LATE S. M. ALI

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Tell-tale signs of tarnishing Ekushey

A wakeup call for government

T is really worrying news that some fanatic elements were up to disrupting the observance of Amar Ekushey in places as part of their plan to erase the memory of one of the most glorious days in the history of this nation. Police arrested at least 12 suspected militants and recovered materials from their possession which point to their plan to carry out some violent mission, purportedly to spoil the serene and triumphal mood of the

Ekushey is the biggest unifying factor as far as this nation is concerned. The occasion has traditionally remained above controversy, though some other days and events have been politicised or subjected to myopic interpretation by individuals or parties. Ekushey still retains its position as a unique day when the nation rose in defiance of an extremely arbitrary decision of the Pakistani rulers to impose Urdu as the state language. Its glory and role in the movement that culminated in our independence has never been questioned. In fact, the issue was settled back in the 1950's. An evil force which had used the bogey of Islam against the assertion of our cultural rights were defeated when the masses refused to accept their dictates and launched a movement to secure their linguistic and cultural freedoms.

But the incidents that took place during this year's Ekushey celebrations raise some questions. It seems the extremist elements have decided to destroy the symbols that represent the tolerant political culture nurtured by this society over the years.

There are tell-tale signs of some hidden agenda being pursued by some quarters aiming at countering all progressive and secular ideals, and Ekushey might have been targeted as part of the execution of that vicious plan.

Clearly, it is a wake-up call for the government. The fanatics cannot any longer be dismissed lightly as they are showing signs of being organised and having the readiness to strike. The government must make an allout effort to contain the challenge which is apparently growing stronger by the day in the absence of effective

Minister takes refuge in divinity!

A pathetic attempt at hiding inefficiency

HIPPING Minister Col. (Retd) Akbar Hossain, left completely defenceless by the 120 livesdevouring launch capsize last Saturday, has played out a cruel joke to some searching questions by newsmen about an essentially man-made disaster. He said it was an act of God whereby the river-craft got caught in a storm and sank. So, nobody could have had a

The scribes had put specific questions to the minister hoping he would answer them to the point so as to help bring the facts to light, and in the process, service the people's right to know about a human tragedy of a no mean scale. They tried to draw the minister's attention to the fact that the launch, with 200-passenger capacity, was actually overloaded by a couple of hundreds more; also, it was intrinsically accident-prone in a stormy weather, because its engineering design might well have been

To these suggestions, the minister gallingly pointed out that generally speaking it is with the onset of the season for squalls and rains that the launches are checked on their loading capacity, life-supporting equipment, and all the rest about passenger safety. But the sudden storm caught them unawares, he argued. The question is, why the launches and terminals are not inspected all the year round to enforce the safety standards without any loopholes or cover for any contingency?

No precautions were taken or enforced, and now one sees the attempt at explaining the tragedy away in terms of divine will in the hope perhaps that people would accept such fatalist message. This amounts to taking advantage of people's religiosity. Pray, tell us what is not subject to divine will! Was it not

God's will that we took all necessary measures to avert dangers to life? Despite frequent notices served on the ministry of shipping by major accidents galore in the last few years, the river safety standards remain as deplorable as ever. The minister's providence-centred pontification cannot but go down as a pathetic attempt to hide inefficiency and mismanagement under a pretence of divinity.

Why can't India get along with BNP government?



HARUN UR RASHID

HE Bangladesh government feels that India has let her down in postponing the 13th Saarc Summit at the last minute when every preparations including security for the summit was on a high gear. On the other hand, on February 14, India's Foreign Secretary defended his government decision in an address at the India International Centre, New Delhi.

India's Foreign Secretary in his address underscored the fact, "If the creative energies of over 1.3 billion people were pooled together, what heights could we not achieve? Let us make a new compact therefore among the countries of South Asia."

The vision is no doubt noble and achievable but the difficulty is that India does not practice what it preaches. It seems it is good to preach sermons to others (it does in the UN as well) but is very poor in practice, although (to quote Foreign "India is fully aware that its destiny is inseparable from what happens in its neighbourhood.'

The important thing is how neighbouring countries perceive the largest country in South Asia and not what it considers it to be. The perception is that India uses neighbouring countries for either its strategic or economic purposes only. There are more dimensions of relations than those that need to be emphasized and reinforced.

The vision of India's Foreign Secretary appears to be contrary to what exists on the ground at the governmental levels with Bangladesh. The *Gujral Doctrine* is never to be seen in action and strict reciprocity is the mantra of the Indian government's policy, when it could be, in some cases, counterproductive to cooperative relationship with neighbouring countries.

In early February 1972, Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, after meeting with India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, in New Delhi, issued a statement: "Bangladesh and India would live in eternal friendship as brothers." It was commitment of deep friendship and

The vision of Sheikh Mujib was not realised even during his lifetime. By 1975, he was finding it hard to get his message of friendship and cooperation understood by Indian leaders. He was deeply disappointed that the operation of the Farakka Barrage under the guise of "test-run" of feeder canal, took place in April, 1975, without allocation of water of the Ganges during the dry months (January to May) to Bangladesh, contrary to the Mujib-Indira Joint Declaration of 1974.

It seems that from 1975 to 1996, India was being difficult in bilateral negotiations in resolving issues with Bangladesh except the conclusion

Furthermore, India's proposed mega river-linking project of the Himalayan rivers of the Ganges-Brahmaputra and Meghna has caused serious concerns in Bangladesh. Over and above, Indian Prime Minister's unwillingness to attend the Saarc Summit in Dhaka on grounds of "security" after the fatal attack on the former finance minister and Awami League leader and MP seems to have brought bilateral relation to a new low point.

One simple question is: Why do Indo-Bangladesh relations come to a level of mutual suspicion when both governments have been elected by their people?

cooperative relations with India. What kind of response did Bangladesh get from India?

The answer lies in the words of a former India's Foreign Secretary and former High Commissioner to Bangladesh, Muchkund Dubev, His assessment was that, "The government of India did not take any initiative to deal effectively with any of the issues raised in the trip. The then Prime Minister did not pay the much expected return visit to Banglades

In this the larger share of the blame must be attributed to the bigger neighbour which is endowed with greater capacity to act."

Fourth, the current coalition

view that "Many in India are concerned that with the accession to power, the Islamic component of Bangladeshi nationalism would acquire higher salience which would not only adversely affect bilateral relations but might also pose problems for India's own pluralistic society ... It is feared that the government would work assiduously for imparting a more pronounced Islamic orientation to the Bangla-

desh society and polity." Seventh, there is a section among Indian leaders who doubt the democratic credentials of many BNP leaders. Furthermore Parliament has become a "rubber-stamp' to government policies and the main opposition has been boycotting the

Parliament on grounds of undemo-

cratic behaviour of the coalition

President and the former Secretary

General of BNP has created a new

political party and criticized publicly

the undemocratic activities of the

Furthermore, there is a strong

view that the democratic right of a

Member of Parliament has been

undermined by Article 70 of the

Constitution that states, among

others, that a Member of Parliament

is bound to resign if he/she "votes in

Parliament against that party." A

Member of Parliament cannot even

abstain from voting if he/she is

present in Parliament. This provi-

aovernment.

BNP government

Even the former

Bangladesh to get access to the hydro-electricity of Nepal and Bhutan using India's power grid, a trade corridor to the Himalayan kingdoms through India and reduction of trade deficit with Bangladesh.

Finally, cynics in Bangladesh believe that India probably does not wish to resolve the outstanding issues with the BNP-led coalition government because it will provide much credit to the BNP government with the result that the mainstream opposition party Awami League may be put into disadvantage at the coming election.

Conclusion

India's Foreign Secretary's policy statement on South Asia and India's neighbours reflects the stereotyped attitude of "India can do no wrong," blaming everything on some neighbours for all the ills of South Asia's cohesion and cooperation. It is regrettable to be a jaundiced view of South Asian political and economic environment.

The unwillingness of India's Prime Minister to visit Dhaka for the summit appears to point to the stiffening of the attitude of the Singh government towards the current Bangladesh government. Furthermore, India has to realize that it gains much from a peaceful, friendly, and harmonious relationship with Bangladesh. Given the right spirit and desire to live together in peace and harmony, there is no adequate reason why Indo-Bangladesh relations should go

Strained relations with India may have two far-reaching consequences. One is that Bangladesh may consider seriously looking eastwards and eventually may form a cooperative institutional relationship with Myanmar, Thailand, and China (road link between Bangladesh and Myanmar is to begin soon). The other is to push Bangladesh in the long run into the lap of Islamic extremists. And that could boomerang against India itself.

What is needed is to recognize that friendly relation with the Bangladesh government is valuable for beace and cooperation. Or is India waiting for a new government in Bangladesh in 2006? That would be a misreading of the situation because Awami League is expected to fiercely pursue Bangladesh's national interests as Sheikh Mujibur Rahman did.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh

ing, creating monopolies through

tight patent laws, and following a

WTO-dictated skewed trade

the UPA -- despite its flexibility, for

aviation

This has alienated the Left from

The government's strategy is not so much to negotiate with the Left

parties as to get the corporate media

to malign them as medieval dino-

BOTTOM LINE

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of the 1977 Ganges Water Agreement under the Desai Janata government in the late 70s.

During Sheikh Hasina's government (1996-2001), one landmark agreement, the Ganges Water Treaty, was concluded with India and with the support of India, the 1997 Peace Agreement with the Tribal Representatives in Chittagong Hill Tracts was inked. The conclusion of both agreements has demonstrated that if India is willing to play a fair game with a neighbour, it can be done in no short

The current BNP-led coalition government seems to be unlucky on that score. The earlier Vajpayee and the present Singh government nave failed to build a kind of relation ship that is mutually supportive and beneficial to each other during the last three years of the current Bangladesh government. One of the signs of non-

cooperative state of relations is that none of the major outstanding issues, such as ratification of the 1974 Mujib-Indira Border Agreement, maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal, sharing of water of common/trans-boundary rivers in terms of the 1996 the Ganges Water Treaty, and huge trade deficit for Bangladesh, have been resolved. Moreover accusations of harbouring insurgents from the northeastern states of India in Bangladesh's border areas has continued to be

simple answer appears to be "lack of trust" by New Delhi with Dhaka that constitutes one of the major psychological barriers to cooperative and mutually supportive rela-

I would argue that there are certain factors that are pushing Indian government to be noncooperative with the BNP-led government. Some of them deserve mention below.

First, India perceives that BNP was not born as a traditional political party. The party was created in military cantonment, with largely retired military and civilian officials Although it has now reached to grass roots level, the ideology of the party is not strictly secular. It was during the regime of President Zia, the founder of the party, that the principle of "secularism" was deleted from the Bangladesh Constitution. To many Indian leaders. Bangladesh Constitution has been 'Islamised" under both the Zia and Ershad regimes.

Second, many leaders in India consider that Bangladesh under the current government has aligned itself with Islamic countries including its arch-rival with Pakistan. This does not bring comfort to India.

Third, during her first term of government in 1991, Prime Minister Begum Zia within a year coming to power paid an official visit to India and the purpose of the visit was to make it clear to Indian leaders that

as a right-wing government, insensitive to the needs and demands of religious minorities that constitute more than 12 per cent of the total population. It also ignores the demands of sectarian minorities and unnecessarily banned the publication of books of the Ahmadiyya sect.

government in Dhaka is perceived

Under the BNP-coalition government, it is perceived that rise of Islamic fundamentalism with violence is on the increase, threatening the otherwise secular, moderate and tolerant society in Bangladesh One Indian journalist, Prem Shankar Jha, reportedly warned against the propagation in the country of "an intolerant Arabicised brand of Islam that was alien to Bangladesh's secular culture." India perceives that the coalition government has not done enough to keep off the extremists and hold culprits of violence to accountable

Fifth, the report of the New York Times of January 23 by Eliza Griswold has confirmed India's fear of a possibility in future of "Taliban type" of Islamic regime in Bangladesh, although Dhaka termed the report baseless and motivated. Does the denial wash with India? It seems it does not.

Sixth, the BNP-led coalition government with Islamic parties appears to have a negative impact on Indian government. Ex-Foreign Secretary Dubey has expressed the

sion has been incorporated in the Constitution in 1991 by the first term of the government of the BNP. Eighth, there is a perception in India that BNP-led coalition government has been reluctant to provide India transit through Bangladesh to its northeastern states (in the words of India's Foreign Secretary, "Severed transport and communication

linkages among member coun-

tries") The expert committee to look

into this matter instituted by the

Hasina government has not been

revived. Furthermore, gas export to India from Bangladesh has not been an active agenda of the government Moreover the export of gas through pipeline from Myanmar to India through Bangladesh is conditional

Coalition dharma or one-party dogma?

Congress at crossroads



PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

year ago, the Indian

National Congress built its

first successful national

political coalition including

the Left, regional forces, Dalits, and

Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

The United Progressive Alliance

defeated the BJP-led National

Democratic Alliance. It promised the

Congress to "the leopard that won't

In election-bound Bihar and

Jharkhand, Mr Laloo Prasad's

Rashtriya Janata Dal, has drifted

away and accuses the Congress of

splitting the secular vote. The RJD is

under attack from another UPA

change its spots."

member, Mr Ram Bilas Paswan's Lok Janashakti Party. The Samaiwadi Party and Congress are at loggerheads in Uttar Pradesh.

What has gone wrong? Is the Congress to blame for the present gain from it? Can anything be done to clear the mess? The Congress seems to be

unlearning the rationale of the transition it made from Pachmarhi (1998, when it declared that the people want a single-party alterna

of 12 seats manifold in the coming So they demanded 115 seats

from the RJD-Left (of a total of 243). Their cynical calculation? By denying the RJD an outright majority, ihev would become "kinamakers The Congress then joined hands

with Mr Paswan's LJP despite the latter's opposition to the RJD. This confused the secular-minded voter. Unlike in 2004, when secular

parties fought together and won

state's 87 seats. This is likely to cause the secular alliance some setbacks. As a result, the Congress will suffer too.

The Congress is acting myopically elsewhere also. In its Chief Minister although the post should have gone to the Nationalist Congress. In Andhra, it has ignored promises made to the Telengana Rashtra Samiti.

In Goa, the UPA-appointed Governor overturned the patently foolish to pursue policies that run counter to the Common Minimum Programme. Its Lok Sabha success was attributable to its projection of social healing: reaffirming secularism, redressing agrarian distress terrible recent inequities.

These included falling social indicators, growing disparities, and anti-minority discrimination. The JPA promised to drop neoliberal "free-market" agendas for a Left-of-Centre emphasis on improving the

saurs identical to the xenophobic chauvinist and anti-modern sangh parivar, which blindly defends domestic monopolies against competition. The Left sometimes uses conservative-sounding or outmoded anguage. But it represents modern-

ist and egalitarian politics based on justice. These values are firmly rooted in the Enlightenment tradition. The Hindutya Right loathes the Enlightenment and is deeply uncomfortable with Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity.

Ordinary people will judge the UPA not by what it does for boosting FDI and lowering taxes on cars, but whether it reduces joblessness, and provides healthcare, education, and drinking water. If the UPA drifts Rightwards, it's liable to be punished as severely by the people as was the NDA

To avert this, Ms Sonia Gandhi must urgently begin course correction inside both the Congress and

Ordinary people will judge the UPA not by what it does for boosting FDI and lowering taxes on cars, but whether it reduces joblessness, and provides healthcare, education, and drinking water. If the UPA drifts Rightwards, it's liable to be punished as severely by the people as was the NDA. To avert this, Ms Sonia Gandhi must urgently begin course correction inside both the Congress and the UPA.

tive to messy coalition politics), to poor a New Deal and therefore Shimla (2003, when it accepted that received broad-based support, coalitions are necessary; it must including from the Left. become part of one). Today, the coalition is under The Congress has developed

stress. CPI general secretary A.B. delusions of grandeur and is turning Bardhan has warned of "bad days conservative. It's more concerned to ahead" for it. And CPI(M) Politburo assert its supremacy than follow the member (and likely future general logic of coalition politics secretary) Prakash Karat likens the Bihar and Iharkhand provide the

starkest instance of the Congress's new-found arrogance. In Bihar, the UPA faced its first major test of unity. t failed it -- not just because Mr Paswan and Mr Prasad fell out, but also because state Congress leaders convinced themselves that their party would exceed its present tally

almost three-fourths of Bihar's seats, they are competing and raiding one another's bases. Mr Prasad has formed a bloc with the Left. The LJP has taken him on in all 243 seats. And Mr Prasad has "friendly fights" with the Congress in 83 seats.

Mr Prasad has used relatively restrained language against the Congress, and not once criticised Sonia Gandhi. But the voter cannot get a clear answer: is the Congress the RJD's friend or foe?

The Congress was to peeved with Mr Prasad that it unilaterally allied itself with the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha to corner together 68 of the fraudulent vote organised by the Speaker after wrongly disqualifying one MLA. There were other ways of annulling the fraud. But the Governor chose the easy option. In UP too, the Congress is trying to topple the Mulayam Singh gov-

ernment -- although it's too weak to furnish a secular alternative. The Congress forgets that the key to the UPA's Lok Sabha victory lay in alliances. Good election analyses show that "Coalitions were in Tamil Nadu, Andhra

These contributed more than half of the seats" to the UPA's final kitty. The UPA would be downright

Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand

lot of the common people (the aam aadmi, who subtly displaced the gharib, the poor, in party slogans). Yet, some worthy programmes

were abandoned -- including rural debt relief and credit provision, doubling the health budget, reducing regional disparities, empowerno minorities, and guaranteeing freedom of information. The UPA also diluted compulsory education for all children under 14, and employment guarantee with universal access. Today, the UPA's emphasis is on

tax breaks for corporations and rich people, schemes to attract foreign investment into telecom and bank

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist

OPIÑION

The economy is hostage to hartals

ANM NURUL HAQUE

HE Awami League and its allies recently announced a nine-day action programme including the 36-hour country wide hartal that started on February 14 and grand rallies in the capital on February 19. The hartals have been called again as part of fresh programme to protest against the killing of Shah AMS Kibria, the former Finance Minster and Awami League Advisory Council member. Awami League has so far called 144-hours of hartals countrywide in three spates since January 30 to protest the January 27 grenade attack on the party rally in Habigang and to pressurize the resignation of the government.

The people of this country have seen the immense damage done to

the national economy by the end-less spate of hartals that have been observed since the return of parliamentary government in 1991. The political parties of the country have resorted to hartals as political action to press the government for accepting their demands. The major political parties did not agree to find a substitute for hartals over the last thirteen years considering the huge damage caused to the national economy by hartals.

The Awami League Finance Minister late Shah AMS Kibria told a seminar in 1998 that Bangladesh suffered a loss of Tk 386 crore in a day's hartal. If this assessment is correct, then the national economy has already suffered a loss of Tk 4.632 crore for 12 dawn-to-dusk country-wide hartals enforced by the major political parties during last few months. The civil society and repeatedly requesting the country's mainstream opposition political leaders to put an end to unabated politics of hartal, considering its harmful effects on the national economy and business. The major opposition political

the business leaders have been

leaders were seemed to be responded to the repeated calls by the civil society and FBCCI leaders to find a substitute for hartals with a view to save the national economy and business. They devised the human wall programme to press the government for accepting their demands, which was rather a good way of political actions. This new non-violent device for protest and to register no confidence in government, after all had no harmful effects on the economy and business as in the hartals. The history of this land provides ample proof of positive role that the hartals had played in the political evolution of the country since early 1960s. But now the hartal has lost its positive role and effectiveness as a political tool that the opposition parties are using to achieve their political goals. The country has been experienc-

ing hartals one after another from the mid eighties for which both the major political parties Awami League and BNP are equally responsible. The BNP also imposed several hartals during their opposition period, demanding resignation of the Awami League government, accusing it of indulging in corruption, harassment of political rivals, and failure to run the administration. Being agitated by repeated countrywide hartals, the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had promised that her party would never enforce hartals, even when it would go to the

opposition. Now opposition leader Sheikh Hasina claims that she is forced to impose hartal as the government does not accede to her demand for resignation. Nowadays the hartals are not observed by the general people spontaneously. The shops remain closed in fear of violent attacks and damage by the opposition activists and the supporters of hartal. The mechanized vehicles also do so. The general people of the country

are looking helplessly to get rid of the curse of unabated politics of hartal. But they could not see any ray of hope as the opposition political leaders have not found a substitute for hartals. The human wall was a good way of protest as it did not interfered with the day to day lives of the general people. But the opposition leaders were not happy with the

have again resorted to hartal. The people of the country are extremely shocked at the tragic death of Shah AMS Kibria. But they disagree with the hartals given one after another by the Awami League to protest against the killing. Hundreds of people, wearing black badges and carrying black flags, stood in silence on the city's street on February 4, to protest against the grenade attack in Habiganj that killed Shah AMS Kibria and four others. The cross section of people including women and children came out to the streets as Asma Kibria, widow of Kibria. urged all to join the half hour programme to protest against the political terrorism

According to the separate estimates of the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, the

economy has incurred loss worth above Tk 500 crore due to the recent hartals while export orders worth about Tk 600 crore have been held up. The huge loss includes production loss, bank interest, abour cost, port charges and cancellation of export orders. The economy has come to the verge of collapse as the destructive political programmes enforced by the opposition political parties, said the president of MCCI. He also said that, the chamber would soon make public the final amount of loss caused by the six days of hartal. The fall-out of the hartals on the

economy is really devastating. The national economy frequently becomes the casualty of political actions like the shutdowns and hartals. In fact, the national economy is now a hostage to hartals. As such, the common people of the

country are looking helplessly to get rid of the curse of unabated hartals. The political protest is a matter of right in any democracy. But the way the political parties of our country are exercising their democratic rights is certainly not acceptable to the people. Such political actions are leading the national economy to disaster. The country's foreign trade virtually came to a halt during the recent six days of hartals. It is time for all political parties to pause and ponder as to whether they could shun hartal for expressing their political dissent and instead adopt some other effective, non-violent and harmless means of exercising their democratic rights

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