

## Foreigner kidnap issue

### Concentrate on plus points

HERE is no second opinion that the physical safety of European consultants held captive on the hills for the 13<sup>th</sup> day by tribal elements ought to be the uppermost consideration for all concerned. The Danish and British governments have jointly stressed this point in a note to our foreign office. They have even had advisers experienced in hostage affairs brought over to assist authorities at Rangamati in their negotiation with the tribal abductors. The chief of Bangladesh Army on a visit to the area lately has made three points: first, the army cordon will not be lifted as a wider security precaution; secondly, this need not however signal that force will be used to secure release of the hostages; and thirdly, the military will act only under the directive of political government.

Seldom has a hostage crisis offered a readymade opportunity for contact with kidnapers as the present one did from the day one via tribal intermediaries on hand to do the job. Thank God, even after Thursday's rather off-putting raid on a tribal village contacts have been resumed with the abductors by go-betweens on the following Monday. The kidnapers are said to be willing to sit down for talks but only after they are ensured security through the mediation process. Their anxiety over safe exit is understandable. A modicum of confidence has to be built into their panicked psyche.

We think it is the tribal leadership who can make a real difference in the situation if they want to. They know the terrain like the thumb of their hand and are also conversant with the idiom and reflexes of each other to be best suited for a catalytic role for the early release of the captive foreigners. Moreover, there should be a unified negotiating voice emerging out of a fail-safe coordination among local administrators, tribal leaders, foreign diplomats and security agencies, the key players on the scene.

## After D-8 summitry

### Substantive follow-up needed

THE third D-8 meeting in Cairo this week has been encouraging. Eight of the most populous Muslim countries in the world, representing some 800 million people, have reinforced their rapport and commitment for substantive economic cooperation, particularly in the context of globalisation.

We fully endorse their call for the removal of imbalances between the distribution of benefits and sharing the costs of globalisation, now skewed in favour of the developed world. Added challenges have emerged with the recent slowdown in the world's major economies, leading to apprehensions of increased protectionism, and the continued existence of the external debt burden on the D-8 nations. The developed economies and especially the WTO must be induced to level the playing field and allay apprehensions that globalisation has become a negative rather than a positive force for the developing world.

On their part, the leaders of Bangladesh, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Pakistan, Turkey and Egypt have recognised the importance of moving closer to one another, in order to move forward. Lacking contiguous boundaries, they need to build institutional linkages so that among other advantages, their intra-forum trade can expand substantially from the existing 3.5 per cent. Trade and investment volume between member states would be enhanced with the support of private sector collaboration, lowering of tariff walls and easing of regulatory barriers. We commend the decision to simplify business visa procedures between D-8 countries and bilateral concessions such as duty-free facilities for Bangladeshi goods announced by Egypt. But these and other preliminary gains need to acquire tangible shape and substance. A precise set of economic targets, within a focused policy concept, should emerge as a follow-up to this summit. The next phase of the D-8 economic agenda must demonstrate implementation of these objectives in order to make the D-8 an effective and meaningful economic bloc.

K.A.S. MURSHID

THE primary responsibility of the next Caretaker Government (CG) is to hold free and fair elections. This in itself, of course, is a big enough challenge. I however address myself to another problem, which I believe is of vital longer run importance, namely the problem of establishing non-disruptive political behaviour. This requires institutional change, appropriate mechanisms and collective action. At this point, let me briefly introduce the concepts of "institutions", "organizations" and "cooperation". Institutions may be thought of as rules, formal and informal, including social and political behaviour, codes of conduct, norms that are sanctified by law or by social practice or "culture". The basic element is that these must be easy and inexpensive to enforce. If a rule exists on paper or is too expensive to implement, then it cannot be part of the institutional frame.

The goal of organizations, on the other hand, is to generate cooperation or collective action with the main aim of improving efficiency and reducing transaction costs (i.e. the costs of engaging in any kind of exchange). Perhaps the main problem today in Bangladesh is to agree on the basic "rules of the

game" in our political and economic life and to find easy ways of enforcing these. Our continued inability to generate a minimum level of cooperation bodes ill and threatens to erode the very fabric of our society. Perhaps here, the CG can play a vital role. Let me elaborate.

can this be stopped or are we going to have to suffer continuously, irrespective of what government is in power (or more correctly which party is in the opposition)? An optimistic line of reasoning would expect that repeated tit-for-tat will ultimately generate a solution by

consensus only if they are in power and of course that may not be so easy to predict, and at any rate, immediate gratification is not likely. Typically, politicians have a short time horizon and are rather eager to get a share of the public pie as soon as possible they do not seem to

which we will have to wait another five years. It is therefore critically important to seize the opportunity to try and rid ourselves of TFT once and for all. I will argue below why I think there are good reasons for optimism on this score:

λ The CG will assume power in

The opposition parties in Bangladesh have gotten used to behaving in a certain way. The main strategy employed by the opposition consists of hartals and street violence, a decided refusal to settle complaints through conventional, democratic mechanisms (e.g. the parliament, the courts) or through other "civilized" mechanisms (e.g. through joint meetings, informal contacts etc), and an increasing reliance on criminals and armed groups. Essentially, the strategy can be described as "tit for tat". The question is, can this be stopped or are we going to have to suffer continuously, irrespective of what government is in power (or more correctly which party is in the opposition)?

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forcing the contending parties to realize that an agreement has to be reached, as neither side can win. This is not likely to happen automatically, although there must be a growing appreciation of the fact that political behaviour cannot continue to be conducted in this self-destructive manner much longer. Given the fact that neither side is deemed to be trustworthy, there is the problem of who will agree first to abandon the TFT strategy. There is also the problem of the time horizon involved. A particular party will expect to reap the benefits of a

care if the pie is dwindling and set to dwindle even further because of their actions. Their main goal is to obtain a larger share of this pie, here and now theoretical benefits at some date in the uncertain future, does not seem like a good bet. In addition, there is the problem of third party enforcement and monitoring that is critical for agreements of this nature to succeed in other words, an impartial umpire is needed.

The next CG is best suited to take on this vital task. If it does not address itself to this problem, we will have lost a great opportunity for

the next few months. It is expected to be an impartial body respected by all parties, and will therefore enjoy both the legal and moral authority to resolve disputes and lay down rules of behaviour and codes of conduct.

λ It will be in the interest of both the major political parties (but not necessarily of the smaller, fringe parties) to come to an agreement on the ban of TFT politics and the politics of hartal and violence because neither can be certain of winning the

# Home truths from Gujarat: Stench of hypocrisy and hierarchy

PRAFUL BIDWAI  
writes from New Delhi

BY all criteria of electoral accountability, the Keshubhai Patel ministry should have been sent packing for its handling of the earthquake. Despite generous support from a partisan Central government, a \$1.5 billion commitment from the World Bank, and timely aid from Indian citizens and foreign governments, it failed to reach life-sustaining aid to the victims.

Gujarat's performance was appalling in relation to the 1993 Latur quake, for which the BJP wanted the Maharashtra government sacked. Mr Patel was largely invisible. Relief was politicised through denial of food to Dalits and Muslims.

Rich Gujarat was far better placed than Orissa to handle a calamity. After the 1999 cyclone, everyone demanded chief minister Gamang's head. But Gujarat the only BJP-controlled state was mollycoddled.

The Prime Minister cancelled his Japan-Malaysia tour. The home minister visited Gujarat five times, the defence minister twice. By contrast, Mr Vajpayee had made a token night landing in Bhubaneswar and hesitated declaring India's worst cyclone a "national calamity".

The Centre is raising Rs. 15,000 crores for Gujarat. Shamefully, it gave only Rs. 828 crores to Orissa, and held back its dues. Orissa runs a Rs. 22,000 crores debt, but had to borrow from the market.

The Centre allowed MPs to allot to Orissa Rs. 10 lakhs from their Rs. 2 crores "local area" scheme. (Only 38 of the 790 did so.) For Gujarat,

there is no ceiling.

The elitist media has also been partisan. Its coverage of Gujarat was 20 times higher than Orissa. It privileged Gujarat as one of our most urbanised and industrialised states, and a foreign investment destination.

Odious comparisons were made about Gujarat's "pride" and "entrepreneurial spirit." Orissa was depicted as "the stereotype calamity."

The Patel government's collusion with shadowy industrialists and property sharks is legendary. Ahmedabad and Rajkot recently witnessed demolitions of the homes of the poor to make room for pizza parlours and shopping malls.

The conservative media condoned the entrepreneur-politician-bureaucrat network. Some newspapers urged corporations to "adopt" whole villages by making donations to NGOs. But very few NGOs exist

etc".

This overall elite response to a great natural disaster exposes a terrible social pathology. Donations notwithstanding, our elite remained largely "dry-eyed". It has learnt little from the catastrophe.

As argued repeatedly in this column, "natural" disasters are not natural in their consequences, as distinct from causes. They are especially harsh upon the poor. The key to their mitigation lies not in

societies an opportunity to introspect. Should we build a social order in which unequal starting-points generate yet further inequalities of opportunity? Someone born in a low-caste, poor family faces many disadvantages. Surely, his/her opportunity shouldn't further erode in a natural disaster. But our elite draws the opposite lesson: grabs whatever it can.

Enlightened leaders can counter such perverse perceptions by

of quoting, confirmed this on CNN.

This underscores a hair-raising possibility: that would a launch-on-warning or -retaliation response have meant with missile flight-times of three to eight minutes between Indian and Pakistani cities?

Two: The bombing of Ahmedabad with a crude nuclear weapon, smaller than what Pakistan or India possesses, would be about 50 times more devastating than the Bhuj earthquake. It would release vast quantities of heat and radiation in addition to tremors.

Bhuj was flattened. But will Ahmedabad, Mumbai or Delhi survive a nuclear attack? Have millions of Indians not become defenceless after the Great Folly of May 1998? Do we need lessons in plate tectonics or in plain morality to grasp this home truth?

There was confusion and panic in the military establishments of India and Pakistan on January 26: was it an earthquake or a nuclear attack? This lasted a full half-hour. Stephen Cohen (Brookings Institution), whom our strategic experts are otherwise fond of quoting, confirmed this on CNN. This underscores a hair-raising possibility: what would a launch-on-warning or -retaliation response have meant with missile flight-times of three to eight minutes between Indian and Pakistani cities?

The suggestion was, Gujarat deserved generous assistance being "a wellspring" of private enterprise. Orissa didn't. In other words, most Indians who don't live in industrialised areas, and lack gung-ho "entrepreneurial" instincts don't deserve help.

The truth of this "entrepreneurship" was soon revealed in Ahmedabad's high-rise apartments. Over 50 of these collapsed, killing 700 people. The "enterprising" builders have connections to the chief minister and his son.

Also implicated in rackets are other bigwigs, including the brother of the VHP's Praveen Togadia, and numerous BJP officials. Only six builders were arrested. The biggest culprits got complainants beaten into silence.

in Kutch. Some are RSS fronts which discriminate against low castes and religious minorities.

For all the publicised munificence of private industry, its promised donations are a measly one-hundredth of the reconstruction cost. The highest is Rs. 15 crores. Public sector oil companies alone donated more.

Certain corporate interests used the quake to push even more aggressive agendas: create "special economic zones" in quake-affected areas. These should "make the policy environment as friendly for foreign investment... as [in] China.... a laboratory for... innovative... models [such as] privatisation; involvement of foreign companies to induct technology, finance.... [and] long-term leasing;

fancy high technology, but in long-term prevention, including urban planning, emergency provisioning, pooling of equipment such as cranes and earthmovers, and effective communication.

This is part of the democratic agenda of making government accountable to the people. Our elite has set its face against this agenda.

Second, the elite looks for quick-fixes: e.g. NGO assistance. But this is no substitute for government. Early corporate intervention might bring limited relief to those with the "right" connections. It cannot provide universal relief. Corporations whose sole rationale is profits for super-rich directors can't really "adopt" villages.

Third, natural disasters provide

upholding universal compassion, equality and human dignity. But in Gujarat, we only had the sordid Patels, Advanis and Vajpayees.

Following them, sections of our elite exhibited gung-ho confidence (or is it contrived self-assurance?) in Gujarat's "irrepressible" ability to "bounce back" just as they had wrongly done after the 1993 Bombay pogrom. Accompanying this "confidence" was hubris about India's "invincibility".

Yet, we should reflect upon two facts. One: There was confusion and panic in the military establishments of India and Pakistan on January 26: was it an earthquake or a nuclear attack? This lasted a full half-hour. Stephen Cohen (Brookings Institution), whom our strategic experts are otherwise fond

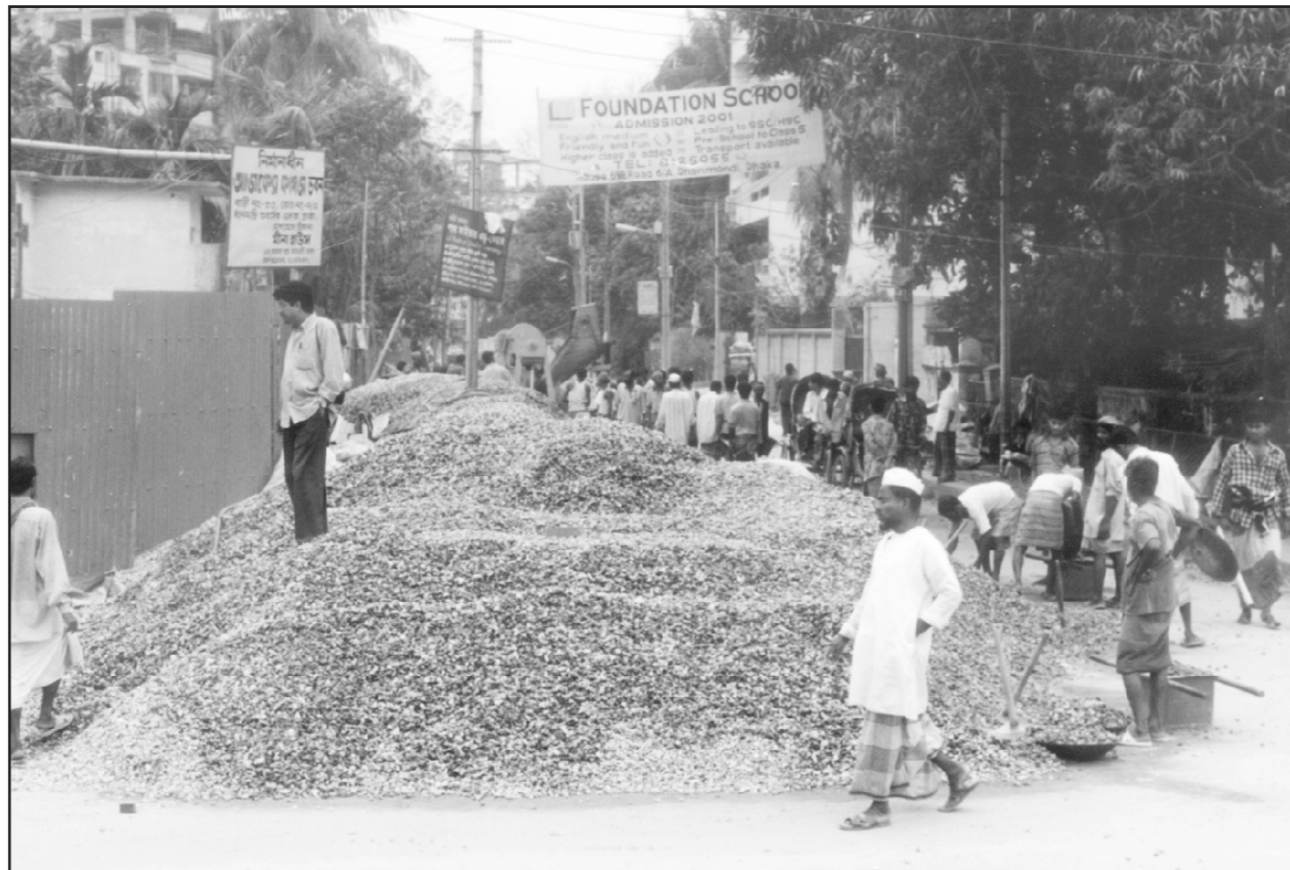
**ERRATUM**  
In the Editor's Response to an Opinion article titled, "The Daily Star and the Prime Minister" by Omar Karim, published on February 25, 2001 on this page, the sentence in the fourth paragraph should have read as follows: "However, the fact is that the Daily Star editor was not in the panel of journalists for the AL programme because the AL did not find him acceptable." The term "BNP" was inadvertently added to the phrase "AL-programme" in the above sentence. We apologise for the error.

## 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.

#### Residents held hostage



STAR PHOTO: SR. ENAMUL HAQ

Residents who use Road 7/A (old Road 14) in Dhanmondi are being held hostage by a construction company that has literally captured the road for its own use. Children are exposed to hazards all day. No one can pass, particularly at night when construction work continues. The noise and pollution is unimaginable. In case of an emergency, what would anyone do? Who is responsible for this outrage? Would the DCC take note?

#### "Editor's Response"

Thank you for publishing my piece, "The Daily Star and the Prime Minister" (25 February). I also appreciate the Editor's response. Apparently, it was Matur Rahman, Editor of Pratham Alo, not Mahfuz Anam, who was one of the panelists in the Awami League question hour, prior to the 1996 general elections. I regret and apologize for the factual error and the lapse of memory. I thank The Daily Star for pointing out the gaffe.

As for the remainder of the Editor's response, most of it is superficial and redundant. I once again thank DS for publishing a different and dissenting opinion piece. I hope it will continue to do the same in the future.

Omar Karim  
Dhaka

#### US Embassy incident

I strongly support the views expressed by "A concerned citizen of Dhaka" (January 23) regarding the death of a businessman in the US embassy. From the media coverage one gathers that no steps have been taken against the culprit. He should have been sacked by the embassy and the foreign ministry should have asked him to leave this country. This particular counselor misbehaves with almost all visa applicants, ridiculing the documents/papers that the applicants present. I have been told that this particular counselor has called many applicants seeking F1 (student) visas, "liars". I believe that if the interviews could be recorded, the counselor would not be able to stay in service. I believe that the embassy has the

right to refuse any visa but it does not have the right to misbehave with anyone. I hope that the US visa process for Bangladeshi people seeking student visa would be eased.

YK  
Dhaka

#### Welcome commentary

Your commentary, "Views can be many, but there can be only one fact", (February 2nd) has gone a long way in making it clear that a newspaper which is the loudest voice for the people's "Right to know" has spoken "without fear or favour" for the people. There are many examples: your stand against the PSA, against hartals, against boycotting of parliament, against acrimonious politics, against using students as cannon fodder for politics. There has been strong advocacy for transparency, accountability and responsible leadership, democratisation of political parties, campaign for environment friendly development, most importantly, your fight against anti-liberation forces and enemies of independence.

The PM's attack was caused by a misunderstanding, thanks to her press department's negligence. By now the PM must have realised that anything she says makes news. The controversy over the president though speculative, deserved consideration. I'm optimistic that this commentary has shown us how journalism can steer a nation through the right course of human development.

S M Humayun Kabir

#### Bagerhat They don't care about us

The current political climate in our country is anything but congenial. While the ruling party accuses the opposition of "terrorism" even when armed activists are caught handed by newsmen in their own procession, the opposition on the other hand is causing much inconvenience for the general people by calling hartals. It appears that the only concern felt by the two leading political parties is to come out victorious in their own combat. The welfare of the people seems to be none of their concern. They don't care about the 13 crore people in this country. Democracy, too, is obviously not at all safe in their hands. They believe in politics for power, not in politics for the people.

Hasan Mahmud  
University of Dhaka

#### Keeping in tune

Until now, the regime has been taking a hard line against the opposition, based on traditional approaches towards idealistic ideologies. Now the reaction is hitting back with telling effect. The hate campaign and slanders have produced an accumulated adverse reaction in the people, who do not see eye to eye with some of the party's policies. The ruling party leadership has to come out of a historical cocoon. It must be in tune with the people, and not expect the people to be in tune with the ego of the leadership. A leader follows the people, and it is not the other way round.

Abd

#### Dhaka Stop hartals

Bangladesh is a developing country and we need to work in a body to make our country prosperous. But all progressive activities are hampered by political unrest. Our political leaders have made a mockery of the ideals of democracy. When one party is in the opposition, it hankers after power. There is no pragmatic reason to support hartals, one after another. Hartals stop all progressive activities, disrupt the academic atmosphere and create an acute delay of academic sessions. I request all the political leaders to stop hartals and violence on the streets.

Gopal Chandra Borman  
University of Chittagong

#### Hurry up RAJUK!

RAJUK issued an urgent notification in the daily newspapers in late August, 2000 followed by another one in late October, 2000 identifying certain roads in Gulshan, Banani and Uttara Model Towns with a width of 100 feet or more, directing that plots on these roads could be used for non-residential purposes, subject to the payment of fees. Many applied to RAJUK to obtain formal approval. But it is taking an inordinately long time for RAJUK to reply to applicants. Through this column of yours may I request the RAJUK authorities to very kindly look into the delay and expedite disposal of all applications received.

Muhammad Abdul Bari  
Dhaka