

Can Anyone Explain This Hartal?

WHY has the opposition called hartal today? Can anyone please tell us what are its objectives, and how the people can remotely be benefited by it. It seems like a move resulting more from having nothing else to do rather than from clear thinking. We condemn this casual — we have not called a hartal for a long time so let's call one — type of attitude in calling for this supreme act of sacrifice that causes so much suffering to our people, brings about financial losses and production disruption, not to mention damage to the image of the country as a possible investment destination. In a democracy and where there is an elected parliament, all hartals, in our view, are unjustified. But this one seems even more unjustified than the usual ones.

In this column we have welcomed the clear indication that opposition parties are gearing for the election. We have praised the recent meet-the-people tour by Khaleda Zia as a part of creating public opinion in favour of her politics. From all account her trip and her meetings have been very successful. So when the public is responding to the opposition's call, and when hundreds of thousands are turning up to hear what the opposition parties have to say, how can a hartal call serve their purpose? We have said so before and we repeat now, hartal hurts the very people in whose name you are doing politics.

As a method of generating public support and gathering momentum for a movement, hartal has lost its appeal. Gradual erosion of public support behind hartals has been clearly evident from the early nineties. What worked very well against the autocratic regime of Ershad cannot work against democratically elected governments, especially if elections are held on time, as has been the case in Bangladesh since 1991. Many people cite AL's hartals against BNP during the latter's rule as a successful example of its use against an elected government. We repeat what we said earlier, AL did not get public support in the last election for its hartals; in fact, there was a strong resentment against them for subjecting the country and its people to such terrible suffering. What clinched the polls for the AL was the farcical election of February 1996.

So, please look carefully into the lessons of the past and prepare strategies that bring you close to the public and not drive you away from them. Hartals will do the latter, have no doubt about it.

Terrorists' Conference

IF Sunday's conference of terrorists in Comilla cannot dispel the home ministry's complacency over the success of its countrywide combing operations, we wonder what would. The gathering of the three 'dons' and their followers with a view to patching up disputes and differences amongst them and working out ways to better 'function' in the face of 'intensified' police operations was, in our view, a slap on the face for the law enforcement authority. Not only does it speak of a dismal state of affairs on the law and order front, but it also augurs further rise in anti-social activities in the future. On both counts, the people across the country have reasons to be alarmed and also to become increasingly unsure of police's ability to ensure safety and security for them.

As law and order has progressively deteriorated over the years, we have seen little action taken against the criminals. In fact, more often than not, they have slipped through the fingers of law, either for enforcement inadequacy or political patronisation. Evidently, low rate of conviction in such cases has led these anti-social elements into believing that whatever crime they commit — murder, rape, abduction, extortion, so on and so forth — they can get away with impunity; so much so that they have shown the temerity to convene the conference.

Ominously still, it is not the first time that a gathering of criminal elements was held in the country. Not long time back, muggers convened a meeting at Demra. So defiant they were that they had even used loud speakers at the venue besides spreading the news around prior to the 'conference'. Then, too, the law enforcement people played a silent role.

What are we to infer from these incidents? Have the terrorists actually become more powerful than the police? Are we really adequately protected against them? The answers to these questions must come in the shape of effective and efficient anti-terrorist and anti-crime drives not the political rhetoric we have all been made to listen time and again.

Pall of Match Fixing, Again!

WHOEVER thought, even in his wildest dreams, that of all the players in the world of cricket today, Wessel Johannes Cronje, the God-fearing, church-going captain of South African cricket team, would fall to the temptation of accepting bribes for fixing matches? The astute all-rounder denied his involvement in fixing results but confessed to 'providing information and forecast' on the matches. There seems to be a thin line between the two. The Indian investigators sound sure of their success into the investigation of match-fixing allegation against Cronje who has, in the meantime, got the sack from the UCB of South Africa.

Cronje is not the first to admit to having taken money from bookies. Shane Warne and Mark Waugh, two Australians, also admitted to having accepted money from unknown persons while in India for 'academic' information about weather and the wickets on which the one-dayers would be played. The news was broken many months after it had actually taken place. Neither the Australian Cricket Board (ACB) nor the International Cricket Council (ICC) took any serious note of it. When Manoj Prabhakar, the former Indian Test all-rounder talked about match fixing by his team mates, he was brushed aside and the whole episode was quickly swept under the carpet. In Pakistan, investigations into allegations of bribery and match-fixing against a few senior cricketers carried out by the PCB were inconclusive.

Match-fixing charges against cricketers have hurt this noble game the most. But neither the ICC nor the national bodies have taken any serious view of it at all. The South Asian cricket authority, UCB, however, deserves praise for taking quick action against the offender and we hope others will follow their suit in the greater interest of the game.

"I feel that no penance that the Hindu may do can, in any way, compensate for the calculated degradation to which they have consigned the depressed classes for centuries. But I know that the separate electorate is neither a penance nor any remedy for the crushing degradation they have groaned under."

This is what Mahatma Gandhi wrote to the British government when it proposed to grant a separate electorate to the depressed classes — the untouchables. He was against a separate electorate for Muslims as well. But it was the separation of the *shudra*, the untouchable, from the main body of Hindus that he could not contemplate. He went on a fast unto death against the proposal. Rabintra Nath Tagore wore a black robe to register his support.

Gandhi succeeded. But the person who really accommodated him was B.R. Ambedkar. His birthday falls this week. The British gave in only when he accepted the 'Poona Pact' which reserved seats for his flock, with a joint electorate. The other gain from Gandhi's fast was that most Hindu temples were flung open to untouchables. This was in April 1932.

After 68 years, the situation has not changed substantially. Temples remain open but the hearts of the caste Hindus are closed. Gandhi called an untouchable by the name of Harijan, son of God, to shame caste Hindus. But their conscience has irked them very little.

The Insulted and the Injured

In fact, the upper castes are taking away from the dalits even the credit for the few achievements they cherish. For example, they feel proud that the constitution was given to the nation by a dalit, Ambedkar. Their fear is that the Review Commission may dilute his contribution.

Untouchability is banned in free India. But the law is only on paper. A religion with caste as its social base is incapable of equality and fraternity. More than 20 crore people live without any dignity and honour. In fact, there is the religious belief that God has created *shudra*, the lower caste, as Manu says, to punish them for 'their sins' in the past birth. Discrimination has been consecrated and institutionalised. The social structure of Hindu society has got stratified. This is reflected in living, attitude and behaviour. The countryside is particularly dotted with separate habitats, separate drinking-water wells and separate schools. Even when segregated, the untouchables are beaten at places for wearing clothes of good quality. They are beaten because they have used the utensils made of metals like copper and brass. Their houses are burnt for the unpardonable sin of purchasing land for cultivation. Over the years, reservations, also extended to government service, have survived because the 'Poona Pact' has been incorporated in the constitution. But the spirit of the pact — breaking the shackles of the caste system — which Ambedkar expected, is lacking. There is no end to the agony and the humiliation of the lower castes, now called the dalits. The Blacks in the US are far better because the discrimination in their case is based on

colour. They can cross the segregation line. For the dalits this is not possible. Their exclusion is because of birth which they cannot escape till death.

Ambedkar was probably right when he said that the problem of untouchability was that of class struggle. It was not a case of injustice being perpetrated by one man against another. It was a case of injustice being perpetrated by one class against another. Indeed, the

wholly or partly out of State funds or dedicated to the use of the general public... The constitution, which Ambedkar drafted, was egalitarian in tone and tenor. But he failed to instill in the minds of the upper castes the concept of equality and dignity. Probably no constitution can help people overcome their personal prejudice or religious bigotry.

That was one of the reasons

a concession for automatic extension after every 10 years. Politicians, who represent the community, are content with the chaff, not agitating for changes in the Hindu religion from within or adopting a scheme of morality and ideal of justice. Even reservations are being cornered by the selected dalits. They have not even accepted the Supreme Court's verdict that the 'creamy layer' among the dalits 'should not be entitled to concessions.'

Caste Hindus must be laughing in their sleeves because the dalit leaders have reduced the battle against inequality and discrimination to a political game for reservations. They have accepted the status quo. For a pittance, the people on the periphery have been forgotten. Steps to ensure an equal status would have upset the apple cart of upper castes. The dalits have stopped short of that.

Ambedkar had warned that "the political freedom means nothing and will disappear without economic and social freedom." His words have come true. The dalits in free India are still at the bottom. Independence has only changed masters, from the white to the brown. Had the dalits made common cause with the other 'backwards' and the poor, they would have at least created some ripples in the society. It would have been a challenge to

the supremacy — and smugness — of caste Hindus.

In fact, the upper castes are taking away from the dalits even the credit for the few achievements they cherish. For example, they feel proud that the constitution was given to the nation by a dalit, Ambedkar. Their fear is that the Review Commission may dilute his contribution. "They do not want to accept that Dr Ambedkar was the framer of our nation's first constitution," says Dr Rahul Deepankar, a leading dalit intellectual. "The dalits will once again take away their source of pride, as they have done in the past by naming Tulidas as the original writer of Ramayana instead of Ravidas." Instances of similar nature must have alienated Ambedkar beyond hope. He said: "The old body must die before a new body can come into existence and a new life can enter into it. To put it simply, the old must cease to be operative before the new can begin to enter and to pulsate. You must discard the authority of the *shastras* and destroy the religion of the *shashtra*."

He could not make any dent. Hinduism stayed impenetrable, with all its prejudices. After living practically his entire life as a dalit, Ambedkar came to the conclusion that he could get dignity or honour only by renouncing Hinduism. Ironically, he stayed a Hindu although he embraced Buddhism. In the constitution, he had formulated, he had referred to Hindus as "persons professing the Sikh, Jaina or Buddhist religion."

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

class and caste are co-terminus in India.

As Law Minister, Ambedkar tried to deal with the reality when he drafted constitution's Article 15: "(1) The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them. (2) No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them, be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to — (a) access to shops, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainment; or (b) the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads and places

why Ambedkar was against reservations. He did not believe that a few seats in the legislatures or a few jobs in the government could improve the lot of dalits lagging far behind. The Hindu society as such must transform. "This means a complete change in the values. It means a complete change in outlook and the attitude towards man and things," he said. Reservations to him were like crutches. The lower castes must learn to stand on their own legs, he felt.

Ambedkar reluctantly agreed to reservations only for a decade. But little did he realise that reservations would become

EU-Africa: 'Strategic Partnership'

by Harun ur Rashid

Two camps among the African countries emerged during the EU-Africa summit in Cairo... While President Mubarak was optimistic about the result of such partnership, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika sounded a bit pessimistic. It remains to be seen how the relationship develops between Africa and the EU in the years ahead.

EUROPEAN Union (EU) and African leaders held their first summit from 3rd April in Cairo for two days. The 15-member EU met with 52 African heads of state in a quest to launch a new direction in their relationship. The partnership would be based on mutual respect for each other that will bury the legacies of colonial times. The summit was inaugurated by President Mubarak of Egypt.

During the colonial period the European powers divided the "dark continent" among themselves, set boundaries of colonies without any regard to the ethnic nature of the populations. The arbitrary nature of boundaries has been the sources of armed conflict among the tribes and the states after they emerged as independent states. The European masters exploited the natural resources of the continent and enriched themselves.

The African countries continue to be in conflict with each other. The Congo, Ethiopia-Eritrea, Angola, Somalia and Sierra Leone are some of the instances in point. Most of the countries suffer from crippled economy, partly because of their huge foreign debt. Some say that Africa is in a crisis and the affluent nations must address the problems faced by them, otherwise in an interdependent world its impact will be reverberated throughout the

world. The people live as a part of global community and no country can be immune from any long-standing crisis occurring in another country. The current World Bank President James Wolfensohn said it aptly in the following words: "We are linked by the air we breathe, by trade, by finance, by drugs, by health, by immigration, by peace, by war and linked in a very direct way."

It is interesting to note that the representatives of non-government organisations were not permitted to have their say on the sidelines of the summit. Many African leaders did not approve the meeting of the NGOs during the summit and it was reported that some of them threatened not to attend the summit if the NGOs were allowed to hold their meet in Cairo. It is understood that the NGOs met in Lisbon, Portugal being the current President of the EU.

Observers believe that the attitude of some of the African leaders to the NGOs demonstrated that they continued to be intolerant of criticism of their alleged misrule and corruption. Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe appeared to be an embarrassment to some of the democratically elected African leaders because of his suppression of peaceful protests against his government in Harare.

Another star performer was the Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi who made his appearance at an international summit in eight years. He blasted the US, the democracy and demanded the withdrawal of the US sixth fleet from the Mediterranean Sea. He said what Africa needed was not "democracy but water pumps."

So the question is: what was the outcome of the Summit? It appeared that the EU and Africa had different ideas of what the summit could achieve. To the African leaders the thorny issue was the staggering external debt. It is estimated that Africa had been saddled with more than \$300 billion in debt. They urgently needed debt relief so that Africa could move towards journey of economic progress and development.

On the other hand, to the European leaders, the issue was good governance by the African leaders. Good governance implied democracy, respect for human rights and fight against corruption. Africa, although big as a continent, constitutes only 8 per cent of the population (Asia being 57 per cent, Europe 21 per cent and Americas 14 per cent). It was argued that if the resources of Africa had been managed well by the African leaders, poverty would not be prevalent in the continent as severely as it exists today. European Development Commissioner Poul Nielsen cited cor-

ruption and lawlessness as major reasons why Africa received barely 1 per cent of global private investment.

Two camps among the African countries emerged during the summit. Countries such as Madagascar, Tunisia and Liberia argued that debt relief and economic development should precede democracy while others such as Benin, Nigeria and South Africa contended there would be no sustained development without democratic government. Some of the most controversial leaders of Africa, including Laurent Kabila of Democratic Republic of Congo, General Robert Gué of Ivory Coast and Zimbabwe's leader Mugabe chose to remain silent in the summit.

The summit was able to agree only on one item, it would meet in 2003, and nothing else. However, the EU officials said that the summit had laid down for the first time a framework for "strategic partnership" with Africa at the highest political level. While President Mubarak was optimistic about the result of such partnership, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika sounded a bit pessimistic. It remains to be seen how the relationship develops between Africa and the EU in the years ahead.

The author, a barrister, is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

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.

Why should not there be high-level probes...?

Sir, It appears from the DS reports on encroachment of public land around Dhammond Lake that there had been enough wrongdoings. Members of the public can, therefore, expect proper legal actions against the wrongdoers.

But on April 6, another report headlined "2 six-storied buildings 'escape' demolition" was published. In the report it was further said, by quoting PWD officials, that the owners of those two buildings, encroaching on public land, "managed to obtain allocation of the lakeside encroached land from the Ministry of Housing and Public Works." According to the report, the buildings are on Road 25 (New, No. 14a) and road 26 (New, No. 15). There were mentions of other encroachment cases on road No. 27, 32 and near Abahani playground.

Again in the 'rejoinders' published on April 7, there were clarifications from a Dhammond resident of road 32 and a straight denial from another Dhammond resident of road 5, of any encroachment as referred in the Star report of April 5. The rejoinder, however, gives an idea of how efforts are made to make irregular things regular.

But knowing the DS to be a newspaper of responsible standing and as your reports are based on facts, we are prone

to believe that there had been enough offences. Then why should not there be high-level probes to find out the offenders?

A Dhammond Resident
Dhaka

Edible chicken

Sir, Attention of the government monitoring and regulatory agencies and that of CAB is drawn to stop the sale for human consumption of over-aged layer chicken. How the latter are disposed off after the egg-laying period is over? Normally this meat is diverted for making fish-meal and food for pet animals. But it is suspected that layer meat or live farm layer chicken is sold in the bazaar shops for use in the home and restaurant kitchens.

The Inspectorate has to come out with a public statement that adequate watch is being kept on violation of regulations. In fact, the regulations should be publicised for public awareness. Also, the rules for selling rotten foodstuff is ignored both by the sellers and the monitoring agencies. Why government departments cannot carry out routine operations, without complaints and reminders?

The basic guidance of good governance is that life's daily operations must run in a routine manner as per regulations; then the country's big problems may be handled one by one, separately. The latter development work is a separate issue.

Even our routine politics is running in a baseless and unstable manner. This is no compliment to any regime.

A. Z.
Dhaka.

Telephone torture

Sir, A week or so before Eid-ul-Azha, lakhs of other telephone lines one was also disconnected without any prior notice. We had, like many others, paid our bills regularly. So at least the authorities concerned should have had the courtesy to give us a notice or warning before snapping the line outright.

On inquiry, the man at the office told us that two bills of 1996(!) were not paid. He also added Tk. 500/- to be paid with the due bill (perhaps for his Eid celebration!). But the weird thing is that, one of the '96 bills happened to be of the month when this telephone no. was not even with us! Fortunately, we were able to show the other bill's receipt of payment at the bank. But the bank officials refused to accept it, though it is clearly written on every bill that the bank should delete the amount of the arrears on showing the voucher. Then why did they refuse to accept the bill? Well according to them, it was too late to accept it! So, again we had to pay for the bills both of which were unfairly taken from us. But that was only the beginning of our suffering. Added to that we had to pay Tk. 200/- more to the man at the T&T office. But still he wasn't satisfied and demanded Tk. 250/- more!

Not only that he also dug out six more bills to be paid! On checking our receipts (which we had luckily kept and filed), we found that most of those had been paid on due time (only the officials had not copied them in their registers may be out of

laziness or to harass the subscribers in future).

So again, we had to pay a huge amount. But our suffering didn't end. The disconnected telephone line wasn't fixed even after two weeks of payment of all the bills and repeated reminders by personally going to the office. What a waste of time, energy and money as everyday we had to go to the T&T office and request or rather beg the officials to fix the line.

But why should the T&T officials work properly? They will neither lose their jobs nor will be punished for laxity and negligence of work. And this negligence will continue to increase unless there is any competition. If there were few private telephone companies, like cellular phone or internet, then the situation would have been different.

And as for the telecommunication ministry, what have they been doing so far that they cannot put in order such an important department which is getting from bad to worse day by day? Will the authorities concerned please wake up?

A telephone tortured citizen
Dhaka

Disintegration galore

Sir, Monitoring the current situation, it is not clear how the present regime can take the country towards the betterment. The next regime will be saddled with super-human tasks to restore the established institutions and bring back moral regeneration. The negative effects will last for many years. How many times we have to start from zero?

The situation is deeper than the political mud-slinging game, as the society has disintegrated. The nobody is listening to

anybody. Which system remains intact in any sector and is serving the people? The situation appears to have gone beyond the control of the political system and culture in vogue. What the genuine leaders will do with the debased groups of powerful, undisciplined gangs who are out to grab and grab for personal gains?

Those unaware may be prepared for civil disobedience movement picking up spontaneously, hence there will be none to arrest — only unnecessary loss of lives. The use of force is not the solution. Those who have destroyed the country should not be allowed to escape and must face judgement and punishment.

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka

One-way dilemma

Sir, I often go to Wari to visit my uncle who lives there. But as recently, Hatkhola road and Joikal Mondir Road have been earmarked exclusively for one-way traffic, rickshaws are generally reluctant to go there and autorickshaws have become almost cut throats. On April 7, a letter was published in the DS letter column wherein the writer suggested that a taxi cab stand at the entrance of Wari along Baidhargan's South Eastern wall on Folder Street be set up immediately for the convenience of the people. Supporting his view, I urge the authorities concerned to take necessary steps in this regard.

Kazi Mizanur Rahman,
143, Tejgaon Park, Tejgaon
Dhaka-1215

Sir, Due to professional purpose, I need to go to Wari almost every week. But recently, the main roads linking Wari have

been ear-marked for one-way traffic and as I do not possess a transport of my own, autorickshaw is the main means of transportation in those areas. But the main problem of travelling by auto-rickshaw is lagging for the fair. In this circumstances, I request the authorities concerned to set-up a taxi-cab stand at a suitable place in Wari to redress the hardship of the citizen.

A. N. M Wahiduzzaman
Advocate, Supreme Court of Bangladesh
Khilgaon, Dhaka

Honourable intentions

Sir, It is interesting to note that the PM of our country has been almost flooded with honorary degrees during the span of a single regime of mere four years. It is certainly not because of the illustrious father, because that would not be fair recognition of one's father and that would not be fair recognition of one's services to the nation, to be accepted as a yard stick in the third world countries for emulation.

Honorary recognition has its indirect worth and price, and there is apprehension in some minds of the form and extent of the price to be extracted as public compensation. The investment return has to be equitable on both sides, as per public judgement.

Soon we might be needing a museum of conferred degrees. The latter is not a hobby, pastime or occupation. What's coming next? The bottomless basket can accommodate a few more containers.

A Husnain
Dhaka



Art Buchwald's COLUMN

Twenty Questions

AS the election gets closer, our distinguished media people are whacking the candidates harder than ever. The reason is that newspaper, television and radio reporters must produce red-meat articles to warrant the price of motels and Dunkin' Donuts breaks on the campaign trail. It is no longer necessary to report on the issues. Now it's the tough personal questions that the candidates are being asked.

The other day Don Weeks, a radio reporter in Albany, New York asked Hillary Clinton if she ever wondered why people were foaming at the mouth at the mention of her name. He followed up by asking whether she even understood that venom and did it bother her.

It was in the same category as "Do you beat your wife?" and Clinton took it well, blaming her hairdo and the fact that she is a woman. Then she said there could be a million reasons why people "can't stand" her.

Ordinarily if this question had been asked of a male politician he would have responded by saying that someone was hitting him below the belt. Since she is a woman and does not wear belts on radio shows, Clinton could not respond with as much anger as a man.

A Clinton supporter said, "The question as to why people hate her is in the same category as 'Why don't people like your cooking?' It doesn't have anything to do with cleaning up the Hudson River. In a political race half the electorate foam at the mouth when a candidate they don't like appears on radio."

Clinton played it cool by blaming her hair. But if I had been her spin-doctor I would have told her to say, "That's probably the dumbest question I've been asked, and I've been asked questions by some of the dumbest people in the media."

I would tell her to say, "Most women running for office are asked a lot of stupid things because reporters aren't sure what else to ask them."

Now that the genie has been let out of the bottle no one knows what questions will come next.

In desperation we can now expect a reporter to ask a candidate, "Why do you hate your mother?" or "Why don't you hate your mother?"

We may also hear, "Why does a fireman wear red suspenders?" and "If people say they hate you, what do they really think of you?"

Clinton is still being polite to the press. Soon she will decide it doesn't pay, and instead of talking about her hair she will say, "Go suck a lemon."

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