

## What did AL gain out of this hartal?

Opposition should return to the parliament

THE Awami League (AL) must make an assessment as to what it got out of its hartal programme last Saturday. In our view nothing. If fact the party lost some credibility as people recalled Sheikh Hasina's promise, while in power, never to subject the nation to a hartal again. Saturday's hartal was a cruel reminder that promises made by our political leaders mean nothing. How sad.

AL should know that hartal as a political programme has long lost its appeal. People abhor it and feel angry at those who impose it on them. The closed shops and the empty streets of last Saturday were more an attempt to stay out of the harm's way than to extend support for the opposition. We want to remind the AL that further hartal calls will subject our economy to greater strains with extreme consequences for our people. It would be far better politics to keep the promise that was made while in power.

However, on the contrary, there is a lot to protest against which the opposition must take a stand for the sake of democracy. We agree with the AL when it complains of not being given any political space to carry out its activities. We also echo their views in protesting against the treatment that is being meted out to some of its leaders, especially those who are under arrest.

It is our view that given the ruling party's harsh and undemocratic attitude towards the opposition, it has become imperative that the latter use the forum of the parliament to tell the people what is going on. We were appalled when the AL collected resignation letters from their MPs and gave to the party to chief to be used as and when she feels like. As we have written elsewhere MPs are "servants" of the people and not of the party, and as such people must be consulted before they decide to resign. It cannot be a simple party decision as any other matter. AL must understand that its policy of shunning the 8th Parliament from day one has not gone well with the general public who expect responsible behaviour from such a old and grassroots based party.

If nothing else the AL can give a dramatic positive turn to our otherwise disappointing political scene by joining the parliament. It is our view that such a move will earn them significant goodwill with the public and definitely increase its standing both nationally and internationally.

## Musharraf's referendum initiative

Can it be a substitute for democracy?

PERvez's Musharraf's decision to hold a referendum to prolong his rule for another five years couldn't have met with universal approval but nor has it been trashed equally as his opponents had hoped for.

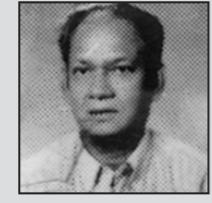
Obviously, this isn't about democracy but extension of the contract to hold on to power. He has read the international situation very well and has played his cards accordingly. Meanwhile, it has become clear that neither the PPP which was in the woods when he took over nor the Muslim League which was in its last innings drew any applause for their democratic behaviour. In fact, the declaration by the PPP and the ML that they will not be a part of it all and reject the referendum is now academic. Musharraf's acceptance is in the theatre of international politics where Benazir and Nawaz Sharif have little space.

A more chilling reality lies in Musharraf's declaration that as a last resort he may use nuclear weapons when it comes to a fight with India. This is a reminder of the facts that govern decisions relating to who rules Pakistan.

As long as Musharraf can deliver the goods to the international community against the "global fight against terror" he will have a safe ride because he is tested, has good connections with the military who matter in such issues. Even in a religious party-loaded Pakistan, Musharraf's government took decisions to curb them which perhaps would not have been possible for a civilian elected leader.

But whatever may be Musharraf's stabilising and modernising influences on Pakistan, he must know that there is no half-way house to democracy. It has to be firmly anchored in the sovereignty of popular will that is expressed freely and not on dotted lines. The people of Pakistan have been betrayed many times since country's birth and Musharraf at least can not claim to be anything more than a usurper with a cause. And the best cause he can espouse now is to work for the return of real democracy in Pakistan.

## President Bush should recognise the state of Palestine now



ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

disarray. The Security Council of the UN admitted Israel as a member of the world body with all the permanent members of the Security Council voting for her admission.

Thus began the half a century conflict that continues to plague the region to this day. The important dates to remember are 1956, 1967 and 1973. In 1956 Israel in alliance with Great Britain and France attacked Egypt on the pretext that

entire Sinai desert. The Israeli army taken by total surprise was in full flight. It was the military intervention of the US that saved Israel from utter ruination. The Israeli debacle of 1973 did not get the media attention that it deserved thanks to the Jewish monopoly of the print and electronic media. 1973 was followed quickly by the Arab oil embargo. This was the most severe crisis that the West faced as they

the White House. Those were barren years as far as attempting to find a solution to the Middle East conflict is concerned. The arrival of young and dynamic Democrat President Bill Clinton to the White House meant a dramatic change in US involvement in the Middle East conflict. Clinton succeeded in establishing an even handed approach to the conflict -- an essential aspect for fair media

platform is security for the citizens of Israel. Since he believes in strong arm tactics (massacre of Sabra and Shatila in the early eighties, encirclement of Beirut and conquest of South Lebanon are some of his feats), using the pretext of terrorist attacks, he has reconquered the entire West Bank, which until very recently was under Palestinian control, has kept in virtual prison Yasser Arafat in Ramallah. Sharon

2001 stands as a monument of what desperate men are capable of doing although the act in itself is reprehensible in the extreme and cannot be condoned. Such a powerful body as the European Union (EU) had to face the humiliation of their representative Javier Solana unceremoniously sent back from Ramallah, because Israel guards its prize prisoner Arafat. War monger Sharon appears bent upon taking the world to the brink.

A grave responsibility lies on the shoulders of President George W Bush. In spite of his pro-Israel tilt, he had the guts to declare the need for two states -- Palestine and Israel living side by side. The State of Palestine is recognised by more than 100 states and Palestine maintains embassies in all those capitals. Palestine has roughly twice as many embassies around the world than Israel. The reason Israel is a member of the UN and Palestine is not is because the US has so far refused to recognise Palestine.

President Bill Clinton since the Oslo Peace Accord tried the step by step method to find a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. It founded on the rock of Jerusalem. By pronouncing in favour of the two state approach (this incidentally is the solution projected by the Security Council resolution 242 and 337) George Bush has attempted to find a dramatic solution to the problem. It is crystal clear that the parties to the conflict are incapable of arriving at a solution. Thus the US alone is in a position to impose a solution from the top.

By granting recognition to the State of Palestine, President George W Bush will cut the gordian knot and lift a huge burden from not only the suffering people of the Middle East but probably save humanity from an impending catastrophe.

Arshad-Uz Zaman is a former Ambassador

## THE HORIZON THIS WEEK

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Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser had nationalised the Suez Canal. According to the two major western powers the Egyptian action threatened their lifeline as they would lose their complete mastery of naval movement between west and east. Egypt and for that matter the Arab region was saved by the forceful intervention of the US under the leadership of President Dwight D Eisenhower. The belligerents were separated and status quo was preserved.

In the 1967 war between the Arabs and Israel, the Israelis made a clean sweep and occupied the vast Sinai desert of Egypt, Golan Heights of Syria, West Jerusalem (where Israel transferred her capital), and virtually the whole of Palestine. Thus since her birth Israel reached the pinnacle of power.

The surprise attack through which Israel conquered a large part of Arab land in 1967, did not last very long. In 1973 on a moonlit night in the month of Ramadan, Egypt turned the tables against the Israelis, crossed Suez and reoccupied the

saw their great cities of Paris, London etc. go dark. This was the most potent weapon that the oil producing and exporting countries (OPEC) could exercise on the West. Thus began a search for peace with the US taking a leading role. The first success was achieved in 1979 under the Presidency of Democrat Jimmy Carter, who brokered a deal between President Anwar Sadat of Egypt and Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel. I was Bangladesh Ambassador in Egypt then. It was land for recognition. Israel withdrew from occupied Sinai in exchange for Egyptian recognition of the state of Israel. Thus Egypt became the first most important Arab country to establish diplomatic relations with Israel. We witnessed the arrival of the first Israeli Ambassador in Cairo as sullen Egyptians looked on. Shortly thereafter Sadat was murdered in broad daylight as he witnessed the military parade filing past.

Between 1980 and 1992 the Republicans -- first Ronald Reagan and then George Bush (the father of the current President) -- occupied

the White House. Those were barren years as far as attempting to find a solution to the Middle East conflict is concerned. The arrival of young and dynamic Democrat President Bill Clinton to the White House meant a dramatic change in US involvement in the Middle East conflict. Clinton succeeded in establishing an even handed approach to the conflict -- an essential aspect for fair media

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has been raining death and destruction upon the hapless civilians of Palestine.

From the activities of Sharon, it would appear that all the gains achieved in ten years through painstaking negotiations since Oslo, are anathema to him and he is bent upon burying the peace process. The tragedy is that Sharon appears to have the tacit blessing of US President George W Bush.

Watching President Bush on CNN can be very revealing. He utters dire warnings against Arafat that he may rein in the terrorists and specially lately the suicide bombers. Yet Arafat is holed up in his dark room in Ramallah and there is precious little he can do. President Bush manages to utter a few words about Israel's withdrawal without a single word of criticism for his war like activities. How is it possible to achieve any result when the leaders must be ruling today.

Since Ehud Barak failed to

deliver, he was summarily rejected by the Israeli electorate and they brought in his place that old, inflexible hawk, Ariel Sharon. Sharon's

oil embargo of 1973 was an act of desperation. There has been talk of a fresh oil embargo. It must not be totally discounted. 11 September

Political parties must steadfastly demand that the guilty be punished. They must take to the streets.

We also need to explore all possible forums for prosecuting the guilty, including the International Criminal Court, due to come into being in July. It can hear cases involving crimes against humanity. India must become its member.

Only public pressure, combined with expression of international concern, could impel Mr Vajpayee to control the damage. So far, he hasn't even promised to punish the guilty in an exemplary way.

Mr Vajpayee's response has been bland, tokenistic and gutless. He lacks the courage of a decent politician. Within the NDA, the dice are loaded against him. The BJP's brief dominance in Indian politics is unravelling.

Most of us won't mourn the NDA's demise, the BJP's eclipse, even Mr Vajpayee's fading. Mr Vajpayee has himself caused this decline by hunting with the hounds and running with the hare.

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What must concern us is the damage that the NDA is likely to inflict upon the nation before it retreats into ignominy. This must be limited, rolled back and reversed before it consumes us all.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

## The Gujarat onus shifts from Modi to Vajpayee

PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

AFTER the National Human Rights Commission's "preliminary" report on Gujarat, Mr Narendra Milosevic Modi's continuation has become completely untenable.

The report confirms what civil society activists have said about the organised post-Godhra violence, and the state's demonic complicity in it. It also demolishes Mr Modi's claims about having brought the situation under "control" within "72 hours".

Even five weeks on, as Mr Vajpayee discovered during his April 4 visit, Gujarat bristles with insecurity and fear. This "broke his heart", but it didn't persuade him to sack Mr Modi.

The NHRC report is the most scathing indictment of Mr Modi's government yet by a semi-official agency. It is not a political document and does not recommend his dismissal.

The report's conclusions are clear: the government failed to discharge its "primary and inescapable responsibility ... to protect rights and to be responsible for the acts ... of its own agents", and "non-State players within its jurisdiction". It says: "The burden" is on Mr Modi to rebut this "adverse inference".

The NHRC takes the government to task for "serious failure of intelligence and action" and "failure to

protect life." It says "grave questions" arise about Mr Modi's "fidelity to the Constitution".

It says it cannot reprove faith in his ability or will to prosecute the guilty.

So poor is the NHRC's opinion of the state police that it wants the CBI to investigate incidents such as Godhra and Naroda-Patiya in which

says (Gujarati weekly *Chitralekha*, March 25) that the Hindus are "finally" behaving the way they should like *Mahmood of Ghazni*.

These fanatics see nothing wrong in Hindus imitating the "barbaric" conduct which they attribute to Muslim "conquerors" to claim Hindu "victimhood".

director I.G. Patel have spoken out too.

Mr Vajpayee has responded to Gujarat with platitudes and tasteless poems which speak of "deep scars and broken glass" or of faces which have become *benaqab* (unmasked) a strange inversion of his own description as a mask

"dead" the title of a rotten magazine cover story.

This is nonsense. In reality, Gujarat is an exceptionally communal state. Some 95 percent of India's population has not been "not-prone". Eightytwo percent of the urban population has never experienced riots. And villages only

account for four percent of all deaths in communal violence.

The vast majority of Indians, including Hindus, regard secularism and pluralism as the core of democracy. Or else, one can't explain the shame they feel at the Gujarat pogrom, the response of the journalistic and artistic communities in rallying to the victims' cause, or citizens' campaigns everywhere.

These campaigns have compelled disparate leaders to share platforms, including Ms Sonia Gandhi, Messrs V.P. Singh, H.S. Surjeet, Amar Singh, and A.B. Bajrang.

Citizens need to do more: collect evidence of the culpability of individuals, file FIRs, record victims' testimony, and shame the police.

222 persons were burned alive.

The Commission's recommendations on "rehabilitation" and "police reforms" reflect lack of confidence in Mr Modi.

The NHRC report, and media coverage documenting the state government's culpability, confronts Mr Vajpayee with a stark choice: shield Mr Modi for South Asia's worst pogrom in half a century; or defend the Constitution.

Mr Vajpayee's choice is between people like Mr Praveen Togadia, who reject peaceful Hindu-Muslim co-existence, and the political-legal obligation to defend secularism and protect citizens' rights, *irrespective* of religion.

Gujarat has further polarised the two options. Mr Togadia now openly

equate justice with bestial revenge and retribution, thus practising Mr Arun Shourie's odious appeal to claim "both eyes for an eye and the whole jaw for a tooth".

Against them are ranged secular democrats, who regard the Gujarat pogrom as a grave threat to pluralism. Democracy ceases to mean anything in the absence of the citizen's right to life.

This large group comprises the liberal intelligentsia, working people, and progressive movements.

Buttressing them is world public opinion, and now, sentiment within the business community. This has become important since Mr Deepak Parekh demanded Mr Modi be sacked. Other figures like former London School of Economics

and the *Hindutva* can only invite ridicule by contrasting the Vivekananda's and the VHP's *Hindutva*, and then not opposing the latter. The longer he delays dismissing Mr Modi, the more he contributes to the Constitution's subversion, breach of law, and his own political irrelevance.

Mr Vajpayee has got isolated with the BJP's ignominious defeat in election after state election. (The latest is Delhi where it sank from absolute majority to a miserable 17 seats out of 134).

The shine went off the Vajpayee leadership months ago. Now its survival itself is in jeopardy. Its "inside" opponents now falsely claim that Indian secularism is

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## OPINION

## Terrorism in the Middle East!

KHANDAKAR QUDRAT-I ELAHI

WHAT a controversy has been long kept on foot and remains still undecided, we may presume that the disputants affix different ideas to the terms employed in the controversy. For as the faculties of the mind are supposed to be naturally alike in every individual -- otherwise nothing could be more fruitless than to reason or