

Don't Give in to Hardliners

ONLY yesterday we ran an editorial expressing relief over the opposition's emerging resolve to distance themselves from hartal by way of saving energy to go in for 'mass contact' befitting an election year scenario. Apart from sound tactical reasoning that seemingly dictated such a change of course on the part of the opposition we thought it would enhance the latter's standing with the people for having correctly read of the popular pulse. As a paper we have been consistent in our longings that the opposition would sooner or later see the reason to shun the path of offloading its wrath against the government on the people of the country in a grossly misplaced fashion. Whenever we glimpsed a possibility of this happening we seized it with both hands as if it were our own opportunity to get it translated into reality.

But no sooner had we greeted the auspicious sign of an announcement of an alternative programme to hartal than the Central Liaison Committee (CLC) in a meeting with the leader of the opposition Begum Zia on Sunday churned out a call for dawn-to-dusk hartal on October 2. Obviously, the CLC, dominated as it is by hardliners saw to it that the pendulum swung in the direction of hartal-seekers. Furthermore, those on the liaison committee who are not MPs could predictably have had little sympathy for softer, sober options.

There is one very crucial factor that BNP, as the sheet-anchor of the opposition alliance, cannot afford to ignore in terms of its equations with other partners in the combine. The Jatiya Party and Jamaat have no mass-base but the BNP certainly has one, so that the former would only try to reap the most out of their alignment with their larger partner BNP. In the process, they could soft-pedal their own dubious and high-voltage brain-waves to the BNP in a bid to ensure that the latter pulled its weight behind their implementation. And if anything goes wrong it is the BNP who will have to pay the premium or the penalty.

While warning the BNP of such consequences we urge them not to succumb to the pressures of hardliners in the BNP, Jatiya Party and Jamaat who don't have the mindset to see the merit of constructive options in politics. Hartal is untenable from the standpoints of common sense, economic sense, politics in an election year, and above all, patriotism. In the name of harassing the government, it actually harasses the people. When would the opposition see this self-evident truth?

Moment of Truth for LDCs

DUTY and quota free access of 919 products from 48 least developed countries (LDCs), including Bangladesh, to the EU markets, upon withdrawal of generalised system of preference (GSP) in 2005, would touch off an era of fierce competition. With the preferential arrangement withdrawn, the LDCs would only have their competitive strength to lean on. The European Commission's proposal to this effect now awaits the approval of the EU Council of Ministers to become law.

The proposition does promise tremendous boost to Bangladesh's export to the 15 EU countries; however, the crucial question is, are we up to the challenge? What have we done so far to ready ourselves for the intense competition in post-GSP era? Nearly nothing.

The country's export growth has been directly linked with the growth of the RMG sector. With the expiry of the multi-fibre arrangement (MFA) in 2005, our RMG sector would be exposed to intense competition. Issues such as availability of raw materials, quick delivery of goods and cheaper prices would then acquire critical importance, almost of the make-or-break type. Unfortunately, although we have had advance knowledge of these prospects for years now we are yet to come up with a confident-looking post-MFA strategy. At the official level, there have been tall talks of establishment of backward linkage industries; however, that's about all the government has apparently done so far. Of course, we don't expect the government to fund establishment of such industries. What it is expected to do is to facilitate private sector participation, a role the government has largely failed to play. On the contrary, inexplicable policy rigidity and unwarranted formality hassles have discouraged investment, local and foreign alike.

When made into a law, the EC's example is likely to be followed by developed countries in allowing duty and quota free access to goods from the least developed countries. The future, therefore, looks bright for developing countries provided they use the interim period for an optimal level of value addition to their industrial processes. The few backward linkage industries that have grown in Bangladesh are just a speck of what we require in the RMG sector. We have lost some valuable time, but still we can turn things around with some aggressive negotiations to set up the string of backward linkage units we need to revitalise the RMG sector with.

Tackling Late Floods

AS five northern districts face the onrush of floodwater, due to continual rise in the water levels of major rivers, Bangladesh once again faces another disaster management year. Thousands are struggling in submerged areas of Rajshahi, Chapainawabganj, Kushtia, Chuadanga and Meherpur to keep afloat.

That the army has been called out in aid of civil authorities to take care of the affected people means that the situation is serious. The tasks at hand are to bring the marooned people to flood shelters and provide them with food, medicine and safe drinking water. Flooding and recession of water go hand in hand; and it is the latter which is fraught with dangers of diseases breaking out. So, steady supply of vaccines and ORS sachets need to be maintained to avert casualties. Moreover, by way of damage-control the flood protection embankments need to be kept in order and their breaches repaired at the shortest notice. In fact, we would advise the local authorities to mount round-the-clock vigil on the protection embankment so that the cracks are quickly mended to avert further inundation of land.

Our conventional flood preparedness strategy is falling out of steps with the changing climatic patterns. Let's fine-tune it to meet the exigency before the latter overtook us by miles.

PM's Phone-in Programme : Points to Ponder

If phone-in programmes are intended for a dialogue of the Chief Executive with the common people and if it is objective and taken dispassionately then it is obviously a very good instrument of accountability and transparency. In this age of information technology when the people even in the remotest villages are exposed to media, there is no scope for fooling them by any subtle tactics.

TECHNOLOGICAL advancement in the realm of electronic media has revolutionised its effectivity and advantage. One such advantage is the successful introduction of phone-in programmes in which the viewers and listeners can directly put questions to the persons concerned and elicit his or her opinions and views and enter into a dialogue. Such phone-in programmes have become popular in different countries enabling a two-way traffic, instead of a monologue where listeners and viewers are just dished out what the controlled media only intend to say or show. Bangladesh Betar did quite an innovative job in arranging for the Prime Minister the first-ever phone-in programme which was also simultaneously telecast live by the Bangladesh Television (BTV) and the Ekushey Television (ETV) on September 20. With this programme Bangladesh can be said to have entered the age of phone-in programmes in electronic media. Earlier on two occasions the Prime Minister had appeared before select gatherings in BTV and answered questions put to her by audience as well as the queries received over telephones and fax from viewers in different parts of the country. Bangladesh Betar might have been prompted to go for the programme after a similar one by CNN recently while the PM was in New York in connection with her participation in the UN Millennium Summit. In CNN she wanted to say something in Bangla for the convenience of her countrymen, but could not reportedly do so. This probably has made her interested to go for the Betar programme so as to be able to have a dialogue, some sort of a question-answer session with her listeners and viewers.

But as with her TV

appearances so also with the Betar programme, allegations have been made by quite a large number of interested persons that they could not have access to the PM though they desperately tried to do so. Different dailies including the Prothom Alo published their complaints, who naturally thought that the entire show might have been stage managed. It appeared that the PM was not intentionally embarrassed with critical and burning questions and only those queries were mostly entertained which were mild in nature and were put by party supporters. The daily Prothom Alo in an editorial on September 22 claimed that the programme might have been intended as part of the election campaign of the Awami League and for its propaganda blatantly using the government controlled electronic media which are run with the taxpayers' money, because the PM dwelt at length on the success of her party rather than on her government. Questions put to the PM were also more eulogistic in nature than designed for seeking accountability of her government. Many of the issues like continued violence and terrorism and breakdown of law and order as well as frequent power failure, rampant corruption, ineffectiveness of parliament, the repeal of the Inhuman and highly communal Vested Property Act, women's representation in Parliament, repression on women, schedule of the next general election, clash with judiciary, politicisation of administration and election commission, relations with Pakistan, trial of 1971 war criminals, loan default,

Awamiisation of FBCCI so on and so forth were avoided and bypassed. If wide spectrum of listeners were provided with the opportunity the programme would have the desired credibility and would not have doubly established the fact that the government controlled media are being misused for furthering party and individual interests completely blacking out opposition news and

crime rates cannot be attributed to the amendment, nor can the President be blamed for his suggestion. Only recently the Chief Justice has publicly stated that the police are not found serious to apprehend the criminals due to which justice is delayed. He, however, did not dwell further on the reported inertia and indifference of the police, but it is common knowledge and widely

their sons, no action was taken with the result that two young lives were lost and the main accused gang leader could not as yet be nabbed allegedly because of the fact that his mother is a local influential leader of the ruling party. Rape of a British woman while in a police station for filing a case of stealing is still fresh in memory. The PM told a questioner that her government would soon appoint an Ombudsman as provided for in the Constitution (Article 77). No government has so far cared to appoint Ombudsman. From the time the present government took power there is very often feeler in the press that the Ombudsman is being appointed and many names were speculated. But now the PM is telling that the law relating to the appointment of Ombudsman needed to be amended by Parliament and that a consensus candidate would have to be appointed. In short, it means that the office of the Ombudsman will not be filled up during the tenure of the present government as there will be no consensus (was the appointment of CEC and many other appointments were made on consensus basis?) and not much time is left for parliament to take up amendment in this regard. So, in probability, there will be no Ombudsman.

The PM reiterated that electronic media would be given autonomy as per her party's election pledges. The AL in its 21-point election manifesto announced on May 10, 1996 committed that if voted to power it would free government controlled

radio, television and news agency and privatise the newspapers owned by it (vide point No 7 in AL manifesto). On June 30, 1997 the Commission formed for suggesting modalities of granting autonomy to radio and television submitted its report to the PM. Since then nothing is heard about the report. Nothing is also heard of privatisation of BSS.

For obvious reason the Bangladesh Bank opposed the idea of inclusion of army officers in the Board of Directors of nationalised financial institutions which was introduced by the military government after the 1975 mid-August change-over and was followed by all previous governments. The present government had also yielded (under/invisible) pressure. But the logic given by the PM is not tenable. The army's participation in disaster management can never be akin to management of finance. The army has now (ostensibly) a separate private bank (Trust Bank) which is very much under their control. The civil society also opposed the inclusion of the move but to no effect. In this regard the AL is no different from the previous governments.

If phone-in programmes are intended for a dialogue of the Chief Executive with the common people and if it is objective and taken dispassionately then it is obviously a very good instrument of accountability and transparency. In this age of information technology when the people even in the remotest villages are exposed to media, there is no scope for fooling them by any subtle tactics. The organisers as well as the Prime Minister should therefore have sincerity of intent and purpose when they next go for such phone-in programme.

HEART OF THE MATTER

Mansoor Mamoon

views.

Even though the questions from the listeners were allegedly doctored and selective in nature, the replies the PM had given to them created controversies on a wide range of issues. When asked why even after the passage of the Public Safety Act (PSA) incidences of crime have not declined, she made the President scapegoat and claimed that after incorporating the amendments suggested by him it has become slackened and its effectiveness largely diminished. Legal experts through press statements differed with her and claimed the PM's contention in this regard is far from the truth. The President had suggested for amending the provision of bail in Article 16(3) of PSA and for giving the High Court the jurisdiction of granting bail under certain conditions. The record high in the increase of

reported in the national press that anti-social elements roam freely and are committing crimes with impunity as they either belong to the ruling party or are under its shelter. Not to speak of ordinary party activists, even the sons and close relatives of some of the ruling party lawmakers and veterans have been accused of indulging in violence and terrorism, killings, extortions and land grabbing. Hence when the PM said 'friend or not, law will be applied equally in all cases' it did not appear credible enough. The situation that she claimed to have existed during the tenure of the past regime has not at all altered in any way but has reached the nadir.

People are now really afraid to go to the police. When parents of the two recently slain persons in Soutapur in the city desperately sought police intervention to save

World Bank-IMF Meeting

Why Protesters Gather Also in Prague?

by Harun ur Rashid

Their arguments are lucid and intelligent, full of references to humanists, such as Martin Luther King. Hovering in the background are many Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) who will join the protest against the existing gross inequality of people between the developed and the developing world. Furthermore they will hold an alternative summit in Prague while the delegates to the annual meeting are in town.

massive increase in international financial transactions and the globalisation of production, symbolised by an increase in the activities of transnational corporations. The global merger wave of recent years involved banks, airlines, media and internet companies, pharmaceutical companies and many others. The philosophy is: the bigger it is, the better it is for survival from fierce international competition.

Globalisation is presented as an unmitigated disaster, replacing the social-democratic prosperity of postwar Europe. They see it as producing a '20-80' society in which the benefits are captured by transnational corporations and the highly skilled workforce. The Internet revolution has dramatically changed the business of the world. Globalisation has come to stay in the economic world. There is no going back to the past.

Globalisation might seem, at first sight, to be uncontroversial. But it is worth standing back for a moment and asking the question: where is it leading to? or whether globalisation is a brave new world or a techno-trap?

Casualties of Globalisation?

While globalisation has been hailed as a unique and historic opportunity for humankind, it has become a force of disintegration of many cultures and more inequality among nations. While only 20 per cent highly skilled persons derive benefits, 80 per cent foresee a life bouncing between unemployment and insecure employment, with the potentially restive masses kept quiet.

There is a serious asymmetry in the relationship between the developing and developed countries. Globalisation of

economy has resulted in the marginalisation of the economies of the developing countries. The gap between the rich and poor countries is larger at the beginning of this 21st century than it was at the beginning of the last century. It is estimated that Bill Gate's wealth (Microsoft) alone is equal to all the combined gross domestic products of the world's 48 Least Developed Countries, including Bangladesh.

Statistics indicate that the developing nations constitute 86 per cent of world's population, 76 per cent of world's land area and only 23 per cent of world's wealth; 20 per cent of the population consumes 86 per cent of all the goods and services. In 1960, a fifth of world's population living in rich countries had 30 times the income of the poorest fifth. By 1995, this multiple has risen to 82 times. Three richest people have more assets than the total assets of the poorest 600 million. A child born in the US or Britain will consume, pollute and waste more than that of 50 children in a developing country. Just put into more graphic picture, the people in Europe and the US spend US\$12 billion on perfumes alone a year while US\$6 billion is required to educate every one on this planet. These figures indicate that something is grossly wrong in the existing global system.

There is a view that globalisation with its demand for free markets and unfettered conditions of trade tends to diminish the distinction between the economic and political realms. The nation state is the agent of the global capital. It is the capital which decides what to produce where and what to grow where and how. Again as economies move from industrial capitalism into global capitalism, businesses move into industrial

plants to find workers of the developing world for cheap labour, often without collective bargaining rights of the workers.

The IMF-Bank are alleged to have pursued market economy through their aid and funding. They impose structural adjustments on the developing countries that dictate drastic cuts in public sector spending, to save them 'from bankruptcy'. But in the end the result appears to be pauperisation and the elimination of educational, social and welfare programmes in the developing countries. The protesters believe that the values 'we live by are more and more those of the market.'

To the developing countries, globalisation means unfettered access to their markets but not the other way round. The quota restrictions, tariff and non-tariff barriers and in-built discriminatory national trade rules make the goods of the developing countries inaccessible to the markets of the industrialised countries. Trade should not only be free but fair too. At the UNCTAD Conference in Bangkok in February this year, the Director General of the World Trade Organisation Mike Moore drove home this point when he said: 'There is no point in spending billion of dollars in aid if production can't then get to the market.....We co-operate or we perish.'

To the protesters, globalisation means naked exploitation of the markets of developing nations by the developed nations. In the high-tech economy co-ordinated development of the money and capital markets is required and this is absent in most of the developing economies. The indigenous industries, banks and other enterprises in the developing countries cannot survive in international competition,

ushered in by globalisation.

This regime of unfairness of global trade among the nations has, among others, united the young people to protest about in Prague.

Unfair Trade Regime and Bangladesh

Let us look at the alleged unfair regime in respect of the agricultural trade of Bangladesh. Bangladesh possesses an agro-based economy where agriculture nearly accounts for 31 per cent of the nation's Gross Domestic Product. A noteworthy development in agricultural exports has been rapid growth of processed food exports from Bangladesh. In late 90s, it has been reported that processed fish alone accounted for 70 per cent of agricultural exports of Bangladesh.

The Uruguay Round trade negotiations which concluded in 1994 led to two related agreements: Agreement on Agriculture (AOA) and the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement (SPSA). They are applicable to Bangladesh and in particular the SPSA is of particular significance for Bangladesh.

There is a view that the expansion of food exports from Bangladesh to the developed countries, such as to the European Union and the US, has triggered a protectionist response from them in the form of extraordinary stringent sanitary and phytosanitary standards imposed prior to shipments from Bangladesh in the name of health and hygiene. This has occurred at a time when British beef is being hailed as safe (from mad cow disease) in Europe, although there is a genuine fear in France that British beef is not safe.

Furthermore, a view prevails in the circles concerned that the sanitary and phytosanitary agreement is not being strictly followed in the case of Bangladesh. First, there is no effective mechanism in place for dispute settlement in the country. Second, the developed countries do not take into account the circumstances for Bangladesh when they apply the sanitary standards. Finally, in most cases the notification of new measures under this agreement is too short a period for Bangladesh to respond in an effective manner.

There appears to be another greater concern if environment is linked with trade by the developed countries. For example the US laws require tuna fishing nets to have modifications to allow dolphins to escape. If other countries wish to sell tuna fish in the US market, they have to ensure that fish is being caught through such modified nets. Similar requirement is reported to have been imposed by the US on shrimp catching by other nations. The nets should have escape latches for turtles. There could be in future rules that shrimp should be cultivated in such a manner that does not adversely affect environment. In

that case there would be severe deleterious consequences on the shrimp exports from Bangladesh. This is not to suggest that environment protection is not important for Bangladesh. Environmental degradation may stifle Bangladesh's economic growth. What I refer to in the preceding examples is the allegation of the unfair aspect of environmental guidelines in trade on a developing country by the developed nations.

Unfulfilled Promise of Debt-relief

There is another aspect of global regime which underpins the protests. The debts owed by the poor nations (mostly African) account for US\$212.6 billion. The world's leaders set themselves the target of writing off debt of US\$100 billion of 24 of the world's highly indebted poor countries (HIPC) by the end of 2000. By July this year, they have managed to agree on US\$15 billion only to nine countries. It is reported that the goal has now slipped to 20 from 24 HIPCs by the end of this year but even that is looking unlikely. In the G-7 Summit in July in Okinawa (Japanese remote island), British Prime Minister Tony Blair was reported to have aired his frustration over progress on debt relief to HIPCs.

There is a view that some of the policies of the rich countries appear to be double standards. For example, the West is too happy to take in migrants if they are affluent businessmen, professionals or technologically-skilled. They welcome the computer wizards of 'Silicon Valley' of Bangalore but do not want unskilled people from the developing world. However, immediately after the second world war a pool of unskilled labour was allowed in the countries of the West.

Conclusion

It may be noted that the protesters are not socialists or anarchists or outcasts of the society. They are enlightened young people from across the social spectrum. Many of them reportedly gave up lucrative jobs in their countries. Their arguments are lucid and intelligent, full of references to humanists, such as Martin Luther King. Hovering in the background are many Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) who will join the protest against the existing gross inequality of people between the developed and the developing world. Furthermore they will hold an alternative summit in Prague while the delegates to the annual meeting are in town.

There is a view that globalisation has ignored 'the human face'. Out of world's six billion people, 1.2 billion live on less than one dollar a day while 32 richest people have the wealth of the combined gross domestic products of all SAARC countries. The picture is grim and stark at our face. The claim of all-inclusive globalisation remains a myth in the developing countries. The world has to create an environment of responsible globality. The political leaders of the IMF-Bank may take note of the causes of the protest and address the issues raised by the protesters.

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

To the Editor ...

Sumon of Sutrapur

Sir, The DS report of 23rd on the above reads very much like a fiction. Yet truth is stranger than fiction. Kudos to DS staff reporter for baring the ugly facts. This just shows how depraved we have become as a nation. Criminals like Sumon and Ershad Shikder may exist but it is the insensibility of the people in general that frightens me.

Also what kind of police department are we taxpayers maintaining? Can't we demand a report on the double killing from the IC of police, especially on the role of the police? Shouldn't he resign if he had any shred of sense of dignity and integrity?

And what about the 'close friend' of the PM Begum Nasibun Nahar? How come such people become ward commissioners? Does the ruling party have to rely on such criminals for clinging to power? For her own integrity, PM should have this Sumon arrested and put our minds at ease.

Must the PM be reminded that the wrath of people may be slow but it is sure. If Awami League

wants to serve the people it must portray some rule of justice. Right now it appears that the whole society is in the grip of government condoned mastaans and criminals.

Concerned Citizen
Dhaka

The guilty party must be punished

Sir, We are deeply shocked and anguished by the news of the two teenage boys' gruesome murder. The bodies of Mohsin (18) and Seam (19) were cut into pieces and then thrown in a manhole from where police recovered those. The incident is so appalling that it is beyond anybody's comprehension.

It has been learnt from different dailies that a group of local youths of Loharpul under Sutrapur took the boys to a club at Gendaria. It is alleged that when the parents learnt about this they rushed to the club and begged to spare their sons, finding no positive response they then went to the police station

and informed the police in a written statement but the police did not pay any attention. After their repeated begging a sub-inspector went with them to the club and talked to the abductors.

Again at 9 PM, Sub-Inspector Liaquat went to the club along with the parents and spent some time there and had cold drinks with Sumon, one of the abductors. The sub-inspector informed the relatives that the abducted boys will be released in the morning. Believing this the parents went home with a restless mind. But the next morning they learnt about the horrible fate of their sons, a blow which might have stopped their hearts and it would have been a mercy if it really happened.

It seems that policemen in our country are expert in recovering dead bodies, not in saving lives. We demand to know why the police left the boys at the mercy of the criminals. If they had been rescued they would have been alive. So for their deaths the police is as guilty as the murderers. We demand exemplary punishment for the killers and the

guilty policemen.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Detergent bar

Sir, In Bangladesh many varieties of 'washing soaps' are available. People can buy any brand of their choice. However we are not getting any 'detergent bar washing soap' which is generally available in the neighbouring countries. This type of washing soap is good in quality and clean the clothes well. Large multinational companies make and sell their own brand of detergent bar washing soap in other countries. Unfortunately in our country it is not done for reasons unknown to consumers.

In view of the 'open market policy', this item can be imported and sold to meet the requirements of the large number of consumers.

SHaq
Eastern Tower
20, New Eskaton Road