

## Mutually assured destruction

### Politics of confrontation must end

THE widespread violence that has accompanied the three hartals called in two weeks by the main opposition Awami League has made an already undesirable phenomenon much worse. We have long written that hartals have no place in a democratic polity. Hartals that erupt into violence are even less worthy of us.

In this matter, neither the opposition nor the government is guiltless. The opposition can and must be faulted, not only for the calling of the hartals, but for the violence and lawlessness that have accompanied them. There can be no excuse and no justification for vandalism and destruction of public and private property, and the assault of law enforcement personnel. To blame it out on smaller groups cannot absolve the leaders of their responsibility in the matter.

We express our deepest sympathy to the family of Police Constable Ashraf Siddiqui who was killed in the line of duty attempting to keep the peace during Sunday's hartal in Sherpur. Five other police officers were wounded in the Sherpur fracas, one critically, and among other atrocities, a businessman was also set on fire by pickets in Old Dhaka. Our heart-felt sympathy goes out to all those who have been victims of the recent violence which we condemn unreservedly.

For their part, the administration is also culpable for much of the violence by, in the first place, denying the opposition any democratic space in which to operate and routinely denying them permission to gather or breaking up their processions and rallies; and in the second place, by authorising the police to use excessive and brutal means with which to suppress such demonstrations. The shocking violence meted out during the course of the hartals to the protesters, many of whom were demonstrating peacefully and lawfully, is unacceptable, and that the police excesses have contributed to the overall climate of fear and violence is undeniable.

Both sides need to retreat from their posture of mutually assured destruction. No one is served by the country's streets turning into a war-zone between police and protesters. The opposition should eschew hartals, and at the very least, make it their responsibility to ensure that no one is hurt and no damage is done during them. The administration, for its part, must take the responsibility to ensure that the police do not themselves run riot and brutalise the protesters. To continue along this dangerous path risks the total destruction of the possibility of constructive democratic politics which is something that no one who cares for the future of Bangladesh can want.

## 'No' to hartal

### People of Hili have shown us the way

THE political leaders and businessmen at the small border land port named *Hili* have reached an understanding on keeping their place hartal-free for the next five years. The moratorium on hartal which aims to prevent any obstruction of the activities related to export and import is perhaps the first of its kind in the country's history.

The goodwill, *bonhomie* and, above all, pragmatism that went into the agreement between the supporters and leaders of rival political parties deserve great appreciation. The local BNP and Awami League leaders have also agreed to withdraw the political cases against each other that were filed in the past. They have done so for defusing tension which leads to violence. So there will be no more witch-hunting which is expected to have a salubrious effect on the longer-term relations between the local units of the major political parties.

The Hili episode is a truly significant development when judged in the light of our national politics which is passing through a grave crisis. The parties are locked in confrontational politics of the most damaging kind and the tendency frightfully is towards having a showdown.

The people of small town Hili have made their disapproval of hartal public in a robust fashion. If the parties concerned are prepared to put economic interest or larger good of the nation above individual or party expediencies nothing is beyond bilateral consensus. Hili has shown the power and magic of positive collective will. It might just have been a modest beginning, but it can change the whole political culture. From Hili the idea can be replicated across the districts, divisions and finally in the capital city, where hartal is threatening to cripple everything.

The Hili truce, as it might be called, should be an eye-opener to the national political parties and their leaders.

# Bush's state of the union message

## A mixture of hope and challenge



M. M. REZAUL KARIM

PRESIDENT George W Bush Jr delivered in the Congress his first State of the Union Message in his second term on 2 February. The message delivered at the joint session of the House and the Senate traditionally sets out the Administration's policy and programmes for the coming year in the same way it is done by the Queen's address to the Parliament in Britain and Heads of State's addresses to Parliaments in other democratic countries.

While reiterating support for lofty ideals of freedom and democracy at home and commitment to measures for social justice and employment at home, the Presidential message, as expected, generated a mixed reaction. Elections in Afghanistan, Ukraine, Palestine and finally Iraq were highlighted as success stories of his crusade for freedom and liberty. The support reiterated by him for the ongoing moves in search of an understanding between Palestine and Israel has brightened the prospect of success of his road map for peace in the Middle East.

The election of Mahmoud Abbas as President of the State of Palestine, yet to be recognised as such by Israel and the West, the current unsigned truce between the two warring sides, Israel's latest decision to withdraw from some of the cities in the West Bank and the hopes generated by the forthcoming meeting between Sharon and Mahmoud, indeed, represent positive moves in right direction.

The recent election in Iraq, held fairly with much less violence and

exercised their right to franchise much less.

The most interesting episode is going to unfurl with the announcement of the election results and the formation of a new cabinet. It is natural to expect that the United States would welcome the prospect of the incumbent Prime Minister to stay put or having someone with their blessings to be placed in that post. But it will depend mostly on the Shia chieftain to decide on the issue. The new cabinet will

who were identified by the President in his message as principal sources of terrorism. The governments of the two countries immediately protested and rejected the accusation. Observers are ill at ease at not merely identifying such states by the President, but for the underlying implication of American policy and actions in future toward these two countries. Despite the new Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's dismissal of

themselves. But many Americans would not like to remain in a state of uncertainty and witness continuing parade of military corpses back home as well as colossal impact of the operation on American taxpayers.

As for North Korea's nuclear issue, the President demonstrated prudence in continuing support for the multilateral diplomatic initiative to resolve the issue through negotiation. It is also impractical to act in any way that may be

privatisation of retirement benefits. He outlined his plan by depicting a gloomy picture of possible bankruptcy of the present system due to the need for increasing benefit receivers and payments in future vis-a-vis relative reduction of contributions to pay for it. Even while listening to the Presidential address, some objected to Presidential calculations in a hushed voice. Though they were democrats, the proposal will pose a veritable challenge to the President. The Democrats will not only strive to prove Presidential scheme as faulty in substance but will also seek support of the American people by terming this as a means to bestow Presidential patronage on some chosen financial firms to operate the scheme. But with the Republican majority in House of the Congress, he is expected to steam roll his favourite plan of action. The other issue on which the President was unequivocal in his firmness was his support for family values and sanctity of the institution of marriage. With the increasing tendency of people opting against marriage and the fact of legalisation of homosexuality in some states, the Presidential dictate is destined to divide the American people, though on a non-partisan basis. Judging by all standards, the President appears to have ushered in a process of 'smooth sailing' in his second term of office.

M.M.Rezaul Karim, a former Ambassador, is a member of BNP's Advisory Council.

## CURRENTS AND CROSSCURRENTS

The major dissatisfaction abroad was registered in Iran and Syria, who were identified by the President in his message as principal sources of terrorism. The governments of the two countries immediately protested and rejected the accusation. Despite the new Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's dismissal of any suggestion to take military action against these countries, Presidential reference appears designed to caution them against their future untoward ventures and the stern reaction it would ensue.

much more participation than expected, helped America pursue its policy in that country in restoring a semblance of democracy for the first time in the past half a century. Though the official results would take some more time to come, it is certain that supporters of the Shia community headed by Ayatullah Shistani will win the election with thumping majority. The Kurds living in northern territories of Mosul, Kirkuk, Arbil and Sulamaniya will elect leaders of their tribal political parties. As anticipated, the Sunnis mostly living in Baghdad, Tikrit and the central parts of the country

undertake the responsibility of providing a constitution for the country and conduct a general election in accordance with that constitution. The dissatisfaction of the Sunnis is likely to give vent to their rejection of the last election and the constitution it will then enact. How effective will that be is still a matter of conjecture. Over and above, the United States is sure to monitor every move the new Iraqi government would take towards the neighbouring Shia mentor and citadel, the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The major dissatisfaction abroad was registered in Iran and Syria,

any suggestion to take military action against these countries, Presidential reference appears designed to caution them against their future untoward ventures and the stern reaction it would ensue. The President will definitely be ill-advised to take any military action against any country in that region, as he already finds it difficult to extricate military involvement from Iraq promptly. As a matter of fact, President faced criticisms for his inability to furnish a time table for withdrawal of troops from Iraq. He said it would be done once the Iraqis are trained and able to defend

interpreted as a threat to a country, which reportedly possesses nuclear weapons. President's pledge to fight HIV/AIDS and diseases in Africa were well received. But his pledge fell short of a commitment to eradicate poverty, especially in Africa, Asia and Latin America, which has recently been taken up as a mission to accomplish by the revered leader, Nelson Mandela, President's attitude towards the United Nations still remains largely undefined.

On the domestic front, the most important issue raised by the President was his plan of part

## OPINION

# Dangerous bomb culture

MD. GOLAM ROBBANI

BANGLADESH is said to be known to the western community either by its poverty or by its vulnerability to natural calamity. Although many positive things are missing in the view, it is grossly correct. While there are fundamental reasons for being poor due to over population with relatively less resource endowment, however, there are also genuine reasons like 'bad governance' imprudent policy formulation/implementation and lack of political commitment for not being able to get rid of harsh poverty despite generous support from international donor community.

In line with patriotic thinking, so far concern was centered mainly over 'how to develop our country' or specifically 'how to get our people out of poverty'. With increased openness throughout the 90s, globalization offered many opportunities although not without challenges. Problems like corruption were there since long, which came to the forefront of development agenda after consecutive shameful reports of Transparency International on the issue. Likewise, lack of social security across the country has been another point of worries. Whatever detrimental to the developmental goals, these are local issues in nature and, hence, manageable internally. However, recently proliferated 'dangerous bomb culture' in the country has surpassed all the existing worries, which cannot go without shaking the sense of any patriotic mind. Therefore, the patriotic thinking is being reoriented to 'how to save the nation' from plausible collapse over 'how to develop it'.

Whoever is behind the scene or

Given the widespread consequences and dangers attached to the issue, people of the country have legitimate expectation and right that government will act properly against it and, opposition parties as well do their duties in addressing the crisis. Therefore, leaders in power and in the opposition alike must be held accountable to the people.

whatever the purpose attached to it, the sure consequence is that it will fragment out common belief, paralyse our economy and destroy the society. The poor country hardy can bear the cost of such consequences. And, as experience shows, it will be almost impossible to get back to normalcy if it goes any further.

People seem to have been less aware of the long-term consequences of the 'dangerous game'. This is not only dangerous for our innocent people who are frequently being victims of the criminal acts, but more importantly, international community is getting more and more skeptical over such sensitive issues. Every explosion in the country is conveying wrong perception regarding the socio-cultural and religious beliefs of the peace-loving people of Bangladesh.

Such unfortunate events will have far reaching consequences spreading over local, regional and even global arena. Locally it will destroy the social system. Outlawed activities can never be good for a society. This will definitely create social conflict. Social security system will break down. Society in general, and the young generation in particular, will be fragmented over the contentious issue. Massive unemployment with extreme poverty will make frustrated youths easy prey to miscreants. Organised crimes will find their way to be deeply rooted in the society and political powers will invariably be used for vested interests. Common

people in the society will be the ultimate sufferers. Hopelessness will lead us to nowhere.

Regionally the issue will create wide mistrust among regional partners/neighbours. On going regional cooperation arrangements in SAARC will be thwarted (e.g. recent postponement of the 13<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit). Security issues will spring up in the regional agenda. Gray propaganda will gain new impetus to mislead international community further. Globally the activities will have even the worst consequences. Open policy of Bangladesh has made her deeply integrated to global economy. Evidence is abundant all around us on what might be the consequence on our economy and international relations, if we fail to address the issue now.

More frustrating is that the leaders still seem to be playing the dangerous game of blaming, naming and shaming, without considering its deep-rooted impact and long run consequences. The nation seems to be divided, being fragmented along the line of political ideologies. But this should not be an issue to be divided upon. Social security is a public good and a national issue. Therefore, we must face it collectively now or get ready to face its harsh reality afterward. Given the widespread consequences and dangers attached to the issue, people of the country have legitimate expectation and right that government will act properly against it and, opposition parties as well do their

duties in addressing the crisis. Therefore, leaders in power and in the opposition alike must be held

accountable to the people of Bangladesh for not having played their proper role at appropriate

## Drishtipat speaks out

THIS note of clarification is being issued by Drishtipat in response to reports carried by some media outlets that quote the Honourable Law Minister, Barrister Moudud Ahmed, citing circulars that were sent out from a 'New York based expatriate organization' as examples of propaganda against Bangladesh. As the issuing body of that circular, or 'action alert', we are rather astonished at the erroneous interpretation of our appeal to the Government of Bangladesh, and would like to clear any confusion surrounding it.

We sent out the circular to enable Bangladeshis -- both expatriates and those at home -- to voice their concerns to their local Bangladesh Embassies. Communicating with representatives of one's own government is a standard democratic practice, and it is a constructive form of protest that we advocate, as opposed to hartals. This cannot be construed as a conspiracy because we are appealing openly as one Bangladeshi to another.

The content of the 'action alert' was formulated in response to overwhelming reaction, both at home and abroad, to the assassination of Shah AMS Kibria. This call for voicing concerns about an attack on a political leader of a major opposition party does not speculate on the identity of the attackers. Demanding that they be identified and brought to justice is our right as citizens and is not propaganda.

There is nothing 'mysterious' or 'alarming' as far as the phrase 'action alert' and the date are concerned either. An 'action alert' is a standard online label used for Internet petitions asking individuals to take a specific action on a current issue of concern.

It is not a term coined by Drishtipat. Dates are put on action alerts to prevent them from becoming chain mails that keep circulating on the

internet beyond a reasonable timeframe. The specific date of 20th of February was chosen because it is three weeks from the day the 'action alert' was issued, enough time for the circular to make its rounds and serve its purpose.

Drishtipat has long been involved in campaigning for basic human rights in Bangladesh, in accordance with the principles of Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. We are committed to being non-partisan and are not affiliated with any political party. We campaign for human rights no matter who is in power in Bangladesh. We raised money for medical treatment and campaigned for justice for Tipu Sultan, a brave journalist who was grievously injured for his brave reporting during the former Awami League administration. We have worked on a wide range of other projects, from highlighting abuse faced by child domestic workers and the fate of abused workers in Saudi Arabia, to raising money for women war veterans and victims of 1971. Our members have a strong commitment towards Bangladesh, and are active not because of any political affiliation but from a concern that human rights and good governance need to be addressed to make our homeland prosper.

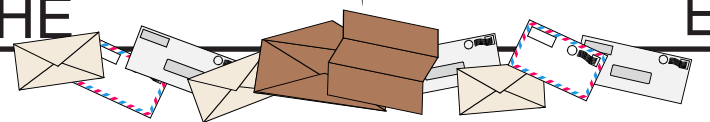
These allegations against Drishtipat are inappropriate and an unfortunate diversion from the task at hand. We renew our appeal to the Government of Bangladesh to investigate all the bombings to date and bring those responsible to justice.

You are encouraged to contact us if further clarification is required at the following address:  
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time to save the country in such a period of national crisis. People in general are waiting to see political courage and commitment in addressing the issue. This is going to be an acid test for the leaders in power and in the opposition camp.

Md. Golam Robbani is Associate Professor, Department of Finance and Banking, University of Rajshahi.

# TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



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.

## Damage done to Bangladesh

Those Bangladeshis who agree with the contents of Ms. Eliza Griswold's anti-Bangladesh article, "The Next Islamic revolution," published in The New York Times on Sunday, January 23 should realise the magnitude of the damage that the article has caused to Bangladesh. Many Americans, we know, were horrified after reading the article and have asked us if Ms. Griswold's dire predictions will come true. Anything published in The New York Times is widely read, especially on Sundays, and believed as fact.

While the rest of the world considers Bangladesh, with its democracy, fast development and women's empowerment, as a success story, Ms. Griswold portrays Bangladesh solely as an Islamic-fundamentalist, semi-terrorist and failed state. The immediate effect of Ms. Griswold's error-filled article will be to dampen the enthusiasm of investors who want to invest in Bangladesh. Investors from India, Malaysia and France have recently expressed interest in investing in Bangladesh.

Investors will never invest in a country which they believe could be taken over by a Taliban-like regime.

A Bangladeshi American entrepreneur we know, who was thinking of investing in Bangladesh, is having second thoughts after reading Ms. Griswold's article. It saddens me when I see expatriate Bangladeshis in America siding with foreign journalists who wish Bangladesh no good.

Kabir Mia  
New York, US

## AL politics

People of Bangladesh have very fresh memories of AL misrule from 1996 to 2001. No matter how much destructive means they resort to, call the 2001 general election unfair, approach donors, claim violation of human rights in Rab crossfire; people clearly understand their intentions.

It is a shame for our glorious nation that a certain political party is desperate for power. It is not so easy to topple an elected government with two thirds majority in parliament. After failing to accept their election debacle, they issued deadlines to government several

times, but failed to achieve anything.

Wasiuddin Khan  
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

## A wrong way to pay homage

I have been shocked but not surprised by the killing of former finance minister SAMS Kibria. No person was arrested (in true sense) after the massacre of August 21, 2004. The government did not take any special precaution to protect AL leaders while they were in public meetings. At least, the government could use video cameras. I am not convinced that the intelligence agencies cannot identify the killers. This government is eliminating hired terrorists through Rab keeping the persons who hire them untouched. It is likely that many of them belong to their party. To continue their "democratic dictatorship" they are not allowing the separation of the judiciary from the executive.

But hartal will bring sufferings to the common people, will decrease the popularity of the AL and will do no harm to the BNP and its cadres. To make the hartal successful a

poor rickshaw-puller was killed in a bomb attack the same way Kibria was killed. I am a believer and I believe such kind of killing or setting vehicles and others' property on fire will not bring peace to the late Kibria, rather his soul will be unhappy. Let him rest in peace and do not do politics with his dead body. Time and again it was proved that hartal cannot stop terrorism, rather it enhances it. Bangladesh has the highest (probably) number of hartals called by political parties. There are hundreds of ways to protest, other than hartal. Violence cannot be the answer to violence. Please do not make this poor country poorer. I hope the AL will try to make the country safer and will not call hartal any more. Let me finish with a great word of Mahatma Gandhi, "I object to violence because the good it brings is only temporary and the evil it does is permanent."

Dr. Mahboob Hossain  
Niigata University of Pharmacy,  
Niigata, Japan

## India's withdrawal

It is truly disappointing that because of India, the Saarc summit could not take place in

Bangladesh. Obviously India has to shoulder the responsibility for that since the other five countries had no trouble whatsoever and were eager and prepared to participate in this great event. One wonders about the basis of India's excuse for not attending, because the other five nations were happy and satisfied with the security measures. It is really surprising that only India could see the split in the security measures, while the others could not see anything despite the discussion and inquiry regarding this matter. It is certainly not understandable what made Monmohan Singh take such a decision, when even the King of troubled Nepal was ready to attend the summit.

This Saarc summit was very important not only for Bangladesh but also for the other countries. Many important matters were to be discussed. What is most disturbing of all these is India's last-minute decision, which sounded like an attempt to shift the responsibility to Bangladesh.

Obaidur Rahman  
Gopibag, Dhaka

## Postponement of Saarc

Our foreign secretary said in the news that he was shocked and saddened that India would not join the Saarc summit. Unfortunately, I, as an ordinary citizen of the country, is not shocked at all.

In my view India had done the very right thing. In a country where sitting MPs like Kibria and Ahsanullah Master and a leader like Ivy Rahman and many others are killed in bomb attacks and the authorities concerned are only good in forming probe committees, consisting of highly talented officials who eventually come up with no clue and solution, do you, as a neutral citizen, believe that Bangladesh is a safe place?

M Fuad Hussain  
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

## Tigers roaring

Each of the players did his best to earn the victory. The cricket fans saw some high class batting when young Aftab Ahmed came to the crease in the third over and launched an assault against the Zimbabwe attack immediately. When he lofted Tinashes

Panyanagara for a straight six that was the shot of the match.

The win against Zimbabwe should give the boys enough confidence to face stronger sides in future. I have no doubt that after this win Bangladesh is a better team now.

Md Shahed  
Dhaka

## New Pay Commission

A lot has already been said about the sixth pay commission and its recommendations. But sorry to say that many failed to express their real heartburnings and none really seems to care about the real sufferings that we go through. Economists say that irrespective of the approval of the recommendations of the pay commission at any degree the living costs would increase. Isn't that ironic? Wasn't the pay commission formed to meet the needs of the govt employees? Why then market price should or would rise? Is the expected price hike the result of the as yet unapproved pay structure? Or is it indeed the vice-versa? So what the fun is all about? Doesn't the government feel the necessity to have control over the market? It never had that control, but it must have it.

It's better to be late than never. Our politicians would never feel it, since they

make enough of money, we don't know how. They do feel, yes, when they are not in power. If the government thinks it can't control the market at all, then it must have a permanent pay commission which must remain active throughout the year. Secondly, the recommendations made in the suggested pay structure don't really commensurate with our needs and expectations. Proposals made by the commission were practical literally, but something was missed out while suggesting the pay-digits. That is sad. Only we, the sufferers, understand how difficult it is to survive with the salaries given to government servants. It's quite difficult managing a standard four-member family and maintaining the basic social activities, considering the minimum needs of our respective status.

A government employee,  
Dhaka

Dear readers,  
We have a new e-mail address for the Letters to the Editor page. Please send your letters to letters@thedailystar.net