

Wishing all a glorious Eid

Let us honour its true spirit

THE month of Ramadan is coming to an end, and after thirty days of self-purification and looking inward and of self-abnegation from the crass materialism of the everyday world, now is the time for celebration and fulfillment.

Eid, the biggest festival of the Muslim year, is a time for joyous celebration and for reflection on the glory of the Almighty and his bounty. We would like to take this opportunity to wish our fellow countrymen and women and Muslims around the world every happiness. Eid Mubarak.

While we should never lose sight of the true significance of Eid, it should be noted that the worldly significance should also not be overlooked.

Eid and the days leading up to it are a time for a vast expansion of commerce and creativity, the evidence of which is apparent from the humblest of bazaar markets to the glittering shopping malls of the capital. It is a time of gift giving, which heralds an explosion in the apparel, handicrafts and food industries, among others.

Let us come right out and say it. If we were to better plan for this season and if coordinated thought were given to how best to harness its great commercial potential, the Eid season could emerge as a major boost to the economy.

Expansion of business is profitable, and there is nothing intrinsically wrong with this. More commercial activity ultimately leads to greater overall prosperity, and in a country that is so poor in economic terms, this is a big thing.

There are, of course, minimum expectations that should accompany this understanding, and we must do everything in our power to ensure that the true spirit of the season is not lost, but rather enhanced and honoured.

For instance, while it is understandable that that prices would rise during the Eid season, every effort should have been made to ensure that they were kept within reasonable limits and that the occasion not be exploited by the unscrupulous for selfish personal gain.

The second thing that we would like to see is that proper provision is made for people to return to their homes to be with friends and family. The current situation, rife as it is with bribery and extortionate ticket prices, and with insufficient public transport available to meet the people's needs, is unacceptable.

Eid speaks to the best in human nature. We note with pleasure the manner in which people meet and greet one another, exchange gifts, and attempt to heal enmities, and the generosity and goodness of heart that is shown to all.

Let us look forward to an Eid that is free from exploitation and truly celebrates the glory of Allah.

Lackadaisical traffic campaign

A no-go affair from the start

THE month-long traffic education and disciplining effort launched with fanfare in early October ends today on an ineffectual note.

But things could have been different had the idea of devoting a whole month to the goal of better traffic management been not mixed up with the month of Ramadan. People have been busy shopping fast-breaking food items and for the Eid as well resulting in heavy rush in the streets. So, they didn't have time to listen to the recitals on traffic rules blared out incoherently from microphones. Besides, most of the activities were confined to traffic intersections; the rest of the city saw business as usual. In fact, it was a non-starter from the beginning.

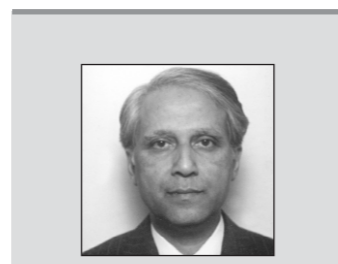
Those who planned it to coincide with the month of fasting might have had their our arguments, but the fact remains that the overlapping adversely affected both the traffic campaign as well as the Ramadan-related activities.

There has been parking anarchy and congestion in and around the shopping malls; even the deployment of community policemen could not help matters as the high-pitched mobility was simply too much to handle.

People, at least a section of them, would have learnt something about traffic rules had the exercise been organised at some other time of the year. The poor timing, total lack of planning and the failure to demonstrate imagination reduced the month to a futile exercise.

Perhaps a better way of imparting traffic education is to adopt a well-thought-out, locality-based problem-oriented approach which thence could be replicated within a broader framework of city-wide programmes. Obviously, what we have witnessed is an exercise in which the audience showed little interest, and for understandable reasons at that

The grand coalition in Germany: A difficult pairing



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

ONE is tempted to recall the humorous retort of former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder wherein he described how political coalitions are formed. He compared the usual slow process with the mating of two porcupines. Consequently, the world watched with interest how having fought each other 'tooth and quill', for more than three decades, the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Christian Democrats (CDU) along with Bavaria's Christian Social Union (CSU) finally came together in an awkward embrace.

Such grand coalition or period of 'cohabitation' (as it is known elsewhere in Europe) is not something new in German politics. It was first tried between the two parties back in 1966 after an indecisive result in the elections held that year. CDU's Kurt-Georg Kiesinger and SPD's Willy Brandt formed a grand coalition, with the two of them serving, respectively, as Chancellor and Vice Chancellor. Kiesinger had earlier taken over from Ludwig Ehard who himself had succeeded the long-serving Konrad Adenauer. This grand coalition did not go through a happy time. It limped along through difficulties till 1969, when Brandt, in coalition with the smaller Free Democratic Party of Walter Schell, formed a new government. The CDU went into opposition and Germany had its first 'socialist-dominated' government which through its policy of 'Ostpolitik' unleashed forces that eventually led to the reunification of Germany.

Germany passed through a period of flux since its September 18 election

and the formation of the grand coalition was seen as a way out of the political chaos that followed the election. The uncertainty reflected among its 62 million voters was also particularly disturbing because Germany, this October, was marking 15 years of national unity. The political impasse over the knife-edged deadlocked poll results (the Christian Union Alliance won 35.2 percent of the vote as opposed to 34.4 percent for the Social Democrats)

close ally of the outgoing Chancellor a number two (for all purposes as Vice-Chancellor) in the Cabinet and Minister for Labour.

Six Cabinet posts were set aside for the conservative Christian Union group. It included-economy, interior, defence, agriculture, education and family and also that of the Chair of the Parliamentary Speaker.

Merkel's victory has been welcomed, as expected, by the right wing

the SPD.

Another area that might create ripples will be the question of Turkey's entry into the EU. Merkel and her party had openly opposed Schroeder's support for Turkey's entry into the EU. Her view was based on the argument that a large Muslim majority country, relatively 'poor', would be out of place in a club of prosperous countries with 'predominant Christian values'. She supported

Left in German politics -- the SPD, the Greens and the Linkspartei control 54 percent of the seats in the German parliament. The majority in Germany, despite a Christian Democratic government is left of center.

It would however be wrong to underestimate Chancellor Merkel. She, in her own way is a tough minded liberal, who genuinely believes that she can clear away the obstacles that are preventing Europe's biggest

manoeuvre and have therefore already expressed pessimism about Merkel's ability to hold such a broad coalition together. They have also expressed doubts about whether she can achieve anything 'of lasting value'. In this context, they are pointing out that many of Merkel's proposed reform programmes have already been shelved-a flat-fee health care premium to lower non-wage labour costs, further labour-market reforms, such as loosening Germany's strict protections against dismissal, and radical tax reform.

I believe that such prognostication of failure is a bit hasty. The two camps have been able to nominate and put together a better group of people than anticipated. Yes they will have the challenge of not only convincing Germans that they need economic reform but also persuading them to feel better about it. They will also have the tough job of simplifying the country's less than efficient 'financial constitution' and the regulatory mechanisms pertaining to tax-revenue equalisation and joint public spending.

Chancellor Merkel has however already demonstrated that she has nerves of steel. One thinks that she, despite the odds, will give it a serious try, at least for a year or two. If it does not work, and if she finds that she has a reluctant coalition partner, both in matters of financial reforms and foreign relations, then she will probably seek fresh elections in the last quarter of 2007. Till that time, the SPD will have to learn to deal with her determination.

In the meantime, the market reaction to the election and the formation of the grand coalition has been positive. After a slight dip, the Frankfurt Stock Exchange's Dax index has come back strongly. The IFO business confidence index has also risen. This indicates that the European business community is willing to give the coalition a chance to prove itself.

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

POST BREAKFAST

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was further muddled as a result of the fierce wrangling over the post of Chancellor.

CDU's Angela Merkel finally won the battle and became Germany's first woman leader and the first from the former communist east to govern united Germany. Having failed to obtain outright majority, Merkel and her colleagues fought on the democratic principle that the biggest party in Parliament nominates the head of government. Merkel has reached the pinnacle after a remarkable political career which saw her entering active national politics in 1990, and since then, rising through the CDU ranks despite opposition from traditionalists in the male-dominated party.

Merkel won her fight to oust the incumbent Schroeder at the price of a power-sharing deal which gave Social Democrats eight of the 14 Cabinet posts, among them the powerful portfolios of finance to Peer Steinbrueck, a state premier and the foreign ministry to Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the Chief of Staff in Schroeder's Chancellery. The other important concession was the decision to have former Social Democrat party Chief Franz Muntefering, a

political parties in Europe. Conservative French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, who has already shown interest in seeking the French presidency in 2007, shot off a congratulatory message pointing out that 'the trust that German voters showed in your confirms that the ideas and values that we share are correct'. This was a pointed dig at French President Chirac, who was a close friend and ally of Schroeder. Poland and some of the other countries of Eastern Europe, who have been uneasy with Schroeder's warm links with Russia, have also welcomed the change in Germany.

As is usual, after any important election in Europe, analysts will focus on the new government's foreign policy. Trans-Atlantic relations with Washington will come under special scrutiny. The previous SPD government was not only critical of US and UK policy in Iraq but had also disassociated itself from the 'Coalition of the willing'. Merkel on the other hand had been more receptive and agreeable. It would therefore be interesting to see how the new grand coalition will treat this issue, given the fact that it is led by Merkel with a Foreign Minister from

the idea of Turkey gaining a status of 'privileged membership'. One will have to now wait and see how the coalition, with differing agenda handles this sensitive issue.

Despite all the hoopla, one thing is however clear. European nations -- France, Italy and now Germany -- are hamstrung by the weakness of their political leadership. The inconclusive nature of the elections in Germany, Europe's biggest and yet one of its most sluggish economies might further deepen the prospects for stagnation in Europe at a time when pressing domestic and international problems call for decisiveness.

Another aspect has been underlined. Stefan Theil had correctly observed that the difficulty that Germany's major parties have faced in assembling a governing coalition may be 'a tipping point'. Michael Meyer has also interestingly pointed out that 'with the decline of the SPD and the CDU, coupled with the rise of the radical Linkspartei and its split from the Social Democrats, the country's political landscape has not only fractured but veered further to the left'. The CDU lost a 20 point lead in the polls and today, the parties of the

economy from realising its potential. She also appears to be ready to take the necessary risks in this regard.

I had several meetings with her in 2001 and 2002, when I was Ambassador in Brussels, and recall her firm and quiet confidence that unemployment in Germany can be reduced through encouraging an increase in domestic consumer spending and gaining a greater share of global exports of manufactured goods. Last year Germany became the world's top exporter, larger even than the USA, despite the fact that the American economy is five times bigger than Germany. Given her past comments, many analysts will now monitor Merkel's handling of the scenario with care.

Others in the EU will also carefully follow how her coalition plans to tackle the plugging of the nearly US\$ 42 billion budget shortfall by the end of 2006 in order to bring Germany within EU budget limits in 2007. It may be recalled here that years of sluggish growth has pushed Germany's budget deficit over the EU-mandated limit of 3.0 percent of GDP.

Some pundits have pointed out that Merkel has very little room to

Garments blame game: A response

ANNISUL HUQ

THAT the Ready Made Garments industry in this country is facing a turmoil is not news to any. That there is detailed scrutiny being made against any random or occasional violence, accidents is not news, either. That it is natural and rational for anyone to react to any such blame being directed towards the entire industry should not be taken as a surprising gesture by anyone. Rather a considerate, balanced viewpoint from all responsible entities are expected at this point of time.

Reference is made to Dr. Hameeda Hossain's article captioned: Garments Blame Game, published in The Daily Star on October 30.

The article has raised questions that relate directly to me and my recent comments, hence I feel it obligatory to respond.

Firstly I must thank Dr. Hossain for her detailed opinion on RMG. We fully appreciate her concern to ensure compliance of national laws and international standards that are applicable in Bangladesh. However, some of the international standards are not attainable for Bangladesh owing to many reasons. We also

acknowledge the necessity of mutual understanding and cooperation between the workers and the entrepreneurs in building a healthy industry.

You would all appreciate that with the phasing out of the MFA and withdrawal of duty free access of our readymade garments to the USA market, our industry is going through a critical phase. It has come to our

edge. We have tried giving some feedback to the government in this regard. While we try actively lobbying for our trade during our trips abroad, there are many anti lobby movements that happen behind closed doors. This is not exposed to the public. Our democracy, political instability, apparent fundamentalism, and our environment are issues that are unprofessionally and falsely used by

working in Bangladesh about whom we should be careful.

I do not find it appropriate to comment on the factual issues related to the incidents that took place at Savar and Kanchpur, save that we would also welcome a neutral and independent enquiry into these incidents. By the same token, I do believe that it is the responsibility of the government to conduct an inquiry

Kanchpur. I also voice my unity with her. BGMEA strongly believes in taking strong action against such an aggression. In this regard, an enquiry committee has been formed by us with a few trade union leaders. Violation of prescribed working hours, safety measures, pregnancy benefits, and all related laws of the country is not acceptable to BGMEA, and we have started a transparent

was BGMEA's proposal to build a trust fund for the workers of Spectrum funded by the buyers and BGMEA.

BGMEA did not blame INCIDIN and OXFAM in the press conference. It was a random comment made by a trade union leader. BGMEA rather acknowledges with gratitude the transparent support that OXFAM continues to provide to our trade. The minimum wage issue is discussable. BGMEA strongly maintains that regularity in payment of wages must be made. However, bonus still remains an optional offer (as per the laws of the country) as it depends on various factors related to the owner's financial capability.

Any issue relating to workers, in spite of its gravity and content is dealt appropriately by BGMEA. As a result, over 6,400 cases, major and minor, mainly between the owners and the workers, have been negotiated and settled by BGMEA arbitration committee over the last 15 years.

I believe, with detailed and constructive criticism, the industry definitely has a better chance of survival in the present world of globalisation and extreme competitiveness.

Annisul Huq is President, BGMEA.

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notice that some organisations are endeavouring to exploit the situation at the behest of vested interests. The activities of such organisations are destabilising and disrupting the business environment of our industry, which may result in us being driven out of the world market with catastrophic consequences for our economy.

These organisations carry out activities from various positions, mostly unavailable to public knowl-

our competitors in order to kill our competitive edge. All this is pretty closely felt and experienced by us involved with the process but can hardly be made public.

It has never been my intention to blame all NGOs working in Bangladesh. But I believe it is my responsibility as the representative of the millions of workers and entrepreneurs engaged in the industry to bring to the attention of all concerned the activities of a few organisations

into the activities of NGOs and unions active in the garments sector in order to ascertain and identify the few organisations working against the interests of the industry. We are confident that bona fide NGOs would find no reason to be concerned about any such inquiry.

I fully agree with Dr. Hossain asking us to acknowledge with frankness our own handicaps and points of weakness. To her comment on the maltreatment of the female worker in

campaign against all such activities. BGMEA has strongly supported establishment of a national forum for compliance which will attempt standardisation of a code of conduct with the Commerce Minister chairing it.

Dr Hossain's reference to the workers of Spectrum Sweaters not being paid is inaccurate. Taka 100,000 has been paid to the families of the deceased. Moreover, the figure of Euro 300,000 being donated by the buyers is also not correct. Rather it

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR 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.

People love rankings

The Transparency International Corruption Perception Index has been published and has again created a stir. Is the sensation justified on logical grounds?

Firstly, it is logically necessary that, in any ranking, some members should be at the bottom and some at the top - this is the meaning of a ranking.

Secondly - and this is more important - the statement "Bangladesh is the most corrupt country in the world," says nothing about Bangladesh. To maintain that it states a quality of Bangladesh is to confuse a relation with a quality.

Let me illustrate. "Everest is the highest mountain in the world," says nothing about Everest. It is not a quality of Everest that it is the highest mountain in the world. It is a rela-

tionship between Everest and other mountains. On the other hand, if I say, "Everest is 29,029 feet high," then I'm stating a quality of the mountain. I'm saying something about Everest, and not about other mountains. In short, the former proposition states a relation; the latter states a quality.

Therefore, the statement "Bangladesh is the most corrupt country", says nothing about Bangladesh. If we observe that "Bangladesh is a poor country," or "Bangladesh is a tropical country," then we are stating its qualities.

Unfortunately, we seem to believe that TI's finding that Bangladesh is the most corrupt nation says something about Bangladesh. Nothing could be further from the truth. It says nothing about Bangladesh. Therefore, the entire exercise on the part of TI is a vacuous enterprise.

As one philosopher put it, "The

worse your logic, the more interesting the conclusions...."

Iftekhar Sayeed
Dhanmondi
Dhaka

Bird flu pandemic: are we ready?

The possibility of a pandemic of Avian flu disease, also called bird flu disease, which is caused by the avian flu virus, is drawing attention from world leaders now.

Avian flu is virus that used to be seen in wild birds. But the virus mutated and spread in poultry. This flu virus is carrying all the symptoms of being pandemic. There is a pattern of flu pandemics that occurred in the world. Scientists say that it takes 30 to 40 years for virus to mutate to stronger one that is resistant enough to cause a pandemic among humans.

The 1918 Spanish flu pandemic

killed 20 million people worldwide.

The 1957 Asian flu pandemic killed more than one million after spreading from China.

The 1968 Hong Kong flu pandemic killed approximately one million people.

The 1997 Avian flu outbreak occurred in Hong Kong, first in chickens; then, it jumped to humans. After six people died, officials ordered all chickens slaughtered.

The 2003 Avian flu virus, H5N1 strain, a mutated form of the virus, infected poultry populations in many parts of Asia and jumped to humans again. Since December 2003, H5N1 strain has infected 117 people and killed 60 of them. Thus, more than 50% of infected people died.

The possibility that this Avian flu could mutate to spread infection from human to human is very high. And, if that happens, a pandemic will be

inevitable. A UN health official warned that a pandemic of this sort could happen at any time and could kill 5 million to 150 million people throughout the world.

WHO recommended a prophylactic strategy for all countries to follow: http://www.who.int/csr/resources/publications/influenza/WHO_CDS_CSR_GIP_05_8-EN.pdf There are two drugs that have proved to be effective, but not 100%, against this H5N1. But both of these drugs, Tamiflu and Relenza, cannot be produced in bulk to supply to all the countries on a short notice - even the production will not be enough to supply only to the rich countries. Also, the virus can develop resistance against these drugs. In that case, creating a new effective drug may take a long time.

As an overpopulated country,

with a feeble health infrastructure, Bangladesh is at high risk, should a pandemic occur.

I hope our media will help make the government and the people aware of the impending danger.

Ataur Katebi
Gainesville, Florida

Eid shopping

People are spending lavishly on Eid shopping. That is understandable, but conscious citizens can hardly overlook the fact that a huge number of people in the northern region are spending their days amid extreme poverty; many of them are starving.

We should show a greater sensitivity to the matter and cut our Eid budgets to help those people in distress.

Mansoor Raja
Dhaka

Most corrupt country

It is indeed very sad news to know Bangladesh retained its position as number 1 as far as corruption is concerned. It is indeed very demoralising news.

Just after the news the opposition leaders started to condemn the government and started throwing mud, but one thing they must bear in mind is that they too are Bangladeshis and it is as disgraceful to them as it is to the government.

It is high time the opposition sits with the government and sorts out the problems in the parliament. It is not only the government's fault, the opposition is also to be blamed to some extent for our poor image.

If you love your country truly and if you consider yourself a patriot, then hartal is not the solution, come and speak in the parliament. If you are denied that opportunity in the parlia-

ment then come and do what you are doing now.

Badal
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Desolate Dhaka

The DCC should take advantage of the fact that a huge number of people will leave Dhaka on the eve of Eid and clean the city as far as possible when there will be empty roads and lanes and no rush of pedestrians.

This is really time to clear the city of unwanted garbage and other stinking materials. Well, if the DCC employees are on leave, they cannot do much.

So you need better planning to handle all such issues.

Habib
Dhaka