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21 February

21st February is a day of pride. Yes, this is the day when the brave sons of the soil sacrificed their lives for our rights.

The day has been recognised as the International Mother Language Day by UNESCO. It is due recognition to the language martyrs who will continue to inspire people around the globe in the days to come.

Mohammed Fahim Hara  
Universal Tutorial, New Eskaton Road, Dhaka

Violence in the name of religion

I had the opportunity to observe many students praying in different ways. They all were looking for peace and happiness in their life. I strongly believe that must be the only reason why religion exists. I mean religion is for spreading peace and happiness in our life.

But when I see President Bush bombing in Iraq saying "God bless America", Osama bombing on civilian buildings in the name of Islam and the BJP killing innocent women and children by uttering the names of Hindu Lords, I wonder where is religion in this mass terror?

Abu Arif  
Diversity Ambassador Programme  
University of Windsor

US-French relations Iran factor

After becoming the Secretary of State of the United States, Condoleezza Rice set out for a ten-stop tour in Europe and the Middle East. Among these, Paris was anticipated with the maximum interest. We saw on TV Rice and President Chirac smiling broad during the handshakes. But the million dollar question is: will the smiles last long?

No doubt, the US would seriously want to normalise its relationship with France which went severely wrong when France refused to join America in the Iraq war. Now, the Iran factor has cropped up. Condi Rice will soon again come to Paris to seek French support in a war against Iran. What will be Chirac's response? Will Condi Rice be able to maintain her smile if Chirac says 'No'?

Asif Chowdhury, Brussels  
What does 'Islamist' mean?

I was searching my dictionary to find out the actual meaning of Islamist. But I couldn't find the meaning of this word. Does Islamist mean an extremist, it sounds like that. Can you make it clear to me?

Please do not use a word which hurts the followers of any religion. If they are terrorists, then call them terrorists, not Islamists.

Mahbub Murshed  
University of London, UK

Why this delay?

I praise Dr. Kamal Hussein for demanding of an Independent National Commission to conduct a neutral and credible inquiry into all the bomb & grenade attacks. But why the report of the commission conducted by a panel of renowned lawyers constituted after the August 21 grenade attack on an AL meeting held at the Bangabandhu Avenue has not yet been published? They conducted inquiries separately and I do not find any reason why they are not publishing the report.

The renowned personalities of our country in different forums or platforms give us good advice, but there is nobody to listen to them.

MS Islam  
Dhaka

An appeal to UGC

I saw the letter of Tanzina Zinat Ovey about the credit transfer and an appeal to the UGC to rescue the students who are studying in those blacklisted universities (DS, February 16, 2005). I know that the UGC has the right to take action

against the universities which are not following the rules and regulations under the Private University Act, 1992. But I don't know why the commission did it without considering the interests and future of the students. It has a responsibility to solve the problems of those students. It is a matter of regret that the commission has not taken any steps to make sure that the affected students can continue their studies.

As a student of a private university and considering the situation, I ardently appeal to the UGC and the Ministry of Education to do the needful in this respect.

Mamunur Rashid Tomal  
Department of English, DIU

Defend the country

I refer to the article of Ms. Griswold, which termed Bangladesh as the place for the next Islamic revolution. It is surprising that none of the national dailies even protested the article.

Bangladesh is not full of Islamic terrorists and extremists where there is no law and order like she has described in the article. I think it is a disgrace that we cannot defend our country from false accusations.

Nayeem Islam  
The Aga Khan School, Dhaka

Sensationalism

I was shocked by the emerging story of the book that alleges use of women in a highly questionable manner to force out confessions from some Guantanamo Bay prisoners, as discussed by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed in 'Point-Counterpoint' of February 17. However, I am also appalled by the heading of his article, 'America uses

women to torture Muslim prisoners'. What an over-the-top cheap shot! Shouldn't you have used a more relevant, true-to-the-fact title like, 'America uses women to torture Guantanamo Bay prisoners'? Words like 'Muslim' or 'Christian' are heavily loaded words and should be used with caution. To a non-discriminating reader or someone who only glances over the headlines of The Daily Star, your title may give the impression that the US government has taken a policy of using sexual lures and invectives of women to torture all Muslim prisoners, possibly including the ones that are in jails in the US. We should also think that however bad these questioning techniques at Guantanamo Bay are, it is very likely that similar means would be used even if these prisoners were non-Muslims. One should not give religious colour to something that is not necessarily so.

None of us are happy about the activities of the Bush government, but publishing articles with titles that are half-truths and which portray Muslims once again as victims, especially in a newspaper of Bangladesh where our traditional society is reeling under attacks by the Islamic fundamentalists almost every day (please see The Daily Star of the same day for several examples), is short-sighted.

Golam Mowla  
Dallas, US

World policeman

M J Akbar's article (The Daily Star: Feb. 15) has provoked me to pen my pennyworth of thought on the subject. Neither a political thinker or strategist and least of all a policeman, I pity our World Policeman who, thanks to his cunning, with wisdom and foresight; surrounded by his team of market grabbers in the guise of political advisers, has led to the sorry state of affairs in Iraq. Now they are planning to repeat the exercise with Iran and then Syria: which stand between the Mighty Policeman and his goodies of Energy loot!

Why should he bother with North Korea? There is no oil or gas there. Its nuclear reality is relegated to a backyard issue for the neighbours to sort out: while our Policeman is licking his lips over the under-guarded (read non-nuclear) energy goodies of Middle East. The other, possibly ignored, issue is the real hurt suffered by the Policemen and his team in the Korean peninsula. The bitter pill takes a long time to swallow! Like all policemen who bully and beat the weak and are scared of well armed (read nuclear); our World Policeman is no exception. He and his police dog (Israel) are busy in beating up the helpless unarmed (read non-nuclear) Middle East countries of their oil wealth.

After all, the old axiom that "Might is Right" has been proved time and again. The old imperial lust has taken a new label called "Democracy". The game of "grab as grab can" still remains the same. Mao rightly said that "Power comes from the barrel of the gun"; today the guns are nuclear!

One wonders how the so-called guarantee by the World Policeman or his followers is worth the paper it is written on? The only solution is to be nuclear prepared; to ensure that you are left alone. No wonder, there are no takers to export democracy to North Korea!

SA Mansoor  
Gulshan, Dhaka

Weekly holiday

I have gone through the recent news in your daily "DCCI meets PM" with great interest and am really inspired by the proposal to make Sunday the weekly holiday.

I do fully endorse this brilliant idea, which I am sure will earn the support of most people, particularly the entire business class of our country, as this will help ward off the Weekly Three-Day Hibernation Period that the country undergoes every week, putting Bangladesh completely shutdown from the global community.

This will help the country keep pace with the entire global community by having more

interactions and more business dealings, which will surely be a very healthy thing for the whole country.

Faiz Mohammad  
Banani, Dhaka

Country's image

I was surprised to hear a ruling BNP lawmaker demanding enactment of a new law to bring opposition leader Sheikh Hasina and some other intellectuals to justice for what he said tarnishing the country's image abroad.

A lot of things have been going wrong in this country. These are: the world's most corrupt country, haven of terrorists, repeated grenade attacks on opposition leaders and activists, journalists, intellectuals and cultural events. Besides these, "Crossfire deaths", human rights violation, political volatility, women and child repression have risen sharply. Amnesty international, European Union, Human Rights Watch, US state Department and many national and international organisations have observed the country's situation and urged the government to improve it.

The new York Times, Time Magazine, Far Eastern Economic Review, Washington Post, The Guardian, Asia Week and News Week are publishing so many articles full of evidence that fanatic elements exist in Bangladesh.

So how could we refute the allegations?

Mostafa Kamal  
Mirpur, Dhaka

Extra judicial killings

This refers to an article published in The Daily Star on 15 February by Mr. Mahfuzur Rahman on Rab activities and the editorial dealing with the same issue captioned "Extra judicial killings". It is heartening to see that there are still some people in this society who care about what is just and what is not. Clearly, crossfire deaths are extra-judicial killings.

No sane person can support or condone crimes and criminals. Majority of the people are as much interested in curbing crimes and bring criminals to justice as the authorities in the government. However, history has it that creation of "extra police or paramilitary forces" over the regular ones have always turned out to be counterproductive. It has happened in our own history. Has the present regime already forgotten the role of the Rakkhi Bahini and its ultimate fate? The Germans during Hitler's rule had Gestapo. A careful assessment will tell one that none of these agencies both in character and perspective is any different. Excesses in any form does not pay. Creation and activities of Rab and other parallel agencies like Cheetah and Cobra is also contrary to the very basic principle of democracy.

What has happened to our regular police forces? Have they been disbanded? How long will these agencies operate? What happens to these agencies once their tasks are accomplished?

On a lighter note do you not find the black headscarf and the long shirt having strong resemblance to some of the terrorist outfits in the Middle East?

In today's world we are supposed to bring criminals to face justice, through the process of law, as

meted out on a case-to-case basis, rather than kill them " through crossfire or encounter" at random.

Violence breeds violence. Each time you eliminate an individual in this fashion you only ensure the creation of double the number in the future. What about the question of violation of human rights? I suppose government's response to that is typified by a statement made recently at a press conference by our Honourable Minister for Communications where referring to such killings he said, " Those who have died in crossfire were listed criminals with 20 or more murder cases against each", the underlying message is that the killings are quite "justified".

I have a hunch!! There is yet another purpose behind these killings. May be the so-called terrorists were becoming too hot to be dealt with for their Protectors and Godfathers. Remember the story of Frankenstein and his Creator?

Shamsher Chowdhury  
Dhaka

Anything but democratic, Mr. Jalil

The general secretary of the AL has said in a press briefing that hartal is a democratic means to express dissent. At a time when hartal has been rejected by all because it is disastrous for the country, the statement by Mr. Jalil shows how far the AL is away from reality. In their mad desire to oust the democratically government by force, the AL seems to have taken leave of its senses.

Even if one accepted Mr. Jalil's view on hartal for the sake of argument, that hartal allows the opposition to express dissent, there are elements in this concept that make hartal the anti-thesis of what democracy stands for. Here is why. Hartal encompasses just not politics. It brings into its purview the total stoppage of all public activities, including economic that a developing country like ours can afford only at suicidal costs. Even schools and colleges are not exempt that, if you explain to foreigners, will only bring from them an expression suggesting madness. Finally, even if one overlooked the suicidal and insanity aspects of hartal and agreed with Mr. Jalil, there is one aspect of hartal that should leave no doubt in the mind of anyone with sense that hartal can be anything but democratic. This is the implementation part of hartal. Parties calling hartal do not just call upon the people to participate in hartal. They ensure that people listen to them and to do that, they use threat and coercion. How on earth can such a strategy be anything but unadulterated fascism at its worst?

Here is a test for Mr. Jalil and supporters of hartal to prove whether it is democratic or not. If you believe hartal is a democratic right of dissent, then please give a call for hartal but also give the people the right to be with you or not and then see what the people of Bangladesh think of hartal. Democracy is after all the freedom to choose while fascism is the absence of such freedom.

Shahjahan Ahmed  
Dhanmondi RA, Dhaka

Hollow rhetoric

One wonders where we stand today. Despite all security around



Simply barbaric

The incident in front of the TSC on the Valentine's Day, dealt another blow to the state of democracy in Bangladesh. It does not really matter whether the JCD or the BCL was involved. The fact is that a bomb attack in such a place, in the midst of such an occasion, is not acceptable. It was a function organised on the Valentine's Day, bombs should not have been even near the place. Attempting to create disruption in such an event had no justification. Injuring innocent members of the audience that could have even led to their deaths, showed that people in this country are simply not safe anywhere.

We are not safe. If this continues, the countries all over the world will have all the more reason to condemn and criticise us.

Arbab Quadri  
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

In your editorial of 15th February you mention that The Daily Star has 'exercised caution in writing about the subject of crossfire killings'. Why? With regards to Rab, surely the role of a newspaper would have been to exercise some judgement and highlight the consequences that lay ahead with the activities of the Rab going unchecked.

You should have helped to put more pressure on the government to tame this state-controlled instrument of terror.

Radwan M Siddiq, On e-mail

the DU, we had another bombing incident on the campus. "The perpetrators will be found out and punished" the oft repeated empty rhetoric of the government without any purpose or direction follows as night follows day. Unfortunately for us the day of democracy is fading with the night of autocracy and tyranny setting in.

What we are busy doing is however acting out a drama or "tamasha" using the country as a stage, enshrined in empty "Banis", "Ajobans", "Adesh" and other similar grandiose dialogues from the heroes and heroines.

Citizen, On e-mail

Hartal and our rights

Can anyone tell me how HARTAL is allowed by our constitution. Nobody seems to quote the constitution while talking about HARTAL. I am not an expert on the subject "constitution". I did go through it, but can't see how HARTAL is permitted by the constitution. Yes, assembly and participation in a meeting or a peaceful procession is, subject to reasonable restrictions from the law enforcing agencies. HARTAL in fact violates a basic right which is "RIGHT TO WORK". It is guaranteed to every citizen by the constitution. And that's what exactly we violate when we refuse that right to millions of daily wage earners. And that too led by the lawmakers. Hartal is responsible for many avoidable deaths. Is there anybody to shoulder the responsibility of those deaths?

Nobody has called any HARTAL for that unnamed Rikshawallah who died a few weeks back in Mirpur!!!

Rahim Ahmad Munshi  
Sydney, Australia

Democratic move-traffic

If exponents of 'Hartal' or for that matter of democratic rights call hartal right and left at the cost of national life and security of properties, public or private, the people also have the right to accept or reject it.

Now it has become a fashion or a routine affair to burn valuable vehicles and damage properties in the evening (which was extended to noon-time as happened the other day in Motijheel) preceding the days of hartal! What kind of exercise of democratic rights is this? Nowadays violence and destruction in the name of democratic movement is patronised by the opposition parties and hailed by the so-called intellectuals, who are usually very prompt in issuing statements, collecting signatures or demonstrating by 'Manob Bandhans' but remain conspicuously mum when murders take place in broad daylight.

I wonder and fail to convince myself how this opposition which preaches violence and hatred, engage in anti-state activities and blur the country's good name abroad can expect to have support of the people? I just cannot understand how this opposition movement can be called democratic.

AF Rahman  
On e-mail

Politics in Bangladesh



In his letter to the Editor (Daily Star, 20th Feb), Mr M. Awlad Hossain displays an unfortunate lack of knowledge of his country's system.

First, let us appreciate that Bangladesh is an exceedingly rich country, and has no need to work most days. Less fortunate countries, such as the United States or Switzerland, are poor, and must work as much as possible, with few holidays. I think this is fairly obvious.

Second, the hartal system is yet another facet of the gentle and gracious manner in which politics is conducted in the subcontinent. You see, in the West, we always want to win. For example, Tony Blair in the UK wants to win the next election. This is vulgar, greedy, and blatantly opportunistic.

In the East, you guys are much more gracious. You campaign to come second, and let the other chaps (ladies) have a chance. That is how cricket used to be played, and a jolly good game it was too, until you foreigners started beating us!

So, in Bangladesh, the object of any election campaign is to come second, for two reasons. The first is that it is gentlemanly (ladylike?) to give the other lot a chance.

The second, and here we see the cunning of the Orient, the real prize is not the right to run the country, but the right to call hartals! If you read the constitution of your country, you will see it is quite clear. He (she) who comes second shall call a hartal every time he (she) feels a bit grumpy!

So there we have it, Mr Awlad Hossain. Thank you for bringing this subject to my attention. I intend to call on the British High Commissioner at the earliest possible opportunity, and exhort him to study your system, and then recommend to Her Majesty that she consider an amendment to our constitution as soon as possible.

At least then, although we are no longer rich, we can at least be civilised...and no more Tony Blair!

Dr RJ Murphy  
Gulshan-1, Dhaka

## A frustrated visitor

As a visitor to Bangladesh to represent the committee of a small charity in the UK, I have been frustrated by 5 days of hartal which prevented me from being as effective in visiting our project in Sylhet as I could have been. I lived in Dhaka in 1993/4, a period of similar unrest, and find that Bangladesh has made little economic progress since that time. Your bright young people move abroad thus further restricting the development of Bangladesh. The violent and aggressive nature of demonstrations, attacks on the least fortunate members of the community, e.g. rickshaw-pullers, the disruption of education and business all give a picture of a country in chaos. The politicians appear to have no understanding of democracy and think it is acceptable to try and bring down a government by crippling the country. All this has ensured a lack of development which is tragic when considering other economies in the region, Malaysia and India for example, which have made phenomenal progress in the last ten years.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh is known as the most corrupt country in the world which means those at the top have no interest in changing a system which presumably enhances their lifestyle. Amongst ordinary people I find a sense of hopelessness and no optimism that things will change. Everywhere I have been I have talked to small businessmen, nursery owners, telephone shop managers, drivers, teachers and students, and all are vehemently against corruption and hartal.

So wake up Bangladesh, the world is moving on and you are being left far behind.

Anne French, London, UK