

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 co-ordination. 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.

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

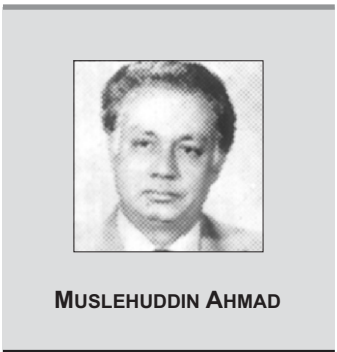
PHOTORIAL

Bathing ground!

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.

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

Mini-war escalates: Truce proposal by Egypt and Jordan



THE Israelis may have to regret their decision on electing Ariel Sharon as their Prime Minister. The present Intefada erupted because of him. Unfortunately, the Israelis ignored the reality and decided to vote him to lead the nation. Now, in terms of democracy Ariel Sharon is the Prime Minister and is entitled to lead the nation, but leading to what? In a conference held, recently in Tehran, Nasullah of Hezbollah, Lebanon said [European] Jews must go back to where they came from, thereby indicating another Jewish diaspora. A friend of mine who is well conversant with the international affairs but generally holds moderate views on them said, 'As the situation has been developing the Jews may have to prepare for the 3rd diaspora.'

Now even the Israelis have started thinking in terms of their future. *Jerusalem Post* has started a poll and the question is: 'Ariel Sharon said to *Post* he is "completely optimistic" about Israel's future'. Do you share his views? Yes/No.' *Jerusalem Post* will come out with the poll result later but the very question indicates the concern the Israelis have about their future.

Ariel Sharon won the election on the promise to provide security to the Israelis. So far he has delivered, nothing in terms of security and indeed mini-war has broken out in the area and it is intensifying every day. So far nearly 500 deaths have taken place during the violence and

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 be involved directly. For domestic and most importantly for strategic reasons the

still Sharon of Sabra and Shatilla; 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 Tulkaram.

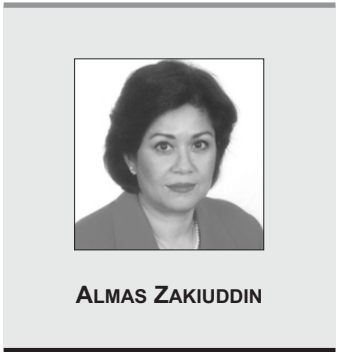
Peres emphasised that Israel would take "immediate and unconditional steps to facilitate the lives of the people in the territories, in every possible way ... we do this unconditionally... because we are convinced that the Palestinian people

Palestinian territories.

International Alliance for Arab-Israel Peace (Copenhagan 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.

Uncle Abdul's Cabin



TALK about a 'slave' and my convent-bred memory banks leap across borders. I see heroes and heroines, villains and oppressors, but none that relate even remotely to this land or this part of the world. Slaves are mostly black and oppressors are mostly white.

Even now, I cannot bring myself to use the word 'slave' to describe the woman who came to our apartment in Dubai, UAE, about 15 years ago.

Her name was Fatima. When she arrived, at the crack of dawn, she looked like any ordinary Bangladeshi woman worker in the Arab Gulf. Shiny georgette saree, a few glass bangles, a tiny necklace that caught the light and slippers that made a clucking sound as she walked. She clutched a small bag, bright red and as shiny as her saree.

Fatima was sold into slavery.

What happened to her makes sordid reading and has taken me years to understand. That morning, all I recall is a phone call from a friend at the Bangladesh embassy in the neighbouring *emirate*, Abu Dhabi. "Can you help us," he asks. "We have a woman who needs shelter until we can get her on a

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 convent throwback) Fatima reminds me of a

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, but that is another story) are small fry, compared to the big bucks that the UAE and other Middle Eastern countries provide to Bangladesh. I see them at diplomatic parties, a bunch of penguins in their long white robes and silly headress, pontificating at the world and sneaking quick glances at Bangladeshi women in their slinky sarees. Has the government taken this matter up with them? I mean, more than just in passing.

If they had, and 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.

Slavery exists. Stop it now.

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.

Abdul says he found her. Normally, he would not be working in a hospital compound but his department was short-staffed so they sent him to fix the light bulbs or something equally challenging in the home of a doctor.

"Rascal" explodes Abdul in our living room as I give him tea. The

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 naïve, 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

their 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

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 Masjid was demolished. We are showing constraint even now

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

Mujibul Haque
Sobhanbag, 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.

ABangladeshi
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?

India complains that bodies of their men were desecrated and mutilated. I want to ask them that

does a dead body remain fresh when it remains in a water-logged paddy field for hours and is also exposed to sunlight? The body has to be decomposed partially. The Indians are also complaining that some of their men were killed at 'point blank' range. The BDR camp was encircled by the BSF soldiers. And as the BDR replied by machine-guns, isn't it natural for the dead bodies to carry 'point blank' wounds?

Actually, the Indians do not believe in peace and that's why they are accusing us on ridiculous grounds. I request our government to make an agreement that the Indians won't intrude into our country in the future and repeat the Roumari incident.

Moinalam
Dhaka

Erosion in industries

The BSS report on our sugar industry (DS May 3) makes gloomy reading. Similar is the case with the newspaper and paper industries, and the power and energy sectors, not to mention the atmosphere in academia.

The situation seems to be slipping out of control of the policy makers. The market conditions are

changing, as Bangladesh is poised to reach the take-off point in development activities. The state-owned industries are beset with peripheral problems, which simply defy solution, decade after decade.

The government's monitoring system for policy planning is lagging behind, as the environment now changes at a faster rate, and BMRE projects pile up for financing. The foresight and judgement at the planning levels is none too encouraging, coupled with hostile political confrontation, and politicisation of the labour unions.

Since Parliament is ineffective and the general elections are round the corner, the status quo is likely to be maintained, and the database would look more gloomy in the near future. It is time to debate the situation publicly, for focussing on current options.

A citizen
Dhaka

How much does it cost?

In line with K. Rashid's letter "What is the big deal?" (May 3), I would like to add a few words. All of us know that courtesy costs nothing but can give many things. However very few,

if at all, bother to apply courtesy in their daily life particularly in a society like ours. Please do not mistake me thinking I am talking big being in the USA!

How often do we experience the joy of giving and receiving a smile in our daily life? Let it be home or office, we all like to pretend to be too busy to care about the petty(?) stuff like exchanging a smile with people we meet every day or showing some humbleness in dealing with customers or common public in business or office. Some tend to think that such an attitude or gesture may lower their personality. How fragile is our personality!

Sadly this also applies to most of the educated people. At college or university, are there many teachers who can claim to have a rapport with his/her students that is based more on frankness, honesty and cordiality than fear and age difference?

After coming to the USA, I have realised that by not indulging in a friendly and honest gesture in my daily life I have deprived myself of genuine pleasure and satisfaction.

Jahed Ahmed
Colorado State University, USA