden by the internal conflict, can heave a sigh of relief?

This writer was in Colombo recently and witnessed the new ray of hope that has emerged for a possible settlement of the civil war, which was still continuing in full swing in parts of the country. The government

timely alerted the government on impending dangers. Some paid heed and showed wisdom and others, for obstinacy, could not avoid the pitfall. It was the Press, that exposed "Raskhak became Bhaskhak" (the protector becomes the devourer) in RAJUK plot allotment. PM did accept, and showed her wisdom to avoid an explosive situation within the party and outside by canceling it.

PSA has many latitudes that could be misused, or abused to harass people. Despite PM's assurance, the public feels unsafe under the Public Safety Act-2000. I hope the PM's staff understands that.

A language mourning on the eve of 21 February. It was nice to see so many people being present in the Shahid Minar premises. But I am sorry to say that the people were undisciplined and behaved rather immaturely. On such a day, it is unnecessary to push through their way so that they can be the first ones to place the flowers on the destined place. The student leaders of the ruling government party broke the rule and stood in front of the line, though they had arrived hours later than many people. Some of the people, including women, fell on the ground owing to the activities of those behind. Such activities really dampen the spirits of the occasion, which is, to express our feelings and gratitude in a quiet and sad manner. I sincerely hope that in the coming year, people pay their respects in the right manner.

The outcome of the election made many Sri Lanka observers convinced that the people in that country want the civil war to be resolved and are not averse to dialogue. They certainly admire the dynamism in the leadership of Chandrika but are concerned about the hard-line approach because the war is costing the nation dearly. The pattern of the balloting gives the impression that people are willing to concede grounds to the Tamils demands up to a point - by maintaining the territorial integrity of the country.

The war is proving disastrous for both sides but it is the government which is losing more in a sense because this situation has retarded the progress and has been affecting the economy in the negative.



Chandrika Kumaratunga



Ranil Wickremasinghe

troops and the Tamil Tigers were both claiming successes in their battles although the war seemed nearing its decision goal. President Chandrika Kumaratunga is fresh from a win a second term in office but she just managed to secure the victory as she polled just over 51 per cent while 50 per cent is a must for winning the contest. The incumbent president had changed the time of the polls: much before the expiry of her term. She was hoping to secure a fresh but a big-margin win, but that did not happen despite her victory. Her main challenger Ranil Wickremasinghe bagged more than 42 per cent of the votes and charged rigging in the voting.

The President miraculously survived an attempt on her life by the separatist Tamils just three days ahead of the "election", scheduled on December 21, and this may have caused sympathy of the people and proved beneficial for her in winning the election. Many felt that Chandrika might not have won the election, but for the sympathy brought by the attempt which killed many others including the police chief of Colombo at the Town Hall premises. She hardened her position on the Tamil issue before the polls while opposition candidate was seen comparatively soft since he favoured dialogue with the militants while simultaneously carrying out the war.

The conflict in Sri Lanka can be resolved only through political means and dialogue," said Norwegian foreign minister Knut Vollebeck, who held lengthy talks with President Kumaratunga earlier this week. It was not known whether the militants or the government have set tough conditions for dialogue. The beginning of the talks may prove cumbersome. Still, there are flickers of hope since some ground has been broken which was difficult in the past. The growing realisation on both sides about their difficulties may encourage them to concede grounds. The breakthrough in Sri Lanka is possible but it still has a long way to go. Prudence and wisdom coming from both sides may contribute to end the long civil war.

To the Editor...

Unsafe PSA

Sir, Mr Press Secretary Comments (DS-21 Feb) have been expressed in strong words, tainting the DS for having an opposition political partisan role. Since the President is a man of wisdom, integrity, and strong principle, the Press and a section of the public had drawn his attention on certain subtle matters of the PSA. The ruling party with a faction of JP only passed it, only a few days after it was tabled and sent to the President for his assent. During that period, some ruling party stalwarts stated in public meetings that the President, as an ex Chief Justice and conversant with the Constitution, would certainly give the Bill. The President held that Bill for about a couple of weeks. This shows that the President, probably had his doubts.

Ordnance to remove some ambiguities tells many untold stories of grey areas of the PSA. Those are the sore points for the press and public, but the Press Secretary has not given a wind of that. I am, as a reader of DS, appreciating the justful courage of DS in replying the 'twisting' of Press Secretary on PSA. I wonder, if at all, the President felt any pressure on this issue. If so, then I understand, he has all paraphernalia to let his mind known to the concerned. Who then prompted the PM's Press Secretary to delve on this and harp on the President's image and demeanor? In freedom of press, any one can publish anything owing the responsibility, but one representing an office to disclose official views remains within that office boundary only. I am not a politician, nor attained the quality to be one. As a reader of dailies, I find DS always lets, the people's voice known to all. For this, our government (including previous ones) should be grateful. It had

The spirit of Ekushey

Sir, It was a pleasure attending the International Mother

Arbab Quadri, House 92/A, Road 7/A, Dhanmondi.