

Welcome Ramadan

Let us grasp the essence of its lessons

AS the month of self-abnegation and prayer begins today, it is important that we pause and introspect. What does Ramadan teach us? Have we been able to appreciate essential message that *siam* bears for the Muslims? Have we ever tried to internalise its lessons of peace and harmony, equity and justice, and mutual respect and tolerance in our individual and societal lives?

One may feel such soul-searching has been rendered all the more crucial by disconcerting developments in national and international arenas over the last several weeks. The air strike on Afghanistan by the US-led international coalition continues and so does the fierce war between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. There have been dramatic developments over the last few days all right, with the Northern Alliance capturing one Taliban bastion after another; however, the war is far from over. Neither the Taliban nor their adversaries are ready to relent on their respective stands. That means the fear of a severe humanitarian crisis is still very much there.

The international war on terrorism induced by the September 11 terror attacks in the United States has also had a crippling impact on the world economy, already in the grips of a recession. Bangladesh has already started to feel the chill. Export of readymade garments, which plays a major role in our economy, has plummeted in recent times and a BGMEA study shows the country earning from this sector could plunge by 60 to 70 per cent this fiscal. In such a delicate economic condition, consumer confidence is of crucial import. Unfortunately, unethical business practices more often than not pose a detriment to the consumer confidence. For example, there have been reports of hoarding and unwarranted increase in price of essential commodities across the country several days ahead of Ramadan. It is an irony that such unethical practices proliferate during the holy month.

Islam stands for equity and justice, as fasting during the Ramadan makes us learn. It is also a religion that recognises the rights of people of all creed and caste to practise religion. We have recently seen, heard of and read about attacks on the religious minority. Such acts give religion a bad name. In this month of self-abnegation and prayers, let us hope that we would better learn the essence of Ramadan and Islam.

Arsenic project promised as usual

Too little, too late and not always useful

THE Minister for Health has recently announced that an "Arsenic Public Health Project" will be launched. This is great news. Millions of people suffer from varying degrees of arsenicosis but there is very little opportunity for disease management. Basically, this is an ignored part of the tragic situation. The words of the Minister for Health Dr. Mosharrif Hussain should bring some solace to the patients.

However, this should be remembered that arsenicosis is a complex and compound condition and not one particular disease. The initial impact is on the skin followed by other parts of the body including the vital organs. Many people suffer from nerve damages as well as other impairments. In the final stages, people may suffer from gangrene, cancer etc.

As will be noted, none of these conditions are stand-alone diseases. They are primarily symptoms of slow poisoning. Hence, the declaration of a health problem mitigation project could lead people to believe that all that is needed is the energetic pursuit of a cure that exists but is not accessed. It's important that transparency is maintained on these matters as they are occurring in the public domain.

But as long as arsenic water is consumed, the problem will not disappear. It's important to treat the affected and it's even more important to treat the cause of such suffering. It's not an either/or situation. Safe water supply is critical to the management of the arsenic problem. Safe water will end the arsenic crisis.

There is also a need to remind all that the problem came to the government's knowledge in 1993 when tubewells in Chapainabganj were tested. At that time the BNP was in power. The NIPSOM, the social medicine outfit of the government, prepared a project but the then ruling BNP held it up. This was ultimately taken up in 1997 when Awami League faced severe public pressure, as the scale of the crisis became known. Hence before blaming the past government, BNP may do well to recollect its own past performance.

The arsenic problem has become one that affects the rural poor most, according to the dominant policy making imagination. It has also been relegated to back pages because it doesn't affect the elite of Dhaka like dengue fever does. Till they are affected, nothing serious is likely to happen. But this declaration is hopefully a beginning and is welcomed.

DR SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

BA NGLADESH is beginning to settle into another era of political leadership. A burning question on every sane lip is "Will anything change and, if so, will things become any better?" With a two thirds majority and virtual control to do what they please, there is a sense of euphoria among the newly elected that they have won the people's favour. That perception may be premature, misguided, and far from the truth. In fact, the newly elected ought to consider that they did not win because of a sudden surge of good feelings for them among the voters; they won because the voters voted to punish the party in power for its inability to deliver the goods. And if the truth be known, I suspect that trust in and respect for politicians in Bangladesh is generally very low and that elections are won by default because of a lack of better alternatives.

Let me substantiate this claim. In December 1996, Democracywatch conducted a public opinion poll seeking people's perceptions about politicians (among other groups). On a ten-point scale here's how politicians were rated: sincerity (3.36), fairness (2.66), honesty (2.6), trustworthiness (2.91), and competence (3.44). There were other attributes, but the above should be evidence enough of what the people thought of politicians. The numbers are neither impressive nor inspiring by any measure; and nothing has substantially changed since, to believe that the ratings would be any better today.

The above ratings were not about a single party. But, by most accounts, the period around 1996 was an era of poor governance. To be fair, it was also a time of turmoil when the country was virtually shut down for a sustained period of time by the opposition, all at the expense of the common man. Thus, the ratings reflected the extent to which politicians had endeared themselves to the voters and the level to which they had stooped. Low variances in the scores also reflected that there was no love for "any" party. Since the BNP and its four-party alliance were not in power for the last five years, they had little to show by way of accomplishments. In fact, one might argue that they played the same brand of negative politics that they encountered during their previous rule.

Apparently, the BNP's negativism weighed less in the scales of political preference among the voters of 2001 than the brand of politics displayed and the results produced for the people by the Awami League

that paved the way for their debacle. Hence, the people did not vote so much "in favour" of the victors as they delivered a resounding statement against the vanquished.

The election results also have an inherently powerful and threatening message. To the victors it says: Deliver, or you will be punished in the same way....again! To the vanquished the message is: Manage your negativism if you want us to bring you back in the next election, for we may again punish the present party in power if they do not deliver.

Whether either party will heed this message is a moot question and will be answered the next time around. But if past trends continue, what the people are likely to experience is more of the same: insecurity, mean-spiritedness, hypocrisy, bitter rivalry, violence and bloodshed,

corruption, nepotism, mismanagement, party-over-country, fanaticism, and so on. And if one reads the signs, they seem to be turning ominous. The air is already thick with vengeance, violence and bloodshed continue unabated and may even reach new highs, territories (including residence halls and even public toilets by some account) are being reclaimed, sympathizers of opposing parties including minority groups are being targeted and harassed, positions are being filled with party cadres (witness the installation of 27 ministers and 32 state and deputy ministers), insecurity perceptions are high, and there is also the fear that a strain of fanaticism will be brandished and unleashed on the more staid and middle-of-the-road Muslims of Bangladesh. Of course some of these are presumptions and we must wait with bated breath to see what will actually transpire in the coming months and years. I certainly hope I am proved wrong.

But let me be categorical: Perpetuation of the *status quo* is not what the large majority of the people voted for; what they voted for is "results". In translation, they want to see tangible and measurable improvements in their conditions. If the newly elected are able to hear this message (and one is profoundly intrigued by the deafness of "all" parties on this count as 30 years have shown), it is time for a paradigm shift in political leadership; it is time to shift the battle from conflict and competition for control over

resources, to winning the hearts and minds of the people by understanding their needs and meeting those needs. It is high time to be people-centred rather than to be opposition-centred; it is time to share the not-so-plentiful resources that the country generates with the people rather than party cadres. That's the bottom line!

To embrace this new paradigm, what does it mean for the ruling party? I believe they must downplay and even abandon the spirit of conflict reflected in opposition bashing and persecution. Similarly, they must abandon the idea of monopolising control over resources (to be pilfered and plundered at will). In its place, they must pay greater attention to their constituencies (the people) rather than the competition (the opposi-

tion). They must present to the nation their vision of what they want to accomplish and the end results that people can expect in measurable terms. The newly elected must also present a road map that clearly shows how they plan to get there. They must specifically show what paths will be abandoned, what paths will be maintained and reinforced, and what new paths will be developed that bring the benefits to the people. Choices will have to be made and explained to the people that they cannot have it all; and generally people understand the phenomenon of choice. These choices will have to be presented with commitment (heart) and logic (mind) rather than pure brute force (i.e. two-thirds majority).

The leadership must be particularly careful not to over promise because people question the sincerity of those who over promise. It must be understood that any promise sets up expectations that people tend to remember. Thus, when promises are not kept and expectations are discarded by the wayside, people wait for their turn to repay! The vision and strategy must specify the gains for the people that must be laid out in clear terms (e.g., food, health, jobs, security, convenience, leisure, education, opportunities, etc.). It is particularly important that the full slate of ministers soon show why they are not redundant because the plethora of ministerial positions could easily lead to intense turf wars and wasted resources. Each appointee must

thereof. Wisdom must embody sincerity reflected in saying what they will do and doing what they say; and they must walk the line of sincerity carefully because as Oscar Wilde pointed out, "A little sincerity is dangerous, and a great deal of it is absolutely fatal." Wisdom must be operationalised in transparency, accountability, honesty, and commitment. It must be reflected in selection of the right person for the right job and in producing the promised results. If the selected are unable to perform, they must be replaced; if need be, by not from one's own because serving the people's interest should be paramount.

Justice must be demonstrated in the enactment of fair laws and their implementation in accordance with the spirit of the law. Unfair treatment of anyone, including those opposing the views and actions of the elected, can be a major stumbling block to being re-elected. No one should be above the law and the rule of law must be vigorously established and pursued, even if it means going after party stalwarts and their relatives and henchmen. The spirit of justice must demonstrate that everyone will be dealt with in a fair manner and it is best to begin by cleaning up one's own house. Let us remember Aristotle who said, "No government can stand that is not founded on justice." Simple as the two principles may sound, they represent a tall order. Emerging evidence does not show that the party is committed to these principles; hence, winning

hearts and minds, and earning the right to govern, may become increasingly difficult for them with time.

The opposition might also gain from the above guidelines. They should begin to formulate a new vision that must be laid out as a blueprint before the next election (apparently the old one was inadequate, did not get the job done, or was never understood by the people). This vision must be better and more appealing than what it previously offered; and the road map must also be clearly laid out. They must also demonstrate a better brand of wisdom for the people to experience and appreciate. That means it must go to the parliament instead of revising a negative brand of politics that seems to have little support even among many of the

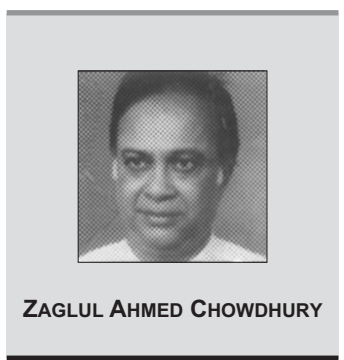
nately, history will corroborate that they have neither chosen the wise, nor the just. Not surprisingly, they have always complained of being under the yoke of insincere, corrupt, and despotic regimes. But they must share in the blame because as Samuel Adams said "I believed that no people ever yet groaned under the heavy yoke of slavery but when they deserved it."

Today people seem to be driven much more by their emotions than by their intellect, and the divisiveness of politics has intruded into their daily lives with a singularly corrosive effect. The battle lines are already drawn up and, from what I see, people have dug deeper into entrenched positions, blinded by their support for the party they favour or inflamed by their hatred for the opposition they never fail to malign. Many, if not all, are quick to point out the defects of the party they oppose while eulogizing the attainments of their own, often to the point of being ridiculous. When the people lose their sense of wisdom and justice, they help the cause of the evil and carve out a perilous and uncertain future.

Instead of being critical of others, it is high time for the people to "flip it" and examine their own positions seriously and confront why their suffering continues unabated. I firmly believe they will find the poor brand of leadership over successive regimes as the root cause. People must now unite, regardless of party affiliations, to build a strong civil society and raise their voice in a united bid to remove all injustices and to install the good way, the right way. They must cry out from every corner and make their voices heard against all forms of oppression; and they must seek within to find better representation and a new brand of leadership. Until that is done, insincere, unjust, and incompetent politicians will rule, often with impudence and disdain. The essence of good governance lies in a partnership between those who govern and those who are governed as reflected in the first public speech by Abu Bakr (RA) when he was appointed caliph. He said, "I have been appointed as your ruler, and I am not the best of you. If you find me following the right way, support me. If not, correct me." That's how true leaders win hearts and minds, that's how they attain the legitimacy to govern.

Syed Saad Andaleeb, Ph.D., is Professor and Programme Chair of Marketing at The Pennsylvania State University, Erie, USA. He is also the editor of The Journal of Bangladesh Studies.

Next Indo-Pak summit seems uncertain



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

AFTER the "Agra" summit, the second meeting between Indian prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pakistan president General Pervez Musharrif is scheduled in Pakistan.

Besides, it was thought earlier that the two leaders might hold discussions in New York on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) when both of them would attend the event. UNGA has been delayed because of terrorist attack in the United States. Prime minister Vajpayee arrived in the United States after visiting some countries including Russian Federation. President Musharrif too reached New York following his swing to some western nations like France and the United Kingdom. But they didn't meet. Understandably, the objective of their visits was discussions on the Afghan situation in addition to other matters. Both India and Pakistan are backing the US-led coalition against the Taliban in Afghanistan. But New Delhi and Islamabad have differing positions

on the issue of "terrorism" and they have adopted also in a way divergent perceptions on the Afghan tangle. As such, both are seeking to take advantage from the crisis by extending facilities to the United States and its allies on war against the Taliban. This has widened their differences on bilateral matters as well and consequently, talks between Vajpayee and Musharrif appears uncertain.

It was something like a "great news" in the south Asian scenario

be held because of increasingly worsening political environment that gripped the region. Even the cricket teams of India and Pakistan could not escape the wrath of situation -- refusing to play against each other. What an undesirable situation persisted in the area which often boasts of "commonality" because of historical background. True, this "commonality" and neighbourliness have also spawned bitterness and enmity but the regional feelings should also act positively as much

situation in the region but it is broadly the Indo-Pakistan relationship that causes an effective impact in the area. It is in this context that there was an unexpected positive news and it was of the summit between the leaders of two countries. Although the Agra summit was later largely dubbed as a "failure", this had at least established a rapport between them. Vajpayee had similar rapport with former Pakistan prime minister Nawaz Sharif through the Lahore summit

the composite talks covering different fields in the bilateral ties have also been discontinued for long. Indo-Pakistan contacts have virtually been frozen for last two years and the fallout of this terribly disappointing condition has extended to the field of cricket which is a passion in south Asia - and more so for India and Pakistan both of which go crazy for this game. Against such a background, the news that the Indian prime minister had shown the olive branch and that too in a big way like

contacts at highest level despite the fact that the first Vajpayee-Musharrif meeting left no tangible result as far as their main problems are concerned. It goes without saying that the problems surround the vexed "Kashmir" issue where New Delhi and Islamabad have totally differing positions on "self-determination" by the "Kashmiri" people and "Pakistan-sponsored" terrorism. These differences are hard to ease because of the historical background known to all. However, the summit facilitated the way for future contacts at different levels including the top.

Accusations and counter-accusations by two countries against each other in the aftermath of Agra summit undoubtedly queered the pitch of next summit. Even discussions at the UN between the two leaders has not been a possibility as India feels no concrete outcome is possible from any such talks. The Afghan situation has introduced new complexities in their ties. As such, the next Indo-Pak summit is uncertain. However, one good thing is that the two leaders may meet on the sidelines of the next SAARC summit in Kathmandu in the first week of January next. If their talks take place there, this may pave the way for a future summit. After all, any discussion leaves some good impact and the coming SAARC summit may provide a scope for improving the climate for next Vajpayee-Musharrif summit any time in the future.

Jaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is Senior Special Correspondent of BSS.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

Just another view

After September 11, Bush appeared on the CNN with an angry look and expressed his fighting attitude. The first comment he made on the attack was that the Muslim terrorists had committed it. His father came up and corrected it saying that they not necessarily all Muslims are terrorists. Then again, the US President declared the crusade against terrorism. Was it right for him to sensitise the Jews and Christian community against the Muslim community?

If the Jews or the Christian citizens of his country were involved in this attack would he have reacted the same way? Is it not possible that actually the Jews did this with a view to bury Palestinian and wipe out the Muslims from the USA? Is it impossible that the aboriginal people of USA having cumulative frustration carried out this attack?

of Afghanistan in the name of eradicating terrorism. **Salimul Haque** Jigatala, Dhaka

Inferiority complex?

This is a strange philosophy of Bangladeshi Muslim that they always depend on America but in most of the cases they oppose this country. During the Gulf War, almost every Muslim of this country were in favour of Saddam Hossain and presently they are out to sacrifice their lives for Osama bin Laden.

Probably this has also been noticed by an American. Very regretfully he/she has written, "How many Bangladesh children has America fed?" ("An American opinion", October 30).

I feel that we people are ungrateful. We would do every thing for our religion, but not for the country that sends us aid.

This is true that about 99 per cent of Bangladesh directly or indirectly depend on American aid. About 76 per cent foreign currency come from garment sector and most of our

garments products are exported in America.

This is really frustrating that we always forget who our friends are. Let us forget, that if religion don't support our conscience.

Siddhartha Jhenidah

SAARC summit

As is well known, it is Bangladesh's turn to nominate the secretary-general for SAARC. It may be recalled that Ambassador Abul Ahsan had served SAARC as its first secretary-general and left an indelible imprint on the organisation with his wisdom, eloquence and panache bringing a great accolade for the country.

SAARC has grown over the years but has also been facing enormous challenges due to various reasons. It is also a fortunate coincidence that the new secretary-general from Bangladesh would have his tenure during the Prime Ministership of Begum Khaleda Zia. Her own deep commitment, as we all know, goes beyond her personal

feelings, to a noble vision for regional co-operation and amity for the common good of almost over a billion people in our region. The Secretary General, hence, would also obviously seek to garner a stronger degree of support from all the esteemed leaders of SAARC nations. There are number of new ideas that can be suggested for adoption by SAARC to strengthen and broaden its constructive developmental role further.

We believe there is a quiet move to nominate someone whose credentials are distinguished by the absence of any of the above qualities. And that certainly should not be allowed. It will not only put SAARC Secretariat and its activities at a very low level of performance but also the image of Bangladesh and its diplomats will be tarnished perhaps beyond redemption.

Our new secretary-general should not be just a lack-lustre, routine kind of an official. He should have the leadership capability to set new standards of performance and delivery as he is entrusted to carry out the wide-ranging tasks by the

Heads of State and government of the SAARC.

A concerned diplomat, on e-mail

Irresponsible statements

The AL chief has once again called for vigilant behaviour from her party activists. She has threatened to burn one house for one of AL supporter's house is burnt. Although it is a slight improvement from her earlier call for ten JCD dead bodies for each BCL dead body, it is utterly irresponsible. While any sensible person would condemn all criminal attacks on anyone and demand justice, the AL chief keeps encouraging the masses to take law in their own hands, which is absolutely unacceptable. Under no circumstances, should people start taking revenge on their own-- it is precisely this kind of attitude that has thrown the country into lawlessness over the last few years.

If the AL chief or anyone else has substantial proof of criminal behav-

our against anyone, they should file charges, work with the prosecutors, and use the judicial system to seek justice. It is unfortunate that our country tolerates leaders of a major party who instigate and provoke further violence as a retaliation of violence. Isn't it ironic that the same leader condemns the US war against Afghanistan?

It is not enough that she has broken her promise about hartals within months of gaining her new status as an opposition leader, she continues to use violence as the means of fulfilling her agenda. In some countries, people can be prosecuted for provoking violence that leads to murders, looting and other such crimes. Is there no provision in our penal code for the same? If not, the lawmakers ought to look into creating one.

A Concerned Citizen Dallas, USA

Smelling the rat in the gas deal!

I would like to thank Mr. Aftab Khan's excellent piece on the "Gas Export"

issues, which clearly proved our long held suspicion about the "Rotten Rat", expected to be served by the US Oil and Gas companies.

The simple arithmetic does not add up to benefit Bangladesh neither in the short term, nor in the long term by exporting gas to India. Americans are fond of "numbers"; here is our answer to UNOCAL's rosy depiction of Bangladesh making money out of the expected deal.

I don't know, what accounting methods were followed to show billions of dollars revenue for Bangladesh; may be, UNOCAL got Enron's experts to work on this deceiving proposal. Enron-- once the darling of Wall Street is being investigated by the Security & Exchange Commission (SEC) for shady accounting practices. Due to this fall out, Enron is saving its skin by offering itself on the platter for sale.

We should be very cautious while dealing with these "Greedy Corporations", and make a point that we will not tolerate a rebirth of a new "East India Company".

Nafees K, on e-mail

US foreign policy

President Bush is beating about the bush, now that the Islamic world is reacting negatively to his body language on the US war on terrorism.

The distorted American foreign policy encouraged the growth of international terrorism, mainly directed against the United States, for reasons well known to the American policy makers but not to the general public in the States.

Why misinform the citizens and tarnish the name of Islam? If the cause is removed, the effect will go. The US people are not being fed with news and views in the right perspective (watch the CNN mania).

This myopia, unless corrected, is going to cause misery and would damage this civilisation. Anyway, the beginning of the change has been heralded, and time and tide will wait for none.

Abul M Ahmad Dhaka