

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Rickshaws and the middle class

Rickshaw is one of the most common and cheapest means of transportations in Dhaka and all over Bangladesh. The Rickshaws are providing the middle class with almost trouble free short distance travelling. As you step outside your home, you see a rickshaw ready and waiting for you! This is almost like a blessing and a luxury.

Yet, who is there to think of the people who are making it possible

Two years back, this amount was taka 40 and 50 respectively and the number of rickshaws was not so high. So they could earn more and since they had to pay less they could save more money each day. More rickshaws mean more competition, less number of passengers, and lesser amounts to earn. It has been reported so many times that most of the rickshaws running on Dhaka's streets are without any license or are holding fake licenses. The government should restrict the number of rickshaws running on the

ours and Masters syllabus. Would the professor say that it was anyway appreciable?

She has mentioned that in her department there are researches going on which is very good news. I understand the severe shortage of funds to do research works. But this is in no way the answer to our teachers' lack of accountability. I think most of the teachers are learned, but sincerity is something else. Let the students say that there is good research going on and/or teachers are dedicated. That's why I men-

ache about them. Most of the work-shops have no license but are still doing business without any problem, thanks to the indifference of the authorities concerned.

As most of them have set up their shops beside the main streets, they occupy parts of the streets and thus cause untold suffering to the pedestrians. They work till midnight, and people are disturbed when they are supposed to take rest. Furthermore, ultraviolet rays that are emitted by these shops are very much harmful to the eye.

Children are the main victims of the proliferation of welding shops. As they are unaware of the risk, they watch it with great interest. So parents should be extra careful about the hazard.

I would request the law enforcers to bring the offenders to book.

Eahtashamul Karim Anu  
West Shubidbazar, Sylhet

"Maglev Melodrama: Act II"

I would like to take the opportunity to respond to the letter of Mr SA Mansoor, Gulshan, Dhaka, "Maglev Melodrama: Act I".

In fact, the communications minister by supporting the Maglev system is also at the same time ensuring that many jobs will be created in Bangladesh for the manufacture of the components required for the project, and hundreds of workers would be required to carry out the civil works. The company that is supposed to assist the project is also very hopeful about its future in Bangladesh.

So I believe that the minister is right in this instance.

Zabidur Rahman  
Amsterdam, Netherlands

Our expatriate columnists

I read with keen interest and attention the writings of a number of columnists writing from abroad in The Daily Star. Their subject matter is mostly international affairs. Their focus is mainly on the biased and unjust policies, including military interventions of the powerful Western countries -- most notably of the USA in recent times -- against the third world countries. The critique of those policies by the columnists is most often well grounded in facts and historical antecedents. But I keep wondering who their readers and audiences are. As I see it, they are a microscopic few located in the Dhaka city, who are already convinced about the justness of the cause they espouse and the facts and analyses that they present.

This is not to say that readers like me have nothing to learn from them.

My question is: have our columnists at all tried to address their facts, analyses and points of view to the readers and audiences of those countries which are the perpetrators of the wrongs? All of our columnists live in one or the other of those countries. There is quite a sizeable audience for these stuffs in the countries concerned, I am sure. There may be people who have little access to alternative points of view, especially of the third world people, and even they may be ignorant of facts. I am aware that it is not easy for a third worlder to have access to the media in those places. That's why I keep wondering whether anyone has ever made any effort to have such access and with what results.

We frequently complain that the media in those places would print or

publicise only those facts and reports which they themselves like or the majority of their readers/audiences would like to hear or see. But that is not necessarily always true about all of them. The celebrated Indian author/ human rights activist Arundhati Roy has a reasonable foothold in the West. I have seen several of her publications recently in bookshops in Boston-New York. In her speech in Mumbai, she advocated 'resistance' against injustice. To my mind, the way to resist, and perhaps the only way we can offer resistance, is to make our voices heard in those places to create public support for our cause, as opposed to the rulers who are often impervious to our pleas.

The other day a friend was complaining that our own media reports are often biased against us. I told him to look carefully at the source of their reports on world affairs and pointed out that they simply carry the reports from western wire services, and these days sometimes from the Internet. They cannot afford to keep their own correspondents posted abroad to write independently.

The whole things deserves a close scrutiny.

Dr. Abul Hashem  
Uttara

Ready to miss yet another boat?

I was surprised to read in the online version of ChannelNewsAsia.com ([http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp\\_asiapacific\\_business/view/70006/1/](http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp_asiapacific_business/view/70006/1/)) that Bangladesh has opted to pull out of the free trade deal for Southeast Asian nations under the BIMSTEC talks held in the Thai resort of Phuket on February 7, 2004. Apparently, the talks were on the brink of falling apart when the Bangladesh delegation confused the rest of the delegates by asking to be compensated for any losses incurred by signing this deal. However, the Bangladesh side failed to make any proposal as to how it expected those compensations to be made.

Personally, I am a big proponent of any regional trade blocs especially when it includes two of our most successful neighbours, namely Thailand and India. Thailand has magically transformed itself in the last 20 years by a mixture of tax liberalisation and cutting bureaucratic red tape to encourage private industry and entrepreneurship. As I recall, the government of Khaleda Zia has quite rightly pushed its "Look East" policy forward since coming to power. As a South Asian, I have to agree with the Thai minister's comments about our so-called western "partners" in development, when he said, "While they promoted free trade, they raised protectionist tariffs ... Asian nations should not follow their example."

If Bangladesh had arrived at the talks with the intention of seeking compensation, why didn't anyone at least propose the framework of its terms? This lack of preparedness has not only embarrassed the entire region but has put the credentials of Bangladesh as a mature and constructive trading partner in question. By opting out, are we ready to miss yet another boat to progress as was the case when Bangladesh missed a golden opportunity to technology development by opting out of the International Telecommunication Optical Fibre Consortium in the early nineties?

Say 'no' to hartal

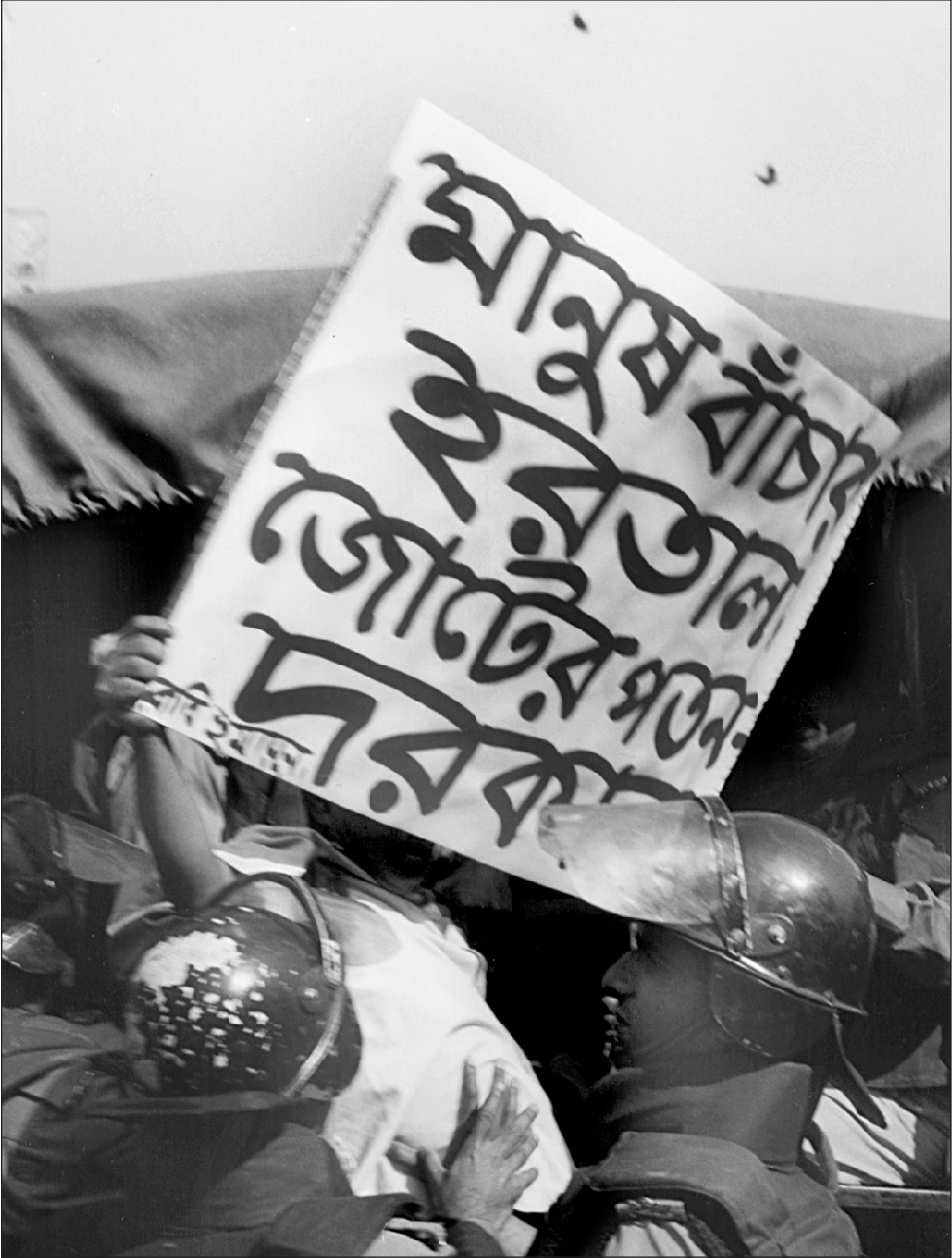
Yesterday we witnessed another hartal. The school-going children missed their schools and many people got an extra day off, all in the name of bringing an end to the deteriorating law and order situation. Since many of the leaders, who call hartal, sent their wards to schools abroad, they don't notice the difference. The opposition congratulates the people for observing the hartal. We're

tired of this game.

We have seen the performance of the main opposition, and now we are witnessing the performance of the ruling party. The opposition did no better when it was in power.

Give us respite! Let's say an emphatic 'no' to hartal.

A citizen, Dhaka



Hartal: Never the right way.

Shabbir A Bashar  
Stanford University,  
California, USA

An appeal to the PM

I am writing this letter to request the prime minister of Bangladesh not to allow construction of a natural gas-pipeline through the country from Arakan to India. I am a citizen of Myanmar now staying in Bangladesh.

We, Arakanese, are against natural gas export to India through Bangladesh. The residents of Arakan province in Myanmar are agitating against export of gas to India through Bangladesh. The International Oil Companies (IOC) will begin producing natural gas from Block (A-1) of the Arakan coast of the Bay of Bengal and the public have no idea as to what to expect from the major oil exploration. Similarly, the people of Arakan do not know that the project has

already been sold to India..

We oppose any sale of natural gas from Arakan gas fields to foreign countries. The gas sale will not benefit the people of Arakan, or the people of the country.

Mohammad Zahir Gaffari

MA Rahim  
President of Arakan Muslim  
Community Development  
Foundation  
Savar, Dhaka

Crime wave

Crime has become a common phenomenon in our society nowadays. The rate of criminality is increasing drastically and in an alarming way. Each day we see various kinds of reports of crimes in the newspapers. But not all the crimes are reported. Only reports on smuggling, killing, rape and some unusual crimes are covered by the newspapers. These are done by a cluster of derailed youngsters.

Political godfathers patronise them. A large number of educated youngsters are so much frustrated due to unemployment, that they have no other choice but to get involved in such heinous deeds. They do not get the proper opportunity to do something worthwhile for society. On the other hand, our society is steeped in widespread corruption. The government should think seriously how it can combat crime and save the future generation from total ruin. Law and order must improve if you want to develop the country. Punishment for crimes must be exemplary.

However, crime cannot be rooted out without first awakening the people's sense of morality.

Zahid  
Karatia, Tangail

Seats in JS

The four-party alliance has come to the consensus to increase the number of parliamentary seats from 300 to 450. We need to scrutinise the pros and cons of this decision. There was a pledge of 500 seats in parliament in the BNP election manifesto. We are sure that the ruling party will have no problem passing any bill in parliament, as necessary conditions are in favour of it.

I was very surprised at the feedback of Mr. Mannan Bhuiyan, Secretary General of the BNP, aired by BBC on Jan 14. He reasoned that they had no plan to increase the number from 300 to 500 due to space scarcity in our Sangsad building. It sounded rather strange indeed. Enhancement of parliamentary seats will depend on state infrastructure, not on rooms in the parliament building. Our population and assets do not support such steps. It will be a further drain on the state coffer.

The government has not yet crossed the Rubicon and so the scheme should be undone for the welfare of the nation as a whole.

Molla Mohammad Shaheen  
Dept. of English, Dhaka University

More MPs for better governance?

Recently, the ruling coalition in Bangladesh has raised the issue of a larger parliament to deal with better



representation for a burgeoning population. But the rationale that larger population equates to a greater need for a larger parliament is not clear, to say the least.

Today the US population stands at about 300 million, compared to the 140 million in Bangladesh. In the US, there are only 435 members in the Lower House, the House of Representatives. If Bangladesh wants to have a larger parliament, then instead of creating a larger general chamber, it should consider creating an upper house, the terms for whose members should not run parallel to the lower house and their constituencies should be different from those of MPs ( Britain

also follows a similar model). Maybe, the solution lies in creating a hundred-member upper house, each of whom would be elected from three parliamentary seats. This would strike a balance and create an environment of compromise in parliament, as it would have the opposition parties serving a greater role in governance. It would force bickering politicians into Handshakes. (Please ask them to read the "Federalist Papers" of the writings of Thomas Jefferson)

If their motives are to satisfy all of their leaders and pseudo-leaders by giving them a taste of power, then they should consider federalising the government and creating states and state

governments. This way more and more conflicting interests will bring about more transparency. It might even ensure more co-operation from opposition parties as even if they do not hold federal power they might end up running a few state governments and by forcing them to have a stake in the government, it might be possible to banish the hartal-culture. Moreover, it would bring the government closer to people, and that is always welcome.

In the current political landscape, it is easily conceivable that the BNP is holding federal power and the Awami League running the state governments in Sylhet, Khulna, and Mymensingh.

This possible scenario would lessen the frictions among the politicians or at the least create the mechanisms to grease the wheels to lessen the frictions. Another question that has been considered is the reserved seats for women. How it is possible that this has not been challenged in court as a violation of the constitution of Bangladesh as it discriminates against men on the basis of gender. Instead of holding reserved seats for women, the political parties should try to groom more female leaders and field them as regular candidates for parliamentary seats.

I hope someone is going to read all of this and try to take the pulse of the nation before burdening the poor country with an annual expenditure of another one to two hundred crore taka.

Mahmud I Hasan  
New York, USA



Mobile business

No doubt Bangladesh is a new and emerging region for mobile business. Many people are still quite fascinated with the idea of being an owner of a mobile phone, without considering the quality of service. And mobile phone companies are taking this chance. They are attracting people with colourful advertisements. And general people are convinced. For example: three taka per min from 12:00 at night to 8:00am. Now the question is, who is going to call after midnight?

It has become virtually impossible to reach numbers that are not under the same pro-

vider, the same company I mean. Sometimes it has been experienced that even when no call is made, money is being deducted from the account and you cannot have a satisfactory answer by calling the help line.

I have hardly met anybody who has a mobile and is satisfied with the service of his company.

I hope the authorities concerned will pay attention to this matter.

AHM Rezaul Karim  
Lecturer, Dept. of CSE, Asian University  
of Bangladesh