

Businessmen's failed persuasion

Begum Zia unmoved on hartal

THE FBCCI chief Yousuf Abdullah Harun-led business delegation's meeting with Opposition leader Begum Zia has proved to be a failed mission.

The businessmen put forward two demands before her: First, they wanted her to eschew hartal during the next two months, which would see us through to the end of the present government's tenure; and secondly, on a longer term they urged her to make a commitment in the party manifesto that in future BNP will not take recourse to hartal, if and when the party would be in the opposition.

As for the first demand of the business leaders that she refrain from hartal calls for the next two months she argued that since the agitation programmes she undertakes as alternatives to hartal are foiled by the government she has little choice but to go for hartals. The question is: why is she taking her anger against the government out on the people at large making them suffer for no fault of their own? Insofar as the government's scuttling of the opposition's public rally, demonstration and siege programmes or its hauling up of the opposition leaders and activists go, do hartals enjoy any special immunity from such counter actions that these cannot be done away with? For all we know, anti-hartal processions go round the city in a bid to have a sway on the streets, clashes do occur between the pickets and the ruling party activists on the one hand and between the opposition activists and the policemen on the other. Passions are inflamed, violence leads to human casualties and arrests are made, too. So, how is hartal deemed to be a safer option, albeit an easy one though, that the opposition is staking so heavily on to the detriment of their popularity rating?

Nobody has heard of hartal being discarded through a commitment in party manifesto. Begum Zia says that if Sheikh Hasina declares her 174 days of hartal before 1996 as a 'mistake' then a 'consensus' could be reached on the subject, presumably without her accepting any blame for her hartals. Sheikh Hasina who originally floated the idea of arriving at a consensual 'no' to hartal also insisted that BNP did it first, so that she could follow suit.

None of our two leaders seem to think that they need to take the decision jointly and simultaneously!

Policeless at ZIA

No more ad-hoc measures, please

YET again the Zia International Airport (ZIA) has slipped into sheer lawlessness. And passengers, incoming and outgoing, and domestic and international, are having to pay the price. Out in the canopy and parking area, passenger harassment has assumed horrific proportions. Thirty Ansar personnel, deployed to maintain order, have understandably been outnumbered and outmanoeuvred by the 'consortium' of 'resident' beggars and rent-a-car brokers. Withdrawal of police force from the key installation following a tiff with the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) from Thursday last has no doubt accentuated ZIA's trademark problem of indiscipline and disorder.

The trouble began when the CAAB disconnected water and electricity supply to the temporary police camp at ZIA forcing it to move out. A rather abrasive action. However, the civil aviation authorities claim that the Dhaka Metropolitan Police have paid no heed to their repeated request to relocate the camp to facilitate expansion work of the terminal building. The policemen, insulted and infuriated, withdrew from the ZIA premises as a tit-for-tat measure. Officially, of course, they say their routine patrol is still on. Now that the stand-off has reached a critical point, the government has sprung into patching up efforts. A meeting between the home affairs, and the civil aviation and tourism ministries was scheduled for yesterday highlighting the absence of any unified command at the airport.

Admit it or not, the ZIA is a classic case of conked-out coordination. Several - 19 according to media reports - monitoring and enforcement agencies are at work there, and still the airport, both inside and outside the terminal building, is a passenger's nightmare. Through our editorial comments, we have repeatedly called for a command structure. We also have urged the authorities to set up a full-fledged police station inside the airport. Nothing has so far been done in this regard. The latest episode of disorder, we hope, would jolt the authorities into making amends for that.

Mini-war escalates: Truce proposal by Egypt and Jordan



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

over 400 are Palestinians. Now the attacks are taking place within Israel and several bomb attacks in and around Tel Aviv have made the lives of Israelis totally insecure even within Israel. Sharon has been blaming Arafat for the attacks saying he is not stopping them. Why can't the Israeli security forces stop them when the attacks are taking place within Israel? Arafat is not in charge of security within Israel. In any case, Hamas and other extremist groups are in fact claiming the responsibility

parties need the help or even intervention of neighbours or others who are directly or indirectly involved in the affair. Middle-East is a volatile place but strategically very important for many countries of the world and this is why all involved or having interest in the area must make all efforts to find an acceptable solution. The countries in the Middle-East and particularly Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia etc need to be involved directly. For domestic and most importantly for strategic reasons the

still Sharon of Sabra and Shatila; he has not changed. Nobody can do anything as he is there through the democratic process which has its own limitations

However, some good steps have been taken by President Mubarak of Egypt and King Abdullah of Jordan. They have put forward a joint truce proposal which could stop the present violence and facilitate the commencement of the peace process. The truce proposal consists, inter alia, of removal of the Israeli

Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. These include another 11000 work permits, raising the number to 15,000. Israel would also allow Palestinians to resume fishing off Gaza, build pipeline to Hebron and railroad from Gaza to Tulkarm.

Peres emphasised that Israel would take "immediate and unconditional steps to facilitate the lives of the people in the territories, in every possible way ... we do this unconditionally... because we are convinced that the Palestinian people

Palestinian territories.

International Alliance for Arab-Israel Peace (Copenhagen Group) put up a statement praising Egypt-Jordan truce initiative. Israel's refusal to stop settlements was deplored by the group. Indeed, the Palestinians have proposed EU-Arab leaders' meeting on the peace process apparently following the recent discussion between Javier Salana and Arafat. This may change the course and the direction of the peace process as the present US Administration has not yet come forward with positive initiative to guide the peace process as was done by the previous Administration. President Bush has not yet invited President Arafat to the White House to discuss the peace process though Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was the first among the leaders of the region to visit White House and hold discussions with the President. Indeed, Shimon Peres is the second leader of Israel to visit Washington. Peres's visit was welcomed by all, but apparent hesitation to invite the Palestinian leadership does reflect somewhat different attitude of Bush Administration towards the Palestinians.

After Egypt-Jordan initiative, the US needs to move faster. Peres's visit to Washington has produced some good results. He said after meeting Colin Powell that Israel was serious and anxious to resume the peace process. As Secretary Colin Powell appears involved in the negotiations, he would do well if he advises President Bush to invite Yassir Arafat to the White House for discussions and also ask Israel to stop settlements and take the Israeli security forces away from the flash points. This would certainly reduce tension and strengthen Arafat's hand in stopping violence which may lead to resumption of the peace process.

SPOTLIGHT ON MIDDLE EAST

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ties for the attacks. Still Arafat is blamed for the attacks...

The Palestinian leaders have always been saying that Palestinians are making the attacks because they are under occupation... Indeed, the people are entitled to fight any occupation. Similar views were expressed by one of the important politicians of Norway. The Palestinians term this as *Jehad* as none has any right to throw any one out of his house situated in its rightful place. The western world has wrong impression about; may be for the reason that some use the term for wrong and often extremist purposes and they often involve the name of Islam too though Islam never allows extremism. Fighting occupation is not extremism; it is within one's own basic rights. Islam preaches dialogue to settle all disputes, but if dialogue fails, war becomes an inevitable option.

But war affects not only the feuding parties but also others. That's why war option has to be discarded and there the feuding

US is also directly involved and this is why it was making good efforts during Clinton's time. But the US has been having wavering attitude since Bush has taken over. Now it seems that it is trying to be more involved. But the best course would be to involve Europe and the UN and make a joint effort to relieve the area of the curse of occupation. As long as occupation continues, there will be no peace in the area.

The serious effort of and indeed pressure from every country involved and particularly from the US would be absolutely necessary because of the presence of a person like Sharon at the helm of affairs in Israel. He is the problem and would continue to be the problem as long as he is there. Even in Israel the people have serious problem with him. Former Justice Minister Yossi Beilin asked Sharon to "try to implement his promises to bring peace and security, and stop his campaign of lies that proves that Sharon has not changed." The developments in Israel clearly show that Sharon is

Defense Forces from the flash points, cessation of settlement activities, lifting of blockade of the Palestinian areas and allowing more Palestinians to move to Israel for work etc.

The negotiations on the truce proposals may bring forth good results as a person like Shimon Peres is there as the Foreign Minister of Israel to negotiate though he has to take the final approval from the Cabinet headed by Ariel Sharon. Peres has already met President Mubarak and King Abdullah. Though there was some initial misunderstanding with President Mubarak on the contents of the talks and possible agreement between Israelis and Palestinians on the issue of reduction of violence, this has apparently been clarified. President Arafat was there in Jordan and made a statement that helped clarify the matter.

Peres later told the press that Israel was introducing immediate and unconditional measures to ease the financial pressure on the

should not suffer because of the present situation." He, however, stressed as was done by his Prime Minister that Israel was adamant about not to negotiate under fire. He also clarified that Israel would abide by what was agreed upon and not accept proposals which were on the table. Apparently he was referring to Taba proposals many of which were not even accepted by Palestinians.

But there was serious differences of opinion on the issue of settlements. Peres said apparently repeating his Prime Minister's words that Israel would not go for new settlements but would provide natural growth inside the existing settlements. Egyptian Foreign Minister Moussa said, "We sharply differ on this point calling all settlements unlawful." He also rejected natural growth within the existing settlements. Indeed, this was a new tactic to expand settlement. 'Settlement is an obstacle to peace' was recognised by the US and the international community. Even now most of the attacks are due to the presence of settlements within

Uncle Abdul's Cabin



ALMAS ZAKIUDIN

flight back home," he explains. "She has escaped from her employers and needs a safe place until tomorrow morning."

In a moment of weakness, I decide to consult my husband, the official head of our household, who proceeds to throw a fit, (what's new?) and warn me of dire consequences from the *shurta* (the UAE police), their immigration department, the ruler, his cabinet, the UAE secret police and perhaps even the CIA, I am not sure. All our

'rascal' is this doctor from a Middle Eastern country who has 'bought' Fatima for the princely sum (not an amount one could sneeze at, particularly in those days) of UAE Dirhams 6,000.

Bought her, I ask. How can you buy a person?

Fatima was not aware, of course, that she was goods to be disposed off. Her recruiter, someone called Nadim, promised to get her a job as a nurse's aide in a city where the streets were paved with gold. Her

only to keep myself from giggling hysterically.

You see, the whole slavery thing is so unreal to people such as I, that the possibility of being 'sold' for one's flesh is something that elicits silly laughter. Even in the UAE, where many people including my other half, alas, felt intimidated by the severity of local law, one scoffed at the bravado of the locals. My Arabic language skills were nothing to write home about, but a burst of English would always halt them in

the police or going through legal channels. Don't ask me why, it was all terribly vague and yet, completely real. I am not even sure exactly how Fatima managed to escape, but she did.

Abdul brings her in a taxi, glancing over his shoulders several times, thanks me profusely and leaves her with me until the next day.

Like Eliza running for dear life in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, (a convert throwback) Fatima reminds me of a

IF YOU ASK ME

If the authorities in the Middle East really wanted to stop it, believe me, the problem would have ended. Nothing gets past the law in those lands unless it is kosher. Certainly, any woman who ends up as a slave in this day and age must do so with the connivance of someone with clout or influence.

hides will be cooked, good and proper, he cries, if 'they' find an illegal in our home.

I say okay to the embassy friend.

That's when Uncle Abdul appears. He is a friendly Bangladeshi face, an electrician by trade, who found his way to the UAE in the early 1970s, learned the language and got himself a cushy job with one of the government departments. He does odd jobs for Bangladeshis, hangs around, baby sits our children and keeps us abreast of local gossip.

Fatima was sold into slavery.

What happened to her makes

family paid an undisclosed sum of money to Nadim, waved her goodbye at Dhaka airport and waited for her wage earnings to haul them out of their squalour in Azimpur.

"Rascal is married," exclaims Abdul. "Wife beat Fatima, burn her once with iron because rascal complains. Said she lazy. Both say she lazy. Wife work in school. Lock her up in house."

"Then, wife goes to home country. Rascal goes into her room at night," says Abdul.

Silence. Abdul says nothing. I stare into nothing. Rape, I wonder. Can't be true. A doctor? (I was that naive, believe me.) But why didn't she call someone, report it to the police, scream for help, do something? How long has this gone on, I ask Abdul. "Three months," he says.

"Rascal!" he adds, for good measure, as I nod, tempted to join him if

they're tracks. "It's a difference in class," my South Indian friend used to intone. "They know we are upper class. They won't mess with us."

But mess they did with Fatima. The doctor had a field day while his wife was away and would have no doubt concocted a story to indict poor Fatima upon his wife's return, so that even if she had complained, the wife would not have believed her. Trapped, sexually abused, beaten in body and spirit, Fatima would have either killed herself one day or languished in that home indefinitely.

Uncle Abdul, the electrician, became her knight in shining armour. She slipped him a note when he appeared, unexpectedly, to check something terribly electrical. Abdul sprang into action, alerted the embassy. They decided to spirit her away, no reporting the matter to

hunted animal. I can think of nothing to say to her. She eats, sleeps, eats and sleeps again. Late at night, I hear a sound and find her in the kitchen, on the floor. She does not like my guest room bed. She tells me then, as I try to take her back to the bed that she is bleeding and does not want to soil my clean sheets. We do female things to help her, but whether that helps or not I will never know because she falls off to sleep, on the floor, until dawn when she leaves. Abdul returns to take her in a taxi. I never see her again.

Fifteen years later, there are still slaves in the Middle East. Recently, the *Gulf News*, a popular English daily, ran a story that was evidently corroborated by the Bangladeshi ambassador himself. A story of Bangladeshi women sold into slavery. Duped by agents in Bangladesh who circumvent the law which prohibits women from working as domestic servants outside the country. Forced to sell their bodies, submit to physical and mental abuse, confined in a strange and hostile land, at the mercy of an army of exploiters, from Bangladeshi agents to local employers, to disbelieving and unsympathetic officials.

What are we doing, one must ask. Does the government of Bangladesh feel it has any responsibility to prevent this kind of abuse? Sure, it has a law. That is always a great idea. Pass a law, ban the movement of women and sit back and pretend you have nothing to do with the problem. How do these women slip past the law? Do their agents bribe our immigration folks? If so, why is it not being stopped?

One is conscious of the reality that the women who are sold into slavery in the Middle East (and elsewhere in the region as well, that is another story) are small fry, compared to the big bucks that the

authorities in the Middle East really wanted to stop, I believe me, the problem would have ended. Nothing gets past the law in those lands unless it is kosher. Certainly, any woman who ends up as a slave in this day and age must do so with the connivance of someone with clout or influence.

Slavery exists. Stop it now.

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.



Bathing ground!

THIS PHOTOGRAPH HAS BEEN CONTRIBUTED BY FREELANCE PHOTOGRAPHER TAREQ HADI, DHAKA

This is not a common bathing place or a garbage dumping ground but the banks of the river Buriganga, Dhaka's lifeline. We don't realise that while we are killing the river by dumping garbage or bathing cattle, we are also killing ourselves as we use this filthy and dirty water for our daily purposes. We have been urging for a long time to save this major waterway but nothing has been done and nothing is in the offing.

Show tolerance

It is really frustrating that although the border incident took place inside Bangladesh territory, some Indians are trying to look at it in some other way.

In the first place what were the BSF men doing inside Bangladesh territory? Was a single Bangladeshi found in Indian territory? What role did the Indian intelligence personnel play in this regard and who was the person in command when the incident took place? Moreover, why should a big country like India every now and then try to put up 'fencing' in 'no man's land'?

We have always shown constraint and love for our neighbour. But the Indian activities are quite the opposite. India's corridor problem arose due to their own faulty intelligence agency and this has caused sufferings to our people too.

India as a big brother must learn to show tolerance. Many of its newspapers and quite a number of TV newscasters of various 'independent' TV channels have used words which display a gross absence of sensibility, fellow-feeling inherent among good neighbours. We have shown constraint when Babri Mashjid was demolished. We are showing constraint even now

though the people of Boraibari are passing their days and nights in constant fear.

Mujibul Haque
Sobhannbag, Dhaka

Opening third front

The recent border skirmishes on the Indo-Bangladesh border raises a question: Can India afford to open three military fronts-- Kashmir, North east India, and Bangladesh? If not, then how were these border incidents initiated, and that too during the pre-election period? Such diversions have to be explained for formation of correct public opinion.

A Bangladeshi
Dhaka

Stop blaming us

This is a reply to the 'True Indian' (April 23) and also to those Indians who are continuously blaming BDR for the recent border clash. The Indians are trying to make the BDR feel guilty, suggesting that it was the BDR who intruded into Indian territory. If that was the case, then why were the bodies of BSF soldiers found inside Bangladesh territory?