

Kidnapping in the CHT Need to step up vigil

THE abduction of Torben Mikkelsen and Nils Hugaard of Denmark and Tim Shelby of Great Britain on Rangamati-Khagrachhari highway last Friday has willy-nilly put the Chittagong Hill Tracts situation on the international news circuit. Evidently this hogging of headlines is the last thing we wanted. Needless to say, when foreigners are kidnapped not only is the host country embarrassed, the area in which that happens also acquires notoriety. None of this is palatable, especially when the kidnapped Danish and British Citizens were at work as consultants for the Roads and Highways Department of the government.

The latest abduction incident has had nothing to do with any ideology, rather it has been induced by the greed for ransom money. The kidnapers have made no bones about their monetary appetite by letting go of British consultant David Watson and his driver on an errand to Rangamati to arrange Tk 9 crore as ransom. The CHT peace accord was signed in 1997 marking the end of two-decade-long tribal insurgency in the area. But in the following year, the US oil company UMC had to put off operations after one of its security staff was shot dead and its geo-physicist kidnapped but later released on ransom payment. Even as early as last month, two European tourists were waylaid by tribal gunmen.

Altogether there have been three major kidnapping incidents involving foreigners in the post-accord phase which is about the same number recorded during the pre-accord period. That the accord has made little difference in terms of toll collection, robbery and ransom-seeking by criminal gangs is summed up by available statistics. Fifty cases of abduction of local folks have been reported in the last six months alone.

Most of the organised crimes are said to be the handiwork of two groups, one opposing the CHT peace accord and another supporting it. Illegal money collection seems to be the order of the day, which in turn, could lead to acquisition of arms, a dreadful prospect for the future of the peace accord. Even after the surrender of weapons by Shanti Bahini cadres, crimes are committed at gun-point clearly indicating the presence of caches of arms.

The authorities in Dhaka, the local administration and the tribal leadership have a common stake in ensuring that the criminals are treated as criminals, irrespective of whether they are for or against the peace accord.

Save the Sundarbans Ministry must change policy

THE first national conference on the Sundarbans in Khulna, has highlighted an issue that merits national attention. We applaud and endorse the NGO initiative to induce a people-friendly developmental climate in the Sundarbans. President Shahabuddin Ahmed's inaugural remarks at the conference have underscored the issue. Calling for integration between government programmes and private-sector initiatives, he has emphasised the need to induce conscious people to play a greater role in protecting the preserve.

We fully endorse the President's call. NGO activities at the field level, together with research, are crucial elements that must be incorporated into government policymaking. What cast a shadow on the conference is that the minister herself and the ministry of Environment and Forests were conspicuous by their absence. Officials alleged the minister was not given due placing in the official event hierarchy, a claim that the event coordinators have countered by complaining that the ministry failed to respond to sustained efforts to obtain support.

The government's non-participation cannot be excused on any grounds. The snub was churlish and bureaucratic. We would like to know what the government has achieved in its management of the Sundarbans? This newspaper has been replete with first-hand reports on an escalating trend of poaching, misuse of resources, loss of bio-diversity and overall neglect, heightened by increasing lawlessness and exploitative practices by vested interests.

The Sundarbans have been neglected for so long that only a concerted campaign, spearheaded by joint venture understandings between government and NGO agencies, would have any chance to redress the imbalance. The Ministry has failed to protect its decline and is ignoring private initiatives. We want the ministry to heed this reality and amend its policy. There is no redemption for action that causes such irreversible damage.

M SHAFIULLAH

THE Washington Post and The International Herald Tribune simultaneously published an editorial under the title 'A Phone in the Village' on 11 February 1998. Bangladesh has only one fixed-wire telephone for every 300 people and most of those are in the towns. The two influential newspapers commended Professor Muhammad Yunus, founder-philosopher of Grameen Bank for his another innovative idea to take poor countries without fixed-wire telephone system to leapfrog straight into wireless age. Explaining the working method of mobile phone the editorial said that one 'telephone lady' in each village buys a phone set on credit from Grameen Bank and pays for it gradually by charging other villagers small sums for each use. Villagers found the system useful for instance in communicating with their relatives working abroad or to check whether a strike in town has ended before bringing produce or the perishable to market and the like. The editorial did not miss the all pervasive reality of Hartal in Bangladesh.

In a sequence of events both natural and man made Bangladesh has had more than her share of tragedies ever since the bloody birth in 1971. Floods, famine, pestilence, tidal waves, assassinations, coups and counter-coups, military and autocratic rules, as if, all joined hands to tarnish the mirror image of a nation that came out clean and serene out of the ashes of the War of Liberation. In less than two

decades Bangladesh profile became synonym to disaster news in the international media. Being in the front line abroad Bangladeshi diplomats bear the brunt of indignity, specially of being a food aid seeking nation.

The silent millions, however, reversed the basket image of Bangladesh through their sweat and toils over the years. The farmers by cultivating high yielding varieties of rice and wheat with the aid of canal

currency with remittance of approximate 3 billion US dollar per year are the Bangladesh work force abroad. This estimated 3 million dollar remains a dependable support to foreign exchange reserve of the country. Bangladesh no longer seeks bilateral balance of payment support from other countries. Working often under harsh and hostile condition they are denied of fair deal both at home and abroad. After 1994 there was no meeting of the Labour Attaches and the

is facing increased uneven competition due to emergence of more and more countries with quota-free and duty-free access to the world markets. At home this hundred per cent export oriented industry came under axe of continuous political strikes. Manufacture is delayed, consequently dishonouring of the commitment made to the foreign buyers and tailing far behind the shipping schedule. With the spree of Hartals congestion is at its worst in the Chittagong Port. Business

appeared to have been crying in the wilderness. Major buyers are opting out of Bangladesh RMG. This is one of the few viable sectors of our economy. Besides, the question of foreign investment and aid dependency are inter linked with political stability. No body is crying wolf but signals are too loud to remain deaf. It has been said that if a person loses sixth sense he/she ceases to be a politician.

With restoration of democracy,

driver asked me, "Apka mulluk ka kea ho gia? Ya sailab ho, natu hartal. Sailab ho tu thoda kuch foreign saman mil jata. Mogar hartal may kea faida?" [What befallen to your country? There is either flood or strikes. In case of flood your receive some foreign assistance. But what do you gain by resorting to strikes?] As a diplomat I could not say to him that in hartals some more nails are inflicted on the body of Bangladesh. Claims and counter claims by the political parties for the bodies of the victims bewilder the bereaved. Photo sessions are held with the widows and the orphans focusing on mock sorrow and anguish of the political leaders. Gayebi janaja is organised followed by a statement to the press congratulating the people for 'spontaneous' support to hartal call. Are not these windfall gains of strikes?

A Japanese investor tried in vain to contact on phone his Bangladesh representative for consecutive three days. On fourth day in desperation he called the private number and surprised to find him at home on a working day. "We are on hartals. Could not go to office," replied Shahrulk. "Is it a season of festival?" inquired Masamoto. "No. A political party asked people to stop work and to stay home. That is Hartal in Bengali," explained Shahrulk. "The Japanese work 14 hours a day. Your Hartal in Japanese is Harakiri." Masamoto closed conversation to save time.

M Shafiullah is former ambassador to Libya, Tunisia, Malta and the State of Palestine

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irrigation and deep /shallow tubewells kept up with the pace of ever growing population. Bangladesh today produces 20 million metric tonnes of rice and 2 million tonnes of wheat to feed 120 million mouths. The farmers kept the wolf of food aid largely at bay. Bangladesh became less and less dependent on food aid. They won respectability for the nation. With the farmers, our agricultural scientists also remain the unsung heroes of our time. Conversely the farmers are caught in the whirlwind of Hartal and political strip in marketing their produce and perishable.

The another faceless millions replenishing much needed hard

Ambassadors posted in manpower importing countries to redress the grievances of wage earners abroad.

By far the best contribution has been made by the Ready Made Garment industries to change the aid scenario. RMG earns US dollar 5.6 billion per year that is 76 per cent of total export of Bangladesh in a year. This sector made the country less dependent on foreign aid and also added dignity to women in employing them in thousands. Without the growth of garment factories most of the women work force would have ended as domestic helpers and some of them allured to foreign soil for a wretched life.

This vital sector of the economy

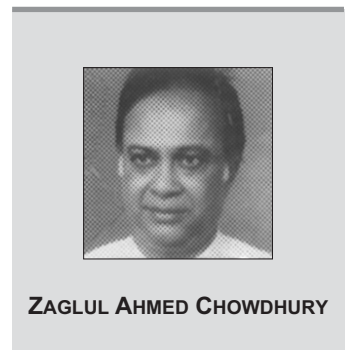
activity has come to a standstill and mills and factories suffer production loss due to continuous shut down. The entrepreneurs, however, made to pay salary to the idle employees and on the other hand their bank loan and interest was mounting. Bangladesh RMG has been conceding markets to her rivals abroad.

FBCCI, the apex body of the business community and BGMEA, the representative agency of the garment industry appealed to the major political parties for the successive years to come up with alternative option to Hartal as a means of political protest and to spare the economy and the national image from ruination. They

near self-sufficiency in food grain, contribution of the wage earners and garment sector, home grown micro-credit system, genuine NGOs working at grassroots level, unfettered flow of development assistance, direct foreign investment, EPZs, and top of all two ladies at the helms of two major political parties in an over populated and economically backward Muslim country, world sympathy and support were outpouring for Bangladesh. For the first time the image of Bangladesh came close to that of 1971. Regrettably good image soon melted in the over hit of hartals and consequent blood letting.

Some years back a Pathan taxi

Valentine's Day: zealots' new victim in India



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

liked by the majority and saner section of the people and this is applicable in any society, particularly in the south Asian region. Most religions put certain restrictions on some sensitive social matters and issues like "Valentine's Day" for April Fool but nothing excessive is accepted in a civilised society. In Malaysia, several couples have been charged for creating public nuisance in the name of the "Valentine's Day" but there was no bar as thousands took pleasure in the celebrations in a sober and dignified manner. In Bangladesh too, it is not

often mingles them with such matters that are otherwise innocent in nature. Two years ago, he threatened to disrupt the tour of the Pakistani cricket team to India citing the Kashmir situation and Islamabad's alleged involvement in assisting the "terrorists" there. Prime Minister Vajpayee did not yield to pressures of the Shiv Sena leader for calling off the tour of the Pakistani cricket team since the people of India were eagerly waiting for it. Needless to say that cricket is a passion in south Asia. The Sena activists even damaged the pitch of

mostly in Maharashtra state. The BJP often finds it difficult to keep the small recalcitrant ally under control. At times Shiv Sena supremo's fulminations cause serious embarrassment for the NDA government. The BJP may be close to this party but several other allies of the NDA are not because they believe in secularism. The religious zealots belonging to the Shiv Sena, "Swadeshi Jagran Manch", the "Bajrang Dal" and the "Vishva Hindu Parishad" are at the forefront of turning India into a theocratic state. But the secular parties like the Congress and other centre and left political parties are totally against this communal jingoism and are asking the BJP to restrict the activities of these parties which are otherwise close to the BJP. On its part, the BJP mostly seeks to strike a balance but being allied with the zealots politically and ideologically to an extent, it often finds difficult to ignore them. The issue is a matter of debate between the hard-liners and liberals within the BJP. Prime Minister Vajpayee belongs to the liberal group despite the fact that some of his positions are interpreted at times as communal in nature.

Now, Valentines Day has been the latest victim of the militant Hindu organisations. They terrorised people in Maharashtra and elsewhere on the eve of the occasion. The Shiv Sena is not in power in Maharashtra at present as a combination of the secular Congress led by Sonia Gandhi and nationalist Congress headed by Sharad Pawar formed the state government following the last elections. The state government pursued a case against the Shiv Sena supremo for his alleged links in inciting killings in the aftermath of the demolition of Babri Mosque in December, 1992. But the case was dismissed as being "time barred". He often comes out with potentially dangerous remarks and comments. It is necessary to keep the fundamentalists under control as much as this is necessary elsewhere because they seem to have a penchant for making issues out of nothing.

MATTERS AROUND US

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an unknown matter in view of the growing popularity of the occasion although it is restricted within mainly the younger generation. I watched that the forlists at the New Bailey Road area made brisk business when most other shops were closed on the day coincidentally marked by an opposition-sponsored hartal. Young people exchanged flowers, books and other form of gifts and nothing ugly was reported. Whereas unruly scenes and incidents were galore on some New Years eve celebration. As such, the "Valentine's Day" in effect sends a positive message unless it is taken otherwise to send the wrong one. In India too, the occasion generates lively enthusiasm but the call of the Shiv Sena and another extremist organisation "Swadeshi Jagaran Manch" to keep away from such celebrations only once again put the extreme religious forces in broadlight.

Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackarey is occasionally in the news for his political and religious positions on different issues but he

the Feroze Shah Kotla ground in New Delhi to force cancellation of the tour. But the government put its foot down strongly and finally took strong measures against any disruption of the matches which were later went off peacefully. Bal Thackarey had to eat his own words in face of public apathy and disapproval to his call to boycott the matches.

Sometime ago, the Shiv Sena leader demanded that the Muslims be defranchised in India for he felt that they were not 'loyal to India'. That too caused ridicule among the Indian people who only laughed at the suggestion. Religious fundamentalists at times make funny demands and adopt peculiar positions on many issues. But none really heard of making a plea for defranchising religious minorities in a country. When most of the Indian political parties had castigated the zoning of the Babri Mosque in Avodiya by Hindu militants, Bal Thackarey was gleeful and reportedly encouraged the violence that followed and claimed 2000 lives

OPINION

Adaptation to change

A MAWAZ

AFTER reading the debate on 'Modernising the Mindset' in the supplement of The Daily Star (Jan 30), I was wondering about some points which rose in my mind. Here is a general matrix.

'Modern' ways of doing things are now appearing faster than it did even fifteen years ago, as the information technology has reduced the communication gap (time and distance), and is turning the world into a global village (mobile telephone in the village, and satellite cable channels in the small towns). Millions of Bangladeshis are working abroad, and sending useful feedbacks (and remittance) deep into the village homes. Traditional and conservative minds are subject to constant pressures of changes in the society, including the local urban society. The mental barriers are under constant bombardment in the Third World societies, and Bangladesh is not lagging behind in this cultural flux.

The generation gap has been reduced by almost fifty per cent (formerly reckoned as 25 years). Mobility and new job opportunities have increased. In the IT field, for example, there are university students in Dhaka who are working part time as computer specialists, earning their way through the university (at salaries several times more than their fathers earned). Fashions and styles are changing too fast for the economically backward countries, introducing social stress and strain in local societies, generation-wise.

Today it is not necessary to be literate to be up to date, as the audio-visual media has become cheap and fast and accessible even in real time. The social and cultural barriers are down, and the older generation is gasping for breath.

Modernism is in a sense adaptation to change. In the rate, quality and quantity of adaptation is variable in different local societies and communities (East, West, North, South). Education provides a window to the

world (as also travel). Now more input (feedback) is available to an individual than he can handle (at any level). The processing of the information is also overloaded, leading to communication stress, a symptom easily detected in the developed countries.

The bug has crept into the Third World, thanks to the Internet, and other IT gadgets and services. The WTO is a by-product of modern technology, and time and distance are becoming virtual in day to day transactions. It is a psychological challenge for the uninitiated, and a nuisance for the initiated. Another point to note is that nowadays too many options are available in life, individually or at the corporate level. Choosing or exercising an option is far more complicated than it looks on paper. Without option, the role of decision-making is reduced; and tradition and conservatism thrived, as in the earlier centuries. Now the mind has to be switched on, and the brain brought into the proper gear, before opening the mouth. There are less uses for the hands and feet, as technology takes over most of the daily chores (some scientists conjecture that future homo sapiens might take on the physical shape of a ball).

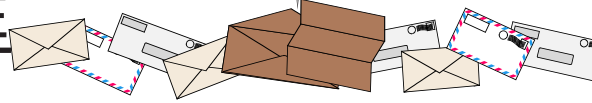
When the drudgery of routine work is reduced, what to do with the extra spare time, without using the mind? The resulting availability of time and space encourage innovation and entrepreneurship. The latter have to be fast and furious, to cope with the faster rate of change. Therefore adaptability becomes a part of everyday routine, at home and in the office.

Bureaucracy is fighting a losing battle.

As the mental barriers collapse, modernity has to be accepted as a part of routine life by every individual. Therefore the governments and the social and cultural systems have to be adapted to updated levels of sustainability (oneupmanship).

Education provides a window to the

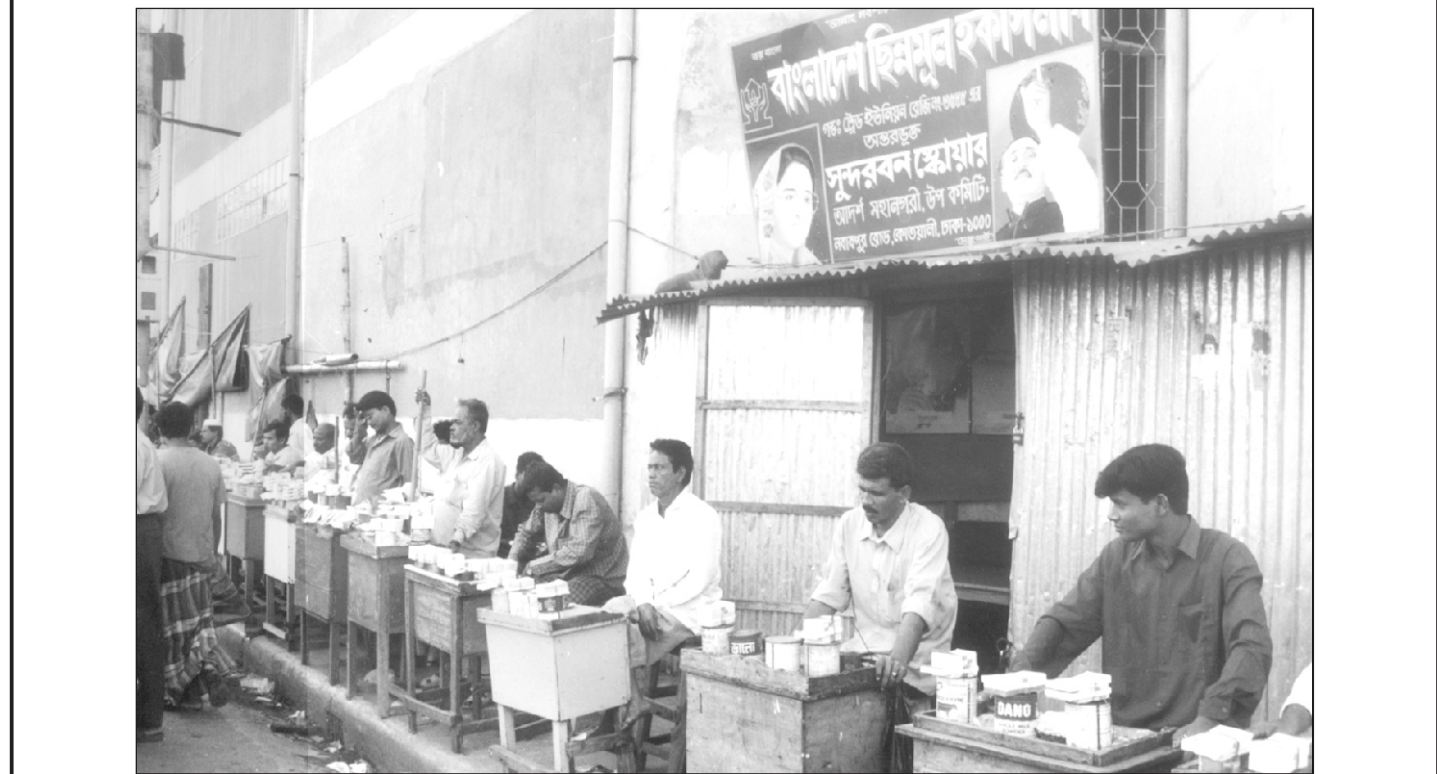
TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.

Using portrait of Bangabandhu



STAR PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

The footpath outside the Gulistan Municipal Market has been invaded by a line of unauthorised money exchange booths. By hanging images of Bangabandhu and the prime minister above them, these traders are giving the impression that their activities have official or ruling party approval. We strongly urge the authorities to clear the footpath and make sure dubious business concerns like this do not get away with giving a wrong impression.

From the mouths of babes

My four year-old daughter, sitting beside me as I read your newspaper, asked me a question about the photograph of a ruling party M.P. surrounded by people with fire arms, with policemen looking on. "Why are these people running with guns in their hands?" she asked. I was taken aback. I told her they were not law abiding, naughty people. I thought that was the end of her query.

I was wrong! The next question she asked was, "The policemen are not doing anything to prevent them?" I did not know what to say. I finally replied, "Not really." Alas! That was not the end of my ordeal. To my utter surprise she then asked me, "Whose police are these policemen then, Mom? (Ora tahole kader police ma?)" I could not reply. This toddler's question has been haunting me ever since. Can any one tell me what I should have said?

Demise of Tawfiq Bhai

The members of the Rotary Club of Dhaka (North West) and I are deeply shocked at the demise of our beloved club president Rtn. Tawfiq Aziz Khan. We pray to Almighty Allah for the peace of the departed soul.

Rtn Sirajuddin Sarkar Vice President

Where do we go now?

Our leaders are talking about democracy but doing the very opposite. Democratic governments

are coming and going one after another but we are not being able to escape from tyranny. Will Allah give us the power to be released from the grip of these people! Perhaps not. The social structure is nearly impossible to change. In which case, where should we, the general people who are constitutionally the owners and decision makers of the country go to hell? Our present condition is no less than that.

Shaikat Dhaka.

Where have the leaders gone?

The ruling party is more interested in chasing opponents than in paying attention to the issues which bedevil the nation and create political and social controversies.

Its vehemence use of hatred is now rebounding on the party itself. The display of unashamed arrogance is an undemocratic stand.

The next general elections should prove to be a watershed in political transparency. If not, the country will go to the dogs.

Our intellectuals are not protesting, because most of them are not independent --either by choice or by circumstances. There are not enough powerful and influential groups to exert control over unethical political leadership. The teachers are partisan, and the big loan-defaulters are practically untouchable. Most institutions have been politicised, including the apex body of the neutral NGOs. The good people are ruled by leaders who lack statesmanship.

AH

BUET, Dhaka

Bravo for the 10th Anniversary issue

Your 10th anniversary issue (January 30) has come to me like nectar from heaven. I am a regular reader and this is the best issue I have ever had. I would like to thank all those tireless efforts made this issue possible.

I have started going through this issue meticulously so that I don't miss a single word. An article 'The inner beings of Bangladeshi women.' by Dilara Chowdhury really impressed me. I must say she is absolutely night. In fact, she somewhat underplayed what actually happens in our so-called civil society against women. I hope she remains as intrepid as ever and expresses the hard realities of life.

Kumer Lovelu Udichi, Madaripur

Point of view

Poet Shamsur Rahman remarked on ETV news on February 3rd that a true Muslim says his prayers away from others and does not call others to prayers. One should go through the teachings of Islam. One should not interpret the teachings of Islam as one would like them to be. Mr Shamsur Rahman has the right to express his views. And I have the right to disagree with him.

Mahmud Ali Dhaka.

Saifullah,