

## ACC is creating more problems than solving

*Put your house together, please!*

THE Anti-corruption Commission is hogging the headlines for the wrong reasons. Far from taking up any sensational corruption case, it keeps generating sensational news about itself. When as a neophyte, it needed to put the best face forward in order to project a self-confident image, it's doing the exact opposite, stuttering rather hopelessly.

ACC is at best turning out to be a premature baby, and at worst, a body set up without the conviction and will that would have given it a force of existence and an inner substance to move forward. It has faced a host of dilemmas after the day one of its inception, the inaugural day having been suffused with fanfare and promise of a break with the past. First of all, there was the long duel between the government and the ACC over the absorption of the now-defunct Anti-corruption Bureau's staff into the ACC. A few months on, the matter still hangs fire. Then there were the chairman and members of the commission pulling in different directions with their views on how to get on with their job.

The latest dilemma facing the ACC is whether it should take up all the 4000 under-trial cases which had been processed earlier on by the now-defunct Bureau of Anti-corruption. The ACC chairman Justice Sultan Hossain Khan has decided to seek legal opinion from the Attorney General on the subject. We wonder, why such an important matter was not resolved by reference to the highest court before constituting the statutory body?

Now, there is a new twist in the organisational contradictions. The chairman is preparing to send a proposal to the government to appoint 18 army officials to man intelligence and counter-intelligence units on deputation, together with taking on board six officials from revenue departments, five from the police force and three from the judiciary. The chairman is now thinking of taking the proposal to the next ACC meeting. Because, by his own admission, "there are differences of opinion among us".

Why the chairman and the two members of the ACC cannot work together, being such a small compact body as they are? This is the fundamental question agitating the public mind. Please get your act together at the top, so that by a contagion effect, the functionaries below you do not fight each other.

## To contain cheating at exam

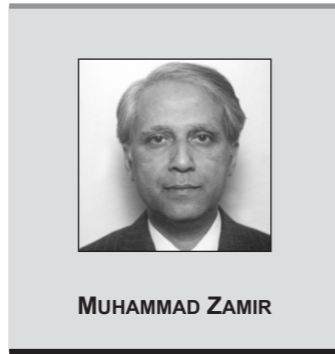
*System preferable to personal mission*

ONE of the most important and big public examinations -- Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination -- began on Thursday with nearly one million students taking part in it. There has not been any news of any chaos or disturbances at the examination centres due to cheating that had been rampant in recent times. In fact, for some years now, incidents of cheating at the examinations have dropped to a considerable extent. The state minister for education, Ehsanul Haq Milon, has been showing a lot of enthusiasm to see it happen through vigorous exhortations upon the text book boards, schools, coupled with high level supervision of the whole corrective process.

The drive was good and we must appreciate the effort for bringing in success to a large extent, but we also must not ignore the controversy that has arisen over the use of helicopter by the state minister to make on the spot inspection during the examinations. He has, in fact, reiterated his earlier decision to use helicopter irrespective of the criticism the move has garnered. Surprise checks are important and undoubtedly yield good results, but the state minister's mission seems to be critically reliant on a total personalised approach to the problem.

And this is where we differ with the basic idea of the campaign. We would like to stress on the fact that the system must be improved. The system must take care of any irregularities. But obviously the self-contained mechanism to fight cheating at the examinations has not yet been developed. If the state minister takes it upon himself to act like a lone ranger in this case, then it is bound to have an ephemeral effect. Rather than taking it on as a personal mission, he ought to associate the people concerned to do it. And that's why we repeat our emphasis on developing a system to permanently end cheating in examinations.

# ME peace and a zebra crossing a zebra-crossing



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

IT was 1969. Thirty-six years ago. I was a Pakistani diplomat, practising my Arabic with an elderly Druze politician, in a restaurant in Beirut, overlooking the Mediterranean. We were talking about Lebanon, importance of Syria within the Levant and the prospect of finding peace in the Middle-East. I was also seeking his views about the future of Palestine and Israel. Walid Hitti, that was his name, claimed that finding peace in the Middle East was like pursuing a mirage. He also laughed and commented that "it is like a zebra crossing a zebra-crossing (near a traffic intersection), -- now you see it, now you don't."

Recent events appear to be proving him right once again. They have unfolded at a quick pace over the last few weeks. The peace process has moved like the proverbial snail climbing a greased pole ascending two feet the first minute, to slip down one foot the next.

The diplomatic flurry, initiated on February 6, 2005 (through the meeting between the Israeli Prime Minister and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas), ushered in a de facto truce between the two parties. This agreement was subsequently followed by Israeli gestures meant to build confidence release of more than 500 Palestinian prisoners and a suspension of Israeli army raids and targeted assassinations. This restored some calm to the scene.

Hamas and other factions, at the forefront of the four-year old uprising, known as the Intifada, also expressed limited agreement and

satisfaction with the agreement and promised to restrain themselves from provocative action. They underlined that they still wanted a larger number of prisoner releases and more sweeping Israeli pullback from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. However, they were willing to wait.

This process of gradual understanding within the Middle East was however greatly affected by the sudden assassination of Rafiq

increased their pressure on Syria not only to evacuate its troops from Lebanon but also to stop giving sanctuary and assistance to those opposing the current Iraqi government. Israel, as expected also joined in the chorus.

Further instability was created with the unfortunate suicide bombing in Tel Aviv on 25 February. This led to Israel launching a raid into West Bank on the next day. The truce had lasted only for a few

Europe. It also included representatives from the World Bank and the IMF. Israel stayed away. This unfortunately underlined that their concern for immediate security was more important than long term peace.

Nevertheless, the presence of US Secretary of State introduced some degree of optimism. This encouraged participants to believe that the US and the European officials were trying seriously to cool

It has been reported that this meeting also discussed various facets related to the organisational aspects pertaining to Palestinian statehood and the evolving of its Institutions. There was however one snag differences over how the US intends to coordinate the peace-drive. The Europeans feel that they have been given the role of being fund-raisers but have been left out of the decision making process. This needs to be addressed sooner

sions. The presence of US Lt Gen. William Ward (the Special Representative of the US Secretary of State) in the region, will hopefully help in coordinating security contacts between the two sides. It will probably also enable the Palestinian security services to obtain travel permission within the occupied territories vital for finding those accused of criminal offences.

Israeli good faith can be further demonstrated by halting construction of their arbitrary territorial barrier and fresh settlements in the West Bank. Mere withdrawal from Gaza will not do if this is also accompanied by the construction of 6,000 new homes in occupied West Bank by the Israeli Lands Administration. Such action would be totally contrary to the US call for a freeze in settlement activity and also against the principles of the US proposed road-map. Such construction would also be totally against international law.

On the other hand, the Palestinian Authority and it security agencies will also have to do their bit if peace is to be seen in the region. It is not enough to say that they are against suicide bombings. They have to ensure that severe punishment is meted out to anyone associated in perpetrating such an act. They also need to persuade Islamic militant groups located in Syria and Lebanon that the peace process and the emergence of an independent Palestine is being affected by their interventions.

Such a demanding role cannot however be undertaken by the Palestinian Authority without support from the donor community. The Palestinian political institutions have to be strengthened. Necessary credit facilities will also have to be made available so that fresh employment opportunities can be created for the frustrated educated youth. There must be a palpable peace dividend. This is the only way that their leadership can gain the full support of the suffering Palestinians population.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador -- any response to mzamir@dhaka.net



The US Administration continues to demand that the Palestinian Authority keep its part of the bargain with regard to providing security. They should similarly exert pressure on Israel to abide by agreed provisions. The presence of US Lt Gen. William Ward (the Special Representative of the US Secretary of State) in the region, will hopefully help in coordinating security contacts between the two sides.

Hariri, the former Lebanese Prime Minister and another suicide bombing in Tel Aviv. Both these incidents have caused a slide.

Killing of Lebanese political leaders has not been a new phenomenon. President elect Bashir Gemayel was assassinated in 1982 Prime Minister Rashid Karami, who held office sixteen times, was killed in 1987. President Reni Moawad died in a bomb explosion in November 1989. Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt, former Interior Minister, was killed in 1978. However, none of these killings created the kind of outrage that has followed Hariri's death. This was partially because Hariri was held in high esteem by Arab leaders not only for his moderate views but also for his contribution towards the reconstruction of war-ravaged Lebanon.

There has been no compelling evidence that Syria was involved in this latest outrage in Lebanon.

However, subsequent days witnessed public demonstrations and anti-Syrian slogans. This eventually led to the downfall of the pro-Syrian Administration in Beirut. This sentiment was seized upon by hawks in the US Administration and they

weeks.

The downside of the situation was reflected in Israel indicating that their leadership had ordered the resumption of military operations against Palestinian militant groups and put on hold the peace process, recently initiated.

Many in the Palestinian Authority believe that efforts are underway to thwart the chances of peace. No clear claims are being made as to who might be responsible for this. There are analysts based in Europe and the US who have suggested Syrian and Iranian links. On the other hand, there are also some Palestinian and Arab analysts who believe that continuity in the cycle of violence is being engineered by extreme rightist elements within Israel, who are against a process where thousands of illegal Jewish settlers would have to leave occupied territory.

The month of March will be very important for Palestine and Israel. We have just had the Special Conference on Palestinian nation-building in London on 1<sup>st</sup> March. It was attended by representatives from the Quartet and Foreign Ministers from the Arab world and

down existing tensions and revive the peace drive as a key test of transatlantic cooperation.

Leaders from both sides of the Atlantic reiterated their commitment to halt bloodshed and restore strategic stability in the Middle East. Pledges were made once again to provide financial assistance so that the peace process could be given a fresh lease of life. This was demonstration of the right kind of political will.

The Palestinian delegation appears to have conveyed a simple message. They reiterated that the London Conference on Palestinian reforms 'must lead to a return to the road-map and also eventually to an international conference to re-launch final status negotiations for the establishment of the Palestinian State and credible peace.' Their leader Mahmoud Abbas pointed out that 'peace is possible now and we are ready to negotiate with Israel to reach a true and lasting peace based on justice and international legitimacy.' In this context, it was also highlighted by many participants that it would be 'irresponsible' of all concerned if this chance was allowed to slip away.

than later, if the Quartet efforts are to be seen as successful. The role of the United Nations has also not been properly clarified. It is being seen as a facilitator rather than a central player.

There are significant areas that still need to be sorted out. They are that much more important given the fact that dialogue is expected to start in Cairo between Palestinian officials and militant leaders very soon. It is anticipated that this meeting will lay down the parameters of government in a future Palestinian state.

The world has to understand that any effective fight against terror has to start with a just resolution of the Palestinian problem. Important issues related to this question have to be addressed by all members of the Quartet.

Israel also needs to play a positive role in this regard. Mere words will not do. Their stated intention of believing in peace needs to be translated into practice.

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## OPINION

# Why frequent hartals?

A R SHAMSUL ISLAM

MANY of us who complain that the main two political parties of Bangladesh act like those poles apart may correct their assessment because both the parties practically behave the same when put in the same position -- in power or in the opposition. As for instance, the Awami League (AL), now in the opposition, is in a lavish habit of resorting to hartals on this issue or that and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), now in power, is all out to resist hartals preaching it as a sacred duty to safeguard people's interests by maintaining law and order, saving private and public properties from vandalism. Amusingly when the AL ruled in 1996-2001 it also countered the hartals almost in the same manner throwing similar sets of arguments and the main opposition BNP courted hartals rehearsing the stereotyped text of causes.

The brutal truth that has of late gained ground is that in our country gaining political power means gaining all means of minting money and commanding governmental machinery at pleasure to clear off any impediments that stand on way to authoritarianism. Conversely, losing power amounts to forsaking privileges of money plundering and risking to lose life and property at the retaliatory vengeance of the political adversary seated in the government. This is why the political parties run so wild to catch power.

Election is a vital democratic process. But the main political

parties go awry to take any political lesson from it. This is because they are devoid of practising any democratic culture within the party. As such whenever results of an election comes out one of the two main political parties bound to lose the election comes up with the prepared version of statement -- election is rigged (subtly or grossly). It resolves to take to streets to topple the government. Both the BNP and AL are equally adept in showing off this

Finance Minister and sitting MP, a rare luminary of Bangladesh, on 27 January by grenade the month of February witnessed a series of hartals with greater frequencies and lengthier stretch of duration (60 hours without break). There were other methods of protest, too, like human chains across hundreds of KMs, token hunger strike etc. operating in between the hartals to resent the killing. To supplement hartals, protest rallies by the AL with

day of hartal cost hundreds of crores of taka. Interestingly the leaders who all hartals and their counterparts who go wild to resist hartals are probably the least hartal vulnerable sections of the society who reportedly own enough money to roll in luxury and security amid non-working days too.

The question is why a government of our country gets so very perturbed by hartals? They (government) say hartals cause immense

The opposition takes to progressive dose of hartals as other mild form of protests like debate, discussions, peaceful processions, token shutdown of business enterprises, token pen down strike, token hunger strike and the recent induction of forming human chains have been trifled away by the government. Besides the long standing governmental inaction to countryside bomb and grenade attacks targeting pro-liberation, secular quarters, sky

accommodation and tolerance to the opposition. It is difficult, though not impossible, to break away from the old habit of obstinacy and overlordism. The long standing resentments of the opposition that they are not allowed to speak in the House, that they are denied proportionate representation in the Parliamentary Standing Committees including the post of Chairman and that the Speaker is partisan and docile should be redressed honestly and honourably by the government. Being guardian of the House the Speaker should be given sufficient constitutional power to stand bold and independent. Enjoying these privileges and honour it is apt that the opposition should not resort to the unwholesome game of muddying and muddling the decency, decorum and proceedings of this august body.

Presumably, it is hard to create an effective and meaningful Parliament as it needs, first and foremost, a basic change in the existing mindset of the main political parties. However, there is a silver lining in the dark cloud. It is still believed that both the BNP and AL have such saner elements in their ranks as may be used by the respective top leadership to moulding the Parliament anew in thoughts and deeds.

AR Shamsul Islam is Retd. Principal, Govt. Mahila College, Patna.

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undemocratic gesture. I remember a cartoon published in a weekly in 1996 that nicely summed up the psyche of the two chief political parties. The caption read: "Hunger for 21 years versus facing starvation for 5 years."

The losing political party forming the chief opposition gets to building up strategies considering what is capable of disturbing the government in the most effective manner as judged from the viewpoint of the latter (government). The opposition finds the government is most allergic to hartals. And naturally the opposition takes it as its most favourite weapon to chastise the government.

Following the brutal killing of Shah AMS Kibria, the erstwhile

like minded parties were held but with very limited success as the law enforcers with armed BNP cadres tore these (rallies) up in lethal ways. Mentionably, the women picketers and processionists were clubbed by the ruling party cadres to set a new example of national ignominy. The AL also beat up during their rule the women demonstrators of the opposition but the perpetrators were law enforcers in preference to party cadres.

Hartal brings all round miseries to the nation. The most affected are day labourers who go workless all day long risking an empty stomach for their entire family. The export-oriented industries with a tight timeframe get totally upset. According to governmental version each

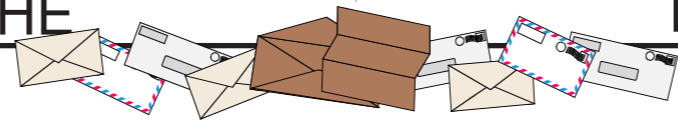
financial loss to the nation, sap the stability of the country, breed anarchy in the society and they are pledge-bound to set these destructive forces at rest. But the people are no longer that gullible to believe in government's lullaby. They have seen how deep the hand of government is dipped in corruption, nepotism, usurpation coercion etc that cause more harm and distress to the nation than the hartals.

The real answer is that if the government is fascist to the core it tends to do everything by force. It suffers from a phobia of conspiracy all around. This fear leads to exert itself to pre-empt any bid of the opposition that may grow strong to effectively challenge government's nonchalant course of action.

high price spiralling of essential commodities etc have offered the opposition to fall back on strikes comfortably.

But political disputes cannot be settled by calling hartals by the opposition and bullying these to the background by the government. A third alternative should be devised upon. Ours is a parliamentary democracy. We preach it through lips and we must learn to practice it in acts and deeds. The floor of the Parliament is the proper place to decide upon all sorts of differences between the ruling party and the opposition. It is not the force of muscle but the force of logic that should be valued most. To build this culture it is the ruling parties that should come first with the grace of

# 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.

## Dhaka's traffic jam

As a commuter in Dhaka metropolis for several decades, I get the layman's feeling that the public transport system in the city is mismanaged due to lack of coordination and cooperation between the successive city fathers (DCC); now aggravated by the latest interest of the Ministry of Communication to control the traffic system.

While too many cooks spoil the broth, coordination is absolutely a must for running a vast, complicated transport system in a city of over 10 million -- indiscriminate residents, indiscipline crowd -- and technical expertise at the planning level handled by a mixture of local and foreign consultants. They city commuters have become victims of loopholes in new experiments being tried by the different authorities every now and then. Why make 10 million residents guinea pigs for unfruitful experiments?

There are several components

classified as problem areas, namely, the unauthorised use of crowded footpaths (and too few footpaths, and that too without proper width), the non-popularity of the overhead pedestrian crossings or bridges, the untrained rickshaw drivers, and the majority of motorised vehicles and drivers who have fake certificates or license (what percentage prosecuted?).

Then the majority of the Traffic Police are undertrained and dishonest. To top it all, the system losses in the political regimes is questionable. How the regulators are shirking their responsibilities is very transparent!

Just one small example: the DCC has failed to come up with the planning and construction of several thousand authorised bus stops on the city roads. How the ticket booths have been dismantled (in periodic raids), and the ticket sellers of the bus services are sitting on stools. The incoming buses line up on the main roads alongside these make-

shift bus stops, blocking flowing traffic. The bus route numbers are not displayed properly and uniformly on the buses and at the stops. It is pandemonium, with the queue culture still in infancy. Many buses run with no standing passengers allowed inside, but this rule is being violated time and again. What has happened to the ladies' seats? Equality, no discrimination?

BRTC, has been announcing putting more buses on the roads, but the bus stops cannot cope with the expanded services. Cycle pedal rickshaws are being made scapegoats for the traffic problems of the metropolis, while the majority of the residents use rickshaws as commuters! The problems of the middle classes are being ignored, and unpractical schemes are being put into operation, and then changed with new projects!

Restrictions are being imposed on movements without first setting into motion alternative arrangements. The school going children

and female commuters are suffering due to restrictions on the rickshaws. The employment or unemployment of thousands of rickshaw drivers is a separate issue (sources of livelihood for the marginalised population).

The overall picture is very clear, and points to a glorious failure of political governance in initiating firm measures for decentralisation of power from Dhaka to the divisional and district headquarters (in three decades!).

The city corps cannot run in the amateurish way followed at present. The professional touch is missing (including garbage disposal). There are no signs of municipal reforms, while the elections of city fathers are being duly and expensively contested! This office-bearership syndrome is hampering the fast development of the country.

The government is trying to increase the technical efficiency of the Police, but if corruption prevails at the current level, then develop-

ment projects are a waste of money and time. The politicians are busy with their footprints, in or out of power, and damn the public services! The parliament is a mockery, and waste of crores of Taka. Where is efficiency, looking from the top to the bottom at the various tiers of the public services? There is a craving for seeking new projects, for siphoning off a large percentage of the project funds. The Communication Minister is partly right when he remarked that there were too many TPs manning the traffic (good source of bakshish!).

Alif Zabr, Dhaka

## Foreign policy

I have a few comments to make on your lead story regarding the Foreign Ministry (DS March 6th). It is true that the Foreign Ministry has failed to articulate our foreign policy effectively. However, a product sells as good as it is. The

adverse propaganda against Bangladesh abroad cannot be stemmed by the Missions. This must be done at home where the failure of the government at good governance is an issue that our diplomats, even if they are replaced by the best, cannot overcome by any diplomatic skill. If the country has a Leader of the opposition and a former PM telling foreigners that we are a terrorist, fundamentalist, communal and corrupt nation, then why blame the Foreign Ministry or the poor diplomats for contributing to our depressing image abroad?

The issue concerning the Foreign Minister was also over-emphasised. It is true that he did not contribute much to the Foreign Ministry. His "Look East" initiative was built in the press and had no substance. Then he has brought Bangladesh to a position where never in history did we have had such a bad relation with our most

important neighbour. His ill-temperated outbursts against India are now bearing fruits as India keeps us on our tenterhooks with its participation (or lack of it) in the Saarc Summit.

However, a lot of what the FM did in leading the Ministry were perhaps not his initiatives. The same sources that are now wishing his departure must have encouraged, for example, his stand against India. Then the PM kept a FS for nearly 4 years and now with nothing but failure to show, he is being sent to Washington! His replacement is coming from New Delhi at a time when our relations with India are at their worst. Thus it looks like it is just not the FM and his Ministry but the government as a whole has lost control over the country's foreign policy. The changes contemplated show signs of further worry for those who may be looking at the Foreign

Ministry with hope. **Shahjahan Ahmed** *Dhanmondi RA, Dhaka*

## Indian Idol

We have seen the splendid show of the Indian Idol. We can feel how much impressive the programme was. Indian idol was the buzzword of whole India. Actually, not only Indians but people from all over the subcontinent were impressed by that programme. Rahul, Abhijeet, Amit and so on came to the limelight through this unique presentation. I think it is a great way to search out for the budding star. I am sure that most of the people of our country also expect such a programme to find out a Bangladeshi idol. **Thunu Marma** *Habibur Rahamam Hall, Rajshahi University*