

## An act of block-headed irresponsibility

*Who is responsible for these deaths?*

A long power cut at a public hospital causing deaths of at least three patients -- it may sound totally absurd in today's context, but that's what really happened at Chittagong Medical College Hospital on Wednesday. Two seriously ill patients died during a three-to-four hour deliberate power hold-up at the hospital while another patient could not be kept alive since his life supporting machine was switched off, thanks to power cessation during a tropical storm.

We are outraged and demur at the reason being cited by the Power Development Board (PDB) for such an abrupt power cut at a major hospital in the country. Apparently, the PDB snapped the line as the CMCH authority had failed to pay the arrear electricity bills despite, what they claimed, repeated reminders for paying up. But the cruel irony is that the outstanding bills were for four months only and to top it all there was an understanding between the health ministry and the PDB not to disconnect the electricity lines since payment had been cleared up to December, 2004.

What an act of irresponsibility that was? This is nothing short of involuntary manslaughter at the altar of thick-headed ego-play by PDB officials.

But irrespective of whether the bills were paid or not on time, or whether electricity was snapped without notice, there should have been a fall-back system to tackle any contingency in the hospital. Why does not the hospital have adequate generator facility to cope with any emergency?

The hospital authority reportedly could not pay the electricity bills in time since there was not enough budget for it. How ridiculous it is! Are they implying that we do not have the money even for the most essential utility service in a hospital?

After an incident like this, we recommend action against those responsible for the ordeal at CMCH and make a strong plea for adequate budgetary allocation for essential services in all the public hospitals of the country.

## Hartal is a public outrage

*Show us something new*

THIS is unbelievable, thoroughly unnecessary and totally repugnant to public sensibilities. We also suggest that it is wholly unexpected of a political party which claims itself to be a champion of public rights to turn against these by thoughtless politics.

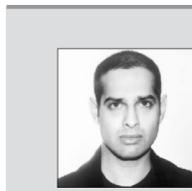
It was not on the public mind at all that the hartal syndrome could return with such vengeance. It was the farthest from their thoughts that a call for hartal would be foisted on them following what passed off generally peacefully on Wednesday as a Dhaka centred dawn-to-dusk shut down. The extended call is even worse than the original one; for, while the call for last hartal was confined to the capital that for Saturday is countrywide.

Yes, we are in full sympathy with the anger and anguish of the opposition over continuing lethal assaults on its leaders and inadequate government response to the situation topped off by investigation failures of the police to bring the culprits to book.

The day preceding the intended hartal is a Friday and at the other end is the Buddha Purnima holiday, so that there is a three-day vacation palmed off with scant regard for the HSC examinees, daily wage earners' plight and losses in manhours, productivity and national earnings, not to speak of the missing emergency medical attention to the seriously ill.

This is not just a meaningless hartal the opposition is calling for but also one that is in essence counter-productive as well even looked at from their self-interest point of view. Whatever public sympathy the opposition has drawn and there has been a groundswell -- in the wake of the dastardly murder of lawyer and AL leader Khorshed Alam Bachchu, is bound to be eroded by the repeat hartal call. The latter comes as a stock AL demand for the government's resignation because of its 'failure to run the country' which actually dilutes the focus on the public demand for trial and punishment of the killers of Khorshed and other opposition leaders. Election is where the people would like them to test their popularity vis-a-vis the BNP rather than punishing the public with frequent hartals. Tactically, hartal is impolitic in another sense which is this: a loss of public image for the opposition is a gain for the ruling BNP-led coalition.

# The future is now



ZAFAR SOBHAN

BANGLADESH needs a coherent and complete foreign policy vision. Right now our foreign policy seems to be formulated on an ad hoc basis and too often is focused on specific bilateral relations rather than on a comprehensive and cohesive understanding of the modern world and our needs with respect to it. The time has come for a complete re-envisioning of Bangladesh's place in the world and a complete reformulation of how we are to engage with our neighbours in the region and in the world at large.

The main need is to integrate ourselves completely with the world community. Time and technology cannot stand still at the Bangladesh border, and we should be sparing no expense to make sure that we are able to compete in the world market-place on an equal footing with everyone else. The most important thing is to bring us up to international standards when it comes to business practices, technology, and infrastructure.

If we are not up to the mark then we will be unable to avail ourselves of the advantages of the new global regimen, and will continue to fall behind. One example is the submarine cable deal to bring faster broadband cable access to the nation, something that we are in desperate need of. The government's failure to sign on to a similar accord in the early nineties is a good example of its almost criminal incompetence due to its lack of comprehension of

today's imperatives, and the entire nation has suffered from the resulting limitations.

Now, the government has belatedly signed on to a new protocol, but is far behind schedule when it comes to developing the infrastructure inside the country necessary to link us up to the submarine cable. These are the kinds of issues that the government needs to pay closer attention to if we are to ever have any chance of catching the technological wave that is sweeping the

relinquish their fiefdoms, and know that opening up will entail precisely that. In others, it may just be a case of yesterday's men and women being unable to come to terms with, and having no idea how to navigate, today's world.

Either way, these people need to be retired from public service. The nation needs to look towards leaders who understand the modern world, and are able to articulate a compelling vision for the future and lay out a coherent plan for how we

paign by the then-opposition caused the government to shelve the plan.

The benefits of transshipment are self-evident for both countries. India would get faster and more cost-effective access to its presently more or less inaccessible North-Eastern states, and Bangladesh would benefit due to the additional employment generated and trans-shipment fees paid.

There are a number of arguments put forward by domestic opponents

event, the transshipped goods would be subject to international protocols and conventions, which permit them to be checked, and which outlaw the illicit transportation of arms.

In any case, since 1980, India has been using Bangladesh waterways for limited transshipment of cargo, and up until 1965, transit rights were granted by the Pakistani government with no discernible ill effects.

Finally, when it comes to Bhutan

ing India and other countries transit rights through Bangladesh. With southern China and the Asean countries either on our border or just around the corner, there is serious money to be made letting them use the Bangladesh route.

More to the point, the ancillary benefits of opening up the country in this way are limitless. We gain nothing from shutting ourselves up in our own little box of 55,000 square miles. India, China, and South-East Asia are growing by leaps and bounds. If we play our cards right and open ourselves up to these countries, we can benefit from our proximity, but if we do not, then we are destined to remain an insignificant backwater.

Essentially we need to change the way we think about Bangladesh. Take the example of Chittagong port. There is no reason on Earth why we can't permit it to serve the land-locked hinterlands of North-Eastern India, Bhutan, and Nepal.

This would entail granting them transit rights, but the pay-off would be immense, including making them contribute towards the upgrading of the infrastructure that they will be using. It is true that Chittagong is not a deep-sea port, but that does not mean that it cannot be of great utility to our land-locked neighbours, and at the same time earn us millions if not billions of dollars a year in additional revenue.

Bandar Abbas in Iran and Rotterdam in Holland are examples of ports that have generated their host countries billions of dollars by opening themselves up to serve the land-locked hinterland.

But this requires a more enlightened policy with respect to opening oneself up to one's neighbours and permitting them transit rights through one's country. We need to do the same. The time has come for Bangladesh to make a decisive break from the self-defeating and inward-looking policies of the past.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

## STRAIGHT TALK

**Bandar Abbas in Iran and Rotterdam in Holland are examples of ports that have generated their host countries billions of dollars by opening themselves up to serve the land-locked hinterland. But this requires a more enlightened policy with respect to opening oneself up to one's neighbours and permitting them transit rights through one's country. We need to do the same. The time has come for Bangladesh to make a decisive break from the self-defeating and inward-looking policies of the past.**

region and that can help us on the path to modernisation and development.

The key is the understanding that as a nation we need to open up to the outside world. Too many people in government and the administration seem to have a Fortress Bangladesh mentality that translates into an unwillingness to open up the economy to outsiders and total lack of comprehension of the need to integrate ourselves with the community of nations.

These ministers and bureaucrats are living in yesterday's world. They need to move beyond out-dated and unhelpful concepts of narrowly-defined sovereignty and self-interest that are absolutely counter-productive to advancement in the world today.

Why the resistance? Why the old-school thinking? In some cases it may be because those who have profited handsomely from business and politics as usual are unwilling to

get there. For the sake of the nation, the days of old-school, self-defeating foreign policy thinking must come to an end.

Exhibit A when it comes to self-defeating foreign policy is our stance on transshipment of Indian goods through Bangladesh.

Transshipment contemplates only that Indian goods -- not Indians -- be permitted to travel through Bangladesh. Transshipment arrangements would permit the unloading of Indian goods into Bangladeshi trucks at the border which would then transfer them across Bangladesh to the opposing border. Thus the movement of goods would be accomplished without granting India the right to travel through Bangladesh at any point in time.

This was the deal which was on the table in negotiations between Bangladesh and India in 1999, before three continuous days of hartal and a well-coordinated cam-

of transshipment, none of them convincing.

First, there is apprehension over the probability that the gain to India will outweigh the gain to Bangladesh. Second, there is apprehension that permitting transshipment would diminish the prospects for market for Bangladeshi goods in the North-Eastern states of India. Another argument is that national security would be endangered if Bangladesh becomes involved in India's dispute with North-Eastern insurgents by granting transshipment facilities. Finally, it is argued that transshipment should be discussed in the context of India granting transshipment facilities from Bhutan and Nepal through India to Bangladesh.

India points out that the apprehension that the route would be used to transport arms to the North-East is unfounded, as military personnel do not travel separate from their weapons, and that, in any

and Nepal, these countries do have limited transshipment rights through India to Bangladesh at present. Certainly, these rights could be expanded and this is the kind of arrangement, together with greater market access to the North-East, that Bangladesh should be seeking to negotiate in return for granting India transshipment rights. But refusing to even entertain the notion of granting transshipment rights gets us nowhere.

The real problem is our mind-set. Part of the problem has to do with the anti-Indian sentiment in the government and administration which I have already written about.

But part of the problem is also that the concerned politicians and bureaucrats insist on clinging to out-dated and counter-productive notions of the appropriateness of opening up our borders and permitting others to use our land.

Forget about transshipment. We should really be talking about grant-

# Power of the people



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE answer may sound obvious even before the question is asked. Who won the mayoral election in Chittagong? Of course, it was one of the two candidates, if we talk about individuals. If we talk about the political parties, yes the victory went to the Awami League. But the real victory went to the people, if you ask me, people who exercised their voting rights to show that no matter what the politicians said, they could still apply their minds. I would say they voted for the candidate, not so much for the party.

Now that gives us hope. Those who know enough, knew it already that the incumbent mayor of Chittagong was going to win. The man did a good job during his past two terms, keeping a clean city, running a good administration and simply being adorable. The voters rewarded by sending him back to the office for the third time, despite the fact that they had snubbed his party in the national election.

That is the beauty of democracy. Keep the candidate separate from the party. But it is an ideal situation that doesn't always exist. The voters are constrained to give the majority to one particular party so that it can

form the government. Look at George Bush's second term and Tony Blair's third term. People have sent even them back to office.

Those are the countries where political and economic realities are different. A cow gets subsidy of USD2 per day in the United States and USD4 in Japan. I would assume that the cows in the UK must be hovering somewhere in between. In our part of the world, humans live on more or less USD1 per day. The Americans spend USD9 billion on

study shows that the opposite holds true in the oil-rich states. In countries where natural-resource profits come to a fifth of GDP, the switch from autocracy to electoral competition lowers the annual growth rate by a hefty 2.1 percentage points. In ordinary countries, where the state has limited cash at its disposal, the most efficient way to attract votes is to provide public goods: low inflation, rule of law, infrastructure that is carefully chosen to benefit the whole society.

Often voters have to choose between two evils. That is when elections bring compromise. Voters go with the flow, even though they don't know their candidates from a hole in the wall.

We all know how politicians descended upon Chittagong like locusts and how it was a fierce battle between the two political parties as each tried to prove that it held sway over the voters, and the city was nothing but its stronghold. We have seen how it was a battle within a

ment, be it at the city level or national. Many will always be ruled by a few and there is no exception to that rule, but democracy gives many a fair chance to choose which few will do that job. Democracy is the golden mean of political science, where the right to rule is balanced with the duty of power, making governments accountable to its people.

It has worked in Chittagong, and bet your jollies, it can also work in rest of the country. You don't have

thousand wins have produced no victory. Because people have been playing suckers to the candidates and the candidates have been playing suckers to their parties. It is a common sight these days when elderly party stalwarts walk behind young leaders like humble courtiers following their princes.

It is a sad, sad case. It is as also a shame that we have turned politics into an ingratiation business, all in the name of the leaders and their families, while people are like fronts for shady dealings. It works just like a Ponzis Scheme, which is basically a swindle in which a quick return on an initial investment paid out of funds from new investors lures the victim into bigger risks.

Think about it! Every time a party promises people to bring prosperity and wellbeing, it leaves them in more miseries than before, and then makes more promises to lure the voters to elect it again so that it can leave them in even more miseries. The election in Chittagong has been a breakthrough from that vicious circle, for once in many years showing that politics can be a healthy business between contestants and their constituency.

Going back to Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, a resource-poor country like ours will need elections to grow faster. And that faster growth will come even faster if people take those elections in their hands. First we need to ensure that politicians don't return to power unless they deliver on promises. Next step would be to hold them responsible for their mischief. The people in power will not behave unless they are showed what the power of people can do to them!

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

## CROSS TALK

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cinema tickets every year, which is more than the annual budget of many poor countries.

Let us face it. If people live in affluence, it has an influence on how they think. Likewise, if they live in poverty, it also equally affects their judgments. Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, two economists at Oxford University, have recently tied in all these through statistical analysis. They have showed that ordinary, resource-poor countries grow faster if they have elections. Quite a departure from the researchers until 1990s, who propounded that voting was bad for economic growth, contributing to the idea that dictators were better at imposing necessary austerity.

It is a paradigm shift. The same

Heartening to hear for the first time that poverty is bliss, that low income produces high outcome in the election years. It makes sense since the mayor of Chittagong has won the election. He delivered what the voters expected, good facilities of city life, clean roads, power supply, water supply, development projects and rule of law (excluding hostage-taking, which is a divisional rather than a municipal problem). It is obvious that the voters judged the man by his deed, not by his creed.

This is how elections ought to look, if money, muscle and manipulations were withdrawn. Here is the dichotomy between the politicians and the voters, one interested in how power is achieved, another interested in how power is exer-

battle, and the larger conflicts of national politics were force-fitted within the frame of a municipal showdown.

That is all the more reason why the glory goes to the people. They went above partisan interests and voted for clear judgment. The candidate has won in his own right, not for his political affiliation. He got it in the old-fashioned way: he earned it. How can you tell? He has been winning under three governments between two political parties, his own and his rival. He is popular in his job and he does it well. You would know it the moment you step on the soil of Chittagong.

If anything, that is surely the cornerstone of democracy. Let people choose their own govern-

to topple your opponent or shoot him down. Just take your case to the people, and let the voters do it for you.

Politics is a high-wire act of human psychology, a crucible of vices and virtues where people often manipulate public opinion by dint of perfidy and pretension. But you don't have to be confrontational all the time, threatening to topple the government if your candidate doesn't win or calling for ouster of government when you are celebrating his victory. That is catch-22, and you are damned if you lose and you are damned if you win.

For many decades now, people have been losing in this country, while candidates have been winning elections. And if you think of it,

# South-South dialogue

## Seeking deterrence to American influence?

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

BRAZIL has initiated a dialogue between South America and Middle East countries to develop their economies. Brazil has sponsored a summit meeting of the heads of the state of 32 countries of the two regions to establish a South-South dialogue. This has caused displeasure in America and to some extent in the European Union. The idea, if implemented, may become a counter balance to European Union integration. Brazil President Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva floated the idea of the two regions get-together in December, 2003 while he was on a five-nation trip to the Middle East. Algerian President Abdul Aziz Bouteflika was another brain behind holding the summit.

The summit of the heads of state of the two regions representing half a billion population was held for the first time. While Brazilian President laid emphasis on economic issues, Arab leaders called for solution of

the Middle East crisis and vacation of Arab territories which Israel occupied in 1967 war. Both Algerian President Bouteflika and Arab League Secretary General, Amr Moussa criticised Israel and the United States and called for greater solidarity with the Palestinians. It is interesting to note that President of interim puppet government of Iraq was invited to join the summit among other Arab nations. Only strongest allies of the United States in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan did not participate in the summit, apart from Syria. America's request to have guest status in the summit was turned down. Israel, the closest ally of the United States in the Middle East was not invited in the summit.

Rumsfeld, Defense Secretary and Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State during their March and April visit to Brazil persuaded Brazil and Chile, another US ally, to condemn Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez through OAS (Organisation of American States)

resolution for failing in its commitment to democracy without any effect.

America's policy to have their yes man as Secretary General of OAS, which consists of 34 countries, also failed. The election of Chilean former foreign minister Jos Miguel Insulza as Secretary General in April this year is seen as a defeat for the United States, but a successful diplomatic game by Condoleezza Rice to throw support in favor of Insulza at the eleventh hour, who was supported by Chavez of Venezuela. Bush administration is having bad relations with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

Both Condoleezza Rice and Rumsfeld criticised Venezuelan President who has become the supporter of Fidel Castro of Cuba. Bush administration did not see any justification of buying arms from the Russian Federation by Venezuela.

It may be mentioned that Venezuela recently bought 100,000 AK-

47 rifles from Russia, and is negotiating with Brazil to buy 24 Super Tucano multipurpose combat aircraft. Russia may also supply MIG -29 fighters and attack helicopters to Venezuela Bush administration expressed concerns because 'weapons deals could be used to help militant left leaning Marxist revolutionary armed forces of Colombia rebels'. Apart from this, President Chavez's decision to cancel a 30-year military agreement with the United States not appreciated by the latter.

Against this backdrop, the summit of the leaders of South American and some Middle Eastern countries in Brasilia is seen as an effort to counter political and economic influence of the United States. The summit was held at a time when the United States was planning to revive the stalled talks about free trade zone. According to US Today newspaper, "while the stated goals of the summit is to boost economic ties, the summit brought together leaders from

countries that resent America's forceful hand in everything from regime change to globalisation that critics say benefits only large multinational corporations."

It is understood that Brazilian President's initiative holding summit is to unite together developing countries to bring about pressure for issues like the reform of the United Nations including expansion of the Security Council and the elimination of rich country's subsidies for agriculture. Brazil is aspirant for permanent membership of the Security Council from Latin America.

Two diametrically opposite cultures met in Brasilia on a common platform and their leaders adopted Brasilia Declaration at the end of the two-day summit on May 12. The major themes of the declaration are: to work towards closer political and economic ties; that trade liberalisation talks promoted by developed nations like the United States could benefit the global economy, but current rules

of international commerce widen the gap between the developed and developing countries; that free trade must be harnessed to the benefit of world's poor; it denounces terrorism, but asserts the right of people to resist foreign occupation in accordance with the principles of international legality and in compliance with international humanitarian law.

The leaders rejected terrorism in all its form and manifestation and called for an international forum to define terrorism, saying the current definition has been set by wealthy countries. This clause in the declaration would certainly cause irritation in the western countries, including the United States and Israel in particular, but the stand by 34 nations of South America and Arab countries is certainly praiseworthy. Terrorism should be defined by international community keeping in mind the fact that people who are fighting to liberate their territories from foreign occupation should not be treated as terrorists.

Rather, illegal invaders should be declared terrorists by all standards. Jewish human rights group, however, did not welcome the clause in the declaration. It said that it "encourages every insurgent in Iraq, every al-Qaeda operative and every Hamas terrorist."

On the issue of Middle East, the declaration called upon Israel to disband settlements and retreat to its borders before the 1967 war and supported international efforts to peace in the Middle East. The Declaration stressed for the unity, sovereignty and independence of Iraq and for no interference in its internal affairs. This goes directly against the United States, which is an invading party along with Great Britain. On the other hand, the Declaration denounces US economic sanctions against Syria.

While US State Department refrained from commenting on the declaration, the Washington Times in its editorial comment of May 13 urged on the United States to establish a stronger voice in its

backyard.

The presence of so many leaders from Arab countries, including Palestinian President Abbas in the summit reflects their willingness to develop political and economic relationship with South American countries. Arab League Secretary General traced back cultural links between South American countries and Arabs, saying that "about ten million South Americans are of Arab descent." In the words of Brazilian President, the summit of like minded leaders 'marks the beginning of a new historic moment in the relations between the two regions.'

Mohammad Amjad Hossain, a former diplomat now resides in Virginia, USA