

Just a little more give-and-take

And we are there

From breakdown to a breakthrough in sight, it has been a big stride indeed. The outcome achieved by virtue of a presidential intercession basically rolled on by the Prime Minister's initiative and positively responded to by the leader of the opposition is a thaw the nation keenly awaited, and needless to say, welcomes now so wholeheartedly.

Opposition alliance leader and BNP chief Begum Khaleda Zia has relaxed her deadline for the government's resignation from March 30 to the first week of April marking a change in her agitational tenor. What's important is that she has done this out of respect for a presidential request that she consider withdrawing her March 30 ultimatum to the government as well as retracting her countrywide marathon hartal call for April 1, 2 and 3.

This is for the second time that she has played positively by the dictate of an inner political instinct, the first time being when she met the President on an Eid-ul-Azha courtesy call following PM's announcement that she would go for election on the date the opposition wanted it. On that occasion, Begum Zia mentioned 'end of May' to the President as being her preferred date for election. Her second meeting with the President on Wednesday carried a special import against the backdrop of a simmering divergence of opinions between the ruling party and the opposition alliance over the question of timing the government's power-transfer to a non-party caretaker government. The gap has been bridged somewhat now raising the hope that maybe the opposition alliance leader will deem it fit to withdraw her hartal call. About that, she has two days' respite to rethink her position in greater national interest.

Here we recall in a complimentary tone the Prime Minister's rather quiet, unassuming and definitely sagacious initiative to call on the President in the first place and request him to take a role in all this. She argued with a sixth sense that since the opposition 'listened to the President's words' it was only desirable that he took up the responsibility of resolving the crisis. To our mind, this is a most pragmatic use of her advisory role in relation to the President.

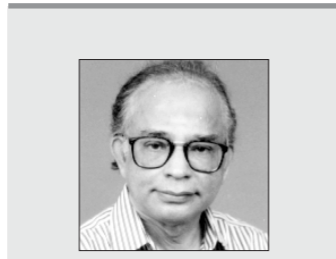
Let's therefore, congratulate the President, the Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader on their mutually reinforcing dispositions towards the common purpose of fixing a date for government's resignation before the constitutionally due date. They are very near it now.

This provides for a new opening, an opportunity that must not be squandered on a capricious spurt of complications or by adoption of intractable positions at either end of the political spectrum. The Prime Minister and the opposition alliance leader have shown the sense of responsibility and maturity that was direly needed to pull back from the brink of disaster. And they need to build on this.

Their contention on the timing of the government's resignation is reduced to 11 days now. There is no conflict on substance, what remains is a matter of detail only. One hopes very much that the middle road will have been reached in a few days' time with a wee bit more mutual accommodation that historically, when the situation demanded, they were not found wanting in.

It is highly imperative at this juncture that the President continues with his persuasive role until the terms of settlement have been reached by the political parties. At the same time, we implore the ruling and opposition parties to be unfailingly cooperative in their collective pursuit of ensuring the removal of all roadblocks to early elections.

Beyond the pale



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

THE Taliban epitomise obscurantism and zealotry in their most abominable extremes. Their hands may not be drenched and dripping with blood of innocent civilians as those of the perpetrators of "Killing Fields," but in terms of ruthlessness and barbarity the record is unparalleled. The Taliban, by all accounts, have become a scourge to their nation and a threat to all that civilised norms and conduct stand for.

The Muslims all over the world feel greatly embarrassed because all the violation of human rights and other atrocities are taking place in the name of Islam. To the non-Muslims it is grist to the mill of depicting Islam as a religion of depicting Islam as a religion of reaction and retrogression. The destruction of Buddhist sculptures is the *coup de grace*, literally and figuratively, to the denigration of Islam as a religion of tolerance. While the Islamic *umma* wring their hands, apologetically and somewhat helplessly, many non-Muslims may have gloated. The demonisation of the believers of the religion in the name of Taliban is now complete. The non-Muslim world seemed to be saying: "after this what forgiveness?"

The Taliban came under criticism from the world community, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, as soon as their decrees on women, culture

and modernisation became public. They came down viciously on women, practically banning their movement out of doors. Attendance in schools and educational institutions was restricted drastically while employment in offices and elsewhere outside home was totally prohibited. The initial limited permission to work for foreign agencies including relief organisation has been withdrawn. Afghan women cannot go to hospitals or clinics if there are no women doctors and

lent in hides of dead animals. Raquel Welch in Two Million BC would appear as a liberated modern woman guilty of sacrilegious to the Taliban eyes.

It is not only the women who have suffered through violation of human rights. The children, the future generation, who are to be brought up by them have had a stunted growth, emotionally and intellectually. If the trend continues unabated they will cross adulthood as ignorant bigots ready to lay down

sanctions on that score. It has not occurred to the champions of sanctions that this measure does not hurt the ruling class to any significant degree. As always, the ordinary innocents suffer in bitter silence and withering misery. What is more, sanctions and blanket condemnation harden the attitude of the tyrannical rulers into greater arrogance and defiance. The outlawed do not have any obligation to abide by the law, nor do they deign to pay even limited lip service. Being beyond the

tics which was declared out of bounds after the Taliban came into power, it can be said that their undeclared policy for the Buddhist statues was the same viz. let them exist but be not visited by devotees, Muslim or non-Muslim. They could not have suddenly woken up after more than half a decade in power about the sacrilegious nature of the icons about which they were aware all the while. Moreover, statues erected and revered by the followers of another religion is not

pale of civilised law and conduct. In the cowboy westerns the outlaws don't cringe and crawl before their adversaries. Nor do they repent and make amends for redemption. They retaliate with brute force and maraud with impunity. Through their outrageous and barbaric act of iconoclasm that is what the Taliban may have done, ignoring the requests and even appeals from all over the world including their closest Muslim neighbours.

The whole world has rightly condemned the senseless destruction of rare monuments that enriched human heritage. If appeal and condemnation did not deter the adamant Taliban zealots from razing the statues into rubble, the same may not be effective in reining the mad regime in. Sanctions and other punitive actions can only be counter-productive in situations like this. Instead of exile and isolation the Taliban should be brought back within the world community, albeit with a short leash. They should be given recognition and be made to realise the obligation of being a member in the comity of nations. The world has to be kind to the Taliban in order to be harsh. It should be realised that the script for the Taliban has no final showdown as in the film "High Noon." Beyond the pale, the Taliban will drag on interminably with their atrocities and outrageous behaviour. The living and the dead (statues) will bear the brunt of their wrath. But for their outrageous conduct, the Taliban alone should not be held responsible. The world community cannot absolve itself of guilt, however tenuous the link. After all, the predecessors of the Taliban, the Mujahideens, were nurtured under the guidance and supervision of one of the most civilised country in the world during the cold war.

IN MY VIEW

Beyond the pale, the Taliban will drag on interminably with their atrocities and outrageous behaviour. The living and the dead (statues) will bear the brunt of their wrath. But for their outrageous conduct, the Taliban alone should not be held responsible. The world community cannot absolve itself of guilt, however tenuous the link. After all, the predecessors of the Taliban, the Mujahideens, were nurtured under the guidance and supervision of one of the most civilised country in the world during the cold war.

nurses in attendance. In extreme cases, male doctors are allowed to examine female patients only in case of certain ailments and that too, in the presence of their male guardians. On the rare occasions, when they are allowed to come out of doors in public, they are required to wear a dress that covers the body from head to toe, only keeping the peeping holes open. Even the scarf and loose dress prescribed for women in Islamic Iran are disallowed. If a nation is judged by the way it treats women the Taliban have undoubtedly gone back thousands of years in history taking their place beside cavemen. The irony is that even the cavemen of the Stone Age allowed their women to gather food and do daily household chores outside their dwellings. To hide their shame the cave women wore nothing more than fig leaf or its equivalent

their lives at the call of Taliban leaders. It is not only the present, but the spectre of the near future that should send a shudder to the outside world and make it sit up in horror. The chilling prospect should also engender a sense of urgency for prevention of a greater catastrophe.

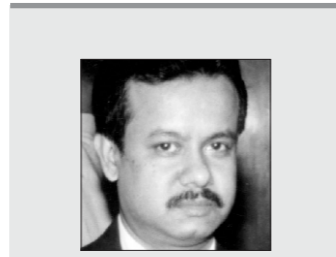
Given the gravity of the situation and dark foreboding for an ominous future the reaction of the world community has ranged from indifference to righteous indignation and only lately, following the demolition of Buddhist statues, in bitter condemnation. Sanctions have been imposed on the Taliban-led government not for violation of human rights and oppression of women in particular. The UN, at the beck and call of America, has labelled Taliban's Afghanistan as a terrorist state and clamped down economic

pale they feel free to go about their barbaric way in reckless abandon. They do this to assert their independence and invincibility. When pushed to the wall they react in anger and blind fury like a cornered animal. They retaliate in a language and acts that are abhorrent to those on the right side of law.

The chronology of events leading to the destruction of the Buddhist statues amply testifies that this barbaric act was not part of the official agenda of the Taliban regime. In fact, when the Taliban took over power and control in the greater part of Afghanistan their leader Moulavi Mohammed Omar's Islamisation programme did not include any step to demolish statues or murals depicting Buddha and Buddhist monks. Drawing an analogy with the shrine of Rabea Balkhi visited by starry-eyed roman-

regarded as repugnant in Sharia because the body of religious law is meant to govern the lives of the faithful i.e. the Muslims. If icons were anathema to fundamentalist Islamic regimes then multitudes of figures and pictures in Iran would have been destroyed long ago. When the first fundamentalist Islamic state did not feel any need to be iconoclastic there cannot be a reason for the Taliban to take a "holier-than-thou attitude" now. Their use of Islam and Sharia is obviously a ruse, a superficial excuse to hide a deeper and more telling reason for the iconoclastic savagery. It is a tit-for-tat, a riposte for the humiliation thrust upon the regime through sanctions and blanket condemnation. Having been declared as an international pariah state, Afghanistan under the Taliban are now virtually beyond the

Thirty years of independence



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

neglected as "the land of birds and not of men" in the Vedic Age, and considered to be "outside the region hallowed by the feet of the wandering Pandava brothers" in the Epic Age. It was despised as "a hell well-stocked with breads" in the Mughal times, and an exasperated Western bureaucrat in the twentieth century ridiculed it as "a bottomless basket." By the standard of those epithets of derision, we have come a long way as a nation in this short span of time, our identity trans-

dered our virtues to satisfy our senses.

In 1969, Kris Kristofferson sang in the United States, "Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose." In the paroxysms of greed, we have lost more than we have gained in thirty years, completely flushing out values from our system, at once obscuring the tradition of the past, obfuscating the transition of the present, and obstructing the transcendence of the future. We have emptied our souls to negotiate

enough to rape a girl. The rage goes full length to kill that girl and then shave her severed head before peeling off the skin to disfigure the face. The mutilated corpse is then cut into pieces as if the physical disintegration is the ultimate way to cleanse the crime.

In thirty years our hearts have frozen solid, our emotions turned cold as ice. We calculate everything in the measure of money; every handshake, every hug and every conversation weighed in the math-

future, they are eager to exploit it, their energy and talent wasted on heroine, phensidyl, violence and political pettiness. As a matter of fact, our greatest loss in thirty years has been the concussion of youth, the representatives of our future thoroughly damaged by the squabbles and dishonesty of their ancestors.

The heart of this nation has been filled with contradictions. The ignorance of intellectuals, the innocence of criminals, the devout-

have created certain insolubles, which continue to grate on the nerves of this nation. Who is the father of the nation? Who proclaimed the independence? Are we Bangladeshi or Bangalees? Who killed Major General Ziaur Rahman? All these questions and confusions have been subsumed into a primordial chaos that has darkened our minds and intellects.

In thirty years the condensation of doubt and mistrust has gone from bad to worse. Mischief and manipulation have disjoined the society, people shaken loose from people in the angst of despair. Excessive and irresponsible freedom has undermined independence, each person caught in the Brownian motion of his own agenda. We stand more divided in independence than we stood in subjugation, our politics performing some kind of a black magic to keep us in the unending state of meta-physical agitation.

Are we better off after thirty years of independence? The answer will vary from mouth to mouth. Those who have made their fortunes will probably answer it in the affirmative. But most people will not agree with them because fear, anxiety and frustration have eroded their lives. If eternal vigilance is the price of freedom, the common man has stayed up for too long, his mind forever disillusioned by an ever-churning contradiction: he cannot enjoy his freedom in an independent country. Going back thirty years in time, he still was the same. For all the advancements we have made since 1971, he still wonders what is the meaning of freedom.

CROSSTALK

If eternal vigilance is the price of freedom, the common man has stayed up for too long, his mind forever disillusioned by an ever-churning contradiction: he cannot enjoy his freedom in an independent country. Going back thirty years in time, he still was the same. For all the advancements we have made since 1971, he still wonders what is the meaning of freedom.

formed from that of a victim of natural calamities to that of a resilient nation fighting back to its adversities.

But somewhere in the strength of that fight our national morale curdled and tumbled off into the unthinkable. As the material space in our character spread, the spiritual space shrank at the same time. In thirty years, we have moved towards the Mephistophelean bargain, our souls gradually forfeited by the devil, which exchanged affluence for vulgarity with us. If we have successfully wrestled with starvation and hunger, it has been at the cost of our moral standards; we have squan-

dered our virtues to satisfy our senses.

In 1969, Kris Kristofferson sang in the United States, "Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose." In the paroxysms of greed, we have lost more than we have gained in thirty years, completely flushing out values from our system, at once obscuring the tradition of the past, obfuscating the transition of the present, and obstructing the transcendence of the future. We have emptied our souls to negotiate

enough to rape a girl. The rage goes full length to kill that girl and then shave her severed head before peeling off the skin to disfigure the face. The mutilated corpse is then cut into pieces as if the physical disintegration is the ultimate way to cleanse the crime.

In thirty years our hearts have frozen solid, our emotions turned cold as ice. We calculate everything in the measure of money; every handshake, every hug and every conversation weighed in the math-

future, they are eager to exploit it, their energy and talent wasted on heroine, phensidyl, violence and political pettiness. As a matter of fact, our greatest loss in thirty years has been the concussion of youth, the representatives of our future thoroughly damaged by the squabbles and dishonesty of their ancestors.

The heart of this nation has been filled with contradictions. The ignorance of intellectuals, the innocence of criminals, the devout-

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

Perspective on foot and mouth disease

I read with interest Dr Choudhury's thought-provoking article on foot and mouth disease (FMD) in Britain published in The Daily Star on 25 March. The outbreak is serious. But it should be put in perspective.

Foot and mouth disease occurs in many parts of the world including the sub-continent. Britain has been free of FMD since 1967. Illegal imports of meat products may lie behind the present outbreak. Sixty per cent of the cases are in just two areas. Very large parts of the country have had no cases at all. Others have had only isolated occurrences. The total planned slaughter of animals to halt the disease is only around one per cent of all cattle, sheep and pigs in the UK.

Visitors to Britain are at no risk from the disease. There is no reason why people should not come to the United Kingdom. Britain is not in quarantine. Britain is not closed for business.

I am pleased to see that Bangladeshis are continuing to visit Britain in large numbers. If they are there to do business, most of this will be transacted nowhere near affected areas. Life in most urban areas goes on as normal: there are no food shortages or significant price rises. The vast majority of tourist sites and events are open to welcome visitors. Much of Britain's wonderful countryside is open for business and there to be enjoyed.

There are no restrictions on people leaving Britain.

We are determined to continue to fight the foot and mouth disease outbreak with all the many resources at our disposal. But we are also determined to fight myths about the disease that threaten to do as much damage as the disease itself.

The British High Commission website (www.ukinbangladesh.org) has links to a number of specially created sites in the UK giving the latest updates on the outbreak.

David Carter
High Commissioner,
British High Commission,
Dhaka

Evicting Khasias

The government is planning to set up an Ecological Park in Madhabkunda. But by establishing the park, they will be evicting the Khasias who have been living there for more than 400 years. Isn't it a violation of human rights? Where will the Khasias go? Has the government made any plans for their rehabilitation? The first priority of the government should be the rehabilitation of the Khasias and not setting up of the park.

Rajmoni Wahangbam
Dhaka University
A frustrated nation

The nation recently celebrated its

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.

Public roads in pitiable state



STAR PHOTO: S. K. ENAMUL HAQ

This road at Khilgaon area has been in such a damaged state for quite some time that rain water has only made it worse. Dirt and filth have clogged the sewerage system, turning the road into a messy puddle. What is the point of building roads which are reduced to ruin with a little rain? The authorities must use genuine products in road construction and repair our roads, especially before the onset of the monsoons. This is a most basic responsibility of governance.

31st Independence and National Day. But what have we achieved so far? Can we consider ourselves a proud nation? Certainly not. Bangladesh is considered the most polluted country in the world. Law and order situation of the country is deteriorating day by day. Instead of studying, students are involved in cheating and mass copying in the examinations. Instead of looking after the welfare of people, the politicians are involved in petty party politics. Frustration and despondence are the order of the day. Is this why millions of people sacrificed their lives in 1971?

Rumana Kabir
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

In search of real leaders

How unfortunate for this country that the two leaders are too busy attacking each other, instead of thinking of the people. I wonder why they are doing this? Do they not realise that if any one of them works for the people, honestly, the people will reward them by voting them back to power? People can see through all the political drama that is being played out in front of us. Do they have no respect for the common person? I feel that maybe, our leaders are of the view that ordinary people are like sheep: they will blindly follow any one who calls himself or herself a leader. This may be true to some extent. Everyone knows how disillusioned the people are, vis a vis both

the ruling party and the opposition leadership. People realise that there is so little to choose from. The two leaders are part of a dynastic tradition. New leaders have not emerged. This is the reason people continue to vote one or the other back into power. But surely this cannot go on forever. The time will come when the voters will express their total dissatisfaction with the quality of leadership and opt for a change. I wonder how that will actually happen, but I am sure that unless the present crop of leaders wake up to reality, that day will come.

M.H.A.
Dhaka

Give us a break!

From the beginning of April, we are in for a spate of hartals. Everyone has been moaning and groaning about it. I find it terrible because everything slows down during a hartal. Although many people find ways to continue working and keep their business going, the overall impact is to make people lazy and unused to a working day. I find it difficult to come back to work after a hartal. There is no way of measuring this loss to the country, but it is a real one and causes untold harm.

I appeal to the leaders, both of them, to stop their political manoeuvring and give us a break!

Hartal weary
Dhaka