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Earthquake in Pakistan

I did not expect in my lifetime to see a great calamity in the form of a mammoth earthquake, which took place in north-eastern Pakistan some days ago,

causing such colossal damage to so many people in the country. However, I must say it has been a massive international response to President

Musharraf's appeal to friendly countries for immediate help for the survivors of the earthquake, which is most encouraging indeed. After a calamity of such a magnitude it is a gigantic task for any government to tackle the situation alone. I believe pledges have started pouring in from countries around the world for rendering help to the victims.

Rescue teams are already in the ground and many lives have been saved. The Pakistan army has been mobilised to coordinate all relief work. Immediate needs are temporary shelter e.g. tents, medicines, medical equipment, clean water and basic hygiene and essential foods. The latest death toll in this tragedy stands at over 50,000. Casualties on account of injury will be well above this figure. About 4 million people have been badly affected especially in Muzaffarabad and Balakot. After rendering immediate relief assistance to all these affected people, the Pakistan government will have to embark on a massive rehabilitation programme, which will need financial help and aid from friendly countries and international organisations. The Pakistan government alone

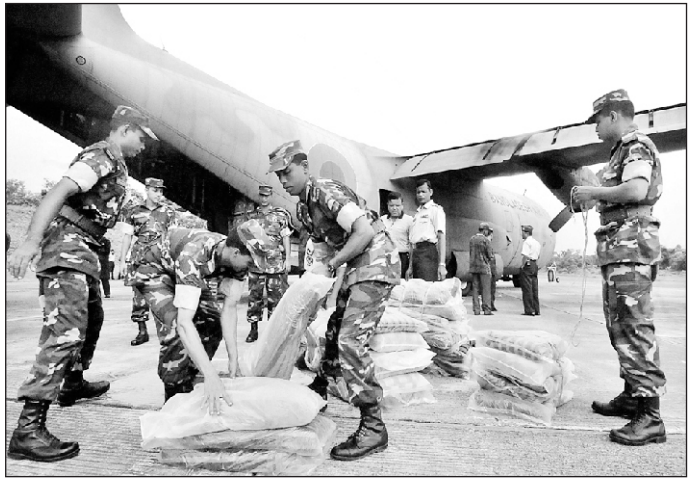


PHOTO: AFP

cannot undertake this gigantic task. It is heartening to find that countries, which were involved in conflicts, now are very much involved in cooperation to help one another, like in the case of Pakistan and India. India has already sent a plane load of relief materials to Pakistan and has offered any other assistance that

Pakistan may require. Finally, I would strongly urge our government and through this column, all big business houses, multi national companies and all citizens who are capable of contributing financial help to come forward and donate to President Musharraf's Relief Fund. **Rasul Nizam, Bangkok**

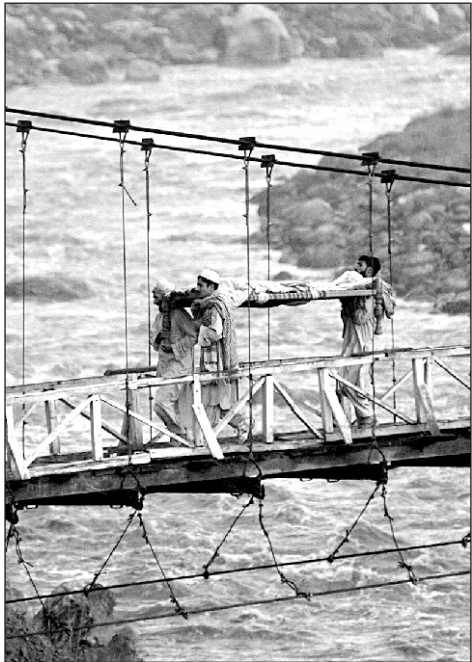


PHOTO: AFP

Secularism in politics

This is to thank Mr A Mahasen for his letter under the above heading (DS-3.10.05) and congratulate ex-Mayor Hanif for the bold articulation of his views on secularism, which evinces his sagacity and pragmatism. Secularism is indeed an illusory concept and there is a lot of misunderstanding about it, particularly among the common people, which has a negative effect on the popularity of the Awami League. Secularism grew as a movement in Europe to liberate the society from the bandage of the church. So they could progress towards modernism. But the situation in our society is different. In a sense we are more secular than many other societies: our mainstream education is secular, our legal and political systems are secular (excepting some family laws), our very outlook is secular, and all these have not incompatibly with Islam, the religion of the overwhelming majority, which accepts co-existence of different faiths, prohibits compulsion in regard to religion, and ordains justice to all irrespective of caste or creed, victor or the vanquished values which are universal and essential for peace and welfare of mankind.

To conclude, the AL should give a serious thought on the views of Mr Hanif in the light of reality for its own good. **MA Hashem**
Mirpur Road, Dhaka

A divided society

Unfortunate Bangladeshis are under dual pressure now, thanks to the inefficient leadership. The political divide is widening; and the religious bigots are now making their presence felt in politics; rather boldly, through chain bombing all over the country (now add the attacks on judge courts). The feeble explanations offered by the government lack credibility.

Earlier, the causes of the spate of bomb attacks on public meetings have yet to be unearthed. The plain fact is that the government is living dangerously! Can it ensure containment efforts? A tainted self (specially in public service) destroys itself - the timeless law of compensation! Common sense,

ordinary minds, and experience cannot steer a nation out of trouble; the right motivation has to be injected, above party gimmicks.

It appears that the regime is banking on the coming scheduled general elections; and might even advance the date. But there is another gridlock: the western powers are not happy with political performance and supports (for grabbing the vast energy resources of the country), and might bring in their own local team (as done in another Saarc country)

The Hounds of Baskerville are barking!
AMawaz
Dhaka

Science and human life

People all over the world are now living longer than ever before one of the major triumphs of scientific efforts in the twentieth century. Never before in the history of mankind has the average life increased so dramatically. According to the UN projection, several industrialised countries will have one third of their population over the age of 60 years by 2030. The world as a whole will have a third of its population over 60 by 2050. Now the health care personnel will have to take care of the elderly patients more frequently than in the past.

The elderly of most of the developing countries are not getting the attention that they deserve. The event of unprecedented increase in life expectancy has given rise to an emerging possibility of identifying the process of ageing when it is examined through the two dimensional biomedical approach to deal with the problems of the process.

The technological revolution has captured our imagination. Its impact on all walks of life has been discussed and felt for many years but the far-reaching effects of the demographic revolution have been relatively ignored. It is called a 'silent revolution' though the individuals, families, neighbours and nations throughout the world have felt its effects.

For the first time the biologists and the physicians started to study the ageing pattern making the biomedical

paradigm to be an effective basis of gerontology and geriatrics. Though it is in the next stages in the study of gerontology, the personnel working in the fields of psychology, sociology, economics, demography and anthropology became serious in the examination of ageing process, of course, the biomedical paradigm continued to remain the forerunner in understanding the complications of ageing trends. Subsequently, the environmentalists and nutritionists became involved with the problems of the elderly. A related issue that is likely to shape the approach to promote services to the elderly is that of ethics and human rights. There is the rapid proliferation of new biomedical information and information technology. Ethics today has been a subject of lively public interest to reflect a strong desire to assert some measures of control over the all-pervasive effects of information technology. The public want democratic control over their own lives as well as societies. For example, genetics offers the hope of therapies for previously incurable diseases but it also holds the risk of eugenics. While screening is a leading tool for prevention and cure, it may also lead to discrimination and breach of confidentiality. The researchers working in the field of religious gerontology plead that a segmented approach to the ageing process can only result on a reductionistic, one-dimensional caricature of the elderly. They emphasise that there is an imperative need for the inclusion of the spiritual dimension in the study of ageing.

Since time immemorial, the quest for possessing longer life has been pursued all over the world the developed and the developing, the urban and the rural, the rich and the poor. The ageing process starts at the time of conception and it is a lifelong course.

Professor MA Sattar
Member
Bangladesh Association of
Gerontology

What can we do?

A few months back a court in Pakistan dismissed a case filed under the family law, which forbids marriage of girls

below the age of sixteen. The learned judge ruled that marrying girls under 16 is permitted by our religion.

I am totally perplexed. In such a situation how is it possible to stop the marriage of under aged girls and how are we going to be benefited by following the various standards set by our religion.

Free and logical thinking is necessary to keep pace with the development of civilisation.

Ahmed Shah
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Free and fair elections

The main opposition AL and other parties have been demanding reforms in the Election Commission and the Caretaker Government, so that the next general election can be free and fair. In this regard we know that upazila election officials play a vital role at the grassroots level to make the election free and fair.

We were shocked when we came to know through the press that 150 JCD activists and relatives of BNP leaders had got appointments as upazila election officers. How could the appointments be recommended by the PSC? And how can the BNP claim that the next elections would be free and fair?
Abdus Salam
Meherpur

Religious extremism

People in Bangladesh are living in uncertainty and insecurity. Fundamentalism is increasing day by day and these so-called Islamic groups and the militants are busy in subversive activities, including bombing of public places. The role of the ruling party is so frustrating. It can't assure our security, rather many of its leaders are patronising the militants. Recently, our special force (Rab) caught the leader of the Harkatul Jihad named Mufti Hannan, which is a good sign. But the other side of the coin tells a different story. The government has totally failed to catch the big fish. The series bombing of 17/8 and recent bomb blasts in three districts show the real picture of the helplessness of our government. It is a matter of great regret that many university teachers (like Prof. Galib of

RU) are also involved in such type of activities. This "Jihadi Islamic (!) Andolon" is leading our country towards chaos and confusion.

These days Bangladesh is known as not only a country of corruption but also a state of fundamentalists and militants. The cover story of SWM (16th September) shows the dangers that we are facing.

Dipayan Goswami
University of Rajshahi

University admission

It is really good news that the number of seats in public universities will be increased. We welcome the decision of the university authorities. But it is a matter of regret that the number of seats, which is allotted to the students of Business Studies Group, is comparatively very low. For instance, in Dhaka University the number of seats for the Business Studies Group (c-unit) is only 640. On the other hand, the number of seats for other groups is above one thousand.

Sujan Ghosh
Khulna University

Load shedding

I think that like other basic rights, Electricity is the most fundamental right of citizens in a modern metropolis. Load shedding has become an indispensable part of our day to day life. There is hardly any area that is not affected by load shedding. In the holy month of Ramadan also, the situation is not improving.

I would like to ask the government through this newspaper what it is doing to improve the performance of the power sector.
Md. Zakir Hossain
Mirhazaribug, Dhaka

PM's address to the nation

I was pleasantly surprised to see our prime minister accept some failures in her recent performance, in the address to the nation on BTv. This is a good way to earn respect from the people, and I hope it is a trend the leader of the opposition will also emulate in her speeches.

But it occurs to me that in many other democracies (eg USA, Canada, UK, Australia, India), when the

government or ruling party makes an address on television or radio, it is a custom to allow the opposition to do the same, often as a rebuttal. This takes place every week after the US President's radio address to the nation, and on the next day in England after a "Party Political Broadcast". It allows the opposition to analyse the government's position and disciplines the ruling party to be accurate and responsible in its presentation.

My request to the prime minister: Please allow the opposition leader to make an address each time you do so, and set it up as a rule. This means if the prime minister becomes opposition leader one day, she will still have a chance to address the nation, as the population demands.

Sanjoy Nath
Sundarkhali, Chittagong

Living with qualms

I can never forget those days, when police arrested my sister, an aunt & a cousin along with some innocent school going children from a bus when they were returning from Shaheed Minar. They were taken to the Motijheel Police Station. Next day, they were sentenced to three days' jail without proper trial & sent to the Dhaka Central Jail during the April 30, 2004 crisis.

The incident that took place still haunts the children who went to Shaheed Minar with their elders to visit the place. At that time police arrested thousands of innocent people. Yes, such is the democracy of our country.

It's my notion that the present government is a semi-fascist one in the guise of democracy. There is fear everywhere.

After 33 years of independence, a girl killed herself because she had no food to eat. It's a national shame.

Solaiman Palash
East Jurain, Dhaka

New era

With the end of the Cold War, there is a horizon of new era for Muslims across the world. Let there be no grudge, hatred and ill-feelings; let there be clear understanding and forgiveness among Muslims.

Mr. Karl Marx gave a clarion call for the workers of the world to unite! But Almighty Allah through the Holy Quran gives us the opportunity to have unflinching unity and brotherhood among the Muslim Ummah worldwide. Let's not allow others to deviate us from reaching the common goal of political stability, economic development and social justice in all the Muslim countries.

Now by the grace of the Almighty since 1st July 2003, the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) countries are every day earning over one billion U.S. dollars. Let other Muslim countries have a small share of this fortune.

Golam Ashraf
DOHS Baridhara, Dhaka

Ineffectual Traffic Month

The ongoing Traffic Month has little visible impact. Violation of traffic rules, plying of unfit vehicles, emitting of black fumes-- everything is going on as usual. In the past, we observed a substantial decrease in the number of faulty vehicles in the city roads during Traffic Weeks. But this time around, nobody appears to bother about it.

The Traffic department is trying to make the people and drivers aware of the traffic system by announcing the rules and regulations through megaphone that is all we observe till now.

We expect stern actions in the remaining days of Traffic Month.
Md. Ibrar
One-e-mail



Corruption

The Honourable Prime Minister, in her television speech on 10.10.05 rightly indicated that her government has not been able to do enough to limit corruption. On 11.10.05 a Customs Assessing Officer at the GPO, has proved her correct, but with the added "gift" of bad behaviour.

School children in the US were getting new athletic uniforms, had heard about Bangladesh, and wanted to donate the old uniforms to young people here. They raised the money for postage and sent them for our National NGO-The Institute of Integrated Rural Development (HIRD)-to distribute free of cost among the young people of the five upazilas where we work (it may be mentioned that all 5 have BNP MPs).

Eight large boxes arrived at the GPO some unspecified time ago; through initiative of the NGO workers, we learned that the boxes had arrived at the GPO. Three workers went to pick them up on 11.10.05. The officer opened one box. He told the workers that they would have to pay about Tk. 20,000 in customs taxes. When the workers mentioned that they were old clothes and donated, he rudely behaved with them. He took two uniform sets. He would not give any documentation to show that the tax claim he made was as per the rules of the government.

The Honourable Prime Minister rightly mentioned on 10.10.05 that her government had not done enough to

curb corruption. The officer gave proof of that the very next day. In addition, he has shown that he can behave towards fellow citizens as rudely as he wants.

Is there no one to whom to appeal?
William Christensen
Consultant, IIRD

Durga Puja & BUET

I would like to draw the kind attention of the Durga Puja celebrants who are the most promising, potential and esteemed students of the highest seat of learning in the country.

They stand a good chance of getting jobs abroad. India, being the only country where the festival in question is a holiday (to my belief), has too many of them already. In case of employment, elsewhere except in India, the festival is not a holiday.

From my experience, I find that 50% of the expatriate employees in the Gulf countries are Indians and most of them are Hindus where Puja (commonly called Deewali, festival of lights) is not a holiday, followed by the Indian Christians with no holiday for Christmas.

I expect a logical and scientific way of thought from the scholars from the highest scientific educational institution in the country.

Thomas Gomes Bhura
Monipurpara, Dhaka

Hartal, opposition politics, and we



PHOTO: AFP

Raquib Shamsad's letter on October 2, 2005 DS reflects the exasperation we all feel. We have been hostage to the hartal calling opposition for the entire fourteen years of democracy. Hartal has nothing to do with our interests; it has everything to do with limitless greed of politicians for power.

Consider this: on May 18, 2005, the AL called a hartal, sending many ordinary working people out of livelihood for the day. On that day AL's General Secretary Mr. Abdul Jalil attended the annual general meeting of his business enterprise Mercantile Bank, in the secured environment of Hotel Sheraton.

The hartal picketers grabbed CNG driver Amir, who came out with his three-wheeler because he had no food at home. They doused him with gasoline, and then set him alight. He fought for his life for a few days, because he knew with him would die the hopes of his family to which he was the only earning member. He lost the battle.

This is struggle for people Awami League style. The leaders go on with their work on hartal day piling up on their millions, while Amirs are roasted alive for the crime of trying to earn a little money to feed their kids for the day. We, ordinary citizens, are helpless.

Ashish Ahsan, Uttara, Dhaka

Depletion of forests

Trees are the most essential bounties of Nature contributing to the sustenance of life on earth. To the industrialised countries trees are a treasure trove of biodiversity and Greenhouse gas sinks that absorb carbon dioxide and thus keep global warming in check. To the developing nations these trees, so to say, are resources ripe for exploitation: potential farmland, a free source of fuel and a storehouse of exotic kinds of woods that command high prices in the domestic as well overseas markets. And these forests and plantations must be continued to maintain ecological balance of the planet earth. Without any contradiction, the world needs a lot of them to store the carbon produced by the growing population that thrives on industrialisation. Forests work as carbon dumps: trees extract carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, emit oxygen and store carbon in the trunks, roots and leaves. These utilities call for preserving the forests that are still there after massive logging by human beings and restoring

those that have been destroyed. Not surprisingly, in Bangladesh trees are being destroyed in the old fashioned way. They are cut down for fuel, in the houses and brickfields and to meet the growing needs of croplands for the burgeoning population.

But other than this type of extinction, there is another deadly culprit at work, that is, plundering of the Sunderbans, forests in Cox's bazaar, Sylhet and in northern parts of Bangladesh, much beyond our knowledge. The disease called "the dying forest syndrome" which in the Sunderbans in Bangladesh is known as "top dying disease" strikes selectively but with deadly effect.

To preserve the environment, whether it is wetlands or forests in any part of the world, more so in Bangladesh, there must be an acceptable and rising level of economic well being for the humans who live in and around it.

Md. Asadullah Khan
On e-mail

