

Hartals petering out

Take the road to election

THE last-minute shortening of Monday's hartal by five hours following the Sunday's dawn-to-dusk one has more to it than meets the eye. Originally, when the alliance partners in the Opposition had called for the two consecutive days' hartal it was definitely a precipitous decision on their part. For, they were unmindful of the inconvenience that the Hajj pilgrims preparing to depart for Jeddah on Tuesday would be put to, if there were strikes on Sunday and Monday, let alone the Eid-ul-Azha and SSC examination related considerations outweighing such an option. Then, almost as an afterthought, opposition leader Begum Zia sent words to the liaison committee leaders from the airport before her departure for Singapore that Monday's hartal had better be done away with for the sake of Hajj pilgrims.

Unfortunately though, her instructions went unheeded primarily because of the hardline taken by Jamaat, and to some extent, by Jatiya Party at that time. But it goes to the credit of Begum Zia that she intervened twice in the matter, the last time phoning her party secretary general from Singapore itself to ensure that the duration of Monday's strike were at least curtailed.

On the whole it is good augury that Begum Zia's will has finally prevailed over that of the dissenters in the matter of Monday's strike. But it is a small consolation before the wider public expectation that she eschew hartal option altogether now in favour of preparing for the fast approaching national elections.

The opposition's latest hartal call hardly carried any conviction, something which stands proven from the regrets expressed within their ranks over 'perfunctory' picketing by their leaders and activists. As it is, the opposition is scaling down on the hartal option in March in view of Eid-ul-Azha and SSC examinations time-tables. After that only three months will be left for the dissolution of the incumbent government, transition to a caretaker government and its staging of the national elections in a rapid sequence of events. Hartal, confrontation, violence and destabilisation can only upset the appellation. Nobody in the right frame of mind can welcome such a prospect.

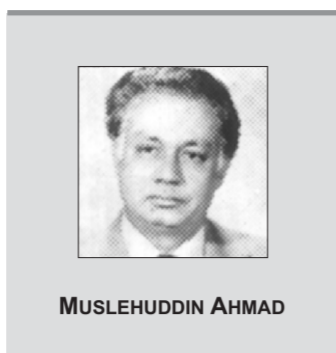
Bradman passes away

Legend to be revered

WITH the death of Sir Donald Bradman at the age of 92 the world of cricket has lost a legend. Bradman has so many astounding achievements to his credit that superlatives could be piled one upon another to adorn his name. Several distinctions remain paramount in our mind. As a batsman, his Test scoring average of 99.94 in 52 Test matches and 6,996 runs, will probably never be bettered. In his last Test appearance in 1948, he made a second ball duck against England and was robbed of the chance to have retired with an average of 100. But not even the most prolific batsman today has been able to come close to matching Bradman's average and it is unlikely any will. His career best included a remarkable 334 not out in the Ashes at Leeds in 1930, at the height of the Great Depression, and 396 runs including a defiant century against England's 'bodyline' attack two years later. Captaining Australia from 1936 onwards, he also made his mark later as an administrator in two stints as national selector.

Hailed as the greatest Australian of all time, Bradman will be revered not only for his talent and tenacity, but also for his remarkable humility, particularly after he had acquired a hero's status. Guarding his privacy in later years, he took great pains to prevent his name from being exploited for commercial interests. Yet, he was frank and almost ingenuous when describing his achievements. When asked in a rare interview five years ago how he had managed to score so fast, and avoid taking risks, Bradman replied that there were lots of other batsmen who were better, "but they just kept getting out". The simplicity of his reply testifies to an innate genius that will be revered long after his innings has come to an end.

ME peace process in jeopardy



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

AFTER a series of wrong political decisions and faulty steps Ehud Barak has finally decided to quit Israeli political scene for the time being. Despite his earlier decision to take time out of Israeli politics after having lost miserably against Ariel Sharon, his decision to join the unity government under Sharon led to heavy internal strife within Labour party. Even his Foreign Minister Ben Ami sent him a strong letter 'accusing him of failing blatantly at leadership'. Jerusalem Post reported that Ben-Ami wrote, "I was amazed to hear that you changed your mind about the unity government. Don't tell me it was hard for you and good for the country. In my eyes, it is sad and absurd that discussions and arguments will now revolve round the allocation of portfolios." Several other ministers and Labour leaders severely criticised him for his decision which apparently he took without proper consultation with his party. Now Barak's latest decision may save his party from being split. Now Shimon Peres is being enticed to be the Defence Minister under the proposed unity government. Peres has not confirmed this yet nor is the unity government a certainty. Many of the Labour leaders are opposed to sharing political bed with Sharon as this would compromise

Labour's political ideals, particularly those relating to peace in the Middle East. Labour also feels that any form of unity government headed by Ariel Sharon would be short-lived. Even former Likud Prime Minister Netanyahu predicted that Sharon's government would not last more than three months. Thus the unity government appears unlikely unless Labour gets important ministerial portfolios that can control the decision making process. Ariel Sharon's political ascen-

dancy in Israel has shocked not only the Arabs but also the peace loving people around the world. It appears surprising that the people of Israel elected a person like Sharon to lead the nation at such a critical stage of its political existence. Sharon promised security for the people of Israel, but the level of violence has indeed increased greatly on both sides and the people of Israel are now facing more stones and bullets and the Palestinians braving more deaths from Israeli tank fires. Many Israelis now feel that Sharon's election has made the future of Israel more uncertain and as various reports indicate this is now being openly discussed in Israel. In fact, the earlier question of the legitimacy of planting a Jewish state not only of the descendants of Israelites (Israelites came from Egypt with Prophet Moses) who claim the land as Biblical promised land but also Jews

border is hotting up due to increased hostile activities of Hezbollah and this is increasingly involving Lebanese government too. Syria has already expressed its hostile position immediately after Sharon's victory. It knows well that it cannot even negotiate with Sharon on Golan Heights let alone recover it from Israel. Therefore, Syria would remain hostile and would indirectly encourage Hezbollah to continue its operation. Saddam Hussein has already asked for the formation of a special Palestine Liberation Army unit in Iraq. He certainly does not have the nuclear bomb as Israel has, but he can certainly mobilise a conventional army which, with the support of other Arabs fighting for the Palestinian cause, may become a source of major concern for Israel. Saddam does not bother about losing his people his people are

losing anyway because of 10-year old UN sanction led by the US and the UK. Indeed, Iraq has lost a generation. Does the civilised world bother about it? Has the world body taken any serious tangible action to overturn the sanction? What a strange democratic world we live in! The apex body of the democratic world the UN is run on a dictatorial system of veto veto of the permanent members. The question arises why veto of some selected members in the decision making process of

such a remote possibility is to go for an all out effort for peace, by way of Israeli withdrawal from the occupied Arab territories so that such threat is removed permanently as in that case the Palestinian State, Syria, Lebanon Egypt etc would work as the buffer. The present policy of using some Arab and neighbouring states for punishing Iraq may not work for long. These countries have started expressing their serious concerns over the deteriorating situation in Iraq and mass murder

problem with Iraq something like an old score or even family legacy in terms of Gulf war and Iraq. This might make President Bush's ideas in the matter somewhat fuzzy and thus might even lead to counterproductive actions. Secretary Colin Powell has rightly advised both Israeli and Palestinian leaders to stop violence and engage in the peace talks. Sharon said he would not negotiate under the pressure of violence and terror. Arafat welcomed Powell's suggestions and indeed pressed for US's direct initiative in the peace process. But reactions in the streets of West Bank and Gaza and also in other parts of the Arab world are certainly different. Things are steadily getting out of control of their leaders. The situation may turn worse if Israel continues its blockade of the Palestinian territories and also use its superior fire power.

Therefore, the UN Secretary General should take immediate initiatives with the help of the leaders of Europe, Russia, China and other countries concerned and try to find a way to pursue the peace process and prevail upon Israel, regardless of the ultimate shape of the government, to pick up the negotiations from where it was left by former US President Clinton. Indeed, it would be worthwhile for the UN to invite former President Clinton to formally lead the peace process now on behalf of the UN. If he has the full support of the UN and also of the US, he would be able to do the job as he knows the issues and the leaders of two sides so well.

SPOTLIGHT ON MIDDLE EAST

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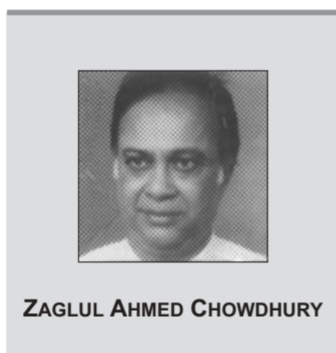
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No thaw in Indo-Pak ties



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

CONTRARY to the expectations generated in recent days, there seems to be no thaw in the ties between the two south Asian neighbours India and Pakistan. India has just extended the current ceasefire in the troubled state of Kashmir by another six months, saying this would help peace in the region. The truce has now been extended to May 31 but Pakistan has questioned the sincerity of purpose and said the semblance of a truce was not helping create a conducive atmosphere for the settlement of the vexed Kashmir problem. The leader of the alliance of several militant Kashmiri organisations also doubted the rationale of the extension of ceasefire as he found the decision of New Delhi largely as a propaganda stunt. Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee announced the extension of the truce at the lower house of parliament (Lok Sabha) and said India would not allow the process to be "derailed, diluted and misused". He also sounded a warning, saying those who think that security forces of this country are now less determined to put an end to terrorism are only deluding themselves. This means that the prime minister is not ready to buckle

up and New Delhi's appreciation of the attitude. Leaders of the two countries prime minister Vajpayee and Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf also spoke over telephone for the first time since Musharraf took power in his country in October, 1999 toppling an elected Kashmiri separatist groups, reacting to the extension said the situation in the India-held Kashmir is now worse than it was without so-called ceasefire.

from time to time from international community for settling the problem which is also a big burden on both India and Pakistan. India is maintaining a huge presence of its army in the area and the cost of this is obviously very staggering. Pakistan has to support and assist the Kashmiri militant organisations morally and materially and this too is a big expenditure for the country. India says Kashmiri "terrorism" is fully a creation of Pakistan which, on the other hand, says it only provides

priority and in the process no meaningful progress is made towards an effective bid for settlement of the issue. Despite all this, India and Pakistan maintain normal relations and talk to each other on various bilateral matters and disputes. But the pitch of the ties is also often so queered that these contacts appear jeopardised or totally cut-off at times. The "Kargil" conflict between the two countries in mid 1999 caused such a bad phase in their

neighbour Pakistan like everybody else to express sympathy and rush relief materials for the victims. This introduced positive elements in the hitherto bitter bilateral ties and the heads also had telephonic conversations. This led many to wonder whether a thaw was discernible? But the latest situation in Kashmir does not provide an encouraging sign as far the question of improvement in the ties is concerned. Judging by the respective positions of the two sides, it is not plausible to think that things are moving in the positive direction the goodwill generated by the Gujarat disaster notwithstanding. Nevertheless, two sides probably cannot abandon the path of reconciliation on the Kashmir issue as they are being constantly reminded of the need to reduce tensions centring the disputed region two thirds of which is controlled by India and one third by Pakistan. A high-powered congressional team from the United States led by David E. Bonior is visiting Pakistan for talks on the prospects of easing tensions over Kashmir between the two neighbours. President George Bush has conveyed his feelings to both nations on the necessity for lessening tensions between them. Sri Lankan president Chandrika Kumaratunga, who is the current chairperson of the SAARC, is visiting India and her talks with prime minister Vajpayee covered the unhealthy political climate in the south Asian region. Needless to say, the environment can improve only if bilateral ties between India and Pakistan improve. Kashmir is their main bone of contention. Going back to square one is no success but exploiting the positive omens for betterment of the ties is admirable. Hopefully, leaders of India and Pakistan will pursue the latter and not the former for the sake of peace.

MATTERS AROUND US

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New Delhi's decision and reactions by its adversaries evidently lead nowhere of any degree of optimism that two sides are getting nearer for any kind of settlement of the contentious Kashmir problem. True, the magnitude of the problem is such that any glimmer of hope for its solution is terribly remote because this issue has been defied a settlement for more than fifty years. But once again there has been a flicker of hope in recent days that the ties between India and Pakistan is likely to improve in the coming days because of a number of factors including the indications for dialogue among the contending parties on the sensitive problem and more importantly, the gesture shown by Pakistan in sending relief goods to the earthquake victims of the western Indian state of Gujarat

propitious climate created by certain factors led the area analysts to believe that although hostility will not disappear by any noticeable extent but some betterment of relations may be in the offing. But the latest situation suggests that the hopes are largely belied although whatever positive ambience created in recent days has not been fully obviated either. Arguably, any qualitative change in approach to the Kashmir problem by either side is difficult because of the complexities involved in the issue which is emotive in both countries. Political leaders or persons in power in both India and Pakistan can ill-afford to take any bold or realistic step in the form of concessions to the other side to facilitate a resolution of the tangle. Nonetheless, there are pressures

moral and political support to the "freedom fighters." Independent observers believe both sides are wrong and try to place the truth under the carpet. The Pakistani assistance in all forms is established while the uprising in Kashmir is essentially an indigenous matter. The Kashmiri militants are also losing their men and materials every day in the fight with the Indian security forces even though they also inflict damage to the opponents. The acquisition of nuclear power by both the countries has now made the situation more vulnerable. All these combine to force all the quarters involved to take a look also at the chances of peace in the region. However, the known positions of all sides weigh heavily on formulating their policies and hence the positive aspects often receive less

relations that New Delhi and Islamabad have since been not in touch with each other. The presence of army chief Gen. Musharraf as the top powerful person in Pakistan made it worse since India sees him as responsible for the "Kargil" as the chief of Pakistan army while now deposed and exiled prime minister Nawaz Sharif, who was the head of the civilian government at that time, was considered a 'dove.' 'Hawkish' Musharraf, as India views him, remained a stumbling block in the improvement of the ties even if he expressed willingness for talks with India provided what he said the discussions should have meaningful purposes. Under this situation, the logical corollary is a stand-off and this is what persisting between the two countries. The catastrophic earthquake in Gujarat prompted

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

Hot air

This refers to 'Valentine's Day: zealots' new victim in India' by Mr Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury, (February 19). The article should have taken no more than two paragraphs of space. The essence of what the writer had to convey was: 1) The Shiv Sena had raised hackles over Valentine's Day celebrations and tried to stop Indians (specially those in Maharashtra) from celebrating the event. 2) Indians by and large ignored the call and went about their business. 3) The Shiv Sena has a history of raising controversial issues, mainly those that are perceived to be 'anti-minority'. Instead, the writer wastes precious newsprint to recount various unrelated events, without providing any fresh point of view. To readers unaware of the ground realities, the article would lead them to believe that there was an army of Hindu zealots vandalizing and spreading terror among those who attempted to celebrate Valentine's Day in India. The writer claims that the 'Shiv Sena' 'terrorised' people in Maharashtra and elsewhere on this occasion. The picture being painted was of wanton terror on the streets of India, courtesy the Shiv Sena. Please!

The fact is, while there were a few incidents where miscreants attempted to 'terrorise' shopkeepers and shoppers into submission, most

of these had more 'whimper than bang'. In fact, the Indian media has reported that most of such demonstrators were merely playing to the gallery (read, camera). I thought the last line of the article referring to 'making issues out of nothing' was appropriate to the article itself.

AProud Indian
Dhaka

Vivid picture

The vivid picture (February 14) showing the Awami League procession led by MP Iqbal was enough proof of the ruling party's terrorism and tyranny. Yet they called a press conference to hoodwink the press and the people! One wonders how long such mockery will persist. What a travesty of justice. "Hasina condemns the killing", was reported by you, but the PM did not utter a single word about those involved nor ordered any inquiry; whereas Mirza Abbas and 17 others of the BNP were sued under the PSA. And the same happened to the Chittagong MP Morshed Khan and his son. At the same time, the gun toting criminals have gone scot-free. It is high time that people started to resist these so-called peace processions, led by MPs and Ministers.

Ahmed Rahaman
Dhaka
Appeal for life
May Allah bless your staff for the

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.

PHOTORIAL

Hartal distress



STAR PHOTO: SR. ENAMUL HAQ

Passengers arriving at Zia International Airport face unimaginable distress during the hartal. These two women were stranded after arriving from Dubai. They finally managed to hitch a ride on a 'rickshaw van', at obvious inconvenience to themselves. There are other serious consequences for the public during a hartal. We call upon those responsible to be sensitive to these problems and end the hartal culture, once and for all.

report on four-year-old Nayeem who is fighting for his life, with his only kidney not functioning (February 25). According to the report, doctors have said that he needs treatment abroad, but this is too expensive for his family that can hardly manage two meals a day. If necessary steps are not taken in time, Nayeem may not be able to live. May Allah save the boy's life. As the Prophet Mohammed (may peace be upon him) said, Allah keeps on helping those who engage themselves in their brother's assistance. In the Holy Qur'an it is said that if you help those in need of help, Allah will surely help you.

With these few words, may I ask all my sisters and brothers to come forward and extend the necessary cooperation to four-year-old Nayeem, a child from a poor family, badly in need of their help. This is my earnest request. I would specially like to draw the attention of those who watch Tafseerul Qur'an and other Islamic programmes on ATN Bangla TV Channel.
Moulana Abul Kalam Azad
Chairman,
Masjid Council for Community Advancement (MACCA)

AL handling

The Awami League's handling of Islamic issues has been showing cracks. It has to improve its public relations, specially with issues dealing with mass and religious psychology. AL is notorious for

belligerent, abrasive attacks, revealing an uncompromising attitude towards a multiplicity of views among patriotic citizens. The AL attitude appears to many to be feudal and patronising; this is due to poor salesmanship. Recently it has been running after a section of *ulemas* trying to establish rapport with them, after being scared by the unforeseen and unexpected train sabotage. The foreign ministry has been meeting repeatedly with foreign diplomats and agencies in the country to explain how the government is handling a potentially inflammable issue of religious sentiment.

The fatwa issue is a national and human issue, going beyond the confines of political sabre-rattling. A political party, however strong, cannot fight against religion involving huge masses without creating a lot of confusion and misunderstanding. The fatwa issue cannot be solved as long as the political parties do not act together in the national interest. Suppression is dangerous, like an ostrich burying its head in the sand. Statesmanship has to come back in political leadership, regardless of differences in political ideologies. Get the basics right, before sermonising.

A Voter
Dhaka