

A Wise Move

THE opposition, especially its leader the BNP, we say thanks for withdrawing your proposed hartal on the 6th of August. Hartal, as we have always said, is a bad thing for the country, for the economy and, most of all, for the people. So withdrawal of such an anti-people programme must be greeted with joy, and as a victory of commonsense.

Our political parties never withdrew a hartal once they called it, even when they knew that the call was a mistake in the first place. The reason given privately always was that such a move would make them lose face and appear weak in the public eye. We are delighted to note that this time around the opposition was able to overcome such silly arguments and boldly face the fact that hartal is a bad and unpopular action and withdrawing under the pretext of dengue was humanitarian as it was wise.

To the ruling party, we say, don't interpret this to be a sign of weakness of the opposition (for calling a hartal you really don't need too much strength) but as a sign of their growing sobriety and wisdom. Your effort should be to build on that trend. Instead of mocking them for not having the public support for carrying through with hartal you should congratulate them for taking a pro-people move and look for ways as to how the opposition can be weaned away from confrontation. But for that to happen, the ruling party itself must decide to move away from confrontation. We see no sign of that.

To both parties we say, people have their backs to the wall. They are tired of your brand of confrontational politics, a politics that ignores their problems - both the day-to-day and the long term ones - and talks only about capturing power or dislodging the other from it. Heed people's views before they punish you both for the damage you are doing to us all.

We Back the Govt on This

SCIENTISTS of the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council (BARC) are agitating against an agriculture ministry decision to appoint a finance man as the member-director, finance of the institution. Traditionally, this has not been the case, and that is the ground for the agitation. The protesters' question is why should an outsider be brought into BARC and why also a man from another cadre service should occupy a job that belongs to BARC people or at best be given to a person from the agri-cadre service only.

All these arguments are tenuous at best, or highly motivated and geared to protecting some vested interest at worst. We think the government is correct to have taken this step and back it totally. These are our arguments. First, we must become more and more aware that financial discipline is the key to effective management and the continued success for any institution, including those who conduct research. In fact it is perhaps more necessary for a research body because the attitude in such places can easily be that since we are researchers we don't need to be bothered about financial discipline. Second, it is far better to have a professional finance person to run the finance department than somebody from the agri-cadre. Traditionally, we Bangalis have always underestimated importance of financial management, confusing it with accounting and even that in the narrowest sense of keeping a book of expenses and receipts. Things have changed enormously but our ideas and attitudes have not. In addition, the ministry has taken the present decision in line with the directives of the relevant parliamentary standing committee, BARC's own board and the recommendation of the present chief of the organisation. In fact, the ministry would have been guilty of violating BARC's own recommendation and the advice of the parliamentary standing committee if it had done otherwise.

We find no substance - either legal or administrative or moral - in the protest by the BARC staff and employees. We have reasons to believe that this protest is being fanned by people who may have a vested interest in preventing a finance professional taking charge of the BARC. Financial irregularities have been discovered in the working of the institution, which needs to be set right for the betterment of all, especially all the staff and employees of this premier agri-research body.

Employment in Rural Areas

ALTHOUGH an issue of crucial significance, generation of more employment in the rural areas has so far been perfunctorily addressed. Wednesday's brainstorming session in the city on Reproductive Health Right of Adolescent Girls: A Basic Human Right brought to the fore vulnerability of rural girls who travel to Dhaka in search of employment. The number is staggering; about 1000 adolescents, aged between 10 to 19, migrate to Dhaka city everyday. Such a steady influx naturally puts strain on a city which is already bursting in the seams. Besides, the urban life turns out to be an endless nightmare for many of these hapless girls. The work they usually get are hazardous with poor pay. Moreover, they have neither healthcare coverage nor social security. Then, there is the almost inevitable experience of sexual harassment. Yet, unendurable poverty in the rural areas leave them with no choice but to migrate.

These are all common knowledge. We have had seminars and symposia on the issue, both in the public and the private sectors. On several occasions, the government aired its plan to generate jobs in the countryside. That's where the issue has been laid to rest. The non-government organisations (NGOs), of course, stand out for their tireless effort in this regard; but they cannot tackle the problem all by themselves. Needed is a comprehensive plan with inputs from our development partners, the private sector, the NGOs, the government and other stakeholders. The government should play the facilitator, providing policy support to attract and sustain more investment in job generation in the rural areas.

Migration to the urban areas is the last resort for the rural people, especially women and young girls. Unless their backs are pressed against the wall, they don't want to leave their homesteads. We hope the people at the helm would appreciate the fact with empathy and devise means to create jobs for them.

Justice Delayed, Not Denied

The ousting of Jethmalani from the cabinet and Thackeray's surrender to the police have a lesson. The machinery for cleanliness and justice operate slowly. But it does operate. And no man, however high, can escape its reach. People should never give up hope, nor slacken their pressure.

PRIME Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee deserves congratulations on two counts: one, for the firmness with which he handled the ousting of Ram Jethmalani from the cabinet, and two, for the way in which he resisted the pressure to abort action by the Maharashtra government against Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray.

Take the first. A few months ago allegations were made on the floor of the House in Parliament that Jethmalani, then Urban Development Minister, had restored the allotment of land for a hotel and a guest house to M/S M.S. Shoes, even when they had faulted on payment of installments. The company had also lost the case in the High Court. The Prime Minister promised to hold an inquiry to verify the charge against Jethmalani.

During the budget session of the Rajya Sabha in 1999, I submitted a question to find out whether the inquiry on the land deal had been completed and what the contents of the report were, if it was ready. I got a written reply from the Rajya Sabha secretariat that the information could not be divulged "in public interest." This shocked me to no end. My question did not relate to any defense matter. Then why was the secrecy? I wrote a letter to the Prime Minister saying: "This confirms my fears that certain information is sought to be kept back." I also said: "If it (the report) is withheld, as is the government's decision, it will create doubts which are not good for the government's image." The Prime Minister phoned me up to say

that he had entrusted the matter to Attorney General Soli Sorabjee and that I should check with him. I met him. He said he would require "some time" to study the problem before arriving at any conclusion. He took a few months to do so. But he was reluctant to tell me anything. Whenever I contacted him, he would be evasive in his reply. However, in the first week of July, he told me that he had sent back the file and that I should check with the Prime Minister. On July 13, I wrote another letter to the Prime Minister: "Please let me know where does the matter stand. I await your reply." Ten days later Jethmalani submitted his resignation. I am told the Prime Minister discussed my letter with a few ministers. But I never heard from him.

The Attorney General, according to information, had said in his report that the charge regarding M.S. Shoes was a serious one and required deeper probe by the CBI. He wanted Jethmalani to be kept away from the process of inquiry. How could a minister under suspicion stay in the cabinet must have been the Prime Minister's dilemma. He had no alternative except to tell him to quit.

Home Minister L.K. Advani intervened at this stage. He

pleaded with the Prime Minister not to drop Jethmalani. Advani reportedly even suggested a change in Jethmalani's portfolio but he did not want him to be dropped from the cabinet. The Prime Minister remained firm. He was conscious of the displeasure he would incur in the Shiv Sena, which has 15 members in the Lok Sabha and which is a member of the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Jethmalani, who won the Rajya Sabha seat with the Shiv Sena

sent to the President with a forwarding letter by the Prime Minister.

The PMO has unnecessarily tried to dilute Vajpayee's stance not to compromise with the charge of corruption. It has been saying that Jethmalani has gone because of his tiff with the Chief Justice of India over the appointment of MRTPC chairman. This was only a minor irritant. The real reason was what he did as Urban Development Minister in the M.S.

Chief Justice so as to divert the people's attention from the charge of corruption. I personally think that parliament should summon the Attorney General - it can do so under the constitution - and ask him to tell the full story so that a clear picture emerges. Jethmalani is parading himself as a martyr. He should be exposed. Similarly, Vajpayee took up Bal Thackeray's case with the same conviction and determination he showed while dealing with Jethmalani. Even when the latter, the Law Minister at that time, said that the centre could direct Maharashtra not to arrest Thackeray, the Prime Minister rejected the advice. He did not want to give Thackeray any quarter.

The Shiv Sena ministers, Manohar Joshi and Suresh Prabhu, too, put pressure on the Prime Minister to stall the arrest of Thackeray. Vajpayee reportedly told them that the centre could neither play an "active role," nor provide any aid to Thackeray if the Mumbai police arrested him. New Delhi, despite Advani's discomfiture, treated Thackeray's surrender to police as a non-issue. Indeed, the case turned out to be a damp squib. The state government had not prepared the case properly, though it made noises about the repercussions. Thackeray's arrest would have. Vaj-

payee felt cut up when the Supreme Court expressed its "distress and concern" over the statements by some of his cabinet ministers. He did not want them to go against the government's official line: the law must take its own course. The Prime Minister's own stand all along has been that the centre should not oppose the prosecution of those who have been named in the Srikrishna report on the Mumbai riots in the wake of the Babri masjid demolition on December 6, 1992. It is, however, strange that the centre rejected the state government's request for additional paramilitary forces. Knowing how the Shiv saimiks run amuck on Thackeray's order, the desire of Mumbai to have more policemen to tackle the law and order problem was understandable. But the Maharashtra government should have known that the Home Ministry under Advani would have never acceded to the request. Even asking for such a help was a mistake. The state was justified in withdrawing its forces deployed at various central government establishments in Mumbai, besides pulling out the security personnel attached to the Sena leaders.

The ousting of Jethmalani from the cabinet and Thackeray's surrender to the police have a lesson. The machinery for cleanliness and justice operate slowly.

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BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

support is very close to Bal Thackeray. Still the Prime Minister did not relent. But after Jethmalani's resignation, he had to mollify the Sena and give him a clean chit. The PM did not disclose Attorney General's noting. In fact, at one stage, the Prime Minister thought of addressing a letter to the President to suggest that Jethmalani be dropped from the cabinet. The latter was taking his own time to respond to the Prime Minister's advice to tender his resignation. Willy-nilly, Jethmalani faxed his resignation. This was immediately

Shoes case. In fact, the PMO should have told how Vajpayee, despite pressures, did not allow Jethmalani to continue in the cabinet once the Attorney General put a question mark over his integrity.

Jethmalani can raise as much dust as he likes to cloud the issue. He can go on heaping abuses on the Attorney General and singing songs in his own praise. The fact is that he would have faced an inquiry by the CBI even if, by some arrangement, he had stayed on in the cabinet. He preferred to make indiscreet remarks against the

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Financial apocalypse loomed ominously on Oct 12. Strangely the previous regime had a Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde approach to the economy. The documentation of the economy is a must and the government gets an "A" for determination and effort. It fails miserably in the modus operandi of tax surveys, the two should have been separated.

AS I SEE IT

Ikrum Sehgal writes from Karachi

is unrealistic if the CBR does not get a move on. With a scalpel to the CBR, the extra Rs 80 billion targeted will be a piece of cake. Along with honesty you need deliverability. When that one-window operation becomes one in actual fact and cuts out the thousand and one rules that Shehrezade of the Arabian Nights would have given her eye-teeth for, we will have investment mostly from our own expatriates. Reviving the manufacturing sector certainly do not burden the Services Sector that is the only area of business presently capable of providing more and more jobs. It costs \$ 50000 to create a new job in this manufacturing sector, only \$ 500 (in Pakistan Rupees) to create one by the private security services. About 500000 residential and commercial units presently need guards, potentially a million more blue collar jobs and for every ten blue collar jobs at least one white collar one, but guess who gets taxed almost out of existence?

And what about our agriculture sector which is the backbone of our economy and needs much more sustenance than the financial institutions than presently available? We have had a good wheat crop. Let's keep praying the weather holds for the cotton crop to come in. Our Finance Minister (FM) is hostage to the bureaucrats who are past masters at fudging figures, the last decade in particular. The military regime needs to mount a twin mission inter-

active assault to free the FM's mind to do the job that was expected of him and set the economy free from its long-time kidnappers.

Merited appointment and promotions will go a long way to de-politicise the state institutions. Unfortunately merit is a disqualifier in Pakistan. Not to say that people with merit have not made it to the top but few and far between and mostly by chance. Unless we stop promoting undeserving (and undesirably) people for all the wrong reasons, we will never be able to escape the client-patron nature of appointments and promotion, a crony system that targets merit instead of eulogising it. Unfair promotion is not only at the cost of someone more deserving but efficiency and honesty (that are the hallmark of merit) are frustrated. The notorious gullible public will never accept such persons who stand out as symbols that merit does not pay but negative qualities and attributes do.

The military regime is giving top priority to solving the water problem, without more reservoirs we are dead (and it will not be in the water). But how do we convince the smaller Provinces that Kalabagh Dam is not a Punjabi conspiracy to deprive tailenders Sindh of water and NWFP of land? We badly need Kalabagh but can we attempt it without irreparably damaging the unity of the country? Are these alternatives, and if not, can we have an open TV debate among knowledgeable experts from all Provinces

in language that the layman understands? Today Punjab is equated to Serbia, it may not be justified but facing up to reality and countering rabid nationalists in fact and perception both is a tall order.

Law and order is within limits at the present time but the portents for the future are alarming, both in the context of sectarianism and ethnicity. Focusing on police reforms as well as comprehensive citizens' and alien registration, the regime must also take initiatives to exorcise the root causes of disorder, economic shortcomings and disparity leading to mass unemployment and frustration. To compound issues the law enforcement agencies are not properly equipped to handle the situation, the favourite pursuit of our intelligence agencies being to target individuals on personal vendettas out of a combination of parochialism, jealousy and misinformation. See how planted "facts mixed with fiction" are used to campaign against the critics of government. Is this the role and mandate of intelligence agencies? Law and order will never get better unless our covert agencies perform not only to their ability but to their mandate.

Devolution of power to the grassroots is an important and

sincere cornerstone of this regime. Barring one or two individuals lower down the hierarchy having business ambitions no one has any personal agenda. The important concept of a "run-off" election instead of "first past the post" is a vital ingredient for real majority rule in a democracy. Theory has not taken account of ground realities, a tribal society requires an Assembly to include more than two/three tribes, castes, etc for homogeneity or we are in serious trouble on the Yugoslavia pattern.

Moreover the Province has to retain some control, alternatives are either (1) more Provinces and District Assemblies or (2) the same number of Provinces and Divisional Assemblies. Moreover a linkage between administration at lower level and representation in the Assemblies must be established by having the elected administrators be also the representatives in the Assemblies. We must not hasten into devolution on the pattern of District Assemblies suggested by NRB presently that is a sure recipe for disaster.

The last point on the CE's agenda, "national morale", is very much dependent upon the six already discussed. They will lead to good governance, that is the touchstone to the raising of the people's morale. At the moment reality is way apart from expectation, only when they come together this nation will rise to the heights we aspire for.

OPINION

Dismal Database

A Husain

The lengthy analysis of the performance database of BTB policies and performance (DS July 2002) makes dismal reading, as far as transparent governance is concerned, as also technical incompetence, and the courage to face the changing technologies in the IT sector. How is it that the Telecoms Ministry is held a hostage by the technical agency? The national telecoms policy may be opened to public debate every time a change or amendment is contemplated - this is a learning process in the LDCs, and introduces some accountability.

Two negative peaks stand out: (1) the technical outdatedness of the Telecoms Board; and, (2) the poor technical awareness at the Ministry level to grasp the implications of the technical proposals received from the technical agencies inside and outside the country. In this IT age, the technical awareness of the non-technical decision makers is of paramount importance for the right and quick development of each sector, otherwise technical obsolescence would overtake the policies; which means that the policies need constant reviews and updating. Technical duplicity is also a lapse in administration, compared to the usual political bluffs imposed on the public in a weak political climate; (governance, technical administration, and politics are linked together, hence politics has been dragged into this discussion).

The Dhaka Secretariat is too weak and helpless to face this modern challenge of change. Good governance means more than a first class political front and exposure. The progress is measured by the right technical policy decisions (On another page of the same issue of DS, the technical and professional weaknesses of Ctg port have been glaringly exposed at a DS Roundtable).

The GoB may consider seeking through UNDP, an ITU technical mission to have a good at the government Telecom Policy and recommend

amendments which are in public interest (for example, how to reduce the waiting period for new connection to mere one week from three years at present; how to implement the WAP and SDR standards, e-and m-commerce, etc, etc).

How many recommendations of the previous WB mission on telecoms a few years earlier were accepted. Such international reports are not made open for public scrutiny (do not leave grey areas and dark corners for the vested groups to hide). The inputs of the local outside experts have to be there; this is not possible without public exposure of the documents.

The bureaucracy has to change its mindset in these days of non-colonial administration. The JS has been made useless, hence information is not available to the public for comment. Why the Prime Minister has not been approached for seeking clarification on each and every controversial policy? This is a sort of cover and protection trying to pass the buck up! What is moral swindling, and how far is it present in Dhaka in the corridors of power?

The way the government is run has to be changed. The 22 PARCs could not dent the obduracy of the civil service (recent debate on TV). Why the complex technical projects should suffer? The Planning Commission and the Finance and parent ministries need background experts for evaluation of modern technical proposals. The generalists must be adequately backed by the independent professional experts. Consultancy services are all right if not influenced dubiously.

The IT implications are more tricky than it looks in the project documents. The future implications may be jeopardised as the technical approach and standards are changing fast almost every year, for which the valuation monitoring agencies have to be alert and sensitive.

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.

Eviction of sex workers

Sir, Last year the residents of Tambazar and Nimtoli brothels in Narayanganj were evicted suddenly and brutally without considering its negative impact on social life. A majority of the inmates fled while a few were taken to the state-run vagrant homes. Despite knowing that rehabilitation centers cannot afford to accommodate all the evictees the eviction drive had been conducted.

It is learnt that most of the sex workers at the shelter homes are subjected to various kinds of sexual and physical harassment by the authorities and the staff. The Red Light Areas that guarantee earnings, are far better than the so-called Rehabilitation Centers.

Many of the driven sex workers have moved to other brothels across the country in order to survive. Instead of rehabilitation, migration to another Red Light Zone has just been ensured by the authorities.

A large section of the evicted sex workers are found roaming around different busy

spots/points of the city and soliciting for prospective clients. The floating flesh traders as they are engaged in a besetting sin contaminate the minds of the people, contribute to the erosion of values and adversely affect social life. Apart from this, a floating life is not and cannot be safer/more dignified than a brothel one.

Extreme poverty, family complications, failed marriages etc force the hapless girls/women to take to the vicious profession of prostitution. They need to be properly rehabilitated based on a well thought-out plan so that they can enjoy rights and freedom like other citizens of the country. Sex trade should be localised as long as proper arrangements for rehabilitation are made.

Ahmad Mohammad Faruq Dhaka

Political solution in Fiji

Sir, The rebellion in Fiji has not much meat in it, as the migrated Indians, who comprise

40 per cent of the population, control the majority of the economy; and several generations are living there. Therefore, the migration issue is weak, and may cause setback to the nation in its development efforts.

The political solution needs wisdom and tolerance. Let us hope wise counsel will prevail in the end, as political solutions veer towards the path of the golden mean.

An Observer Dhaka

CPWP Entitlement limit

Sir, In 1995, the government amended the Companies Profits (Workers' Participation) Act 1968, enhancing the monthly basic wages from Tk 5,500 to Tk 9,000 in the definition of 'worker' for the purpose of entitlement of benefits under the Act.

Meanwhile, to match persistent devaluation of Taka and consequent of astronomical increase in the price level in last four years, companies have raised their salary level. Moreover, many employees' salary level have gone up due to longer service length.

For the general well-being of common employees of the companies, greater number of them should be accommodated under

the Companies Profit Participation scheme. Government should enhance the basic wage limit to Tk 12,500 which will act as a big impetus for higher productivity and will rationalise its distribution base.

Md Rafiqul Islam 137 East Goran, Dhaka

Law and order predicament

Sir, It appears that instead of 'law' and 'order' their adversaries 'lawlessness' and 'disorder' now prevail in our country.

We are surprised and shocked that our government and the opposition parties blame each other for all the ills in the country. But does this practice help curb corruption and terrorism and mitigate the untold sufferings of the people? The answer is obviously in the negative.

Our people silently and helplessly observe the activities and conduct of our political leaders especially those who are in power. No matter which party we elect it seems that our misfortune would never be over. If this be the state of our country then what was the point of electing a democratic government?

O H Kabir Wari Dhaka