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Shrine tragedy



To our utter surprise, a powerful bomb blast took place at saint and preacher Shahjalal's (RA) shrine. It was a horrible crime, the motive behind which is not known.

However, there is no doubt that during the *urs* some anti-social activities take place at the shrine which offend the real devotees. There are divisions among the men who work as caretakers at the shrine.

The whole matter can be attributed to the failure of the government to maintain law and order. Every mass congregation is at risk now. The administration should have taken proper precautions before the *urs* began. We urge the government to bring the

culprits to book as early as possible and take proper action to save the shrine from all evil activities, as the shrine has a historic and religious value and it attracts people from many places.

Md. Yusuf Raihan
Londoni Road, Sylhet

The recent bomb blast in Sylhet reminds us of a host of previous grisly bombing incidents. The abominable elements started this since the AL's coming to power. *Uddichi* was the first target in this case.

Hardly had the news of the *Uddichi* bombing reached the then prime minister Sheikh Hasina, when she blamed the opposition BNP for the crime. After a few days, the latter responded in the same manner. This mud-slinging has been continuing ceaselessly. This weakness of our politicians has emboldened the culprits to commit the same crime again and again with impunity and the Sylhet bombing is just one of them. Presumably, these activities of the anti-social elements will go on unless and until an in-depth and impartial investigation is carried out.

A few months back, the ammunition haul in Bogra and even in Dhaka had an unsettling effect on citizens. Terrorists are pursuing an evil design in this country.

Since the killers go punished, they might have even more horrific things up their sleeves. Since the investigation wherewithal is at government's disposal, it can seek help from the opposition and initiate a thorough investigation to all such incidents. It might also seek help from international investigation agencies.

Aminul Islam
4th year Economics, DU

That was the lead story on the first page of The Daily Star, 13 January, 2004. I have a feeling that it could be the result of rivalry between the two or more parties who control the *urs* at the shrine.

I must admit I have no first hand information of what goes on there because I am a woman and I have never been there myself. I was born in the vicinity and from a very tender age I have been taught to respect the wishes of the great saint and as such I have never set foot on the *Darga Sharif* itself even as a child. While my brothers went up the stairs, I always patiently waited for them down below.

When I first heard about the drugs and chanting that have become the norm during the *urs*, I felt very disturbed and would, if I could, do anything to put an end to this. The sanctity of Hazrat Shahjalal's (RA) *mazar sharif* should be ensured and maintained.

As a little girl growing up - I have never heard of drugs and *halla gulla* in the name of religion around the *darga sharif* during the *urs*. Let it remain that way - sans drugs sans anti-social activities, with the sanctity and solemnity that the occasion demands.

Zeba Rasheed Chowdhury
Baridhara, Dhaka.

Hartal culture

It is possible in Bangladesh for any political party to call and make a *hartal* successful even if that party does not have a single seat in parliament. The *hartal* culture has assumed such proportions that the general public does not even bother to know as to which party has called it and why. They hear of a *hartal*, sometimes by word of mouth, and observe the *hartal* religiously.

During a *hartal*, shops and road transportation remain most vulnerable. According to some knowledgeable people, if some how the shops and road transportation could be kept safe and open during a *hartal*, it would not be as damaging to the economy as it is now. But that is not to be because it is very easy to throw a stone/cocktail towards a shop window or a car/bus from a picketing procession without being identified.

Our constitution (Article 37) guarantees that, "Every citizen shall have the right to assemble and to participate in public meetings and processions peacefully and without arms, subject to any reasonable restriction imposed by law in the interest of public order or public health". The spirit of this article is that there is no restriction on peaceful procession during a *hartal*, but a picketing procession does not have any right to cause inconvenience to public life e.g. by obstructing traffic or by breaking shop windows and breaking/burning cars and buses. The article is also open to enactment of new laws in the interest of public order or public health if the existing laws on the subject are considered inadequate.

In the light of the above, the authorities concerned may seriously think of enacting and implementing such laws which, during a *hartal*, would allow peaceful processions but at the same time would not allow public life to be disrupted.

Syed Farhat Ahmad Roomy
Dhaka-1206

War criminal- Saddam or Bush?

The US-UK-Australia alliance unilaterally attacked Iraq in March 2003 without any threat from the Iraqis. The allied force killed many civilians and destroyed many natural resources and social organisations of Iraq including some invaluable relics of the Persian Civilisation. Thus, the US led war was against humanity, not only against Iraq or Saddam Hussein.

The war on Iraq did not have UN approval, nor did the world organisation support this attack. So the attack was both illegal and immoral.

The US soldiers arrested Iraqi President Mr. Saddam Hussein on December 14, 2003. The US says that Saddam is a war criminal and he will be tried. Yes, Saddam is a

criminal just because he was defeated in the war and could be caught! This is a usual norm in war that the defeated party can be tried for criminality!

But all other norms and logic say that the US is the culprit. It has killed not only civilians but also military personnel (because they did not attack first, rather they defended only!), and destroyed some relics of an ancient civilisation.

However, the world community other than the US and its allies are weaker and do not have the power to try the US administration and forces.

Therefore, it is hoped that Saddam would be treated according to the Geneva Convention and the trial (if any) should take place in the International Court of Justice. This cannot be done in Iraq or the US. Why not in Iraq even? Because Iraq does not have a valid govern-

ment--the present one is just a US lackey.

A better option is to arrange for a 'yes' or 'no' vote on Saddam as the President of Iraq. The majority of Iraqis are the ultimate authority of Iraq. They must decide on the matter whether Saddam will be tried or given a chance to govern the country again.

MAS Molla
BAAS, Dhaka.

A different sunset

Finally I got sometime to reflect back on 2003. Oh, it seems like 2003 was the most dismal year of the millennium. Yet the 31st drew its grand finale. But it was covered with the cloud of great remorse as the martyrs of Benin air crash landed at Zia International Airport.

Speaking as one of the many who saw the live telecast of the entire evening, it was heart

wrenching! Initially, when I read about the plane crash, I only sighed as most would have done when they read about mishaps. Then I was back to business as if nothing had happened. An inexplicable excitement was working within me keeping the 31st in focus.

We planned dining out, being the rather subtle celebrators of 31st! As the evening of 31st commenced my mother kept pasturing us to see BTW as it would telecast the arrival of the dead bodies live. BTW was the last thing we wanted to see on 31st when other satellite channels had flamboyant programmes lined up to celebrate the evening. But mom is the boss, so follow her rules! As the programme began my disinterested siblings found a way to leave the TV room. I sat with her in front of the TV thinking anything would be better than studying for MCAT (medical college admission test) on 31st!

Strangely enough, as the programme progressed, I found myself getting interested in what was being said and showed. The martyrs' families, waiting in that bitter cold for the dead bodies of their loved ones to arrive, was a sight that overwhelmed my conscience. I started to think about the people who gave up their lives serving a country that's not even theirs! No matter what great honour the country show to the departed souls, it can never make amends for the losses their families suffered. A child who has lost her father will always be known as an orphan or the wife who lost her husband will always be known as the widow of a martyr. Thinking how they would ever conjure the courage to move on with their lives without the member who matters most in life, the Man of the family, I began to shed tears.

For the first time in my entire life, I realised that people who die mean a lot to others even if they are a complete stranger to us. I earnestly wished people in this civilised world would find a way to settle disagreement with words rather than weapons. May be physical force work faster than peace talks but in the long run so much is lost that the eventual success leaves behind only nightmares for the victims.

I began my new year not being angry at my father who couldn't keep the promise for the perfect new year's eve party but rather happy that he devoted his time in paying tribute to these exceptional Bangladeshis, who have put Bangladesh on the world map with an entire new image at the cost of their noble lives.

I know I can't do anything for their families like most, due to our limitations as teenagers. But on behalf of all those I would like to tell them, "You are not the only ones mourning for your loved ones, we share your grief and hope and pray that the Almighty gives you enough strength to endure this great tragedy...we are really proud of you."

Nusrat Nazneen Nasir
Dhaka, on-mail

Ahmadiyya issue

So it begins by banning books and ends with murder and mayhem in the name of hurting the feelings of a few? I was under the impression that Bangladesh was a People's Republic. I thought there was a democracy. It shames me to think that my own kinsmen can be so blind and so ignorant as to treat the citizens of their own country differently and with such prejudice.

Also, books are supposed to expand a person's horizon.

Islam attaches great importance to knowledge. How can anyone do something so atrocious as to ban books in the name of Islam? It's unthinkable! How are we different from the so-called Communists who burned books to oppress their people? By banning these Ahmadiyya books you are not only alienating them as minorities in their own country, but you are also oppressing the rest of the population by not allowing them to read.

So what if a collective few are close-minded. The government has every right to uphold people's basic rights. Emotions play no part in politics. But then again, our government has failed us over and over again.

Zeenat Syed
Atlanta, GA

What is Third Force?

For quite some time, the political arena is turbulent. All are very agog about the so-called Third Force. Actually, in our society most people are fed up with political polarisation. So the Third Force, an innovative jargon in the political domain, sounds palliative. But who are behind this blueprint? Mr. Badruddoza Chowdhury and Dr. Kamal Hossain, two luminaries of Bangladesh, are well known to all. The Dr duo are versatile genius of our soil. They both contributed in building the nation. But it is true that they are not messiahs to salvage our festering society. They are not better than Awami League or BNP leaders, as both of them are divorced from these two mainstream political parties. Their

Manik Saha

It was a horrible shock to pick up the morning paper here in Sri Lanka and read of Manik Saha's death. I knew him well while based in Dhaka (1996-8) and he was a sweet man -- professional, quietly efficient, honest, charming and also extremely brave. For us, he was an important part of the extended BBC family and the brutal way in which he was killed is an insult and shock to all of us.

I have been away from Bangladesh too long to venture a guess as to who is responsible for Manik's death. But I do know that it is rapidly becoming known as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists to do their job. Perhaps because so many Bangladeshi journalists continue to seek the truth despite the increasing risks. It may be a tribute to Bangladeshi journalism but certainly not to those in authority.

As an outsider I was privileged to see for myself the warmth of people in Bangladesh, their innate good sense

and desire for truly democratic rule, not to mention the extraordinary beauty of the country. Indeed, I don't think I have ever been somewhere where people have such a deep sense of hospitality and are so welcoming. That's why I sincerely hope I will not pick up the paper abroad and read of yet another Bangladeshi colleague being killed or tortured.

For Manik's family my deepest condolences and I am sure there are many inside and outside Bangladesh who will strive



and the government seem to bother the least for these people!

I was appalled to read in a national daily recently that, Bangladesh Bank/Finance Ministry was tagging yet another tangle for the Savings Certificate buyers/bank depositors. In future, they might even require producing Tax Identification Number and proving their 'source of funds' while buying these, for what they call 'curb money laundering'!

Please be mindful, the so-called policy makers, that these Savings Certificate holders are mostly innocent retired persons or migrant workers trying their best to save something for an uncertain future in this current volatile world or trying to eke out a living from these accrued interests. You have already slashed interest rates from these savings instruments and

so in view of objectionable materials in Ahmadiyya publications which hurt or might hurt the sentiments of the majority Muslim population of Bangladesh. However, the argument is in no way convincing, neither to the 'majority Muslims' nor to the civil society. In taking such an imprudent and hasty decision, the government has exposed its weakness. It obviously goes against the constitution of our country, which is supposed to provide equal rights to all the people, irrespective of religion, caste or class. By clamping a prohibition on the publications of a particular sect, the government has not only curbed the rights of that sect but has also given a heavy jolt to the right to free expression. The constitution of our country does not allow anybody to propitiate the 'majority' hurting the minority.

Frances Harrison
BBC Colombo Correspondent
Sri Lanka

Take action or stop talking

Everyday I read about grievances against Guantanamo Bay or digital finger-printing or "danger lists." Because we've all been detained in Guantanamo, and suffered personally at the hands of the American President and been victim to American violence in the past few years, right? We've all joined the ranks standing in vocal and constructive defiance of American injustice, organised rallies to help the oppressed, and written to "henchman" Tony Blair begging him to listen to his people, right?

What a city of talkers. People in this city have time to talk so much because they do so little. America-bashing lets people pretend they are versed in international affairs and keeps them safe from any need to act simply because America is so far away, "too powerful." If we complained to the slightest comparable degree about incredible human rights violations within the radius of our city or about our inhumane ignorance of the homeless or about the treatment of pris-

oners by our police, then some attentive listener might actually tell us to put our money where our mouth is. America-bashing needs minimal effort.

So let us keep talking. Let us implore our leaders to continue using the word "terrorist" to describe imbecile teenagers brandishing pieces of wood; let's keep writing to our newspapers merely to state that we hate America; let's ignore our country's injustices and point fingers at America; let's continue to sit down and do nothing about anything in any country. That way, if America ever uses our unchecked social injustices and oppression of females and internal "terrorist" problem and corrupted political system and anti-American sentiments as excuses to waltz over unhindered and point their M-16s at our city of rhetoricians, we would say it's because we spoke so well and sat down even better. Do something or shut up.

Sajid Chowdhury
Gulshan, Dhaka

Third Force cannot be a panacea for our country. If we want to frustrate political hulla-balloo, we need to be conscious. At first, a political decorum should be framed in our society. The Third Force cannot change our destiny but we can.

Molla Mohammad Shaheen
Dept of English
Dhaka University

Fanatics gaining ground?

The last thing Bangladesh needs now is further provocation to the negative campaign that is being launched against it in the international media.

Some of the recent incidents in the country have undermined the efforts to portray the image of Bangladesh as a moderate Muslim democracy in the international arena.

The recent banning of all kinds of publications by the Ahmadiyya community is just a glaring example of how the government is playing in the hands of a few religious bigots. It is not clear as to what prompted the decision to ban such publications. The small Ahmadiyya community has been here for long and they were not

ingly becoming a third force in our political power game. The reason for Jamaat's increasing influence is not that people believe in its fundamentalism, but that people are left with no other alternatives as they have lost confidence in the leadership of the two major political parties.

We cannot allow the fundamentalists to take control of our destiny as a nation and destroy the very essence of our national identity.

KM Zubair Sadeque
Duquesne University
Pittsburgh, USA

Why the middle class?

It seems to have turned into a compulsive practice of the government to ring the hapless middle class by any means until they groan under the impact of all kinds of newly imposed levies and other related strains! It's an irony to watch that, the money thus accumulated mostly from the people of middle stratum is burnt mindlessly in the name of so-called development or usurped shamelessly by politicians and bureaucrats for their amazing luxury in a poor country like ours! Today, by all counts, this despised middle class are the hardest hit in every respect



from time to time slapped levies under a host of pretexts. Talking about money laundering, you know all too well, how these take place and who are doing this business. They are all big fish and often work with your blessings in connivance with the law enforcers. They get away by looting banks in broad daylight, while we the hapless ones only gaze and gawk.

Let's not trouble us any further with this and make us pay for your inefficiency and senseless luxury. Taxing us any further under such silly pretext shall only widen scope of further corruption in the system and heighten our sufferings and distress. Hope you use a bit of your wisdom and save us from any further humiliation as small savers, who are by no means party to any financial rackets.

Shah Mushtaq Ahmed
Lalmatia

Ban on Ahmadiyya books

It is regrettable that the government has imposed a ban on all publications of the Ahmadiyya sect. Sadly, once again the government has capitulated to religious bigotry. According to the press release, the government has done

How does the government have come to know that the Ahmadiyya publications hurt or would hurt the sentiments of the 'majority Muslims'. We never heard the 'majority Muslims' voicing such a feeling. If any opposition has ever been expressed to Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat, it has been done either by those political bigots or a religiously fanatic segment of our society who are obviously not the representatives of the 'majority' Muslims. On the other hand, if the government is responsible for protecting the interests of the 'majority', it must also be responsible for protecting that of other minority groups, if it is not autocratic.

There are at least one lakh Ahmadiyya Muslims in our country. The government has already taken a move believed to be the first step towards declaring these people as non-Muslims. What absurdity! These people are Muslims not by any declaration and they cannot be made 'non-Muslim' by a decree. Religion is not a matter of 'declaration' but a matter of belief.

Ranjit Mallick (Ranjit)
Farmgate, Dhaka-1215

Judicial reform

The government is made of three organs: Legislature, Executive and the Judiciary. These are inter-related as the legislature enacts laws, the executive branch implements them and the judiciary interprets. As law and order is deteriorating, some reforms are needed to establish good governance.

To restore the rule of law, separation of the judiciary from executive is a must. Article 22 of the constitution says, "The state shall ensure the separation of the judiciary from the executive organs of the state". The judiciary acts as a custodian of fundamental rights and guardian of the constitution. Nothing but an independent judiciary confirms the institutional features of democracy.

Bangladesh has become champion in corruption which spreads its grip down to the lowest level. An independent anti-corruption commission could resolve the problem to great extent. Appointment of an ombudsman will ensure check and balance in the administration. According to article 77 (2) of the constitution, "Our ombudsman shall exercise such power and perform such functions as parliament may, by law, determine, including the power to investigate any action taken by a ministry, a public officer or a statutory public authority."

One may ask why such reforms remain pending. The answer is that lack of political commitment of the government and the negative attitude of bureaucrats stand in the way of fulfilling the goals.

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