

Review Hartal Decision

Tuesday was in many ways a successful day for the Opposition BNP and its alliance partners. Begum Zia held a very big public rally at Paltan Maidan which was rounded off by a 'mass procession' she led through some city streets which could be seen as a show of strength. More importantly, the opposition leader utilised with maximum effect, so it seemed, the vehicle of mass meeting and contact to highlight the government's follies enumerated by her as partisan policies, terrorism, law and order downside, corruption, campus disorder, tension at the border, killings in Chittagong and electricity crisis.

Although she had levelled such charges against the ruling party through different fora from time to time, but to reel those off at a big rally to drum up public support for the opposition was something different. The other opposition alliance partners also held their rallies to air their views. What we wish to drive home is that Tuesday's mass rally served the opposition's purpose much better than it would have been if they had resorted to a hartal on that day.

The reason why we are having to say this is because the opposition BNP and its alliance partners have called for hartal on August 6, a Sunday to make it a sabbatical as usual for three days inclusive of the weekend. That a hartal had not been announced by the opposition for quite sometime does not legitimise their calling it now. Because the purposes behind the proposed hartal, as mentioned in the public rally, being protestations against 'anarchy, terrorism and repression on BNP activists' those stood squarely served, as we look at it, by the massive Paltan rally itself. More such meet-the-people initiatives will strengthen the opposition's cause as opposed to the hartal hype which actually proves damaging to its image. Public opinion surveys have invariably pointed to the unpopularity of hartals because of the imposition factor embedded in them, let alone the hardships caused by their frequency.

The political parties need not resort to hartal to keep their cadres warm, the latter would be activated just the same by imaginative programmes of engagements like public meetings and peaceful demonstrations. Moreover, at this juncture, what the opposition needs is neither a hartal nor a call for the government's ouster but preparations for the general election due less than a year away. As a vital part of that preparation it is imperative that they talk with the government on electoral reform and schedules for elections.

Repression by Saalish

We thought that Noorjahan, a housewife in Sylhet who was stoned to death in 1995 after the elders of her village had found her 'guilty' of alleged infidelity, would be the last instance of fatwa-related repression on women. But the humiliation inflicted on Rashida Begum, another housewife of a village in Narayanganj, by the religious bigots has proved us wrong. According to a report in *Prothom Alo*, Rashida had allowed a young man, a resident of the adjacent village, to wait for her husband inside her room. That was enough for the zealots of the village to pounce on her. In public, she was whipped 20 times for 'her offence.' All these, according to the self-proclaimed religious leaders of the village, were done in line with Islamic law. What's more, they deemed it 'unnecessary' to seek intervention of the police for such a trivial matter and decided to let the matter be settled in *saalish*.

The incident has multi-dimensional implications. First, it amply proves that special act or no act, unless the existing law is effectively enforced, repression on women on one pretext or the other would go on. What good did the Prevention of Repression on Women and Children Act, 2000 do to Rashida? Second, it also shows that despite growing concern and resistance within the society against them the *fatwabaz* elements rule the roost in places. Third and the most crucial message that the incident bears concerns the society's refusal to empower women. With her husband psychologically unstable, Rashida used to run the family affairs, a proposition people like Khoka Matabbar, the mastermind of the heinous design, found very difficult to accept. Rashida had no way of saving herself from the wrath of these bigoted and chauvinistic minds.

Reports say, Rashida left her village, disgraced and distraught. Her husband himself says she has been sinned against. Neither Rashida's silent but loquacious protest nor her husband's plea stands a chance against Khoka Matbar or his fellow *fatwabaz*. Unless the hands of law intervene and mete out exemplary punishment to the perpetrators, our effort to ensure empowerment and economic emancipation of women would continue to be undermined by the dogmatists and chauvinists.

A Welcome Decision

The decision of the Shipping Ministry to demolish 104 illegal structures on the Buriganga is welcome. Though such a constructive move could have been taken much earlier before enough damage was done to the river, the belated decision nonetheless will have positive impact on the river and its environment. These installations include the ones of enakalyan Sangstha and other organisations. The BIWTA has already served notice on the so-called owners of these installations to remove their illegal structures. Public notification to this effect will now be made through newspapers allowing a month's time to remove these installations or face demolition.

A report in the *Prothom Alo* on Wednesday said that the navigability of the Buriganga over a distance of 17 miles from east to west must be maintained for better functioning of the river port. Some illegal structures are creating impediments to navigation and other activities of the port. We hope the authorities will not rest until the whole exercise of making the river navigable and free from illegal occupation is completed. We hope the activities of the Shipping Ministry and WTA will not be confined to serving notices only. They must in all sincerity remove all illegal structures under a time-bound plan.

Two disasters took place on Tuesday, July 25, 2000. An Air France Concorde, a supersonic passenger plane, en route to New York, crashed in Gonesse, near Charles de Gaulle airport. And so did the Camp David summit on Middle East peace after having been on for about two weeks at an almost supersonic speed. The Concorde crash left 113 people killed (109 in the plane and four on the ground), one does not know how many would be the ultimate victims of the crashed Camp David talks.

As the situation stands, it would probably have been better to terminate the talks when US President Bill Clinton had to leave for the Group of Eight Summit in Okinawa allowing the Israeli and Palestinian leaders to return home and ponder over the issues and the progress made. A fresh summit could be arranged before the crucial date of September 13, 2000 for a final chance for peace.

But, as it seems, all the three leaders in Camp David summit were in a hurry for different reasons, though to strike the ME peace deal. Unfortunately, they failed. President Clinton, while talking to the press after the summit said, 'The two sides are not able to reach an agreement at this time,' leaving the scope for further summit in a couple of weeks. This needs to be pursued vigorously as temporary or final departure of any one from the scene would make ME peace terribly uncertain.

Prime Minister Ehud Barak, having barely survived a second no-confidence motion in the Knesset (parliament), came to Washington for the summit. He, however, said before leaving for Washington, 'I am not going alone (to the States). With me is still all the wide public of Israel, citizens who hope a modern Israel can be built on peace and security, a country that is ending 30 years of ruling another people.' But the Opposition Likud leader Ariel Sharon said that the Prime Minister did not represent anyone except himself. Even former Prime Minister Netanyahu reappeared in the political scene of Israel after a long time and heavily criticised

Barak for giving away the nation's capital.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who is seemingly in failing health, has been facing tremendous pressure from his people to recover all the occupied territories including East Jerusalem which the Palestinians want as the capital of the Palestinian State. The Palestinians, particularly the younger generation, are getting increasingly impatient over the sluggish peace process. He is also promise-bound to declare Palestinian State on September 13 this year, regardless of what happened at Camp David.

President Clinton leaves the White House in a few months and must find a solution in order to make ME peace a legacy of his presidency. Because of this and certainly for the welfare of the people of the region, he appealed to both Arafat and Barak to 'find a way' which they could not despite their best efforts.

However, the summit had started off against a grim political and diplomatic background on July 11. Joel Peter of Ben Gurion University said, 'Never before have the stakes been so high, the issues so complex, the leaders so weak.' As the stakes were really very high, President Clinton personally chaired some of the crucial meetings and tried to bridge the yawning gaps that divide the Palestinians and the Israelis. Marathon meetings many of them very late into the night failed to produce the results. The parties remained divided on major issues, namely status of Jerusalem, borders of the Palestinian State, refugees, settlements etc. After nine days of intense negotiations, the news blackout was lifted and it was announced that negotiations had broken up without any agreement. One side blamed the other. Barak was seen as 'behaving like settlers' and Arafat 'not a partner of peace'.

Later on, however, there was an agreement to continue negotiations. Expected, turned out to be the hardest of all. Clinton emphasised on this while talking to the press and praised, albeit mildly, Prime Minister Barak for making some moves on the issue of sovereignty of Jerusalem from his basic 'red line' which President Arafat apparently could not. Here it needs to be pointed out that it is Barak who has to make moves as he is occupying the entire Jerusalem and not Arafat.

Israel wants Jerusalem to remain its eternal undivided capital. A Jewish community weekly in the US published an ad saying Jerusalem 'has been the capital of the Jewish people for over 3,000 years'. Similar claims were made by the Israeli side. History does not substantiate such claims. The history of Jerusalem is very long and complex. Jerusalem has witnessed many wars over thousands of years. Many invaders including Greeks,

Romans, Persians, came, fought

wars over Jerusalem, and occupied it before being thrown out by others. The Temple in Jerusalem

appeared to be the main target. Among many attacks one can cite the destruction of the Temple by Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC, when the Jews were taken into captivity. The return of the Jews from Babylonian captivity took place in about 520 BC and they rebuilt the Temple but the final destruction of the Temple was under Titus in 70AD.

With this sort of long and complex history where all three religions of the people of the Faith are involved, negotiations will obviously be extremely difficult and unless descendants of Abraham decide to be flexible and try to

ever may be the ultimate agreement on the issue of sovereignty. The idea of joint sovereignty in its present form put forward by the US has been discarded by the Palestinians for obvious reasons as their claim is for full sovereignty over East Jerusalem. The details of the proposals are yet not available, but the present proposal in the form of three sections with some form of Palestinian sovereignty over the suburb area of East Jerusalem including Abu Dis which excludes the Old City was a non-starter. The ideal solution that the Palestinians could readily accept is something that gives full Palestinian sovereignty over East Jerusalem but problem lies with the Jewish religious site. Therefore, the idea of joint or shared sovereignty seems to be the possible way out, but it has to be worked out in a way that would take care of the sentiments of both the Palestinians and the Israelis. Israeli claim of full sovereignty over the biblical 'Promised Land' cannot solve the problems. In any case, the land might have been 'promised' to the 'wandering people' for homes but there were already people in that 'promised land' with their sovereignty on that land. This needs to be considered seriously before rejecting the claim of those who live in that land before. Therefore, the idea of joint sovereignty deserves consideration and the following may give clues to any future deal:

The new area of East Jerusalem including those three villages with Abu Dis may go under full sovereignty of the Palestinians. They may be prepared to set up their Parliament and other administrative establishments, as already indicated, in the new area, as there is hardly any space in and around the Old City for such purposes.

The entire area of the Old City with all the religious sites including the Wailing Wall should be under the joint sovereignty of the Palestinians and the Israelis. But,

initially, the UN should be involved for some agreed period for making the system work. There must be complete freedom of access to the people of the Faith into the respective religious sites. Politically, administratively and for all other purposes, the Arabs of East Jerusalem should belong to the Palestinian state and the people of the Jewish faith should belong to Israel. This could be a unique solution to the unique problem; one does not have to look for precedents. Indeed, this could be a precedent for others in situation so demands.

The area of East Jerusalem would have to undergo some changes as the new areas would have to be brought under East Jerusalem and the Jewish settlements in the extended areas beyond the Green Line may go to Israel.

Alternatively, Palestinians should have sovereignty over East Jerusalem minus the Western Wall and adjoining areas with Jewish areas and other establishments over which Israel should have sovereignty. The access to the Western Wall can be through the Dung Gate. Even today the Jewish people exclusively use the Dung Gate for entry into the Western Wall.

Similar sort of arrangement may lead to an acceptable compromise and thus end the half-a-century-old conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Even Hamas might agree to such an arrangement. Therefore, both the leaders must make bold moves towards a solution. The September 13 dead line is made. If necessary this should be moved towards the end of the year allowing maximum chance to the peace all have been desperately looking for.

Any such deal with enough security guarantees from the states and backed by adequate financial assistance from the US and the rest of the world may satisfy both the Israelis and the Palestinians. After all, the people in the area minus the radicals want peace with security. Any deal that can guarantee peace with security would be acceptable to the people.

Battle over Jerusalem

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Spotlight on Middle East

Muslehuddin Ahmad

OPINION

Politics of 'Congenial Atmosphere'

A H Dewan

After their long boycott, the elected opposition members to the nation's parliament had raised great expectations by their announcement that they would return to parliament to foil AL government's bid to make constitutional amendments. People took it as a redeeming gesture from the opposition as to ward off the long standoff they have been maintaining. People were also in a mood of gratification that the lack-lustre Jatiya Sangsad would after a long time wear a vibrant look and they would behold the lawmakers busy in dispensing their legislative stints and that they would keep their marks to put the treasury bench members on their toes which would ultimately help the nation get a comparatively good budget. But to everybody's utter dismay they had walked in only to walk out paying no attention to the imperative necessity of their presence because of the national Budget. Later they let the nation know that they would return to the nation's house only when congenial atmosphere returned and decided to let the matter be settled in *saalish*.

As the PM sensed that BNP and its allies had a card up their sleeve, she and her cabinet colleagues were prompt to unveil the motive of their (opposition's) return by saying that the opposition had gone to the parliament to save their membership which was but on the verge of annulment following their absence from the parliament sessions consecutively for 90 days. Everything became crystal clear to the countrymen that their demand for creating congenial atmosphere was starkly a phoney plea. People found them playing a dirty trick with them. It is unfortunate

that the opposition lawmakers do not feel any scruple to belie people's expectations by boycotting the parliament and to sheer displeasure of many, by showing up there only for signing their attendance.

It is never a one way track to create congenial atmosphere. Although the onus lies first with the government to bring the opposition into confidence, the government, though belatedly, made overtures to the Opposition Leader in the House on a number of occasions. It was the latter who turned down all the offers. But they also could not have evaded their responsibility of coming to terms with the government taking into account the national interest above all else and of their being important as country's lawmakers to contribute to that end. The charm of being called the Leader of the Opposition in the House, Deputy Leader and so and so forth as the media continue to call them even after their wilful nonperformance is well weighed up by them as holding their image still high, besides the perks they enjoy.

In fact matters lay elsewhere. The way the opposition especially BNP who manoeuvred the JP and the JI to join forces started behaving right from the AL's ascend to power, it betrays no room for doubt that it was more vindictive in its plans and programmes than its legislative role it had/had to play in the parliament. Nevertheless, if they could make the House their centre for stump oratory, instead of the streets, to raise issues, to bring allegations against the government's follies and encounter the government with incisive debate over those issues and allegations including

the abysmally deteriorating law and order, it would have created impact on the voters of next general election. But they continued resorting to unparliamentary demeanours and despite their all efforts, covert or overt, perhaps made little sway in too much tarnishing the image of the AL government let alone its tumbling down, rather their boycotting paved the way for AL's easy sailing in its legislative pursuits. But it is pity that the opposition are not reckoning that by doing so they are damaging their credibility.

Last but not the least, the opposition MPs have inalienable rights vested in them by popular votes to stage walk-in and stay-in to speak for the people and against the government and its misdeeds, and if they are barred from doing that, they have every right to walk out whatever be the atmosphere. Therefore it makes no sense that they would abstain from applying their inalienable rights for inestimable time on the plea of absence of congenial atmosphere. Then Voltaire's utterance that has been inculcated as an important component of democracy and that says, 'I may disagree with what you say, but I must defend your rights to say' has no relevance in the democracy practiced in Bangladesh.

The elected opposition lawmakers are not willing to take advantage of that right. And so long BNP remains out of power, things look like that they will continue to loathe and oppose AL and will present us this or that implausible ground to keep themselves away from their constitutional obligations to the people, come what may to them.

On 9th July 2000 and just before the Parliament was prorogued, Prime Minister Hasina spoke on corruption, irregularities and terrorism in Bangladesh. The PM deserves our attention for candidly saying about the special phenomenon that prevails in the country after her four years long rule. She spoke her bitter experience of fighting against corruption, terrorism and irregularities that plagued society and administration, and as has been reported by the media.

'In absence of democratic practice for long, these cancers rooted deep in every sphere of national life, and it became very difficult to come out of this vicious circle,' she is said to have told lawmakers. In her 48-minute valedictory speech, she painted a grim picture of adverse impacts of corruption, terrorism, neglect of duty by doctors and indifference of teachers, resulting in malpractice in public examinations. The PM lamented that corruption and irregularity pervaded the entire system from an orderly right up to top brass, the UNB report published in The Daily Star of 10th July 2000, continued...

The situation has gone to such an extent that even my recommendation does not work in the face of bribery in getting a job,' the PM said bluntly about the disarray in society and in her own administration.

'The question is who could detect this corruption. By mustard seeds? But the ghost itself lies in the mustard,' she said. Then she continued speaking about corruption and malpractice in hospitals, schools and colleges, and in every sphere of national life. Finally she asked the opposition 'not to create any obstruction to acts of public interest'. She spoke about unresolved problems over the decades and concluded her speech saying that a country gets infected with problems and irregularities if democracy is not there.'

'When so many problems are there, the question comes up again if there had been any govt

she declare her assets for the public and ask her ministers to do so? What about the other people hanging around her? Can she claim that she is reasonably clean and that she has honestly discharged her duties and has never benefited unduly of the power and the privileges that has been vested in her by law? How a Prime Minister of a poor country like Bangladesh could undertake so much unnecessary foreign trips as she has done? How many allegedly inefficient and highly corrupt relations of her has she put on top government jobs? By talking about corruption, irregularities and terrorism whom was she trying to impress?

The country was corrupt and there was no democracy from 1975-1996, as she said, and it may be very much true. But the question is how much improvement she has made of the situation in the last four years of her rule? Have the law and order been improved, have crimes like rape and killing in the country minimised since 1996? She gives us a dismal picture of the society at large. She confirms candidly that the country is highly infected by corruption, terrorism and misrule. But does she admit that her rule has contributed to these ills greatly instead of checking it? The goons have been plundering the country, terrorists have taken law in their own hands and kidnappers and rapists have been doing their job with full impunity. Could she stop we are not talking about improving the deteriorating situation of law and order in the country in her long four years of rule that she said to people in her election campaign to be her first priority?

'The ghost itself lies in the mustard seeds', she said. Does not it clearly mean that the problem lies in her governance? If it is so, and if she has fathomed the situation correctly, why does not she quit the Prime Minister's office? Someone who publicly admits that she has failed to rule the country diminishes her right to cling to power!

To the Editor ...

Dengue and Finance Minister

Sir, A glaring example of the government's campaign against dengue was witnessed by the people of Dhanmondi area on the evening of 24 July. On that fatal evening, a group of well-equipped persons came to road number 3/A and moved to the Finance Minister's (SAMS Kibria) residence and sprayed aerosol for about half-an-hour.

The ordinary (I) people of the area felt contendantic anticipating some share of the benefit. But their expectation proved wrong when the municipal contingent, after their operation at Finance Minister's house alone, was beginning to leave the area hurriedly. Aggrieved with this act of indifference, some people of the locality approached the municipal men and demanded an explanation and requested for some anti-dengue action in other houses too. Rubbing salt into their wounds, the municipal men replied that they were categori-

cally directed to spray aerosol at the Minister's house alone and they had already exhausted the entire stock of aerosol at the Minister's premise.

Long live our dengue-free ministers (and Mayor of course).

An Ordinary Citizen Dhaka

Deadly dengue
Sir, A number of people have already died and many are suffering from the deadly disease dengue. And to check this fatal disease, massive cleanliness programme is a must. But the government seems to be very much apathetic about the issue. For example, the inhabitants of Shamoli area are passing their days in danger as DCC seems to be absolutely oblivious about the cleanliness of the area. For days, garbage litters scattered on the roads, dustbins remain unclean and moreover many roads are full of puddles which we all know are the breeding place of mosquitoes.

Will the authority concerned please take necessary steps and protect the people from this

deadly disease?

Kathika Rahman Dhaka

Who will protect us?