

An unnecessary hartal passes peacefully

AL lost public sympathy that it could have otherwise gained

It is with a tremendous sense of relief that we greet the news of no violence during the hartal programme called by the opposition AL yesterday. Many newspapers speculated about possible clashes between AL and BNP workers as the hartal fell on the 20th founding anniversary of the latter. It is to the credit of both sides and of the police that the day passed peacefully.

The whole episode prompts us to raise two sets of questions that relate to our political future. What was the justification of the hartal of yesterday? Almost all the newspapers carried the news of the attack on Sheikh Hasina as headlines and many wrote editorials condemning it. There was a general outburst of sympathy for the AL and a chorus of condemnation against the ruling party. Why then was the hartal? Was it to teach the government a lesson? But doesn't the former ruling party know that hartals punish the people and not the government? Why did the BCL boys torch five buses in the city on the evening before, and who will be responsible for the death of one of the passengers and others who were badly injured? The AL chief tried to blame it on the government but does she think anybody believed her? The responsibility of that death lies on the shoulder of the miscreants who set fire to those buses and they were none other than AL activists.

On the government side, does it really think a tailor-made DC's report will exonerate it of the responsibility of the actions of its party members in Kolaroa? Why were the houses of AL leaders raided the night before the hartal? Why were nearly 300 of its city ward level leaders detained? These are repressive measures that are product of autocratic mind-set. The crucial question is what is the space for the opposition activities in present day Bangladesh?

We decried the attitude of the former AL government towards the then opposition, which was the present BNP. We saw how BNP party offices were blockaded and how its leaders used to be harassed and punished every time it called for a hartal. We recall the attempts to subvert road marches by Khaleda Zia and how her motorcades were intercepted and stopped with roadblocks and commandeered trucks and buses. For all that people rejected the AL and elected the BNP. Today BNP is behaving precisely the way the previous government did, if not more ferociously.

The circle of violence and counter-violence must come to end sometime. The ruling party must take the lead. AL failed when it was its term. Will BNP fail too?

Ban on polluters

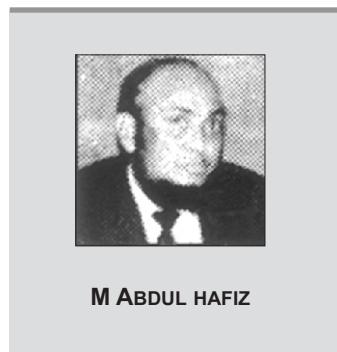
Transition should be smooth, scientific

The government ban on 12,500 two-stroke three-wheelers took effect in the city yesterday amidst a dawn-to-dusk hartal by the main opposition Awami League and an indefinite strike by the Bangladesh Rickshaw, Auto-rickshaw, Auto-tempo Chalak-Malik Sangram Parishad. The ban will certainly have a positive impact on the public transport system and, more importantly, the environment in the city. Withdrawal of 12,500 vehicles looks set to create a vacuum in the public transport system. Despite frantic efforts by the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) and the Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC), alternative arrangements to offset the impact of the ban remain inadequate. The shortage of public transport, according to government and independent sources, will linger on for at least a month.

The efficiency of the ban depends heavily on how the government follows it up. Alongside arrangement of adequate alternatives in terms of more CNG-run three-wheelers, buses and other passenger vehicles, the government should also engage the disgruntled section of auto-rickshaw and auto-tempo owners and drivers into dialogue. Although the Dhaka Auto-tempo, Auto-rickshaw, Auto-truck Malik-Sramik Oikya Parishad, the coalition of thirteen organisations, in an agreement with the BRTA over enforcement of the ban, has distanced itself from them, the government should not. It must not forget that the decision, bold and beneficial it is though, has a negative bearing on some people and their families and their grievances should also be heard and redressed. However, there should not be any shift in the government's position and should there be the need, it should be tough on the trouble-mongers.

Patience is crucial here. Short-term hiccups by no means should detract from bold decision the government has taken to rid the capital and eventually the country of a major air pollutant. In case of the Adamjee Jute Mills Limited, the government has set a precedent of how a sensitive issue such as laying off thousands of workers can be handled with minimum disruption. The same is true for the ban on polythene bags. There is no reason why there should be any problem in enforcement of ban on two-stroke three-wheelers.

It's law and order, stupid!



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE law and order in Bangladesh was seldom good. But never before had that been so bad as of now when a deep despair inexorably grips the society. On earlier occasions we could at least indulge in wishful thinking that things would improve, our law enforcing agencies would come of age and, above all, the nation would mature enough to rid us from the menace. The people were fed on these hopes for long. Those hopes also no more survive. How could they when the unfolding dangers on the law and order front are ominously real?

As reported in the newspapers there were as many as 13 gruesome murders within an interval of 10 days right here in the capital city. The public reaction is obviously one of shock and trepidation. The people are aghast at the bestiality in the killing of Shihab, Bappi and Don. But for the remorseless criminals of the city killing is a game, kidnapping

an adventure and rape a fond pastime. Even the members of the law enforcing agencies are bewildered at the escalation of crimes and afraid to face the criminals since several of their colleagues died in brushes with them. While fear and anxiety now stalk the countryside, Dhaka - the country's nerve centre has virtually turned into a den of criminals.

Amidst this bleak development the government's threat, warning

government has few justification to stay. Actually conscious of this the BNP-led alliance government did act but with a lopsided concept of law and order. It seldom realised that the real power to govern ensuring an order in the society springs out of a moral authority. Instead it wanted to achieve it through skull-duggery combined with swash-buckling. Even if that worked at times - more often than not - it did not.

the country's democratic credentials it has also given its unruly cadres a taste of crude power which they now often exhibit even by challenging law-enforcing authority. Both the law enforcing agencies and party activists have taken advantage of this murky situation to their diabolical ends thus throwing the society in a deeper abyss.

What it can lead upto has been graphically exemplified in Rampal of Bagerhat where something igno-

term policies of the parties in power.

In the meantime the nation seethes with a sense of anger for what it perceives to be deceit meted out to it by the government of four party alliance. It was in last election that for the first time the law and order figured very prominently and the BNP-led alliance vowed to restore it and also promised to root out terrorism. It was on these pledges that the alliance was catapulted to power although it never

energy against a discredited opposition perhaps to inflict it a decisive blow. As a result the post-election violence between the two major parties snowballed into a major breakdown of law and order while the identified criminals and terrorists could avail the opportunity for settling down with the new dispensation. According to the inherent dynamics of such violence now the intra-party rivalries are rampant within the alliance itself over the spoils. It is only natural that the crimes will intensify in emerging milieu. But the law and order now seems to have totally spiraled out of the government's control.

Notwithstanding the alliance's attitude and actions with regards to prevailing law and order, it is at the core of the country's survival. It is the single most factor that most substantially influences the country's state of progress and prosperity. The country is today held hostage to its vicissitude not allowing it normal economic life or an investment climate or an environment for optimum production. In a law and order situation when a hell seems to have been let loose only a national effort subsiding in it all social and political forces will have to be employed to combat the menace. The inevitable point of departure for this will, however, have to be the recognition of its gravity in a national context. Whether we survive or progress it's now the law and order! Whether we win or lose election it's again the law and order.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

PERSPECTIVES

Notwithstanding the alliance's attitude and actions with regards to prevailing law and order, it is at the core of the country's survival. It is the single most factor that most substantially influences the country's state of progress and prosperity. The country is today held hostage to its vicissitude not allowing it normal economic life or an investment climate or an environment for optimum production.

and admonition for the criminals just ring hollow. Because the armed activists of the political parties which came to power in the election of October last on the pledge of restoring order and banishing terror are ironically in the fore front of most of the crimes - be it rape, kidnapping, grab or murder. The party cadres who consider their licenced excesses just as wage for their services rendered give a damn to the authority.

Yet the law and order is the first and foremost test of the government's authority. In its absence the

It is amazing that a highly mandated government like the present one has to so frequently aberrate in its political conduct which alone is no less responsible for aggravation of law and order problems. Look at the series of repressive measures against a poor-second opposition which is gasping for merely its survival. But its potentials in promoting a stable law and order situation can never be underestimated. By antagonizing the party the government has only compounded its problems. While this effort might have been a zerosum effort it has not only dented

minious has happened as a result of the trend that has since been set in motion. In Shamsunnahar Hall of Dhaka University it was done by police with the help and support of Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) activists. In Rampal it was neatly done by party activists themselves in party office. Desecration of Chhabirani's honour has indeed been the ignominy for the nation while the action itself was blatantly fascist. Even if the government has acted promptly to initiate action against the hoodlums the episodes like these are product of the long

seemed equal to the task - given its class composition and quality of politics which were same as those of Awami League.

The prospects of the alliance fulfilling its election pledges on law and order looked bleak with its assumption of power when it started to blame the preceding government for the deteriorating law and order situation which was deliberately played down by the new government. Instead of clamping down on the known terrorists and criminals busy then in changing side the government preferred to divert its

BJP against BJP

Power greed behind crisis

PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

It is characteristic of Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee's ambivalent, indecisive style that he mildly reprimanded Mr Narendra Modi for his vicious attack on Chief Election Commissioner J.M. Lyngdoh for delaying elections in Gujarat.

With this, Mr Modi has "ended" the "controversy" he himself started - without even a hint of regret.

Mr Vajpayee's intervention was not just "too little, too late"; it was *mis-directed*. He only cautioned against "improper language" and "indecorous insinuations".

However, Mr Modi was guilty of downright venomous hate-speech. He singled out Mr Lyngdoh from the three-member Election Commission for its unanimous decision by virtue of his Christian birth. Mr Modi unleashed filthy abuse at this Constitutional functionary, saying he is in cahoots with Ms Sonia Gandhi.

Mr Modi should be prosecuted for defamation. But Mr Vajpayee "even-handedly" equated Mr Modi with Mr Lyngdoh, and declared both to be "high Constitutional authorities".

The chief minister's office is not "Constitutional" or statutory in the sense the EC, Supreme Court or the Finance Commission is. The EC didn't intrude into Mr Modi's "domain", it was within its rights to delay elections.

Mr Vajpayee's ambivalence

springs from a larger dilemma. He is uncomfortable with his own Cabinet's decision to refer the EC's powers to the Supreme Court. Sources close to him say he even thought of resigning after the Cabinet decision.

But Mr Vajpayee is also afraid to assert himself for fear that it will rock the boat and bring the faction-ridden, discredited and demoralised BJP tumbling down. Mr Vajpayee

tries against one another, or (as in Mr Shourie's case) write articles on the mismanagement of ITDC offices (by Mr Ananth Kumar). But Disinvestment Minister Shourie is meant to enhance the value of public assets before privatisation!

Exposés of the petrol-pump scam and award of real estate to *sangh parivar* NGOs came less out of journalistic burrowing than from

There has always been some tension between these two wings. But this has recently acquired a new edge: the RSS and VHP have allied with the BJP's organisational bosses against the government.

The party apparatus has been taken over by *Hindutva* hardliners. Mr Advani has replaced Mr Vajpayee as the direct "coordinator" with party functionaries.

Some inner-party differences were publicly aired at the BJP's August 3 national council, with fireworks between Mr Naidu and Mr Mahajan, and Ms Swaraj and Mr Rajnath Singh.

The rivalry's third dimension is the Vajpayee-Advani power-struggle. Mr Vajpayee is a tired, ailing, disillusioned man, and would

If Mr Vajpayee has an alternative to this strategy, he hasn't disclosed it. He is content to play a manipulative power-game from the sidelines. This is an unflattering comment upon his leadership. He is allowing the BJP's takeover by the *parivar's* Rightwing.

Regrettably, the Congress is NOT demarcating itself sharply from the BJP. Instead of taking a principled secular stand, it too is flirting with the likes of the Puri Shankaracharya and Chhote Moraribapu in Gujarat.

During her last two visits to Gujarat, Ms Sonia Gandhi spent more time with various saffron-robed *sadhus* than with the victims of violence. It is not accidental that the RSS's M.G. Vaidya has lavished praise upon Mr Shankersinh Vaghela as a *Hindutva* "hero".

The Congress would be ill-advised to adopt a "soft-Hindutva" approach. This won't achieve even the eminently worthy objective of defeating the BJP. It will do immense harm to the national polity. Each time the Congress flirts with soft-Hindutva, it helps its own enemies - as in Maharashtra, where the police recently banned the exhibition of two anti-*sangh* films.

Nothing is more vital today than adhering to clean, non-nonsense secularism.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

Regrettably, the Congress is NOT demarcating itself sharply from the BJP. Instead of taking a principled secular stand, it too is flirting with the likes of the Puri Shankaracharya and Chhote Moraribapu in Gujarat...The Congress would be ill-advised to adopt a "soft-Hindutva" approach. This won't achieve even the eminently worthy objective of defeating the BJP. It will do immense harm to the national polity.

still remains the BJP/NDA's unique selling proposition. He is also a victim of its internal power struggle.

That struggle is best understood in three dimensions: Cabinet-level tussles, fights within the *sangh parivar*, and the Vajpayee-Advani competition for supremacy.

First, take the wranglings between top BJP functionaries: Mr Arun Shourie and Mr Ram Naik, Mr Shourie and Mr Ananth Kumar, Ms Sushma Swaraj and Mr Pramod Mahajan, Ms Swaraj and Mr Arun Jaitley, Mr Venkaiah Naidu and Mr J. A. Krishna Murthy. ... So visceral are their mutual hatreds that these politicians plant media sto-

leaks inside government.

The sudden revival of the Shivani Bhatnagar case 3½ years after her murder is related to BJP insiders' attempts to embarrass Mr Pramod Mahajan, who retaliated by demanding that the party brass close ranks behind him, or else ...

The fact that many BJP leaders chortle at Ms Madhu Sharma's allegations against Mr Mahajan underscores the inner-party rivalry's ferocity.

The second dimension is the struggle between the BJP's government and organisational wings, itself related to intra-*sangh parivar* fighting.

BJP ministers and party apparatchiks differ on many issues - *swadeshi*, *mandir*, labour and disinvestment policies, even Jammu & Kashmir. Usually, the apparatchiks prevail.

For instance, the RSS recently sponsored the Jammu Rajya Morcha, which wants to carve up J&K - which Mr Advani says is "against the interests of India". The BJP had vowed to fight the JRM. But now, it has humbly made an electoral tie-up with it!

There are divisions within the RSS too, with Messrs K.S. Sudarshan and M.G. Vaidya backing Mr Murlu Manohar Joshi, and Mr Madan Das Devi supporting Mr

like the present government to carry on. It seems highly unlikely he will lead the BJP into the next election. *Atal Behari is not in a hurry.*

But Mr Advani is! He wants early elections in Gujarat - followed by a mid-term national election in which he leads the BJP's campaign. That's why the BJP apparatchiks are so maliciously attacking the EC.

They calculate that even if the BJP's Lok Sabha strength decreases from the present 180 to 130 seats, it could still form a government with its weakened, obedient allies. To this end, it can risk repeating Gujarat - in UP, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, elsewhere.

Patronised lawlessness

Our democracy's credibility crisis

ESAM SOHAIL writes from Kansas, USA

As a university student, I juggled the then new intricacies of computer software on one hand and political economy on the other. Shortly afterwards I went on to teach politics, economics, and international relations in college. Time and again in debates with socialists, collectivists and martial law apologists I have stoutly defended the Churchillian maxim that 'democracy is the worst form of government except for all others tried'. Throughout my days in academia and beyond I have nurtured a deep respect for representative democracies, ordered liberty, individual rights, and the free market. Hence, it has always been with a tinge of pride that I have observed democratic elections and subsequent peaceful transfer of power in Bangladesh. It is said that in the long run each nation gets the government it deserves. Perhaps Bangladesh has finally

come to a point where, through political maturity and sheer sacrifice, the gods of politics have decided that she is fit for democracy. More likely it seems that the people in Bangladesh have opted for democracy over other forms of governance.

The people are a fickle lot. Alexander Hamilton opined two and a half centuries ago. What they can opt for, they can also opt against. In a peculiar manner, the history of the subcontinent has been instructive in regards to the popular judgement against the ineffective democratic order. If all of us die hard democrats, myself included, set aside our decided bias, what we discover in 1958, 1975, 1977, 1982, and 1999 is quite troubling. Troubling not because of the military takeovers during those years but the popular acceptance of the same in the initial stages of such a putsch. Rhetoric and semantics aside, the fact is that when Ayub Khan, Ziaur Rahman, Ziaul Haque, H M Ershad, and Pervez Musharraf took over, their

countrymen generally heaved a sigh of relief. The democratic dispensations that each of these generals displaced had scary similarities. In each instance, cabinets and legislatures had become extensions of the egos of democratically elected leaders and law and order consisted of brutalizing opposition political activists while henchmen affiliated with the ruling party ran crime syndicates and extortion rackets with impunity.

In each of those military takeovers, the first few weeks saw street crime drop to negligible proportions as erstwhile politically protected gangsters and extortionists (often known as 'student'- or 'labour'- leaders) trembled in the fear of swift martial justice and corrupt policemen became honest overnight under the shadows of the watchful zonal martial law administrator. Sadly though, as is the inevitable nature of things, the cleansers of the system co-opted it and became indistinguishable from the crowd they replaced. In the pro-

cess, the credibility of democracy suffered tremendously. The military usurped democracy after the civilians elected to safeguard it had sullied it beyond recognition.

It is that threat to the credibility of democracy that frightens me. A general, no matter how egotistical or powerful, will think a dozen times about mounting a coup in today's world. No matter how much he fancies himself as a saviour, as most military dictators typically do, he will most likely have inhibitions moving his tanks on a populace that is comfortable with democracy even if not content with the democratic regime of the day. After all, in a democracy if you do not like the law and order situation under ABC party's government, you can always vote XYZ party into power to improve the situation the next time, right?

Regrettably, for our country, the answer to that question is not that easy. Three successive democratic regimes have acted as carbon copies of each other. The only difference

has been the partisan affiliation of the petty goons, the major extortionists, the murderers, the rapists, and the toll-collectors. In some cases, in a tragicomic twist, the same individuals have simply changed party labels to continue with impunity their criminal careers. When it comes to safe streets, sanctity of life and property, and business environment, nothing has changed. And there are no signs thereof either. The message to the masses is clear: those who have the blessings of the ruling party ministers, legislators, and other leaders are a class above the law. Elections seem only a revolving door for two alternative sets of criminal elements.

A military takeover has never been a solution to such deep seated problems of governance. If anything, such digressions from the path of gradual democratic progression make things more complicated in the long run. Yet, we are all humans with incredible but not infinite patience. When lives are threat-

ened daily by random violence and livelihoods by toll-collection and the police shrug off responsibility for fear of offending some MP, it is only natural for ordinary citizens to be fed up with the gift of a democracy that has made their existence in their own land so insecure. It is in the hearts and minds of these ordinary people that the long term welfare of our democracies lies.

For if our 'democratic' leaders in their ornately appointed Parliament building do not control and curb the lawlessness of their cronies, a day will surely come where the ordinary man on the street will lose the last shred of respect for them. That loss of credibility will be a blow to our democracy far more lethal than all the self-important generals and one-party dictators combined. Before that breaking point is reached both the major parties are well advised to reform their attitude, rein in their unruly elements, and shape up.

OPINION

Muslims, Bangladeshis and America

R D QURESHI

A speech delivered by US Ambassador to Bangladesh Mary Ann Peters recently at a conference of American Muslims in Chicago and circulated by USIS, Dhaka appeared in the newspapers here in Dhaka. She was invited to deliver a speech at the Chicago conference on 'Islam in America' and she did.

Her Excellency Mary Ann Peters has earned regards of the people here for her sincere approach to our problems. In spite of being a diplomat, she often expresses herself openly for the good of our people and the country.

I would like to discuss some points mentioned in her speech.

It has been mentioned that Bangladeshis have had little exposure to the true nature of American society. This observation is true mainly due to the fact that people from poorer countries seldom make costly holiday trips. From Bangla-

desh to the US -- it's almost like from one end of the world to the other. Those who go are mainly students, job seekers or visitors to family members residing in the US. Embarassing visa ordeals discourage many respectable people to approach the consular section of the US Embassy here. I was one fortunate person to visit the US twice with my wife. We needed to attend to ailing family members there and as such had to tolerate the insulting situation. I do not know of any ordinary citizen of Bangladesh having obtained a visitor-visa without facing any embarrassment.

The picture of American society as exposed at the US Consular Office at Dhaka, however, is not the true picture of the real American society in the US. We were very much impressed by the civility of the people there particularly outside the large cities like New York. In large cities, people are too busy to care for others. Even then discipline is visible everywhere. People do not

have to worry about their lives and property as we do here in Bangladesh.

Concerning any connection of Islam with the events of September 11, the ambassador is right. Islam as a religion does not approve of such violence. But the feelings of Muslims worldwide towards the US are divided as are evident from different reports. There are reports that some people enjoyed the horror scene when TV screens were showing the attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Centre. Perhaps they were jubilant at the thought that there are some people who dare an attack on the monster-power (super-power is rather an under-statement) to describe the power of the US), whatever the consequences be. There are Muslims who have bitter feelings about US policy towards their fellow Muslims in different countries, particularly Iraq and Palestine. Muslims are puzzled by the explosive attitude of US leadership

towards Presidents Gaddafi of Libya and Saddam Hussain of Iraq. Neither of them ever threatened to invade the United States! US leaning towards Israel at the cost of the Palestinians is another cause for the ill feelings of the Muslims towards US leadership. But the Muslims generally do not have any ill feelings towards Americans in general. They rather feel sorry for the Americans, whose fate their leaders have pawned to the Jews.

About the violent reaction of some Americans towards Muslims in that country after the events of September 11, Mary Ann Peters expressed her sorrow and anger. Apparently she realised that Muslims in general were not to be blamed for those attacks and only a few extremists were involved with that incident. Speaking for those Americans who expressed their anger at the attack on their pride, may be they were misguided against the Muslims by evil elements, I would say that any self-

respecting people anywhere in the world would react instantly in similar manner if their object of pride is attacked. Unfortunately the outburst of violence against the Muslims in America does not appear to have subsided yet, as we hear of incidents still occurring. The loud talk of President Bush against such Muslim leaders as Saddam Hussain and Yasser Arafat may be indirectly encouraging some hot-headed US citizens against getting cool.

The Americans deserve their pride. A bunch of people of different roots united together in nationhood has transformed a country from the scratch to the shining heights in just respects, only in two to three hundred years. God has given them a vast country having all varieties of landscapes, resources in abundance and a people hard working to build an enviable state of human development in history. Possibly the Americans will retain their leading position for quite a long time. However, human history tells us that no

person or people remain ever-prosperous. Ups and downs shift from people to people and place to place, the duration of a particular situation depending mainly on the conduct of a people.

Mary Ann Peters expressed her hope to see an increase in the number of Muslim visitors to US including students. That is encouraging to those who wish to go to the US. But do the visa officers at her consulate share that feeling? An elderly couple like myself and my wife was denied visa twice in 1991 on the plea that we would stay back in USA. We had to go to the consulate for a third time as we needed to go to attend to a family member there in illness. For our second trip in the year 2000, we had to seek influence to get visa. The Americans at the US embassy in Bangladesh seem to think that all Bangladeshis, irrespective of their age and social status here, seek US visa to go there forever. In spite of the bad shape of our economy and the law

and order situation, there are people proud of their motherland who want to live and die here in Bangladesh.

Visa-seekers are even penalised by the US Embassy at Dhaka in more than one way. First, they have to go to the American Express Bank at Motijheel to deposit visa fee in advance. They, if a person having deposited visa fee wishing to go to the US, decides not to seek a visa for some reason or other, does not get his or her money back! Does the Ambassador know that? The British High Commission, on the other hand, collects visa fees from visa-seekers after they get inside the consulate and seek an interview.

As for university students seeking visa for studies in US, we hear of a lot of denials. Very recently, a PhD aspirant having a good scholarship was denied visa on the plea that PhDs do not come back after having their degrees and securing well-paid jobs there. Of course such denials reduce brain-drain from our under-developed country but

causes frustration amongst scholars falling in their chance to secure a good degree from a good foreign university. The visa officers apparently fail to realise that such scholars, even if they decide to stay back after obtaining a good degree, will add to the qualified man-power of their country and enrich their academic environment. A highly educated person does not turn terrorist.

Her Excellency the Ambassador deserves our thanks for her honest approach to the points she discussed in her speech at the 'Islam in America' conference at Chicago. We are also thankful to the US for its continued help and support to us. All those grains under PL 480 kept our people fed during the dark days of food shortage in Bangladesh. We shall continue to express our gratitude for any un-tied help but shall not fail to criticise any US policy against our interest or against any innocent people elsewhere, criticism that US may not care but keep our senses alive.