

# The Daily Star

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## Chittagong Gasping for Breath

THE country's second biggest metropolis and its premier entrepot, Chittagong, is in deep trouble. The city's windpipe is literally choking. The political predicament looks to be the worst tormentor of life with five straight days of hartal-cum-weekend holiday beginning with yesterday and bound to be a cupful of anguish till Tuesday. The Islami Okkiya Jote's hartal on Thursday ended on a boiling note. BNP and Jamaat had backed it up, the latter apparently chagrined at a police crackdown on Jamaat-Shibir elements against the backdrop of the mayhem on some BCL activists a couple of months back. After this weekend the Chittagonians will have to bear up with a SCOP hartal scheduled for Sunday followed by a transport strike on Monday. Each of these politically loaded programmes contains seeds of further unrest and consequent strikes following clashes with police, arrests and jailings under the Public Safety Act and what have you.

We have seen port activities being disrupted through wildcat strikes by various workers' groups and other stake-holders' associations with direct or indirect support from this or that political party vying with each other to retain a foothold in the port area.

Right at this moment we have a trouble brewing over withdrawal of cut-off time by Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) at the behest of BGMEA. The cut-off time meant loading of export cargo within 24 hours after berthing of the container vessel at the port jetties so as to avert delay in the departure of container vessels. The shipping agents and stevedores are furiously insistent on the cut-off point to be re-established.

So, essentially the scenario is this: apart from the trade union-based disturbances, it is the hartals called by political parties of Chittagong that string out to cripple the port's functioning even in a more pronounced way. The civic life stands disrupted and so too is the port life.

Chittagong's susceptibility to trouble is outstripping Dhaka's proclivity to it, a message that must not be lost on the government. Dhaka has monopolised national attention largely because of its pivotal position - not necessarily with commensurate results though. It is time that a sizable part of national concern were now directed to Chittagong in view of its vastly unrealised potential.

Improving the image of Chittagong port appears crucial. It presents our investment face to the outside world. With subregional groupings almost certain to gather momentum into the new millennium Chittagong port's future looks exceedingly bright. Only that we have to translate it into reality almost entirely by our own actions.

Even the maestro of surrealist painting, Salvador Dali, could not have conceived of such a bizarre and grotesque composition. A human head placed upright with a slight tilt in the middle of a deserted road looking upward with open eyes at a man in uniform stooping low. The illusion of conversation between the disembodied head and the half-bent figure is perfect in spite of the physical incongruities which make it so quintessentially surreal. The head is that of a suicide Tamil bomber which has landed smack on the road after the fatal explosion severing it from the rest of the body with such precision that it sits with stunning poise and calm, eyes wide open and lips slightly parted. The impression of a conversation between the dead and the living is stark, not the least because it is illusory. No other picture of armed conflict, even the famous one by Robert Capa on the falling fighter in the Spanish civil war, comes close to this one in vividness and the ability to evoke shock, horror and revulsion. It is a very poignantly direct picture with a crying message: how long will this bloodshed go on before the world lends its ears to listen.

Death like this is taking place at present in more than one country for the same cause, using more or less the same types of weapons and the same tactics.

The result of these armed conflicts are also monotonously the same: death and injuries of the combatants, death and maiming of the those caught between, disruption of normal life, enormous loss of property, and destruction of infrastructures. In every respect these are shooting wars, albeit on a small scale and taking place intermittently. The government authorities describe the conflict as 'terrorist attacks' or at best as 'civil war' while the rebels call it a 'war of liberation'. According to them and their supporters they are 'freedom fighters' professing ideologies from the left to the right.

The most disturbing and worrying thing about these 'localized wars' (where 'terrorists' or 'freedom fighters' take part depending on who is defining them) is their prolonged nature and continuation of death and destruction. With every month rolling by the list of casualties lengthen and the burden of suffering mounts.

In Kashmir though the fighting has been intensified in recent years it is going on for over four decades freezing the relation of two neighbouring countries as arch-enemies. The enmity became so bitter that both the countries have now become nuclear powers in a dangerous

face-off. The conflict over Kashmir has attracted fanatics and well-trained guerrillas from other countries and there is no sign of scaling down of the clashes. The innocent civilians have become cannon fodder in these bloody clashes with gross violation of human rights of the non-combatants. The once peaceful valley now reeks with fumes of gunpowder and resonates violently with shellfire and wheezing bullets. The civilian life of everyday chores has been blown to smithereens by the bloody conflict and the atmosphere of suspicion and hatred. Yet India refuses to allow other countries or international bodies to intervene insisting that it is an internal matter and she will resolve it on her own or through bilateral talks. Even President Clinton during his recent visit obliged India by not discussing this issue. This policy of asking outsiders to keep their hands off has so far produced no result except spilling of more blood.

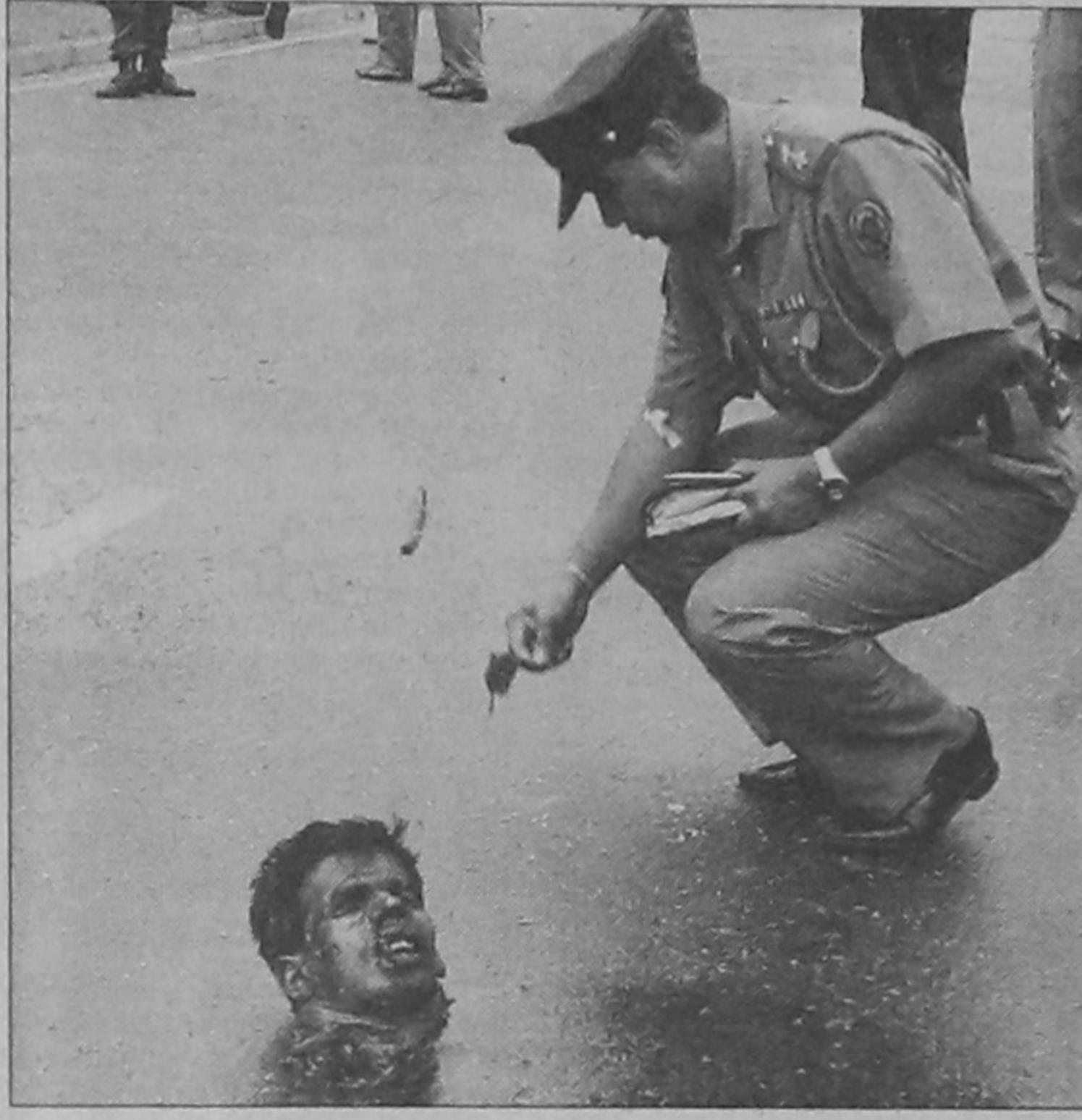
In Sri Lanka the armed conflict has completed fifteen years with every sign of greater escalation.

The firepower used on both sides and the resulting casualties are on the increase. The area in the north with Jaffna as the capital is a veritable wasteland where the civilians have died and are dying in thousands and the survivors pick up the remnants of life in a ghost territory every time there is a new 'liberator'. Though no other country has got entangled with this 'war of liberation' by the Tamil Tigers, it is obvious that they receive external help on regular basis. A dangerous aspect of this continuing war is the attack by suicide bombers which have claimed the lives of one former Indian Prime Minister, a President of Sri Lanka, one eye of the present President of Sri Lanka and the lives of many others, some of whom are non-combatant civilians who just happened to be nearby. The severed head on the road looking up at the 'authority' is the latest of these dare-devil brand of suicide bombers. He wants the world, including the Government of Sri Lanka, to listen to him seriously.

In the Philippines the Moro Muslims are waging a war for autonomy/ independence for over four decades. The rebels receive assistance from other countries in the form of money

and weapons. Here also the antagonists confront each other mostly with the language of weapons though a negotiated settlement showed some promise of a peaceful settlement. The recent attack on the island of Jolo shows the fragile nature of negotiation and the impatience of the authorities with a fair settlement. The island has been cordoned off by the navy and indiscriminate bombing and shelling are taking a heavy toll of civilian lives. There is total dislocation of normal life of the ordinary people which in the best of circumstances is one of animal like toll.

The fight between the Talibans and their adversaries in the north will be completing a decade of armed clashes soon but the country is already in ruins, physically,



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and blind to injustice.

Kofi Annan has recently broken the silence and asked for investigation of the killing of 20 Tamil guerrillas in a rehabilitation centre. It is high time that the world body took tough stand on these long running 'local-wars' without waiting for judgement as to who started it all and who has more responsibility for the carnage. A decision has to be taken by the UN that if a 'local war' ('terrorist', 'guerrilla' whatever appellation it may have) goes in for more than a certain period and it cannot be resolved one way or the other locally, there will be international intervention to arbitrate or mediate, even to impose its decision unilaterally. The justification for this role is already in the mandate given to the UN for peacekeeping. It cannot maintain peace without stopping war in the first place. The message has to go out loud and clear that the world cannot sit idle as the river of blood flowing before it. Peace accord through external mediation has also gained urgency because of the risk of the localised clashes escalating into a nuclear war as in the case of India and Pakistan over Kashmir. Resolution of outstanding conflict can also yield peace dividends in the form of reduced defence expenditure and greater regional cooperation. It is no secret that South Asian cooperation has not taken any concrete shape and is at present almost about to founder on the state of Indo-Pakistan relations.

Will external intervention impose a limit to sovereignty of the countries concerned? The answer will depend on the weightage given to peace and human rights. If all countries believe that peace is essential and human rights are inviolable and they are committed for the same under the universal declaration and other charters they should not grudge the surrender of sovereignty over matters of life and death that they fail to resolve internally or bilaterally. Moreover, by virtue of their membership in many international organizations and as signatories to many international agreements they have already ceded some of their sovereign powers. Sovereignty is still there, but it is not the same as applied to nation states of the nineteenth century because the time has changed. The minor limits to sovereignty will make it up to date and give it a human face. The choice is very simple: sovereignty of the old that led countries to conflicts and wars and sovereignty with minor restraints that contributes to peace, stability and development. Given the past experiences and future portends only the shortsighted will hesitate to make the right choice.

## Friday Mailbox

### A gruesome poster

Sir, A few days back, I went to Shantinagar bazaar when I noticed some people eagerly looking at some posters stuck on the wall in front of the Titas Gas Distribution office. At first, I thought that they were looking at some cine-posters. However, soon I realised that the centre of their attraction was another poster.

It was a gruesome coloured poster of the dismembered limbs of the twin murder of Supratap committed a few days earlier about which there were graphic descriptions in the newspapers. But I never realised it could be so cruel, so real! Literally, the two heads and all the other limbs were separated from the torsos.

Apparently, we have become numb to such inhuman and unspeakable cruelty, otherwise, how could this happen in the presence of many onlookers as reported in the print media. Perhaps, we Bengalis have become a different race altogether over the years. It seems we have become butchers, literally. Everyday one or more persons are being murdered in cold blood and nobody seems to care.

There is no serious attempt to catch the murderers or their abettors. Nobody seems to care, neither the administration nor the police. Very soon the murders will become part of statistics of the annual crime report and be forgotten!

Abul Mohsin  
Siddherwari, Dhaka

### Bilateral agreements-- for whom?

Sir, According to the Bangladesh Women Lawyer's Association there being no bilateral agreement between India and Bangladesh they undergo greatest difficulties in repatriation of Bangladeshi who become victims to illegal trafficking. Our present government, headed by a woman, has been moving heaven and earth to bring back the alleged killers of her father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from countries like Thailand, Canada and the USA whereas she has perhaps not even given a little thought to bring back poor Bangladeshi languishing in brothels or jails of India and Pakistan!

A F Rahman  
Dhaka

### Cold Storage network

Sir, It is heartening to note the government decision to set up a national network of cold storage depots and mobile CS container facility for distribution and marketing of vegetables, fruits and flowers. Of course frozen fish and meat products should be included in the project for easy shopping by male and female office workers. More semi-finished eatables may be marketed for spending less time in the kitchen, and serve food faster on the dining tables.

The capital investment will come from the pri-

vate sector, once the government provide the sites and other facilitator services. The ports are cold spots and need to be thawed. Vegetables, fruit and fish should be available during off-season and round the year. Why we should not have access to our own local products? Next comes the canning industry.

A Citizen  
Dhaka

### Dhaka city and entourage

Sir, Enough success stories of all the government in power continue to be preached through government controlled media but as a humble middle class resident, I am worried like many a fellow citizens. I was totally flabbergasted to observe the flooded city of Tilotoma Dhaka after six hours of rain stoppage on last Saturday, the 28 October though millions of Taka continue to be spent every year towards storm water disposal and so on. Electricity remained disrupted for twelve hours or more before the start of the shower accompanied with gusty winds.

As I was walking along Elephant Road-Sonargaon Road, I could witness that on three occasions crowds fighting around electric poles could short circuit the transmission line with a big bang along with fires and intense flames. Who is accountable for this type of electricity distribution system in the context of frequent short circuits leading to fire accidents? The concept of providing food, shelter, medical aid etc by the government will continue to be a matter for debate but at the same time should we not try to improve the state of our metropolis which are within the control of human efforts! Polythene bags and papers have practically obstructed the drains, disposal canals and so on like derelict rivers of Bangladesh. For the last four years, the government has been claiming their achievement of high rate in literacy but isn't it also essential to teach those literate people in respect of other civic duties like disposal of polythene bags etc?

Recently, the PM visited the USA with an entourage of a few dozen like other hundred entourages in the past. Even minor children were included in the entourage as I could see in BTV telecast. It reminded me of a public meeting around 1948-49 where late Sheikh Mujibur Rahman criticised the then Pakistan Prime Minister's tour to USA with his wife. I still cannot understand why two of our foreign ministers are to accompany PM Sheikh Hasina in one country when Foreign Ministry officials are also present in that official tour! Again many of the PM's entourage comprised of FBCI, DCCI, MCCI etc representatives, many of them are masterminds in plundering public money through sale of shares and debentures but they do not pay dividends for years. Then how these defaulters could be included in the entourage and accompany the PM? Let the authority look into the facts stated and do something for Dhaka!

Mahbubur Rahman  
Dasani, Bagerhat

Views expressed in this column are the writers' own. The Editor may or may not subscribe to those views. The Editor reserves the right to decide which letters should be published.

# Limits to Sovereignty

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## IN MY VIEW

Hasnat Abdul Hye



and weapons. Here also the antagonists confront each other mostly with the language of weapons though a negotiated settlement showed some promise of a peaceful settlement. The recent attack on the island of Jolo shows the fragile nature of negotiation and the impatience of the authorities with a fair settlement. The island has been cordoned off by the navy and indiscriminate bombing and shelling are taking a heavy toll of civilian lives. There is total dislocation of normal life of the ordinary people which in the best of circumstances is one of animal like toll.

China, in the western autonomous region of Xiankang the Moslems are up in arms against the Han Chinese and a low grade guerrilla war is going on for some years though the Chinese pretend that it does not exist. Reports of human rights violation abound.

In central Asia Chechnia could possibly belong to these categories of countries with war of liberation waged by local people but it was crushed mercilessly by Russia in the matter of a few months with a few pockets of resistance still smouldering. Though death and destruction wreaked upon the country was the severest the rest of the world kept more or less silent with occasional muted words about violation of human rights. It was apprehensive of

vituperative tirade from Russia.

In Europe, the fight for independence or autonomy in the Basque region in Spain continues to take toll of lives almost at regular intervals ever since the end of the Second World War. This too, has not attracted any external pressure or intervention for peaceful settlement. The thirty years old armed conflict between the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland ended with a peace accord last year but its implementation remains tentative and somewhat uncertain. In this case the Good Friday peace accord was brokered not by any international body or a third country but by an American politician in his individual capacity.

After the recent outbreak of clashes in Palestine where more than a hundred Palestinians died and more are likely to die the proposal to send a peacekeeping force by the UN in that flash-point is not likely to be approved by the big powers in the UN and is almost certain to be rejected by Israel.

The examples of armed conflicts in different parts of the world where blood letting appears to be endless could be extended by giving reference of Sudan, Congo, Mozambique, Peru and other countries but that is not necessary.

The point is that these 'conflicts' (it does not matter whether they call them 'terrorist attack' or 'liberation war') are not 'quick and dirty' but have become prolonged and vicious. The point at issue is not which side has a legal right or which side is more ruthless than the other in killing or whether third countries are involved behind the scene. The overriding concern is that these localized wars are going on for far too long a period to be ignored by the outside world, by the UN and other international forums.

Secondly, the casualty in these armed conflicts not only involve the combatants, but innocent civilians as well who are caught in the crossfire and are also held in suspicion as collaborators. Not knowing what is a normal life in peaceful time for long the men, women and children in these areas of conflict live out nightmares day in day out. The gross violation of human rights taking place in these countries by both sides can be overlooked only by people who are totally insensitive

# Why Do the Poor Want to Live?

WHAT is the kick that makes the poor tick? It is a profound question to ask, but a perplexing one to answer. What is the attraction for the poor whose life is beset with poverty, which is the lack of means to satisfy their basic needs? Why would anyone want to stay alive in the face of an incessant struggle to cope with privation, hunger, disease and squalor?

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Even though one may idealise poverty, it does not diminish the hardship that comes with it.

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