

Unjustified as Ever

ONCE again, the Opposition has called a countrywide dawn-to-dusk *hatal* without giving much thought to how people might take it. The pretext is the new budget. It could be "anti-people, fabricated, false, unrealistic" and a hoax in the judgement of the BNP and other members of the opposition alliance. But we are not sure what is so compellingly suggestive of a national crisis in it that necessitated a *hatal* call. Could it be that the opposition has read something between the lines which the rest of us have failed to do? In that case, should the opposition legislators not join the budget session and express their apprehension on the floor of the House so that we too can benefit from it? Even if the budget were anti-people, as they say it is, what is so pro-people about their *hatal* call boding a spate of bloody violence in the streets across the country? If the budgetary provisions were detrimental to the interest of common people as they claim, in what way is a *hatal* beneficial to them? We believe the opposition's call for *hatal* is premised on no more a logic, than the fact that it has to do some muscle flexing.

The argument that it has been forced to take recourse to the confrontational course for want of any other viable alternative doesn't hold much water. Parliament is the option and, unfortunately, the opposition has deliberately ignored it. We appreciate their concern that they won't be allowed to speak by the 'biased and partisan' Speaker. Their suggestion for amendment to the budget, we admit, may well not be taken into consideration, let alone incorporated. Even so, had the opposition joined the session and voiced their concern on the floor of the House, they would have been hugely benefited. First, they could expose the Speaker's bias to the ruling party and second, they could relay their apprehensions about the budget to the people through the parliament. Why doesn't the opposition understand that the Sangsads belongs to the "people" and not the ruling party.

We have heard speculations that they are planning to join the session for "a few minutes" as a technical ploy to avoid nullification of their membership on the ground of continuous absence from the parliament for 90 days. Does it not mean they value their membership? Once again, we plead with the opposition, please join the parliament and make yourselves heard, if not to the Treasury Bench, to the people then. Your abstention cannot be beneficial to either your political interest or the interest of the people. On the contrary, you run the risk of losing credibility with the masses.

Unruly Disciples

YET again the indisciplined disciples of the Peers of Charmonal and Dewanbagh clashed at the north gate of Baitul Mukarram National Mosque on Friday after Juma prayers. It seems that the sudden attack by the disciples of the Peer of Dewanbagh, allegedly backed by the cadres of Islamic Chhatra Shibir on the followers of Charmonal Peer, a leader of the Islamic Constitution Movement, was premeditated. The Charmonal folks had gathered at the north gate of the mosque after the Juma prayers to protest a bomb attack allegedly made on the car of their Peer at Bogra some two months back. The Dewanbaghis attacked the Charmonal people injuring at least 25 persons, ten of whom were admitted to the DMCH. Followers of these two Peer sahibs have been fighting pitched battles in Narayanganj and Dhaka for quite sometime now. Only some days ago the clash of these religious zealots caused the death of three persons near Narayanganj, yet there has been no sign of calming down to senses. There have always been people trading on the soft-hearted people of this country in various ways and the blind faith of a section of disciples of these Peers is causing more harm than good to the society.

Religion is absolutely a private affair of the citizens of the state and it should be left at that. Any one or any organisation mixing politics with religion and taking their rivalry on to the street to send shock waves to civic life cannot be condoned. We call upon the Peer sahibs to restrain their followers from coming to blows. They should confine their activities within their precinct.

Mayhem in Colombo

ONCE again a suicide bomber killed a senior minister and 21 others in Sri Lanka on Wednesday last. Industry minister of Sri Lanka, CV Gooneratne, fell victim as he was collecting donations for the army at his constituency in Colombo. The attack also marred the country's first War Heroes' Day, aimed at boosting the morale of troops battling Tamil rebels. Police blamed Tamil Tiger separatists, who have frequently used suicide bombers, for carrying out the attack. However, there has been no reaction from the Tigers. But the episode has raised tension and fears of a backlash against the minority Tamil community. After neck-to-neck fighting in the Jaffna Peninsula between government troops and LTTE things started looking somewhat positive in the Indian Ocean island-state but the bombing certainly came as a serious setback, especially to the Norwegian efforts for peace.

Amidst regional and international diplomatic overtures designed to bring both sides to a negotiated settlement of Sri Lanka's 17-year-long war, the latest bombing incident leads us to conclude that saboteurs get to work when military conflict starts tapering off. We condemn this act of violence. Sri Lanka is a very important and friendly country of the SAARC region whose national integrity and cohesion must find stout defenders in the Tamils and Sinhalese alike. The blood-letting and repeated obstacles in the path to negotiated settlement of the Lankan problem can only prove to be attritional.

'Wait and Watch' Policy Does Not Pay off

The biggest snag is the ethnic distance between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. They also refuse to forget the past which is littered with the memories of estrangement, killing and looting. New Delhi has readily sheltered the Tamil refugees but it has done little to help Colombo allay the Tamil fears.

It appears that the danger of Elam distorted New Delhi's normal reaction to the problems of a friendly neighbour. This is still there. The ban on the LTTE in India has been extended not because of the party record of duplicity and murder but because of the concept of Elam which posed a threat to India.

The sympathy factor of Tamils in India is more exaggerated than real. They have had experience of the LTTE when its members were officially given shelter in Tamil Nadu a few years ago. Violence and crime engulfed the area where they were settled. The Tamils in India do not want to go back to those days. At the same time, they do not want the Tamils in Sri Lanka to be only drawers of water and hewers of wood. They want them to enjoy equal citizenship in Sri Lanka.

This is why New Delhi's role to bring the LTTE to the negotiating table is crucial. The wait and watch policy has only exacerbated the problem. Vajpayee must put pressure on Karunanidhi and Vaico to make Prabhakaran realise the fullness of violence and hold talks.

This is also an opportune time for the LTTE to wrest the maximum concessions from the Sri Lankan government and to ensure that the Elam enjoys full autonomy within Sri Lanka. This will require changes in the Sri Lankan constitution as well as the consensus among political parties in the country. New Delhi can see to it once Prabhakaran comes round.

DELHI can bring the LTTE to the negotiating table. This is what Sri Lanka President Chandrika Kumaratunga said nearly three weeks ago. All have been looking towards India since. But its policy is: wait and watch. Neither the Cabinet Committee on National Security nor the Strategic Policy Group of the National Security Council has given any indication of the efforts, if any, to make the LTTE talk with the Sri Lanka government.

It is nobody's case that the situation is easy. The solution is, indeed, difficult. But what has New Delhi done to help Colombo when it is, in fact, acting as India's first line of defence? Prabhakaran said in an interview five years ago: "Eventually I have to battle India, which will not allow us to create Elam because of its own 35 million Tamils." He wants to be the Prime Minister of Elam, an independent Tamil state. Prabhakaran is indebted to Karunanidhi, who even led a march through the streets of Chennai when the LTTE was ousted from Jaffna some five years ago.

The last time Vajpayee met Karunanidhi was a month ago. They may have talked to each other on the phone after that. But this does not reflect the sense of urgency New Delhi should show or an all-out effort to arrange a dialogue between the LTTE and Colombo. Karunanidhi is on record as saying that he has faith in the handling by the Centre. But he has also said that he would be happy if the Elam came into

London, my counterpart from Sri Lanka, D. S. Attygalle, told me that Karunanidhi could solve the problem in no time. Attygalle was once associated with talks with the Tamil militants. He said: "There has to be a political solution to the problem, not a military one."

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hand. What would India do then except to evacuate the beleaguered Sri Lanka troops on humanitarian grounds, a phrase of the Vajpayee government's policy on Sri Lanka? Colombo would be so weakened after the defeat at Jaffna that it could itself wonder about the utility of talks.

Vajpayee is not even discreet. He expresses support to the LTTE openly and repeatedly. His PMK in Tamil Nadu is propagating the formation of Elam. And there is nothing Vajpayee has done to silence Vaico, who is a member of the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

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BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

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India in Sri Lankan Crisis

What exactly is the position of New Delhi on the demand of an independent state by the LTTE, and is there any consensus on this issue in India? The question of unanimity is important here because the key figures in the Indian ruling circles may not be looking at the issue from the same angle.

THE situation in Sri Lanka continues to draw international attention. Most analysts are keeping their fingers crossed about the coming event in Sri Lanka as the Tamil Tigers stepped up actions to capture the Jaffna and the government troops are equally hell-bent to defend this former Tamil stronghold. But some new developments in the last few days have raised new thoughts on a possible settlement of the conflict. One aspect of the latest developments in the Lankan front is the desperation of the rebels to strike in capital Colombo once again while simultaneously trying to move closer to Jaffna after taking control over the Elephant Pass. Suicide bombers have once again become active in the heart of the capital city. Killing one cabinet minister and at least 20 others on Wednesday creating fresh panic among the key figures who thought the rebels are now more concentrating on the war rather than such attacks.

The Tigers in the past made several such daring attacks. Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi were among such victims of the Tigers. The former was killed in Colombo while attending a government function and the latter in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu where he had gone to address an election rally as the opposition leader before the national elections in 1991. Both these killings were shocking, but they also revealed the ability of the LTTE rebels to strike at the "targets" despite heavy security measures.

The new development, which is being talked about with greater significance of late, is

because the militants sought to dictate terms even on authority of Tamil Elam for the minority Tamils in Sri Lanka. Now, what exactly is the position of New Delhi on this vexed demand of an independent state, and is there any consensus on this issue in India? The question of unanimity is important here because key figures in the Indian ruling circles may not be looking at the same angle. And certainly, the positions of the federal government appears to be in variance with a powerful regional ally who can call shots on the matter causing rapture in the ruling coalition. It may even trigger Vajpayee government's fall. However, it may be premature to think that things will go that far. The Tamils in Sri Lanka constitute nearly 18 per cent of the less than 2 crore population of the island-state and they are concentrated in the northern region. Obviously, the Tamils in India feel sympathetic for the Tamil cause in Sri Lanka and the rebels are believed to be enjoying supports from Tamil Nadu. Tamil leaders in India regardless of their political differences are supporters of Lankan Tamils. Whether it is present Chief Minister Karunanidhi of the DMK or former Chief Minister Jayalalitha of the AIADMK - all have enormous sympathy for Lankan Tamils.

The issue involving the nature of Indian support to Colombo came to the fore when New Delhi was approached to help and assist more than 30,000 Lankan soldiers believed to be trapped in the Jaffna region. India initially indicated it was willing to consider such a request if approached formally. As New Delhi was considering a

best consider humanitarian assistance if requested by Lankan government. Later, at an all-party meeting convened by the Vajpayee on policy towards Lankan tangle, several parties including the DMK demanded that even humanitarian assistance if at all come from India should cover both the Tamils and the government troops. Karunanidhi favours sufficient autonomy to the Tamils but stops short of supporting independence for them.

Now, can India support such an independent state carving out from the present Sri Lanka? Officially, it cannot. India has no reason to do that even there is a strong support for Lankan Tamils in Tamil Nadu. Arguably, New Delhi faces a dilemma and has to carefully

chart its policy on Lankan civil war. Some important figures in Colombo said that any Indian support towards an independent Tamil country would eventually contribute to "balkanisation" of India itself since this may encourage others to be separated. An independent Tamil Elam could be a danger to Indian integrity. New Delhi cannot be oblivious of these factors while pursuing its policy.

Rajiv Gandhi's government might have pondered over these possibilities and favoured a strong anti-rebel policy. With secessionists being active in some parts of the northeastern Indian region, New Delhi can ill-afford to encourage anything that may cause harm to its own interest. Furthermore, the support in Tamil Nadu for an independent Tamil state may be strong but not overwhelming since there are opposing views as well. In the aftermath of Rajiv killing for his anti-Tamil rebel policy, elections that followed had seen his party riding a sympathy wave winning most of the 39 federal seats in Tamil Nadu which had helped the Congress to return to power in 1991. However, it was not much for his anti-rebel stance.

When Sri Lankan government sends Indian assistance for its troops, it may be assumed that it is conscious of the Indian compulsions. As such, New Delhi had initially indicated its readiness to help Colombo but later backed out on influence from Karunanidhi, who has of late suggested "partition of Sri Lanka" similar to that of Czech

and Slovak republics. Alternatively, he said, Colombo must give enough powers to the Lankan Tamils.

Sri Lankan Media Minister Mangala Samaraweera said he was surprised by the remark of Karunanidhi and said "partition" of his country would result in the "balkanisation" of India. It is important to note that Indian state of Tamil Nadu, home of 55 million Indian Tamils, is separated from Sri Lanka by a narrow strip of sea. What the Lankan minister meant is quite telling.

India has opposed the demand of a separate state for the Tamils and this was echoed during the recent visit of senior US official Thomas Pickering to India. Pickering said Washington was opposed to partition of Sri Lanka and warned that its division could have long-term implications for India. The remarks of Karunanidhi on partition came after the visit of Pickering and it did not take others by surprise. Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar said that Colombo believes India would not encourage the secessionist Tamils in his country. True, but India has to weigh the pros and cons of two sides. In the ultimate analysis one may conclude that New Delhi is unlikely to come out with support of partition of Sri Lanka despite Karunanidhi's influence on the government and his line of thinking.

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To the Editor ...

English medium schools vs discriminating thoughts

Sir, This is in reference to the letter "English medium schools" by Mr Mushtaq Ahmed published in your esteemed daily on 6 June 2000. In the letter the writer has raised a number of complaints regarding the English medium schools and education system of our country. However, I would like to differ with him on the matter.

In a democratic country with a free market economy, one clearly comes across a choice between the cheaper lot of good quality and the less-cheaper or expensive lot of very good quality of products and services. Which of the two, one will prefer is totally one's own option; on the other hand, lamenting about not getting the best with the least is an impractical approach. Sorting out Mr Mushtaq's complaints is quite difficult but at least below is what can be said against his comments:

When the writer had the option to choose either the "reasonable and economic" government educational institutes or the "school-like centres", why did he prefer the latter "from the day one of his son's schooling"? Throughout his letter he has written nothing but against English medium schools criticising everything about them. Then how come he chose his own son to be educated under the same system? Is there nothing good about these schools?

Under what circumstances do a country and its people select academic text for private schools mostly from foreign countries (definitely not India alone but Singapore, USA, England etc.) is not at all abstruse to the literate. Although there is no harm in obtaining knowledge through books originated in other countries. In

seven and above are designed to assess their standard of English on global scale. These are not at all mandatory and are opted by the parents for their children.

Where it has become a practice to crucify education by mass cheating and other mal-practice adopted by students and teachers alike in government and semi-government schools at national level, are such letters as that of Mr Mushtaq not blowing out the last lamp at the dead of night with the sunrise still a far cry?

Ayesha Hossain
Dharmundi R/A,
Dhaka

Do we have a loadshedding policy?

Sir, Saturday, 3rd of June was a weekly holiday and a hot sultry day as well. And on this day, we, the residents of Moghbazar, Noyatola, had to experience a total ten and half-hours of loadshedding. Starting from 11:00 AM to 1:00 PM for two hours; then from 2:30 PM to 4:30 PM for two hours; then again from 6:00 PM to 9:00 PM for three hours and finally for another half hour from 9:15 PM when the flood light of Dhaka Stadium was shut down where the Asia Cup Tournament was being held.

Was it so necessary to put an entire area under loadshedding for 10 and half-hours while others enjoyed Asia Cup tournament? There were children, elderly people and sick people in the area, who DESA employees think about them?

I would also like to ask our policymakers whether they ever considered that a country having acute power shortage should refrain from organising day-night cricket tournament? They should realise that if smooth power supply cannot be ensured then people of this country are not interested in having such day-night tournaments.

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Dr Sabrina Rashid
Dhaka Cantt.

And moreover, 3 June was not one of those days when the country was experiencing drastic power shortage, then why there was so mismanagement that a area had to experience more than ten hours of loadshedding while other areas experienced only one or two hours? This is absolute negligence of duty and should be properly investigated.

And finally I would like to know whether there is a policy to cut power in certain areas where no political high-ups live. If there isn't then why should it suffer so immensely? And if there is such policy then why the political dignitaries would enjoy such facility? Don't they always say that they are to serve the people? Is this the way of serving people?

Syed Tarique Islam
Dhaka

Shopping malls everywhere

Sir, What is the use of building huge shopping centres and malls? All the purpose these serve is to sell foreign merchandise (as we can see now) - dresses, shoes, cosmetics, jewellery etc. Our products rarely get a place there.

Whom will that serve? Only the rich class of course and the countries whose materials are sold and who need a market there.

Will it do any good to the general masses or to the ordinary, struggling middle class that doesn't have piles of black of white money to shop at such places?

Seldom we see any new schools, colleges, mills, factories being constructed, or any new roads paved. All of which the public is in dire need of for education, for jobs, for decreasing traffic jams.

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THE National Rifle Association has just finished its annual convention and re-elected Charlton Heston to a third term as president. I'm sorry to keep writing about guns and rifles, but I am a Second Amendment junkie.

My thoughts have to do with the guns we are selling abroad. We in the United States are safe and sound, but can you say the same about people in Afghanistan? The demand gets greater every day. Even Turkey wants new ones to use against the Kurds.

When you watch the evening news you become aware of how weapons are being used in Sierra Leone