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Hartal, yet again!

The opposition parties led by the Awami League called marathon hartals in response to the killing of the former finance minister SAMS Kibria. This once again demonstrates the profound truth in the "legendary antipathy" between Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia and the agonising political instability that prevails in the country as a result.

The unabated grenade attack



PHOTO: AFP

on Mr. Kibria demonstrates the crumbling law and order situation, which it must be stressed is not the sole making of either the BNP or the Awami League, but their rather combined failures to see what's at stake. However, questions have been raised as to why Mr. Kibria was left to bleed to death while an air ambulance/helicopter could have been easily dispatched. It has

been reported that formal requests had been turned down in case of Mr. Kibria because of his insufficient "rank" while this emergency service was extended to a leader of BNP's student wing [1]. What if the situation had been reversed and the AL had been in power and god forbid a former BNP minister was suffering from injuries sustained in a potentially fatal

attack? Would the state have made an attempt to save one of its most precious sons? I am truly ashamed to admit that I don't know the answer to that question.

I totally empathise with the anger of the late Mr. Kibria's family and their demand for a thorough investigation. In light of the grave nature of the harm caused, the stress they placed on having a "peaceful" protest is truly a lesson that the entire nation can learn from. It is also heartening to note that for their part the family has expressly kept their distance from the AL so as not to confuse justice with politics.

While the AL has every right to turn this killing into a political issue, it has no right to bring the country to a standstill for days upon end through hartals at the cost of hurting the livelihoods of millions of its citizens. No true statesman, let alone the late Mr. Kibria, would allow this. Recalling the deadline set by the AL in April 2004, no one has the right to topple an elected government - not then, not now, not ever. As the main opposition, the AL must put national interest over partisan ones. Unfortunately, it has (perhaps unwittingly) allowed itself to be used by India, which to the detriment and shock of the whole region,

has lamely cited AL's street agitations to balk out of the Saarc summit. While one understands India prime minister's unwillingness to be publicly hob-nobbing with the King of Nepal at this time, it is not only unfair but also unbecoming of a regional power to be snubbing Bangladesh so undeservedly when the entire world was watching. The AL could have easily put India on the spot by (a) withdrawing the hartals and (b) making their own objective statement about the Saarc conference preparations as the Jatiya Party's Ershad did [2]. A regional trade agreement signed sooner stands to help Bangladesh while hartals always set it back.

Hartals, by all accounts, are a very damaging and belligerent method of protest that has been rejected by the electorate, and will not bring Mr. Kibria back. If the true intention is to bring his killers to justice, the AL should focus on holding the BNP accountable on points of fact. If the government does not give it time and space in parliament, the opposition should launch a national media campaign through private TV channels (given BTV's continued failure to be objective and balanced) and newspapers; they should

refute every statement of the authorities with facts of their own and leave it for the viewing public to choose between the truth and the lie. While in the short term this pressure will add to the international heat already on the BNP in seeing justice to this gruesome killing, in the long run it will also set a precedent for creating an alternative yet healthier and more powerful political forum which has less potential to turn violent. I am happy to note that the security forces in Bangladesh have vowed to prosecute violent and destructive protestors by taking video footage.

Finally, I truly believe that if the opposition engages in newer non-destructive methods of holding the government accountable, it will not only clear confusion and show leadership but also earn the empathy of the voting public rather than its ire. As a result, it will create a "win-win" atmosphere with Bangladesh being viewed as a progressive country ready for global participation in trade and development.

Shabbir A Bashar
San Francisco Bay Area,
California, US

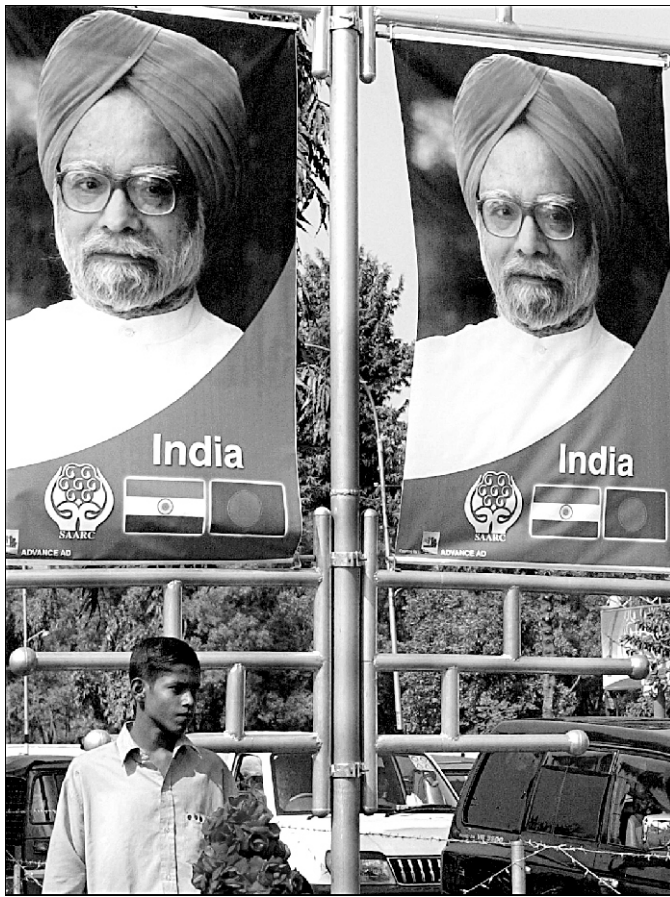


PHOTO: AFP

Postponed summit

For the second time in less than two months, the Saarc summit has been postponed. While the one scheduled for Jan 9-11 in Dhaka had to be put off because the region and the world had to cope with the Tsumani disaster, the second postponement has been caused by India's decision to stay away.

This is the fifth time that India has been the cause of a Saarc summit postponement. In 2003, too, the conference scheduled in Islamabad had to be called off because New Delhi refused to confirm its participation.

Wednesday's Indian decision came in the wake of political developments in Nepal, but the official reason given by New Delhi for its decision was the security situation in its "neighbourhood".

This was a setback to Bangladesh, which has spent millions of taka for the preparation of the summit. Press reports say that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh did not wish to sit at the same forum with King Gyanendra, who declared an emergency in his kingdom after dismissing the government. India also cited the security situation at Dhaka, only to reverse its saying by sugar coating it a little bit on Feb. 05.

But, it's too little and too late. India's argument does not hold much water, because in every Saarc summit Indian leaders had no qualms about sitting with the king of Bhutan, which is lagging behind Nepal in terms of political development.

Besides, in all international groupings of which India is a member- say, the non-aligned forum- New Delhi have had interactions with some of the world's autocrats. The decision, thus, to stay away from Dhaka lacks substance politically and morally.

Unfortunately, Indian media has often been critical of Bangladesh in the recent years and has campaigned in the past against Bangladesh on many issues including but not limited to border infiltration, border security, push-pull scenarios, religious fundamentalism etc. In comparison, Bangladeshi media, I would say is more positive about its neighbour.

Political parties in Bangladesh, regardless of their own differences, understand that India is a powerful and big neighbour and simply have no choice other than doing business with it. But that should not be taken as granted by the Indian authorities. Mutual respect should be there for neighbours, regardless of their size, religion and population mix.

After the last year's elections in India, the Bangladesh's foreign minister went to New Delhi for improving relations and to come to better terms with the new government there. This was a positive gesture from Bangladesh. But India has let Bangladesh down by withdrawing from the Saarc summit.

S Arif Jamil
California, US ***

The decision of the Indian government not to attend the 13th Saarc summit has disheartened people from all walks of life here in Bangladesh. When all the preparations were complete and Saarc delegates started

arriving in Dhaka, the Indian decision surprised not only Bangladesh but also all six other member countries that were looking forward to attending the summit.

"Deteriorating security in Dhaka" and "political developments in Nepal" are the reasons that made India to restrain itself from attending the summit. "Unacceptable" and "unwarranted" are probably the best words to describe such an irrational excuse. With Dhaka going in "yellow alert" days before the summit and with more than 2,000 Rab (Rapid Action Battalion) personnel along with detectives, dog squads and Armed Police Battalion guarding the city, it is hard to understand why India would be concerned about "security" when all other member nations were satisfied. And as far as Nepal's matter is concerned, it is totally that nation's internal affair and being concerned about such an issue also goes against the Saarc Charter that says, "Bilateral and contentious issues shall be excluded from deliberations". Hence the question comes what is the grudge of Indian government against Saarc? Is it security in Dhaka or development in Nepal? Or is it the SAFTA, that was to be signed in the summit, that requires India to lessen some of its dominance over Saarc nations?

In my short span of a life of 17 years, I do admit that I do not have much knowledge of international politics. But from what I have seen I can say that India has been uncooperative in widening regional cooperation amongst Saarc countries. The bitter rivalry between India and Pakistan has long overshadowed the summit, making it even ineffective to some extent.

Ashfaq Kabir
A-levels, Scholastica ***

I was very embarrassed to hear that the Saarc summit was postponed. The reasons which India gave were unusual. It was confirmed that the Nepalese King would attend this summit, and massive security measures were taken. The local political developments were not going to influence any international conference.

Tahsin Hyder
Maple Leaf International School, Dhanmondi, Dhaka ***

They have succeeded in their mission, no matter at what cost, to stop the Saarc summit from being held in our country and must be laughing gleefully. We have plunged into a dark abyss, all our hopes have been dashed to pieces. We were looking forward with so much expectation from the summit.

India's decision not to attend the summit is regrettable and the reason put forward is not convincing. All other countries were happy with the arrangements made by the Bangladesh government including the security measures, but India was not happy and gave lame excuses for not attending the summit.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Police brutality on poor people

Hartal was almost coming to its end on that day. It was 5:30pm by my watch as I was crossing the Mirpur Road in front of Rapa Plaza. Suddenly, something I saw which I guess is a very common sight in the city a furious traffic sergeant was beating mercilessly a young rickshaw-puller who is barely 16. Street vendors and fruit merchants nearby were helplessly watching the incident, some other policemen and sergeants were also amongst them. My hands were occupied with the stuff I bought to carry home and I couldn't run down to help the poor boy though it was both heart-wrenching and intolerable to see the unlucky, unarmed guy being beaten up by the angry sergeant. I checked with the vendors about his 'crime'-- it was only because he couldn't understand the sergeant's signal not to pull his rickshaw on the main road! And the tragedy remains there--the whole day he had been allowed to pull his three-wheeler on the main road in order to prove that there was no hartal happening, everything was normal. He gets such a reward at the end of the day! I shouted towards the sergeant from the other end of the road to stop his monstrous activity but vendors told me that he won't listen to me as this is a common thing and it happens almost everyday. Thank God, about 5 minutes later, he had to stop kicking and boxing him as he 'unfortunately' hurt himself during the process of performing this action.

I know most of the readers have similar experience of seeing this common but barbaric attacks on poor people by the members of law enforcing agencies. Besides this incident, one hot summer day I saw a sergeant kicking a rickshaw puller straight on his chest with his boot at Kalabagan area. Later on, I brought this matter to one of the high officials of traffic police and he gave his views to defend his officer which were quite unacceptable to me. He mainly talked about a traffic sergeant's poor salary, long duty hours, job full-of-tension, and that's why they always remain agitated etc., etc. I told him that they exactly knew what kind of job they would be doing

before they join here and many of them paid a huge amount to get this painful (?) job!

Mr. IGP, please do something about it. It is inhuman and barbaric. I also call all of you who see these things happen every day on streets, please come forward and demand

directly and let you know about this kind of heinous assault by public servants.

I also demand justice for that poor boy who couldn't even say sorry before that beast in the guise of a traffic sergeant jumped on him. Don't you think the beast deserves

Congratulations, cricketers

When the whole nation was waiting for victory, the cricketers lived up to our expectation. Today the nation is proud of them. So congratulations to all the cricketers. I also congratulate our national coach Mr. Whatmore and other concerned people who are playing a role in the development of the game in Bangladesh. I believe that without their contributions, the victory would not have been possible. I think victory depends on three things: commitment, competency and courage. Our players are slowing acquiring these qualities. And that day may not be far away when they will become a force to reckon with in world cricket.

Kamrul Hasan Chowdhury
Bogra, BRAC

Our cricketers don't need short time enthusiasm and overwhelming receptions. They don't need glass, plate, spoon, towels etc as gift. What they need is life long support and encouragement both from the government and from the people.

When the players win, we start calling them "Tigers" and when they lose we term them "Cats"! What a demotion! We should keep in mind that there is victory and at the same time defeat in games.

Cantara Wali Ruhi
Dhaka



PHOTO: AFP

explanation from the person whoever is doing it. Today it may be someone else, tomorrow it could be you! If someone has committed a crime or violated any rules or regulations, he or she should be handed over to police or fined, but not to be beaten in public mercilessly.

Mr. IGP, tell your staff not to misuse their power. Give us a telephone number where we can call

punishment?
A concerned citizen
Dhaka

Hartal

I strongly agree with your editorial (Why the continuing hartal? Feb 4) as I think it is ridiculous to have a 60 hour-non-stop hartal for a respected and reputable politician, instead of

to have a fuss about it than to actually take the initiative to do something right.

I, for one, never understood the importance of hartal, since it depreciates the value of our nation and creates crisis within our infrastructures. How does the Awami League think that hartal would solve this problem? I do not think that burning a few cars and wrecking private buildings are going to

is not the way to register protest against the tragic death of SAMS Kibria.

They should know that a large section of the citizens will keep this in mind during the next election.

Tariq M. Abd'alah
US

Hartals cause serious problems to the poor people. They cannot purchase the required medicines, cannot meet their relations at hospitals and provide them food and other medical supplies.

It is not even possible to get transports and go to the burial ground for burying the deceased.

For a number of lucky rich people hartal is a holiday. They cannot understand the difficulty of the poor.

Foreign investment in the country get affected by frequent hartals. I would request our opposition leaders to understand the difficulties faced by the majority of the people.

Concerned
One e-mail

The country is going through a rough phase at the moment. Bangladesh has a history of chaotic political unrest since independence or creation of Bangladesh. If political leaders truly care about their countrymen why cannot they act with patience and respect the elected government. It seems that all of us are in a hurry to share the booties and we do not have the time to be considerate and courteous to others. In many cases political leaders are found to be embroiled in a dogfight on petty matters. If political leaders were dedicated to the people's welfare and the country's development, they would not have called a marathon hartal. Sensible people are trying to instil sense in these leaders but, alas, they have

Funny, indeed



It's funny how the US didn't bother to ask for any "permission" to search for WMDs in Iraq but now, according to The Daily Star of Feb. 2, "The US is still awaiting a clear-cut decision from the government about whether the FBI would be allowed full access to evidence and witnesses of the Habiganj grenade attack."

It's amazing how little it takes to tear a country apart with nobody's permission and how long it takes to actually make the decision of helping a poor country like ours to investigate an unsolved crime.

Rohena Alam Khan
Winthrop University, SC, US

PHOTO: AFP