

Defuse tension

Apply restraint

WE welcome the restoration of village Padua off Sylhet bordering north-east Meghalaya to our possession following 30 years of illegal Indian occupation by virtue of a successful operation by BDR, our border sentinels. It is all the more praiseworthy, because not a single shot was fired nor any casualty or injury sustained on either side in the accomplishment of the task. But in a parallel development, exchange of fire between the border security forces of both countries at Kurigram claimed eighteen lives, 16 of them BSF personnel and two BDR members. Tension is prevailing in the area.

Respect for territorial sovereignty and integrity is important between any two countries and it is more so when seen in the perspective of relations between a big country and a small one. Unfortunately, there has been a border incidents galore with India - hot pursuits, wild goose chase, one-sided firing, exchange of fire or skirmishes have occurred with routine regularity. Many a Bangladeshi life has been lost.

Padua has been a test-case in that constant reminders for the return of that 230 acres of land to us had fallen on deaf ears and matters came to a head when India pressed ahead with the construction of a pucca road within thirty metres of the no-man's land despite our repeated requests to dismantle it.

The new spate of incidents at the border should impel us to take a holistic view of the vestigial remnants of our border problems with India in the light of the 1974 land border agreement which India is yet to ratify through her parliament and resolve them as early as possible in the interest of friendly relations between the two countries.

Meanwhile, the trouble-shooting mechanisms at the border should be perfected to play an effective role in reducing tensions as and when they arise.

Israeli aggression in Gaza

US role critical for peace

WITH the blatant invasion of Palestinian-held territory in Gaza, Ariel Sharon has confirmed dire predictions of being a reckless and conscienceless aggressor. We fully endorse US Secretary of State Colin Powell's statement, describing the Israeli action as being "excessive and disproportionate". There was absolutely no justification for Israel's massive military operation on Monday in which its troops, aided by tanks, navy and helicopter gunships, seized parts of Gaza that have been under Palestinian control since the Oslo accord of 1994. Entire Palestinian villages were razed to the ground, a policeman died and some 36 civilians were injured. Sharon's excuse, that the action was provoked by a Palestinian mortar attack on an Israeli town, is unacceptable given the fact that the Palestinian action did not claim a single casualty or injury.

Israel's decision to pull back from the Gaza after its brute occupation may have temporarily brought the conflict back from the brink of disaster, but the danger is far from over.

The escalation has created an "undeclared war" in the region. Israeli soldiers are continuing to fire on Palestinian positions in the Gaza and the West Bank and its fighters have mounted air strikes against Syrian positions in Lebanon for the first time since 1996. Apart from being a setback to the already fragile Middle East peace process, the aggression demonstrates that Sharon will not hesitate to breach long-standing agreements with the Palestinians, nor balk at invading Arab land in retaliation for any action against it.

We have been urging the United States to play a greater role in this conflict and we do so again. Israel must be forced to honour past agreements, respect Arab rights and exercise restraint in the use of a military might that is has built up with US assistance. Unless the US decides to take a stronger and more consistent influence, the conflict is bound to become worse.

Electoral brass-tacks still overlooked



SH IMAM

THERE was an expectation that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina might flag off a march to early elections, perhaps sometime in July, from the Mujibnagar Day podium at Meherpur on April 17. For one thing, this would befit the spirit of the auspicious day in our national calendar. For the other, it sounded plausible with the Prime Minister having recorded her express willingness to transfer power to a non-party caretaker government after April 17, in the aftermath of her government's observance of the Mujibnagar Day.

Setting that opportunity aside, the Prime Minister has now virtually drawn her party's battle lines with the Opposition by scheduling a nationwide 'hated day' for April 22

against the evil forces behind the Batamul carnage.

In another development, President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed has promptly appointed retired district and sessions judges A K M Mohammad Ali and M M Munsel Ali Election Commissioners following the retirement on Monday of previous incumbents Abidur

Election Commissioners (if any) shall, subject to the provisions of any law made in that behalf, be made by the President." The President having done this in his best judgement no controversy should normally arise over the question.

The pending job before the Election Commission is stupen-

their leaders and activists. Several BNP leaders and followers have willy-nilly had the Sword of Damocles of the PSA hanging over them. In the process, the opposition might have picked up some laurels in terms of moral sympathies but they have had to pay a heavy price for it.

Overall, the ruling party must be

frantic electoral preparedness drives. Only that they are making an overkill of precipitate electoral campaigns as the electoral brass-tacks are largely ignored.

The big irony is that while they are treating everything, including even hartal and counter-hartal stances, as grist to the mill of electoral preparations, the substantive

examination of their accounts, speedy disposal of electoral disputes, to voice some of the obvious concerns.

It is too much to expect that the Election Commission can stoically pursue its agenda without being caught in the whirlpool of political controversy and confusion. It could only have the right sense of direction from appropriate political behaviour at the top.

We better take a leaf or two out of the 1996 pre-electoral book for our guidance at this juncture. On March 5, in that year, a news headline read: "Dialogue only if President initiates." A R Biswas was the incumbent President at that time. On March 9, 1996, only four days on, this is what hogged the headline: "PM requests the President to initiate dialogue." The situation was extremely complicated then as the opposition alliance comprising AL, JP and Jamaat had launched a non-cooperation movement against the then BNP government. The dialogue across table did not quite take place but the contentious issues were resolved anyway. What made the difference was the intent. In the present context, the situation is not inherently as complex as it was then. So the time for declaration of positive intent on both sides of the political spectrum is here to get it over with.

JUST ANOTHER VIEW

It is too much to expect that the Election Commission can stoically pursue its agenda without being caught in the whirlpool of political controversy and confusion. It could only have the right sense of direction from appropriate political behaviour at the top.

Rahman and Mushtaq Ahmed. The BNP-led opposition apparently felt hard done by and has termed the appointments as 'motivated'.

In terms of the Constitution, however, it is the President's prerogative to appoint them. Article 118 (1) of the constitution states, "There shall be an Election Commissioner and such number of other Election Commissioners, if any, as the President may from time to time direct and the appointment of the Election Commissioner and other

dous, so that the CEC who had earlier braved election in May now says he needs up to September or early October as preparatory time for staging 'good elections'.

In clinical terms, AL has succeeded in acquiring some electoral levers against the opposition by weaning Ershad away with an implication that this might cut into the anti-AL vote-bank at the end of the day. The ruling party has sent the Jamaat reeling in a beleaguered state following a spate of arrests made of

all for elections now.

At the same time, the BNP-led opposition seems ready for elections, whether these are held in the dry or rainy season. That being the case, it is a big question mark on the opposition alliance's sense of judgement as to why they are persisting with the hartal option which is evidently distancing them from the public.

Both at the policy and field levels, the major political parties, therefore, are deeply immersed in

agenda for ensuring free and fair elections are being obscured, even thrown overboard. For instance, there is little time left for them to devise ways and means to stave off the use of black money and musclemoney in the polls which they must do to ensure free and fair elections, let alone taking up the issues which are close to public heart. The election laws need to be firm up, especially those pertaining to expenditure ceiling, declaration of assets of candidates and

New Delhi's finger in Nepal's pie



KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

IMAGINE India compelling Queen Elizabeth on taking a salute at the Republic Day parade without letting Prime Minister Tony Blair know about it. This is precisely what the Atal Behari Vajpayee government did when King Mahendra of Nepal was invited as the chief guest to the 26th January parade this year. The democratically elected Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala was not even informed beforehand, much less consulted.

The king was also taken to Hardwar to participate in a function the Vishwa Hindu Parishad had organised as part of the Kumbhmela celebrations. That the BJP-led government goes overboard on religious gatherings is nothing new. But the importance it gave to the king, a mere constitutional head, seemed deliberate as if New Delhi wanted to create a channel other than the elected government to improve relations with Kathmandu.

"A democratic country like India preferring monarch to the Prime Minister for the 50th anniversary of the republic is bad enough but still worse was inviting the king directly, without even informing us," a top aide to the Prime Minister said at Kathmandu a few days ago. When I sought Koirala's reaction, he did not want to be drawn into the discus-

sion. "The fault is ours," he said, adding, "We are suffering because of confrontation between us and the opposition."

I do not think that New Delhi realises the harm it has done to Nepal's precarious democratic set-up. The king has never reconciled to the position to which he was reduced nearly a decade ago when a popular uprising against his autocratic functioning cut him down to size. He has been trying to expand his role since.

New Delhi's direct invitation has given legitimacy to the king's efforts to retrieve what he lost after the popular uprising. Word has gone round that India finds him more dependable than the elected government, which has 'failed' to check the ISI activities in Nepal. (Koirala says that New Delhi is satisfied over what his government has done to check foreign intelligence agencies' operation in Nepal.)

The stalled parliament has also helped the king's stock soar high.

The main opposition, Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist), sees no way out until Koirala resigns from the prime ministership. There are some in the Nepali Congress who concur with the thinking. In fact, the dissidents within his own party - former Prime Minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai is leading them - are Koirala's biggest headache. His threat to dissolve parliament has not worked since all political parties know that the king would never entertain the proposal.

be looking towards China for inspiration and help. But its main support comes from People's War Group, which is operating in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa. The killings by the Maoists are making deep holes in the prestige of the government. Koirala's own party has blamed the government for its weak-kneed policy.

Bhattarai has demanded the use of army to crush the Maoists. But this is not going to be easy. The Prime Minister has no authority

The tripartite agreement, recorded after independence on November 9, 1947, has India, apart from Nepal and Great Britain, as one of the signatories. New Delhi should have taken up with London the question of discrimination against the Gorkhas. The king is conspicuous by his silence.

The treatment of the Gorkhas is, however, not a matter of dispute between India and Nepal. The Indian soldiers and the Gorkhas are at par, enjoying the same facilities. The grievance of Nepalese against India is on other counts. The main one is the attitude of superiority that they find among Indians towards the Nepalese. This is reflected in every field, more so in business, which the Indian community dominates.

Kathmandu is probably too sensitive and New Delhi, too nonchalant. Both have not yet found the equation, which they should have by now. The result is the ever-smouldering suspicion, whether it is the Tanakpur Agreement of 1993 or the Mahakali Agreement 1977. Everything has remained on paper because of mistrust. New Delhi's tilt towards the king may complicate matters.

Soaked in tradition and reverence, people in Nepal have respect for the king. But his position is symbolic like that of the British monarch. India should not try to distort the arrangement. It forgets that it had fruitful relations with most of the monarchs, including King Mahendra.

Nepal is poor and volatile. India should be engaging itself to win over the people of such a country, not the petty games it is playing at times to have a say in Nepal's internal politics. The king looms large; this is what New Delhi believes.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Soaked in tradition and reverence, people in Nepal have respect for the king. But his position is symbolic like that of the British monarch. India should not try to distort the arrangement. It forgets that it had fruitful relations with most of the monarchs, including King Mahendra.

For example, the king has referred the innocuous bill to amend the Citizenship Act, 1963, to the Supreme Court for advice. All that the government wanted was to streamline procedures to issue the certificate of citizenship at district level. But the king has stalled it on the ground that he wanted to know whether the bill violated the constitution.

Take another instance. This is about nominations to the upper house. Members were chosen from the panel of 15 names, which the Prime Minister would submit. The king does not take into account the Prime Minister's panel any more. He nominates whom he wants. Again, he has discontinued the practice of getting a draft statement from the government for a formal address before parliament.

The lower house has not been able to transact business because of the charges of corruption against the Prime Minister. Koirala is alleged to have been involved in the Dharmiya scam. (General sales agency of the Royal Nepal Airlines for Europe is said to have been offered to a family friend of Koirala.)

The stock of parliament has gone so low it reminds me of our parliament that people make fun of politicians. I heard phrases like "it is a waste of money" and "corruption is synonymous with politics" which are current in India as well. The press has come down heavily on the non-functioning of parliament. One English daily describes it thus: "With blows, punches and the largest ever stalemate, the lower house of parliament has sunk to the 'lowest' ebb possible."

Because of a messy political scene, even the king's failed panchayat system indirect elections to the top has begun to attract attention, however limited. Disillusion over the non-performance or misperformance of elected governments, people are questioning the democratic system itself. Economic conditions are so bad that anyone who can promise people employment can become a deliverer. This is the main reason why there is a sneaking admiration for the communists, who are close second to the ruling Nepali Congress. Some support even the extremists, the Maoists, who have picked up the gun to fight against the vested interests.

One-third of the country the northern part of Nepal is under the Maoists is beyond the pale of Kathmandu's authority. It is said to

over the armed forces. The 'reformed' constitution in 1995-96 put them under the control of the king. He will have to pull Koirala's chestnuts out of the fire. The government is willing to talk with rebels but the Maoists want to be the sole representatives in the opposition, not overshadowed by the communist party.

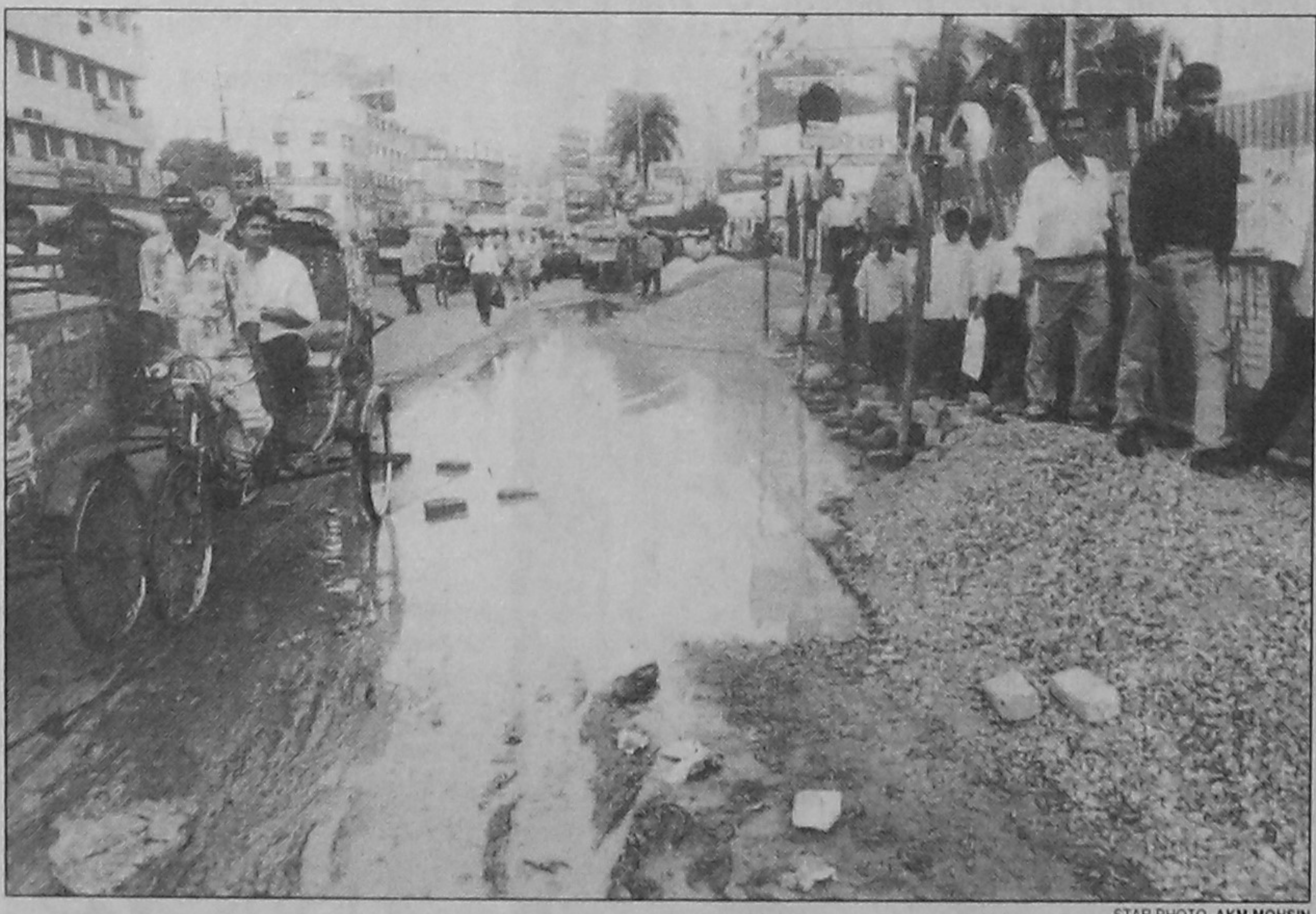
The king has another advantage. The Gorkhas, who comprise the army, have been always loyal to the monarchy in Nepal. They have also served the British well. But it is a matter of shame that London has not given them the same status, much less the pension, which it has given to the British soldiers. The retired Gorkhas are languishing in Nepal. Even their concerted demand for 'fair play' has not moved the UK.

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.

Construction chaos



STAR PHOTO: AKM MOHSIN

Piles of construction material for the renovation of Baitul Mukarram Masjid encroach on the public road. This causes immense inconvenience to passers by and also damages the sidewalk and the pavement. Such uncivilized practice is a common sight in the city. The culprits are totally uncaring about the inconvenience of people and the authorities concerned are reluctant to maintain these roads. How long will city dwellers have to put up with this nuisance?

Pahela Baishakh incident

After three days of intense media reporting, the identity of two victims of the heinous Ramna Batamul incident is still unknown. Many horrible photographs of the victims were published in national dailies showing the distorted human figures despite contemporary criticism on the adverse impact of such photographs especially on younger citizens. However, it seems the same media has forgotten to publish the photographs of the two victims yet to be identified though it could have been helpful in identifying them.

Please print their photographs immediately so that they can be identified by their acquaintances.

Khaja Ahamed
Dhaka

The Pahela Baishakh bomb incident took place on April 14 and immediately everyone seemed to smell a conspiracy. We may all differ on who did it, but we can all agree on one thing: our political parties have lost our confidence and trust.

The only person who is above all controversy is President Shahabuddin Ahmed. This man of character often acts as the conscience of the nation. To relieve us from the prevailing political turmoil, President Shahabuddin Ahmed should launch his own political party, comprising the members of the last caretaker government. And if his party can form the next government, we will definitely find out who

is responsible for the Pahela Baishakh bombing, otherwise this bombing incident will also go into oblivion like that of Udichi, CPB and other such incidents.

Omar Chowdhury
Banani, Dhaka

Innocent people were killed at Ramna Batamul while attending a new year function. What on earth is happening in the country? Have we become a barbaric nation?

While we mourn and condemn this heinous act, we eagerly wait for the political turmoil to end. We want democracy back in our country. We appeal to all political leaders to fight their battle in the parliament and not in the streets. We've seen what they are capable of and we are sick and tired of their political mud slinging. We don't want our beloved country to become their battleground and people their sacrifice. We want peace and sanity to prevail in the country.

Shehna Falila Mulik
New D.O.H.S, Dhaka

We don't like hartal!

We are the students of Class II. We don't like hartal because during hartal time, we have to attend school at the weekend. We also cannot go out and play with friends. On a hartal day, we get bored in our houses.

Ankita, Mohona, Karishma, Fahima, Farheena, Nazia, Zaheen, Anandita, Raiyan Sunbeams School, Dhaka

where the short-term grab of foreign currency by the government and big business houses is leading to long-term social and ecological disaster. It is the women and families in small communities of the coastal regions who suffer most. Shrimp production methods also threaten Bangladesh's unique natural resources.

We women are challenged to question our own eating habits and their effects on our sisters.

Anita Fahmi
Switzerland

Awami League rule

People in this country are fed up with the misuse of Awami League government. Awami League came to power assuring us of a democratic rule. People thought that under the government of Sheikh Hasina the country would emerge as a democratic state and people would be able to live peacefully. But it turned out to be the opposite.

Murder, rape, extortion, kidnapping have become the order of the day. The opposition parties are not allowed to carry out their activities, though this is their democratic right. When Awami League was in the opposition they observed hartal for 172 days but now they have put obstacles in the way of the opposition. Awami League claims that they are committed to uphold the value of democracy. But in practice they have proved themselves to be the very opposite.

Abdul Aziz
Dhaka

To our politicians

This refers to Naushin Fargana Amin's letter "We want to come back" (April 14). It is often said that our students who go abroad for higher studies forget their motherland and stay back for comfort and luxury. The complaint might be true in very few cases. But most of the students who have acquired a foreign degree are eager to come back. It is only the dirty politics of our country that compels them to stay back.

I urge the politicians to stop their nasty game of politics so that our children like Naushin can come back and contribute to the development of the nation. Will our politicians pay heed to my request?

Md Ahmadul Haque (Topu)
Zia hall, DU

Women suffer most

While visiting Bangladesh early this month, I attended an international meeting of NGO's studying the questions raised by shrimp-farming in Asia. The official reports of the social, economic and ecological effects of large scale shrimp production in the communities involved are enough to make any woman wince never to purchase or eat prawn again.

Efforts to keep shrimp-farming out of the ecologically important mangrove forest of Bangladesh and resistance to land-claims made by the big business houses are met with violence and violation of human rights, from harassment to murder and rape. In Bangladesh and else-