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FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

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Grand rally today

Both govt and opposition must show restraint

TODAY is the day that has been announced for a grand rally to be held by the 14-party opposition coalition in Dhaka, and the entire nation waits on tenterhooks to see it pass off without any untoward incident.

It is incumbent on us to point out at this moment the background to the current rally. Context is important and it would not be possible to fully appreciate the issues involved without recourse to recent events in Bangladesh and the current political climate.

On the one hand, the government's record of sparing no effort to disrupt these kinds of opposition activities is well known. The government has time and again sullied its own reputation by resorting to highhanded and excessive means to deny democratic space to the opposition. Fears that the government could use today's rally as an excuse to unleash violence upon opposition leaders and activists may not be ill-founded.

On the other hand, the government has a duty towards the people to ensure that law and order is preserved and that the general environment remains safe and secure. The periodic terror attacks serve to underline the need for the government to remain fully in control of the situation, thus one cannot fault it for being security-conscious at such a time.

The important thing is to strike the right balance. The government must make sure that it acts out of concern for security and not merely to harass and intimidate opposition workers and activists.

Initial signs are not encouraging. Already over 4,000 opposition activists and workers have been arrested, and harassment and intimidation are widespread. The government seems to be using security as an excuse for its actions, rather than being motivated by unalloyed security considerations.

The government must allow the opposition to hold their rally without any hindrances. The rally is a legitimate and constitutional means of expressing their political opinion, and should not impinge on the lives of the general public. There is no justification for government to preempt it by obstructionist methods.

By the same token, the opposition must ensure that there is no violence and that people's lives are not disrupted by their agitation. Both sides thus have a serious responsibility before them. Lest either side forget, confrontation between the two of them will only serve to direct attention away from the terrorists.

Goutam, another victim of impunity culture

When will the administration wake up?

THE cold-blooded murder of Goutam Das, bureau chief and correspondent of daily Samakal in Faridpur, has left the entire journalist community shell-shocked and feeling increasingly vulnerable to machinations of vested quarters whose raw nerves are easily exercised over exposes of their misdeeds.

As many as 13 journalists have been killed in the southwestern region of the country and yet not a single case has been resolved and culprits brought to justice. Add to this the occasional doses of journalist bashing by some ministers and MPs, and you have an ideal fuel to the fire of reprisals against journalists who dare report facts out of professional obligations.

It looks as though there is a pattern to the relatively high number of journalist killings. But it seems the vulnerability of journalists to violence and vengeful action is increasing with a downslide in law and order marked by rise in terrorism and bombings.

Goutam's killing is yet another wake-up call for the administration to gear up the investigations into all the killings that have taken place so far. As in most other cases, the perpetrators of Goutam's murder must be tracked down and punished along with those who called the shots from behind.

For quite sometime, there have been both silent and open hostilities from some familiar people in high places towards the journalist community. On several occasions, working journalists have suffered humiliation and harassment both at the hands of law-enforcing agencies and certain powerful people. This has created an environment, which is neither conducive to nor desirable for the growth of healthy journalism and news dissemination in a democratic country.

Government must ensure the security of journalists and help them carry out their professional duties without any fear for their lives. For, in the ultimate analysis, the government stands to benefit from good journalism as much as the people do.

Our condolences and sympathies to the bereaved family and relatives of Goutam Das.

Towards an endgame in Syria?

M ABDUL HAFIZ

EVER since the Bush administration declared Syria as a country that had WMDs and placed her on the priority list for the pursuance of Bush doctrine of regime change, a barrage of accusation has been building up against the country while Washington's neo-con cabal advocates a militaristic approach towards Syria.

The charge-sheet is updated with every negative and disruptive development in the region against a beleaguered President Bashar who is now virtually isolated and fighting for the survival of his regime after being implicated by a UN enquiry into the murder of Lebanon's former prime minister, Rafik Hariri.

A UN report published recently named President Bashar's powerful brother-in-law and other Lebanese and Syrian security officials in the February 14 assassination of Hariri, redrawing overnight Lebanon's political landscape. As a result, the ruling regime in Syria is visibly shaken because it has documented now what everybody in Lebanon and Syria had suspected, that the latter was involved in Hariri's assassination in one way or another. "This is another nail in the coffin of the Syrian regime," said Volker Perthes of the German Institute of International and Security Affairs and an expert on Syria.

It may be recalled that Syria came under severe US pressure for the withdrawal of her troops from Lebanon -- where they were stationed since 1989 under Taif agreement after a civil war broke out there -- immediately after the reelection of President Bush. Finally vide UNSC resolution No. 1559, Syria complied with the US demand, thus averting a crisis.

The murder of Lebanon's former prime minister -- known for his advocacy against Syria's military presence in Lebanon -- provided the US with another opportunity to turn the screw on a recalcitrant Syria, and she easily prevailed upon the UN Secretary-General to take cognisance of the assassination. An obliging Kofi Annan appointed a German prosecutor, Detlev Mehlis, to conduct the investigation and submit his findings. After an intensive investigation by the UN appointed prosecutor, the Lebanese intelligence personnel and head of the Lebanese presidential guards were taken into custody, although no Syrian suspect was as yet identified. It was however widely reported that General Gazalleh, then head of Syrian intelligence in Lebanon and powerful Maher Assad, the brother-in-law of the Syrian president, were to be interviewed by Detlev for their possible complicity.

This is not all. The latest charge-sheet includes allegation of "Syria allowing its territory for those bent on sowing murder and mayhem in Iraq." Syria is also blamed for its "association with terrorist elements in Gaza and West Bank" to sabotage the peace process. These accusations are part of the policy of Bush administration that seeks regime change in countries deemed hostile to US interests.

To defuse the looming crisis, Bashar had planned to attend the UN summit for availing the opportunity to interact with the world leaders in New York to plead Syria's case. He was ostensibly thwarted in his attempt by an unusual delay in the issuance of his US visa and later, of course, by Detlev's visit to Damascus on September 10. Now should Mehlis report establish a Syrian complicity in Hariri's death, President Bashar and his regime will, in fact, be doomed. For it is bound to invite international odium against Syria leading to the weakening of the Bashar's authority. It would thus provoke a national crisis -- an ideal scenario for the US to pursue its agenda of regime change.

In 1984 when President Ronald Reagan withdrew the US forces from a then pro-US Lebanon following a suicide attack that killed 244 US marines, the conservative Republican and sometime US presidential candidate Pat Buchanan aptly said: "It is dangerous to be America's enemy but fatal to be America's friend."

Since then, the people of Lebanon had reason to recall those words. In 1990, President Bush Sr traded Lebanese sovereignty for President Hafiz-Al-Assad's support in the first Gulf War, which was decisively won by US-led coalition forces while Lebanon was ceded to Syria to be under the latter's military occupation. Today, various regional media outlets report that their sons, George W and Bashar Assad may be working on another deal -- an arrangement driven by realpolitik considerations. Bashar, taking a page out of Muamar-El-Gaddafi's playbook, is alleged to be negotiating with the Bush administration the modus vivendi to save his regime from the findings of a UN investigation into the assassination of Hariri.

The car bombing that killed Hariri precipitated huge protests in Lebanon and around the world forcing Syria to vacate her military occupation. This was fondly dubbed "Beirut spring" and considered an unequivocal triumph for the Bush administration, notwithstanding his colossal failure is stemming political chaos at home and containing escalating violence next door in Iraq.

Despite a short-lived Beirut spring, the Bush administration does realise its limitations in Lebanon which also witnessed massive pro-Syrian upsurge. As the last Syrian soldier crossed the border, an insidious campaign began to destabilise Lebanon. Scores of bombs targeting Christian areas gave rise to vigilante groups and heightened sectarian tensions. The security situation deteriorated immeasurably. Hizbollah, the dreaded outfit -- which alone could compel Israelis to vacate South Lebanon -- is still alive and active in Lebanon despite the US-Israeli efforts to wipe them out.

Now those Lebanese who counted on Bush's support are increasingly concerned over the deal that the US president might have agreed to cut with Assad to short-circuit the Mehlis report, granting top Syrian officials immunity in exchange for Syria's significant cooperation and support over Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestinian-Israeli peace process. It is not for nothing that Henry Kissinger once remarked that there couldn't be a war in the Middle East without Egypt and no peace without Syria. It is more so if that peace settlement has to be achieved in a way scripted by America.

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BIISS.

PERSPECTIVES

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Can't the people embark on Saarc?

BOBBY HAJJAJ

"AND they were garlanded with bouquets of exotic flowers, regaled with magnificent feasts -- a celebration befitting the court of Louis the XIV. Tables were adorned with voluptuous delicacies and the fairest maidens in all the land stood alongside to serve. Hosts and guests alike toasted to their vaunted egos while we the people gazed with awed expressions, ignorant of the grandiosity of the scenes we beheld."

Would that be a fitting portrait of the just-concluded and highly celebrated thirteenth Saarc summit, a demonstration in pomp and profligacy that we Bangladeshis have never before witnessed? So, what was the meaning of it all: the city beautified; state coffers compromised; and the city draped in a security curtain? What are to be the fruits of such lavish expenditures? How are we the people to be benefited from these ostentatious displays, and why were the people left in the lurch during this whole hullabaloo?

There was a grand party in town, celebrations the likes of which we could not previously comprehend. So why were we made to go on a two-week extended vacation. Not two months ago were our business communities incensed over the introduction of a two-day weekend, what are they thinking now? How are they rejoicing? After all never have we celebrated a Saarc summit with such pomp, and we have hosted quite a few. But seriously, did the summit necessitate the cordoning of all major transportation routes and bringing the lifeline of Dhaka to a standstill? The traders of Kawran Bazaar alone have faced losses of over a hundred million takas daily, how can that bode well for our fledgling economy? Would not the government have received more support for their initiative if they had not shunned the people so brusquely?

Of course there were security concerns. But did not our Finance Minister declare our law enforcement the best in the region (not surprisingly on that very day a suicide bomber blows up two court justices). Funny how our authorities will go to any expense to portray to the world how safe and free from violence our nation is, but hardly lift a finger to actually rid it of terror.

So what exactly was achieved during these three days of heightened security and skilful PR, apart from grand receptions and polite dialogues? A feeling of mutual trust was created; there was a lot of camaraderie among leaders of the seven states. However, the states once again stood their ground on maintaining the status quo. Our leaders discussed, and professed their consolations to the people of Pakistan for the devastating earthquake, to the people of Sri Lanka for the destructive tsunami, and the famine. Did everyone forget to mention that there rages famine in northern Bangladesh? Famine it seems is an issue considered taboo in civil dialogues.

Three actual agreements were signed which, however auspicious, do not skim the surface of the issues that need to be urgently addressed. It has become politically correct to include poverty alleviation, and combating terrorism, in any and all state discussions, other than that mutual aid in confronting natural catastrophes, and increase of trade and economic relations were also discussed.

Though our member nations are geographically contiguous and maintain a close social kinship, the socio-economic state of the seven member countries vary immensely. A popular catch phrase for political stalwarts the world over has become "global terrorism."

Will our esteemed leaders please explain this global branding! Where lie the core similarities between the LTTE in Sri Lanka, the Maoist insurgents in Nepal, the separatists in Kashmir, and the JMB in our own beloved state? How again, can we deal with such disparate problems if we cloak them all under a single banner? Notwithstanding the problems of the other states, can it not be stated that the terrorism that we fear today in our cities and even in our homes is fully home grown? If it was the indifference of our law enforcement authorities and the tacit support of some of our glorious leaders that gave rise to most of these groups and their dastardly "Bangla Bhais" then should not the remedy for such terrorism also necessitate a cure from within our establishment. What is needed is the intent of our authorities, which is criminally lacking; no other nation can help us there.

But speaking of terrorism and violence, the most integral point our leaders have missed, and that too with intent. They have discussed cross-border terrorism, and yet not an agreement was reached on the prevention of the most insidious form of cross-border terrorism, vis-a-vis state authorised terrorism. Border tensions between BSF and BDR are ever ignescent. Innocent lives are lost on a daily basis. What we needed from this summit was some conclusive dialogues and an end to the strife that inhabitants of border regions endure every day of their lives.

A fifty-three-point declaration was issued pledging to truncate trade barriers and boost economic growth in the region, and the creation of Safta. A noble undertaking indeed, until one is reminded of a similar body with a very similar name -- Nafta. Nafta has shown how for developed nations open markets equate into economic growth, but not so for nations who have somewhat a backseat on the development train. A brief study of the effects of Nafta on Mexico will illustrate the case. So how productive can following such examples be for our nascent economy?

According to a news report, the Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry has estimated that trade between the member nations shall multiply almost three fold once Safta goes into effect. Those are rather impressive figures, though with questionable authority. But the primary question remains which countries will finally pocket that increased volume of trade. Open markets will not automatically mean growth for nations like ours. It has been argued by many that our current Finance Minister's far-sighted and holistic policy of opening up our markets has already done quite a lot of damage to our burgeoning and indigenous industries.

Our leaders need to understand that there has to be a fair amount of balance in all negotiations. Completely opening up our markets to more mature economies like India, and China (who might become members soon) will not auger well for our own economy. Saarc needs to be a platform for the important issues that need to be addressed, not just a PR frenzy. Issues that are of immediate concern to our people were not tabled at the conference; border tensions and water sharing with India were not even brought up. This summit seemed more intent on giving awards and toasting past leaders.

We need to use platforms like Saarc to bring attention to issues that need urgent resolution. Our leaders need to put their noses to the grindstone and do what is best for the nation and the people at large. Let us not just sign agreements for the sake of signing agreements, nor for the sake of boosting our political PR.

And one more thing, let's hope next time the circus comes to town the townsfolk is allowed a peek at the fat lady. We really have had enough of the backs of those black bandanas. Let us also participate in the festivities. Let the people embark on Saarc.

Bobby Hajjaj studied politics in USA. He is now a local entrepreneur.

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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.

Slum-life

The very idea of slum-life gives a bad impression that it is something which is very unhygienic, crowded, unhealthy, and unsuitable for living. This fact is true like day-light!

Anyway, the rural people are rushing to urban areas for employment and better life, but actually they experience the reverse and suffer untold miseries when they come to the city. The rich put on nice dress but the poor cannot get dress. The rich people eat delicious food but they hardly think that these foods have been produced by the poor peasants. This trend should be changed by hook or by crook.

Lastly, the life and realities faced by slum-dwellers are really horrible. So, it is our sacred duty to provide them fresh food, shelter, and medical care.

Sarwar Ali
Dhaka

Newly released English movies

"Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire" was released worldwide on November 18. While the Pottermaniacs all over the world will be enjoying the movie, we Bangladeshis will have to appease our minds by watching pirated, hazy version of the movie. Whenever a blockbuster movie gets released our hearts sink with despair. Even our neighbouring city Kolkata enjoys the privilege. But why are we deprived? All of this could change if the government becomes a little generous. Screening of entertaining and blockbuster English movies all across Bangladesh will generate a lot of revenue for our ever tax-hungry finance minister, Mr. Saifur Rahman, through VAT, supplementary duties, etc. Besides, it will curb piracy to a great extent, as the people will be able to watch the movies first-hand.

Something must be done in this regard. I humbly request Cineplex and other premier cinema halls all over Bangladesh to bring a revolution by screening newly released English movies (of course after being censored by our hon'ble film censor board!).

Syed Towhid Hossain
Lalmatia, Dhaka

Saarc summit

I would like to pose a question about the euphoria of the government regarding the Saarc summit. The decorations and lighting of the Sheraton Hotel and the grand welcoming arrangement to receive the honourable Saarc representative members, including the sophisticated security measures like patrolling the city with guard dogs and using mine detectors in order to ensure safety for the coming guests are somewhat acceptable, but only to some extent.

It is not tolerable for general public like us who are well experienced to frequent shocks and frustrations while skimming through the newspaper headlines of unexpected bomb blasts and grenade attacks taking the lives of innocent civilians which occurs due to the negligence of the government, as they never take these safety measures beforehand like they are now doing. It is my view that this grand Saarc summit would make little difference, if any, in alleviating poverty from our country. The government is making unappreciative expenditures just for presenting Bangladesh as a country of "Hospitality and Heritage" while failing to realise that it has already lost its chances to erase the notorious reputation and the name-tag before Bangladesh as the number one corrupt country.

Bangladesh is an underdeveloped country and the beautification on occasion of Saarc summit is extremely costly and is in fact one of the reasons for our country's economic hardships. Moreover it is not the government's money which the government is spending lavishly, but the national property. In addition to the two unreasonable official holidays, now the government has imposed more holidays. The government must not overlook that even one day holiday is not affordable for low class poor people whose bread is dependent on daily income.

I hope the government makes good use of what it is spending on Saarc, otherwise the occasion of Saarc summit would be nothing more than a mere razzle-dazzle and a slap on the face for our poverty-stricken country.

Naome Syed
Mohammadpur

GrameenPhone network

I'm a loyal subscriber of GrameenPhone. I haven't switched my subscription to any other mobile phone operator whereas many of my friends are availing the lucrative offers of other mobile phone operators. The reason for this is that, wherever I go I am sure that I will be in touch with my family and friends. But recently on my visit to Saint Martin Island I found no network from Ukiya (in Cox's Bazar). What really got me disheartened was Aktel and Citycell subscribers could talk on their phones even from Saint Martin Island. I feel like I have been cheated right from the start of my subscription. Maybe Grameen-Phone should give a second thought about their motto "Durutto Jotoi Hok, Kache thakun."

Asaduzzaman Nur
Abdul Latif Road, Sholakbahar, Panchlaish.

Hizb-ut-Tahrir

There are clearly some misunderstandings happening here. As a conscientious citizen, I carry a good impression about this party, Hizb-ut-Tahrir. I have attended their seminars, and in my knowledge, many educated and caring youth from all over the Dhaka are the members of this organisation. They are very much aware about their identity as the citizens of a sovereign nation. Moreover, they want to maintain this proud identity by peacefully protesting the malicious conspiracies by the greedy imperialists who have long been eyeing our land and the natural resources in it.

About the status and well-being of non-Muslim citizenry and the minority living in our country, I have seen no other organisation more concerned and dedicated than Hizb-ut-Tahrir. Very recently the members of this group forewent their essential Eid expenses and with that money they helped nearly 1,000 Hindu families in monga affected Gaibandha, Rangpur area. This feat speaks for itself and several Bangla national dailies covered this. As I said, lack of information may be the cause of this misconception as this group does not publicise this type of humanitarian works like other parties do for their own interest. I hope now it clears all the misconceptions about this increasingly popular group.

Kazi Golam Wayes
Lalmatia, Dhaka

Monga hit people of northern district

Every year we see hundreds of poverty sticken people of the greater district of Rangpur throng the highways, nearest market places for food and cash money. In their colloquial they call it 'monga' which means without or having an insufficient quantify of food due to absence of employment. The situation is disquieting no doubt and newspaper column of every day are full of dissertations by the leaders of the society and political parties although no permanent solution has been pronounced. The government in the current year's budget has earmarked a sizeable amount for amelioration of financial hardship of marginalised people but nothing tangible has been reported. A good number of NGOs have been working in those areas only to lend money at usually high interest rate but failing to guide them as how to invest the fund resultant of which their purchasing power is diminished and coupled with recovery method applied by lender NGOs it is eventually pushing them into abject situation.

If propounded positively we see perpetual leadership vacuum in the area as all members of the parliament (mostly non-resident), local administration, civil society appear to be antiquated, keep distance from facing local problems but hyperactive to speak in a pompous style. October is a month when extra labour is not warranted in the cropland to take out weed, wild herbs provide irrigation etc resultant of which day labourers remain off the field. This situation applies to the entire country. People living in the islands of our southern coast who are highly vulnerable to our weather conditions could be cited as example as how have they adjusted themselves to the situation and during this period they produce plenty of green vegetables, fruits in the roadside land, open space, courtyard of their own homestead without resorting to any other means and they struggle for survival. Indolence is not a part of their life and they have learnt to survive against cyclone, tidal wave and other natural calamities.

To subvert the monga we all should be univocal in unambiguous voice calling upon community leaders, area members of the parliament, official of the ministry of both land and agriculture of the government, large NGOs, leaders of the civil society and agriculture experts of the country to come forward with their positive and brilliant ideas to guide the inhabitants of the affected areas for production of vegetables, fruits, egg, poultry etc in every inch of unutilised land and other labour intensive jobs. These steps if implemented in right earnest shall offset supply gap to arrest rising price every year this time and bring enough revenue for the grower owners as well as labourers and landless people of greater district of Rangpur.

Rezaul Huq
Lalmatia, Dhaka