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Put human first

Garos and Eco-tourism

"The Garos must be treated better", the DS advocated in its first editorial on 6-1-2002 issue. We say Garos, who are one of the ethnic minority communities in Bangladesh, must be treated equally like majority population, as the government does not differentiate between the communities. It is an excellent idea but all minorities must be treated as equal citizens of the country, not in words but in deeds. The killings of Piren Slan--a Garo youngster and injuries to 25 others--are not acceptable to us.

The Garos have inalienable rights to participate in their own development activities, but it seems that the project planning lacked participatory approach in its different phases of implementation. Obviously, the Garo voices must be heard with sympathy and deep respect. Importantly, pre-education on eco-tourism at their places should have been done much earlier to avoid dissension that finally led to the tragedy.

It is mandatory on the part of the government to probe the death of Piren Slan. The culprits must be brought to justice and the victims must get adequate compensation.

Efforts must be made to integrate Garos into the process of development.

M.A Rub Human rights activist Uttara Dhaka 1230

Manik, Salam, Zahur

In our history of struggle for freedom, journalists have and will always remain the brightest of stars. All the three names mentioned above in the title paved the way to expose the ills of those days against mighty states power engaged to gag the voices of Bengali interests. And that they did with their pen and verbal utterances without any fear whatsoever must be remembered forever. No one in this country should have any doubts or reservations about the great role Manik Mia, Abdus Salam and

dom fighters by naming ;"Binoy, Badal, Dinesh Bagh" in Kolkata. I am confident there should not be any serious differences of opinion among our political parties in this respect. Perhaps the existing Manik Mia Avenue can take the new name with due magnanimous consent of Late Mr. Manik Mia's family members. Surely they will realise the impact of such a move to immortalise the three great journalists of this soil in a much bigger way since they had the most cordial relationships and also its ultimate effect on uniting this divided nation

the sporadic tension in the border between India and Pakistan from time to time and the scornful nonchalance of the leaders of the relevant countries.

To the utter exasperation of the people, this institution could not bring about a remarkable change in the attitude of the leaders, nor could it execute any tangible change in the lifestyle of the tens of thousands of starving and the underprivileged people of this region. Ironically, despite some sincere attempts from different quarters, the purpose of its very establishment failed to serve any

could they come to terms with each other through any decisive negotiation.

This time some auspicious omens were ostensible from the concluded Saarc summit, as the leaders have inked some agreements on free trade, uprooting of terrorism to ensure harmony in the region and to help this institution become more effective than ever.

We, the people of the region eagerly look forward to its becoming instrumental in keeping all the hindrances at bay and

matter how strongly it feels that the government is doing a bad job in governing the country. This government is a democratically elected government and any attempt to bring it down by force would be totally undemocratic. A one-month time frame is ridiculous to carry out most of the demands, even if the BNP decided to act upon them.

The BNP has now got to act because there are some issues in the 15-point demands like Hawa Bhavan, law and order and corruption are genuine concerns of the people. The government needs to assure the people that Hawa Bhavan has no influence in the affairs of the government. BNP should act to dispel this belief, either by disbanding Hawa Bhavan or proving to the public that it plays no part in the government. The BNP must also act decisively on corruption and the law and order for no one in the country feels that it is doing anything about these problems.

The tragedy in Bangladesh is that we have a totally irresponsible opposition and an equally inactive government. We are literally caught in a classic 'catch 22' situation.

I wish, in line with your editorial, that the government would open a dialogue with the opposition and resolve the crisis democratically, keeping

Bangladesh's interest in top priority. But I cannot help feeling extremely pessimistic given the known positions of the two parties.

Shahjahan Ahmed Dhanmandi, Dhaka

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Shaheed Ziaur Rahman

I am responding in reference to Mr. O.H. Kabir's letter (DS, 03.01.04) on the subject. I do agree with him about the unhealthy mentality of both BNP and AL of not acknowledging our leaders fairly and with due respect.

However, I would differ with Mr. Kabir on his remark "... had there been no Shaheed Ziaur Rahman there had been no proclamation of war". It was not as if Ziaur Rahman had decided on his own to proclaim independence.

Here I would like to mention about the unacknowledged heroes of Bangladesh who are yet to get any state recognition. Their only 'crime' was they neither belonged to AL nor later joined BNP, but were leftist freedom fighters. A lot has been argued over the years as to who proclaimed independence first, i.e., Abdul Hannan (an AL activist of Chittagong) or Major Zia. Nobody cared a hoot about who actually had set up the transmitter at Kalurghat and how the above two persons came into the scene. Had there been no transmitter, there would have been no

The besieged Ahmadiyya sect

When Mahatir made the rabidly anti-Jewish remark, most of my fellow Muslim brethren, including the enlightened bunch, newspaper columns and editorials offered metaphorical cacophonous applause from the sidelines. They were effusive in the praise of this demigod as a statesman and ideal spokesman for Muslims. After the last election, when the Hindu minorities were targeted by the hacks and henchmen of the ruling coterie, most of us kept mum and did not bother to protest. It did not trouble most of us because it did not touch most of us. The intolerant bigots, anti-Semites and the unscrupulous religious fringe gangs do not stop. They proceed in an incremental manner, taking advantage of the neglect and indifference of the people.

Now they have targeted the Ahmadiyya sect. The fanatics want Ahmadiyyas to be labeled as non-Muslims and occupy their mosque. The bluster, tall talk and threat of dire consequences are insidious, shocking and insufferable. The reaction of the feckless, spineless government by banning religious publications of the Ahmadiyyas, setting another low in punishing victims of religious bigotry in an obscene gesture to mollify the extremists. The official reason was that these publications insult the sensibilities of majority Muslims. This is a semantic minefield of phoney rationale. Gita, Bible, Old Testament, Tripitak all offend the feelings of Muslims with dogmatic mindset. Should these all be banned? Also, the government is elected by the majority to protect the rights of the minority. This is the theme of the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the US constitution.

If the government appeases the mullahs now, as it seems inclined to do, the possible future is Shia-Sunni conflict, pro-Jamaat and anti-Jamaat confrontation and a whole gamut of sectarian discord and violence, similar to Pakistan. The anti-Ahmadiyya bigots often refer to Pakistan in support of enacting a law, declaring the adherents of the sect as non-Muslims. Wasn't the main reason for our independence movement to opt out of a theocratic reactionary sham tyrannical setup in favour of a progressive, democratic and secular system?

The government has to end this anti-Ahmadiyya frenzy forthwith and ensure freedom of religion for all citizens, especially the oppressed and targeted groups. The first right and righteous step would be to remove the prohibition from Ahmadiyya religious publications.

Omar Khasru Special Assistant to Vice Chancellor North South University (NSU) Banani, Dhaka 1213, Bangladesh

Ahmadiyya...

I am appalled by the government's decision to ban Ahmadiyya literature, bending to the will of extremists. Even if the Ahmadiyyas were a separate religion, a democratic gov-

ernment should not have banned the books. Only a fascist undemocratic government would do this. I guess this can be expected from a government who allies are the extreme rightwing fundamentalist parties. However, what can we say about the silence of the Bangladeshi people? The silence is a boon for the fundamentalist forces since it is probably the sign of strong support.

If the people of Bangladesh were truly religiously tolerant, I would have expected non-Ahmadiyya Muslims rallying in support of the Ahmadiyyas and attending the Friday prayers side by side with them in defiance of the extremists' threat of attacks. Sadly that was not the case. The silence of the people shows that Bangladesh is probably heading towards becoming Bangladeshtan sooner than one can predict.

The people of Bangladesh loudly declare their religious tolerance and the harmony that exists in the society. Last year's headlines on repression of minorities (especially Hindus) and the current repression of Ahmadiyyas contradict such "politically true" statements.

This decision by the government will greatly encourage the fundamentalist extremists to impose their will further upon Bangladesh. They have tasted their power.

Raqta, On E-mail

Ban on Ahmadiyya Books

State Minister for Religious Affairs Mr Shajahan's comment -- "There was fear of bloodshed and we found no alternative to avoid it other than banning Ahmadiyya publications" clearly indicate that the minister (may be the whole government) is intimidated by a fanatic religious group. He further said, "Although it restricts Ahmadiyyas' right---but we thought it (is) good for the time being." The present state of affairs vis-a-vis religious fanatic groups is a natural outcome of Bangladesh' journey on a religious slippery slope since 1975. Starting with the elimination of secularism from the constitution, adoption of Islam as State Religion and sharing political power with the criminal-collaborators -- each of the steps was accepted by a powerful section of the enlightened elite for political expediency (with all the booties that came with it), feeling it to be 'good for the time being'. Following the Pakistani cue, the religious fanatics are after the Ahmadiyyas now. One should ask what & who is next? The fanaticism of any kind need to be confronted politically and intellectually and with force if necessary, but never with appeasement and sacrifice of principle. A few months back Bangladesh was looking for a certificate as a 'moderate Muslim country'. The time of reckoning has arrived!

Bilayet Hossain Norman, Oklahoma USA

Taxpayers' money

Yes, taxpayers' money has always been squandered (under all the governments) due to mismanagement, or for ill planned and motivated projects, as we all know. No need to repeat all the stories here, but I am touching the one being planned and re-planned, in line with the write-up by Sultana Rahman (DS Jan.07) i.e. the DCC's foot-over-bridge.

I also want to recall the previous coverage of the issue by the DS. We are now seeing the replacement of the 'New Jersey Barriers' (modern road dividers) on the Airport Road, which were built at a heavy cost but were dismantled and rebuilt with 'unknown costing' to the coffers! I have not forgotten the fabrication and building of steel bridges in different places and also dismantling of them from some locations viz. near Malibagh Crossing, Navana Motors Crossing etc.

I want to ask who were behind the original planning and who are behind the dismantling? Are these people allowed to do something like this whimsically without thorough planning and thinking? The question arises, is the DCC run by 'good-for-nothing' bureaucrats /engineers or is it a den of only corrupt and avaricious people? I just fail to understand how such costly projects are undertaken only to be discarded later right under the nose of the high-ups and very much within the capital city of the country! Do we have anyone responsible enough to look after us and take care of our tax money? Now, I have a few points to make.



Taxing comfort

Let us have real expert opinions as well as opinions from the citizens who are the actual users of the roads and bridges and let us pin-point the proper locations for road crossing-- whether by overbridge or through underpass. Here I am of the opinion, considering the past experiences and our climatic conditions, that we should better opt in most cases for the underpasses and abandon the idea of controversial overbridges whether built of concrete or steel. Again we should consider the plight of the women, children, elderly and sick who have difficulties or are unable to ride the overbridges and generally speaking most of our people

are reluctant to climb the stairs (with blood pressure or no pressure) and remain vulnerable (risking lives) by crossing the roads overboard. As for the locations of underpass or over-bridge, it's very simple to decide by observing the flow of traffic and passers-by. And I want to leave the decision making to an expert committee composed of engineers and citizens but not only the officials.

A decision must be a concerted effort.

A F Rahman Dhaka

Zahir Hossain played in our liberation of freedom against Pakistan. They all had equal standings, friendly relations and mutual understanding amongst themselves despite attempts to create confusion by others at times after the liberation. Recently after reading an article on the three great souls written by another great journalist, late Syed Nazimuddin Hashem, I feel compelled to write this letter to humbly suggest naming an avenue of Dhaka city as Manik, Salam, Zahur Avenue like it was done to immortalise three free-

once again! Z Rahman Gulshan, Dhaka - 1212

Saarc, the ignominious fiasco

Saarc established with the goal of providing a congenial and peaceful coexistence of all the people of this region regardless of the creed, breed and ethnicity has turned out to be a sanctimonious epitome of a sheer fiasco. The underlying element impairing its smooth functioning attributes to

success worth mentioning till date.

The late president of Bangladesh, Ziaur Rahman with his solemn desire to share the feelings of the people of this region embarked upon the key role in founding this institution. An overwhelming enthusiasm and festivity was evident among the people at the time of its inception. Regrettably this enormous enthusiasm suffered a great setback at the very outset as two great nations India and Pakistan could not settle the dispute encircling the Kashmir issue, nor

in ensuring peace and harmony in this region.

A. Sakur Dhanmondi, Dhaka

AL's 15 point demand

Your editorial on Sheikh Hasina's 15-point demand has highlighted the concerns of the public. Let me add my own views to the points raised in the editorial.

The AL's 15-point demand is, in the first instance, an illegal demand. It cannot decide to bring the government down no

End to Indo-Pak tension in sight?

In response to Mr. Kazi Anwarul Masud's post editorial, I would like to thank The Daily Star and Mr. Masud for a valuable writing on the above issue. According to Indian wildlife officials, about 30,000 migratory birds have returned to a wetland on the frontier between India and Pakistan. Normally, the thunder of artillery and mortar fire between the Indian and Pakistani armies keep the birds away. But since a cease-fire commenced in November, they have been fluttering back.

A sign of the times! This is indeed a hopeful moment in the long and sorrowful history of the Indo-Pak conflict. Earlier in the month, President Parvez Musharraf of Pakistan and

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee of India reached a breakthrough agreement to resume talks on the issues that divide them. The talks will cover terrorism, illegal drugs, cross-border trade, boundary disputes and a number of other points, but the main one is the fate of the Himalayan territory of Kashmir. It has been the trigger for two of the three wars fought between the two countries since independence from Britain in 1947. In 2002, a fourth Indo-Pakistani war almost broke out there. Pakistan controls one-third of Kashmir, India the rest. Both say that they alone should have all of it. Those positions appear irreconcilable, and may well turn out to be. But a solution is

not beyond reach with good faith and practical action from each side.

To begin with, both countries have to acknowledge that they have failed to get what they want in Kashmir. Despite years of diplomacy, two costly wars and endless small-scale fighting, Pakistan has failed to budge India from the region and is unlikely to in the foreseeable future, given India's superior size and military might. Similarly, India has failed to bring Kashmir fully under its control. An anti-Indian insurgency has boiled there since 1989, leading India to occupy the mainly Muslim region and take repressive measures that have given it a black eye around the world.

proclamation of independence!

The real hero is Belal Mohammad (and his team), a leftist activist and an employee of Radio Pakistan, Chittagong, who had actually mastered the removal of a transmitter and installed it in a house at Kalurghat to start "Shadhin Bangla Betar". To give credibility to the freedom movement, he invited Abdul Hannan (an AL leader) to read out a declaration of independence on behalf of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman but the transmission being weak was not heard by many. The next day Belal Mohammad went to seek

the assistance of Bengali army officers who were on duty nearby, to give momentum to the freedom struggle. Major Zia was present at that time and was invited to visit Kalurghat Transmission Centre. Belal Mohammad explained about their mission regarding declaring independence, and the same declaration was read out by Major Zia..... the rest is history. The details have been narrated in Belal Mohammad's book 'Shadhin Bangla Betar' (a must read for everyone).

Coming back to the main point, had there been no Major

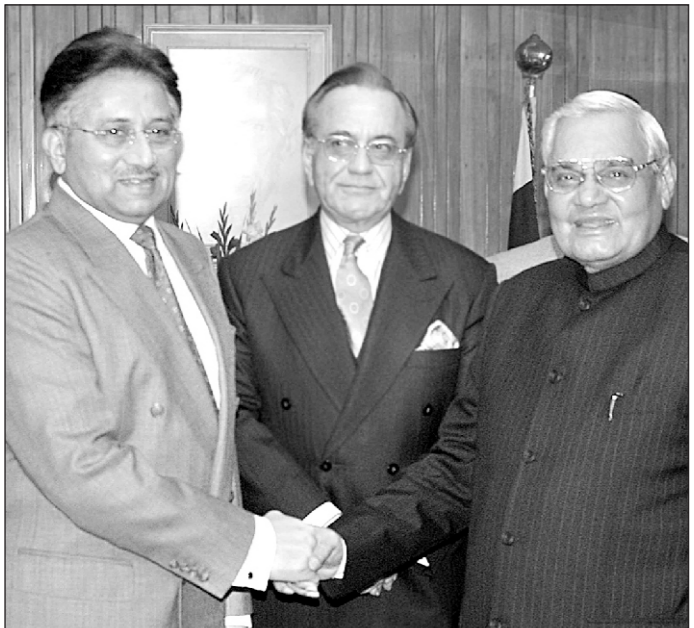
Zia, some other army officer would have been lucky to have read out the declaration.

Belal Mohammad is one such person who never bothered about his recognition or publicity but had fought the war with his team as patriots. It is my appeal to Daily Star readers to please seek out Belal Mohammad from wherever he may be and help in giving him the due state recognition, which he deserves, as a great freedom fighter.

Prisoner of Conscience Dhaka, on e-mail



Hostile gesture



Bliss for millions

of Kashmir would decide the issue for themselves. The prospects for holding a fair and peaceful vote in the near future, however, are remote. In the interim, the best thing would be to accept that the frontier between the two nations, known as the Line of Control, is the de facto international border. On its side of that border, Pakistan would ensure that the territory it controls would cease to be a launching pad for militant attacks on targets in Indian-controlled Kashmir. On its side, India would ease its repression, withdrawing as many troops as possible, muzzling those who remain and giving the population broad control over its own affairs.

General Musharraf and Mr. Vajpayee have already made a good start. The Pakistani leader made a categorical pledge not to allow anti-Indian terrorists to operate from Pakistan's side of the frontier, as they have for many years, often with Pakistani help. The Indian leader said his government was committed to a "peaceful settlement" of the Kashmir question "to the satisfaction of both sides."

But what kind of settlement will be that? Ideally, the people

At the very least, General Musharraf and Mr. Vajpayee need to bring a permanent end to the dangerous skirmishing along the frontier between these nuclear-armed rivals. Let the talks begin, and the birds stay. Gopal Sengupta/Shyamali Sengupta Montreal, Quebec