

PM's priority projects

Irregularities in water resources ministry

We commend the parliamentary standing committee on the planning ministry for bringing to the attention of the nation the scandalous state of affairs surrounding the PM's priority projects under the water resources ministry. This is precisely the function of the standing committees, and the fact that the members of the committee from the ruling alliance have taken the lead in speaking up stands to their credit and also renders the allegations more credible.

The committee has claimed, and provided persuasive evidence to back it up, that the water resources ministry is a hot-bed of irregularities and corruption, and the most explosive charges relate to the projects designated as the PM's priority projects.

By far the lion's share of these projects has been undertaken in constituencies of ruling party MPs or cabinet ministers. Among the constituencies are those of the PM's brother Syed Iskander, the PM, the law minister, the commerce minister, the PM's sister and women and children's affairs minister, and the state minister for home affairs. Indeed, the list of those whose constituencies have been allocated priority projects reads like a who's who of the senior leadership of the BNP. Only one of the 49 priority projects has been allocated to a constituency represented by an opposition MP.

The fact that these projects have been allocated according to party consideration is undeniable -- and this is a disgrace. Not only that, but the standing committee has made allegations of corruption with respect to the priority projects, for instance pointing out that embankment protection schemes are typically implemented in the monsoon season thus perpetuating the schemes indefinitely. The standing committee also suggested that the reason the implementation rate of these projects is so poor is that there is often no real need for the projects that are approved and that they serve more as money-making enterprises.

We endorse the standing committee chairman's opinion that the only two criteria to allocating projects must be where the need is greatest and to promote some kind of regional uniformity across the country.

Let us make no mistake about it. This is a serious scandal and one that implicates the most senior layer of the government. This type of politicisation erodes public faith in leadership.

The matter is a serious embarrassment and a severe blot on the government's record. But the only way forward is for it to admit wrong-doing and take immediate remedial measures against all involved in this sordid affair. Nothing less can recover its deeply compromised credibility.

Partha finally released on bail

He deserves justice

HAIBAL Saha Partha, who was arrested seven months ago for allegedly issuing an email death threat to leader of the opposition Sheikh Hasina, has got a reprieve from his long drawn out ordeal. The court has granted him bail.

We wonder why he was arrested and what was his crime. Nothing is clear about him yet. But the young man has complained that he was subjected to severe torture and gave a vivid account of the same. We cannot but feel outraged by the circumstances surrounding his seven months in detention. We cannot protest enough.

Though he had been granted bail by the High Court, his release was delayed by seven days for some inexplicable reasons. Procedural reasons could be cited, but the impression is difficult to shake off that the poor boy was not shown an iota of sympathy, and that he was a victim of vendetta.

There is the additional factor that we must not overlook; when someone is from a minority community, a greater sensitivity has to be demonstrated in protecting his rights. Overall, it is a question of upholding constitutional and human rights of our citizens. Our democratic norms and the ethos of rule of law do not permit any impingement on such rights.

Partha returned to the country on completion of higher studies in India and landed in the great mess falling victim to fortuitous circumstances. The strange perceived linkages between different things are a source of worry to any sane mind.

The laws are there to protect the rights of individuals as well as our collective interests. Partha like any other citizen of this country deserves justice.



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSEN

It is time to celebrate again. Another Independence Day and our nation turns 34 tomorrow. The government buildings will be illuminated once again, and the national flag will flutter on rooftops. The televisions and radios are going to blare patriotic songs. The nation will wake up to the sound of canons and children are going to parade in the stadiums across the nation. The public halls and state functions will fill up with festive patriots. It is time again for celebration, as the nation prepares to treat itself to this annual orgy of professed patriotism.

But whose celebration is it anyway? In 1852 an escaped slave named Frederick Douglass raised a similar question in the United States. "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" was the title of his speech. He addressed the white people of America, saying that it was their national independence, their political freedom, and therefore, their celebration. Then Douglass instructed them to feel their shame for observing a happy holiday that reveals, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty, which turns their celebration into a sham.

We are going to observe a happy holiday tomorrow, many of us waking up late to watch a movie or visit a

friend. There will be family reunions, visit to the parks, the smell of rich food wafting from kitchens. For the poor and the hungry, the day will bring its special lures. They will be fed in the community centres and local party offices. Beggars will have a field day with streams of people flowing in the parks and the streets.

The Independence Day, which was earned in roughly 9 months, will last for roughly 18 hours from six in the morning to the strike of midnight. Then a tired nation will go to bed and wake up to go to work next day. There are others who must have

to perform better than politics. Perhaps we need to be more corrupt than honest. Perhaps the new ideal is redacted in the clamour of ringing mobile phones, honking cars, droning TV channels, and heavy metallic sounds from construction sites. We are growing as consumers but shrinking as a nation.

Ronald Reagan warned against that shrinking in his Farewell Address to the American people. The "eradication of the American memory," could bring about "the erosion of the American spirit", he said. He suggested a few basic

to know how to teach our children what it means to be a Bangladeshi? Do children know when to nail their parents if they are not teaching it?

What are we then going to celebrate tomorrow amidst the roar of canons, flying flags, festivities, illuminations, gymnastics, speeches and up roar of people? What are we going to celebrate in a nation that stands gloomy like a divided house? What are we going to celebrate when a foreign bureaucrat calls us a "troubling" nation? Others call us other names. They call us a fundamentalist state, a

CROSS TALK

Our 34th Independence Day is only hours away. Many people have died and suffered to bring us this day, many who were our own flesh and blood, our kinfolks, neighbours, friends, and villagers, who sacrificed their lives to build and protect our future. They did not have to do it. But they did it nonetheless for us, those who are living and breathing to rejoice a holiday tomorrow. It is their Day, which we are going to celebrate. Apart from a holiday, we should celebrate our national memory tomorrow, and thereby celebrate our national spirit.

already left the country on packaged tours. It is a shame how the Independence has given some of us the freedom to ignore it.

Two years after the fabled speech of Douglass, Henry Thoreau wrote in *Walden* that the Fourth of July represented an unattained ideal. Does not the 26th of March represent the same thing for us? Where is the society, which should be free from exploitation and oppression? Where is the country of freedom and equality? Where is the Golden Bengal?

Perhaps the ideal has shifted in the age of globalisation. Perhaps now we are more outward looking than inward, more material than spiritual. Perhaps economy needs

things, which included more attention to American history and a greater emphasis on civic ritual. Then he offered lesson No. 1 about America. All great change begins at the dinner table and he hoped that starting from the night after his farewell, the Americans were going to begin their talks in the kitchen. He asked children to nail their parents, if they haven't been teaching what it means to be an American, because that would be a very American thing to do.

The foremost thing about being a nation is to know what it means as an identity and then to take pride in it. Do we know what it means to be a Bangladeshi, what virtues entail it and what vices curtail it? Do we failed state and the most corrupt nation on earth for several years in a row.

Disgrace and disappointment hang over us like mushroom cloud. It is the sign of an implosion, a disturbing turmoil within us. We have been clashing amongst ourselves, tugging this country in different directions, our vile interests subverting the greater spirit of freedom. There are those who are going abroad to undermine this country. There are those who are arrogantly defending their silly mistakes and petty interests back home. In our contentions for power, we are gradually turning this country into a powerless state. We are

living conditions in Bangladesh is rapidly improving whether one looks at infant mortality, or vaccination rates, or school participation, or child nutrition, or fertility rates.

These improvements are happening not just for a privileged elite but also for the population at large. Compared to that, India's development strategy is fundamentally distorted and lop-sided. The social progress has been slower and less broad-based, despite much faster economic growth.

If we celebrate anything tomorrow, we should celebrate our regret that we could have done better. We have done better in some areas and that tells us we could have done better in other areas as well. We

have come a long way in 34 years and we could have gone further. When the clamour of children, fanfares, festivities and all the noise of jubilation subsides at the end of the day, we should begin talking at dinner tables, parents to children, children to parents.

Our children must know and understand that it was not just another day out in a circus or a fair. They must understand that everything was part of one thing, that it was not a celebration of one particular day such as the Flower Day or the Chocolate Day but the celebration of our past, present and future. They must learn to extricate dream from despair, imbued with the pride of having a homeland where they can live out their lives with freedom and dignity in the manner a painter can use his paints and brushes to draw his imaginations on the easel.

Our 34th Independence Day is only hours away. Many people have died and suffered to bring us this day, many who were our own flesh and blood, our kinfolks, neighbours, friends, and villagers, who sacrificed their lives to build and protect our future. They did not have to do it. But they did it nonetheless for us, those who are living and breathing to rejoice a holiday tomorrow. It is their Day, which we are going to celebrate. While we watch TV, visit a friend, go to park, eat sumptuous meals and enjoy the recess of the day, we must feel grateful to them and tell our children about them.

Apart from a holiday, we should celebrate our national memory tomorrow, and thereby celebrate our national spirit. Let us talk about it at our dinner tables today, tomorrow and everyday henceforth.

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Global terrorism: The Latin American connection

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To confirm that the War on Terrorism is global struggle, one has only to look recent developments in South America's Tri-Border Area (TBA), a part of the world that

the US intelligence officials have been monitoring for a decade out of concern that it has become a hotbed of Islamic terrorism. The TBA is a place of dense tropical forests that attracts tourists from all over, who come to see the catacombs of the Iguaçu River, the world's greatest waterfall. A few miles away is the magnificent Paraná River, the symbol of local prosperity and the source that provides millions of kilowatts of energy, thanks to the world's most powerful hydroelectric plant.

After the governments of Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay successfully harnessed the Paraná River's

potential in the 1970s, they founded three border cities in the TBA: Foz do Iguaçu in Brazil; Iguaçu Port, Argentina; and Ciudad del Este, Paraguay. To promote regional trade, Brazil and Paraguay established a free trade zone in the rapidly growing boom town of Ciudad del Este, and it became a popular destination for Argentineans and Brazilians who came to purchase cheap electronic products. In no time, it seemed, the TBA had half a million inhabitants and was a thriving corner of South America.

After the end of World War II, colonies of Middle Eastern Muslims from Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine migrated to the Tri-Border Area. After the civil war in Lebanon broke out in 1975, many Lebanese began looking for a safe place to escape the turmoil. Thousands flocked to the TBA, eventually making the area one of the most important Arab communities in South America. Today an estimated ninety percent

one against the Israeli embassy on March 17, 1992, and the other against a Jewish Community Center on July 18, 1994. More than 120 people were killed in the two attacks. Hezbollah terrorists, using the TBA as a base, were believed responsible.

In the 1992 incident, a Ford F-100 truck loaded with the high explosive Semtex was bought in Ciudad del Este with hundred dollar bills traced to a currency exchange house belonging to Morizer al-

has expressed concern about the activities in the TBA. At a seminar in Asuncion, Paraguay on combating drug trafficking and organized crime in the Tri-Border Area, Ambassador Francis X. Taylor, Coordinator for Counter Terrorism, US Department of State, complimented the TBA as a "busy, culturally diverse business center." He then talked about the Dr. Jekyll-like aspect of the TBA's development. "We are worried, however, not by the things we can see, but by the things we can't see –

instance -- could make their way along this drug smuggling trail. This is no hyperbole. US law enforcement officials have readily acknowledged that they stop only about ten percent of the illegal drugs entering the US. An explosion of one dirty bomb would be all it would take to throw the US economic and political system into chaos. It's conceivable that smuggling into the US of a weapon of mass destruction may already have happened. The security alert in the US for several weeks during December 2002 and early January 2003 was Code Orange, the second highest it can be. The reason? Authorities feared a terrorist act potentially bigger than 9/11.

As these developments are showing, the growing strength of the terrorism-drug trafficking connection, has begun to complicate the efforts of the US-led anti-terrorist coalition in the War on Terrorism. Not only must the US confront terrorism at the source in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, and other places around the world, it must now guard against the narco-terrorist threat in its own backyard.

and working there.

Brazilian intelligence officials also believed that Al Qaeda has been active in the TBA since the mid-1990s. Citing an anonymous high-ranking official of the Brazilian Intelligence Agency, Veja, a leading Brazilian newsweekly, reported that Osama Bin Laden had visited Foz do Iguaçu in 1995. The source told the publication that his agency had obtained a 28-minute video of Bin Laden participating in meetings at a mosque during his visit. Al Qaeda's Khalid Sheik Mohammed is also believed to have visited the TBA in December 1995 and in 1998. In late December 2001, after the US-led coalition ousted the Taliban from power, a CNN reporter found a large tourist poster from the TBA at an Al Qaeda safe house in Kabul.

The violence and hatred from the volatile Middle East spread to South America. Buenos Aires, Argentina, became the scene of two major terrorist acts in the early 1990s –

Kassar, a well-known arms dealer.

Al-Kassar is suspected of participating in several terrorist acts, including the 1985 hijacking of the Achille Lauro cruise ship, and he still remains a fugitive. No one has ever been convicted for the crimes in the Buenos Aires atrocities, but Argentine authorities indicted Hezbollah security chief Imad Mughniyeh, believing him to be the mastermind behind both atrocities.

In the past decade, the terrorists in the TBA have largely confined their activities to criminal fund raising and to plotting strategy for future terrorist attacks in the Western Hemisphere. As a lawless zone with few governmental regulations, terrorist groups in the TBA have thrived and grown. With the help of organized crime and corrupt local officials, they are able to raise significant revenue to finance their plans for the destruction of the US and Israeli targets in the Western Hemisphere.

Since 9/11, the US government

the darker side of the commercial trade, clandestine networks of persons and money -- money that may act to support terrorist organizations in the Middle East."

Experts monitoring the Tri-Border Area wonder when the US government and its allies are going to talk less and act more to clean up the local corruption and the terrorism haven. "For me, the Tri-Border Area is the Hilton of Islamic Extremism," Magnus Ranstorp, director of the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St. Andrews in Fife, Scotland, told *Vanity Fair* magazine in December 2002. "It's one of the most lucrative safe havens in the world. It's been on our radar screen since the early 90s, but no one has done anything about it."

A terrorism-organized crime-drug trafficking connection is taking shape in the TBA, and this development is making narco-terrorism a formidable global threat, according to intelligence analysts who monitor

using these contacts to help smuggle arms."

Meanwhile, the Argentine intelligence service has reached a serious and disturbing conclusion. The service believes that because the US and its allies have had some success in the War on Terrorism, terrorists from Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Middle East are now looking towards the Western Hemisphere as a base of operation. Getting into the TBA is easy and from there terrorists will have no problem moving about the region and conducting terrorism. According to Argentine intelligence sources, terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda and Hezbollah are joining forces with local drug lords to develop a smuggling trail all the way to Mexico. The ultimate objective – sneak across the border to get at Uncle Sam.

If this analysis is accurate, then it's likely that weapons of mass destruction -- a dirty bomb or perhaps a suitcase bomb, for

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The political economy of hartals

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HAVE hartals and lockouts been a tool of last resort for voicing dissenting views by opposing political parties? Although the economic and social consequences of such drastic measures are debated in the national and local news media and in the public forum with monotonous regularity, the politicians of the opposite pole claim that they have no alternative but to use this recourse to fight the intransigence and deaf ear of the party in power. This has been true for both major parties. After living in the US for over twenty five years, I may have apparently insulated and distanced myself from the detrimental fallout of hartals. However, because of my family roots and lineage, I cannot escape from the sad realization of the adverse economic impact of hartals and lockouts. In the US or for that matter in any Western industrialized countries, hartals are not a rare occurrence, they are an unheard of occurrence in recent memory.

Hartal is not simply an inconvenience or a nuisance as deemed by some people. It is tantamount to a

call for an "economic boycott" of our own goods and services by our own politicians during the period hartals are in effect. In stronger words, one may regard the calls for hartals as an act of constitutionally sanctioned economic terrorism.

Political protests, open political dialogue and debate are the fundamental rights of the citizens of a free society. But how can the politicians promise its citizens a better economic future if their acts are directed to destroy the economic fabric and infrastructure of the country they want to rule? Of course, the blames for loss of output and welfare due to recurrent calls for hartals rest equally on both the major political parties.

I was motivated to write this after I read about the UNDP report on GDP loss due to hartals. The report's claim about the loss of 3 to 4 percent of annual GDP apparently caused some discomfort to some circles. Leaving aside any contentions about the precise measure of the loss of economic output, and the magnitude of the parameter reflecting the negative effects of hartals, one must recognize that the GDP does not provide an accurate measure of the welfare of the people. The GDP measure does not reflect

the welfare loss brought about by the inconveniences, hardships, and anxieties the citizens have to withstand during the periods of hartals and after. The GDP loss would be further aggravated when one considers the measure of discouragements for foreign investments, potential loss or delays of supplies of exports and imports due to delays in productions, and distribution? Hartals and the concomitant loss of output and welfare may seem as being a short-term phenomenon by the hartal callers. Political instability is probably the most important discouraging factor for foreign investment and inflow of capital. Political instability not only drives away foreign investment, it discourages domestic investors and encourages capital outflow.

In a capitalist and free market economy sources of funds for business investment and expansion depend on how strong and efficient is its financial market. Unfortunately, even after 33 years of its existence as an independent country, financial market in Bangladesh is still in a primitive state. Because of recurrent hartals and rampant corruption, public distrust in corporate accounting and

finance, business conditions are not congenial to stock market activities. Profitability of businesses is already cut by bribes to government ministers and officials even before factories are built and operational. If businesses are not profitable and the factors that foster economic growth are hindered by hartals, lockouts and corruption, financial market will remain ineffective to generate sources of funds for business expansion and cease to function efficiently. Thus the impacts of hartals have long-term political and bleak economic implications.

Most immediate effects of hartals are losses of many daily essentials worth millions of taka which are perishable unless refrigerated or stored in cold storage. A small fisherman whose catches are for daily sales, a small farmer whose produce, such as vegetables and dairy products, are ready to be traded for purchase of his daily essentials cannot afford to lose their sales. The next day when the hartal is called off, there is bound to be shortages of these daily necessities. The public rushes to buy whatever they can get driving prices up. This price inertia will not revert itself

in days to come and the result is an economy-wide inflationary pressure. Day labourers lose their wages and are thrown into uncertainty about post-hartal employment.