

Hidden cost of hartal

Time to assess social, psychological damages

Now that the main opposition BNP has decided not to go for any hartal over the next few weeks, we may hope for a break in what appeared to be a streak of death and destruction. This month alone, there have been nearly nine days of non-stop hartal. With the recent spate of shutdowns behind us, the time has come to objectively assess its impact on national politics and economy on one hand, and the societal and individual psyche on the other.

The opposition alliance is wont to claiming success at the end of each and every hartal. We would like to ask them for the umpteenth time: what gains have you had so far? Has the ruling government's position been weakened a bit? How much progress have you made in your so-called oust-the-government movement? None, admit it or not.

In the first place, the opposition combine's combative stand appears premised on the flawed rationale that a prolonged streak of hartal and street agitation would give rise to antipathy amongst the public against the incumbent government and thus expedite its exit well before its term ends. But, contrary to its expectations, the recent series of shutdowns has actually eroded the support, sympathy and goodwill its mass contact programme generated in the public mind.

People, especially those for whom a day without work means no food for themselves and their families, have started becoming apathetic, if not antipathetic, to opposition politics, just as they did to that of Awami League and its allies when they were agitating to oust the BNP government from late 1994 through early 1996. Moreover, the incumbent administration has made it amply clear that it would not step down until its tenure expires on July 13, which is merely two and a half months away, and its position is well within constitutional parameter. The opposition would therefore be hard put to rationalise the deaths and the damages its movement, especially hartal, has so far brought about.

With national politics poised to turn more confrontational, and violent thereby, leading up to the transition of power to a neutral and non-partisan caretaker administration, more deaths and damages could be on the cards. Business leaders have already made public their concern over the prevailing political impasse and its detrimental effect on the country's economic activities. The Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) has put the loss incurred daily due to hartal in the excess of a couple of million dollars.

What is more worrisome, however, is the hidden cost hartal makes us pay. This month alone, there have been nearly nine days of non-stop countrywide shutdown. Add to it a minimum of five days of regular holidays, nearly half of the month has been lost due to hartal. Such long-drawn workless periods also generate indiscipline in societal and individual lives. Whatever the type of work, however tedious it may be, it keeps people stuck to a definitive routine. Such long breaks not only tell on performance but also spawn insincerity and irresponsibility in individuals. More obvious is the impact of hartal on the country's overall education system. More and more educational institutions, even the pre-grammar and primary schools, remain open on the weekend and, sometimes, public holiday to make up for the hours lost during hartal, which also is actually a breakaway from routine.

We believe that the opposition political parties, in their one-track bid to pull the government down, have failed to see beyond short-term political gains, into the long-term detriment their actions today may bring about. Insistence on such imprudent and, needless to say, destructive strategy, both in the short and long term, might still reap some political benefits. However, if they care to look further down, they would see the cost, hidden though it is today, far outweighing their now-visible gains. The consequence would be anything but happy.

Border skirmishes: Impact on Bangladesh-India relations



M.M. REZAUL KARIM

THE shooting incidents between the personnel of the Bangladesh Rifles and the Indian Border Security Force near the Indo-Bangladesh borders in Roumari region in Kurigram district on the 18th April and later have been the worst among the numerous border skirmishes that have taken place between Bangladesh and India since the creation of Bangladesh 30 years ago. It left 16 Indian BSF and three Bangladeshi BDR personnel dead and a number of others wounded. Earlier, on the 15th instant the BDR personnel successfully obstructed illegal construction of a road, in violation of provisions of the 1975 Indo-Bangladesh Border Agreement, and drove the BSF personnel away from their outpost in Padua, a Bangladeshi territory unlawfully held by India in her possession.

The Indian government lodged a strong protest with the Bangladesh government. The Bangladesh government was forced to withdraw its BDR contingent from Padua, agreed to maintain status quo ante and settle the issue through discussion. Neither of the two Prime Ministers issued any statement. However, the Bangladesh Prime Minister telephoned her Indian counterpart on the 23rd instant to express sorrow at the incident and grief to the families of the Indian soldiers who had been killed.

It took quite some time to get a clear picture of the unfortunate incidents. The people of Bangladesh were long deprived of the detailed

knowledge of what had actually happened in a chronological order so as to ascertain the responsibility of one side or the other. It is our smart and inquisitive journalists, who portrayed the real picture following personal visits to the places of occurrence, albeit, at a later date. The statements issued and press conferences held by officials of the Bangladesh government provided scanty and piecemeal information and were far from satisfactory. The BDR Chief was

The failure of the present Bangladesh government to do what it should have done once again testifies to the fact that it pursues a foreign policy subservient to that of the Indian government. The failure of the government to make a strong diplomatic protest earlier when the construction had been taken in hand as well as unprovoked and unjustified aggression into Bangladeshi territory and killing of BDR jawans only reinforce this postulate about the foreign policy of the pres-

The governments of India and Bangladesh are at fault or to blame. Both of them are guilty of violation of one kind or another. The Indian side, by construction of a link road in Padua, willfully violated the bilateral agreement governing conduct and operation of their security personnel guarding frontiers. They committed even a greater offence by sending troops across the international frontiers into Bangladeshi territory in Roumari. The very fact that the Indian BSF personnel were found

viding case of its subservient foreign policy. Some people allege that the entire scenario was the product of a scheme masterminded by the Awami League in order to counter people's apprehension of Awami League's undue love for India. On the other hand, a few went so far as to blame even the Opposition Alliance or the BNP to have organized the whole episode in order to spite the Awami League. We may not

1974 Mujib-Indira Agreement, which envisaged exchange of over two hundred enclaves and remaining demarcation of land boundary between the two countries. As for the enclaves, Bangladesh immediately transferred the Indian enclave of Berubari to India. India, on its part, did not transfer any to Bangladesh so far on flimsy and untenable grounds. It took India over 20 years only to grant passage through the Tin Bigha (one acre of land) corridor to the corresponding Bangladesh enclave of Dahagram and Angarpota and that too for a limited hours only. I have since visited these enclaves and was distressed to witness the difficulties the inhabitants faced. The remaining demarcation of land boundary is still to be done and has become a victim of procrastination. The action relating to maritime boundary has been kept in deep freeze.

Initiative to settle disputes or issues between states need to be taken, also with an amount of grace, by the stronger party, if the latter is genuinely interested to settle those issues. Otherwise, one may be apprehensive that the stronger party wishes deliberately to linger those issues as an instrument of pressure in the future. However, the ball is in India's court and India has the opportunity to seize it in order to promote peace, harmony and co-operation in the region through understanding, grace and some amount of magnanimity. So far as Bangladesh is concerned, people want to live with India and others in the region in peace and in a spirit of mutually beneficial co-operation and of good-neighbourliness. But our foreign policy should be the independent policy of a sovereign, independent nation and not subservient to the policy of any other nation. The policy should be conducted on the basis of the principles of sovereign equality and mutual respect. The people of Bangladesh, who had earned freedom through so much of blood and toil, will uphold it forever at all costs.

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CURRENTS AND CROSSCURRENTS

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barred from making public statements, apparently to hide some unpalatable truth that would have caused annoyance to certain quarters. The statement made by our Foreign Minister referred to construction of a certain road by the Indian government in Padua. He failed to mention that the BDR rightfully prevented construction of the road much within the limits of 150 yards from the international border in violation of the agreement concluded earlier by the two governments. Besides, and it is of greater significance, the Bangladesh government miserably failed to demand and obtain from the Indian government due explanation as to why the BSF troops without provocation crossed into Bangladeshi territory in Roumari, killed three BDR personnel and caused havoc with the life and property of innocent villagers in Bangladesh. These have all the semblance of an act of aggression against the territorial integrity of a state, infringement upon the sovereignty of that state and constitution of gross violation of international law and conventions.

ent government. The government's explanation to India that the BDR opened fire in self-defence is yet another stark example of our government's timidity and undue desire not to displease our big neighbour. By giving this explanation, the government not only undermined the dutifulness and bravery of our frontier guards, but also hurt the patriotic feelings of common people of the country. People regard the acts of the BDR as manifestation of their chivalry in fulfilling their sacred task of guarding our international frontiers. Many people think, when someone sneezes in the South Block (Foreign Office) in Indian capital, stalwarts of the Bangladesh Foreign Office catch cold. This had been starkly manifested earlier in the failure of the government to condemn the acts of ethnic cleansing and genocide perpetrated by the Bosnian Serbs on Muslim compatriots as well as persistent refusal to condemn India following her detonation of nuclear devices and bringing the risk of nuclear holocaust to our doorstep.

An objective analysis of the scenario leads one to believe that both

and were lying in Bangladeshi territory was the conclusive proof of Indian aggression into Bangladeshi territory. The Bangladesh government, on the other hand, demonstrated its inability or unwillingness to endorse actions by its jawans purported to prevent construction of an illegal road and to retrieve what belonged to them but had been kept in illegal possession of another country for the past 30 years. On the contrary, they appear to have reprimanded our frontier sentinels for their actions inspired and motivated solely by the spirit of patriotism and call of duty. People think it was demeaning for Bangladesh to withdraw its forces pursuant to demand of the Indian government. A peaceful settlement through negotiations could have indeed been possible even without requiring the BDR personnel to withdraw ignominiously from Padua. Secondly, it is most unforgivable for the government not to lodge initially a strong protest against India's territorial aggression in Roumari. It seemed that the Awami League government succumbed to India's threat and displayed another

indulge in speculation and need to arrive at our conclusion on examining hard facts. The strong heavy of Awami League intelligentsia appear to have adopted a policy of strange silence on these incidents. To many, the silence may not be strange after all. Again, this was perhaps the lone case where the Ruling Party could not blame the mainstream Opposition Alliance or fundamentalists. Whatever may have been the motive behind the actions, it is important to assess the impact of these conflicts on future Bangladesh-India relations.

The relations between Bangladesh and India have treaded a zigzag path and often on cycles. According to an estimate, 54 BDR jawans were killed by BSF firing since the beginning of the last year and 425 Bangladeshi civilians likewise lost their lives during the past 25 years. There have been numerous instances of the BSF personnel abducting Bangladeshi villagers and forcibly taking away their cattle, goats and crops. These border incidents would not have occurred but for the lack of implementation of the

A practical joke with the poor



M.J. ZAHEDI

RECENTLY the government has made changes in the postal rates. They have been raised, in most cases, by one hundred per cent or about. For example, an ordinary inland letter now needs postage of Rs 4.25 - Rs 2 more than then the previous charge. Similar is the rate of increase as far as mail to foreign countries are concerned. As a result, an ordinary letter to Bangladesh now costs Rs 16, to India Rs 20, to the Gulf countries and the UK Rs 30 and the USA Rs 32. All these charges are more or less double the previous rates.

Naturally, the people think that the increase is, in the words of daily 'The Nation', unbearable. It really does not stand to reason that the price of an inland postal envelope should be raised by almost one hundred per cent, i.e. from Rs 2.25 to Rs 4.25.

Most surprising is the fact these increments have come without any prior notice, not that such information would make it easier for the people. However there was no advance notification from the relevant ministry or department. The newspapers carried an agency-circulated news item dated the day the changes came into effect that caught the public or customers of the post office totally unawares.

Only a few weeks previously, the minister in charge of post offices had announced with a great deal of pride that his department had come

out of the red and was making profit. He also quoted some figures (in millions) to prove his point.

Naturally, the question being asked is: if the post offices were running on profit, what was the justification of increasing the cost of postal envelopes and foreign mail by one hundred per cent? The shocking increase in inland and foreign postal charges at one go is perhaps unprecedented in the history of the Pakistan Post Office.

Undoubtedly, the revolution in electronic communications and the equally unprecedented expansion in the use of information technology have made postal services in many countries almost redundant. Those citizens who can buy computers (and millions have done so in the Western countries) are no more dependent on postal services to communicate with their friends and relatives. The use of computers has facilitated communications among individuals living in different areas of the globe more speedily, efficiently and, above all, inexpensively. But in a country in which the people generally suffer from extreme poverty and the literacy rate deserves more boosting, such increases will only add to their sufferings. Already, a growing concern in Western countries about the possible winding up of postal services is discernible. The postal services in those countries cannot compete with the fast growing information technology. Only parcel services may be retained, if necessary, although couriers in the private sector have proved more efficient and effective in this field.

In view of this development, the

almost one hundred per cent increase in the cost of using the postal services may prove counter-productive in Pakistan as more citizens would want to use computers and information technology to meet their communicational needs, however rare they may yet be.

The brunt of the latest increase in the charges of postal service will have to be borne by the near and dear ones of the millions of Pakistanis who work or are settled abroad. These Pakistanis living in far away countries and their relatives in Pakistan need to maintain regular contacts, especially those who live in the rural hinterland in Pakistan. They have to correspond at short intervals to exchange news about each other's welfare or other important news. Of course those who can afford and have the latest and more advanced communication facilities easily available will discard the now expensive but much slower postal services. But the number of such people will be minuscule. The officials in the Ministry of Communications who favoured the latest increase in the postal service charges should have been prudent enough to consider this eventuality. It would have been in the larger public interest not to increase the charges of postal services to such an extent.

Writing on this development, daily 'The Nation' said, "currently a great deal of disenchantment exists with the military regime, which promised to mitigate the sufferings of the people". The people who had suffered much in the past pinned their hopes on the promised good performance of the new government. But, the paper said, they have

been sadly disappointed. During the past 19 months substantial increases in utility charges -- gas, electricity, water, and telephone -- have been made which have added much to the people's misery and difficulties.

Most people think that the tenure

of the present regime has been a period of dashed hopes. The people of Pakistan, given as ever to extremes of emotion, expected too much from the present government. But even a government, in the words of an analyst in 'The Nation', more generously endowed with compe-

tence and talent would have been hard put to meet these expectations. The military regime's major shortcoming was a lack of direction: it was not clear were it wanted to go, the analyst wrote. Instead of providing the promised relief to the people, the regime has added much to their woes by increasing the prices of utility services and by imposing general sales tax on these items. All talks of providing relief to the people have now proved to be a practical joke with the poor, helpless public.

The steep increase in the charges of postal services, people say, is one such cruel joke.

LETTER FROM KARACHI

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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.



STAR PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Hot and humid
As the temperature is on the rise, people are taking shelter under a tree near the High Court area. There are not many places in the city where people can take rest on such a scorching summer day. The authorities could put up sheds beside the road and install water fountains to supply drinking water, giving people respite from the unbearable heat.

Border tension

The statement made by the Indian authorities about mutilation of dead bodies of BSF men killed during the recent border clash is not a new allegation. During the Kargil crisis, similar allegations were levelled against Pakistani forces.

The objective is very clear i.e. projecting the two Muslim countries of South Asia as uncivilised nations who don't even have any respect for the dead bodies of their enemies. Such propaganda goes well in the West, already worried about the so-called Islamic militancy. The Indian authorities exonerated the political government of Bangladesh from this 'crime' and held the armed forces responsible for the incident as if the armed forces and the government think on different lines. Similarly, during the Kargil crisis Indian government did not blame the Nawaz Sharif government and said that it was a military plan. The ultimate purpose behind this seems to be to create political instability in the neighbouring countries. I hope

Bangladesh would not fall into this trap.
Zulfiqar Ali Khalid
Ottawa, Canada

I have been reading the Indian newspapers with much interest about the present border tension between Bangladesh and India and to my surprise I found that they are constantly marking our political characters as either pro-Indian or pro-Pakistani. I do not think it fits well with our interest as citizens of an independent country. It is high time our leaders established themselves as pro-Bangladeshi, not pro-Indian or pro-Pakistani.
Ruchira
Dhaka

The Bangladesh-India border, of about 4,000 km, is suddenly seeing a lot of action. The stand-off between the Border Security Force (BSF) and Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) is threatening to spill into a battle for contentious territories. Though 18 lives were lost on a single day, it is imma-

terial to count the number of casualties on each side. To have fewer casualties does not mean a side has won.

The question is, why this unnecessary loss of lives? Why did the war like situation arise at a time that is important from the Bangladeshi aspect, since Bangladesh goes to the polls in two months from now? Another question is that since there are 111 Indian enclaves inside Bangladesh and the same number of Bangladeshi enclaves inside India, then why did BDR capture the village Pyrdawah (Padua) without discussing it with the high officials like Home Secretary, Home Minister? According to news reports, this happened at the decision of Director General of the BDR Major General Fazlur Rahman. The Director General proclaimed the capture of Padua a 'victory', saying it had 'reclaimed' the village after 30 years. This confrontation is certain to turn into a major controversy, given the fact that there are Indian enclaves in Bangladesh and vice versa.
Bhajan Sarker
Toronto, Canada

It is a shame that two sovereign states fight over only a few acres of land and 18 lives have been lost due to this dispute. Which side has lost more lives, BDR or BSF, is immaterial. What matters most is that 18 men got killed for only 238 acres of land. Through this clash, some parents have lost their sons, some wives have lost their husbands, and some children have lost their fathers. It is our earnest request to the political leaders of both the countries, please don't let people get killed over a quarrel for a patch of land. Let's awaken our conscience.
Faruque Hasan
Dhaka

have had border problems for years and this could have been resolved through bilateral talks as it was done in the case of the Ganges Treaty and the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace treaty. It is in Bangladesh's best interest to continue the friendly relationship. Bangladesh should not let some reactionary elements destroy its good relationship with India. There are quite a large number of Indians living in the United States and while living in the US, I found that the Indian people have treated me sympathetically and with dignity when they found out that I am a Bangladeshi. Hope this friendly relationship never ends.
James Rozario
Chicago, USA

On April 24, I saw a report by Almas Zakiuddin on CNN, Q&A. She has profoundly echoed our feelings about the occurrences on the border. I was following some news reports from Indian channels and BBC about the incident and was just amazed! None should overlook that India is the only country in this

region that has conflicts and tensions on the border with all the neighbouring small nations. The reporting from Ms Zakiuddin clearly spoke out for the other side of the line. It was pleasant to hear the convincing portrayal of outspoken journalism on behalf of Bangladesh.
M.Rashid
Fuller Road, Dhaka

"Bangladesh-India relations"

Your editorial 'Bangladesh-India Relations' (April 21) says, "We also believe that there is no fundamental difference between our two countries..." Indeed! One knew there were no differences between David and Jonathan. But between David and Goliath--in terms not only of physical dimensions, power and resources, but of Weltanschauung no less, and therefore of beliefs and values and their vastly differing ethos and aroma. The points made in the editorial were all very apt but that I am a Bangladeshi. Hope this fundamental-difference plea, which snapped the drift of your argument

and smacked of an effort to bend over backwards to placate one's master. Shouldn't our publicists, especially leader-writers of an independent daily like The Daily Star, handle words, and by implication, facts, ideas and perceptions, with greater care?
Shahed Quaderi
Dhaka

Pollution control

Recently I rode scooter, which has been converted to operate on CNG. The driver told me that the vehicle was smoke free. The fuel that is fed into a two-stroke engine consists of petrol and lubricant. Most of the smoke comes from the unburnt lubricant and this, I believe, is taken in excess of the minimum quantity required, and a lesser amount from unburnt petrol. CNG, as we all know, burns completely and hence produces no smoke as expected. This leaves the lubricant as the main pollutant. I noticed that this in case of CNG powered engine, the lubricant is held in a container and is gravity fed to the engine through the air

intake. There is a valve at the point where the lubricant enters the air inlet, and later enters the engine. This valve has a screw on top with which the quantity of lubricant that enters, is controlled manually.

If the above technique is applied to normal non-CNG powered scooter, i.e. instead of mixing petrol and lubricant and feeding the mixture to the two stroke engine as it is normally done, the lubricant is fed via the air intake, as is done in the CNG powered scooters, and the lubricant flow manually adjusted till the minimum level is reached. I believe that the pollution exhaust level of the ordinary scooter would come down significantly. Needless to say this would be very much cheaper than a total conversion to CNG and as such, could be easily and quickly implemented.

I would request the authorities of the mechanical engineering department of BUET to check it out and advise the relevant authorities accordingly.

Arahman
Motijheel, Dhaka

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