

## Hajj tragedy

Saudis cannot alone find a solution

HERE are no words to express our shock and sadness at the extent of the tragedy to have befallen the victims of this year's stampede during Hajj, that has killed over 360, including, at least count, at least eleven Bangladeshis. Needless to say, our hearts go out to the families of the dead in their hour of darkness.

This is not the first time in recent years that the annual Hajj had been marked by this kind of tragedy. Indeed, starting from 1994 when 270 pilgrims were trampled to death in a stampede similar to the one this year, more often than not there has been some incident of fatality, though the numbers have, thankfully, never again reached, the 1426 who died due to crowd pressure in 1990.

It is true that there is no way to overstate the magnitude of the task that the Saudi authorities face in terms of the safety and welfare of the pilgrims who number in excess of three million each year. The Hajj is the largest annual gathering on the planet and is a logistical nightmare.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the time has come for the Saudi government to rethink the entire process. The recent death tolls are simply unacceptable to anyone. Ensuring that there is never again a repeat of this year's tragedy must be the number one priority, and the entire process needs to be re-engineered to this end. It is perhaps that simple.

By the same token, the countries from where the pilgrims originate should also take the responsibility to build awareness among the prospective pilgrims as to what to expect so that they will be prepared for undertaking any rigour that came their way keeping the wits about them. Close cooperation between the Saudi authorities and those of other countries should be part of the process.

One final suggestion is that perhaps higher priority should be given to first time pilgrims and that some of quota system should be put in place for repeat Hajjis depending on the space available each year. No one would argue with the proposition that first time Hajjis fulfilling a religious requirement should get precedence, if such a thing would help the overall situation.

## Saving those lives on the highway

Festival-time slack must be overcome

IT is with a routine regularity that when newspapers resume publication after each Eid festival their front pages are filled with gory details of highway accidents as if these were just waiting to happen. But this time around, a record number of 78 people were killed and nearly 600 injured -- thanks to reckless driving in the foggy atmosphere of extremely low visibility that engulfed the highways.

What is most regrettable here is the lowering of guard when maximum caution was needed to avoid fatal accidents. And, some of the accidents took place as a result of sheer madness on the part of drivers. The death of 20 people at Savar has been attributed to a senseless race that the driver of the bus started with another vehicle.

The highways seem to go totally unguarded during festival holidays. The newly-inducted highway police are reported to have claimed a degree of success against crimes; but what arrangements are there to monitor the vehicles and, most importantly, to check overloading and speeding? The drivers are on their own and can do whatever they like once they reach the highways. The most worrying news is that many helpers take charge of vehicles on occasions as ramshackle vehicles creep back on to handle extra load passenger loads. All this might not sound strange in a society like ours, but is there anybody to carefully weigh the grave risks that passengers are exposed to in the process? The authorities concerned seem to be content with allowing things to remain where they are. It's the lives of people that are endangered and they will perhaps wake up to the danger when some of their kith and kin will have died in such accidents.

During the festival time, special arrangements must be made to protect passengers from accidents, many of which could be averted if the drivers complied with traffic rules. It is obviously more than a matter of thinking routinely, or letting a slack in when maximum vigil would have been the expected response.

We express condolences to the bereaved families and demand that compensation be paid to them.

## Why BNP will be hard to defeat

## NO NONSENSE

A former Barisal city municipality chairman (AL member) whom I met on the boat on my return trip to Dhaka told me that while BNP is busy recruiting financially strong political neophytes, AL leadership is preparing to move with their next street agitations. If AL loses the election as badly as the prediction goes, in all likelihood, it will be the end of AL's existence as a political power to stand up against BNP.



DR. ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

service. Many people think that Khaleda Zia, who was picked after her husband's assassination to resuscitate the dying BNP, has successfully established an empire (with sister a cabinet minister, brother a sitting MP, son in the forefront of BNP leadership who reportedly cashes millions by simply saying hello to a phone call) now being designed to be ruled by her family members long after her retirement.

While BNP's organizational structure is grounded at the village level, AL is pre-occupied with its antique philosophy of bringing down elected government by street agitations. Mr. Jalil with his repeated deadlines of bringing down the ruling alliance and Hasina's numerous nonsensical statements have done irreparable damage to AL's image, which only parallels Law Minister Mr. Moudud's obliteration of the country's previously well-respected and largely independent judiciary.

People across all walks of life believe that AL is becoming a party of antiquity with the aging faces and thoughtless strategies of Jalil, Razzaque, Tofail, and Hasina (JRTTH). When I told my cousin, a leader of the 14 party alliance, that the Finance Minister's assertion of AL not winning more than 38 seats in the general election was a "no nonsense" prediction, he appeared unsettled as if hit by a bolt from the blue. He said the JRTTH are riding high with the chimera of returning to power. When I scoffed at his statement, he explained that rising prices and increasing fundamentalist violence would turn voters away from the BNP alliance.

Many believe that Khaleda is smarter and more knowledgeable than she gets credit for. She denigrates her opponents and often treats them ruthlessly. Her recent attempt to cow them down with threats of sedition charges is what an autocrat often resorts to. My cousin in the 14 party alliance apprised me that during Khaleda's first term, BNP was essentially free from any retaliatory posture. After AL came to power, its political functionaries started scratching BNP people. Now BNP is paying the AL back in spades.

In politics and governance loyalty of one's followers often guarantees successful outcomes. When talking about loyalty, I find it interesting to underscore three cases among others.

Education Minister Osman Farouk's father Dr. Osman Ghani, one of the most powerful Vice-Chancellors of Dhaka University ever, was blindly loyal to infamous Governor Monayem Khan. That period may be marked as the most repressive times during which the seeds of independent Bangladesh was sown. With a Ph.D in agricultural economics, he is ill qualified to be an education minister. No wonder his attempt to introduce the unitary system for SSC was aborted, and the country has seen the alarming growth of madrasas and the spread of deceptive education in these institutions. His greatest virtue is his unflinching loyalty -- like that of his father.

Finance Minister Saifur Rahman has proved time and again to his bosses that he is the man to be trusted, even though his budget has been scrapped 11 times once it reached the PMO.

Political expediencies take precedence over economic realities under his nose. An accountant by

smarter and more knowledgeable than she gets credit for. She denigrates her opponents and often treats them ruthlessly. Her recent attempt to cow them down with threats of sedition charges is what an autocrat often resorts to. My cousin in the 14 party alliance apprised me that during Khaleda's first term, BNP was essentially free from any retaliatory posture. After AL came to power, its political functionaries started scratching BNP people. Now BNP is paying the AL back in spades.

Under Khaleda's directives, BNP is now in the process of recruiting 40 or more young and wealthy individuals for nominations for the MP elections. This move, many observers perceive, is to create a cadre of loyalists who, in the near future, will bow down to her son's accession to the position of chief executive. It will be interesting to see if the country will tolerate another half-educated person in that position of power. My concern is: if that is the design, then why not send him somewhere to get some real education rather than have him watch his father's video tapes and imitate his demeanour and style in public speaking and posture.

The upshot of all this is to alert JRTTH that the opponent is formidable; do not hibernate in illusion of victory simply because of rising prices of daily essentials and the rise of religious extremism.

Being realistic, a dispassionate analysis of events and issues favour BNP to win the next general election with a large majority. The reasons are:

- Incumbency is a powerful condition very hard to pass up.
- BNP's grass root organizational structure and recruiting efforts to enlist new people in lower level leadership positions.
- Availability of nearly inexhaustible election funds and the ability to raise more;



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- BNP's success in restoring law and order. Voters still remember AL's misrule when they were in power.

- AL's strong criticism of Rab cross-fire has infuriated many voters. People think that once AL comes to power, Rab will be disbanded, and disorder will become a way of life again.

- BNP politicians, like the US Republican Party, will exploit terrorism in their favour by fear mongering, and claiming that BNP is the party strong in law and order to combat this menace.

- BNP politicians have been painting AL as the party resorting to rabble-rousing and is already threatened to bring charges of seditions.

- BNP has more academically

qualified, financially resourceful, and politically shrewd people in the party than AL.

- The recent recruits of BNP cadres as election officers will make sure that BNP win the election to keep their jobs secure.

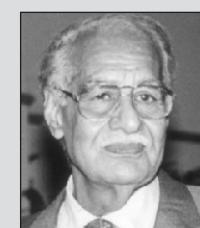
A former Barisal city municipality chairman (AL member) whom I met on the boat on my return trip to Dhaka told me that while BNP is busy recruiting financially strong political neophytes, AL leadership is preparing to move with their next street agitations. If AL loses the election as badly as the prediction goes, in all likelihood, it will be the end of AL's existence as a political power to stand up against BNP.

The author is Professor of Economics, Eastern Michigan University.

## Not to square one yet

## BETWEEN THE LINES

Musharraf is talking about demilitarisation in three cities of Kashmir, to begin with. How does he expect Manmohan Singh to reciprocate when the latter says unequivocally that he cannot move forward until cross-border terrorism ends? The entire process is stuck at that. Is it possible for the two countries to set up a joint committee of eminent people, including retired police officers, to verify the allegations of cross-border terrorism and to suggest ways to stop it if the committee gets such an evidence? Subsequently, the Indian and Pakistani forces should jointly patrol the LoC to stop infiltration.

KULDIP NAYAR  
writes from New Delhi

PAKISTAN spokesperson Tasneem Aslam must be having a great sense of humour. Otherwise, how can she say that the forecast about the peace progress between New Delhi and Islamabad was certainly not "bleak"? There is nothing else to suggest.

The spokesperson says: Please do not read too much. What can one do when President General Pervez Musharraf expresses explic-

itly in an interview to an Indian TV channel that he feels disappointed because there is "no progress in the peace process." He even criticises the futility of a process which does not make any headway, although he says that India-Pakistan relations have never been so better before. His real regret -- he makes no secret about it -- is that no new ground has been covered since the beginning of talks. Back channels, according to him, have also elicited no response from India. Obviously, they are clogged by officials who stick to old thinking.

Musharraf has no hesitation in saying that if Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh comes to Pakistan to watch cricket match and there is no progress on the problem, meaning thereby Kashmir, then the meeting would be of little use. I know the military men are frank and come straight to the point. But the President has been in politics long enough to know what he should say in public. He

should realise that here, unlike the battlefield, discretion is the better part of valour. Musharraf's defence is that he had no option except to go public when India had not reacted to his various proposals.

Still there are better ways to make the Indians, the Pakistanis, and the Kashmiris debate on his initiatives. Even the manner in which he has invited the Prime Minister to the cricket match -- "Yes, I invite him" -- does not befit the head of state.

On the other hand, Manmohan Singh, reserved and taciturn, tells me during a conversation before Musharraf's interview was shown on TV that it is not possible for him to proceed further when cross-border terrorism has continued even after Musharraf's repeated promises to stop it. Musharraf says that he has done so much that no other person could have done it. But the fact remains that cross-border terrorism has not ended.

The two interviews, one by

Musharraf and the other by Manmohan Singh, took place within a span of five days. Both indicated more or less the same distance between the two governments as was before. This is despite people-to-people contact. However, there is no doubt about the absence of tension in both the countries. This is a plus if it stays that way.

New Delhi admits that the number of infiltrators has gone down but claims that the intermittent flow has not stopped. Musharraf's defence is how can he guarantee that not a single bullet shot will be fired. Nor can he say for certain that none will cross over. It is difficult to imagine Musharraf's helplessness knowing well how disciplined the Pakistani forces are and how tight is his control over men and the corps commanders. He has himself said in his interview that he would throw out anyone from the army if he disobeys him. Then how can infiltration take place without the army's connivance?

Exasperated, Manmohan Singh says that he does not know what is in the mind of Musharraf. On an Indian TV show, the number of people who ticked "no trust in Musharraf" is 80 per cent. New Delhi suspects that he has kept the machinery of training and arming terrorists in tact to enable to play the jehadi card whenever he thinks that India needs to be pressured.

During my recent visit to Pakistan, I heard some voices confirming the existence of training camps.

One young man described how the terrorists were boarding the army vehicles at Muzaffarabad and how they were being transported to the Line of Control (LoC). One leading Pakistani newspaper has alleged that "the banned jehadi organisations have changed names and are still operating." If there was any credibility to Pakistan's claim that they had gone off the field, the paper says, "it was destroyed when the jihadis reemerged and took reconstruction of the earthquake hit regions of PoK and NWFP, incidentally the very areas where they had been known to train for covert jihad."

The governments on both sides have their own versions and their own perception. Even the little common ground is shrinking bit by bit. Mind-set bureaucrats on both sides are having a field day. The spokespersons in the two countries are using such language and expression which do not reflect a civilised behaviour. The worst fallout is that practically every act of violence or sabotage in one country is attributed to the other. Intelligence agencies get the most blame. In India it is ISI and in Pakistan it is RAW. The Indian press has quoted extensively from the US 9/11 Commission Report to reiterate that Pakistan continues to send the jihadis across the border.

The two countries may not yet be back to square one. Yet, the lack of agreement on anything, except on the itinerary of cricket

matches, is pushing things to a point where the same old mood of estrangement is taking over. The peace process may be irreversible, but if there is no progress on the confidence-building measures, the situation will become more uneasy and more uncertain as the days go by.

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Foreign secretaries of the two countries are discussing Kashmir in New Delhi, something which they should have done long ago. But they must keep in mind what Jawaharlal Nehru told Zulfikar Ali Bhutto: "Zulfikar, I know that we must find a solution for Kashmir. But we have got caught in a situation which we cannot get out of without causing damage to the systems and structures of our respective societies."

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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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.

## Resorting to hartal

Isn't it enough that the multiple bombings that have killed many people and injured even more have left communities in a sense of fear and panic? Lives have been disrupted; businesses have been halted and interrupted and normalcy is all but gone. Among all this the main goal would be to work towards achieving the usual day to day life. Instead, we thank our opposition party to call hartal and further stall life and business.

It doesn't seem to be enough that bombings and other forms of terror affect our economy and our people. It is not enough that endless studies and research have been done that clearly point out the damage to people and their livelihood that "hartals" have caused. It seems that the way to deal with

death and devastation is to call hartals? That causes further pain and suffering for the already impoverished people of our nation.

Isn't it beyond the time when the elected politicians put aside their differences, regardless of how many there are, to stop this political blame game and work towards finding a solution? No one is safe against such heinous attacks. Party members, judges, policemen, shopkeepers, pedestrians, children etc. have all gotten caught in these attacks and have all lost their lives.

One is also forced to wonder why such fanaticism and fundamentalism found its way into our secular society. We have always had poverty and political instability but why now and what has triggered it. It is important to get to the root of

the solution instead of simply trying to close our eyes and move on as if nothing is happening. Pretty soon people will stop leaving their homes, offices will shut down, businesses will close down, more intellectuals and professionals will either be targeted or be so fearful that they will leave their professions.

The result will be that the fanatics will win and that will further destroy our country.

**Zeenat Z. Syed**  
UPS eDeployment

## 'Probashi' voters

Refer to your headline news on the Internet edition of January 6. As citizens of Bangladesh we can have access to HC orders on voter list only through the media. We have seen quite a number of inter-

## pretations by the media, depending on their own political views. I

can categorise these newspapers as neutral and party papers. They should care for objective reporting of events. HC cannot be expected to give further clarification about their directives. This is perhaps outside their purview. I, therefore, request the news media to kindly publish the full and complete text of the directives of HC so that we can read it and reach our own conclusions on the judgment.

We are also interested to know about our chance to become voter and participate in the forthcoming elections. Please enlighten us on this issue.

**A Bangladeshi abroad**  
One-mail

## Problems of good gov-

## ernance

Nearly seven or eight years ago Bangladesh was focused in the international media and arena as a country of disaster and poverty as well as a cyclone prone zone etc. But this country has a role to play in the international arena. We recently discovered a huge quantity of natural resources. Now we are facing problems of human rights, good governance, transparency, lack of rule of law and order etc.

After liberation from the colonial rule Pakistan, most of the time this country had military rule which ignored human rights. From that period we witnessed indiscriminate violation of the constitutional rule. The "Yes-No" vote culture was initiated at the very beginning of our statehood.

which ruined the entire electoral process.